

A Study on Sports Media Coverage of Domestic Violence Incidents Involving Professional and Collegiate Athletes

Annice McEwan
Oklahoma State University

Introduction

The issue of domestic violence among amateur and professional athletes is not a new problem. Instances of athletes involved in domestic violence date back years before 2014, but this particular year became important when a series of notable athletes faced legal charges as a result of a domestic dispute. In the NFL alone, 11 players appeared in the news for domestic violence charges. Of those, several received special attention because of the player's prominence and value to the team.

In May of 2014, Carolina Panthers defensive end Greg Hardy was arrested and charged with two counts of threatening and assaulting his then-girlfriend at his home in Charlotte. Just a few months later, in September, Minnesota Vikings running back Adrian Peterson was indicted on felony charges of child abuse after allegedly hitting his four-year-old son with a tree branch. In both instances, pictures of the victim's injuries sustained during the disputes were released to the public and, consequently, sparked outrage.

No incident, however, received as much attention as the domestic violence case against Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice. His arrest followed a dispute with his then-fiancé in an Atlantic City casino elevator on Feb. 15. Six days later, TMZ released security footage showing Rice dragging his fiancé out of the elevator after their alleged confrontation. Rice met with Ravens officials and NFL administrators up until his indictment for aggravated assault on March 27. He accepted a pretrial intervention program to avoid trial, married his fiancé on March 28, and was suspended two games by the NFL in July. On Sept. 8, a video surfaced showing the entire altercation between Rice and his wife inside the elevator. The video clearly depicted Rice punching and knocking out his wife

before he dragged her out of the elevator. That same day, the Ravens released Rice and the NFL indefinitely suspended the running back.

The Rice case dominated sports news outlets for most of 2014, and provided a reference point for other incidents. Members of the media not only covered Rice's arrest and trial, but offered editorial opinions on Rice, the NFL, and the issue of domestic violence on a broader scale.

The intertwining of one of America's favorite pastimes with one of its darkest social issues makes for an interesting conversation. The way in which media chose to cover such a complex and sensitive issue can, in some ways, reflect how society itself handles the topic. Thus, the focus of my research is on the sports media coverage of domestic violence incidents involving professional and collegiate athletes in 2014.

Literature Review

Hegemonic Masculinity in Sport

Western cultures have predominantly relied on competitive, contact sports to characterize acceptable standards of heterosexual masculinity (Hargreaves 1994; Messner 1992). In particular, American football has been crowned the most violent and masculine of United States sports since the early 1900s (Rader 2008). As the game has evolved, so have its athletes. Advancements in the nutritional and physical sciences have effectively produced more powerful players, therefore increasing the inherent violence of the game (Sanderson 2002).

Conventional representation of American football players depicts them as young, muscular, rough, and violent towards themselves and others. This puts these athletes at the top of masculine echelons, and at the forefront of young boys' concepts of role models (Messner 1992).

The social process that holds this type of masculinity in high regard is, as Connell (1995) described, hegemonic. Connell explained that the dominant culture's emphasis on this type of masculinity idealizes it as superior to other forms (Connell 1995). Very few men actually achieve the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Most fall into other forms that generally include those that are submissive or in some form trivialized. The process, then, maintains the oppressed in their position among the hegemony (Gramsci 1971).

Men at the top must also preserve their position by adhering to rules and expectations associated with a paragon of masculinity. This includes heterosexuality and the condemnation of all things associated with feminine

expression (Pronger 1990; Messner 1992). Even more, masculinity's rules must not only be followed, but also verbally advocated. Anderson, Adams and McCormack (2010) labeled this "masculinity-established discourse." In it, athletes prompt others by referring to masculinity or strength. Homophobia can also be used to dissuade others from appearing less masculine.

Performing according to this sort of dialogue substantiates football as the ultimate masculine sport. Within these boundaries emerge warrior attitudes and behaviors associated with hegemonic masculinity. Young players are exposed to this notion early on. In sport, "weaker" players are weeded out while the most warrior-like are rewarded through promotion (Anderson 2009).

Research Questions

RQ1: How much attention did major sports websites give to the issue of domestic violence and various alleged types of domestic violence: male on female, female on male, male on male or female on female?

RQ2: What were the sexes of authors of these articles?

RQ3: How often were domestic-violence experts and women quoted in these articles on domestic violence?

RQ4: What dominant themes emerged in a textual analysis of sports articles on domestic violence that supported or contrasted hegemonic masculinity in sport and sport media coverage?

Methodology and Coding Procedures

This research used a textual analysis to examine media framing of domestic violence in sports. Search terms "domestic violence," "NFL," and "aggravated assault" were used in a search for all articles published in 2014 on three prominent, mainstream sports websites: ESPN Internet, SI.com, Yahoo! Sports.

ESPN Internet and Yahoo! Sports have the two highest rates of unique visitors of all sport-focused websites in the United States per ComScore (Fisher, 2015). SI.com was selected because it is the affiliated website for *Sports Illustrated* magazine, which has long been the gold-standard for investigative and critical sports journalism on serious issues in the United States.

Each article that had one or more of these terms that was published by one of these three outlets in 2014 was downloaded and included in this study for analysis.

The data was broken down and put into quantitative tables to differentiate between the sex of article author, and various types of domestic violence that the articles focused on: men on women, women on men, men on men, and women on women, although it was obvious that most articles would focus on male-on-female domestic violence.

Textual analyses are a non-reactive and subjective inquiry tool used to examine printed content, especially media content (McKee, 2001). Framing is term common in media research that is used to describe the process and means through which journalist interpret and portray events by selecting facts and anecdotes to include or exclude in storylines (Devitt, 2002; Kian & Hardin, 2009).

My adviser trained me in coding procedures for textual analyses based on his research and other scholars, which was the primary focus of this study. Working independently, I read each article multiple times in searching for dominant and consistent themes in the framing of these sports articles on domestic violence. I then used the constant comparative method to decipher and define key concepts by unifying their supporting data (Glasser and Strauss, 1967). From there, I identified dominant themes in these articles, which will be elaborated upon below. This process was subjective and interpretative (Creswell, 2003).

Quantitative Findings

Table 1: Media Articles on Domestic Violence in Sport Based on Outlet

Total Number of Articles: 58

ESPN	48
Sports Illustrated	7
Yahoo! Sports	3

In relation to RQ1, media did provide some coverage of the issue of domestic violence, led by ESPN and its conglomerates. Of the 58 articles reviewed, *ESPN* published 48 of them. *Sports Illustrated* had the second most with seven, and *Yahoo! Sports* published three. All articles collected were found within the search terms defined above.

ESPN provided the most day-to-day coverage of the Ray Rice incident. Many of the articles were reports detailing the most recent developments in Rice's case, including legal proceedings and both the Baltimore Ravens and NFL's responses. *ESPN* was the only outlet that included coverage of domestic violence from female abusers.

For *Sports Illustrated*, most of the website's coverage took an investigative approach. Rice's incident was related to other athlete's criminal offenses, or outsiders' perspectives on the case.

Yahoo! Sports, in its three articles, focused solely on football. Two were about Rice and Jonathan Dwyer's arrests and suspensions, while the other one investigated incidents of domestic abuse in the Canadian Football League. That article was one of just two articles that examined domestic violence outside of the U.S.

Table 2. Articles on Domestic Violence Overwhelmingly Focused on Male-on-female Violence

Male-On-Female Violence	56
Female-On-Male Violence	2
Male-On-Male Violence	0
Female-On-Female Violence	0

Most articles included in my research focused predominantly on domestic violence incidents where the victim was female and the alleged perpetrator was male. This was the case for Greg Hardy, Ray Rice, Jonathan Dwyer, and others. Only two articles included explicit details about domestic violence carried out by women. One was a report on Ebony Walker, a women's basketball player for the University of New Mexico, who was arrested and accused of assaulting her boyfriend after she threw a knife at him during an argument. The other is the more familiar arrest of U.S. Women's Soccer goalie, Hope Solo.

The article's author, Jim Caple, wrote of Solo's arrest and fourth-degree misdemeanor charges after a physical confrontation with her then-teenage nephew. The details of the incident are ambiguous and Solo's account is vastly different than her nephew's. Interestingly, so was Caple's portrayal of Solo in contrast to journalists' coverage of male abusers.

The article details the abuse Solo says she suffered as a child, something that was never written about for any of the accused men in the other articles examined. Caple also asked his audience whether the public should "punish people before we know the allegations are accurate," (Caple 2014) a warning that I also did not see in the other articles. Caple's most interesting quote, however, did relate back to a notorious incident involving a male athlete:

"The Ray Rice case increased the attention on Solo's domestic violence case, and suddenly her name was being thrown around as the female equivalent of Rice. But there are key differences between the two" (Caple 2014). Caple went on to differentiate the charges leveled against the two athletes, and the punishment, or lack thereof for Solo, from their respective teams.

Although my research only looked at a select number of articles within sports journalism, it became apparent that cases involving female abusers were not covered nearly as much or in the same way as cases involving male abusers, despite alarming details in both incidents. Furthermore, no cases involving same-sex abuse appeared in my search results, with the exception of references in articles to Adrian Peterson's charges of child abuse against his son. With this, it would appear the media's primary focus is on male-on-female domestic violence.

Table 3: Authors of Domestic Violence Articles Were Primarily Male

Total Number of Articles: 58

Male Author	32
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Female Author	11
Unspecified/Multiple Contributors	15

Of the 58 articles included in my textual analysis, 32 were written by male authors, 11 were written by female authors, and 15 were reports from multiple contributors or unspecified authors. Of the 32 articles with male authorship, 11 were attributed to multiple male journalists. Of the 11 articles with female authors, the same journalist wrote six of them. The writer, Jane McManus is a longtime sports journalist who is now with ESPNW, a website specifically targeting female readers.

There appeared to be a division in the way that women and men generally wrote about the issue. This is why it was important to look at how many articles were covered by each gender. None of the articles authored by women talked much about the effect a player's suspension would have on his or her team, whereas several articles men wrote referred to who might play in place of the suspended player. One *ESPN* article written by a male journalist shortly after Rice was arrested, offered possible "draft selections" that would "make up" for Rice if he was suspended.

In contrast, most female-authored articles focused on their opinion of Rice himself. Five of McManus' articles were columns in which she discussed her disapproval of Ray Rice's original punishment, and her assessment of the NFL's handling of domestic violence afterward. In comparison to all 58 articles, McManus was the first in the 2014 period to raise concern with the overall pattern of domestic violence in professional athletics. "Athletes may not be statistically more likely to commit an act of domestic violence – or any crime – than any subset of the population, but that doesn't make these any easier to stomach" (McManus, "Leagues Stand Against," 2014).

The other five articles with female writers were also editorials. Most criticized NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and the league's handling of domestic violence cases among its players. Louisa Thomas even used satire to poke fun at how the league has punished drug offenses more severely than personal misconduct transgressions. "Wait – I'm confused. Why would anyone do something so heinously inexcusable as smoking marijuana, a relatively common recreational drug that is now legal in some states?" (Thomas, 2014).

The most intriguing female author of the included articles was Janay Rice, Ray Rice's wife. The long-form piece is written in first-person from Janay's perspective, with the help of former newspaper journalist and current ESPN personality, Jemele Hill. The article is the only article of the 58 that is written from

a domestic violence victim’s perspective. Although Janay offers her thoughts on how the NFL handled her husband’s case, most of the article recounts the events leading up to and during the confrontation in the elevator (Hill 2014).

Although somewhat limited in number, the articles written by female journalists included a lot of personal reactions to domestic violence in sport. It is important to note that their sentiments were echoed by a large number of male journalists in the other articles.

Table 4: Most Articles Did not Consult a Domestic Violence Expert or Include their Perspective

Includes Domestic Violence Expert	8
No Domestic Violence Expert Included	50

In relation to RQ3, domestic violence experts were used as references for slightly more than an eighth of all the articles I reviewed. In the first 30 stories and columns of 2014, no domestic violence experts were consulted at all.

The first time an expert was quoted in an article was for ESPN’s news services. The article, which had multiple contributors, was a report on Ray Rice’s pretrial intervention. Under court-approved conditions, Rice avoided a possible conviction by completing court-mandated requirements. The prosecutor on his case faced criticism from outsiders, including Donna D’Andrea, a legal advocate for The Women’s Center in New Jersey, who was quoted in the report.

D’Andrea explained her surprise and “outrage” over Rice’s approval for pretrial intervention. Colleague Erin O’Hanlon was also featured in the story (“Prosecutor’s office,” 2014). D’Andrea was interviewed again for a second ESPN article that revisited the pretrial program controversy.

One of McManus’ articles, published in September, interviewed several domestic violence and legal experts whom Goodell consulted for the NFL’s revised domestic violence and sexual assault policy for players. McManus included their input on Goodell’s actions and what they remembered from their conversations with him (McManus, “NFL’s New Stance,” 2014).

The most interesting article, however, was written by a domestic violence expert herself. Esta Soler’s article, “It’s Step 1 – Again – for the NFL on Domestic

Violence,” was written for SI.com. Soler was among the experts Goodell conferred with for the new policy. In her column, Soler offers her thoughts on how the NFL can continue to rebuild its image. One thing that was unique to Soler’s piece, was her encouragement for the NFL to now follow through in its new policy. She focused less on what had already happened, and more on what should happen in the future (Soler, 2014).

Table 5: Women Rarely Quoted in Domestic Violence Articles

Quotes From Women	52
Quotes From Men	197

Also in relation to RQ4, men were quoted almost four times as often as women. Of the women’s quotes, some were victims of domestic violence or their advocates. Others were coaches and media members. Just one source quoted was a female judge. Of the 52 quotes from women, just 10 were used in articles with female authorship. The other 42 articles were written by men or unspecified authors.

As for the men’s quotes, their statuses and occupations ranged from prosecutor to professional athlete. All quotes taken from NFL administrators or team executives were male. This includes Roger Goodell and Baltimore Ravens head coach, John Harbaugh. Of the 197 male quotes, 114 of them were used in articles written by men. Interestingly, female authors used 38 of the 197 quotes. That’s 28 more quotes from men used in female-authored articles than quotes from women.

The quotes included in the count were from individuals on the record. Organizational statements and releases were not counted, and neither were alleged quotes, police reports, or sources without gender identification.

Table 6: Roger Goodell Mentioned Nearly a Third of the Time Ray Rice Was

# of Times “Ray/Rice” Used	782
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# of times “Roger/Goodell” Used	218

Despite a focus on domestic violence victims and their alleged attackers, many articles referenced Goodell a number of times. As the case against Rice unfolded, and his punishment was increased from a two-game suspension to a lifetime ban, more journalists began commenting on Goodell’s handing of the situation, since Rice’s punishment was ultimately his decision.

In all the articles, “Ray” or “Rice” was used 782 times, not including when “Rice” referred to Janay. In those same articles, “Roger” or “Goodell” was mentioned 218 times. McManus was the biggest user of Roger Goodell’s name. In two of her articles, McManus used “Roger” or “Goodell” more times than “Ray” or “Rice.” Three other articles, by men, also did the same. In all three instances, the article was written solely in criticism of Goodell.

The article to use the most of either name was Janay Rice’s. Excluding the names counted in her story alone, the totals drop to 617 for Ray Rice and 172 for Roger Goodell.

Goodell’s name appeared most often in the fall of the 2014, right after the entire video from the elevator was released and shortly before Goodell suspended Rice indefinitely.

Qualitative Themes

Four dominant themes emerged from this textual analysis that were mostly focused on male-female domestic violence and alleged incidents involving current or past NFL players, which dominated sports media headlines on this issue in 2014:

1. *This is a problem in NFL.*

Overwhelmingly, as Ray Rice’s arrest and trial unfolded, sports writers focused their attention on what some deemed a “problem” in the NFL. After Rice’s arrest, many went back to look at other players who had been accused of or charged with domestic violence. In fact, more than 20 of the articles referenced more than one instance of domestic violence in the NFL.

Sports Illustrated's website featured a lengthy breakdown of NFL players' arrested over a two-year period. The article listed the player, his team, and the circumstances surrounding his arrest. Author Sarah Bishop did not give her opinion on the number of arrests in the league, but wrote that they totaled at least 15 (Bishop, 2014).

Benjamin Morris, in his article for ESPN's FiveThirtyEight, used statistical data to compare the rate of domestic violence in the NFL to national numbers. Morris chose to examine these numbers because, like many of his colleagues, he believed there was an underlying pattern of abuse in league. Morris writes, "But Rice's offense ... is indicative of a larger pattern in arrests in NFL players; they have been particularly prone to domestic violence arrests" (Morris, 2014).

Grantland and fellow ESPN journalist, Brian Phillips, echoed Morris' sentiments and added that he believed the league was directly to blame for its endorsement of extreme violence:

But I think that for many football fans, the main feature of the NFL's image of masculinity is – troublingly – that is so unchecked. It is not constrained by ambiguity or by the limitations that men have, relatively recently, had to learn to accept in their everyday lives. You roar in the NFL, you rage, you hit as hard as you can. This is an atavistic image, one of power based on violence, and it's swollen here to ludicrous proportions.

Phillips also used strong language to address what he deemed as the NFL's "fantasy" of violence, writing, "Which is a problem, because when the league encounters circumstances that compel it to stand against, say, rampant, horrifying abuse, what results is often something like the confusion of the Rice scandal" (Phillips, 2014).

Others wrote of the NFL's domestic violence problem in their criticism of Goodell. Tim Keown (2014) wrote after Rice's indefinite suspension:

This is no longer a Goodell problem. This is no longer a team problem. This is a league problem, and it cries out for a leader who can convince the public he stands for something more than corporate sponsorship and good PR (Keown 2014).

2. The NFL handled the Ray Rice incident horribly.

As Keown made clear in his article, the general consensus in the sports journalism world was that the NFL did everything wrong. Consequently, Goodell took most of the heat because he ruled on Rice's initial two-game suspension

before suspended him again, indefinitely. The original criticism centered on his inconsistent and arbitrary punishments between different criminal offenses and personal misconduct.

Yahoo! Sports' Jay Busbee explains the paradox:

It's not hard to see why Rice's penalty drew such protest. In comparison, the NFL suspended the Colts' Robert Mathis four games for using an infertility drug, and suspended Josh Gordon an entire year for smoking marijuana. The Dolphins suspended Richie Incognito for eight games because of harassment that, while severe and constant, apparently never turned physical ... Just a little perspective on how the NFL works today (Busbee 2014).

More than unfairness, writers appeared angry that the NFL missed an opportunity to show support for domestic violence victims. The issue, they said, was bigger than any player missing games.

Don Van Natta Jr. and Kevin Van Valkenburg outlined the handling of Rice's case and said, "That's why the NFL's penalty is so disappointing. It's an opportunity lost to show not only that the league cares about its female fans but that it cares about putting an end to domestic violence" (Van Natta, 2014).

Phillips also weighed in within his article. Phillips wrote that the ensuing media frenzy over Rice's scandal did not elicit the public conversation it should have saying, "Because far from providing a forum for a valuable conversation about domestic abuse, the Rice scandal turned into a debacle of talk, a catastrophe of failed comment" (Phillips, 2014).

In yet another McManus article, the ESPNW columnist shares her thoughts on the damage she believes NFL's reputation sustained because of how Goodell chose handled it. McManus wrote that it a critical conversation, "can still happen, but there is a lot of damage control to do in the meantime. The NFL's credibility can't withstand much more of this" (McManus, "The Real Reason," 2014).

3. Fellow athletes/players are outraged at both Ray Rice and Roger Goodell.

In their criticism of the NFL and its commissioner, sports writers included a substantial amount of quotes from fellow players. Some questioned Rice's character or place in the NFL, while some mirrored the media's stance that Goodell should be ashamed of his actions, or lack thereof. Twelve of the 58 articles reviewed used a quote from another NFL player in their article.

Former Steeler linebacker James Harrison was the most notable. As Scott Brown wrote in his report, Harrison was punished and fined multiple times as a player while Goodell was the commissioner. After the Rice scandal, Brown wrote that Harrison was “taunting Goodell via Twitter,” (Brown, 2014).

Harrison’s tweets included:

“@nflcommish ain’t no fun when the rabbit got the gun huh?”

“This is just one more example of why the Steelers didn’t vote to approve the CBA!!!”

“@nflcommish remains adamant he won’t resign, source says:”Never.” Yeah that’s what Nixon but then again the CBA gave you more power than him!”

Another former NFL player that posted tweets about Goodell was London Fletcher. ESPN news services featured his tweets, as well other players’ social media posts, in a report written shortly after the full Rice video was released. The article included this tweet from Fletcher:

“@nflcommish to say you got that wrong is an understatement. Very disappointed in you. Wow...unbelievable.”

Other reports focused on the reactions players and coaching staffs had to domestic violence in general. Jeff Legwold wrote a brief article about the Denver Broncos’ reaction to the scandal. Legwold featured quotes from head coach John Fox and players Chris Harris and Terrance Knighton:

Later Monday, in the Broncos locker room Knighton, who said he wants to set an example for his three younger brothers, did not step back from any of it.

‘There’s no place in the world for domestic violence,’ Knighton said. ‘... Little kids look up to you. We’re held to a higher standard and that’s not acceptable. ... It’s not acceptable and if you know something that is going on you should address it’ (Legwold, 2014).

Interestingly, outside of the NFL, other prominent athletes like Charles Barkley, were also quoted criticizing Goodell. In an article for SI.com, Barkley’s quotes called for a lifetime ban of domestic violence offenders for both the NFL and other professional leagues like the NBA (Deitsch, 2014).

4. Changes in the NFL’s domestic violence policy are an improvement, but it’s a little too late.

Even after Goodell met with the domestic violence experts and rewrote the policy on domestic violence incidents involving current players, most articles were hesitant to give Goodell or the league any praise. Most saw it as, too-little too-late. The general feeling was that Goodell had messed up to such an extent that no public relations move stood a chance of fixing it.

An extensive report ESPN's Outside the Lines did over the Rice case called the NFL's investigation into the incident "scant" and posed the one resounding question that followed the issue the past year. The article asked, "Why did Roger Goodell, the NFL's strong leader who for eight years as commissioner has been so committed to player discipline, not immediately follow his often-stated moral compass when he learned -- verbally or visually -- of Rice's attack?" (Van Natta, 2014).

Other journalists questioned how well any attempt at rebuilding an image might go. Keown's column ended by stating what the "debacle" had ultimately done to the NFL's image and the public's trust in its administration. Keown wrote, "Owners, players and fans want accountability and even reassurance. It wouldn't take much. You're the NFL, so nobody ever demands much when it comes to transparency; you've made sure of that" (Keown, 2014).

McManus, who had stated her opinion since the early stages of the Rice case, wrote that it was the league's lack of action that was its biggest problem. McManus wrote that it was only under public pressure that the league changed its attitude:

It was another reactive move from commissioner Roger Goodell, and this brand of after-the-fact justice characterizes the way he has approached the issue of domestic violence all along. The league's initial two-game suspension was met with outrage, and only then did the league put together a comprehensive policy with standards in place (McManus, "The Real Reason," 2014).

Soler, in her article, reiterated the need for tangible action from the NFL. In response to a letter Goodell sent to owners apologizing for his mistakes, Soler wrote, "But the true test of how committed the NFL is to changing its culture and eliminating domestic violence is not the letter -- its whether the league follows up on its programs and promises. Creating a policy was only Step 1" (Soler, 2014).

Discussion and Conclusion

Results from this exploratory study and analysis should not be generalized to all media outlets or sports publications of domestic violence. Only 58 articles were included, from just three sports media websites, over a one-year period. In contrast, many more articles were written and published, from other sources outside of the ones used, long before and after the Ray Rice case unfolded.

The Rice incident, in particular, attracted so much media attention because of the certainty the video provided of his actions. Articles not only detailed the circumstances of his arrest, but they also connected his case with other violent or criminal activity among professional football players. The articles narrowed their subject from domestic violence in general, to male-on-female incidents involving NFL players. The collections' sole article about a female abuser was even related back to Rice. Despite most victims being women, female journalists wrote a small number of the articles published, and even fewer included expert and female perspectives on domestic violence in the league. Journalists' shock and disgust about the Rice case reflected a much broader feeling the public had about domestic violence in general. Media members often used the social media posts or locker-room quotes of fellow athletes to provide proof of this attitude, although many argued that this type of abuse was more common among NFL players. Even more, the journalists included nearly as much criticism for Goodell as Rice and other offenders themselves. The absence of equal and fair penalties was disparaged as much as Rice's lack of remorse afterward.

These general ideas were not absolute for all included articles. Some were simply reports and other outliers used data or statistical evidence to refute these common ideas and themes. Therefore it cannot be said that my findings were unanimous interpretations of domestic violence coverage among sports journalists, but rather broad representations of domestic violence in the sports journalism.

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Thesis Abstract

The 2014-year included a number of high-profile domestic violence cases involving professional athletes. Recognizable names include NFL stars Adrian Peterson and Greg Hardy. But the most notorious case involved Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice, who was seen punching his wife on surveillance video in a casino elevator. The media coverage surrounding the incident largely focused on the video footage itself, and the lack of appropriate punishment from the NFL and its commissioner Roger Goodell.

The study required examination of the media's framing and portrayal of a much broader social issue. I reviewed 58 articles from three prominent sports media websites: ESPN Internet, SI.com, and Yahoo! Sports. The study focused on who wrote the articles, what topics were discussed, what opinions the journalists had, and what sort of wording the pieces used. The media's coverage largely focused on male-on-female domestic abuse among NFL players. Most coverage was spent on journalists' criticism of the NFL's handling of the Rice case and Goodell's inconsistent punishment among players. Many articles said the controversy damaged the NFL's reputation among fans and players.

The more implicit ideas were domestic violence is generally detested by the public and lack of reproach from an organization as powerful as the NFL is shameful. Ultimately, the Rice case unleashed more harm on the reputation of the NFL and Goodell than any player accused or convicted of a domestic violence offense.