

Media (re)presentation of a black woman esports player: The case of Chiquita Evans in the NBA 2K League

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Abstract

This study investigates the media construction of Chiquita Evans, the first woman to participate in the NBA 2K League, uncovering a complex interplay of gender norms and power dynamics. Explored through Foucauldian discourse analysis, her identity negotiation within this unique space, where sport, gaming, and media converge, is illuminated. Evans emerges as a trailblazer who challenges and reshapes established gender conventions in the male-dominated esports arena. While her defiance of gender norms is evident, the media's focus on her physicality inadvertently perpetuates gendered expectations. Moreover, Evans' participation showcases her navigation of racial and gender norms, exposing lingering biases. The intersection of sport and media logic demonstrates evolving dynamics while also highlighting challenges faced by women players. Overall, the media construction of Evans works to encourage acceptance while reproducing established stereotypes, suggesting that increased representation may not inherently challenge power dynamics.

Keywords

esport, gender, ethnicity, discourse analysis, sports video games

Esports (organized multiplayer video game competitions) is a rapidly growing global industry that recorded a revenue of \$1.38 billion in 2022 while boasting a global audience of 532 million. Recently, esports leagues based on traditional sports video game (SVG) titles have become increasingly popular. For instance, the NBA 2K League, based on the popular basketball video game series NBA 2K, has gained more than two million followers and 691 million views on social media since its emergence in 2018 (NBA 2K League, n.d.). As a joint venture between Take-Two Interactive and the North

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American National Basketball Association (NBA), the NBA 2 K League was among the first of a rising number of esports leagues operated by a professional sports league (Mirabito and Kucek, 2019). NBA Commissioner Adam Silver noted that esports offers the NBA league an opportunity to tap into a unique range of players, distinct from the ones audiences are used to watching on TV.

Esports is often envisioned as a new and digital form of sports with the potential for increased diversity owing to its inclusive nature, allowing individuals of various backgrounds, genders, ages, and physical abilities to compete on an equal footing (Alvarez, 2017). However, challenges related to sexism, racism, and discrimination persist. The overall dearth of female representation, both as players and as playable characters within games, has been criticized (Bailey et al., 2021; Darvin et al., 2021; Mirabito and Kucek, 2019). Given that various forms of open and concealed sexism are common in both gaming and sports industries, SVGs such as NBA 2 K constitute incredibly precarious cultures for women players (Darvin and Sagas, 2017; Robnett and John, 2020).

SVGs are among the least popular genres among women players, who represent only 2% of all players (Yee, 2017). This may be attributed to historical gender associations with traditional sports (Adriaanse and Claringbould, 2016), limited representation of women in these games (Darvin et al., 2021), persisting stereotypes in gaming culture (Paaßen et al., 2017), and marketing strategies tailored toward boys and men (Mirabito and Kucek, 2019). Girls and women who participate in highly masculine gaming environments experience gendered barriers in the form of sexism, harassment, and discrimination (Jenson and de Castell, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018), resulting in their underrepresentation. This unequal gender balance provides a vital setting to explore the representation and acceptance of women in esports. This is especially true of NBA 2 K, which recently drafted its first woman player.

In March 2019, Chiquita “Chiquitae126” Evans made history by becoming the first female player to be drafted in the second season of the NBA 2 K League. Given this unique opportunity to prove that women also belong on the virtual basketball court, her barrier-breaking participation generated significant media attention. Although Evans’ debut may be a significant step toward improving the inclusion and representation of women in SVG environments, reactions to her participation have yet to be sufficiently examined. Therefore, I aimed to critically examine relevant media discourses and the media’s construction of Evans through a discourse analysis of relevant media texts. Feminist poststructuralist theory (Butler, 2006, 2011; Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1978; Weedon, 1997) was used to examine these representations.

Although esports has been considered to hold great potential in terms of fostering equitable and bias-free competition because of the low relevance of physical attributes compared to traditional sports, gaming cultures have continued to evolve along gendered lines (Jenson and de Castell, 2018; Rogstad, 2022; Taylor, 2012). Women and other minority players are prime targets of sexism, harassment, and discrimination, resulting in gaming being a highly masculine domain (Darvin et al., 2020; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). SVGs’ direct integration into traditional sports’ organizational frameworks may further

influence or intensify these issues by potentially reinforcing gender norms, perpetuating exclusionary practices, and reproducing existing inequalities (Frandsen, 2020). Furthermore, the instances of racist abuse faced by Evans (Turner, 2019) highlight the pervasive racial challenges in esports. Such exposure to racism and racial stereotypes constitutes distinctive encounters for women of color in esports environments. Interestingly, despite its significance, this aspect remains underexplored in esports research (Rankin and Han, 2019).

To address these research gaps, this study aimed to examine the underlying interpretations and power dynamics related to media representations constructed around Evans to advance an esports gender equality agenda (Kavoura et al., 2018). Hence, the research question was defined as:

RQ: How was Chiquita Evans, as a black woman player, constructed in the media with regard to established gender stereotypes and power dynamics within esports during her participation in the 2019 NBA 2 K League season?

I first provide a brief overview of the current research on gender and race in esports and SVGs. Subsequently, I describe the theoretical framework, methods, and materials, before presenting my analysis of the media's construction of Evans as the first woman player in the NBA 2 K League.

Literature review

Over the past decade, women's performance sport has evolved significantly, making considerable advancements in terms of increased visibility, professionalization, and advocacy for gender equity (Bowes and Culvin, 2021; Cooky and Antunovic, 2020; Petty and Pope, 2019). Notably, with the changing perception of gender roles, coverage of women's sport transitioned from openly negative in the late 1980s to seemingly respectful in the 2010s (Musto et al., 2017). Moreover, the professionalization of women's sport has led to increased recognition and establishment of structured leagues and competitive platforms for women athletes, mirroring those historically reserved for men (Bowes and Culvin, 2021). While strides have been made, women's sport is still significantly underrepresented and marginalized compared to men's sport (Antunovic and Bartoluci, 2023; Cooky et al., 2015). The gender pay gap and disparities in resources between women's and men's sports also continue to persist (Bowes and Culvin, 2021; Flake et al., 2013), highlighting the ongoing struggle for equal opportunities and recognition in the sports domain.

Similar to women's sport, the esports industry has undergone positive development while still grappling with certain challenges. The perception of esports players has shifted from the stereotype of unhealthy teenagers confined to their parents' basements to a portrayal of dedicated and serious professionals (Taylor, 2012). esports professionalization has led to structured leagues, competitive opportunities, and player development, resulting in professional career opportunities, sponsorships, media attention, and industry growth (Rosell Llorens, 2017). However, the predominance of masculinity and the male gamer stereotype leads to several negative effects on women in esports environments (Jenson and de Castell, 2018; McLeod et al., 2022; Taylor, 2012).

Gaming communities and industries are often hostile to women and nonbinary people (Paaßen et al., 2017; Rogstad, 2022; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Witkowski (2018) noted that many esports settings frequently frame gender dualistically: female/male, woman/man, and femininity/masculinity. Therefore, women players may find themselves confined within these simplified gender categories, which do not accurately reflect the complexities of their actual experiences. This framing can influence how they navigate their roles as both professional players and individuals with unique identities (Witkowski, 2018).

Although the number of men and women who play video games is relatively similar, video gaming remains strongly perceived as a “male” activity (Paaßen et al., 2017). This stereotype is often justified by arguing that women cannot be considered “true” or “hard-core” gamers because they are believed to play more casually and less skillfully (Paaßen et al., 2017). However, scholars such as Shen et al. (2016) have challenged this perceived participation and performance gender gap, concluding that the female inferiority stereotype is not only false but may also contribute to unequal participation in gaming. Ratan et al. (2015) suggested that this stereotype affects women’s self-assessment of personal skills, even when these skills are equal to those of men. Women players may find themselves in a vicious cycle of the ongoing false stereotype discouraging participation (Paaßen et al., 2017), and in turn, preventing performance improvement (Chan, 2008). This cycle ultimately underpins the perplexing relationship between skill and gender (Shen et al., 2016).

Women of color in gaming

While research has highlighted gendered barriers and equality issues in gaming and esports, most studies have primarily focused on gender homogeneously (Everett and Watkins, 2008; Richard, 2013a). According to Gray (2012), the favoring of the typical (white male) gamer in video game culture has resulted in the perpetuation of whiteness and masculinity, as well as the marginalization of many minority gamers, who are labeled “deviant.” Compared with white women players, women of color are subjected to a different reality and set of social injustices commonly overlooked by mainstream feminism (Rankin and Han, 2019); they are targets of both misogyny and racial slurs (Richard, 2016). Further, the unequal treatment of marginalized players may share symbiotic ties with the portrayal of minorities within video games (Richard, 2013b). Depictions of people of color within games are often stereotypical. For instance, 83% of all African-American video game characters were featured in SVGs (Glaubke et al., 2001), which may have produced an assumption that most African-American players prefer to play SVGs (Peterson, 2018). Furthermore, black characters within SVGs are generally presented as “verbally aggressive and extraordinarily muscular and athletic” (Everett and Watkins, 2008).

However, apart from in-game character representation and content analyses of what games are lacking, research has generally overlooked cross-gender player perspectives and their intersections with race, ethnicity, culture, gender, and sexuality (Richard and Gray, 2018). Although Leonard (2006) urged researchers to address this gap, research in this area is at a nascent stage (Richard and Gray, 2018). While some studies have

begun to explore the experiences of women of color in esports and gaming culture (Hussain et al., 2021; Rankin and Han, 2019; Richard, 2016), further work is urgently required (Richard and Gray, 2018). By examining the media's construction of the image of Chiquita Evans as the first woman player in the NBA 2 K League, this study aims to contribute to our scarce knowledge of women of color in esports, and of professional women players in the field of SVGs.

Theoretical framework

To explore the underlying gendered interpretations and esports power dynamics through media coverage of Evans, I drew upon feminist poststructuralist theory (Butler, 2006, 2011; Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1978; Weedon, 1997). This theoretical approach provides a novel lens for analyzing gender and power dynamics within esports media coverage, offering a more nuanced model of situated gender construction and performance compared to conventional analyses (Pringle 2005; Rogstad 2023). In the context of the research question concerning how Evans, as a black woman player, was portrayed in the media with regard to established gender stereotypes and power dynamics within esports during the 2019 NBA 2 K League season, the concept of "subjectivity" becomes central. Subjectivity, within poststructuralist theory, encompasses an individual's conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, and their sense of self in society (Weedon, 1997). Poststructuralism posits that subjectivity is fluid, ambiguous, and continually evolving through language and discourse (Weedon, 1997). Therefore, subjectivity offers a valuable framework for analyzing the complex interplay of gender, ethnicity, power, and identity construction within the media narratives concerning Evans.

Foucault's discourse theory (1972, 1978) provides a theory of language and social power that incorporates the poststructuralist idea of subjectivity. It carefully considers the institutional influence of discourse and how it shapes and controls individual subjects (Weedon, 1997). Discourse is a way of producing knowledge, as well as the cultural norms, subjectivities, and dynamics of power (and their interconnections) embedded in such knowledge (Foucault, 1972, 1978). Discourses form and seek to control individuals' conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings, for instance by presenting particular ways of being as acceptable or natural, while marginalizing others (Weedon, 1997).

The nature of femininity and masculinity is one of the primary sites of discursive conflict for individuals, where a commonsense, gendered idea of social behavior seeks to establish specific types of masculinity and femininity as natural (Weedon, 1997). Similarly, feminist theorists such as Butler (2006, 2011) and Weedon (1997) have demonstrated how Foucault's discourse theory can be used to explain how women frequently become instruments of their own oppression by (intentionally or unintentionally) confining themselves to the prevailing binary gendered logic. Within the context of analyzing the media coverage of Evans, recognizing the intersectionality of gender and race/ethnicity within the discourse is crucial. Foucault's discourse theory (1972, 1978) emphasizes the role of language in exerting social power, a notion that intertwines with gender and race. Discourses not only construct gendered subject positions but also infuse racial and ethnic dimensions, contributing to the shaping of individuals' thoughts, feelings, and

practices (Weedon, 1997). The discourse surrounding esports may present different expectations and constraints for women of color, attaching an additional layer of complexity to their experiences. Therefore, both gender and race must be examined in the media's portrayal of Evans to understand power and subjectivity in this setting.

Focusing on the connection between discourse and power, Foucault (1978) coined the term "subject position" to describe how individuals are placed in social hierarchies. Subject position describes the individual's position in relation to dominant discourses; it influences their thoughts, emotions, and practices and provides various possibilities for and restrictions of action (Weedon, 1997). Gendered subject positions are formed in various ways: by common ideas of ideal appearance and behavior, by social norms involving either approval or punishment depending on one's adherence to them, through certain definitions of pleasure that are presented as acceptable and suggest ways of being a woman, and by the limited possibility of negotiating gender within certain discourses (Weedon, 1997). For instance, women who choose to engage in esports risk social, psychological, and economic consequences, for example, harassment, limited access to competitions and player communities, and restricted sponsorship opportunities (Jenson and de Castell, 2018; Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2018). These discourses often intersect with traditional sport narratives, encompassing notions of masculinity, femininity, competition, success, and race and ethnicity (Gray, 2012; Taylor, 2012). The influence of discourses related to hegemonic masculinity in esports, as noted by Rogstad (2022), not only reinforces specific ideals but also marginalizes those deviating from them, creating additional challenges for individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. This intersectionality of race and ethnicity with discourses in esports further underscores the complexities of media constructions within the broader cultural narratives and power dynamics shaping the portrayal of figures like Evans. These discourses are disseminated through various media outlets, online platforms, and player communities. Focusing on these discourses and their arenas sheds light on how media constructions of Evans are influenced by broader cultural narratives and power dynamics.

Method

Data collection

Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) was conducted on media texts relating to Chiquita Evans' participation as the first woman player in the 2019 NBA 2 K League season. The term "text" is broadly defined, including written texts, images, audio, videos, streams, and podcasts (Bratberg, 2021). This approach involves exploring the influence of language and power in constructing subjectivities, reflecting poststructuralist epistemological and ontological assumptions (Markula and Pringle, 2006). The data were limited to media texts published from when Evans was drafted to the second NBA 2 K League season (March 2019) until her unsuccessful redraft to the fourth season (March 2021).

The sample search was conducted in online spaces likely to discuss and report on Evans and her experiences, including (1) the NBA 2 K League's official website, Twitch channel, and YouTube channel; (2) her team's (Warriors Gaming

Squad) official website, Twitch channel, and YouTube channel; and (3) online news media and news-related gaming and esports websites identified through Google. The aim was to capture a diverse range of discourses surrounding Evans' participation, considering the complexities of language and power in shaping representations. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicating that no new insights were emerging from the analysis.

Searching these channels resulted in the final selection of 26 relevant media texts. Media texts were considered relevant if they pertained to Evans' participation in the NBA 2 K League. This included any content that discussed or reported on Evans' experiences, achievements, challenges or any narratives surrounding her engagement in the league. Evans' participation was found to be covered in various English-speaking media outlets: online news sites (ABC News, ESPN.com, Los Angeles Times, The Athletic, and The Lily, Reuters), online content produced by the NBA 2 K League (articles, broadcasts, podcasts, and videos), news-related esports and gaming websites (Cheddar Esports, Dot Esports, GamesIndustry.biz, Kotaku, Polygon, SportTechie, The Score, and Upcomer), and news-related websites focusing on intersections of race, sports, gaming, and culture (Black Girl Nerds and The Undeafated).

Analysis

The analysis of finalized media texts was conducted by following Willig's (2013) six steps of the FDA. These steps provide a systematic and consistent approach to examining how discourses shape and influence social realities, particularly within the context of power dynamics and subjectivities. In line with poststructuralist principles, this approach embraces reflexivity, deconstruction of binary oppositions, and recognition of power relations embedded in language. It seeks to uncover the complexities of subjectivities constructed through discourse, while also accounting for contextual factors that shape meanings. Furthermore, this analysis explores instances of resistance and agency within discourses, highlighting the dynamic nature of identities and interpretations (Markula and Pringle, 2006). Following Willig's (2013) stepwise approach of FDA, the analysis deconstructs the construction of discursive objects in texts, followed by locating these constructions within broader discourses. This contextualization is pursued by closely examining the specific discursive contexts. The analysis then scrutinizes subject positions offered by these discourses, before exploring the relationship between discourse and practice. The final stage investigates how discourse influences subjectivity. These stages collectively provide a comprehensive framework to uncover the complex interplay of power, meaning, and identity embedded within discourses.

In the first step of FDA, the media texts were deconstructed to identify how discursive objects, such as Evans' portrayal, were constructed within the narratives. This involved uncovering the language, descriptions, and themes that shaped her representation. In the second step, I situated these discursive constructions within broader discourses. By examining the prevalent discourses surrounding gender, race, and power in the esports landscape, I contextualized Evans' portrayal within the larger social and cultural framework. The third step involved closely examining the specific discursive contexts that framed the media texts. This allowed me to discern the

various perspectives, intentions, and influences that shaped Evans' portrayal. The fourth step focused on scrutinizing the subject positions offered by the discourses. This involved identifying how the media texts positioned Evans within the esports landscape and the implications of these positions on her identity and agency. Moving on to the fifth step, I explored the relationship between discourse and practice. By analyzing how the media constructions and subject positions facilitated or constrained action, I delved into the dynamic interplay between representation and lived experiences. Finally, the sixth step involved investigating the impact of discourse on subjectivity. This stage enabled me to trace the consequences of adopting specific subject positions on Evans' subjective experience as a black woman player in the NBA 2 K League.

Applying these steps led to the identification of three distinct themes that framed the media construction of Chiquita Evans: "Athletic Prowess in a Virtual, White, and Male-Dominated Domain," "Coping with Expectations and Challenges in the Esports Landscape," and "Intersection of Sport and Media Logics." Each theme delves into various aspects of her portrayal, highlighting the multifaceted ways in which gender, race, and power dynamics intersect to shape her identity within the esports landscape. Through this comprehensive analysis, I aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the media's construction of Chiquita Evans as the first black woman in the NBA 2 K League.

Discussion

This analysis delves into the media construction of Chiquita Evans and her barrier-breaking participation as the first black woman in the NBA 2 K League, revealing the intricate interplay of gender, race, and power dynamics across three main topics: (1) Athletic Prowess in a Virtual, White, and Male-Dominated Domain, (2) Coping with Expectations and Challenges in the Esports Landscape, and (3) Intersection of Sport and Media Logics. First, Evans' exceptional athletic prowess challenges gender norms and reshapes power dynamics, reflecting Foucault's discursive formations. Second, Evans navigates gender and racial norms using coping strategies, revealing both challenges and acceptance. Third, her role as an SVG player and media figure highlights the interplay of sports and media, reflecting her transformative image and the dichotomy between respect and harassment. The following subsections provide a comprehensive analysis of how discourses shape Evans' construction in the media, revealing interconnections between gender, race, power, and societal norms in the esports landscape.

Athletic prowess in a virtual, white, and male-dominated domain

Evans' emergence as the first woman player in the NBA 2 K League and one of the rare woman representatives in top-tier esports attracted widespread media attention, including coverage from some of the leading American media outlets with national and international reach (Davidson, 2019; Seiner, 2019). Most headlines revolved in some way around Evans being "the first" (e.g., Jackson, 2019; Li, 2019; Mitchell, 2019; Obringer, 2019), reinforcing her portrayal as an exceptional figure transcending the

confines of conventional gender roles within esports. In line with Foucault's insights into discursive formations, this construction positions Evans as a transformative force, accentuating her unique stature as a trailblazer (Starkey, 2019a).

The media's narrative surrounding Evans frequently exposes her to a barrage of gendered beliefs that highlight innate physical or mental disparities between men and women players (NBA 2 K League, 2019b; Valentine, 2019). Confronted with such beliefs, Evans responded, "I don't feel like because I'm a female and you're a male that we're different when it comes to video games. You being a male doesn't make you superior at moving your hands and clicking buttons and keys" (Turner, 2019). Some media texts highlighted speculations from some parts of the NBA 2 K community that women players lack the athleticism needed to compete with men at this level (The Breakfast Club, 2019), to which Evans replied, "That has absolutely nothing to do with being a professional 2 K League player. I'm not physically out there. Who's to say we aren't athletic? I'm actually very athletic. So that defeats the point" (Turner, 2019). These responses illustrate a form of resistance to prevailing norms. This resistance, viewed through a Foucauldian lens, highlights Evans' agency in challenging and renegotiating the existing power dynamics that attempt to confine her within preconceived gender limitations (Weedon, 1997).

Meanwhile, the media reports on Evans' athleticism, drawing attention to her physical abilities and her background as a former semiprofessional basketball player. Descriptions such as that she has "the ease and grace of an athlete" (Tsukayama, 2019), an impressive "physical prowess and a seemingly endless supply of adrenaline" (Turner, 2019), and is "blessed with height and natural strength" (Faris, 2019) contribute to a discourse that validates traditional masculine attributes. Moreover, her natural talent and embodied knowledge of "real" basketball (e.g., tactical aspects of training and play, teamwork) were described as being transferable into a kind of "natural skill" for playing NBA 2 K (Esports, 2019; Seiner, 2019). Foucault's (1978) insights into the regimes of knowledge are evident here, as the media's emphasis on Evans' physicality reinforces the existing notions of what constitutes value and recognition in competitive environments, often aligned with masculine traits (Weedon, 1997). Moreover, this tendency may reflect a historical tendency of emphasizing the physical prowess of black athletes (Grainger et al., 2006; van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, 2004), which aligns with the media's construction of Evans as an athletic figure. This interplay between media representation and racial stereotypes underscores the complex ways in which discourses about gender, race, and athleticism intersect and shape the perception of individuals like Evans within their respective domains.

Foucault's (1978) ideas on biological sex differences intersect with the media portrayal of Evans. While research has indicated that such differences do not influence esports performance (Shen et al., 2016), the media's persistent focus on Evans' athleticism, despite her rejection of the relevance of physical attributes in esports, reveals the subtle ways in which these discourses persist and play into her construction as an exceptionally athletic woman player. This focus on her athleticism reinforces the association between physical prowess and esports ability, which traditionally privileges men owing to dominant notions of men's superior athleticism. However, discussions of Evans' athleticism simultaneously challenge biological sex differences by demonstrating

that women can also be athletic in esports. Consequently, this example can be positioned as both reproducing and resisting dominant notions that normalize and naturalize the superiority of men in esports.

Evans' construction is also shaped by the intricate intersection of race and gender. Gender takes the forefront in almost all media texts on Evans, with a minority focusing on her identity as a black woman. Within this minority, the aspect of race and ethnicity emerges through sole references to Evans as a black woman (Starkey, 2019a), or through general mentions of racist abuse she faces in online environments while playing (Turner, 2019). However, the media coverage typically only skims the surface of the race and ethnicity aspects. By refraining from delving into the profound implications of Evans being the first black woman in the league, the media avoids engaging in a deeper discourse about how deeply rooted structural inequalities intersect and persist. This avoidance perpetuates a narrative that effectively downplays the significance of race in shaping her experiences and achievements. This aligns with Foucault's (1978) understanding of power operating not only through active discourses but also through deliberate omissions, shaping societal narratives and reinforcing stereotypes.

Coping with expectations and challenges in the esports landscape

The media coverage of Evans intricately weaves together the challenges stemming from both gender and racial biases. Media accounts expose the harsh reality she faces, enduring derogatory comments and sexist remarks such as "she is trash" and that "she should have stayed in the kitchen" (Boren, 2019; Valentine, 2019). Combined with the exclusion she often faces from male players, who often refuse to include her in gameplay once they find out that she is a woman (NBA 2 K League, 2019c; Pingue, 2019; The Breakfast Club, 2019), these issues highlight the toxic gender dynamics pervasive in esports. Simultaneously, her experiences highlight the racial prejudices within the gaming community, characterized by racial slurs, hate, and discriminatory treatment owing to her race (Turner, 2019). Evans' story echoes the broader issues elucidated in existing research, especially concerning the unique struggles faced by black women in gaming. Richard (2016) aptly pointed out the dual discrimination black women gamers endure, navigating both misogyny and racial slurs within the gaming sphere, mirroring Evans' experiences.

Interestingly, Evans' participation in the NBA 2 K League aligns with the common assumption that African-American players prefer SVGs (Peterson, 2018). Paradoxically, this assumption may have offered her a preconceived space within esports, easing her integration within existing expectations. This intersectionality of race and gender raises intriguing questions about how such stereotypes while perpetuating inequality, might have paradoxically facilitated Evans' acceptance in esports. These experiences mirror Foucault's (1977, 1978) concept of social discipline, where individuals diverging from established norms face punishment and exclusion. In light of such challenges, a coping discourse emerges as a strategic response to navigate the daunting esports landscape. As coping mechanisms and identity management become crucial tools for women players to carve out a space for themselves and mitigate adverse behavior, an intricate tension arises related to how individuals negotiate their subjectivities within societal structures (Weedon, 1997).

In the face of adversity, Evans is portrayed as a significantly resilient woman who is able to withstand the toxicity women players are often exposed to, to fulfill her dream of becoming a professional player. This coping discourse aligns with Foucault's (1977, 1978) concepts of power and subjectivity, where individuals internalize norms as a means of survival. Furthermore, Evans asserts that "It starts with women ourselves. We have to learn to have tough skin and just go out there and compete, no matter what anyone says" (NBA 2 K League, 2019a). Consequently, a particular form of subjectivity is established, based on the expectation that women players should be immune to abuse (Taylor, 2018), necessitating the demanding psychological labor of "toughening up." By emphasizing individual responsibility for withstanding harassment, this coping discourse also works to uphold current power relations within esports. While such strategies may help women gain acceptance and mitigate negative behaviors, they risk further entrenching gendered barriers and inhibiting systemic change. Therefore, the coping discourse exposes how women's agency is constrained by the need to conform, rather than challenging the structures perpetuating inequality (Foucault, 1977, 1978).

Simultaneously, Evans is portrayed in a maternal and caring role, aligning with traditional gender roles (Butler, 2006; Weedon, 1997). Within the team dynamics, where players live and practice together, she is portrayed as a stabilizing and caring presence. Her role as a family figure parallels the concept of disciplinary power described by Foucault (1978), where individuals self-regulate their behavior to conform to established norms. The team's cohesion and functionality can thus be understood as a manifestation of this disciplinary power, where Evans' maternal role contributes to the team's order and productivity. Notably, Evans makes sacrifices for the team's benefit, playing in a position that is not her best to allow teammates to play in their preferred position. On the one hand, this versatility is portrayed positively in the media, showcasing her adaptability and commitment to the team's success (NBA 2 K League 2019d, 2019e, 2019f). One journalist noted, "the overriding theme—seemingly every other word—is *the team*. Her answers always come back to competitive play, and working on the game so she can help her teammates in any way possible" (Sarkar, 2019). However, this comes at a personal cost as she sacrifices opportunities to excel in her preferred position, making her more vulnerable to criticism for not performing as well in other roles (Cole, 2021). Such conflicting expectations create a complex subjectivity for Evans, echoing Hovden's (2004) observation that women in male-dominated domains must negotiate their identity while striving to prove their competence. Moreover, her willingness to make sacrifices for the team's benefit presents a nuanced perspective on power and agency. In light of Foucault's concept of resistance within power structures, Evans' adaptability can be seen as a form of resistance against rigid role assignments, yet paradoxically, it also underscores how power structures can shape individuals' choices and actions.

Intersection of sport and media logics

The emergence of the NBA 2 K League, bridging esports and traditional sports, demonstrates an intriguing process of mediatization, revealing intricate interactions between the practices and values of both realms. This integration showcases how the contemporary logic of traditional sports shapes esports while simultaneously demonstrating the

substantial influence of media and communication logic on the institution of sport itself (Frandsen, 2020). Simultaneously, the NBA 2 K League also resonates with the historical legacy of black athletes in basketball. Rooted in African-American resilience, basketball has become a powerful symbol of opportunity, shaping the global sports landscape (Hoberman, 1997). Within this historical context, the representation of black players in basketball became synonymous with the sport's essence, as media narratives and televised games celebrated their athleticism and charisma (Carrington, 2001). This legacy is important in shaping the mediatization of esports. The contemporary logic of traditional sport, rooted in the visibility and excellence of black athletes, converges with the media and communication logic, amplifying the significance of players like Evans in the broader context of elite sports. Consequently, Evans' portrayal as a professional NBA 2 K player is not merely an individual account, but may also be viewed as a continuation of the ongoing tradition of black athletes' accomplishments in basketball, seamlessly woven into the digital fabric of globalized media culture associated with esports. This intersectionality highlights how Evans' identity as a black woman significantly influences her role, providing a nuanced lens to perceive the intricate interplay of sport and media logic in the NBA 2 K League.

Within this context, Evans' role is multifaceted, reflecting not only the hybridization of sports and media influences but also the interplay of race, ethnicity, and gender within her narrative. In the media, Evans is commonly portrayed as the pivotal "assistant coach," commanding a leadership role during strategic training sessions that underscores her teammates' reverence for her expertise (Cohen, 2019; Cole, 2021; Starkey, 2019b). Her strategic leadership resonates with her teammates' reverence for her expertise, while echoing the strategic depth found in traditional sports (Frandsen, 2020), where the influence of race often shapes athletic dynamics. The stereotyping of athletes based on their race is a pervasive issue, wherein black athletes are often portrayed as physically gifted and naturally talented, while white athletes are typically characterized as tactically smart and hardworking (Hoberman, 1997). Similarly, within the world of gaming, competence has been viewed as a masculine trait, primarily attributed to men players (Taylor, 2012). Evans, with her background as a semi-professional basketball player, challenges these stereotypes. Drawing on a discourse rooted in sports performance, Evans frames her dedication to gaming and confronts racial and gender biases that influence perceptions of competence (Taylor, 2012).

In parallel, the integration of esports into traditional sports organizations has elevated the value of media exposure, sometimes overshadowing skills directly tied to gameplay (Frandsen, 2020). Consequently, a player's online presence, activity, and engagement may attain comparable importance to their performance. In this context, Evans emphasized that "People have to understand that the NBA 2 K League is more than just playing NBA 2 K, it is a business. They are going to want more than just stick skills in return, they will want personality and to know whether they can trust you with their brand" (Cole, 2021). Herein lies a nuanced dynamic where Evans, known for her focused approach to gaming performance over audience interaction, encountered a demand for heightened online engagement to enhance her visibility. For black women players like Evans, this spotlight comes with added challenges as they navigate the esports landscape. They not only contend with the pressure to perform exceptionally

but also face the risk of being exposed to sexist and racist comments online. The increased emphasis on online engagement and personality, coupled with societal biases, adds layers of complexity to their experience, requiring them to handle negative attention while preserving their professional reputation and integrity. This underscores the unique vulnerabilities and challenges faced by black female players in the esports industry.

Within this evolving environment, Evans assumes a role as both a player and a media figure representing the NBA 2 K League and the NBA, sharing insights into the broader implications of esports as a business venture (Newman et al., 2022). However, this duality also brings to light the complexities players like Evans face. The emphasis on traditional sport logics and Evans' skills and knowledge acquired from her background as a basketball player can contribute to her earning respect and acceptance as a lone woman in a male-dominated and masculine environment. By contrast, the prevalence of harassment and abuse, particularly heightened for black women players, prompts caution and restraint, hindering women's ability to fully express themselves online (Cole, 2021; Warriors Gaming, 2019). This resonates with a Foucauldian interpretation, illustrating the disciplining effect of societal norms on individuals, particularly women, who strive to navigate and negotiate their identities within the ever-evolving culture of esports. The demand for online engagement, coupled with the reality of harassment, creates a demanding and often untenable position, perpetuating inequalities that can ultimately lead many women to reconsider their participation in esports and gaming (Taylor, 2018).

Conclusion

The analysis of Chiquita Evans' media construction within the context of her participation as the first woman in the NBA 2 K League reveals a complex interplay of gender and racial stereotypes, exposing the complexities of identity negotiation within the intersection of sports, gaming, and media. Within the media's coverage, Evans emerges as a trail-blazing figure who not only confronts but also reshapes prevailing gender and racial norms within the male-dominated esports domain, pushing the boundaries of conventional expectations. This study, conducted through a Foucauldian lens, challenges a static and binary perception of gender and underscores the transformative nature of her participation while highlighting the unique challenges faced by Evans in the esports landscape as a black woman player.

Examining Evans' athletic prowess, coping strategies, and multifaceted roles as a player and media figure offers a glimpse into her resilience and agency. Despite her defiance of gender norms, the media subtly ties her achievements to traditional masculine attributes, inadvertently perpetuating enduring gender expectations. Moreover, Evans' barrier-breaking participation highlights the nuanced ways she navigates both gender and racial biases. Her coping strategies reveal her resilience while exposing the persistent challenges she confronts in combating deeply ingrained biases. Her strategic decisions and team sacrifices underline the delicate balance between individual agency and systemic expectations, emphasizing the complexity of identity formation within esports.

The convergence of sports and media logics in Evans' representation showcases the evolving landscape of esports, where traditional sport logics merges with the logics of contemporary media culture. Her ability to establish herself as both a player and media representative signifies her adaptability. Moreover, it emphasizes the demanding position women players, especially black women, occupy. They not only navigate gameplay intricacies but also grapple with the intricacies of public engagement and the omnipresent threat of online harassment, highlighting the unique vulnerabilities faced by women of color in the esports industry.

In essence, the media's construction of Evans, while encouraging respect and acceptance, inadvertently reproduces established gender and racial stereotypes, underscoring the constrained ways available for constructing women player identities even at the highest level of esports. Increased representation alone may not dismantle existing power dynamics or cultivate alternative, opposing, and specifically female discourses. To further the gender equity agenda, future research should critically dissect how media practices sustain the hegemonic structure of the discursive field, specifically focusing on the intersectionality of race and gender in esports. While previous studies have addressed race and ethnicity in sports and gaming, there is a pressing need for more research focusing on race and ethnicity, thereby enhancing our understanding of the experiences of black women and other marginalized groups in esports.


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