Abstract: In 2013, Mark Cuban, the team owner of Dallas Mavericks of the National Basketball Association (NBA), announced that he would consider selecting female basketball player Brittney Griner to play for his professional men’s team. Within 24 hours after ESPN posted an online article reporting Mark Cuban’s statement, 921 online comments were posted in response. This study analyzes these comments to investigate the pervasive sexism and gender discrimination found in online sporting news arenas. It investigates how Brittney Griner’s sex, gender, and athletic ability became subjects of scrutiny and debate in these online comments and how discriminatory comments about Griner were
routinely extended to all female athletes and to women even outside of sport. By examining the online backlash against Mark Cuban’s proposal, this paper investigates the maintenance of sex segregation in professional sport and the systemic devaluing of female athletes and privileging of male athletes that upholds it.

**Key Words:** Gender, Gender Resistance, sexism, sport, Unobtrusive Research.

“If Lebron got that thing in the low post, it would set women’s basketball back 200 years. James Naismith would have to come back from the dead and restart it for them.” ESPN Online Comment Poster

**Introduction**

Over the past few decades, female participation in sport has grown exponentially. Between 1972 and 2011, the number of girls competing in high school sports jumped from approximately 295,000 to nearly 3.2 million, according to data from the National Federation of State High School Associations (2011). While these figures imply some progress towards gender equity in sport, they mask ongoing issues of inequities in funding and resources for male versus female sport, instances of media bias in sports coverage, intersectional barriers to girls and women’s participation in sport, compulsory femininity and heteronormativity in female sport, and other forms of sexism in North American sport. This study examines one emerging arena in which gender discrimination and sexism in sport is maintained: online sporting news comment forums.

In 2013, controversy erupted in the National Basketball Association (NBA) when Mark Cuban, the team owner of Dallas Mavericks, announced that he would give consideration to selecting a female basketball player,
Brittney Griner, to play for his professional men’s team. At the time, Brittney Griner was heralded as one of the best amateur women’s basketball players in the world. Standing 6’8” in height, Griner had won a U.S. college basketball player of the year award and a national championship, and was the first woman in National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) history to score over 2000 points and block over 500 shots (Longman 2013). There was no doubt amongst sport commentators and fans that Griner would be drafted to play in the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) given her height, talent, and achievements. The controversy that followed Cuban’s announcement revolved around whether or not Griner could play alongside men in the NBA. As this paper illustrates, the vast majority of online news comment posters did not think Griner had the right or ability to play alongside men. Online commentators dismissed Griner’s and all female athletes’ potential to play with men, while making broader claims about the inadequacies of women’s bodies, abilities, and athleticism. Brittney Griner’s sex, gender, and athletic ability became subjects of scrutiny and debate in these online comments. Cuban’s announcement marked a possible loosening of the rigid sex segregation found in professional sport. Accordingly, Griner became a symbol of the loosening of sex segregation and a target for those who opposed it. The controversy around Griner’s potential to play in the NBA provides a window into the maintenance of sex segregation in professional sport and the systemic devaluing of female athletes and privileging of male athletes that upholds it.

Our study focuses on a single ESPN online news media article about Cuban’s announcement of Griner’s potential, and the 921 comments that were written in response during the day that followed its publication. This analysis highlights how Griner’s sex and gender were scrutinised, whereas
other aspects of her identity, such as her race, ethnicity, and sexuality, were not. Not one of the 921 comments on the online ESPN article referred to Griner’s race, ethnicity, or sexuality; instead they focused on her sex, gender, and athletic ability. Online commentators’ focus on assessing, contesting, and denying Griner’s sex and gender points to the pervasive sexism and gender discrimination that exists in sporting arenas, particularly in online spaces. These comments provide an unobtrusive viewpoint into the ongoing sexism and gender discrimination that upholds sex segregation in professional sport.

**Women and Sport**

Sports historian Stephanie Twin (1979) characterises the early 1900s as a wave of female athleticism, coinciding with first wave feminism. During this period, the number of girls and women participating in local, collegiate, and international competitions rose dramatically. However, by the 1920s and ’30s, widespread opposition to women’s participation in sport had emerged on the grounds that women did not have the strength or ability necessary for sports and that participation in sports could be dangerous to their reproductive capacities, and women who participated in sport were increasingly stereotyped “as unwomanly, as unfeminine, and were labeled mannish lesbians” (Messner 1992:17). Fast forward 85 years to a situation in which women’s involvement in sport has reached unprecedented levels, and the backlash against their participation in sport continues. Instead of being seen in the medical journals and Olympic policy forums, as happened in the 1920s and 30s, the new backlash is a largely digital one occurring in the cyber-realm.
Much research into the sociology of sport and sport studies has been dedicated to theorising on sexism and gender discrimination in sport. Many sport scholars have investigated forms of discrimination within sport, such as the development of sexist attitudes towards women by male athletes (Anderson 2008), barriers to women’s participation in sport (McGinnis, McQuillan, and Chapple 2005), legal aspects of sex discrimination in sport (Patel 2015), interconnections between discrimination on the basis of sexuality and sexism in women’s sport (Griffin 1992), discriminatory sex testing in sport (Dworkin and Cooky 2012), and female athletes’ strategies of resistance to marginalisation in male-dominated sport spaces (Laurendeau and Sharara 2008). Looking beyond the confines of sporting fields of play, other scholars have examined the hyper-feminine representations of female athletes in sports magazines (Fink and Kensicki 2002), differences between television sports reporting of men's and women's sports (Billings, Halone, and Denham 2002; Kian, Mondello, and Vincent 2009; Tuggle 1997), and the construction of gender differences and norms in print media representations of sport (Wright and Clark 1999). Along similar lines, other scholars have explored broader implications of sexism and gendered discrimination in sport, such as the ways in which sport contributes to male dominance and power in society beyond the confines of playing fields (Bryson 1983), the relationship between capitalism and gender relations in sport (Hargreaves 1990), and the consequences of nonconformity to hegemonic femininity in sport (Krane 2001). Largely absent from this vast literature is an examination of discrimination in sport as expressed and maintained in online spaces. This study builds on existing literature on sexism in sport by examining sexism and gender discrimination in sport that is expressed by online print-media comment posters. In so doing, it offers
insight into the role that online spaces play in upholding, celebrating, and maintaining sex segregation in sport and the dominant views of masculinity, femininity, and gendered notions of athleticism and sporting ability that are embedded within it.

The intention of this study is not to argue whether or not Brittney Griner should play in the NBA. Rather, its aim is to examine the online backlash generated by the mere insinuation that a woman might be able to compete successfully against men in professional basketball.

An Unobtrusive Analysis

This study adopts Webb et al.’s (2000) unobtrusive/non-reactive method of data collection. This method requires no human contact for the purposes of collecting research data and instead relies exclusively on existing texts that are publicly accessible. Webb et al. argue that unobtrusive methods rely on existing texts that have typically not been created with the intent that they will be used for academic research.

This study involves the unobtrusive analysis of 921 comments on an online ESPN article entitled Could Brittney Griner Play in the NBA? published on April 4, 2013, in which five sports writers gave their view on the possibility of Brittney Griner playing in the NBA. Of the five writers, two argued that she should be given the opportunity to try to play against men even if only for publicity purposes, while the other three argued that she was not capable of competing against men and should not be given the chance. In the 24 hours that followed the online publication of the article, 921 online comments were posted in response to the question that the article’s title posed. These online comments serve as the unobtrusive data for this analysis. The respondents did not write these publicly available
comments with the intention that they would be used for research purposes, and as such they provide a rich and detailed unobtrusive data source for investigating sexism in sport. By using an unobtrusive approach, the reactive potential of face-to-face interviews, surveys and experimental designs was avoided in this study.

The many advantages of unobtrusive data analysis are accompanied by several limitations, all of which revolve around the study’s limited capacity to provide insight into the general public’s views on women’s competitive participation in men’s sport. The use of unobtrusive data excludes the possibility of questioning the individuals who posted comments further about their comments and broader perceptions. Online comments rarely provide demographic information. The online comments analysed in this study did not include information on the writers’ gender, age, race, level of interest in sport, or any other potentially relevant variables. Given these limitations, this paper is not intended to provide a final say on this topic. The aim is to provide a preliminary examination of the subject by using a novel methodological approach, which could be followed up with further qualitative and quantitative approaches to social enquiry.

The data collected was coded using what Glaser and Strauss (1967) term “open coding”, which involved the purposive thematic coding of all comments pertaining to the question of whether or not Brittney Griner could play in the NBA. A mixed-methods approach was used to analyse both quantitative data (number of comments) and qualitative data (quotes exemplifying themes for analysis).

This study adopts a social constructivist understanding of gender. Gender is understood as performed in interactions, rather than as an innate
state of being (West and Zimmerman 1987). In ongoing interactions, individuals are assessed in terms of their successes and failures in meeting gendered expectations. Through interaction, gender structures and scripts are established and reinforced. In this study, sport is examined as a possible site for “undoing gender” (Deutsch 2007) or “gender resistance” (Leblanc 2013), where gender norms and scripts can be challenged and potentially altered. Messner and Sabo (1994) argue that, “sports are an important organizing institution for the embodiment of dominant masculinity. Sports suppress natural (sex) similarities, construct differences, and then, largely through the media, weave a structure of symbol and interpretation around these differences which naturalizes them” (96). By examining online comments, this study reveals how the gendering of sport is defended and maintained in online spaces.

Findings

Five distinct themes emerged in the 921 online comments to the ESPN article about Britney Griner, with 830 of the comments fitting within them. These themes were: 1) physical limitations, 2) shortcomings in skills, 3) sex/gender policing, 4) a pointless question, and 5) giving women a chance. 91 comments out of the 921 were not assigned to a category because they were too brief to determine their meaning, were directed at criticising the spelling and grammar of other comment posters, or were not on the subject of the ESPN news article. The following section elaborates on these themes.

1. Physical Limitations

One hundred and nineteen comments expressed views that Brittney Griner, and/or female athletes in general, lacked the size, speed, and
strength to compete against male athletes. As one comment poster wrote, “She wouldn’t sniff the court on any men’s Division 1 team. That’s not sexist or anything ‘ist’ – that’s just understanding the physicality, and how we are made.” According to this commentator, Griner, one of the best female college basketball players at that time, could not physically handle playing men’s college basketball, let alone professional basketball. Implicit in this assertion is a notion that males’ strength and athletic ability is natural and innate, as is females’ lack of strength and lack of athletic ability. Many commentators asserted that their claims about women’s physical limitations in sport were not reflective of discriminatory views, but instead, of natural facts of female and male biology. One comment poster wrote, “It’s evolution not sexism.” Putting this in even more explicit terms, another wrote:

Could a donkey compete in a horse race? Could a lab[rador] compete in a greyhound race? Could a cat win in a dog fight? Who cares how good her footwork, skills, passing, etc. is, the fact is that a woman will NEVER be on the same physical level as a man.

These comments similarly hinged on the assumption that athletic ability is an innate quality determined by sex.

Comments that focused on men’s innate physical superiority commonly contained assertions that women are not fast enough to compete with men in sport. One comment poster wrote: “The fastest girl in the WORLD is not faster than the average 16 year old guy.” The athletic superiority of men, this comment implied, is so intrinsic that elite female athletes do not have the speed of an average teenage boy. The presumption that average men are superior athletes to elite female athletes purely because
men are allegedly innately superior in speed and strength featured in many of these comments.

Many comment posters also expressed a concern that due to a perceived lack of size, strength, and speed, Brittney Griner would be at significant risk of injury if she were to play with male athletes. Various descriptors were used to denote her physical risk and likelihood of injury, including “Wrecked,” “Worked,” “Owned,” “Killed,” “Demolished,” “Eaten alive,” and “Massacred.” One comment poster wrote, “She would just get hurt”, and another, “She could get seriously injured.” One expressed concern as follows: “What happens when grown men that outweigh her by 80-100 pounds start throwing elbows?” Although size differentials between men are commonplace in the NBA (e.g. on switched screens it is possible for a guard weighing 165lbs to be guarding a power forward weighing 295lbs), Griner’s potential size difference from some of the men she would be playing with was described as ruling out her inclusion. There is also the embedded, albeit illogical, assumption that the heaviest women weigh less than the lightest men. Clinging to this idea, some comment posters conveyed concern that Brittany Griner would be seriously hurt if she tried to play with men. One wrote, “Imagine her playing defense in the lane when Lebron [James] or DeAndre Jordan or Blake Griffin comes barreling in. She’d be dead!”

2. Shortcomings in Skills

Two hundred and ninety three comments that readers posted highlighted a belief that women, and Brittney Griner in particular, do not have basketball skills comparable to those of male basketball players. One comment poster wrote, “She wouldn’t make the practice squad of a men’s team in a YMCA league,” arguing that Brittney Griner is not skilled enough
to play in a recreational men’s basketball league, let alone against professional male basketball players. Another wrote, “My grandpa is quicker and has better post moves and he’s been in a wheelchair since 1974.” And still another, “She can’t match up with bigger, stronger, faster athletes in the NBA.” That is, she cannot play effectively against bigger, stronger, faster male athletes. And, if she tried, “She would get absolutely man-handled (pun intended)” according to one comment poster.

Many others provided a higher level of competition for comparison purposes such as: “I don’t think she could make a D1 men’s team, let alone an NBA team” and “She wouldn’t make the worst d-league team.” D1 refers to college sport in the United States, whereas D-league refers to the NBA’s development league for players who are close to being skilled enough to play in the NBA, but typically have aspects of their basketball skills that require additional work and practice. This commentator argued that Griner would not fit in either category.

Few comments actually addressed Griner’s skill level in relation to men who play in the NBA. Instead, the comments focused on her lack of size and/or strength and her inability to play competitively even at lower playing levels. Comments on skills related to playing against men in the NBA were similarly disparaging: “She doesn’t have a single skill that can help her succeed against NBA defenses and offenses,” “She’s going to get humiliated so bad,” “It would take a roster spot of someone more deserving,” and “Griner isn’t good enough to hold the jock strap of an NBA player.”

3. Sex/Gender Policing

Two hundred and sixty eight comments explicitly revolved around some form of sex/gender policing. The majority of these comments were
centered around Brittney Griner’s sex and gendered identity and argued that she was not actually a woman. Many commentators referred to Griner as “sHe,” “woMan,” “she-man,” and “wo-man,” while many others used the male pronouns of “he,” “that dude,” “that Griner guy,” and “his” when referring to Griner. One comment poster wrote, “Why is a girl even 6’8? That is way too tall to be a real girl.” Another wrote, “If it looks like a man, talks like a man, and has or had a member it’s probably a man!”

Several commentators encouraged the League to use sex testing on Griner to determine her “true” sex. Sex testing has had a long history in sport, and has been a practice primarily reserved for female athletes. While the WNBA does not do sex testing, sex testing is still done in international sporting events such as Olympic basketball. One commentator wrote, “Let’s petition a gender test.” Another wrote, “She would get busted as a transgender.”

Denying Brittney Griner’s gendered identity as a woman was for many commentators a way of reconciling themselves to Griner’s status as an elite college basketball player. To maintain the dominant notion that a woman could not compete against men in professional basketball, these commentators either denied her sporting ability or denied that she is a woman. Some comments went beyond questioning Brittney Griner’s gender to also question the masculinity and virility of many male basketball players. For example, one commentator wrote, “Brittney Griner has a bigger cock than Lebron James. FACT.” Another wrote, “I thought Steve Nash was the first woman in the NBA. He was MVP too.” Another, “It would be awkward in the shower when she has a bigger package than most of the guys.”
Other comment posters attempted to uphold the dominance of male professional sports not by denying Brittney Griner’s skills or gender, but by stating that women do not belong in professional sports, whether competing against men or against other women. One commentator wrote, “I get confused when I see women outside of the kitchen.” Another, responding to the question of whether Brittney Griner could play in the NBA, states, “Maybe on a NBA catering team.” Another wrote, “Isn’t there a sandwich making league?”

4. A Pointless Question

Seventy-six commentators argued that the question of whether a woman could compete against men in professional sport was absurd and explicitly pointed this out to other comment posters. One commentator said in response to others considering Griner’s potential in the NBA that it was “such a nonsense topic.” Another wrote, “5 minutes of my life gone on this stupid topic.” And another, “Could she play in the NBA? Stupid question” and “We should be slamming ESPN for insulting our intelligence and running this story.”

Others made the case that the question was not a real one that should warrant any consideration and that Mark Cuban, the NBA owner who had proposed the possibility of giving Brittney Griner a tryout on his team, had only done so for publicity and nothing more. One comment poster wrote, “She’s just a publicity stunt.” Another wrote, “She would put fans in the stands! Cuban knows people would pay to see her play, sort of like a freak show.”

5. Giving Women a Chance

Not all of the comments insinuated that women would never be able to compete against men in professional basketball. Twenty-five comment
posters said that Brittney Griner should be given the chance to compete against men; however, none said that she could actually do so successfully. Giving her a chance to play against men, some suggested, would put the question of women playing in the NBA to rest as it would prove that women cannot compete against men and would be a humorous display of Griner’s inability to compete. One commentator wrote, “Draft her so the stupid thought of a female playing in the NBA will be history when she is cut before the first practice is over!” Another said, “I say give her a go in Summer League. She’ll get hammered badly but at least she got a shot and that is as far as it will go.” And another, “Should the Mavs give her a shot? Of course… I want to see it just because it would be funny.”

While no commentators thought Brittney Griner could compete successfully against men, 49 of the 921 comment posters expressed openness to the possibility of a woman competing successfully against men in the NBA. One commentator described the characteristics of a hypothetical successful female NBA player: “Great skill, brains, athletic ability, and she’d have to resolve the emotional instability that would come around that time of the month.” Another wrote, “The only way a woman could play in the NBA is to play point guard – quick, good handles and good jump shot. That way the lack of size and athleticism won’t matter much.” Despite their willingness to imagine that women could someday break through sex segregation barriers in professional sport, these commentators clung to the idea that female athletes would have to overcome innate inferiorities that are intrinsic to their sex.
Discussion

In this controversy, Brittney Griner became a symbol of gender resistance. By dunking a basketball, she is seen to be challenging gendered norms of male athleticism and preconceived notions of the physical capabilities of women. This study has revealed the significant online backlash to Griner’s perceived gender resistance, which rests on several premises. These include: 1) women are physically inferior to men, 2) women are less skilled in sports than men, 3) women who are skilled in sports are likely not to actually be women, 4) the very notion of considering whether women can compete against men in sport is absurd and pointless, and 5) women cannot compete against men in sports, but if there ever was a woman who could overcome all of her innate disadvantages, she might be able to compete against men.

Brittney Griner is only one female athlete, and would not be the first to successfully compete against men in professional sport, yet she is often held up as a symbol of the advancement of women’s athleticism in North America. The hope for ending sex segregation in professional basketball then hinges on one person: Brittney Griner. If it is proclaimed that she is the best, and she is held up as the best among women, then the whole possibility of women’s entrance into male sport can be quashed based on what she does. If she were to play against men and do poorly – cannot score, cannot defend, as the commentators argue – some would contend that this shows that women cannot compete. Sex segregation in sport can continue unabashed. But the fate of women’s sport, and the ending of sex segregation in sport, should not rest on a single athlete.

The comment posters who responded to the ESPN article constructed a multi-pronged argument: Brittney Griner cannot play in the
NBA with her current skill and size, and therefore no women can play in the NBA; likewise, because she is a woman, she cannot play in the NBA because women are presumed not to have the necessary skill and size; however, if it turns out that she actually could compete successfully against men, then it must mean that she is actually a man. A female body and athleticism are mutually exclusive categories. With this logic, there can never be meaningful advancement of women in sport.

**Conclusion**

One of the principles of the Olympic Charter states: “The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind.” However, women continue to be denied entry into male sport spaces and when questions arise about sex segregation in sport, backlash ensues. Despite decades of advancement in women’s sport, women are denied entry into higher paying, higher valued sporting spaces because of continued devaluing of women’s athletic abilities and the assumed physical and athletic superiority of men. When women appear to have the physical characteristics and skills to potentially compete with men, for example Brittney Griner dunking a basketball, or Caster Semenya running the 800m in well under two minutes, the gender status quo is maintained by denying that they are women.

ESPN asked the question: Could Brittney Griner play in the NBA? The answer to the question is likely no. This is not necessarily because she does not have the size or talent to play against men. Rather, this may simply not be the historical moment when the gendered order and sex segregation in North American professional sport is going to be upset. As our findings have revealed, beliefs regarding women’s inferiority in sport are firmly
entrenched in sporting culture and are expressed not only on the field of play, but in the online realm as well. In the years that followed the publication of the ESPN article, and the online backlash it generated, Brittney Griner did not try out for a NBA team, enter the NBA draft, or compete against male NBA players. She has gone on to have a successful career in the WNBA, was selected first overall in the 2013 WNBA draft, and won a WNBA championship with the Phoenix Mercury in 2014. But how Griner would fare against male athletes remains open for sexist-inspired online debate.

References


