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Whiteness in Sports Media: Analyzing Mediated EPL Content for Racialized Narratives

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Thesis of Bradley A. Fountain

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Nova Southeastern University
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

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WHITENESS IN SPORTS MEDIA
ANALYZING MEDIATED EPL CONTENT FOR RACIALIZED NARRATIVES

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Bradley Fountain

Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

Department of Communication, Media, and the Arts

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ABSTRACT

Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and critical rhetoric of race, this study identifies messages of whiteness present in the narratives produced by sports media in order to highlight the presence of racial discrimination in the English Premier League (EPL). Since sports is a field with increased social impact, the EPL is an important place to center CRT's agenda and contest dominant narratives. Focusing specifically on Sky Sports, the EPL's official broadcasting partner, this study examines both verbal and nonverbal racialized messages across their matchday content. The findings suggest that Sky Sports supports the racial hierarchy in the EPL by communicating racialized messages that reproduce systems of White dominance and imply Black inferiority on and off the field. Both CRT and critical rhetoric of race are transdisciplinary, therefore I hope this study can be used as a building block to uncovering mediated messages of whiteness across many disciplines, and inspiring efforts to disrupt them.

Keywords: Whiteness, EPL, Sky Sports, Critical Race Theory

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Introduction

2020 has shown us that equality is a right that is still being fought for by Black communities. The extraordinary success of Black figures, such as former President Barack Obama or basketball great and civil rights activist LeBron James, has inspired hope in Black communities. Hope that Black voices are finally being heard. The success stories of these great Black men, which would not have been possible 100 years ago, stand as clear examples to the world that the opportunity for Black success is greater today than it ever has been. However, considering just how unbalanced the scale was against Black people, does the visibility of a limited number of success stories actually suggest equality?

Critical Race Theory (CRT) believes that it does not. While no longer enslaved or segregated, Black people still endure instances of discrimination every day. Examples of modern racial oppression across some of the most important disciplines highlights that, whether consciously or subconsciously, society does not provide the Black community with equal opportunity. These examples include: the content that is taught in classrooms, which leaves Black students at a disadvantage to their fellow White students; the stereotypes cast against Black men in law enforcement, which has resulted in a justified feeling of fear and mistrust towards the criminal justice system; and the preconceived assumptions about Black women, which has affected their access to equal health care. From a participation perspective, the only financially rewarding fields in which we see a proportionate number of Black and White representatives are entertainment and sports. However, because the entertainment and sporting industries have created an avenue for

success for Black communities, there seems to be limited talk on racial treatment in these fields.

Therefore, with the aim to spark conversations regarding racism in sports, this study utilizes CRT to uncover racial narratives in the English Premier League (EPL). To unearth these types of messages being generated by the EPL, this study's scope focuses on its trusted television partner, Sky Sports. Sky Sports is the only television company that has been present since the birth of the league, and it has become an important component in the EPL's financial and global growth. By analyzing Sky Sports' EPL content, I hope to identify how racial narratives are directly or indirectly communicated throughout English Sports. Narratives that, due to the size and reach of the EPL, are possibly being recycled throughout not only sports, but the whole world. However, before being able to successfully use CRT methods to study the effects of racial discrimination in sports media, we must first understand the central aims of CRT and the ways in which it can (and has) helped the Black community. After outlining the roots of CRT, we then move on to race and sports, looking at the original integration of Black athletes and identifying the ways racism has been mediated and applied in the EPL. We then look into the CRT frames used to analyze the Sky Sports content and look at previous CRT research in the field of sports media. Finally, this thesis discusses the data collected from this study and suggests data themes that hinder the success of Black players.

Critical Race Theory

Since its introduction in the early 1970s, critical race theory (CRT) has been pivotal for attempting to recognize and combat enlightened forms of racial oppression in society. As identified by Cathy Mills and Len Unsworth (2018), “Critical race theory was begun by Scholars of Color and others in legal studies in the USA during post-war civil rights movements” (p. 314). The founding father credited for the introduction of this theoretical movement was the African-American civil rights lawyer Derrick Bell whose work focused on the discrimination African-Americans faced within the criminal justice system. Mills and Unsworth (2018) recognize that the work of Bell and the other pioneers of CRT scholarship, also predominantly civil rights lawyers, was produced in an attempt “to challenge and change racial politics and power relations in institutional systems” (p. 314). In their 2017 edition of *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic echo this call to “challenge and change,” stating that CRT is important for “studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism and power” (p. 1). Although CRT scholarship has expanded into different disciplines since its introduction, the idea of using it as tool to “challenge and change” (Mills and Unsworth, 2018, p. 314) or “studying and transforming” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 1) has remained consistent and reinforces the argument that the CRT movement has been pivotal for *recognizing* enlightened forms of racism and taking steps towards *combating* them.

Since the original work of Bell (1995), the amount of scholarship grounded in CRT ideology has excelled and is now implemented to analyze race issues in all aspects of society. While different scholars identify different tenants and frames of CRT, there are three main aims that most CRT scholarship seeks:

- 1) Understanding the current nature of racism
- 2) Exposing reproductive cycles of white dominance
- 3) Prioritizing the minority voice

Understanding the Current Nature of Racism

The first tenant grounding the theory, and on which all CRT ideology is built, is the understanding that racism is still very much present. As Delgado and Stefancic (2017) explain, not only is racism present, but it is “the usual way society does business, the common, every-day experience of most people of color in this country” (p. 7).

Recognizing that racism has become a normal and everyday experience contests the dominant narrative that racism is no longer an issue, a shallow belief inspired by a select number of victories African Americans have achieved in the post-civil rights era. While the civil rights movement clearly improved the safety and standard of life for people of color in America, it also forced racism to transfer into a hidden form. By limiting the space that overt racial abuse can be communicated and claiming to have provided Blacks with equal opportunity, a dangerous colorblind narrative has been created that suggests that, in the post-civil rights era, society now interacts without acknowledging each other’s race. This colorblind ideology, which has been used to excuse instances of racism by claiming that Whites no longer see color, has been recognized as emerging “as part of the great racial transformation,” and is what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2002) and many other CRT scholars recognize as the “dominant racial ideology of the post-civil rights era” (p. 42).

It is this colorblind ideology that makes CRT approaches so important for identifying the current existence of racism, as belief in this ideology has oversimplified

the complex nature of race and thus allowed it to operate, without recognition, in public spaces. Therefore, by identifying the continued existence of racism across disciplines, CRT aims to limit the space where racist acts can be denied or played off as unintentional and provide evidence that forces society to wake up and acknowledge the systematic restrictions hindering the Black community.

Exposing Reproductive Cycles of White Dominance

As Bell (1992) outlines in his article, the struggle of Black people to obtain freedom, justice, and dignity is as old as the United States (Bell, 1992). Despite valiant efforts throughout the years, the narrative that Whites are superior to Blacks has been globalized and reproduced in ways that have reasserted whiteness and ensured dominant White systems have remained in control. Understanding why and how these ongoing systems of dominance have been so prevalent, and attempting to disrupt them, is another central goal of CRT work. It is no secret that power and wealth has been exclusively passed down through generations of White families across both the United States and Europe. Examples such as the British royal family, whose actions in previous centuries continue to globally affect the way of life, or certain powerhouse families in the U.S, who have controlled the financial markets and political agendas for decades, highlight how a limited number of White families can determine where, and specifically, how large parts of society live. This level of power also involves distributing opportunity, as well as shaping the beliefs and values of those they have influence over. This influence allows them to determine the narrative, and subsequently, the treatment of all racial subpopulations, including Black people.

Delgado and Stefancic (2017), as well as many others in the field, believe that “because racism advances the interests of both White elites (materially) and working-class Whites (physically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it” (p. 7). However, in situations where the inclusion of Black people is deemed profitable there is a greater emphasis on racial opportunity and equality. This is a tool Bell (1980) identified as interest convergence when assessing *Brown v. Board of Education*, a case that was revolutionary for Black Americans as it outlawed racial segregation in schools. In their article “Derrick Bell, CRT, and educational leadership 1995–present”, TyRon Douglas, Christopher Dunbar, and Muhammed Khalifa (2013) highlight that in the immediate aftermath of the case, the “dominant narrative of the decision” was that “*Brown* was a watershed moment in US history making a collective, moral, political cultural shift in attitudes towards race and inequality” (p. 492). However, as Douglas, Dunbar, and Khalifa (2013) explain, Bell contested this narrative instead identifying that the change was implemented “because the interest of civil rights movements coincided with the self-interest of White elites,” ultimately leading him to conclude that the “shift was a result of convergence of interest” (p. 492). It is Bell’s belief that during this case America realized the end of segregation could lead to enormous financial gains for White elites, as well as political influence on the world stage. Bell’s notion of interest convergence, therefore, is the recognition that White elites are only interested in fixing issues of racial oppression when it furthers their own personal or collective interests. This suggests that the increased quality of life Black people have experienced since the days of segregation and slavery are not a turn towards equality from White elites, but instead, they are the result of a continued quest for (White) financial and political gain.

Interest convergence highlights the level of control White elites have on civilization. The idea that White elites are providing Black communities with limited victories to further consolidate their own wealth and power suggests that, despite the perception and narrative of equality, White elites are still in complete control. Since Bell coined interest convergence, CRT work has since recognized many subsequent techniques that White elites have used to ensure dominant structures of Whiteness are maintained. By sparking conversation on the reproductive nature of systems of Whiteness and attempting to identify the tools White elites have used to continuously further the interest of the white population, critical race theorists hope to publicize the role of whiteness in society in order to disrupt and break this ongoing cycle.

Centralizing the Minority Voice

The third tenant goes beyond research to instead focus on giving minorities back their ethnic identity and voice. As previously stated, Mills and Unsworth's (2018) emphasized that the pioneers of CRT scholarship were mostly scholars of color. This is, arguably, one of the greatest impacts that CRT has had since its creation. The platform CRT has created encourages minority scholars to publish literature and provides a community for minority figures and others engaged in the fight for racial equality to interact and story-tell. As a black man who grew up in England and has first-hand experience of life in an EPL organization, my authorship of this study embodies CRT's centralizing of the minority voice. CRT suggests that including personal experiences helps determine if the themes in this study have been ongoing and further validates any findings. Therefore, including my first-hand experiences within the EPL allows me to use my insight to understand and convey the effect that racial stereotypes have on Black

players, identify covert instances of racial discrimination that may not be visible to those who have not been exposed to the EPL culture, and spark much needed conversation and future research on the topic.

From Bell's work in the 1990s to Delgado and Stefancic's in the 2010s, all CRT scholarship works towards the same consistent goal: equal opportunity and treatment for Black people. As in all disciplines, CRT's ideology has developed as its understanding has evolved. Some of the beliefs and ideologies once held throughout CRT are now called into question as our understanding about race continues to grow. However, all CRT scholarship is bounded by three crucial aims: truthfully communicating the evolving natures of racism, exposing and disrupting the reproductive systems of White dominance, and giving the Black community a platform to be heard and interact with the world. Collectively, if a true understanding of the modernized forms of racism is present, then that drastically limits the acceptable space for it to be carried out. The next section looks at how applying a critical rhetoric approach to studying race can help achieve CRT's goals across mass media platforms by helping to analyze narratives of Whiteness in public spaces.

Critical Rhetoric of Race

A critical rhetorical analysis of race can help to identify racialized discourse within all forms of communication. As Michael Lacy and Kent Ono (2011) explain, rhetoric is present in the communications generated throughout all mediated platforms, as well as in the “mundane performances of everyday life” (p. 6). Therefore, a critical analysis of such rhetoric, when grounded in the tenets of CRT, can highlight the ways that “discursive, semiotic, and symbolic skill are being used to maintain power structures” (Carstarphen, 2017, para. 5) as well as provide an understanding for “how and why race works” (Lacy & Ono, 2011, p. 8). This makes applying a critical rhetorical approach to studying race useful for achieving CRT’s goals in mediated spaces by helping to identify racially discriminative messages and communication techniques that reproduce white dominance as well as by disrupting dominant stories by retelling them from a minority perspective.

Although critical rhetoric analysis of race research has identified many rhetorical techniques used to communicate racialized messages, this study focuses on analyzing the deployment of the whiteness narrative.

Rhetoric of Whiteness

The narrative of Whiteness has been identified as a strategic rhetorical concept used to invisibly communicate that being White is considered normal, which creates a “grid of intelligibility against which non-white identities are constructed as different or other” (Wrench & Garrett, 2017, p. 750). As communication scholar Raka Shome (1996) explains, this rhetoric of Whiteness is “the everyday, invisible, subtle, cultural, and social practices, ideas, and codes that discursively secure the power and privilege of white

people, but that strategically remains unmarked, unnamed, and unmapped in contemporary society” (p. 503). Previous research has found that the constant communication of this rhetoric has forced it to be accepted throughout large parts of society, and, as stated by Rachel Griffin and Bernadette Calafell (2011), by remaining hidden and unmarked, its lack of recognition allows it to maintain its dominance thus allowing it to be unknowingly reproduced in day-to-day interactions. This has created a space where Whiteness can be used to alienate and limit Blacks who have either failed to meet the standards of White culture, or refuse to try, as well as to reassert White dominance by remaining invisible, only allowing those who do submit an opportunity to succeed.

The strategic rhetoric of Whiteness is fluid and adaptable and, therefore, can take different forms across different disciplines. Utilizing a critical rhetorical analysis of Whiteness can highlight the unique ways society implements this narrative and the benefits in doing so. As Griffin and Calafell (2011) explain, “without critical and ongoing critiques of whiteness, people of all ethnic backgrounds will continue to ingest messages of indifference, dismissal, and disregard, which will subsequently stymie the movement for racial equality” p. 130). Therefore, by critically analyzing Whiteness and identifying the messages of difference, dismissal, and disregard Blacks receive, we can begin efforts to “destabilize, deconstruct, and redress Whiteness” (McDuffie, 2017, p. 77). By doing so, we can “establish an understanding of what it means to be White, how Whiteness is established legally, how certain groups move in and out of the White races, the passing of White power and White supremacy, and the group of privileges that come with membership in the dominant race” (McDuffie, 2017, p. 77).

Using Kristi McDuffie's findings as a reference point, this study analyzes the strategic deployment of Whiteness across sports media. This will identify what it means to be White, the privileges that come with membership to the dominant race, how certain groups move in and out of the White race, and how Whiteness is protected and reproduced. By utilizing critical rhetorical analysis of Whiteness to help attain these goals, this study hopes to identify how this rhetorical technique has maintained White dominance in sports and the direct consequences this narrative has on the Black sporting community. Having identified CRT's goals and explained how analyzing a narrative of whiteness can help achieve this, the next section looks at the current situation of race, sports, and the media.

Race, Sports, and the Media

Although the Civil Rights Act in America was not signed until 1964, the sporting industry began slowly integrating African American athletes around the end of the Second World War. In his 2001 book, which considers the dominance Black athletes have attained in sports, Jon Entine highlights how “sports became a highly visible way to demonstrate to the world that Americans took their government's pronouncements on freedom and equality to heart” (p. 209). As Entine explains, although segregated from the White population in almost all other aspects of U.S. society in the early 1950s, on the basketball court and the football field, African American males could compete with, and most importantly interact with, their white counterparts. While this integration in sports has been revolutionary for the Black community, CRT scholars have since recognized this integration as yet another obvious example of interest convergence. By integrating and somewhat accepting Black athletes in sports while continuing to oppress them in all other aspects of life, it is clear white team owners and players were happy to amend racial norms if they believed it could improve their team's success and subsequently increase their financial income. However, in areas where the Black community was not advancing the interests of whites, they remained alienated from society.

English scholar Kevin Hylton is the one of the most influential figures connecting CRT to the field of sports. In his article “‘Race,’ Sport and Leisure: Lessons from Critical Race Theory,” he reinforces CRT's origin, stating that “CRT has come out of a particular struggle by black legal scholars who in challenging one of the most symbolic bastions of white privilege and power, the legal system, have developed a transdisciplinary tool in which to oppose the hegemonic influence of the white establishment” (Hylton, 2005, p.

91). Hylton (2005) states that due to the “role the legal system plays in constructing the notion of ‘race’ and racial identities” (p.92) there is an emphasized importance on CRT in the field of law. Hylton (2005) also attaches this importance to the field of sports, identifying how “sport, just like the law, can be observed as a key tool in the subjugation of black people and the magnification of the place of ‘race’ as a major mediating factor within society” (p. 92). By stating this, Hylton recognizes how both sport and law are places where any form of racial treatment, positive or negative, will be emulated around the world. Therefore, as a platform capable of shaping racial beliefs and narratives, sport has become an important space for pushing “CRT’s political agenda of challenge, change and transformation” (Hylton & Law, 2009, p. 41). This has sparked numerous critical race approaches to sports research and has allowed CRT scholars to critically re-examine the discipline where racism is confidently denied.

Racism in the EPL

Like sports in the United States, the integration of minority figures in the U.K sports scene also greatly increased around the turn of the 21st century. While not as dominant as the presence of Black athletes in the U.S, studies find that Black athletes in England’s most popular sports league are far more prominent today than they were in previous decades. The well-known sports website ‘TalkSport’ highlights this with a 2018 study that found at the beginning of the 2017 English Premier League soccer campaign, there were double the amount of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) players involved than when the league was formed back in 1992 (Dibble, 2017). While this is partly due to the global expansion and financial pull of the EPL, it is also due to what

scholar Stefan Lawrence (2017) describes as a “liberal turn” towards racial equality in England (p. 134).

The anti-racism ideology that has resulted from this liberal turn (ideology which stands at the center of the EPL’s approach to tackling racial discrimination) has undoubtedly resulted in victories for Black members of the EPL. It has forced the EPL to criminalize instances of racial verbal abuse, create multiple anti-racism campaigns (such as No Room for Racism and Kick It Out), and take a very public stance against racial abuse. This is evident in a statement released in 2020 on the EPL’s official website, which states “The Premier League is making it clear there is No Room For Racism as we continue to work with all our clubs, fans, the FA, EFL, PFA, Kick It Out and the police to tackle discrimination across all areas of football” (para. 1). By turning to this liberal approach and publicly standing against racism the EPL has significantly reduced the hostile environment for Black players and ensured that the English soccer field is continually becoming a space free of racial hatred.

However, as Lawrence (2017) states, although making significant strides towards ensuring players are safe from racial abuse ON the field, these liberal approaches have “taken the fight against racism as far as they can and in some instances have begun to recede” (p. 145). These views reinforce the findings in a study by Daniel Kilvington and John Price (2017) where they conclude that “football’s key organisations and clubs have, at times, undermined attempts to tackle this racism and, at others, actively prevented it” (p. 13). This is because the EPL has focused all of its efforts on reducing overt instances of racial abuse while ignoring the fact that “racism in English football is historically rooted, structural and systematic” (Burdsey, 2014, p. 431). The EPL’s official website

displays a prime example of this ignorance during their explanation on how they are actively battling racial abuse. While there is a brief mention about educating offenders, which can help make meaningful progress if done correctly, the large majority of the EPL's fight against racism clearly revolves around eliminating verbal abuse at matches. By focusing most of their attention and anti-racism resources at ending verbal racial assaults in stadiums, the EPL is failing to acknowledge instances of institutional racial oppression caused by their own system and is, instead, deflecting the blame onto the fans. The importance of reducing instances of verbal racial abuse during matches cannot be undermined as to not have to endure racial discrimination at work is a basic human right. Having to endure such abuse in no way, shape, or form represents racial equality.

It is this narrow-minded outlook on racism in the EPL that has allowed a socially accepted colorblind ideology to appear. As Daniel Burdsey explains, by displaying and exaggerating high profile achievements, such as the reduction of racial abuse in stadiums, the EPL has managed to implement a consensus in English football surrounding the "effective containment and/or progressive decline of racism" (p. 432). By associating the reduction of racial abuse with the overall decline in racism, the EPL is oversimplifying the "nature and extent of racisms" (Lawrence, 2017, p. 136) and sending the message that this is the only way that Black and minority members of the EPL are discriminated against. This allows EPL officials, as well the British public, to ignore the less obvious instances of racism and proudly claim that racism in the EPL is no longer an issue.

Therefore, it must be concluded that the current approaches to racial equality in the EPL have "failed to achieve the outcomes they profess to desire" (Lawrence, 2017, p. 134). The liberal turn of the EPL towards tackling racism had the right intentions and did

make some progress, but by only acknowledging and confronting the tip of the iceberg, they have allowed the hidden, institutionalized forms of Whiteness to prevail.

Media Impact

As previously recognized by Hylton (2005), sports have a platform capable of initiating social change. The sporting industry, which consists of thousands of sports organizations, has only been able to establish and endure this influence over society due to one essential reason, its relationship with the media. While many sporting organizations have ascended into world renown entities, no organization has generated a mass global audience the size of the EPL. According to figures on their official website, the 2018/2019 EPL season was broadcasted in 1.03 billion homes world-wide, and “shown in a total of 188 of the world’s 193 countries recognized by the United Nations” (para. 7). These statistics, which only record television engagement, highlights not only the EPL’s global pull, but also, the immense power of mediated platforms. When considering the level of global interaction from other platforms, such as the internet and social media which have allowed the EPL to engage with fans beyond matchdays, it becomes easy to understand the gravity of the EPL’s global reach. Besides being an imperative tool for establishing a connection between organizations and their international fan-bases, media platforms have also proved the most effective way to mass communicate racially charged messages to the public. Therefore, although the EPL’s growing relationship with the media is continually improving fan experience, the question has to be asked, is the role of mediated EPL content simply to broadcast and review EPL games, or is the League using the power of the media to covertly reinforce Whiteness to the 1.03 billion homes it connects with each year?

In their book *Mind Wars*, Marie Jones and Larry Flaxman (2015) characterize the level of modern-day media manipulation, identifying mass media as “the biggest remote control ever built” and depicting society as trapped “within the four-walled idiot box it contains” (p. 296). The monopoly media outlets have over the world is due to humanity’s obsession with mass media platforms, and as technology continues to evolve and these platforms continue to develop at alarming speeds, societies reliance and addiction for these platforms is deepened further, consolidating the media’s power. Understanding that the media is, and will continue to be, one of the most powerful weapons for communication, has meant that these platforms are used increasingly by influential figures and organizations to help portray their own messages to the world. As Jones and Flaxman (2015) explain, through these mass media outlets, those in control deploy a variety of brainwashing techniques that allow them to socially program the minds of its audience, and engineer “the behaviors, attitudes and desires of large groups of people” (p. 309). These techniques include methods such as spreading fake news (misinformation), distracting its audience, and imbedding subliminal messages (as well as numerous other mind controlling techniques), which all help to “gradually and subtly manipulate, coerce, or influence a segment of the population” (Jones & Flaxman, 2015, p. 310). While most of the conversation pertaining to social programming examines its use for political purposes, the level of power held by the media stems from audience size and engagement. Therefore, recognizing the immense fan-base held by the EPL makes media manipulation within this sporting organization specifically dangerous for potentially reconstructing the attitudes, values, and beliefs held in society.

Subject of Analysis

Since the EPL reaches the largest audience of all sporting organizations, and, seeing that the EPL recognizes Sky Sports as their official broadcasting partner, these factors make Sky Sports the ideal platform for analyzing CRT in sports as it will highlight racial ideologies held by the EPL's most trusted partner. Furthermore, given Sky Sports' audience size and access to over 100 live matches per season (granted by the EPL), negative stereotypes about Black people present throughout Sky Sports content is especially damaging for the Black community, as any narratives communicated through this platform are recycled frequently and globally. Therefore, this study will analyze the messages generated by the EPL via Sky Sports to help disrupt and expose the various forms of racial discrimination present throughout sports media.

While Sky Sports also televises other live sporting events, as well as midweek EPL related content, this study will strictly focus on its live EPL matchday content. As Highlighted on the EPL website, Sky Sports has rights to broadcast live EPL games on Fridays (between 7:30pm and 8pm), Saturdays (at either 5:30pm or 7:45pm), Sundays (at 2:00pm or 4:30pm), and Mondays (at 8pm). Within these time slots, the EPL confirmed that for the 2019-2020 season, which is the season this study is focused on, they agreed to let Sky Sports broadcast a total of 128 matches on their platform. This provides a large sample size for this study and ensures that there is data for almost all EPL match weeks.

Drawbacks

While the above section details the original plan for this study, geographical issues and a global pandemic created drawbacks. Like many areas of society affected by COVID-19 during 2020, the EPL shut down on March 29th, at the close of match week

29, and did not resume play until June 19th. With no live matches through these dates, Sky Sports was unable to stream match day content, which in turn impacted this study's ability to critically analyze the content. Thus, this study was adjusted to focus on only the first half of the 2019-2020 season. A regular EPL season consists of 38 matchweeks, allowing the 20 participating teams to play each other twice. For this study, I focus on matchweek 1 through matchweek 19, covering all 2019 live broadcasts from August 9th to December 31st.

It is also important to note that Sky Sports broadcasts their live shows primarily in the United Kingdom, and therefore, viewers in the United States do not have access to the live programming. Considering this study is being carried out in the U.S, this creates a major drawback. Fortunately, following the broadcast of the televised program, Sky Sports chops the show into manageable segments and reposts them on their YouTube page. Each match day program produced by Sky Sports lasts around two hours and consists of pre-match build up, half-time analysis, post-match critique, and coverage of the game itself. Within the time frame of this study, there were 48 live matchday programs aired, and from this, Sky Sports generated 90 clips of in-studio discussions and expert analysis to upload to YouTube. This provides them with control over the messages they are communicating and allows them an opportunity to omit conversations if required. For the sake of this study, this has both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, Sky Sports analyzing their own content and determining what is acceptable to be reposted provides them with the chance to omit obvious racial discrimination and does not allow this study to have a complete picture of the messages communicated to their televised audience live. However, analyzing content that Sky Sports determined as

acceptable provides valuable insight about the conscious narratives Sky Sports purposefully tries to communicate.

Frames for Analysis

To analyze ideologies of Whiteness within the gathered Sky Sports content, this study utilized a framework influenced by the work of CRT scholars, Kevin Hylton and Ian Law, and Christopher Campbell. Hylton and Law's (2009) research echoed the goals of this study as it aims to identify racial narratives and highlight the ways White dominance is protected across print sports media. To do this, Hylton and Law (2009) applied a methodology that allowed them to analyze mediated sports content. While the approach was originally used by Hylton and Law (2009) to study sports magazines (print media), it can also be applied effectively to television content, making it a valuable approach for this study. The frames, the myth of difference and the myth of assimilation, were originally highlighted by Campbell (1995) in *Myth, Race and the News*. Campbell identified in his book how the mass communication of these myths can help to strengthen Whiteness by creating a space for the subtle communication of White superiority and helping to protect White systems by reducing the space that racial discrimination can be contested. By utilizing the same frames in their 2009 study, Hylton and Law (2009) were able to highlight how the myth of difference and the myth of assimilation have been adjusted and exaggerated throughout sports-based media.

Therefore, to analyze racial narratives of Whiteness communicated by Sky Sports, a critical content analysis and critical discourse analysis was framed to identify the communication of two myths that Hylton and Law (2009), Campbell (1995), and many other CRT scholars have identified as being present in popular media: the myth of assimilation and the myth of difference.

The Myth of Assimilation

The first frame, the myth of assimilation, is the colorblind belief in sports that due to the overwhelming success of Black athletes, racism is no longer an issue. While this assimilative myth is commonly pushed in sports, it is also a narrative that is used across many disciplines throughout society as a way of denying racism and promoting false images of equality. As Campbell (1995) highlights, media platforms have utilized this rhetoric, especially in the U.S, to manipulate its audiences and create a “contemporary attitude among whites who look at the success of a limited number of African Americans as an indication of a progressive America in which racial discrimination no longer exists” (p.86). With his study, Campbell (1995) highlighted that fictional Black characters, who are broadcasted as successful on television, create an assimilative myth among its audiences who in turn believe this is how the Black community actually lives. Hylton and Law (2009) build on Campbell’s findings in two ways that make this frame particularly useful for this study. They apply this racial frame to mediated content in the United Kingdom, pushing the focus beyond just race in the United States, and, they apply it to sports.

In their study Hylton and Law (2009) explain how the visibility of “high profile aracial sporting icons” has allowed for the application of “a colour-blind rhetoric which removes white society from accusations of racism” and allows White viewers to point to the “social and economic success of a limited number of minorities in arguing that racism is not a factor” (p. 99). This has created a fairytale narrative that portrays sports as an “equal opportunities site of social relations where diversity can meet and people, possibly for the first time, can begin to accept each other for who they are” (Hylton, 2018, p. 4).

The belief and recycling of this narrative is dangerous as it blinds us to less visible aspects of racial discrimination. When communicated by major sporting networks and well-respected sporting figures, it strengthens the sports communities' belief in this mythology, further contesting the space in which racism can be seriously analyzed. Subsequent work from some of the most prominent figures involved with CRT and sports highlight how the biggest names in European football have attempted to communicate these ideas to the public. In his 2014 study on racism in the EPL, Burdsey locates a quote from former Manchester United manager and English football legend, Sir Alex Ferguson, in which he states, "I can't believe there is any sort of issue over race in the game (soccer) given the number of black players who take part" (as cited in Burdsey, 2014, p. 436). Here, Ferguson, a white man, provides a clear example of how the myth of assimilation allows the white public to "point to the social and economic success of a limited number of minorities in arguing that racism is not a factor in Others achieving success" (Hylton & Law, 2009, p. 91). CRT scholar Lawrence (2017) provides another example of how this assimilation myth is consumed and recycled, stating that "some of football's glitterati, such as two-time Chelsea and current Manchester United manager José Mourinho and former FIFA President Sepp Blatter" have both openly stated that "there is no racism in football" (as cited in Lawrence, 2017, p. 133). These statements, given by two of the most decorated head coaches in sports history and the president of European soccer, illustrate the strength of this narrative, as these are some of the most respected figures in the world of sports engaging in colorblind rhetoric.

By utilizing this frame, Hylton and Law (2009) identify that the media uses the myth of assimilation to support the "hegemonic whiteness" in sports by broadcasting

views that discredit accusations of racism, while ignoring “the alternative challenging views of others” (p. 103). This study aims to continue the analysis from Hylton and Law (2009), by using this frame to identify any direct or indirect forms of communication used by Sky Sports to broadcast this myth and to what extent Sky Sports assimilates the Black community beyond the playing field.

The Myth of Difference

The second frame, the myth of difference, emphasizes supposed natural differences between Blacks and Whites, which are used in sports to claim Black athletic superiority. As explained by Hylton and Law (2009), the myth of difference is utilized by the media to push the narrative that “the success of black people in sport is explained by a commonsense assumption that the black athletes are better, because they are genetically different and physically superior to white athletes” (p. 90). Again, stemming from Black superiority across sports, this narrative is used and widely accepted as the reason why Black athletes are so successful. As Jon Entine (2001) explains, by exaggerating the Black physical body and labelling it as genetically superior, “a kind of reverse racism has set in” (p. 331). While this inverted ideology sounds like it should favor black athletes, CRT scholarship has highlighted how this narrative has also been used as a rhetorical tool to limit the success of minorities. As Hylton and Law (2009) explain, the stereotype surrounding the Black athletic body is “used to explain black sporting achievement” while also consoling white athletes because they need to “work harder to overcome the genetic deficiency” (p. 90). This has allowed sports media, when commenting on White sporting victories, to claim that “white athletes are still superior, because the sporting success they achieve are valued more highly” due to the “supposed natural disadvantage

they have had to overcome” (Hylton & Law, 2009, p. 91). Entine expands on this concept, explaining how damaging the “white fascination with black physicality” (p. 5) has been. He explains how in sports, the early belief that Blacks are physically superior to Whites, reopened the door for comparative studies between the two races. The resulting studies, such as *The Bell Curve* (1996) by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, allowed the media to push the narrative that, while Blacks are more gifted than Whites athletically, they are considerably lacking intellectually. Entine (2001) states that “in the minds of many, the notion of physical differences is tethered to racist stereotypes of an ‘animalistic’ Black nature and the implication that Blacks are somehow intellectually inferior” (p. 5). As Hylton and Law (2009) explain, this has led to sporting teams using Black players in roles that require speed, strength, and power, but when it comes to high pressure positions that require intelligence and composure (such as a quarterback in football or a point guard in basketball), Black players have been labelled unintelligent, peripheral players and, thus, stamped as inadequate. Both Entine (2001), and Hylton and Law’s (2009) research recognize that this troubling stereotype against Black intelligence not only insults Black athletes but also affects those in the Black community who are not athletic, as it reduces opportunities for the rest of the Black population who wish to engage in non-athletic sporting roles.

In their article, Hylton and Law (2009) identify many different strategies aimed at unearthing this common myth in mainstream sports media. These included utilizing both quantitative and qualitative analysis to examine “the physical and cognitive descriptions of athletes” (Hylton & Law, 2009, p. 91). By doing this, Hylton and Law (2009) identified that sports media clung to physical racial stereotypes when describing Black

athletes, however, when describing White athletes, media platforms often emphasized “the hard work, commitment, and willingness to make sacrifices” (p. 99). A study conducted in 2020 by Run Repeat on *Racial Bias in Football Commentary*, reinforces Hylton and Laws (2009) findings and brings the frame closer to the scope of this study by applying it to televised European soccer. In addition to identifying the “physical and cognitive descriptions of players,” as Hylton and Law (2009) did, Run Repeat also categorizes the nature of each comment as either positive or negative. Their findings showed that “players with darker skin tone were significantly more likely to be reduced to their physical characteristics or athletic abilities” and highlighted the level of negative criticism dark players receive on comments describing their mental attributes (McLoughlin, 2020, para. 4).

The media’s use of the myth of difference between races is also highlighted by Campbell in his 1995 work. In his analysis, he highlights just how discrete and systemic this ideology can be, stating that “the announcers who make these kinds of observations probably do not consider themselves racist” (Campbell, 1995, p. 60). In fact, as Campbell (1995) states, “they likely consider their remarks to be complimentary,” (p. 60) without understanding the potential damage the spread of this ideology can have. This thesis looks to expand on the work of Campbell (1995), Hylton and Law (2009), and Run Repeat (2020), by applying their frames to identify how narratives of difference are used to discriminate against and devalue Blacks in Sky Sports media.

Both the myth of difference and the myth of assimilation exist in a discrete and subtle manner, which has allowed the media to push both ideas deep into the sporting community. Belief in these narratives is dangerous as they are both rhetorical techniques

used to reinforce and protect Whiteness, and their subliminal form allows them to be normalized and recommunicated on a daily basis. The next section outlines how this study utilized these frames to analyze 2019-2020 Sky Sports content.

Applying Framework

When applying the myth of assimilation and myth of difference frames to the relevant Sky Sports broadcasts, the template seen in Appendix A was used to analyze each video segment. This served as a rubric that allowed for a mixed content analysis to help understand the rhetorical application of Whiteness. Having outlined what this study aims to achieve by analyzing the myth of difference and the myth of assimilation, we now turn to the quantitative and qualitative approaches used to apply these frames.

Quantitative Content Analysis

To analyze Sky Sports content in a quantitative format, a content analysis was applied to each YouTube segment. As defined in *Analyzing Media Messages Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research*, quantitative content analysis of media communication is “a system of standards and guidelines for generating relational statements that describe or explain human behaviors and mental processes” (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2013, p. 20). This is especially effective for analyzing forms of rhetoric, as it allows the researcher to adequately “describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption” (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2013, p. 30). This makes a quantitative content analysis useful for this study, as it can help generate relational summaries which highlight the existence of racial discrimination in Sky Sports content. Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2013) outline two essential steps to quantitative content analysis that were applied to both frames concerned with this study. These steps are: “the systematic assignment of communication content to categories according to rules,” followed by “the analysis of

relationships involving those categories using statistical methods” (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico, 2013, p. 20).

The first step, assigning communicative content to categories according to rules, was applied in different ways for each frame. For the myth of assimilation, where the emphasis was on identifying direct and indirect ways that this ideology was communicated as well as identifying to which extent Sky Sports assimilates the Black community beyond the playing field, the content analysis focused on two categories, soccer coaches and Sky Sports media personnel. As Appendix A highlights, for all live EPL matchday content, this study recorded the racial breakdown of coaches mentioned and commentators present. When analyzing the content to identify the number of Black coaches represented, rules were applied to ensure that for each video only the number of *different* Black and White coaches mentioned were recorded. For example, if during a Sky Sports broadcast, Chelsea manager Frank Lampard was mentioned five times by the Sky Sports commentators, this would be recorded as ‘one white coach mentioned’ as this study was interested in how many White and Black coaches were mentioned and not the total number of comments about each. For the myth of difference, where the main emphasis was on the physical and cognitive descriptions of EPL players, the content analysis switched focus, instead recording the racial breakdown of the comments and categorizing them as physical, mental, or reliability based, as seen in Table 2. In addition, once the comments were recorded, they were further broken down as either positive or negative to help further identify any racial patterns that may be present. This is a similar approach to the one used in the Run Repeat study; however, as previously explained, this

thesis only focuses on the pre-match, half-time, and post-match comments from Sky Sports analysts, whereas Run Repeat's focus was on in-game commentary.

The next step, after placing the comments into their required categories, was to use statistical methods to analyze any relationships or patterns within them. For the myth of assimilation, the data was inputted into a table that highlighted the racial breakdown for the number of coaches mentioned and the number of commentators present for each matchweek. By formatting this information into a table, which can be seen in Table 3, the representation of Black coaches and Black media personnel across Sky Sports became clear and allowed for this study to begin drawing connections. While a table was the most effective statistical method to state my findings for the myth of assimilation, for the myth of difference, the information was placed into corresponding pie charts, as seen in Figure 1. There were three pie charts created for this study (one for each category the myth of difference aimed to analyze), which were used to highlight any emphasis on the superiority of Black physicality or White intelligence, as well as providing a graphic to understand which areas Black players received the most criticism. The results from these quantitative approaches created groundwork that allowed for a qualitative critical discourse analysis to further help analyze the existence of racial discrimination.

Qualitative Discourse Analysis

Having collected primary data for this study and quantified it into a cohesive statistical format, the next stage of this research was to employ qualitative analysis techniques to analyze the messages of Whiteness that were communicated. To do this, a critical discourse analysis was conducted. As Anders Hansen and David Machin (2013) state, critical discourse analysis "offers a number of tools to reveal the ideas, values and

opinions in text and speech that may not necessarily be obvious on first reading, or hearing” (p. 116). In doing so, this can help reveal how speakers and authors use language and grammatical features “to create meaning, to persuade people to think about events in a particular way” and “sometimes even seek to manipulate these people - while at the same time concealing their own intentions” (Hansen & Machin, 2013, p. 116). This makes it a useful approach for exposing insidious, invisible rhetorical concepts, like those of whiteness and colorblindness.

For this thesis, critical discourse analysis was utilized in two stages. First, it was applied during the collection of the primary data to record any overt examples of discriminatory or damaging comments mentioned by Sky Sports. When doing this, I identified direct examples of the myth of assimilation and the myth of difference being circulated by the Sky Sports commentators. This was important as the content analysis was geared towards finding the covert deployment of these myths, whereas critical discourse analysis helped highlight direct ways they are communicated. Next, critical discourse analysis was applied to the collected quantitative data to interpret how and why Sky Sports describes and represents the Black community in the way that they do.

As Lyn Richards (2014) states in *Handling Qualitative Data*, qualitative researchers “commonly overlook potentially valuable sources of data, because they feel ‘data’ should be more impressive, more substantial or simply tidier than the everyday stuff around them” (p. 50). Richards (2014) believes that when engaging in any form of study, the researcher is constantly “immersed in data” (p. 50). This was definitely the case for this study, and it provided another advantage to employing qualitative techniques. As Richards (2014) explains, qualitative data does not need to follow the

rigid and structured format that is required when collecting quantitative data. In fact, to re-enforce Richards's (2014) point, by restricting myself to the rules set forth throughout my content analysis, some invaluable information would have been overlooked.

Therefore, understanding my deep love for the EPL and considering that, even when I was not working on my thesis, I was constantly engaging with Sky Sports EPL content, which allowed me to analyze and record any racialized messages stemming from Sky Sports that was not included on their YouTube page. This included recording relevant data that I stumbled across during the timeframe (which involved information from their website, social media postings, viral moments, and most importantly the match day segments that Sky Sports omitted from their YouTube page). When interacting with these platforms, the only data recorded was data that was deemed relevant and that I believed could help understand the rhetorical deployment of Whiteness.

By first generating quantitative data and providing valid statistics, a solid groundwork was created that allowed this study to deploy qualitative approaches to begin making inferences and drawing further insights. The combination of these two methods provided results that helped to support the hypothesis of this study and allowed this thesis to make the following speculations:

1. Sky Sports believes the White mind is superior to the Black mind,
2. Sky Sports are trying to downplay the existence of racism in England.

Findings

The White Mind is Superior

The first racial narrative found during analysis is that Sky Sports communicates to its audience that the White mind is superior to the Black mind. This message is communicated in both direct and indirect ways and is applied to not only Black EPL players, but also coaches and media representatives. The data gathered for this study highlighted the following four techniques that Sky Sports used to circulate the idea of White mental superiority and create a further belief in the myth of difference: under representing Black media personnel, failing to acknowledge Black coaches, exaggerating White intelligence while undermining Black intelligence, and assuming and portraying that Black EPL players have disruptive and deviant tendencies.

Under Representation of Black Media Personnel

The racial breakdown that Sky Sports chooses for their media personnel sends an indirect message to its audience regarding racial standing. As Table 3 shows, for Super Sunday match day content, Sky Sports broadcasted programming for a total of 13 match weeks (out of 19), which they then transformed into 54 segments uploaded to YouTube. Across these 13 match weeks, there were nine Black commentators in contrast to 46 White commentators. This shows that throughout the relevant Super Sunday content there are roughly 3-4 White commentators attending each match day show. This is compared to just nine Black commentators being present throughout the entire first half of the season. Similar trends also ring true throughout Friday Night Football (FNF), Saturday Night Football (SNF), and Monday Night Football (MNF) content. Although Sky Sports only produced FNF, SNF, or MNF matchday content for 9 match weeks during the scope of

this study, the theme previously identified is still clear. Across FNF, SNF, and MNF broadcasts, throughout the entire first half of the applicable season, there was only 1 Black match day host. Again, when comparing this to the 30 White commentators present, a message is communicated that clearly states that Whites are more intellectually capable of ‘expert analysis’ than Blacks and signifies that White voices are more important than the Black voices in the EPL community.

These statistics also seem to be affected by an event that occurred halfway through the season. During a mid-season international break the England squad decided to leave the field during a live match, protesting the overt racial abuse they were receiving from the opposing fans. The incident received worldwide publicity; however, the story was especially emphasized in England as the country came to the defense of their national team. If it was not for this incident, Black representation on Sky Sports could have been limited even further because it was as the media turned and began to stand behind its Black national team players that Sky Sports slowly began to increase the participation of Black commentators. As Table 3 shows, until match week 10 Sky Sports broadcasts included only two Black commentators throughout their dominant Super Sunday programming. However, at the turn of match week 12 until the halfway point of the season (matchweek 19), they more than tripled this number to 7, ensuring that there is at least one Black commentator present each week. While this is a step in the right direction, it will be interesting to see if Sky Sports continues this trend after the incident died down or if it was just a short-term measure to ensure they aligned themselves with their audience’s outrage.

Failure to Acknowledge Black Coaches

Another significant trend was that Sky Sports failed to acknowledge Black managers (head coaches). As Lawrence (2017) states in his racial analyses of the EPL, one of the “most prominent and enduring racialized debates in English football ... has been the lack of Black managers” (p. 137). As seen in Table 3, Sky Sports mentions four Black coaches across their Super Sunday videos in comparison to 59 white coaches, and one Black coach across their FNF, SNF, and MNF content compared to 52 white coaches. Of the five total Black coaches mentioned, only one is actively employed as a head coach in one of Europe’s top leagues. This reinforces Lawrence’s statement and highlights a clear under-representation of Black managers by Sky Sports.

As disproportionate as these numbers are, we must take into consideration the actual number of White and Black coaches in European soccer. A study done by Andrew Jones in 2018, where he highlights that “of the 78 clubs in the top leagues in Spain, Germany, Italy, and France, the number of Black coaches is two” (para. 12), demonstrates how few Black soccer coaches there are at the professional level. That Sky Sports has no authority over who is hired (or not hired) by professional clubs means that they can be somewhat excused for the under-representation of Black coaches. However, within the gathered content, Sky Sports had several video segments dedicated to vacant managerial positions where the expert analysts debated who they believed was the best man for the open job. It is here that Sky Sports failed to acknowledge the existence of Black coaches as no Black figures were suggested by white commentators in relation to a potential managerial career. In fact, throughout the collected content, there is not a single Black coach mentioned by a White commentator. Instead, all five occasions where Black

coaches are mentioned arise from Black commentators suggesting that certain Black figures deserve a managerial job in English football.

In addition, limiting the opportunities of Black commentators (as previously highlighted) can also have a direct influence on who is hired for EPL coaching jobs. In the opening matchweek, Sky Sports pundit Gary Neville mentions Steven Gerrard, Frank Lampard, Michael Carrick, and Scott Parker, four of the greatest midfielders in the previous generation of English football. All four of these players, after retiring, went on to commentate in the Sky Sports studio, and now, all are head coaches at various top division clubs across Europe.

This shows that a proven pathway for former players to obtain managerial positions is through media commentary, and therefore, Sky Sports, as the most influential provider of EPL content, provides the biggest platform for that to happen. Alongside the list of players Neville mentions, he himself also acquired a managerial role off the back of Sky Sports, as did Jose Mourinho, who was commonly present in the Sky Sports studio before accepting a head coach role at Tottenham Hotspurs, which many believe came as a direct result of how he carried himself throughout Sky Sports matchday content.

Therefore, while Sky Sports is not completely responsible for the systems of Whiteness that have ensured management roles in sports are reserved largely for Whites, the data from this study shows that their content does reinforce Campbell's claim that Whites believe "Blacks have a natural ability to compete as athletes but not a natural mentality to lead and direct teams" (Campbell, 1995, p. 63).

Black Intellectual Inferiority

Another indicator that suggests Sky Sports deems the Black mind as inferior to the White mind is that they label Black players as unfocused and unintelligent. Throughout the 94 videos analyzed for this study, there were a total of 176 comments about Black or White players that were coded into three categories (physical, mental, and work rate, and consistency). As shown in Table 1, this study found that out of all comments collected, 81 were aimed at Black players with 46 of those comments used to describe their mental capacities. While this suggests that Sky Sports are interested in discussing the mentality of Black players, when further dissecting these comments as either positive or negative, we can see that Sky Sports only mentioned Black mental traits to openly and discretely criticize them. As Table 1 shows, when talking about Black mentality, 67% of all comments were classed as negative. Sky Sports seemed to specifically focus on the ‘intellectual inferiority’ of Black players and assumed disruptive tendencies, using this as an avenue to often utilize racial microaggressions and more overtly demonstrate their racial bias. As Table 2 highlights, Sky Sports used comments like “I don’t know if he knows what he’s doing” and “when he had to think, he got a little bit confused” when reporting on Black players. When comparing this to how Sky Sports described the mentality of White EPL players, where there was a total of 64 comments and just 8% were classed as negative, there can be seen a clear discrepancy in how Black and White players are depicted. Instead of being subject to these stereotypes, White players were described as smart, brave warriors who will do anything it takes to win.

A more overt example can be seen in matchweek 10 where Roy Keane directly insults two Black defenders, describing them both as “dreadful” before labelling them as

“dumb and dumber.” This, as with most comments regarding Black intelligence, sparked laughter throughout the Sky Sports studio, leaving the impression that Keane was stating what the rest of the commentators were feeling.

Black Disruptive Tendencies

Except for those who Sky Sports believe have proven otherwise, most Black players were also portrayed as deviant and disruptive to overall team success. While the portrayal of Blacks as deviant and dangerous criminals has been emphasized across all areas of society, for Sky Sports, deviancy comes from Black players who have other interests besides soccer, who are unhappy at their club, or who are commonly in the media spotlight. As Table 4 highlights, Sky Sports communicates multiple times that poor individual performance, and in some cases, even poor team performances, are a result of Black players being defiant and disruptive off the field. The comments shown regarding Manchester United midfielder Paul Pogba represent just one from a total of eight comments that were used to claim he was disruptive and the biggest reason for Manchester United’s recent demise, despite having the most goal contributions on the team during the previous 2018-2019 season (13 goals, 9 assists). The reasons used to create a disruptive image of Pogba were that he spends too much time on social media and that he had openly expressed his desire to leave.

Interestingly, these same standards were not held for White players. This is evident in the match week 10 discussion regarding EPL team Tottenham Hotspurs. During the 2019-2020 season, the Tottenham Hotspur squad was in disarray. This was due to many reasons; however, it is believed that the disruption was caused by Toby Alderwield, Jan Vertonghen and Cristian Erikson, three of the team’s best players all of

whom are White. These players believed they were worth more than they were being paid, and when the club owners refused to increase the value of their contracts, they spoke out publicly in an attempt to force their way out of the club. Despite these actions, which illustrate that the players were unhappy with their club and purposefully grasping for media attention (two of the disruptive tendencies listed above), Sky Sports chose to excuse them for Tottenham's struggles and instead placed the blame solely on Black player, Dele Alli. In a 6-minute rant titled "Dele Alli needs to sort himself out," the commentators suggest that Alli is a declining player who has wasted his potential, who is cocky and overconfident, and who is being held back by his own mentality. They begin by highlighting Alli's potential, emphasizing the physical attributes he has and remembering how good he used to be before suggesting that the cause of his collapse (and subsequently the collapse of Tottenham Hotspurs) was due to his poor mindset. As seen in Table 4, the commentators point to his off the field interests as the main reason for his and his team's decline, highlighting an example where Sky Sports failed to recognize the disruptive actions of three White players (as recognized by their own standards), instead choosing to place the blame on a young Black player. Further examples of Sky Sports portraying Black players as unintelligent, disruptive, and mentally unstable can also be seen in Table 4.

Downplaying the Issue of Racism

The second narrative highlighted by this study is that Sky Sports attempted to communicate that racism is not an issue in the EPL. At first glance, it appears Sky Sports recognizes the issue of racial discrimination in European football and is acting to combat it. Across all their social channels (website, social media platforms, YouTube pages, and

live programming) they strongly reinforced Kick It Out's message that there is "no room for racism" in football. Although liberal approaches like these are questionable (for the reasons mentioned earlier), on first impression it genuinely seems like Sky Sports has the right intentions towards eradicating racial discrimination. This is further strengthened by certain Sky Sports employees, mainly Gary Neville and Jamie Carragher, who seem to understand the complexities of racism and attempt to communicate this to the Sky Sports audience. However, although openly trying to reduce overt racial abuse, this thesis highlights two ways that Sky Sports attempts to downplay the issue of racism in the U.K.

Stepping Away from Claims of Institutional Racism

Arguably the most impactful data for identifying the position taken by Sky Sports regarding racism in the EPL occurred in a broadcast on December 22, 2019. During a post-game debate following an incident where Chelsea defender Antoniu Rudiger was racially abused, Gary Neville went on a courageous rant, pointing fingers at large organizations for failing to acknowledge, and even instigating, institutional forms of racism. Neville, who enjoyed a successful career at Manchester United, calls out the EPL directly, calling for them to "stand up" and claiming that they currently "hide behind the FA" when it comes to matters of racism. Not only does Neville accuse the EPL of allowing racism to transpire, but he goes one step further, calling out both major political parties in the U.K for "fueling" and "accepting" racism. Sky Sports makes two interesting decisions in response to Gary Neville's rant. First, they instantly distance themselves from Neville's claims, then they fail to post the interaction to their YouTube page.

As Neville draws to the conclusion of his speech, there is an awkward tension in the Sky Sports studio. It seems none of the other commentators know what to say in

response to Neville, and instead, they turn to David Jones, the host of the broadcast, to see his reaction. After a few awkward moments Jones, who appeared to be receiving instruction in his ear piece, states the following: “I am compelled to say that those are the opinions of you, Gary Neville, and not those of Sky Sports, that is my duty.” By doing this, Sky Sports is instantly placing a question mark on the validity of Neville’s claims and by doing so suggest to their audience that they do not believe there is an issue with institutional racism in the EPL, or the U.K. Not only does this cast doubts over the legitimacy of Neville’s statement in this segment, but it also brings into question the legitimacy of all of Neville’s takes regarding racism. In addition to contesting Neville’s argument on institutional racism, the failure to post this discussion to their YouTube channel implies that Sky Sports is trying to suppress the narrative of institutional racism in the U.K. Throughout the relevant season, Sky Sports were very vocal in their ‘fight against racism,’ dedicating multiple segments to, supposedly, condemn racial abuse and push equality. It therefore seems questionable that considering the amount of coverage Sky Sports has given towards racial justice, and considering they believe there is “no room for racism,” that they not only disputed Neville’s words, but tried to silence them.

While on this occasion, Sky Sports distanced themselves from claims of institutional racism, their position is not consistent. Following the racial incident that the England national team faced in Bulgaria, Sky Sports made claims like Neville’s, pointing fingers at the Bulgarian FA and shining the spotlight on the Bulgarian prime minister, insinuating that racism is a systemic issue in eastern European countries. During this incident, Sky Sports and other media outlets held those in power responsible for the racial abuse that the England national team had to endure. However, when Sky Sports had to

report on instances of racism that occurred within the U.K, their narrative switched. They stopped blaming those in power and instead placed the blame on a few individuals. When asked following the Bulgaria incident for his thoughts, Sky Sports commentator Roy Keane was quoted as saying “that was horrible, you feel physically sick hearing that” (Sports, 2019, para. 20). Compare this to his comments after a racial incident in matchweek 16, where Keane shrugs the incident off casually claiming that “there are idiots everywhere,” we can see an example that highlights how different the reaction is to incidents of racism within the U.K, compared to incidents that take place overseas.

Therefore, although Sky Sports does recognize and attempt to combat overt examples of racial abuse, by contesting and suppressing communication on the institutional nature of racism, it suggests that Sky Sports is attempting to downplay and oversimplify racial discrimination in the EPL.

Using Black Commentator to Downplay Racism

Another way Sky Sports downplayed racism in the EPL was by giving former Black players the opportunity to participate in the show and then using them to further communicate colorblind ideologies. As previously highlighted, at first glance it looks as though Sky Sports is acknowledging the existence of racial discrimination in the EPL and treating it as a serious issue. Despite the pushback from Sky Sports on the institutional nature of racism, most of the White Sky Sports commentators broadcasted during the timeframe of this study used their platform to, in some capacity, denounce racism. Except for the example identified in the previous section, the Sky Sports panel was usually in agreement regarding issues of racism in the EPL, often labelling it as “disgusting” and calling for the perpetrator to be punished. While I believe that many of the White Sky

Sports commentators do feel this way towards racism, it can also be argued that taking this position is something the White commentators had to do to avoid controversy. This suggests that if Sky Sports were attempting to covertly communicate potentially controversial racial narratives, the most convenient way to do so is through Black commentators.

In matchweek 9, during a MNF broadcast, Sky Sports invited former Manchester United player and French international, Patrice Evra to join the show. Evra enjoyed a long and successful EPL career playing a total of 10 seasons, however, despite his on-field abilities, his time at Manchester United was unfortunately overshadowed by a racial incident that occurred in 2012. The incident, which also involved former Liverpool striker Luis Suarez, made international headlines and resulted in Suarez being banned for a total of eight games. Although the incident happened eight years prior to the MNF broadcast including Evra, this is the first time that he has done a video interview regarding the matter. While Evra makes some very good points regarding racial discrimination, such as the importance of education for spreading equality, it could be suggested that this interview did more harm than good. During the 10-minute segment posted to Sky Sports' page, Evra not only excuses Suarez for his racial slurs, but he also overtly pushes the colorblind narrative by boldly making statements such as "I'm not proud to be Black, no, I'm just a human," as well as claiming not to see skin color when he looks at people. Furthermore, when asked about the cause of racial disparity Evra twice identifies Black culture as the issue, first blaming hip hop music as a factor before stating that "the problem is [that] some Black people are racist to each other."

As previous CRT scholarship has found, these types of colorblind comments from the Black community are especially damaging in the fight against racism because they carry additional weight. On this occasion, Evra's words have even more significance since he himself was racially abused in the EPL. This allows viewers to point to Evra as somebody who has experienced racism firsthand and, therefore, is considered a legitimate source and push colorblind ideologies to excuse and downplay racism, just like he did.

It is interesting to note that, although this was Evra's first time doing a video interview on the matter, Sky Sports posted an article on August 4, 2019 (just two months before the MNF broadcast) in which Evra briefly opened up about the incident and racial discrimination as a whole. In this article, Evra takes the opportunity to downplay racism again stating, "I love England, I have lived so many years in England, you can't call the people of England racist." This brings into question whether Sky Sports would have allowed this segment to air, or even invited Evra to the show, before the article was released. Having previously recognized how Sky Sports reacts to direct allegations made against them (or the larger institutions who control them) and seeing that Sky Sports had eight years to allow Evra to tell his story but only allowed him to do so after the article was published, supports the argument that Blacks are given opportunities if they have proven they can "serve the interests of white men as well as the further deployment of systematic Whiteness instead of challenging or revealing the power and privilege whiteness confers" (DeRouen & Grant, 2017, p. 58).

Conclusion

The results found from this study highlight examples of Sky Sports utilizing the rhetorical concepts of whiteness throughout their live matchday programming for the 2019-2020 season. By over emphasizing the myth of difference and myth of assimilation ideologies, Sky Sports could deploy the rhetoric of Whiteness to safely, and invisibly, communicate white superiority and protect the white systems they operate within, supporting Griffin and Calafell's opinion that in sports there exists a form of racism "where the structure disenfranchises people even if they appear to be included" (Griffin & Calafell, 2011, p. 121). As explained in the introduction, this thesis is rooted in Bell's idea of racial realism, and therefore, the aim of this study is not to identify if a whiteness rhetoric is present in sports media, as previous research has already proven that it is. Instead, this thesis looked to analyze the rhetoric of Whiteness used by Sky Sports to identify what it means to be white, the group of privileges that comes with membership to the dominant race, the protection and passing of White power, and how certain groups move in and out of the White race.

By utilizing the myth of difference frame, we get a clear idea of how Sky Sports views White EPL players. For Sky Sports, they consider White soccer players as smart, hardworking players who are loyal and dedicated to their team. This is a stark contrast to how they see Black players, as per the data collected for this study, Sky Sports communicates that Black players are disruptive, selfish, and lacking intelligence. Therefore, one of the biggest advantages to being a White EPL player is that they are not labelled with the stereotypical assumptions that are used to ridicule Black players. The myth of assimilation frame also helped identify what it means to be White and the

benefits this brings beyond the playing field. The disproportionate number of Black commentators (compared to White commentators) highlights that another benefit of being White is that one has a greater opportunity of appearing on the show, highlighting that Sky Sports deems Whites more capable of 'expert analysis' and further strengthening their position of White intellectual superiority.

Another area in which Sky Sports depicts Whites as superior is in their ability to lead. As highlighted in this study's findings, not a single Black coach was mentioned by a White commentator during the timeframe of this study. In addition, by failing to equally represent Black commentators in their matchday shows, they actively reduced the possibility for Black members of the sporting community to attain coaching positions. This highlights that another benefit of membership to the White race is an increased opportunity at a managerial career.

Having identified what it means to be White, this study recognized that Sky Sports was willing to allow a few select minorities membership to the dominant race, and, in return, access to some of the benefits that comes with it. However, in order to move into the White race, Black members of the EPL community had to suppress their ethnic origin, stay out of the media as much as possible, and be openly willing to protect systems of Whiteness. For Black players, those who demonstrated the previously explained 'white characteristics' were no longer stereotyped as disruptive, or mentally unstable. Instead, these Black players were considered hardworking and humble. After retiring, the Black players who were considered this way (hardworking and humble) had the opportunity to appear on the show as guests. However, this study suggests that Sky Sports will only give them an extended role or allow them to talk on issues of race if they

feel that the Black player will help downplay the existence of racism and thus further protect their own White systems.

By allowing those who portray White attributes access to the privileges that come with the dominant race, Sky Sports are subtly communicating to Blacks that if they leave their ethnicity at the door, they are welcome inside. However, as Griffin and Calafell (2011) state, those who do not are considered complicit and “are packaged, sold, disciplined, and dehumanized under the gaze of whiteness as objects for voyeuristic consumption” (p. 129). This is influential in maintaining White power as it creates a culture that criticizes and stereotypes Blacks who are considered different, allowing for a silent narrative that suggests that being White or acting White is what is needed for team success. Furthermore, by openly contesting and suppressing ideas of institutional racism and then using a Black man to communicate colorblind ideologies, Sky Sports can deflect blame for racial discrimination away from sporting organizations and the media, in the U.K. This greatly reduces the space for institutional forms of racism to be analyzed, while casting a question mark of the legitimacy of this dangerous form of racism.

In conclusion, it can be seen that Sky Sports emphasizes differences between Blacks and Whites to generate the message of White mental superiority. While not all Sky Sports commentators were guilty of utilizing a rhetoric of Whiteness to communicate these racial narratives, this study highlights the standpoint of the Sky Sports organization as a whole. As this study highlights, this stereotype is applied not only to EPL players, but also Black media personnel and Black coaches whose level of opportunity is determined by their willingness to help protect White systems. In addition, Sky Sports are able to further protect their own White systems by contesting and silencing accusations of

institutional racism, taking the spotlight away from systems that are subtly promoting racial stereotypes, and instead placing the blame for racial incidents solely on the individual. By doing this, Sky Sports can push narratives of Whiteness by suggesting that White EPL players, commentators, and coaches are at a level that their Black counterparts have yet to reach. Furthermore, by taking a very public stance against racial discrimination Sky Sports can use this to excuse themselves from accusations of racism, when they arise, and by doing so, have earned themselves credibility in discussions of race, making their failure to acknowledge institutional racism even more damaging.

While this study looks specifically at Sky Sports and the messages it generates regarding the EPL, further research could explore different media outlets covering different sporting organizations to identify if these themes are present in different regions across the globe. Furthermore, future research focusing on racism in the EPL could also consider audience reaction, or social media abuse, which is increasingly becoming an issue.

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Appendix A. Content Analysis Rubric

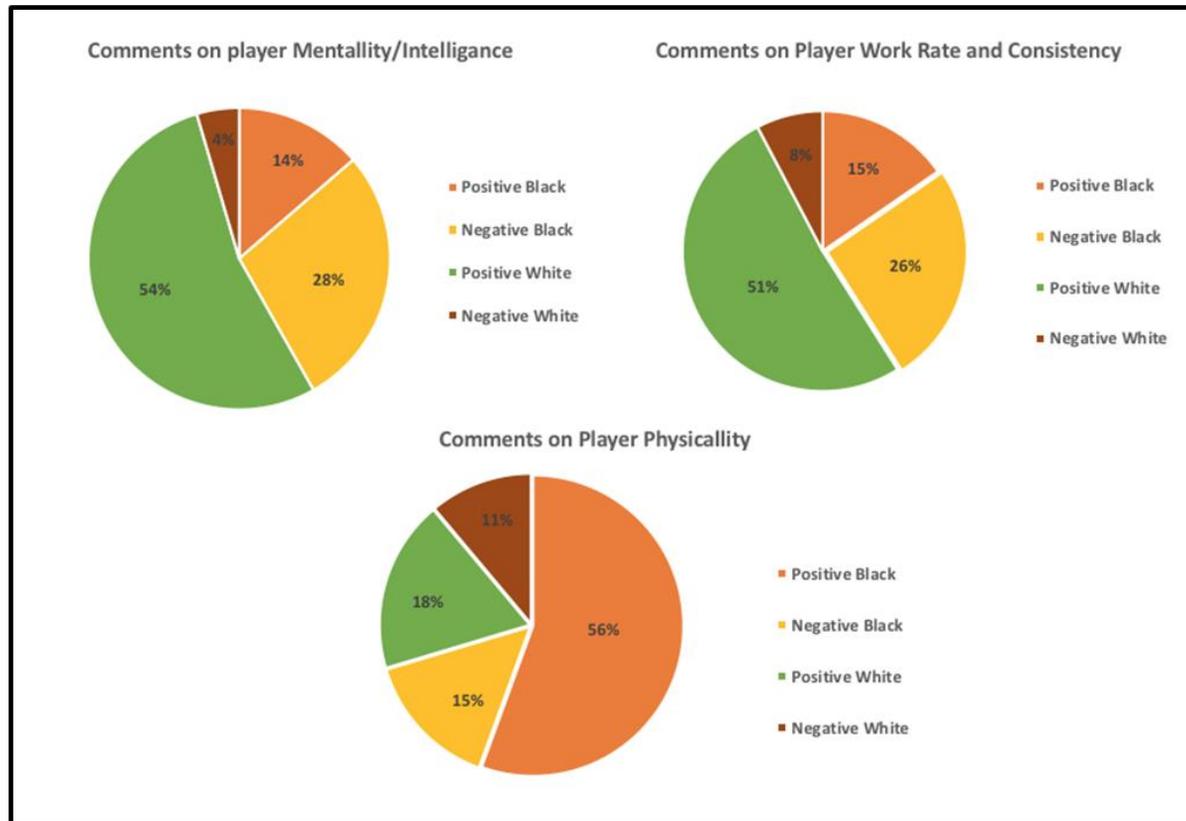
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Myth of Assimilation <p># of White commentators: # of Black commentators: # of Black figures mentioned: # of White figures mentioned: Emphasizing Black success in sports: Views: Likes/Dislikes: Notes:</p> Myth of Difference <p>Comments on Black athleticism: Comments on White athleticism: Comments on Black mindset: Comments on White mindset: Comments on Black work rate/consistency: Comments on Black work rate/consistency: Comments on White physicality:</p> <p>Other stereotypes: Notes:</p> Racial Microaggressions <p>Micro Insults: Micro Assaults: <u>Micro Invalidations:</u></p>

Appendix A shows the template that was used to analyze every relevant Sky Sports YouTube segment, during the timeframe of this study.

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1

Comments on Player Mentality/Intelligence, Work Rate, Consistency, and Physicality



Note. The figure highlights the racial breakdown of positive and negative comments Sky Sports attributed to EPL players.

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1*Number of Positive and Negative Comments*

Mindset Comments				
	Positive Black	Negative Black	Positive White	Negative White
Intelligence	2	5	10	0
Integrity	0	2	6	0
Leadership	3	3	11	2
Mentality	6	12	6	3
Character	4	9	26	0
Total	15	31	59	5

Athleticism Comments				
	Positive Black	Negative Black	Positive White	Negative White
Speed	10	0	1	3
Strength	5	4	4	0
Total	15	4	5	3

Work Rate or Consistency Comments				
	Positive Black	Negative Black	Positive White	Negative White
Consistency	0	8	13	3
Work Rate	6	2	7	0
Total	6	10	20	3

Total			
	Positive	Negative	Total
# of Comments on Black Players	36	45	81
# of Comments on White Players	84	11	95
Total	120	56	176

Note. Table 1 highlights how each type of comment about players (speed, leadership, etc.) was categorized as positive or negative. The raw data shows just how often Black players receive criticism.

Table 2

Example of How Comments Were Further Categorized

<p>Week 6</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Comments on Speed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "He Maguire has a lack of pace, in terms of real sprinting" (slow) ● "Martial a quicker player" (fast) <p style="text-align: center;">Comments on Strength:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "Maguire has a physical presence that is very very important" (strong) ● "He [Rashford] doesn't have the physical presence (weak) <p style="text-align: center;">Comments on Consistency and Work Rate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "Martial is in and out, each week you do not know what you will get from him" (inconsistent) ● "He [Rahsford] works hard for the team" [high work rate] ● "You can not hang your hat on Rashford every week" (inconsistent) <p style="text-align: center;">Comments on character (Leadership, integrity, off-field issues):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "Ole [OGS] is one of the nicest guys you'll ever meet" (nice person) ● Keane refers to Pogba's apology as "garbage" (untrustworthy) ● "Stuart Pierces of this world - Character, Men, Leaders" (good character) <p style="text-align: center;">Comments on Mentality (Intelligence, Concentration, ability to handle pressure)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "Maguire has good experience" (trustworthy on field) ● "He [Rashford] is very professional and understands what to do on defensive point of view" (a good pro)
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Note. Table 2 highlights how the raw data was further broken down to further identify how Sky Sports portrays the Black mind and body. One of these was produced for each matchweek.

Table 3

Number of Coaches and Commentators

Sky Sports SUPER SUNDAY content						Sky Sports MNF & SNF content					
	# of Videos	Black Comm	White Comm	Black Coach	White Coach		# of Videos	Black Comm	White Comm	Black Coach	White Coach
Matchweek 1	6	0	5	0	9	Matchweek 3	3	0	3	0	2
Matchweek 3	4	1	3	1	4	Matchweek 4	1	0	3	0	2
Matchweek 4	6	1	4	0	5	Matchweek 5	5	0	3	0	4
Matchweek 5	2	0	3	0	0	Matchweek 7	6	0	4	0	9
Matchweek 6	7	0	5	0	6	Matchweek 9	5	1	2	0	7
Matchweek 8	4	0	4	0	8	Matchweek 12	1	0	3	0	3
Matchweek 9	3	0	5	0	2	Matchweek 13	7	0	6	0	10
Matchweek 10	5	0	5	0	2	Matchweek 16	7	0	3	0	8
Matchweek 12	6	1	4	0	4	Matchweek 17	3	0	3	1	7
Matchweek 14	3	2	2	0	5						
Matchweek 16	4	1	4	0	2	Total	38	1	30	1	52
Matchweek 17	2	2	3	3	10						
Matchweek 18	2	1	3	0	2						
Total	54	9	46	4	59						

Sky Sports posted Super Sunday videos on 13/18 matchweeks

Average 3.5 **White** commentators per matchweek
Average 0.7 **Black** commentators per matchweek

On average 4.5 **White** managers are mentioned per matchweek
On average 0.4 **Black** managers are mentioned per matchweek

Sky Sports posted MNF or SNF videos on 9/18 matchweeks

Average 3.3 **White** commentators per matchweek
Average 0.1 **Black** commentators per matchweek

On average 5.8 **White** managers are mentioned per matchweek
On average 0.1 **Black** managers are mentioned per matchweek

Note. The figure highlights the under representation of Black media personnel and the refusal to recognize Black coaches.

Table 4

Racial Microaggressions Table

Theme	Racial Microaggression	Message
Lack of Intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When Wan Biassaka had to think he got a “little bit confused” • “Two tottenham full backs [Danny Rose, Serge Aurier] were dredeful - dumb and dumber id call them” • “I don't know if he [Saint Maxim] knows what he is doing sometimes” 	Black players are not as smart as White players
Mentally unstable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You've got [Anthony] Martial, who's form depends on which side of the bed he wakes up on • “IF his [Wilfred Zaha] mind is right ... you have to play him” • “I want to see if mentally he [Pepe] will be strong enough” 	Black players are mentally unreliable
Disruptive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Suggestions that his [Moise Keane] off the field activities are not the best”, “alarm bells are ringing” • “Would like for [Paul] Pogba to start thinking ‘what's best for the team?’” • “[Romelo] Lukaku is a good Premier League player but his character is not right” • “All of this off the field stuff that I here he [Dele Alli] is getting involved in where he thinks he's a male model of some sort” 	Black players are selfish and are unsettle their teammates

Note. Table 4 highlights common racial microaggressions found in Sky Sports content.