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# The Ball's in Her Court: Communicating Gender and Sexual Identity in Today's WNBA

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THE BALL'S IN HER COURT: COMMUNICATING GENDER AND SEXUAL  
IDENTITY IN TODAY'S WNBA

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Jose Maldonado

2017

## **Dedication**

To Olga, Esther, Irma, and Lucy. The four women who raised me from a boy to a man.

THE BALL'S IN HER COURT: COMMUNICATING GENDER AND SEXUAL  
IDENTITY IN TODAY'S WNBA

by

JOSE DAVID MALDONADO, MA

THESIS

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Sport in general can mean many things to many people, depending on their opinion of the term. Sport is universal, having the potential to bring out the best and worst in players and fans from all parts of the world. Perhaps most important, above all else, sport is a business. However, sport also means life to these athletes working in professional leagues plus for die-hard fans who dedicate countless amounts of time, energy and money to support their favorite team and player. This being said, sport then becomes more personal, an activity that many are passionate about and even make a career out of whether they are participants or employed as coaches and staff on professional teams.

As entertaining and as personal sports can be, certain problematic factors among professional athletes and staff can also come with negative aspects as well, for female participants. In 2016, the Women's National Basketball Association celebrated its twentieth anniversary; a quick five-month season built around twelve teams. Undoubtedly a milestone for the association, issues are still present in the league regarding limited roster space and even tighter budgets for these female teams (Berri, 2015, para. 10).

Beginning its inaugural season in 1997, the WNBA started off with a miniscule eight-team league, drafting players from the college and Olympic levels all while building popularity and fan support that showed a promising future for women's professional basketball (WNBA, n.d.). Playing in NBA arenas during the summer and early fall, the female players in the WNBA accomplished much during the first few years; ultimately leading to the need for expansion teams and new owners. Though the league never surpassed more than 16 teams, the WNBA soon took part in an agreement in 2002 that would allow non-NBA owners to take ownership of these franchises without being backed by their business counterpart in the NBA (WNBA.com). In addition to taking revenue, attendance, players' salary and sponsorships into consideration, the agreement also presented a possible reason why owners in the league ceased operations for teams in Houston, Sacramento, Cleveland, and Charlotte, the resulting changes keeping the league to a

twelve-team structure. The regulations of having only 11 active players on the team's roster added on to the financial struggles for the league. In 2009, the Phoenix Mercury became the first to start the trend of branding their game jerseys with their sponsor(s) (Sandomir, 2009) in order to further boost revenue and salary for the franchise, a trend that is now present on every single WNBA team's jersey.

While these inconveniences have remained a staple among the league for as long as it has been around, there are certain obstacles that go unnoticed that affect these female athletes' personal lives and even at times mental health (Melton and Walker, 2015). These complications mentioned are that of gender and sexual identity. After retirement, former basketball star Candace Wiggins commented about her heterosexual experience in the league, claiming she was bullied by some of the players because she was straight, claimed that the league was at least 98 percent full of lesbian players, and also believed that the WNBA was a "conformist type of place" because of the amount of lesbian presence (Bonesteel, 2017). While 98 percent might be a bit of an exaggeration, the WNBA has been known for its large amount of lesbian players compounded by the fact that there are only twelve teams total with eleven active players on each roster. When players in the WNBA come out or publicly reveal their sexuality in other ways, it does not come as much of a surprise versus if a male player in the NBA did the same.

When Brittney Griner mentioned she was gay before the 2013 WNBA draft, the sports world including media did not seem surprised. By comparison in 2013, NBA veteran player at the time Jason Collins, revealed he was gay, becoming the first active NBA player to publicly come out. In a world where coming out is much more complicated because of gender norms and lack of openly gay male athletes compared to females, Collins suddenly became a "pioneer" for the gay community and male athletes. Collins drew a vast amount of attention from the sports world and media, particularly from various athletes and celebrities who chimed in on Collins' revelation, taking to social media to show their support (Luther, 2013, para. 5). Although former NBA player John Ameachi also revealed he was gay long after his retirement, it is possible to infer that other active players in the NBA besides Collins may also be gay, but have yet to publicly come out.

Unfortunately, Collins retired in 2014 just a year after his public outing (Schwartz, 2014), which may have stymied momentum for other male athletes to come out.

However, because of Jason Collins' brave decision to reveal his true self, he was also met with friendly support from players in the WNBA, such as Griner, Elena Delle Donne, and Diana Taurasi, who are all gay and out. Shortly after Delle Donne's news of being engaged to her partner in 2016, it was mentioned that although her reveal was not a big deal to her and her family, she would also like to see the same type of reaction and support for gay athletes in the NBA (Amick, 2016, para. 6). Although it is still a work in progress, the NBA has currently shown support for the gay community highlighted by league commissioner Adam Silver's involvement with WNBA President Lisa Borders and her support of the lesbian gay bisexual transgender and queer community (LGBTQ), including a dedicated pride month during the season in June (para. 7). Furthermore, because of male athletes coming out while currently on an active roster is limited in the NBA compared to the WNBA, players like Griner and Taurasi who also support the coming out of male athletes further understand the difficulty and backlash if they choose to do so, including the comfortability of the player and the stigma of coming out, which serves as a sort of "taboo" in the male world of sports (para. 8, 11). With all these factors considered, it is no wonder why men in the NBA garner more attention than their female counterparts when it comes to the revelation of being an openly gay athlete on an active roster. Although Collins' announcement possibly paves the way for future gay players in the NBA, this situation is not entirely the same regarding players in the WNBA.

In addition to this adversity, while the LGBTQ community works to progress through support and advocacy, certain accomplishments are not as rewarding for those who try to move up in their careers or have a huge fan base watching and following their every move. For instance, a portion of these women playing in the WNBA may try working at hiding certain personal issues much harder than they work at their actual careers and basketball skills. In some cases, certain women may have no problem with being openly gay, or dressing in attire considered to be more masculine than feminine. On the other hand, there are also female athletes who try to conceive or

“prove” their gender and sexual identity for as long as possible for fear of judgment from family, friends and employers, job termination, and even psychological abuse (Melton & Walker, 2015).

It is here where the field of sport communication comes in, and although it is just a few decades old, facilitates understanding the innovative use of mass and social media and the effects they have on users’ personal lives and thoughts. For example, women’s sports may not be aired heavily on national television due to low ratings and the sense that male sports are more entertaining for most audiences. Also, women athletes may be objectified in magazines as more of a sexual object, in clothes that are far different from their sports uniform, while lesbians or women with a more masculine demeanor may not be featured in image media at all. In addition, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter give fans and followers insight into their journey to stardom, their likes and interests, as well as providing an in-depth look at their personal lives through posts, pictures, and videos. Social media also gives players the opportunity to connect with fans and voice their opinions, which at times can be both beneficial or detrimental for the athletes’ social status.

Other than Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, the gatekeepers of mass media outlets such as television, magazines, newspapers and news stations, also have the ability to choose to hide those female athletes who are considered sexually deviant, and instead women who are believed be more feminine and more appealing to the public eye. While the marketing tools of social media may do the same, these applications also give these players the opportunity to voice their personal opinions with their fans, followers, and the rest of the world, breaking the boundaries that mass media might otherwise create. Social media gives these women opportunities to not only engage with fans but also to educate and inspire certain followers who are going through similar situations regarding their sexuality and gender and how to handle challenges within a sports environment, at school and home, or in other public sphere spaces.

Prior research has demonstrated certain societal issues that impact not only female basketball players, but all female athletes on more of a larger scale than just participating in sport. With social media rapidly becoming a popular form of communication today, and the dilemma of

these women being analyzed for something other than their basketball prowess, it is important that certain communication strategies in a mediated environment be further researched. Using textual analysis, three of the WNBA's most popular players will be examined to determine if there are significant themes and differences that confirm the previously established gender norms, along with the intersectionality they show between gender and sexual identity, along with sports communication.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

On April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the Women's National Basketball Association's most exciting draft in years took place, featuring three prospects whose skills and college accolades drew tremendous attention from media and fans. Brittney Griner, Elena Delle Donne, and Skylar Diggins were selected as the number one, two and three draft picks respectively that year. While the draft showcased these women and the potential they brought to their new teams, one thing that was noticeable beyond their height difference was their appearance and performed sexuality.

Not only was Griner a 6'8" center who stood taller than any other player in the league, but she was also public about her homosexuality and her preferred style of dress, a more masculine style. Her attire on draft night consisted of an all-white tuxedo with white jeans and white Converse. The other two picks Donne and Diggins were more formally dressed with makeup on and hair straightened, both in black dresses for the night. Although Diggins was featured in the Swimsuit Issue of Sports Illustrated (SI.com) back in 2014 and confirmed her sexuality by announcing her engagement to a man in the summer of 2016 via social media, it was unclear of Donne's sexual identity until the 2016 Olympics in Rio, when she publicly came out in *Vogue* magazine about her long-time fiancé who is a woman (outsports, 2016, para. 4).

Griner and Donne represent just a few of the many athletes in the WNBA who are openly gay and at times have faced criticism for their sexual orientation and appearance off the court rather than being praised for their talent and skills that they bring to their team's organization. Many of these athletes obtain physiques that at times can be perceived as "too muscular" for a woman's body, and although their height helps during play, standing over six feet tall also adds to the long list of unfeminine-like qualities demanded by society's standards. For instance, Muller (2007) explains:

WNBA game spaces are therefore sites in which female athlete represent challenges to hegemonic definitions of women as the ‘weaker sex,’ and the reproduction of traditional gendered power hierarches is challenged through the very presence of the female athletes’ bodies (as cited in Sabo and Mesner, 1993).

It is common for female athletes in many sports to be oversexualized in mediated circumstances based on personal preferences such as sexuality and physical attributes. The encompassing term “gender” is also communicated in the coverage of sport, especially when dealing with female athletes who still face discrimination based on appearance, sexual orientation, and their chosen field of athletics (Pedersen et al., 2003; Russel, 2007; Heinecken, 2016). The media, which remain dominated by male broadcasters and journalists, still feature a greater number of sports stories focused on men and privilege coverage of male-driven sports (Carini & Weber, 2012), pushing females to feel the need to comply with dominant society’s gender norms of femininity. The chapter ahead shows various aspects of gender roles in female athletes and the issues involving them. The next section also begins by presenting a brief history on the origins of gender relying on several definitions and theories that intersect with sexuality, feminism and masculinity.

### **Review of Literature: Gender**

In accordance with gender, masculinity studies and feminist theories share relationships that are both interactive and changeable, as provided in the work of Gardiner (2002). Despite certain similarities, her research suggests that the two concepts are more conflicting than mutually understanding, as many feminists still have issues with masculinity, believing the term is associated with institutional practices meant to oppress women and uphold male domination, as well as the belief that masculinity is regarded as a degendering movement against feminism

(p. 3). Early feminists attacked men, while men ridiculed their protests and formed masculinist movements in retaliation, though, such ideas declined shortly after and pose irrelevance in academic studies (p. 4). Crisis between the two theories of masculinity and feminism are further discussed in Gardiner's work, forming interesting perceptions of the two and knowledge on the failed attempts of the men's retaliation movement that sought to return male dominance during the 1990s (p. 2, 6-8).

According to Bradley (2013), "Gender refers to the varied and complex arrangements between men and women, encompassing the organization of reproduction, the sexual divisions of labour and cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity" (p. 1). The term itself has well over 500 definitions and was born into academia through women studies and feminist political movements. Gender soon formed challenges along the way due to relentless arguments from feminists and anti-feminists based on sex, biology, labeling, and social environment interaction, although, Bradley responds with the concept of gendering and argues the term's significance against certain theories and constructs:

Both the feminist and functionalist theories of socialization came under attack for being too deterministic, presenting individuals as passively shaped by the process of that surrounded them. If that were the case, how did change in social rules and roles ever occur? Why do some individual men reject the heterosexual norm and the 'macho' aggressive style...? Why do some women carry a tomboy style past their childhood, turn their backs on domesticity and declare their disinterest in having babies?...While some of the old insights from socialization are useful in showing where ideas of normality come from and in revealing the pressures we are under as individuals to be 'normal', the more

active idea of gendering allows us to explore how individuals develop as agents in interaction with their environment (Bradley, 2013, p. 25).

Hilary M. Lips (2014) contends that as early as the 1960s the term was non-existent, biology of maleness and femaleness was also not persistent nor established, "...simply being biologically female does not ensure that a person is 'womanly,' and being biologically male does not mean an individual is 'manly' (p. 19). Lips further explains how early medical researchers viewed the reproductive organs of both men and women to be the same, and how a variety of theorists and present-day psychologists articulated the conformity of both masculine and feminine qualities present in an individual (androgyny), including several theories based on biology, psychology and socio-cultural categories, which all similarly deal with gender identification at a young age and the distribution of power between men and women (pp. 21-23).

It is visible that the authors mentioned above along with many others who study the field of gender, feminism, masculinity, and all other terms that intersect, agree on the ever-changing definition of the word gender. It is more crucially important in society than one might believe or expect, and the idea to do gender is more widely known as society's traditional constructs continue to change over generations. Gender is present throughout the literature, and addresses issues that are relevant in today's society with a focus on female sportswomen and the complications imposed on them because of institutionalized gendered roles.

Sport for both genders requires its athletes to be in top physical condition in order to perform at their highest potential. However, it is often expected of the male athletes over their female counterparts to look the part as well, which means having a strong, defined physique that not only carries them from game-to-game but also draws attention from fans and admirers. This being the case, the role of gender comes into play when female athletes participate in what is

considered to be a male-dominated sport, or present a physique that is not feminine enough for western society's traditional standards.

Pedersen, Schneider & Whisenant (2003) note that because masculinity itself is a defining characteristic in certain institutions like sports where male power and control is present, women athletes become excluded (p. 377). Melton (2013) adds that although that may be the case, women in the modern world are now more prone to embracing their athleticism and muscularity rather than settle for "delicate and dainty", seeming less inclined to present themselves in a sexualized manner and instead appear more athletic (p. 27).

One of the reasons for why these women athletes are judged by their physicality and choice of sport is presented in Russel's (2007) work where the term *compulsory heterovisuality* is cited. This phrase explains how heterosexual males view females based on the sport they participate in, creating the male gaze which holds the female as still being a sexualized object. If the female were to participate in a more masculine sport such as rugby or football, the male gaze suddenly becomes disrupted and the female is no longer sexualized by the male, especially when competing in sports that are widely constructed as a masculine institution that could then lead to their sexuality being questioned (p. 117).

As many female athletes continue to perform in the shadow of their male counterparts, the media's role in sports further highlights the traditional values it holds with masculinity. According to Trujillo (1994), the media values the masculine over the feminine and homosexual, depicts masculinity as the conventional image, and holds masculinity to the status of heroism while demoting female and homosexual athletes. With the emphasis of masculinity, the male gender is then referred to as the dominant ideology in sports, which in turn can also encourage men to always compete with one another while regarding women as "frail underlings" who

cannot measure up to the athletic male standard (pp. 109-110). With these beliefs and values of masculinity enforced by the media, female and homosexual athletes will continue to face negative consequences in addition to the issues they may already be dealing with away from the public eye.

The media also takes part in trying to project these female athletes as feminine when given the opportunity as several media outlets highlight their feminine value rather than their athleticism and skills. An example of this is seen in televised WNBA where the media tends to emphasize the players' femininity before, during and after games, as well as off the court. It is said that the WNBA players are shown with their children either pre or post game, and are also shown out of their uniforms, dressed up and in make-up while their male counterparts in the NBA are not portrayed in the same way (Farquharson & Marjoribanks, 2012).

As mentioned previously in this section by Melton (2013), the good news is that more women and women athletes are continuing to put female masculinity and athleticism in a more positive perspective in this modern generation. These women may continually be judged for their type of sport and muscles, though it is also important to notice certain athletes like gymnast Aly Raisman and tennis star Venus Williams who other than being champions of their own sport and garnering massive success, still embrace their physicality and athletic abilities despite being females. However, besides the type of sport a female athlete participates in and regardless of their orientation, their appearance still factors in as an issue.

Many women athletes may not fit into this particular mold of femininity that society sees as "moral." Female basketball and volleyball players who are above the six-foot mark may not be seen as feminine by some. Female boxers and UFC fighters as another example, possess extremely chiseled physiques which may also be judged based on their appearance. Whatever the

sport these female athletes compete in, wearing lipstick and make-up all the time may not be in their best interest when training, maintaining weight, and competing in their events comes into play, requiring numerous hours of work ethic and sweat.

An example found of a female athlete who implemented femininity in sport was that of retired WNBA Hall-of-famer and 6' 5" model Lisa Leslie. In Leslie's book, "*Don't Let the Lipstick Fool You*," the athlete stresses the importance of maintaining her femininity both on and off the court and presents an awareness of the male gaze on women in sports, especially in Leslie's own WNBA (Heinecken, 2016).

Although it is empowering to hear someone of Leslie's caliber try to incorporate feminism in a female athlete's everyday routine, it is also inferred that the WNBA star fit into society's gender mold that many other women athletes disagree with. Carini and Weber (2012) then counter Leslie's perspective, citing that her stance on feminism in women athletes pose certain issues when it comes to their appearance:

These images serve as role models for millions of females...when a woman basketball player is portrayed as "sexually tawdry", she is judged by college students to be more feminine, more hetero-sexual, worthy of greater disapproval, less worthy to pay to see, and, very poignantly, less athletic. The sexualization of female athletes also reinforces heterosexism and indirectly suggests that lesbian athletes are less worthy of attention and emulation (p. 202).

It can be trivial and discriminatory for these female athletes who are judged and expected to appear feminine outside of their careers, which can also be problematic to those who are not comfortable with relaying their sexuality and personal life to the public sphere. Symons (2007) informs us that women in sports try to emphasize their femininity by wearing makeup and

dresses to avoid the lesbian and “butch” label. While in this modern world there are coaches in the NCAA, high school, and professional ranks who are openly gay, dress as they see fit, and even hold higher-rank positions in sports organizations, Symons also confers that despite these social advances and progress, coaches and athletes in several other institutions will still have to show some femininity to be accepted (p. 144).

Though gender can be a term that has one or multiple definitions, an intersected term mentioned often when talking about gender is that of identity. In the following section, identity along with its intersectionality is brought into context and is revealed further of the important role it plays in society’s values and these female athletes’ lives.

### **Review of Literature: Sexual Identity**

Melton (2013) cites that people have multiple identities that vary in terms of contextual saliency, meaning that one’s sexual orientation may be more important in certain settings and less in others. A person’s identity is also representative of themselves, along with their thoughts, beliefs and behaviors. Identity or rather sexual identity is another on-going issue for female athletes as it pertains to this generation’s standards of racial prejudice and feminine standards. The section ahead discusses the scrutiny and psychological abuse many of these female athletes face on a daily basis for being someone other than what the gender norm insists (Symons, 2007; Walker, 2013). I will also talk briefly about the history of identity and its intersectionality among gender, race, and sexuality, and how this research further stimulates my project.

In *The Metaphysics of Identity*, author Andre` Gallois (2017) cites the earlier work and concepts of identity presented in the work of John Locke, and the idea of how one becomes familiar with identity. Gallois informs us that Locke’s perception discusses the relationship between sortal concepts and identity, distinguishing the difference between living organisms and

mass of matter (section 2.5, para 1, 10). Although the early philosopher's arguments showed faults and was quite controversial among the critics, Locke's theories and ideas of acquiring personal identity served as a strong base of research for future philosophers and theorists trying to decode the difficult origins of identity and its many forms.

“Although the term ‘identity’ takes on different connotations depending upon the context within which it is deployed,... ‘identity’ has achieved its contemporary centrality both theoretically and substantively” (du Gay, Evans, and Redman, 2000). Furthermore, in Hall's (1996) research, the author describes the concept of identity and identification as often tricky and misunderstood, and above all is constructed both within discourse and through difference (Hall, 1996, p. 17). Kroger (2007) also implies the complexity of the term identity over the past sixty years, and includes how the meaning and evolution of identity during one's lifespan has generated numerous amounts of research in the field. Using work from the teachings of Erik Erikson as her basis of research, Kroger explains that Erikson noted identity as “self-sameness and continuity over time” (p. 7), and was both a conscious and unconscious entity which manifested itself in historical context around the era when immigrants struggled with “self-definition” in a land that was unfamiliar territory (p. 13). In more recent years, the concept of identity has developed various theories, concepts, and approaches within its field of study, including that of gender and sexual identity.

The work of Yorburg (1974) describes sexual identity as the male or female image of the self, the image that is built up since infancy and results in learned masculine or feminine behavior, including their own thoughts on how to feel, act and think based on them identifying as male or female. Males and females learn the ideals of masculinity and feminism based on culture and social influence during their upbringing, and can therefore create conflict when a man or

woman does not conform to what is considered man or woman-like. Yorburg further explains how sex roles and society also play a factor when it comes to the identity of men and women, as particular societies may have different roles for men and women based on their gender, such as obligations, rights and authority (p. 9).

While Yorburg also concludes about the terms of masculinity and femininity eventually subsiding, and social standards being constructed to the individual and their behavior only, I do believe it is a bit of wishful thinking on her part. Although, it can be possible should society's standards progress with change in coming years as it has been recently, especially during this generation. As we look ahead to the next chapter of this literature piece, sexual and gender identity is used as framework for the issues and discrimination present throughout these female athletes' lives and careers. Furthermore, it also shows the psychological abuse they may face, as well as the certain protocols they must follow in order to keep their jobs or avoid any further torment from authority, coworkers, teammates, and even family and friends.

Symons (2007) informs us of the three climates many lesbians interested in sports navigate through from their high school years, college careers, and at the professional level as well. The first climate is hostility, discrimination and harassment, which leads to lesbians feeling the constant need to confirm their heterosexuality when seeing that homosexuality is an issue, along with the second social climate of conditional tolerance, where being on the team but also maintaining lesbian invisibility explains the type of mediated tolerance that is shown to lesbian sportswomen and the type of construct they should follow to not call attention to their appearance and/or their sexual orientation (pp. 146-147). The third climate suggests openness and inclusion; those who are welcoming and supportive of sexual orientation diversity of athletes and colleagues. Certain coaches and administrators can understand the limiting effect

homophobia and prejudice can have on their players and colleagues and try to institute the process of openness and inclusion in order ensure a better relationship and chemistry for the team and organization.

Research from Melton (2013) also suggests that these lesbian sportswomen who are publicly out are considered dangerous and should be feared according to society's standards. However, many of these athletes in result deal with stress, low self-esteem, substance abuse, guilt, and shame because of their unsupportive athletic environment and sexual deviance, including "identity management" issues for those struggling to decide whether they should pass or reveal their sexuality in sports (pp. 24-25). Because of this reality, lesbian athletes continue to use various techniques to further conceal their sexual identity in sporting environments.

Although these are the cases for women and athletes considered "gender" or "sexual minorities," those of color face a more treacherous prejudice and lifestyle under societies views of not only being gay women and athletes, but for their race as well. Racism is still an issue today in what seems to be a never-ending matter, and for sportswomen who are gay athletes and coaches, being African-American, lesbian, *and* female creates multiple jeopardy for themselves.

Black LGBTQ sportswomen deal with multiple minority identities due to being labeled as sexual minorities in a heterosexist/homophobic environment, being visibly different from their white counterparts, and contributing forced efforts to adapt to the cultural and social norms surrounding their sport, making these women less comfortable (Walker, 2013). In the WNBA, African Americans comprise 69 percent of the league's players while only 33 percent are head coaches, contending that black leadership despite sexual identity is still limited at the professional level for black females alone.

Along with these circumstances mentioned above, Melton and Walker (2015) bring up the term known as multiple jeopardy, where the authors cite that these athletes are more likely than their white counterparts to encounter discrimination either because of their race, gender, sexuality, or all three combined (p. 258). Heineken (2016) and her research also adds that the media takes part in framing black female athletes as masculine and lesbian because of their muscularity, are “often compared to animals,” and are considered as deviant in society because of their race and sexual identity (p. 329), which in turn refers back to the concept of multiple jeopardy as well.

The issue of race alone also causes infractions on athletes of color during controversial times in their career, an example being that of former Olympic medalist Marion Jones who was an African-American sprinter, versus Tammy Thomas, who was a white female cyclist. Jones admitted to using performance-enhancing drugs after years of denial where she soon ended up being convicted, sent to federal prison, stripped of all her medals, and embarrassed in front of the entire nation. When Thomas was also convicted of using steroids during her competitions, she surprisingly served no jail time whatsoever (Billings et al. 2015). In 2009, African American tennis legend Serena Williams was fined for a mild outburst on a questionable call at the U.S. open which also added two years’ probation and the largest fine in Grand Slam history. John McEnroe, a white male tennis star, admitted himself that his behavior on the court was far worse than that of Williams, yet was met with lesser aggression, further implying that it is more of a spectacle when females act out or take it too far during sports versus when their male counterparts behave the same way (p. 492).

Though the struggles of lesbian sportswomen and black athletes facing multiple jeopardy will most likely continue to be a burden based on the research provided, there are still certain

individuals who ultimately decide to publicly come out and resist concealment in their lives and careers. Although they may face backlash and judgment, their actions to go against society's traditions opens doors and influences the incoming generations of those young girls and women who relate or will soon relate to such limitations.

According to Muller (2007), lesbian fans are “arguably the largest and most dedicated group of WNBA fans” (p. 38). Among WNBA players there are a number of lesbian players, however each woman has approached their sexuality in the public eye differently. WNBA Hall of Famer Sheryl Swoopes publicly came out in an interview with *ESPN magazine* back in 2005 in order to relieve the stress she endured by constantly hiding who she was and the love she had for her female partner (Walker, 2013). Although several years later she stirred up controversy by suddenly making her engagement to a man public, Swoopes was the first African American woman in any sport to make her sexual identity public (p. 74) and sparked many more sportswomen in the same predicament inspired to follow suit.

In 2009, Portland University's women's basketball coach Sherri Murrell made headlines for including a family photo of her partner and two fraternal twins in the team's media guide and school website, and at the time was known as the only publicly lesbian coach in Division I women's college basketball (Melton, 2013). Soccer coach Lisa Howe from Belmont University resigned from her team after announcing that her female partner was pregnant, while Kathryn Brenny who was an associate women's golf coach from the University of Minnesota, sued the athletic department for job termination after revealing her sexuality that same year (Melton & Walker, 2015).

While Murrell's unwillingness to conceal her identity from the world was widely successful, a vast number of female players and coaches do not have the same result, as seen in

coaches Howe and Brenny's case. Although there is a growing presence of lesbians in collegiate and professional sports today, it is well known that many female athletes and women competing for higher positions in team organizations still feel it necessary to hide their sexuality from their peers. Though many who abide by the traditional values and social norms may not understand or want to conform, it can be inferred from this research that sexuality for certain individuals, gay or not, is not just binary (heterosexual or homosexual) but a fluid, complex continuum among gender and sexual identity.

As I begin to delve into the next section in the literature, it must also be made aware of the immense presence social media have in the modern world. While applications such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are among the most popular forms of communication today, they are also relatable to the field of sports communication as well. The following section demonstrates how the two fields interconnect and how these forms of communication can both result in both positive and negative outcomes for female athletes.

### **Review of Literature: Sports Communication**

The field of sports communication is relatively new, but has already tackled major societal issues such as athlete portrayal in the media (Pedersen et al., 2003; Carini & Weber, 2012), social media (Clavio et al., 2014; Creedon, 2014), and gender (Billings et al, 2015). Generally, sports communication has been driven by mass media outlets and sports, but more social media-based and focused research has increased. In this section I will briefly explain the history of the field, how my project has benefited from this research and situate my project in the literature.

Researchers started to explore both media and sport in an academic basis in the 1980s, and has since flourished in academia. Due to the emergence of sport, media, and the

interconnection they both share, the field of sport communication has allowed researchers to investigate the relationship between the two, and deploy certain communication theories to understand and explain observations in the sports world (Kim, Smith, and Yoo, 2013). Among the research, several communication theories that are frequently used within the sport communication field include hegemonic, cultivation, uses and gratification, agenda setting, and framing theory just to name a few, and face new challenges to come as the digital era barges its way onto the scene, potentially changing the practices of journalism and media, as well as news consumption (pp. 10-14). It is also current to say that sport culture is an intrinsic component of one's social life, as its mediation, commercialization, and consumption influences the way businesses, consumers, and fans interact with sport and its contents.

Adding on to Kim et al.'s advances is the research of Billings, Butterworth, and Turman (2015), providing deeper explanations of the origins of how sports communication formed and solidified its place in academia during recent years. Interesting terms such as “sportsugese” and “sportspeak” (Tannenbaum and Noah, 1959; Lipsyte, 1975, as cited in Billings et al., 2015, p. 4) were among the earliest phrases known to be the concept of the sport and communication tandem, including using sport language frequently in American culture, indicating its sports massive role among individuals and society. Billings et al. continues:

In 1975, Michael Real published a study of the Super Bowl, called, “*Super Bowl: Mythic Spectacle.*” In the article, Real explained that the televised broadcast of the Super Bowl was arranged to emphasize the mythology of football as a ritualized expression of American identity. That sport could be used to communicate—and thus affirm and extend—American values became one of the early themes of communication and sport scholarship (Billings et al., 2015, p. 7).

Following Real's argument, earlier studies regarding mass communication also supported the importance of sports and communication during the 1980s, involved more students and scholars in the sport communication field through the 1990s, and by the 2000s, "communication scholars found new avenues for engaging in sport-based research, resulting in numerous conferences and publications, including several special issues of communication journals dedicated exclusively to sport" (pp. 7-8). Boyle (2013) also conveys that sport, no matter what one's attitude may be towards it, also prominently serves as a business model that contains a massive storage of media content by the help of the emergence of digital media during the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Boyle, 2013, p. 89). As sport communication continues to accumulate popularity, the invention of social media also becomes an integral part of the field for students and scholars as well.

When pondering the earliest forms of social media, before Facebook and Twitter came into existence, email, messenger, and applications like Myspace come to mind. However, according to Farrington et al's (2015) chapter on social media, the authors bring up the interesting argument of the concept being first introduced during the 1<sup>st</sup> century, stating, "Social media may not have existed as a commonly accepted term until the mid-2000s, but it describes activity which can be tethered to social influence in any era, including Cicero's Rome" (p. 5, 8). Like the terms communication, gender, and identity, social media itself offers countless definitions redefined and used in various ways such as tools for personal and mass influence, as well as self-profit, serving as an umbrella term that references any online activity involving interaction between individuals and groups. As social media grows more complicated year to year with new concepts and digital media content, it can be argued that there is still more to come in its development. With social media becoming an innate presence in culture and the

everyday lives of its users, it is noticeable of the interaction it has with sport and athletes as well in the following chapters.

Media coverage of women's sports has increased as have stories about female athletes. While this coverage still lacks depth, it is an important improvement and reflects societal change and pressure. For example, Pedersen, Schneider and Whisenant (2003) note the need for more women in journalism positions to help turn the tide of male-dominated sports coverage (p. 378), while Farquharson and Marjoribanks (2012) add on the invisibility black female athletes face when it comes to women's sports coverage and the discrimination they endure for not meeting white American standards of feminine beauty, being labeled as more culturally masculine due to their skin color (p. 74).

Additionally, the media act as gatekeepers for what gets shown and what does not, especially when it comes to male versus female sports coverage. Carini and Weber's (2012) research states that what is shown sends messages to society and can influence the way one perceives gender and what's culturally important in media, such as favoring beauty over performance as many of these female athletes grace magazine covers because of their feminine beauty that is shown when wearing non-sports attire.

To elaborate further on the representation of women on magazine covers, Clavio and Eagleman (2011) emphasize that sports magazines like *Sports Illustrated* portrayed these women as sexualized objects as they wore revealing clothing that barely covered their private areas, were shown in seductive poses, and was seen as powerless and inferior to their male counterparts when seen in such editorial photographs (p. 296). Rather than seeing this as empowering, other females and sportswomen may find such predicaments as being below their male counterparts, and such examples of these photos of these women athletes can be found in *ESPN magazine's*

“The Body Issue” and the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, where coincidentally Britney Griner, Elena Delle Donne, and Skylar Diggins have been featured in previously.

Trujillo (1994) explained that members of the mass media play a pivotal role in reinforcing aspects of society in coverage of sports, and that the relationship between sports and the media is symbiotic, where both institutions offer mutual support for growth in return (p. 7). However, despite these limitations of sportswomen in the mass media and the sexualized stereotypes present on magazine covers, there has been an improvement on women’s media coverage in sports in recent years, especially during the Olympic games. Both media and Olympic officials concede the 2012 Olympics in London opened doors for female participation in the games and had more noticeable media coverage and on-air mentions (Billings et al., 2014; Creedon, 2014).

Billings et al. (2015) explain that one of the most emerging trends in communication and sport is the phenomenon of fantasy sports and fantasy sports leagues. With the help of the internet, fantasy sports exploded onto the scene during the 1990s and soon became a multibillion dollar industry, allowing a new form of fandom to progress and “provide an outlet for friends, family, and sometimes complete strangers to communicate and connect with one another” (p. 20). Fantasy sports and leagues give the user/consumer a virtual responsibility of being the owner of their own team and players that they draft online, then using their fantasy team to go head-to-head against other virtual owners’ teams in their online league, playing for cash rewards or for simple fun. Such fandom also falls under an ever-changing “Sport Fan Culture,” granting fans unbelievably close access to the sports, teams and athletes they follow based on the unique opportunities sports create for spectating fans and online users as well (p. 68).

With fandom being a popular commodity for sports, athletes, and fans, it is also becoming common for these professional sports players to be viewed as heroes and celebrities by their loyal fans. Such high praise from fans can also develop a certain intimate and imaginary para-social relationship and para-social interaction with the athlete although they may not know them personally (Trujillo, 1994, p. 46). Trujillo mentions such a relationship with Hall of Fame baseball player Nolan Ryan, explaining that although he did not know Ryan personally, he knew the baseball legend through the media. Admiration for these athletes from fans begin when a more personal connection is formed, which can then lead to the fan becoming more involved with the athlete's professional and personal life. If we all had a sports athlete that we idolized while growing up, wanting to adopt their mentality and be like them, mimicking their every move just by watching them play on television, that would be the type of heroic relationship Trujillo not only describes, but also part of what sport fan culture (fandom) consists of.

Along with fantasy sports and online sports leagues, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are among the biggest social platforms used by people around the world. Pictures, videos, and thoughts are posted on the user's page, and almost anyone can "add" or "follow" whomever they please with just a click of a button. Towards the end of 2014, Facebook, a social platform that allows you to post images, videos, messages, place phone calls, send invitations, and even conduct video chats, accumulated nearly 1.3 billion users worldwide and has since then become one of the world's most popular and heavily consulted social networking platforms (Hanson, 2016, p. 165). Twitter, known for its messaging and "tweeting" with 140 characters or less, was launched in 2006 and today has over 500 million users worldwide, while Instagram, a photo and video-sharing service that was created in 2010 and was bought by Facebook in 2012 for \$1 billion dollars, contains over 300 million users today worldwide (p. 210, 354-355). With the

emergence of these profitable social media markets and the power they have sustained for years, Fairfield (2017) mentions that digital and electronic media are becoming more of a way of life, and is also decreasing the need for in-person communication (p. 105). Although it is a harsh truth, other users may find that social media rather enhances their social life, serving as a tool for communicating with other fans and athletes (Coxon, 2017, p. 37). Beside fan interaction, these platforms also serve as a potential connection to various business and advertising opportunities as well.

Clavio et al. (2014) explains that social media is proficient for athletes and team organizations trying to sell and make profit on merchandise, shoes, tickets, as well as including the opportunity to advertise their sponsors. Twitter is not only a communication tool, but also an essential marketing strategy that attracts more “followers” including fans and consumers, giving these team organizations and athletes opportunities to also build and manage their brands (p. 26). “Online self-branding” is also now more crucial to most professional industries and involves attention being engaged and spread online while also being socially effective (Coxon, 2017, p. 41). The sports community, social media and fandom suddenly become intersected with one another and suddenly becomes a primary way of communication between the social media community.

In many cases, athletes utilize social media to promote their charity work and other information they feel comfortable sharing with their fans and followers, whether it'd be Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or all three. Creedon (2014) provides examples in certain twitter posts by female Track star and Olympian Allyson Felix, as well as WNBA star Elena Delle Donne where they took to Twitter to post about certain charity foundations they had attended to help bring awareness, including examples of other athletes who may use their social media presence to

voice their opinions on certain topics they feel passionate about, such as former U.S. Goalkeeper Hope Solo and her famous “Twitter Rampage” on gender controversy that went viral back in 2012 (p. 713).

Based on the research above, social media serve as an integral communication tool to express one’s thoughts and opinions, interact with countless numbers of users, and gain insight on news both locally and globally all in one place. These digital applications also give users a much closer look into the personal lives of who they follow based on the amount of information they share and private matters they choose to make public, which in some cases can also turn out troublesome and dangerous. More so, the use of social media also creates a risky situation when it involves sports communication combined with female athletes, as social media in turn can either help these women gain positive attention and exposure based on what they post, or hurt them by giving the media opportunities to expose them negatively based on what they post.

With these matters present, it is important to continue research that will study and further investigate the relationship between social media, social issues, and its users, who are professional women basketball players in this case. Although prior research between social media and athletes has been conducted, it is vital to also connect social media to a subgroup of athletes and dissect potential obstacles they may face when compared to their male counterparts. As social media continues to evolve, it proves crucial to discover how these athletes use such advances to communicate themselves to the public, their fandom, and other social media followers. As the current chapter highlighted key points and ongoing issues between the sports world and female athletes, the use of communication within social media can also possibly assist these athletes in how they deal with current societal topics. Therefore, this study deploys the use of three popular social media applications from three current and well-known WNBA players

using the themes of sports communication, gender, and sexual identity as guidance for these arguments.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Based on the proposed literature and interconnectivity between female athletes, media, race, gender, and sexual identity issues, a textual analysis is the method I plan to use for this research project. A textual analysis is ideal for examining three of the most popular players in the WNBA in recent years and identifying the different ways in which each player is talked about in mediated environments by fans, through profiles and team websites, as well as their own social media accounts. Social media platforms are optimal since they represent open, public channels of communication. I am most interested in viewing the selected players and their use of these platforms for their own personal gain and strategies they use to reveal or conceal potentially private issues such as sexuality.

My methodology is based on the textual analysis of artifacts using a framework of gender, sexual identity, and communication within sport. I searched for current and former WNBA players I felt were most suitable for this project and its research questions, especially when it came to content that was related to gender and sexual identity posted on their social media, as well as how active they were when posting on their accounts. Keeping this in mind, a group of three players became the target of my analysis who were all within the same WNBA draft class and were all well active on social media. These players were Brittney Griner, Elena Delle Donne, and Skylar Diggins, also known as the “3 to see” due to their outstanding basketball accolades in college prior to their stardom in the WNBA, the trio being picked 1<sup>st</sup> (Griner), 2<sup>nd</sup> (Delle Donne) and 3<sup>rd</sup> (Diggins) in the 2013 draft. I analyzed these players by doing a deep read of their social media accounts, consisting of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. My deep read focused on the type of content they posted on those applications, specifically looking for gender, sexual identity, and sport communication-related posts.

In honor of the WNBA's 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, I chose to examine each player's social media individually from the year the league turned twenty years-old, which was the 2016 season. This year was significant not only by its twentieth season milestone, but because it also showed a relationship with current social media culture (which will be discussed later in the analysis), and presented important and useful content for all three WNBA players as well. Research findings were then based on how they have communicated with society through their social media accounts and what have they decided to put out to the public that further reveals or conceals their gender and sexuality and what their stance is regarding those issues. Certain examples would be if these women have established their sexual identity to the public yet and/or if already publicly out, if their sexuality in addition to their gender has affected their career in anyway.

When gathering these particular posts from each player's Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, the types of communication strategies these three women used when constructing their gender and sexuality through messaging was what was ultimately pulled for the analysis. For the Facebook posts, each players' official profile page was first found, then using the search option within Facebook, searched for the player and all their posts from 2016. All useful content found from the year was then saved and stored in my personal Facebook profile. For Twitter, the social site's advanced search option was used, proving to be very convenient when looking for all tweets and retweets from each of the players Twitter feed during 2016. All useful content found from the year was then saved and stored by taking screenshots of the player's tweets and/or retweets. Lastly, a more simple but tedious approach was used for Instagram content during the year of 2016. Using both the mobile and website version of the social app, Instagram posts during the year were found by simply scrolling through each players' feed until every

image/video between the very first and last post of 2016 was found, marked, and also saved by taking screenshots of the images and captions.

All content from the year of 2016 was first dissected, and then divided into the three categories depicting the themes of gender and sexual identity, along with sports communication. For gender, posts were chosen by how they presented themselves on social media such as their appearance and how their wardrobe and/or makeup revealed ways in which they “do” gender. Specific words like feminism/feminist, girl, woman/women, female, and others that may pertain to gender and give insight to the players’ view on the term were looked at, including the use of the word gender itself. Posts also supporting and advocating for women’s rights or women athletes were also used, further determining how these athletes communicated the theme of gender identity.

Sexual identity-themed posts that were gathered consisted of any content that displayed their sexual orientation (images with their significant other, coming “out”) and posts that involved issues of sexuality like Pride night and the LGBTQ community. Specific words like gay, lesbian, dyke, butch, masculinity, femininity, and others that also lead to the notion of sexuality were included, as well as any mention of the term itself. In certain cases for both gender and sexual identity, female athletes are considered gay, or are known to be gay because of their style of dress, their appearance such as no makeup and/or shorter hair, or by the simple fact that they make it well known by sharing their sexuality with the public. Likewise, there are also those female athletes who share their heterosexuality by revealing their evidence of being married to the opposite sex, as well as dressing and appearing feminine. In other situations, certain female athletes who are gay may not yet feel comfortable yet sharing their identity in the

public sphere. The act of staying closeted may be individually challenging to players, particularly if they endure bias or are the target of rumors or innuendo.

Although gender and sexual identity are certain social aspects that these athletes can connect with fans and other followers on their social media, sport communication posts were also identified through the various other ways these athletes communicated a connection. These included posts about any charities or movements that one can help and be a part of, their endorsements and how they advertise using social media, as well as other social topics and opinions that were communicated within their fandom.

Through their content from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, approximately 80 posts were gathered from the year of 2016 that closely resembled the theme and/or use of sport communication through their social media. Approximately 100 posts were shown by the players in 2016 that closely related to their gendered appearance and how they self-presented themselves through their content within their social media. Lastly, sexual identity related posts from the three players' content in 2016 accounted for approximately 55 posts that closely resembled the aspect of sexuality and how they communicated the message of their sexual orientation and/or sexuality in general.

In addition to the social media content, I then looked at what other sources were related to or possibly mentioned these players and the issues involving gender, identity and race. This included each of the players' official website, their team's website and player profiles from WNBA.com, and certain online articles that further displayed these themes. I chose these websites due to the different types of content and information they present on their pages, as well as these mediated environments allowing me to discover how the players' own employer and organization commented about these women, (positive, negative, none) and if other content

displayed went beyond basketball statistics and fun facts about the players. The third party coverage was always less personal and reflected an institutional focus on team organization image.

The environment of sports is far more than an industry that rakes in billions of dollars annually on behalf of their marketable athletes, venues, and merchandise. Sports is a lifestyle that is universal and can even become political at times. Sports is important because it can influence the world and everyone who inhabits it, even serving as a metaphor for life for those who make a career out of it. However, besides all these bits and pieces that make sports what it is today, the importance of the concept is due to sports being socially significant, especially in today's society. For both genders, the wide world of sports and its mediated environment can serve as a release from the hardships of reality at times, inspire young children who have athletes as role models, motivate and alter one's mood, as well as bring fans from all over the world together through presence of fandom and the expanding influence of social media. This project is driven largely by my own interest as a sports fan, particularly as a fan of professional basketball.

This research project contributes to the previous literature work by applying the textual analysis of these three WNBA players and the importance of gender, identity, and the growing field of sport communication. More so, the analysis in this project has attempted to reveal the ongoing crisis of gender and sexual identity in today's progressive society, along with the utilization of sports communication and how mass and social media play a pivotal role when dealing with these female athletes and these issues. The following research questions helped steer the textual analysis for this research study.

**RQ 1:** How do WNBA players communicate gender and sexual identity in a mediated environment?

**RQ 2:** What communication strategies are present in constructing gender and sexuality in player's messaging?

## **Chapter 4: Analysis**

Chapter four presents the results of the study, explained in three separate but interconnected sections guided by my research questions. Within each section, similar and dissimilar themes were identified among the three WNBA players' use of social media, websites, and other channels of mediated content. The first section involves the subject of gender and how these three women involve the use of gender in their everyday lives to the public, including how they support or react to certain gender issues and topics. The second section involves the subject of sexual identity regarding how these female basketball players display and communicate their sexuality and other aspects of the term to the public as well. The third and final section of the analysis deals with the topic of sport communication (or communication in sport) and how these athletes exhibit ways in which they communicate and connect with their fan base through both basketball and personal positions.

As each section coincides with the information and explanations of gender, sexuality, and sport communication mentioned earlier in chapter two, data was found, along with other interesting observations presented in the forthcoming segment. Using these three themes as a framework to guide the research analysis, it was discovered that the three WNBA athletes analyzed presented characteristics that were also discussed in the literature review, including other facets of their methods of communication that were also vital for this research.

### **Sports Communication**

It is no surprise that there is interconnectivity between these three female basketball players and fans who follow them on their social media, getting a peek into their everyday lives beyond their professional basketball commitments. It is through these posts that fans are able to connect with the women on a more personal level, relating to their opinions on social issues,

their support for different charities and groups such as the LGBTQ community, and even advertising their sponsors. As Coxon (2017) explains, using social media is like playing a game for attention points, with the addition of followers, likes and retweets that adds on to the metric system of attention the user gets (p. 37). In other words, valuing another person's image, video, or opinion by liking, retweeting, or following them, gives them the attention they seek when they made that post. It's the attention from these users' followers that allows their image or message to be distributed broadly to others, which can also show the user the amount of influence they have within their social media community, whether their posts are personal, relatable, or entertaining. To go further in depth on how these WNBA players connect with fans and others through means of sports communication, their social media content as well as their official websites are analyzed for this section.

Before this first part of the analysis begins, it is important to recall the definition and sub-fields that fall within the concept of sports communication. Although the field is still being researched, revised, and added onto, the use of social media alone serves as part of what communication in sport symbolizes; the inclusion of gender and sexual identity fit easily into sports communication. This also includes sports highlights and other sport-related videos the public consumes on social media, the internet, local and national news. While fandom is a broad technical term, this project considers the role of fans and their interaction with players, particularly on social media platforms.

Also, because sports communication encompasses mass and social media, what these players type and post on their social media accounts falls under the umbrella of this term as well, which includes what these players mention about gender and sexual identity in their posts. Therefore, the theme of sports communication is first referred to in this chapter in order to better

understand the relationship of these three athletes and the content they post on their social media accounts and official websites.

Some interesting posts collected from Brittney Griner's content revealed themes tied to advertisement, opinions and views, as well as advocacy and promotion of local charity work for the Phoenix community. Other than starring in her first Sports Center commercial for the kickoff of the WNBA's 20<sup>th</sup> season, another set of content presented by Griner was her personal connection and support that came from her fan base by way of social media content. As Griner is also known for her body art, a retweet from her in April of 2016 showed a picture of a fan's forearm with a tattoo that read "Brittney Griner #Fan4Life," while a month later, another retweet from Griner showed a picture of a person's fist, revealing Griner's actual autograph tattooed on the side of the man's hand (Griner, 2016w). While Griner also made it clear through her posts she enjoyed videogames (which others can play with Griner online as well), Griner's celebrity status resulted in her getting asked to prom by one of her fans through a Twitter post. Griner could not attend but did acknowledge the invitation; "That's really sweet of u to ask me! I'm sorry I'm overseas" Griner, 2016t).

Along with fans communicating their admiration for Griner through social media, the Phoenix Mercury star also shared her opinions on political and social issues in 2016. In one of her tweets, Griner shared a picture of her game day shoes with the hashtags "SupportTheBlue" and "#blacklivesmatter" written on them, along with both her parents' names as they were both police officers. (Griner, 2016y). During a year of violence and brutality involving police and African American victims, Griner's support for both groups showed how she responded to this social matter. Another significant topic during 2016 was the presidential election featuring Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. During Trump's campaign for the presidency, Griner took to

her Instagram to show her opinion of the Republican, first showing a comment from Donald Trump in 1998 where he mentions how he'd run as a Republican since "they're the dumbest group of voters in the country" (Griner, 2016l), and then posting a response to Trump's win, saying, "Racism isn't over, but I'm over racism" (Griner, 2016j). With these posts made by Griner, they show her opinions regarding topics such as social injustice and politics, and while her views may differ from many of her fans and supporters, it clearly resonates with fans and followers.

Other facets of Griner's social media presence come into play, such as her charitable work in the community donating pairs of shoes to the homeless in the Phoenix area. With the use of social media, Griner posted on her Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter accounts to bring as much awareness as she could about the drive and the homeless who are in need. Just a few days later, Griner tweeted a picture of her smiling while sitting down in the gym with dozens of pairs of shoes surrounding her, along with the caption "We already have nearly 500 pairs! Thank you to EVERYONE who has donated to my #HeartandSole drive!" (Griner, 2016z). It is clear that even for charitable work, using social media as a way to advertise a message to thousands of followers emphasizes the connectivity Griner has with her fan base.

Her advertising content, overshadowed by her charity, public opinions and personal influence on fans, is also visible within some of her posts to fans. For example, after obtaining her gold medal in the summer Olympics, Griner posted a video on her Instagram dancing in her basketball uniform wearing and talking about a certain brand of headphones and even using the hashtag "#ad" (Griner, 2016i), along with the promotional post of a link to her online store she mentioned on her Facebook page. Griner's online store sells merchandise such as shirts, hoodies

and other basketball gear from Nike that either has her name on it or her logo which consisted of a star in the colors of the LGBTQ flag (Griner, 2016q).

While Griner's official website is not regularly maintained, it is worth noting that the site contains content aimed at Griner's fans. Although these projects and movements may be prior to that of 2016, Griner's causes like her *It Gets Better Project* and the BG:BU movement both address social issues such as coming out and taking a stand against bullying (Griner, 2015a). These themes are likely to resonate with her fans and Griner on her media team see the value in keeping that information posted. Furthermore, her official website also talks about her endorsement deal with Nike, as well as her "personal" section that displays media content of some of her personal accomplishments, news and events from years past.

Compared to the findings of Griner, personal posts may not be Elena Delle Donne's main preference when it came to her posts, as discovered in the two previous sections of analysis. While examining her social media content for how she communicates in sport, Delle Donne's posts were consistent and were aimed more toward basketball and charity work. A large segment of Delle Donne's social media posts focused on the release of her first signature basketball shoe from Nike, one of her major sponsors. Across all three of her social media platforms, Delle Donne spread the word of her shoes as often as she could saying among other things, "So EXCITED to share that my Nike Hyperdunk shoe is now available!" and "As I lace up to play, it's always a good reminder of someone I love" (Nike Basketball, 2016c) (Delle Donne, 2016j). While her shoe was indeed a milestone for her young career, Delle Donne also retweeted several posts from other sites that were advertising the release of the shoe, as well as pictures of the shoes from fans who had purchased the footwear online from Nike, further extending her influence on her fan base.

Delle Donne also used social media to highlight her relationship with the Nike brand, posting video clips of her Nike commercials on Facebook, as well as taking to Instagram to show off her new Nike sportswear. Another act from Delle Donne that kept up the Nike endorsement tradition was a post from her in August which featured the athlete donating pairs of Nike baby shoes to newborns at Christiana Care hospitals, with a special message in each shoebox from herself and Nike that also displayed the brand's infamous slogan "Just Do It" along with the trademark "Unlimited Future" at the bottom of the message (Delle Donne, 2016d).

Delle Donne's official website is geared towards a business-orientation in the same way her digital presence is maintained. Delle Donne continued the trend by displaying her sponsorships by Nike and Gatorade along with her Special Olympics and Christiana Care hospital charities on the bottom of her websites background. Along with those mentions were several sections on her site that showed more ways in which Delle Donne communicated and connected with her fandom. The about section talked about the upbringing, persistence, work ethic, and stardom of the former WNBA most valuable player, which serves as a motivational framework for aspiring female basketball players and fans. Something different than with Griner's site, was the contact section, allowing fans to communicate directly with Delle Donne through fan mail and Twitter, as well as agency contact information for business enquiries, event appearances, and potential endorsements for the athlete (Delle Donne, 2016aa).

Also included in her website was her section involving her basketball camp known as the Delle Donne Skills Academy, and her media section cataloging media coverage including through 2016 more of her Nike commercials, news of a 20-foot statue of Delle Donne erected at her home arena, as well as the start of a new charity known as The Elena Delle Donne charitable Foundation which is dedicated to her older sister Lizzie who suffers from cerebral palsy, autism,

and was born both deaf and blind, as Delle Donne mentions on the page (Delle Donne, 2016ee). For something as personal as this matter for Delle Donne to share, it shows how the charity benefits many who face similar circumstances, or know of a family member or friend who suffer from similar maladies.

Ultimately, one particular section on Delle Donne's site is strictly devoted to a passion project the 6' 5" basketball star partakes in during the offseason; a business called Delle Donne Designs. This venture of design involves home décor made from different elements of fine wood by Delle Donne herself, producing different sized tables, cutting boards, wooden basketball hoops, wall art, and many more useful creations (Delle Donne, 2016bb). Furthermore, Delle Donne Designs also shows the construction of each piece, along with the pricing. Although it is a business venture rather than an endorsement for Delle Donne, her side project much like her first signature shoe, also has the potential to be a part of the economy that Delle Donne finds herself a part of now. It further indicates the connection Delle Donne has with her fan base that goes well beyond the sport of basketball.

Skylar Diggins has the broadest presence in the social media sphere, wasting no opportunity to use her platforms to advertise her endorsements, basketball camps, and opinions. While Skylar Diggins is coincidentally another member of the Nike basketball family, the majority of her social media posts emphasize branding.

Much like Elena Delle Donne, Diggins also had the privilege of getting her own signature shoe, designing a special edition that was released in May of 2016 in honor of Mother's Day and dedicated specifically to her mother as well. Several posts from Diggins upon release of the shoe were made, including captions about her sneaker such as "NOTHING can ruin my mood right now! Check my shoe out! They're gonna go fast!", also "We did it, Mom!", and "Get yours

now!” (Diggins, 2016d, 2016e, 2016f). There were also plenty of retweets and reposts from Diggins of other accounts who were also pushing the arrival of her Mother’s Day inspired shoe, such as Nike basketball’s website, and fans who showed images after purchasing her shoes (Nike Basketball, 2016b).

Other than her shoe, Diggins communicated a great deal of content from the Nike campaign. Her content featured new Nike women’s basketball gear, her official brand of Nike headbands for women, her personal basketball camp gear that sponsored by Nike, videos and images of her training and working out while mentioning the Nike gear she was wearing, her appearance in Nike’s pro bra campaign commercial, and even taking over Nike Basketball’s Snapchat account for the day, which is another popular social media application (Diggins, 2016c). While Griner and Delle Donne are also part of the Nike Women’s basketball family, Diggins appeared to have more social interaction with the company, especially when it came to communicating her Nike endorsement to her fans.

Other than Nike, Diggins also had sponsors which she proudly highlighted through her social media platforms, such as #DairyGood which advocated for children’s nutrition, and sponsored a basketball camp for children on behalf of Diggins. Another endorsement involved the popular clothing franchise Nordstrom, which Diggins supported during their anniversary sale in 2016. Modeling clothes from fall fashion coats to bras, one of Diggins’ posts about the sale read, “Loved being part of the @Nordstrom Anniversary Sale campaign this year! Can’t wait to shop the #nsale on 7/22 #sponsored” (Diggins, 2016a, 2016l). Diggins also advertised her partnership with Rockin’ Refuel in several posts. The protein beverage company let Diggins take over their Instagram account for a day as well, featuring her basketball workouts along with a prize giveaway (Diggins, 2016q).

It was evident that Diggins treated her sponsors just as serious as her sponsors treated her, spotlighting their brand to all her followers by means of social media. In another aspect of Diggins communication in sport, are the multiple posts related to her annual basketball camp known as “Shoot 4 The Sky” or #S4TS for short. Diggins travels across the country to cities like Houston, Chicago, and Tampa Bay in order to promote her camp and pre-registration process (Diggins, 2016b). Much like Delle Donne, Diggins communicates with some of her youngest fans and teaches them life lessons and goals beyond the realm of basketball. In addition to her camps was also an interesting side project Diggins released in 2016; a children’s book called *The Middle School Rules of Skylar Diggins: As Told by Sean Jensen*. The book featured a cartoon likeness of the athlete as a professional basketball player standing next to a much younger, middle school cartoon of herself (Diggins, 2016s). The release of the book in July of 2016 emphasizes a connection with Diggins’ younger audience and fans who aspire to be like their role model.

Moving away from the endorsements and basketball camps Diggins advocates for, her social media posts revealed opinion-based content from the star as well. Though not as political or personal as Brittney Griner, Diggins did present opinions on issues through her social media platforms, whether it was everyday thoughts, responses to certain people on Twitter, motivational posts, or even tweets aimed at the WNBA. For example, the month of October featured posts of Diggins’ guest appearances on ESPN and His And Hers, discussing game analysis of the WNBA playoffs as well as discussing other sports alongside comedian and actor Kevin Hart (Diggins, 2016u). Her tweets also displayed how the athlete’s road to recovery from her previous ACL tear makes her a #rehabwarrior, her paying homage to the many female basketball stars that came before her, her take and analysis on certain professional and college

games, and also thanking the fans for their support after the 2016 season; her first season for the Dallas Wings (Diggins, 2016h). Diggins also voiced her frustration toward the league through her Twitter posts, commenting in May of 2016 on how the WNBA needs to “tighten up,” then again in July about the #blacklivesmatter social movement and her disappointment in how the league was handling the situation by fining players and teams who wore the BLM shirts during pre-game warmups (Grosbard, 2016, para. 1). Diggins’ tweet read “The WNBA is fining \$5k per team + \$500 per player = \$33k. Excessive. For using this platform to speak out! Says a lot!” (Diggins, 2016g).

Lastly, Diggins’ official website was almost, if not, a direct mirror of the content she posted through social media, including her basketball camp information, her online shop and her partnerships as well which even featured a new endorsement. The endorsement came from a sports hydration drink called Body Armor, a direct competitor of Gatorade, which had previously aired a commercial that Diggins appeared in (Diggins, 2016ee). Her site showcased items such as Diggins’ personal biography and a timeline that featured events during 2016. Diggins was among several nominees for the 2016 Sportswoman of the Year at the BET awards, demonstrating her connectivity to fans and the distinctive community of popular music culture.

Differences and similarities were noticed between the three female basketball players through their social media posts and personal websites. It is evident that social media was a primary channel by which these athletes interacted with fans and followers, showing support and advocacy for certain events and charities, as well as advertising their sponsor’s brands and other endorsements. It pinpoints how the women connect with their fans on a more personal level, such as Griner’s fans sharing tattoos of the athlete’s name, not to mention her charitable work in the Phoenix community. Griner’s political and social views also played a role in her public

persona but also anchored her relationship to what she posts on social media about these issues. Not all may relate or agree, however it is clear that Griner uses these platforms to show her ways of communicating with her fan base.

Delle Donne and her multiple charitable events that involve help and interaction from others proved to be her outreach to her fans, garnering support from those who also advocate and deal with many of the circumstances Delle Donne features in these charities, such as the Special Olympics. Although the production of her shoe was a huge milestone, it was also clear that compared to Diggins, Delle Donne and Griner did not market nearly as much Nike gear or other endorsements. Delle Donne's use of her skills academy on her website along with her media section tackled other issues that were both basketball and non-basketball related and cemented a relationship with her fan base.

Analyzing Diggins' presence, the Dallas Wings star used social media platforms to effectively market herself. While Diggins plays professional basketball for a living, it was evident that Diggins' posts of different endorsements throughout the year helped the athlete make a living off the court. Diggins used social media platforms to market her brand as well as connect to all her fans and followers through her three accounts.

## **Gender**

During the research process, it was clear that advocacy for women and women in sports was present with all three WNBA players. The theme of gender was a large part of each of the players' social media accounts, personal websites, team websites and player profiles on the leagues website. The following section will look at how these women presented appearance on social media, including types of attire worn and style of dress at various occasions during the

year of 2016. The theme of how these players support women athletes and display their gender roles through social media will be examined in this section of the thesis.

According to Smith and Sanderson (2015), athletes rely heavily on their public image and how the public perceives them, noting “With the advent of social media, athletes are now endowed with the capability to take more control over their self-presentation and express aspects of their identity that they perceive to be most salient. This opens up avenues for fans that are generally not seen in traditional mainstream media coverage...” (p. 345). For instance, in all three of the females’ posts on social media, it was evident that each player had pictures of themselves in attire they preferred when off the court, irrespective of a specific gender.

Brittney Griner’s posts, especially image-based ones, communicated a great deal about her identity. In one tweet from Griner in April, the 6’8” star was on a skateboard rolling down the street at night, topless, with jean shorts sagging and her blond dreadlocks in a ponytail; the caption read: “I miss Longboarding. #birdchest #proud #freethenip (Griner, 2016v). Three others posts on her Instagram feed showed similar visuals, one a closeup of Griner topless from the back showing a variety of tattoos and jeans with the word “RAW” bedazzled on the back. The second image was of her in a pool topless, with her long dreads covering her chest, and one more of her topless in swimming trunks lounging on a hammock in Cabo, San Lucas during the offseason (Griner, 2016c, 2016d, 2016k).

Griner even bared all in one post found on her Instagram account in March of 2016, however the image was from a photo shoot for ESPN’s Body Issue shot back in 2015. Although the actual image was not as recent, Griner’s reason for posting a picture of her naked self from almost a year before was justified through her caption:

So I use(d) to get ask(ed) and still get ask(ed) SO WHY DON'T YOU HAVE TITTIES?  
me: Well I was sick one day and I sneezed and them big old things fell off and I lost  
them! TRUE STORY! I use(d) to say that to turn it into a joke so I could laugh and not  
get hurt by someone making fun of me! But now! I still say it because I really do think  
it's funny and I work so hard to get to the point where I am now mentally where nothing  
hurts me! I love being naked and I don't care people seeing this bird chest of mine and  
making fun of it! Go (a)head! I love myself and I love my body! (Griner, 2016e)

Though Griner's message may be humorous, it is serious in the fact that even now when asked  
about a personal and sensitive issue, she has developed a strong mentality to positively accept  
her personal image and view of herself despite criticism from others. Of course, not every post of  
Griner showed the basketball star without a shirt on, as the proud "bird-chested" female also had  
several posts wearing clothes, consisting of sport coats, button-down shirts, slacks, baggy t-  
shirts, skinny jeans, converse, and attire such as boat shoes and shorts from the 2016 Olympic  
summer games in Rio where she participated. It should also be noted that although there is  
hardly any mention of it on her posts, makeup as well as nail polish is visible on some of  
Griner's personal images and photo shoots.

The relationship between Grinner's love of nudity and masculine sense of dress may be  
misunderstood at times, though a particular post from her Facebook feed showed a link from the  
*New York Times* website, talking about how women in the WNBA have not established  
themselves in the fashion world like their male counterparts in the NBA have, but how stars like  
Griner are emerging as a potential style symbol (Griner, 2016p). On the post was a picture of  
Griner in her all-white tuxedo ensemble she wore for the 2013 WNBA draft. Sharing this post,

reveals how Griner's proud and unapologetic sense of style also shows her ease as a woman with unique style influenced by male clothing.

Elena Delle Donne and her style of appearance through social media shows a hybrid of both business and a more comfortable sense of style. Although several posts showed Delle Donne in workout gear or her basketball uniform, her makeup was intact along with her hair in a long ponytail. Delle Donne showed her 2016 cover shoot with *Chicago Magazine*, with one of the images from her Facebook page showing a close up of her in basketball gear, makeup, and a ponytail with the headline stating, "From Jump Shot to Cover Shot," (Delle Donne, 2016a, 2016m). In addition, a repost from her Instagram account showed a sneak peak of the cover shot and the cover story title which said, "She Got Game: Basketball Superstar Elena Delle Donne," along with a caption for the photo that let viewers know who was responsible for her hair and makeup, and also provided a link to view the behind the scenes footage of the magazine shoot (*Chicagomag*, 2016).

Several other posts of Delle Donne that year showed the star's full frame, mostly in attire from her 2016 role in the Olympic Games in Rio, wearing Team USA warmups and the exclusive outfit made for all Olympic participants from the United States. Delle Donne appears at ease in these images; highlighting her style of and makeup.

In 2016 Delle Donne followed in Griner's footsteps and appeared in ESPN's *Body Issue* magazine in July, baring all with nothing but her hands and a basketball covering her private areas. Much like Griner's proud post of her decision to bare all, Delle Donne had cross-posted the image and link of her *Body Issue* experience on all three social media accounts, showing the 6'5" athlete in an action pose with a basketball in hand, makeup, and her hair now resembling a braided ponytail (*ESPN*, 2016). Delle Donne's caption for the image read: "Go grab a copy of

the @ESPN #BodyIssue and check out the gallery here: [espn.com/Body](http://espn.com/Body). BIG THANK YOU to @carlos\_serrao and your team for making this shoot such a comfortable and amazing experience for me!” (Delle Donne, 2016b). A day later, the newest WNBA player to bare all for the magazine retweeted a post that showed one of the images done at the shoot, showing the bare Delle Donne kneeling down on both knees, basketball in lap, and bowing her head with her eyes closed (Red Eye, 2016).

Although a ponytail for certain images and photo shoots posted by Delle Donne may be her more comfortable preference of hair style, the appearance and self-presentation seen through the athlete’s social media posts shows somewhat of a business-oriented style. In other words, though Delle Donne can pose in the nude, there also seems to be no issue when it comes to wearing makeup, tying her hair, and throwing on a basketball uniform to feel comfortable as well.

The way in which Skylar Diggins presented herself on Instagram was much different than Griner and Delle Donne, as visuals of the Dallas Wings guard showed many more hair and makeup closeups, and even having the full treatment in photos of her wearing her basketball uniform. For instance, approximately seven of her posts showed Diggins in her basketball uniform for media day, or in workout gear posing for Nike campaign and personal workouts while having makeup on and her hair styled straight, curls, or in a sleek ponytail. Although these images were planned photo shoots rather than candid shots, it can be inferred that Diggins shares a similar philosophy as retired basketball star and model Lisa Leslie, that appearance both on and off the court should be polished (Heinecken, 2016).

Diggins also appeared to have more fashion shoots posted on her social media, wearing elegant dresses, heels, jewelry, and makeup whether she was posing for magazines like *Vogue*

and *Modern Luxury*, or walking the red carpet at the 2016 ESPYs (Diggins, 2016j). A particular post from her Facebook she shared during the year even came from *Sports Illustrated.com* which was the Fashionable 50 Issue, presenting the world's top 50 most stylish and fashionable athletes which also included Diggins herself (Diggins, 2016k).

Diggins had also posed for *Sports Illustrated* infamous swimsuit issue on the magazine's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2014. Although this was shot two years prior, Diggins had posted one of the visuals from her shoot on Instagram in January of 2016, saying, “#tbt #SISwim50 that one time (Diggins, 2016m). Unlike the body issue where athletes bare all for the world to see, Diggins' swimsuit experience consisted of several pictures of the athlete posing in various bikinis (*SI*, 2014). Based on the images examined from Diggins' social media stream, it is evidently clear how different the self-presentation style is compared to Griner and Delle Donne, such as the majority of her visuals being staged photos rather than “selfies” and displaying her use of makeup and hairstyle.

It's important to take into account how these women decide to present themselves based on their respective social media feeds, as their visuals showed what these women feel comfortable wearing on a daily basis both on and off the court. Although these women may have shown differences regarding their preferred attire off the court, they shared similarities in the ways they decided to communicate their views of gender personally, which can be inferred as unapologetic, proud, and inspirational for fans and followers who are also being discriminated for their non-traditional style of dress and/or appearance. This message remains important in that each woman is comfortable when sharing who they are as women, whether they're wearing makeup and dresses, basketball and workout gear, or suits and bowties.

In addition to how these women choose to self-present their appearance through social media, it is also important to examine how they are presented in other mediated environments such as their own personal website or sites that are not handled themselves. With the style of appearance still being what is strictly looked at, each player's own personal domain will be discussed, along with their team's website and their player profiles listed on the league's website in order to explain if and how any of these sites differ from what is personally put out through social media by the three athletes.

Brittney Griner's personal website showed more of the athlete in action rather than her persona off the court as expressed by her topless Instagram photos. Other than a single picture of her in action at the 2016 Olympic games, the website does not seem to be updated past the year of 2015, however the site shows title pictures of her in uniform both posing and in action on the court. What was more interesting however was her player profile on the league's website, not so much because of her appearance on the page, but because of what was mentioned about her appearance in the personal section found in her bio.

Although Griner's height and ability is a sight to see, it is almost commonplace that her measures and attributes be compared to that of her male counterparts in the NBA. For example, the first three points of her personal bio mention how she wears a men's shoe size of 17, the size of her hand is .25 inches wider than that of LeBron James, as well as her wingspan which is .5 inches longer than former NBA player Andrew Bynum, who stands seven-feet tall (*WNBA*, 2016). Other than Griner's three fun facts being pointed out, her actual appearance on the profile page seemed to be standard, showing a small picture of Griner's face smiling for the camera which appeared to be taken during media day, and to the right of that a larger picture of Griner in-action during a game.

Also included was the website of the Phoenix Mercury, which was the team Griner played for during the 2016 season. Much like the player's profile page, the website appeared to be strictly business oriented and standard, showing visuals of Mercury players in action or posing in their uniform for links regarding the team's schedule, tickets, roster, community events and other basketball related news (Mercury, 2016). Other links showed very little of Griner's appearance and more of her highlights and game videos during the season instead.

Elena Delle Donne and her personal website were updated constantly from the player's layout, visuals to her links, and galleries. Particular sections of the site like the home page and media links had visuals of Delle Donne in her basketball gear, makeup, and ponytail either posing for the camera or shots from her games. The majority of her media section for the year 2016 showed in her basketball uniform and workout gear as well, showing links about her in-game highlights, her time in the 2016 Olympics, her personal workouts, and behind the scenes footage from her Nike commercials and Nike Women campaign. Other than her ESPN Body Issue photo shoot which also appeared within her media, a particular link from her 2016 media section showed the star dressed in a black spaghetti strap shirt, black leggings, makeup on and hair styled in a braid this time, posing along with WNBA veterans Sue Bird and Tamika Catchings for their photo opportunity in *Glamour* during the month of June (Delle Donne, 2016cc).

Delle Donne's player profile on the league's website seemed standard as far as appearance goes for the site, having the smaller picture of the player on the left side showing a headshot of her smiling for the camera and then a bigger picture of Delle Donne on the right of her in action. Her personal section in the biography was different from Griner's however, this

time mentioning personal facts about her life such as her parents, siblings and birthdate, with no comparisons to NBA stars and her measurements whatsoever (*wnba*, 2016).

Along with her player profile and much like the Phoenix Mercury's site, Delle Donne's appearance on the Chicago Sky's website was also standard and focused strictly on the WNBA players' appearance in uniform. Delle Donne was featured in some links on the site such as community events and tickets, however visuals of the athlete were generally of her in her basketball uniform posing or in-game as well.

The website of Skylar Diggins reflected much of what the star displayed through social media, which showed a lot of glamour and posing in her basketball uniform and attire off the court. Diggins had several sections on her website showing images that accompanied her links to events, philanthropy and other sections showing her in makeup regardless of the attire she was in. Diggins' photo gallery of images showed her modeling for photo shoots and headshots that were not related to basketball. Although there were a few shots of her in her basketball uniform or workout gear, they also showed the star wearing makeup nonetheless, as well as some of those images being posed for (Diggins, 2016bb).

Skylar Diggins' player profile visuals were also different from Griner's and Delle Donne's headshots, as the smaller picture on the left showed the headshot of Diggins with makeup fully on and her hair semi-curled. Then for the much larger picture on the left (which one would assume would be a picture of Diggins in action such as the previous two players had on their profiles), the same exact image of Diggins headshot on the left was used instead, enlarged and emphasizing the face and smile of Diggins (*WNBA*, 2016). It was almost expected that it would mention something about her fashion style or appearance based on her visuals for her player profile on the league's site, however the text in her personal section was standard.

The Dallas Wings official website appeared to be fairly simple compared to the other two team websites; links were utilitarian with connections for tickets, news, and videos. Videos present showed highlights and game previews alongside stills from the players in action, showing Diggins and teammates of hers in-action or using the Dallas Wings logo instead (Wings, 2016).

Through what was examined between the players' social media and websites, it is clear that there are differences among what is personally posted and what is posted by the employer, displaying more images based on the team and the WNBA rather than what they are wearing or how they look in their daily lives. It was also noticeable of the particular difference in style of each player's dress and choice of self-presentation in which all three could be considered to have their own vision, how they each prefer to do gender and show themselves other than what the websites post of them. With these themes of appearance being noticed, it is also important to examine how these women acknowledge being a female athlete, along with supporting and/or advocating for other sportswomen, whether it is in the WNBA or other sports. In the following section, I discuss how these three women show support and advocate for themselves and other woman in their respective fashion on social media and their personal websites.

If there is a person or group who will test the idea of gender being more of a personal, psychological identity than just a binary term, Brittney Griner would come to mind. Through a few of her posts on social media, it was interesting to discover Griner's thoughts on the term of gender based on visuals and text she displayed through her Twitter and Instagram feeds. First, a tweet from Griner in January of 2016 was an image of a shirt with the words "Gender is Here," showing a finger pointing above to an illustration of a brain. Right below the phrase were the words "Not Here," showing another finger pointing down toward the genitalia of the person

wearing the shirt (Griner, 2016s). Another image came from Griner's Instagram account, showing the difference of what gender is and what gender is not, such as being a spectrum rather than just male or female, or how one relates to themselves other than just sexual orientation, then also adding on to her outlook of gender later in April, tweeting, "Just because someone looks different or identify as a different gender doesn't mean you can laugh or tease them! Some [people] are just assholes" (Griner, 2016a, 2016u).

Switching away from Griner's take on gender, the athlete also shared posts depicting certain support and messages about gender and being a female basketball player. One post she shared on her Facebook showed Griner in action during the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio while notching their 43<sup>rd</sup> consecutive win, the post mentions how Griner had overcome her self-esteem issues related to gender and the adversity she faced due to the term (Griner, 2016o). Another Facebook post from the Olympics showed an article about the on-going feud between Griner and NBA star Demarcus Cousins playing each other in a game of 1-on-1 with the excerpt reading, "Brittney Griner has always loved playing against the boys" (*USA Today*, 2016). Other shares included Griner's opinion on not lowering the rims to nine feet in the WNBA, her advocacy and recommendation of a student-made documentary on transgenderism shared with her by one of her followers, and her Nike Women's Basketball campaign in which her caption reads: "Best Family to be apart of! @nikebasketball #bringyourgame #NikeAllDay #WeGotNext (Griner, 2016f).

Through these posts and images, Griner uses her social media platforms and status to advocate and display her opinions and thoughts of not only being a female athlete, but on the philosophy of the term gender itself. Her posts also garner influence with her followers and fans, as seen by the documentary shared with her by another Twitter user who felt the athlete would

appreciate and support the video's message on transgender athletes in sports based on what she says and shows in her posts (Griner, 2016r).

Elena Delle Donne's posts also showed commitment to supporting women, displaying several pictures, videos, and links to stories and articles that lent to the theme of how she expressed herself being a female athlete. Some videos posted on her Facebook included the star practicing by herself, one of her shooting the basketball with the caption #watchmework and another video a few weeks later of Delle Donne actually dunking the basketball (Delle Donne, 2016k, 2016l). The phrase "Watch Me Work" was the slogan adopted for the 20<sup>th</sup> season of the WNBA to show the evolution of professional women's basketball and how the league is headed for a promising future (Megdal, 2016, para. 3), while the video of the dunk alone shows the athleticism of the 6' 5" star that is not usually seen during a women's basketball game. Delle Donne's Facebook also consisted of her new Nike Women commercial, an article from *Bleacher Report* on how NBA star Draymond Green learned his fundamentals from watching WNBA games (Depta, 2016), a post of her being nominated for choice Best Female Athlete of the year at the Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards, and another video this time advocating for the "Lean in Together" movement, an organization that the WNBA partnered with to help celebrate women who support other woman (Delle Donne, 2016o) (WNBA, 2016).

In addition, her Twitter feed also followed the trend of support and advocacy for women throughout the year. Certain retweets from Delle Donne showed her at the first ever ESPNW Impact 25 Gala, where she along with other female sportswomen were among the attendees (espnW, 2016a) (Foudy, 2016), her "absolutely incredible" response on new WNBA president Lisa Borders (Best, 2016), her take on the sexist remarks female athletes face (*New York Magazine*, 2016), and support for a pair of female firsts, such as former WNBA player Becky

Hammon being named to the 2016 NBA All-Star coaching staff (*Bleacher Report*, 2016), and softball star Jennie Finch being manager for a day for a men's professional baseball team (DelleDonne, 2016g).

A retweet from the Nike Basketball campaign showed the hashtag #WeGotNow in support of Nike women basketball players and the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the WNBA (Nike Basketball, 2016a), as well as a tweet of her own supporting the United State of Women Summit, and soccer star Carli Lloyd's article on fighting for equal pay (Delle Donne, 2016f, 2016g). There were also tweets of links to more videos of Delle Donne's advocacy for the #LeanInTogether movement, as well as the use of the hashtag #Fempire, which, created for women sharing their inspirational stories, was used in certain retweets from Delle Donne, such as a video of her mother being an inspiration for her uniqueness (Lifetime, 2016), and another of her big sister also being an inspiration (Lifetime Canada, 2016).

Her time in the 2016 Olympics also served as a platform for further support, retweeting a response on why the United States women's team were so dominant in their pursuit to Gold, saying: "Three generations of Title IX later, you reap what you sow" (*EspnW*, 2016b). Adding on the success of the women's basketball team, another tweet from Delle Donne in September read: "SO proud of my team! Hard work pays off, we will Keep Playing #LikeAGirl – will YOU?!" followed by a visual of Delle Donne shooting the ball with the hashtag "#WinLikeAGirl" (Delle Donne, 2016i).

Other than her visuals and posts on social media, the official website of the star also offered a few instances of supporting women and growing up playing basketball. In her media section, news and stories from 2016 included a video of her dunking on both 9 and 10-foot high rims, attending the Womens Sports Conference in Chicago, showing her intense weight and

cardio workout, a story on “The Unlikely Media Interest in All Things Women’s Sports” and her new Nike commercial where she appeared as the lone female in the clip, among several other news stories and links. Searching through the site, it was clear that her strong opinion on competing with the males, quoting in her about section, “I could do whatever I wanted as a girl, whatever my brother did. I could play against the boys and achieve whatever they did” (Delle Donne, 2016dd).

Whether it was her Facebook or Twitter, Elena Delle Donne’s use of social media to express her opinion was also beneficial in the sense of allowing her to show her advocacy and support for women athletes of all sports through different types of social media applications. Therefore, her messages of social rights and how she performs as a women athlete is accessible to a larger group of followers and fans than to those who only see the athlete through newspapers or online sports blogs. Delle Donne’s official website also conveyed these messages through a personal but more business-like setting, such as relating to her fans and women athletes while also communicating the ethics of practice and other basketball-related content.

Skylar Diggins showed use of her support and advocacy in similar ways to her display of appearance through the use of her social media, mentioned earlier in this section. For example, a Facebook post shared by Diggins in 2016 showed a link to the women’s fashion blog and online store called *Project Gravitass*, where the site honors certain women about their careers, their charities and advocacy, as well as their wardrobe (Diggins, 2016i). That particular month’s honoree was Diggins herself, interviewing the South Bend, Indiana native about her pre- game rituals, goals for the year, philanthropy, and her mother being her role model, all while posing in outfits made by the site rather than wearing her basketball uniform.

In February of 2016, Diggins had posted one of her visuals from her Nike campaign ad mentioning in her caption how she was proud to represent both Nike basketball and Nike Women, followed by another post in March of her in an action pose alongside WNBA superstar Diana Taurasi for another Nike campaign shoot, with the title reading: “When you find a teammate, you discover strength. #InternationalWomensDay” (Diggins, 2016n, 2016o). In lieu of the twentieth WNBA season, Diggins also posted on her Instagram the same visual as Griner, Delle Donne, and seven other WNBA athletes for Nike Basketball’s #WeGotNow movement, in order to support the partnership and tenure of Nike and women’s basketball (Diggins, 2016p).

Much like Delle Donne’s website, Diggins also shared links and news about her means of support and being a woman who was an athlete. One of her posts in the media showed Diggins featured in Nike’s “Watch Me Work” commercial celebrating the league’s twentieth season, along with her being named woman of the month for Project Gravitass, and her philanthropy of giving high school teens scholarships, which on the site showed seven out of ten of them to be girl basketball players. Diggins’ mission statement under her biography section also features the star’s position as a role model both on and off the court, stating:

Diggins is not only a dedicated and persistent athlete, but she’s also a role model and source of inspiration for other young women and girls. She currently sits on the GenYouth Board of Directors and recognizes outstanding teens through her Skylar’s Scholars program. As a fan favorite, leader on the court, fitness guru and growing fashion icon, she proves it’s possible to be a strong woman in the spotlight (Diggins, 2016aa)

Through this statement, it is also worth mentioning how the words “fashion icon” are also used in the same paragraph, as they are not present in either of Griner’s or Delle Donne’s official websites. It can be inferred that Diggins’ message is not meant to offend other female athletes,

but rather shows how the athlete not only views herself as a woman playing in the WNBA, but also as a fashion icon that enjoys expressing her sense of dress for personal, relatable, and marketing reasons, including how she supports women and female athletes.

Through the analysis of the section, themes within themes of similarities and differences were noticed through the data found between the three WNBA athletes. Brittney Griner's take on appearance showed how the 6' 8" center was comfortable in her own skin despite the potential backlash she may have received upon posting images of her topless or wearing baggy shirts and sagging jeans rather than what is traditionally considered to be lady-like and feminine, which Griner seemed prepared to touch on when it came to the definition of gender. Although Griner is considered a female, the binary code of gender seems to be a definition that holds no weight with the 2016 Gold-Medalist. It is clear that though Griner may have struggled through her upbringing because of her personal issues and preferred style of dress, she is now an advocate for women and men dealing with the same issues. While fearlessly posting on social media of herself living everyday-life as a female basketball player both on and off the court, these visuals, text, and stories show how similar but different Griner is from the other two athletes when it came to her preferred style of appearance and how she chooses to present and talk about it with her fans and supporters.

Through Elena Delle Donne's gender data, the athlete differed from the other two as more of her posts involved advocacy of being a woman athlete than focusing on her appearance and attire. As mentioned before, one particular look Delle Donne appeared to show through all her posts and links was her signature pony-tail and basketball gear, whether it was game attire, workout clothes or basketball warmups. Even for magazine and other photo shoots, it was noticeable that Delle Donne dressed in more of a business/gameday look than the style of

Diggins who is seen more in dresses and makeup than in her actual basketball uniform. Other than her appearance in the section, Delle Donne's advocacy for women and women athletes surpasses that of Griner and Diggins in both her social media posts and website, sharing posts that range from women who influenced her in life such as her mom and big sister, to her involvement with several feminist campaigns that support female athletes in all levels and sports. Delle Donne's advocacy is a huge part of her mantra as seen in her posts on social media and content in her official website, presenting herself to be a force for women's social rights, sports, and athletes.

Dallas Wings guard Skylar Diggins appeared to be more "feminine-conscious" than Griner and Delle-Donne with her posts and website showing more visuals of the Dallas Wings star in attire other than her basketball uniform. Diggins served as the more photogenic player of the three, showing several posts from her social media in 2016 wearing dresses, heels, make-up, various hair styles and appearing in multiple events and galas. As mentioned earlier in this section, it was uncommon to see Diggins in any post without make-up on, as even on media day for the WNBA or on actual gamedays it was present on the star's face. The way in which Diggins presented herself was similar to that of Griner's in regard to the frequency of their distinct posts related to appearance, but different in their style of appearance and dress. Her support for women was a bit more different from the other two players, as Diggins tended to use more visuals and femininity as the source for her gender advocacy, such as being the face of Nike Women's basketball (Diggins, 2016dd), and using fashion as an aspect of being a woman and role model to other women and athletes.

While all three basketball players portray gender differently, each makes consistent reference to gender in the social media presence; a crucial connecting point for fans. Although

there may be different ways in which individuals view the term gender, this analysis also shows how all three players “do” gender in their careers and off days. Along with gender, is the intersectionality of gender with sexual identity, and how the two elements play roles with one another performance of a feminine identity might overlap with a decidedly masculine style. Though the next section does not compare the two, the theme of gender is present throughout the findings on how these women communicate their sexual identity. Furthermore, as discovered in the section of gender, the following also explains how these athletes use their mediated platforms to spread support and advocacy for the gay community and other groups.

### **Sexual Identity**

Other than the expression of gender and the support of women and women athletes through their analysis, the intersectional theme of sexual identity is also greatly noticed between the three players’ social media, websites, and videos. The way in which an individual communicates their sexuality can be similar or different, whether they choose to express their orientation to others rather easily, being more discreet, or choosing to not reveal at all. The next section of this analysis examines the ways in which these three WNBA players either conceal or reveal their sexual orientation to the public, as well as how they do so. Once again, their social media content and personal websites will be among the data analyzed, along with their player profiles from the league’s website and team websites.

Using the same standard of athletes relying heavily on their public image (Smith & Sanderson, 2015), images from these three athletes were examined to acknowledge any similarities or differences between each other particularly in how they conveyed their messages of sexual identity in the mediated environments, as well as the strategies used to do so. It can be

inferred that the same trends found through their data for gender may also be present in how they use their platforms when it comes to sexual orientation and/or issues regarding sexuality.

Beginning with the content from Brittney Griner's social media content, it was a little surprising seeing less sexual orientation-related posts than what was analyzed for the theme of gender. Based on what was seen from the way she dressed, and how she rejected any gender binary, one may be biased to assume that Griner was performing more of a homosexual than heterosexual identity. However, it was no secret that the 6' 8" star was indeed gay, publicly coming out long before she was drafted by the Phoenix Mercury in 2013 (Fegan, 2013, para. 2).

With her sexual orientation revealed, certain posts from Griner showed her signature outspoken nature, whether it was an image of her, advocacy and support, or personal tweets and quotes. In an image on Instagram from 2016 the star appeared smiling while holding a basketball in recreational clothes, quoting in her own words: "Don't worry about what other people are gonna say, because they're always gonna say something," while another Instagram post showed Griner wearing a Nike t-shirt with the words "Basketball is my Girlfriend" along with her caption showing five different color heart emojis that resembled the LGBTQ flag, followed by certain hashtags like #BETRUE and #LOVE (Griner, 2016b, 2016h). In addition, Griner also tweeted in July, "...I've experienced discrimination and bias because of my race, gender and orientation," further acknowledging her sexual identity (Griner, 2016x). It was odd to discover how little Griner had posted regarding her sexual orientation, though it is possible that the openly out player had posted about and acknowledged this matter multiple times prior to 2016. What was more abundant from Griner's digital content however was the support and tribute she paid to the LGBTQ community through her posts and commentary.

In April of 2016, Griner had retweeted a post of a story about a gay man who was killed by his unaccepting father had himself posted previously about the grave predicaments he was in prior to his death, to which she commented, “So Sad” (Pink News, 2016). Then, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 2016, support for the LGBTQ community came to a head, especially on social media as 49 people were killed and another 53 wounded at a gay nightclub in Orlando in the worst mass shooting in U.S. history (Ellis, Fantz, Karimi, and McLaughlin, 2016, para. 1). Among those to share their thoughts on social media was Griner, posting on Instagram the same day an image of five different colored emoji hearts with the red heart broken in two; meant to symbolize the LGBTQ flag along with the hashtag #prayfororlando (Griner, 2016g). In addition, other posts on her Facebook page were also tied to the Orlando tragedy, including a link about the Phoenix Mercury holding a silent auction on PRIDE night with proceeds donated to the city of Orlando (*Mercury*, 2016), along with another post the very next day about the team raising more than \$14,000 in support for the victims of the shooting (Griner, 2016m, 2016n). Similarly, “Spirit Day” was another campaign supported by Griner throughout the year on her Facebook in which the movement by *GLAAD.org* was for people to come together against bullying towards the LGBTQ youth by wearing purple on October 20<sup>th</sup> of 2016 and using the hashtag #SPIRITDAY in their social media posts (Glaad, 2016).

Examining and analyzing Griner’s posts for elements related to communicating sexual identity, it was more common that the athlete had more content in supporting the LGBTQ community and sharing posts that brought awareness and advocacy rather than expressing a specific sexual identity. Regardless, Griner’s use of social media to express her message of LGBTQ support to her fans and followers serves as a way in which the athlete feels she could

best reach her audience when it comes to these specific issues and movements within the gay community.

What was interesting about Elena Delle Donne's sexual identity is that the former WNBA Most Valuable Player revealed she was gay and engaged to her longtime girlfriend right after the Rio Olympics in August of 2016 (Hine and Thompson, 2016, para. 2). The "coming out" was unique because Delle Donne had never really revealed or concealed her sexual orientation particularly on social media despite having multiple images of both herself and her then girlfriend.

For instance, based on the posts pulled for Delle Donne consistent with the theme of sexual identity, more than twenty images and posts showed Delle Donne along with her fiancée in the same picture through the year of 2016, whether it was just the pair or both of them along with others in the photo. However, it is noticeable that in these pictures and posts, Delle Donne does not mention anything about being romantically involved with this woman, nor the two not showing much affection towards each other rather than just putting their arms behind one another when posing side by side for pictures. However, after the news of the engagement to her partner, certain posts by Delle Donne of her and her fiancée started to show the couple in a more different light, this time retweeting certain posts about the two planning their upcoming wedding (The Knot, 2016), and visuals of the two together at certain places and events with an engagement ring now visible on Delle Donne's fiancée (Delle Donne, 2016c). After the reveal of her engagement, it was now made aware of exactly what purpose this woman served in the WNBA star's posts and images. Though, trends that remained constant were the mild use of affection throughout these public posts during their engagement, as well as Delle Donne's discreet mentions of the woman being her fiancée.

With these strategies used by Delle Donne for her posts with her fiancée, it is also assumed that she herself along with Griner are very much a part of the gay community, therefore supporting LGBTQ rights as well. In June of 2016, Delle Donne much like Griner, took to her Facebook account to voice her thoughts about the tragic mass shooting in Orlando, posting: “The shooting in Orlando makes me sick to my stomach. Absolutely devastating. Praying for the victims and their families” (Delle Donne, 2016n). In a later post on her Instagram, Delle Donne also much like Griner, had posted a candid image of her eating lunch outside wearing a Nike t-shirt with the hashtag “#BETRUE” in bold, rainbow letters which resembled the colors of the LGBTQ flag and Nike’s movement to embrace equality and acceptance (Delle Donne, 2016e).

Much like Brittney Griner, Elena Delle Donne shared similar views on support and rights for the gay community by displaying these images and posts through her social media platforms. Although Delle Donne’s content showed more about her engagement to another female than her support for the LGBTQ community, her message was still clear and communicated with those who were fans or followed her on social media.

As if one Coincidence was not enough, Skylar Diggins also made it official through her Instagram account of her engagement to her longtime boyfriend on June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016 (Diggins, 2016r), which is also the same day as the Orlando mass shooting tragedy. Mainly through her posts on Instagram, Diggins made it clear of her sexual orientation, posting multiple images of her and her now fiancée through the year posing for selfies, showing intimacy as well as showing off her new engagement ring. Mentions of her fiancée were also present in Diggins’ posts. Including captions such as, “Cowboys game with my honey!”, “My best friend for life”, and “Future Mr. & Mrs. Smith” (Diggins, 2016t, 2016v, 2016w). Other posts throughout the year of

Diggins and her fiancée showed them at engagement photo shoots, formal events, and even visuals of her partner alone, showing to her fans and followers the man she is engaged to marry.

Unlike Delle Donne, Diggins showed little restriction when it came to displaying and talking about her fiancée on social media, however there was not much more to analyze in terms of data when it came to Diggins' sexuality. Although she is not gay like Griner and Delle Donne, there were no posts found in 2016 that were related to the support of LGBTQ rights, or that talked about sexuality in general. This being found, it does not mean that Diggins is against the gay community or does not support them, but can possibly mean that the athlete uses her social media for more business-type ordeals and other ventures she chooses to display.

By analyzing these three women based on their social media content in accordance with sexual identity, there is an underlying notion of how the year of 2016 was significantly important to each of them based on the issues of the gay community and/or the anticipated joy of getting married. It was clear that each player used their social media environments to communicate messages and visuals in the way they each felt was best, and although their sexuality was revealed, the way in which they displayed it was different from one another.

In the next part of this section, the same aspect of this revelation is examined to see how or if their personal websites show or mention their sexuality, along with other mediated environments and how or if they also communicate the athlete's sexuality the way they conveyed it through their personal social accounts. These other mediated environments include their player profiles on the league's website, their respective team websites, and news articles obtained from *espnW.com* within the year of 2016.

By examining Brittney Griner's outdated website, it is previously mentioned that no new content has been uploaded past the year of 2015. However, from the alternating headlines on the

homepage, as well as her slogan “Be You” found under one section, the values she holds towards sexual identity and acceptance is still present, including the HRC Visibility Award mentioned in her media section, given to those who advocate for equality (Griner, 2015b).

In the official website of Elena Delle Donne, specifically in the media section, content found consisted strictly of basketball, sponsorships, charities, and advocacy rather than finding anything about her engagement, upcoming wedding plans, or news that was related to sexuality in general during the year of 2016 (Delle Donne, 2016ff). Her fiancée was not mentioned in any of her website’s sections, nor pictures of the two, as seen variously in Delle Donne’s social media posts.

Skylar Diggins and her official website also seemed to follow the same trend as Delle Donne’s, featuring lots of basketball related content, philanthropy, sponsorships and charity work, but no evidence of sexuality-based content through 2016 (Diggins, 2016cc). Also similar to Delle Donne’s website but surprising was the lack of any news or images on Diggins’ website of her and her engagement, compared to the way she spread the word of her engagement and fiancée on social media.

As expected, other than her accolades, statistics through her college and professional career, as well as her shoe size, her favorite food and her two pet snakes mentioned, Griner’s player profile on the league’s site showed no content about her sexual identity. However, during the analysis of the headlines the Phoenix Mercury website showed through the year of 2016, there were several stories in June that were specifically related to Pride month and Pride night, particularly in support of the Orlando night club shooting Griner had posted previously before on her social media (Mercury, 2016). Although these news stories scarcely mentioned Griner, they were in support of the gay community that Griner is a part of herself, celebrating pride month,

holding a silent auction at the Mercury game on June 18<sup>th</sup> that raised over \$14,000, and also hosting a blood drive to donate to the victims of the shooting, showing how not only Griner but also the fans and community came together in order to support another community Griner advocates for so heavily.

The same applied to Elena Delle Donne when it came to her player profile, mentioning her stats and a little about her parents and siblings with no information about her partner. When searching through the Chicago Sky's team website, there was no references of any themes regarding sexuality, nor any info on Delle Donne and her engagement. Unlike the Phoenix Mercury, The Sky also had little news to share other than game recaps and highlights, lacking news stories or advocacy for Pride Month or Pride night, news of the Orlando shooting, or other headlines that may deal with sexuality issues/advocacy.

Following in the footsteps of Griner and Delle Donne, Skylar Diggins profile page consisted of the same statistical background with personal references of her family but nothing more. As 2016 also served as the inaugural year for the Dallas Wings franchise, not much was mentioned in the team's website about Pride month or any other aspect of sexual identity besides their roster finalization and game recaps (Wings, 2016).

Using *EspnW.com* (which is a partner site under ESPN) to search about anything based on sexual identity or support from these three players, it was interesting enough to see how these certain events occurred all within the year of 2016 from each of these three players being examined. Although 2016 served as a milestone of love and commitment for both Delle Donne and Diggins, the same could not be said for Griner, as she finalized her divorce from WNBA player Glory Johnson just a month after marriage in 2015 (espnW, 2016, para. 3).

Although the couple married for a short amount of time a year prior, 2016 showed the ending of what was not present in postings on social media from Brittney Griner during the year. Advocacy for the gay community along with sexual orientation was noticed of Griner, however unlike Delle Donne and Diggins there was no show of Griner with a significant other or partner in her content, other than posts of her with friends and teammates. While finalizing a divorce may not be the greatest start to a year, it also showed how Griner's sexual orientation came into play through other sites and content that is not her own. As this story may also be more on the negative side, it also shows how *espnW.com* covers other news and personal stories from these women athletes besides that of just statistics and highlights.

An article found on *EspnW.com* about the engagement of Elena Delle Donne and her fiancée talked about how the 2015 WNBA MVP had not really used the interview from *Vouge* magazine as a way of revealing she was gay, since her teammates and people closest to her already knew about Delle Donne and her longtime girlfriend prior to the engagement (Howard, 2016, para. 2). Furthermore, Delle Donne also explained how although the news of her engagement and upcoming wedding is now known, she still plans to keep her relationship rather private and hidden from the public and media (Howard, 2016, para. 4). This also explains the lack of intimate content posted on Delle Donne's social media of the pair, as well as no mention of her relationship on her official website. Nevertheless, Delle Donne's willingness to announce her engagement despite her preference of keeping her romantic life private, as well as *EspnW.com* sharing the news of the star in a mediated mass media world of sports, further supports the way in which the athlete openly communicates her sexual identity to others.

The news of Skylar Diggins' engagement also garnered a lot of attention from not only fans, but from admirers who had a romantic "crush" on the basketball star. *EspnW.com* shared an

article of how “some of the world is weeping” after news of her engagement broke on social media in June of 2016, also showing certain tweets in the article from fans (or admirers) devastated about Diggins no longer being a “free agent” (Parker, 2016, para. 4). Though this kind of reaction may or may not have been present through Delle Donne’s news of getting engaged, the article did make a point to emphasize the amount of sadness of Diggins’ public announcement. Once again, *EspnW.com* made a point to mention the happy news of one of the WNBA’s most popular athletes other than stat lines, however it also showed a difference between the reactions and article content between a WNBA player marrying another female and a WNBA player marrying a male.

Although Griner shared more posts about advocacy while Delle Donne’s content conveyed images of her partner soon turned fiancée, they both communicated interests in gay rights and acceptance through social media. It was found through the analysis of Griner’s content through 2016 that in addition to her views of gender and being the person one feels comfortable being, her support for the LGBTQ community and the reveal of her sexual orientation coincided with the way she voiced herself, especially through social media. It was clear that certain issues such as Pride month and the Orlando shooting of the gay night club generated advocacy from Griner, which in turn also gained support from the Phoenix Mercury and its community of fans and supporters. Also, despite her unfortunate divorce in 2016 which may or may not have been the reason for her lack of same-sex relationships and marriage posts on her social media, Griner’s methods of communicating and revealing her sexual identity particularly through her social media served to be important to her fans, followers, and fellow supporters of the gay community.

Though Elena Delle Donne kept her relationship and partner's life rather private through the lens of her social media, it was also later discovered in the article from *EspnW.com* mentioned earlier that the star never really kept her sexuality hidden from the public, but rather her intimate life. While also supporting LGBTQ rights like Griner, Delle Donne's analysis of all her content revealed that the athlete did indeed prefer to keep her private life away from the public and mass media and instead display her more professional side through her media and especially on her official website. Delle Donne's approach to communicating her sexual identity was more disguised than open like Griner's, and while also supporting the gay community, it can be inferred that the presentation of sexuality through Delle Donne's content is less apparent than that of her two colleagues.

This being said, Skylar Diggins absence of support for the gay community through her content was far less than Delle Donne's and Griner's, however she differed when it came to the presentation of herself and her new fiancée based on her social media posts. As stated before, Diggins' lack of content regarding the gay community and any other sexuality-based themes other than her engagement does not mean she is a non-supporter, but does show how much more willing Diggins was when it came to sharing her relationship and private life with her fans and followers. There were also differences in the type of pictures Diggins posted on her social media of her and her fiancée compared to Delle Donne, as well as the way she talked about her significant other through the images and posts during the year of 2016. While Skylar Diggins is the only heterosexual female between the three WNBA players analyzed, it should also be noted that the way in which she communicates not only her gender but also her sexual identity through her personal media, official website, and even in certain women's sports articles like the one pulled from *EspnW.com*, is rather divergent from the styles noticed of Griner and Delle Donne.

While these two sections of analysis have shown findings through several modes of mediated content of the encompassing terms of gender and sexual identity, it is also worth noticing the amount of content each basketball player displays. While observations from the player's team website, profile, or online articles may not be as useful when it comes to attracting fan support, it is from within their own personal media that they communicate personally and emotionally with their beliefs and opinions on certain societal issues. While fans can connect, and communicate more with athletes in general through social media, it then serves another useful purpose when it comes to marketing and spreading the word about their philanthropy. The last section of this analysis exhibits one of the facets on how the field of sport communication comes into play with not only sports, athletes and fans, but with the modern age of social media use and the rapid interconnectivity between athletes and fandom by means of personal mediated environments.

### **Summary**

This thesis involved three premiere WNBA athletes who in their own right have accomplished a great deal since being drafted into the league in 2013. Other than their performances on the court, the decision to select these three particular players proved to be insightful to this study especially when dealing with issues that go far beyond the basketball court. Using textual analysis to direct this project, the analysis of the players' social media platforms and official website proved beneficial to highlight the different aspects of the content seen on their personal platforms compared to other media from a third party.

In summing up the chapter, the data analysis described how these three athletes communicated on two topics such as gender and sexual identity to the public through means of specific mediated environments. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that through this media, the

themes of gender, sexuality, as well as these athletes and their fan base all fell within the category of sport communication. Though communication in sport was analyzed in a separate section, the fact that these athletes portrayed themselves publicly through social media, conveyed messages about certain beliefs and social injustices to others, in addition to marketing, all revealed functions of what is known as sport communication. The questions that directed this research study included: 1. How do WNBA players communicate gender and sexual identity in a mediated environment? 2. What communication strategies are present in constructing gender and sexuality in player's messaging?

With these answers in mind, the final chapter will discuss how these questions helped guide my data analysis for my findings in the study, along with how the established framework of the literature review helped reveal certain factors and new discoveries regarding the three WNBA players' media content. Particular content not found or researched in the study is also mentioned in the next chapter, including recommendations for possible future research that can benefit the information and framework in this study.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

This research study was designed on the basis of three themes that are of relevance to both the world of sport and society in general, particularly when it comes to female athletes and new forms of mediated communication. Chapters 1 and 2 conveyed the influences of gender, sexual identity, and sport communication as individual areas of significance as well as the nature of their intersections. My project examined how WNBA players use social media along with official websites to communicate and construct their gender and sexual identity to their fans and the rest of the public. It also detailed the strategies used by these women to communicate these messages of gender and sexuality through posts of images, videos, and captions relying information as well as understanding of the players' stance on these topics. Furthermore, the research questions that drove this analysis of these themes and revealed how the women displayed more personal content, advocacy and marketing through social media and official websites compared to what was found in media that was not controlled personally or individually such as the league's website and their team's respective website.

The study's main focus was on the three themes of gender, sexual identity, and sport communication, positioned through three female athletes active on social media and each currently playing for the WNBA. Analysis related to how these athletes communicate gender and sexuality in a mediated environment resulted in finding both similarities and differences through their personal means of mediated communication as well as third-party content found on other media. Brittney Griner's definition of gender was more of a self-declaration, a term that is not man or woman but more about how an individual perceives themselves, similar to what Bradley (2013) and Lips (2014) discussed in their research. Through this perspective, Griner reinforced her message across social media, posting images and captions on Twitter and Instagram. Elena

Delle Donne's view of gender was distinct from Griner's as Delle Donne appeared to pride herself in being a woman and a female basketball player. Based on social media and her official website, her posts and advocacy for women focused on empowerment messages. Skylar Diggins, who of the three women had the most social media content in general, used personal communication to express herself "doing" gender through images and appearance. Although Diggins advocated for the "Lean In Together" movement for gender equality, as well paying homage to the woman players before her, her main expression of gender seemed to mirror that of former WNBA superstar Lisa Leslie, who also believed in appearing feminine both on and off the court (Heinecken, 2016).

In terms of gender, it was important to understand the significance of the term according to each player, but more important to recognize how they communicated their message. Although the analysis resulted in finding differences in the views of how gender should be constructed (like Griner) as well as how these athletes displayed and supported gender (such as Delle Donne and Diggins), the three athletes all used social media along with their official websites to communicate this social issue to both the public and their fan base.

When it came to the theme of sexual identity, the analysis also revealed substantial findings based on all three players and their digital content, including the use of social media and official websites as primary channels for communication to the public. Griner, who was already known to be gay prior to the year of 2016, did not show many posts or images of her with a significant other, but did show her support and advocacy for the LGBTQ community and her passion for gay rights and gay lives. Delle Donne, also affected by the tragedy in Orlando, used social media to voice her thoughts and support for the gay community, as well as using the channels to reveal engagement to her longtime girlfriend (Delle Donne, 2016). Throughout Delle

Donne's posts the star shared more basketball related news than her private life, yet her fans and supporters were able to reach out and connect to her through social media. Diggins' posts never ventured into sexual identity opinions or anything else that was related to sexuality. Other than posts of her boyfriend along with her engagement during June of 2016, it was clear her digital presence did not include anything mentioning sexuality.

Appearance and clothing intersect with gender and sexual identity and have driven the research for this project. Social bias might be driven by Skylar Diggins' appearance and femininity both on and off the court, or Brittney Griner's assumptions about being gay because she is almost seven-feet tall and wears suits and bowties rather than dresses. It is judgements like these that were brought to attention previously by Yorburg (1974), Symons (2007), Carini and Weber (2012), and Heineken, (2016) when dealing with the binary construction of both gender and sexuality in the case that if a female appeared feminine she was deemed heterosexual, and if a female appeared masculine or butch, they were considered gay/lesbian.

It was because of society's inclination toward bias on defining masculinity and femininity that this study was important to identify how these female athletes reacted and expressed themselves during the most modern of times with the concepts of traditional standards still intact. When discovering how these female basketball players communicated gender and sexual identity in a mediated environment, it was evident that social media and their own official websites generated more content in relation to the two themes, compared to their player profiles and team's website on the league's site.

Furthermore, analysis revealed the communication strategies in each player's messaging about gender and sexuality, despite individual differences. As each player utilized social media

platforms along with their own official websites to communicate their views of gender and sexual identity, the way in which they displayed these messages to the public were quite distinct.

Brittney Griner's use of topless photos to emphasize her "bird chest" and several body tattoos, along with other images of her self-appearance and attire were the ways in which Griner felt comfortable identifying herself. Although it may be too risqué for some, social media channels became a way for Griner to express her gender and sexuality in a way that felt comfortable regardless of how she looked or how she was dressed. Griner's use of the LGBTQ flag also served as a symbolic signal to identifying herself as well as supporting the gay community. The rainbow colors of the LGBTQ flag served as inspiration for her logo on her branded Nike merchandise. Delle Donne's basketball-oriented content differed from the other two athletes due to images and posts focusing more on gender advocacy than sexual identity. Her countless posts representing women, using her mom and sister as motivation as well as playing basketball "like a female" appear consistently in Delle Donne's posts. This message consistency was present in sharing her Nike commercials, personal interviews, or other posts showcasing her work ethic. Her appearance differed from the other two as well, and although certain images of Delle Donne showed her in feminine attire on some occasions, the fact that Delle Donne's main wardrobe consisted of basketball and workout gear also expressed how being a woman does not mean being "feminine" all the time. Furthermore, posts of herself with her fiancée show the discipline Delle Donne had when it came to keeping her private life away from the media. Although there are plentiful posts of Delle Donne with her partner, there were no displays of affection or captions that revealed exactly who this other woman was. On the contrary compared to posts Delle Donne, Diggins with her avid use of selfies and affectionate posts with her fiancé during the year, reveal more. Diggins communicated her messages of gender and sexuality by

displaying images of makeup and feminine attire along with photos of her engagement to her boyfriend. Whether it was selfies posted, or utilizing her digital media presence to market herself, Diggins' style of presentation on social media differed from her two colleagues.

In accordance with the results mentioned from the analysis, several conclusions can be interpreted based on analysis of these WNBA players and their use of social media. Although the research questions asked in this study were answered based on the analysis, there are also certain questions that have potential for future researchers. For instance, a wider sample of athletes across several professional organizations might yield richer data to analyze. Griner, Delle Donne, and Diggins were chosen because of their popularity and activity on social media, and because they were female athletes all currently playing in the WNBA. Choosing other dominant female athletes from other sports would likely yield comparable data on gender and sexual identity, as well as insight into wage gap and racial tension. Although researchers may have tested different methods and types of analysis regarding these issues, it would still be important to study how athletes use social media platforms to speak out on aspects of society. Another useful direction hint for further research could be to include of other communication channels such as Snapchat. Snapchat is a popular form of social media where users display images and videos to followers for limited amounts of time. The promise of partial anonymity and the transitory nature of posts could be compelling variables.

During the timeframe of this study, limitations in the data collection and analysis should be noted, beginning with the specific year researched. Although 2016 was the most recent, completed year at the time of the study, content found in previous years that may have been useful for the research. Brevity drove the decision to focus on one milestone year. Next, because social media content gathered is from each of the players' personal accounts, there is a

possibility that certain posts that could have also been beneficial to the study were deleted during or prior to the research analysis process. This is due in part to the user having control of their account, therefore having the choice to delete and post whatever they want, whenever they please. In addition, the official Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages from each of the players' teams were also not included in the analysis, which may have also provided useful insight to this research. A deeper read of these female athletes' messaging could focus on other issues, struggles, or opinions beyond gender and sexuality.

The use of social media has become a form of communication that these three athletes relied on to convey messages about certain topics such as gender and sexual identity. The entirety of this analysis fell within the field of sport communication based on the athletes' use of social media and their fan base. As Kim, Smith and Yoo (2013) have discussed previously, sports and media have become interconnected over the years prompting communication theories to be deployed to understand sports and the media. The interconnectivity between athlete and the sport fanbase is closer now more than ever. My analysis reveals that these females communicate messages of gender and sexual identity differently from one another, however they all use personal communication through social media channels and their own official websites to do so. Even when it comes to their personal opinions, self-image, marketing opportunities, and other messages, the power of social media allows these players to message and connect with their fans and others in multiple ways.

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## **Vitae**

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