

Social Media Activism Changing the Narrative of Female Inequalities in the NCAA



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Jenna Manke
Department of Communications
Allegheny College
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Social Media Activism Changing the Narrative of Female Inequalities in the NCAA

By

Jenna Manke
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I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities, as defined in the Honor
Code,
and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College as a whole.

Jenna Manke

Approved by:

Jon Wiebel

Joe Tompkins

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I have been playing sports ever since I was little. I began by playing them all, soccer, basketball, track, volleyball, and softball. When sports separated from being co-ed to all boys and to all girls, it became clear that athletics for girls and boys were unequal. In high school boy's games got a bigger crowd and the boy's teams were able to get new uniforms every season. While the women were wearing jerseys that were 20 years old. From that point forward I knew that it was going to be the "norm" for women's sports to get shorted on everything, compared to the men's teams. This sparked my interest in research on the inequalities of women's sports and how Title IX is allowing for the inequalities to occur. The 2021 Women's March Madness Tournament weight room controversy was an event that shocked the world. This was one of the first times that I and many other people noticed this type of inequality occurring on such a large scale. It brought to light what many girls are facing as they are growing up through sports.

When thinking about something that is a big pastime for Americans, many people think of sports, more importantly male sports. Sports have been a male dominated field ever since women have been allowed to participate. This research looks into women's inequalities in sports and more specifically the 2021 Women's March Madness weight room controversy. This is an important topic to study because there is so much that goes into making sure women are protected as athletes. "Title IX protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance" (U.S. Dept. of Education). There is also a lot we need to understand about how women's sports are not able to evolve due to the treatment they receive. Women get significantly less media time when it comes to college athletics. This is one of the reasons why the Women's March Madness does not get more funding, because they bring in less viewers, but they are not able to bring more in if they are not offered the same amount of coverage as men's athletics. This project also calls attention to the way in which the NCAA treats their female athletes. This is through the facilities given to the women's players during the 2021 Women's March Madness Tournament. The weight room that was given to the women were just a handful of yoga mats and a set of dumbbells. These women are division 1 athletes and are competing at

one of the highest levels and they are receiving no materials to better themselves during a month-long tournament.

Also, this research goes to show how professional athletes and other people with a large social media following are able to switch the narrative. The social media activism that took place during the 2021 Women's March Madness Tournament switched the narrative in many ways. When professional male athletes called attention to the inequalities on social media the narrative switched to fans interacting with them about their own personal ideas about that specific athlete and sports. The conversation veered away from women's inequality. Also, during this time people were trying to find a solution to the wrong problem. People wanted the weight room changed, which yes would be great, but we need to be looking to change Title IX. There is nothing in place that is stopping the weight room issue to occur again.

In my research I look at different theories and focus on different scholarly sources. Some of the theories I choose to look at are feminist theory which is the umbrella term for the more specific theory I use. The main theory that I use is gendering in sports. This is prevalent throughout the entire paper through the inequality that occurred which is the case study of my project.

The central argument that I will be making in my research is that social media activism did not make any real changes in the 2021 Women's March Madness Tournament. Social media activism looked to fix the inequalities of the weight room but looked to make no real change beyond that. They found a temporary solution to a problem that is deeply ingrained into the NCAA because of Title IX. I am backing this up by looking at different tweets that were trending and being posted by professional athletes during the time of the tournament. Through these trending tweets by celebrities, it allowed for people to have conversations on social media. I will also be looking at the interactions that were created on social media because of the professional athletes and their platforms. This research in many ways is calling attention to different inequalities that female athletes face that make it more difficult for them to get their recognition or advance to a higher level.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Since women's athletics are still developing to this day, we see a lot of research surrounding it. This ranges from equality to the pay gap to mental health and much more. To get a better understanding of how women's inequality in the NCAA is allowed by Title IX, there are other scholarly research that needs to be looked into. First, we need to think about athlete activism. Athlete activism is one of the most important components of this research. Social media activism is the idea of how athletes use their platforms on social media to spark conversation among other professional athletes, scholars, and other members of the sports community. There is research on this form of activism that will help us reach the goal of understanding the 2021 March Madness Women's Tournament and how people are fighting for change in women's athletics. This project fits into the larger conversation of women's athletic inequality because it is examining how the 2021 March Madness Women's Tournament plays a role in athlete activism, how women's sports are covered in the media, and how the NCAA supports female athletes.

People are often caught in the idea of Title IX being the solution to women being excluded in sports and academic settings. There isn't a lot of thought about how Title IX has enabled the NCAA to continue to treat women differently that prevents them from ever being on the same athletic level of male sports. "Sex Segregation as Policy Problem: a Gendered Policy Paradox" by Elizabeth Sharrow dives deeper into understanding how Title IX reinforces sex based discrimination in the NCAA. "Several consequences follow from this framework for thinking about Title IX. The paradox suggested in policy design sanctions, rather than challenges, pernicious stereotypes about women's inferiority" (Sharrow 260). The way people think about Title IX is for all the good that has come out of it but fail to recognize the flaws that came with it as well. Title IX gives the stereotype of women not being able to compete at the same level as men and that is why there is sex-based separation of sports from children's leagues the whole way until professional teams. Ironically, Title IX is trying to remove sex-based discrimination in higher education, but continues to enforce that same discrimination through sports, which are commonly provided through schools. This fits into my research by understanding how the NCAA is enabled to treat women athletics differently

than men's athletics because of Title IX. It is not just about keeping men and women separate for the sake of competitive and performance matters, but rather allows men's sports to be the more popular option for fans to view and support.

Research shows that women are still fighting for a spot in the limelight in sports, there are other pressing issues with gender that play a role in the inequality in women's sports. Women are still fighting for complete equality in all facets of life. "From Fizzle to Sizzle! Televised Sports News and the Production of Gender-Bland Sexism" by Michela Musto, Cheryl Cooky, and Michael A. Messner analyze how women are still working their way to equality in sports. "The percentage of women employed full-time has leveled since the 1990s (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004), men have not moved into traditionally female-dominated fields at the same rate that women have moved into male-dominated ones (Charles and Grusky 2004; England 2010), and many educational fields and occupations remain overwhelmingly sex-segregated (Gauchat, Kelly, and Wallace 2012)" (Musto, Cooky, Messner 574). According to Musto, Cooky, and Messner, women are commonly the group that needs to find a way into a male dominated workforce rather than men working their way into female dominated fields. This can shift into careers in sports, outside of performance, such as coaching. "Men hold the majority of head coaching positions within the professional and amateur levels of sport, and these hiring practices can be based on gender-role stereotypes (Acosta and Carpenter, 2014)" (Darvin, Pegoraro, Berri 455). Coaching is a male dominated field and male coaches are even more common in women's athletics. This is because sports were created by and for men. Women have knocked down the walls and forced their way into the realm of sports but are still not receiving the attention on television or different social media platforms. Most media outlets tend to cover male sports and when women get their chance on-air the segments are often shorter and less in depth. "This form of sexism, which we call "gender-bland sexism," enables sports news and highlight shows to convey sexist beliefs by discussing men's sports with more excitement, engagement, and reverence, while women's sports are rendered insignificant and inferior through lackluster commentary" (Musto, Cooky, Messner 590). What the news and highlights sports outlets choose to put on their platforms for people to view is what enables people to support certain male or female sports. If the news decides to cover

women's sports with less enthusiasm and excitement, people are not going to want to watch female sports.

Women participating in sports has been on the rise since women were granted the right to participate. Although, research is pointing at women still not receiving proper time on television and opportunities to be seen on social media platforms. "The purpose of this study is to examine how major sports networks visually frame gender on SMP's [social media platforms] and whether the same gender biases exist in general televised programming likewise emerge on social platforms" (Romney, Johnson 740). "Results showed that the networks disregarded women in general, not just toward athletics. Of the 1,587 images, only 52 contained a primary female subject" (Romney, Johnson 746). This fits into the larger conversation of women's inequality in athletics through the disregard of women on sports networks and social media platforms. It also allows us to understand how women remain underrepresented in sports due to big social media platforms and sports networks refusing to show female athletes at the same rate as male athletes.

Another issue that scholars address is how women are covered in the media. "Showing women less in athletic action and more in posed photographs allows a media outlet to construct a reality that serves to maintain the status-quo ideology of women as different and inferior athletes in comparison to men" (Fink, Kensicki 11). This research is showing us that by taking away the image of women competing at high levels, it removes their value as respectable athletes. Women's media coverage is already struggling during their season but there are other reasons men are given more opportunities for coverage. "Additionally, men's seasons tend to be longer, which provides more opportunity for coverage. There is a proliferation of men's off-season programming such as professional sports drafts coverage that is increasingly popular" (Romney, Johnson 740). Male athletes receive more coverage through longer seasons and extra opportunities. These extra opportunities discussed by Romney and Johnson are professional drafts, press conferences, or training camps during the off season. Female athletes lack those same opportunities which makes it harder for them to receive any extra coverage in the media.

Another way that there is a lack of coverage is through gender inappropriate sports. People have formed the idea of sports being gender specific and the media tends to not cover sports that are inappropriate for a specific gender. “In this gender continuum model of sport, Kane suggests that since athletes are encourage to partake in ‘gender appropriate’ sports (e.g, cheerleading for females and football for males) and that the media does not report when male and female athletes partake in what society views as gender inappropriate sports (e.g, powerlifting for females and dance for males), sport subdue any indication of a gender continuum (e.g, where women demonstrate ‘traditional’ masculine characteristic and where men demonstrate ‘traditional’ feminine characteristics) (Fisher, Knust, Johnson, 26,27). This is from “Theories and Gender and Sport”. It investigates the masculinity and femineity theories of feminism. People have certain expectations from both men and women in sports. If you are not following the stereotypical ideas of sports, then you are less likely to receive coverage from media outlets. This is due to the stereotype that Title IX has continued to promote through their sex segregation and sports. It also goes along with the separation due to women “needing protection” from men during physical sports, suggesting that all men are stronger than all women.

We also need to understand how athlete activism fits into the larger idea of women’s inequality in the NCAA. There has been research done on different aspects of athlete activism from their in-game presence of activism and their social media activism. A form of athlete activism is their presence on social media. Jimmy Sanderson and Kelly Gramlich are two scholars who have investigated social media and athlete activism in “‘You Go Girl’: Twitter and Conversations About Sport Culture and Gender”. “In that vein, scholars have suggested that social media can open up cultural spaces where women’s sport can be discussed and promoted (Bruce & Hardin, 2014; LaVoi & Calhoun 2014), pointing to elements of community building (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012) that shift ideological control away from men (LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014)” (Sanderson, Gramlich 114). Social media can be used to promote female athletic events through promotions. Male athletes are also given the opportunity to back these promotions by liking, retweeting, and commenting on posts. When thinking about social media being used as a platform for athlete activism, we must understand the size of social media.

“Twitter reports 302 million monthly active users and 500 million tweets sent per day (About, n.d). While Twitter has become popular in many areas of social life, sport has become an immensely viable sphere for Twitter (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012; Schmittle & Sanderson, 2015; Sanderson & Traux, 2014)” (Sanderson, Gramlich 114). With many users, Twitter allows athletes to have a platform where they can interact with fans. When using social media, there are people who will disagree with you and try to counteract what you are promoting. “Indeed, some researchers suggest that even with the ability to selectively self-present via social media platforms, female athletes and broadcasters continue to portray themselves in ways that conform to long-established gender stereotypes (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Weathers et al., 2014)” (Sanderson, Gramlich, 114). This is to get the approval and support of sports fans. Female athletes portray themselves in a way that the sports community likes. This allows for female athletes to be more “likeable” and potentially allow them to get a larger following.

Understanding how the NCAA treats their female athletes is important to understand because of the events that unfolded during the 2021 Women’s March Madness Tournament. One of the main issues that women face with the NCAA is leadership opportunities. The NCAA restricts women to be chosen to lead in the sports community. If female athletes rarely have female coaches or leaders in their program, it is undermining their ability to lead. “The resistance to hiring women in sports leadership positions, specifically as head coaches, is in part based on men’s reluctance to give women leadership opportunities in any realm, including politics and business; in many ways, sports are just another establishment where women face the glass ceiling” (Hattery 248). From athlete to coaching to administration women are seen as inferior in the NCAA. Also, the NCAA has no obligation to uphold Title IX standards because they are their own organization without government financial assistance. So, if a school is not following the laws of Title IX, the NCAA does not have to acknowledge the inequality. It is in the hands of the federal government to take charge of Title IX infractions. The NCAA needs to certify every college that is considered to be a part of the NCAA. “In 1993, the NCAA began a program that required each Division I college to show progress in gender equity to win certification. A college must be certified to compete in the NCAA. The program is a failure, an investigation by The Kansas City Star shows.

The NCAA certifies campuses that provide women with fewer teams and far less money than men and that offer no proof that they plan significant change” (Dillon). The NCAA is saying one thing and their actions are showing the complete opposite. It also isn’t just about how the NCAA treats female athletes but how the schools themselves treat their own. Money allocation in these colleges is a huge issue for female athletics. “Afterward, in a hallway, Carson recounted the biggest disappointment of her year: The Marymount men, with a losing record, flew off to play basketball in the Bahamas. Her 28-2 team went to a tournament in Georgia, traveling 11 hours by bus” (Dillon). This is on the account of a winning women's basketball team who gets unfair treatment from their school's athletic program.

Women's athletics is currently developing to this day even though women have been allowed to participate in athletics at a collegiate level since the late 1800's, although they were not mainstreamed until years later. In 2021 the Women's March Madness Tournament hosted by the NCAA was a huge step backwards for female athletes. However, the incident that occurred at the tournament allowed for athletes to rally together and display athlete activism through various social media platforms. Female athletes are also undermined and underrepresented on various sports networks through their lack of coverage and, when they do get coverage, it is in much less detail and described in ways that make female athletes seem inferior to their male counterparts. Female athletes must work twice as hard to get recognized as athletes who deserve to be taken seriously and the NCAA and sports media outlets aren't doing anything to help them remove that obstacle. Removing this obstacle will have to be up to the NCAA because Title IX does nothing to prevent the inequalities from occurring. This research will get a clear understanding of how social media activism was used in the wrong way. People were calling out the NCAA for their mistreatment of female athletes but failed to recognize what is allowing this to happen. Title IX continues to allow the NCAA to give unfair treatment to women's programs. There can be no real change unless we look to make changes to Title IX first. This will also help us understand that more money is put into the men's programs to bring in more money. By leaving women out of the media and giving them unequal treatment, it allows for more money to go to male programs.

Chapter 3: Context

As times are changing, we see women gaining more and more equality every single year, or so we thought. Big steps have been taken in the past to get women's sports to the level that they are currently on. Large social media platforms have been created in the wake of women's sports evolving. We see ESPN creating ESPNW, which only represents women's sports. Then we have Overtime which is a social media platform where basketball is represented. To spin off Overtime we have Overtime WBB which only represents women's basketball. Although there have been huge strides made in women's sports, we still see inequalities between men and women's sports occurring daily. Women are still to this day, heavily underrepresented in the sports community on social media and television programs.

During the 2021 Women's March Madness basketball tournament hosted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), there was a controversy over the women's weight room that was provided to the participating teams. During the tournament teams were not allowed to leave the tournament facilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic safety precautions. Because of this the teams were provided with food, hotel rooms, weight rooms, and basketball courts to play and practice on. During the beginning of the tournament a video went viral on the social media platform, TikTok. The video that was posted by an Oregon women's basketball player, Sedona Prince, showed the weight room that was provided to Division I female basketball athletes. The weight room consisted of a set of dumbbells with the highest weight of 30 pounds and just a handful of yoga mats. This video was posted just after the men's weight room went viral for being a top-of-the-line facility. The TikTok video was also posted to Twitter and between the two social media platforms the viral video generated approximately 13.7 million views. This video called professional athletes to action to fight for a change and change the narrative surrounding women's sports.

Throughout the time when this video was trending, we saw a large wave of social media activism take over the internet. Men, women, celebrities, professional athletes, and fans all rallied together to fight for the Women's March Madness Tournament and women's equality in the NCAA. This is important to research because of all the good that came out of the social media activism during these unfolding events. Social media

is very important to this research because the changes were made when celebrities and athletes began speaking out about the inequalities. We saw A-list celebrities and professional athletes speaking out such as Steph Curry, Rachel Bachman, and Sue Bird among others who are well-known in the sports community. This form of activism is important because it allowed for the world to see NBA players showing their support to women's athletics which is a huge step in the right direction for equality among the sports community. This leads to research into understanding how media outlets tend to only cover male athletics, but male athletes can help shift that into women's sports getting more coverage. From "When Athlete Activism Clashes with Group Values: Social Identity Threat Management via Social Media" we get a better understanding of why it is important for athletes to speak out on issues. "Nevertheless, when athletes speak out on social issues, it often creates controversy, particularly minority athletes" (Sanderson, Frederick, Stocz 303). This is due to the following on social media that their talents have given them. The reason social media is a preferred platform is because it offers engagement with the things professional athletes say. "Although traditional media outlets quickly converged on the advocacy taken by these players, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter offered fans and other audience members an outlet to also engage in discussions about this incident and shape narratives surrounding it" (Sanderson, Frederick, Stocz 302). However, athlete social media activism gained headway from this chain of events, it wasn't the first time we have seen professional athletes use their platforms on social media to make a voice for those who can't. Black Lives Matter was something that athletes voiced their opinions about during games, by protesting the National Anthem, and on social media where they voiced their opinions on large social media platforms such as Twitter. They used the hashtag BlackLivesMatter to gain attention from the world of social media. The Black Lives Matter protest started in 2016 and is still used in activism by athletes from different sports. The reason athlete activism is important is because so many people look up to professional athletes. So, when they speak out about certain issues, they have a large audience who is looking to agree with them.

Next, the events that unfolded during the March Madness Women's Tournament shifts focus to how women's sports are covered. There are many different media outlets

for athletics such as ESPN, Overtime, and Sports Center but they tend to favor male athletes over women. ESPNW was created considering finding a platform that catered to women's athletics for fans of women's sports. ESPN has announced that they will begin with ESPNW on social media and an online site as an online presence and based off its ratings, it may turn into a television broadcasting series. ESPNW has found sponsorships from large brands such as Nike and Gatorade, both sponsors of ESPN. This is to make separate platforms for men and women for viewers to easily find different sport contents. All the secondary platforms were created due to the slowly rising demand of women's athletics and the growing number of fans. The reason this is important to understand for the Women's March Madness tournament is because it got the attention of every larger news platform outside of secondary social media platforms that were created for women's sports. There were reports done by CNN, local news outlets, ESPN, and Sports Center. This opened the conversation to much more than women's inequality in collegiate sports. This also allowed conversations surrounding women's inequality, the pay gap, and the history of Title IX in collegiate sports.

In a study that was conducted to see the percentage of female sports that were covered in news stories compared to male sports, they found that out of 807 stories only 2.1% of those were about female athletics. In "ESPN's SportsCenter and Coverage of Women's Athletics: 'It's a Boys Club'" the authors Terry Adams and C.A. Tuggle states "Not only were there fewer stories, but SportsCenter used fewer sound bites from women during the 2002 study period. Stories about women appear later in the show - never earlier than the third block - and though accompanied by a video, were never packaged" (Adams, Tuggle 245). This is looking into the idea that not only do female sports receive less coverage, but when they do get coverage there is less effort put into production. In an article in The New York Times, author Katie Thomas covers the beginning stages of ESPNW and states "In 2010, about 8 percent of its sports programming is expected to be devoted to women's sports, the network said" (Thomas). This was stated by ESPN in 2010, however over the time between then and 2019 we have not seen much change in airtime for women's sports. In a study done in 1999 by Cheryl Cooky, a professor of interdisciplinary studies at Purdue University, and Michael Messner, a professor of sociology and gender studies at the University of Southern

California, they found that “Coverage of women athletes on televised news and highlight shows, including ESPN’s SportsCenter, totaled only 5.4% of all airtimes, a negligible change from the 5% observed in 1989 and 5.1% in 1993” (McCarter). Although, there have been promises made that change will occur for women’s sports, we have not seen those promises carried out. That is why secondary platforms such as ESPNW were made to move women’s sports coverage onto a platform of their own.

The final thing we need to investigate is how the NCAA treats their female athletes. The NCAA is a large organization that is constantly under the microscope from the public for everything they do. While thinking about the Women’s March Madness Tournament controversy, we see how the NCAA chooses to support their female athletes. The weight room controversy goes further than a workout facility. We saw a difference in items that women’s players received versus the items the men’s players received during the March Madness Tournaments. Some of these items for the women’s tournament participants included a water bottle, a towel, and a drawstring bag while the items for men’s tournament participants were name brand shoes, duffel bags, clothes, hats, and many more items. To understand how money is allocated in the March Madness Tournament we must take note of the budget of the women’s tournament compared to the men’s tournament. According to Sports Illustrated there was a major difference between the men’s and women’s NCAA tournament. Author, Madeline Coleman states “The NCAA Division I men’s basketball tournament budget for the 2018-19 season was \$28 million—almost twice as much as the women’s budget, which was \$14.5 million, according to ESPN” (Coleman). The NCAA has made statements saying that they acknowledge the \$14 million difference between the men’s and women’s tournament but has not stated any plans to make changes at this time. The NCAA has also included in statements that these budgets are drastically different due to the revenue that each tournament brings in. In an interview after the events of the March Madness Women’s Tournament unfolded Kathleen McNeely, the NCAA’s chief financial officer stated, “The men’s tournament is just a larger tournament: 690,000 fans compared to 275,000 fans in 2019, that kind of a difference is going to bring in a lot of little costs that are going to drive the difference” (Blinder). To simply put it, the NCAA says it’s because people enjoy watching male sports compared to women’s sports.

There are many NBA athletes who are putting in the work to give the WNBA the recognition they deserve. NBA players such as Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Russell Westbrook, and Chris Paul are all looking to help advance female sports across the board, not just at the professional level. This is just one example of how professional athletes are working together to promote change in the culture surrounding women's athletics. This will hopefully lead to budget changes in college women's athletics and make the 2021 March Madness Women's Basketball tournament an incident that does not need to occur again. The inequality that occurs in women's sports is enabled through loopholes in Title IX. When looking at the March Madness Tournaments, the NCAA collects money through the tournament, not the government. Which means they can choose to allocate their money however they want. This leads to a much larger budget for the men's tournament compared to the women's tournament. In an article by the Atlantic author, Maggie Mertens, states "Although the NCAA is a nonprofit that organizes athletic tournaments for college athletes, it acts more like a professional sports organization. And the deeply entrenched sexism in intercollegiate sports means that male athletes are treated with red-carpet fanfare, and women are treated as second-class citizens" (Mertens). This is referring to the fact of the NCAA doing as little as possible to promote the women's tournament, all because of the size of the men's tournament. Since they are being offered the same tournament, there is no harm being done in the eyes of Title IX.

The steps that are being done to push women's basketball and sports in general, are seen as a collective effort. Professional athletes, celebrities and fans are all working together to give women's sports the platforms they deserve to have. The three main things we need to remember are how social media activism was used to draw attention to the inequalities occurring in the NCAA, how the media chooses to cover women's sports on broadcasts and social media, and finally how the NCAA treats female athletes. These all work together to give a better understanding of how prevalent the inequality is between male and female sports. The texts that I have chosen to analyze are from different media outlets and peer reviewed sources. Some of the media outlets include The Atlantic, New York Times, Fox News, and NPR. These are going to be used to understand how people are perceiving the events that unfolded during the March

Madness tournament and help analyze why this is happening if Title IX is in place to protect women's athletics. The scholarly articles are used to understand the research that has been done in the past years of inequality of women's sports in NCAA. I have also chosen to look at Twitter to get a better understanding of how social media athlete activism is used to create change in the sports community and how it gives people a chance to engage with professional athletes. Also, Twitter will allow us to understand how professional athletes with a large platform are able to change the narrative. By looking at how people with a large following are able to change the narrative we will be able to get a better understanding of how social media activism fixed the wrong problem. I chose to leave out other social media platforms because they don't give the same opportunities for discussion as Twitter does.

Chapter 4: Analysis

“The National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA] is a member-led organization dedicated to the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes” (NCAA). The NCAA covers men’s and women’s sports and is overseen by Title IX, a federal civil rights law, which helps to ensure that both male and female athletes are treated equally if the activities are government funded. During the 2021 Women’s March Madness Tournament, hosted by the NCAA, publicly displayed the unfair treatment of female athletes compared to their male counterparts. The tournament is to provide workout facilities to male and female athletes during this month-long tournament. The women’s tournament facility had only received yoga mats and a single rack of dumbbells while the men’s facility consisted of dumbbells, free weights, barbells, benches, and treadmills. When these events unfolded, people from across the country wanted to let people know how they felt about the situation. That is when we began to see people turning to Twitter to publicly leave their opinions. The events that unfolded following the inequalities during the 2021 Women’s March Madness Tournament left a lot of questions unanswered surrounding women’s inequality in the NCAA. This analysis will help to assist my argument of Twitter being a place to fight the inequalities in the NCAA but for the 2021 Women’s March Madness Tournament it found a temporary solution to the long-standing problem of inequality being rooted in the NCAA.

First, we need to understand how gender plays a role in the NCAA. Female athletes got equality protection from Title IX. “Title IX protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance. Title IX states (US. Department of Education)”. This federal law is in place to ensure that all students in the United States education system are treated equally. However, the NCAA has found loopholes in the system that allow them to allocate more money to men’s athletic programs. During the 2021 Women’s March Madness Tournament, it was the first time we saw the NCAA display such a high level of inequality. “None of this is accidental. The NCAA’s current organizational structure and operations depend on gender inequity. It’s a feature, not a bug, fully and deliberately baked into the enterprise of major American college sports” (Jackson). Putting more money into the men’s tournament allows the NCAA to promote it more

which will ultimately bring in more viewers which will end in higher profit. The NCAA is all about profit and choose to follow the guidelines of Title IX when they must.

Next, we need to transition to how the 2021 Women's March Madness Tournament caused an uproar of angry sports fans to give their opinions publicly on Twitter. Twitter users from across the United States began leaving their opinion on the weight room controversy. A viral video on TikTok was posted to Twitter which generated over half a million likes. People began to repost the video and side by side comparisons of the men's weight room versus the women's weight room began circulating the internet. We saw tweets coming from athletes with a large following such as Steph Curry (NBA), Sabrina Ionescu (WNBA), Ali Kershner (Stanford basketball), and many more people who have a large following on social media. After the tweets and commentary on Twitter, mainstream news media sites began to pick up the story and interview athletes. Following the storm of angry fans, the Vice President of women's basketball, Lynn Holzman, released a statement stating on Twitter:

@MarchMadnessWBB (NCAA March Madness) "We acknowledge some of the amenities teams typically would have access to have not been available inside the controlled environment. In part, this is due to the limited space and the original plan was to expand the workout area once additional space was available later in the tournament. However, we want to be responsive to the needs of our participating teams, and we are actively working to enhance existing resources at practice courts, including additional weight room equipment". Directly after the statement was released, the women's tournament received a weight room with the equipment that they need to continue to compete at the division 1 level.

There was a lot of credit given to the Twitter users for creating a negative image for the NCAA during this time. Many people were thanking the people of Twitter for helping get the weight room that the women deserved. Yes, the users of Twitter who were constantly tweeting about the inequality played a huge role in getting the women a new and better weight room, but did they find a temporary solution to the long-standing problem of inequality in the NCAA? "Although traditional media outlets quickly converged on the advocacy taken by these players, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter offered fans and other audience members an outlet to also

engage in discussions about this incident and to shape narratives surrounding it” (Sanderson, Frederick, Stock 302). It is important to understand that social media platforms such as Twitter offer fans, community members, collegiate and professional athletes to join in discussions together. This allows for people of different backgrounds and groups to come together and work for a change. This is exactly what we saw occurring during the 2021 Women’s March Madness Tournament. We can give credit to the Twitter users, but we will never know if the NCAA made changes to the weight room because of the tweets. Although they made the changes needed for the women in the tournament, did this fix the real issue of women’s inequality in sports? The answer is no, there were no real changes that were made in order to protect women in the NCAA. There is nothing keeping the NCAA doing this again and giving the women’s program the short end of the stick. The changes that were given to the women’s weight room were done for the NCAA to get their name out of the media for negative reasons. The deeper issue is with Title IX allowing organizations to continue to allow inequalities in women’s sports.

The sexism in sports is a deep-rooted issue that does not and cannot change overnight. “This work speaks to the multifaceted nature of an institution as large as sport, the persistence of sexism and male dominance, and the challenges entailed in making social change” (Cooky, LaVoi 43). The sexism and the male dominance of sports at the collegiate level allows for inequalities to occur in the NCAA, such as the 2021 tournament. Social media activism worked tirelessly to put an end to the inequality occurring during the tournament, but they did not change anything that allows for such inequality to happen. The dialogue that occurred on Twitter directed the narrative in the wrong direction. I argue that Twitter needed to be used as a way for people to call attention to Title IX and how it enabled inequalities in the NCAA to occur. However, the conversation on twitter turned away from that and looked at the NCAA and how Title IX should be fixing the situation. People think Title IX is the solution to the inequalities when it is the problem. The ways in which Title IX was written has allowed loopholes to occur for men’s sports to take advantage of.

Since we are talking about Twitter and whether the discussions that occurred during the 2021 Women’s March Madness Tournament made any real changes or not,

we will be looking at different tweets during that time. People from celebrities to professional athletes, the sports community and many more all worked together to fight the NCAA and the blatant disparities. @SportsCenter (Sports Center) tweeted out “Players and coaches, including Stanford's performance coach Ali Kershner, posted photos illustrating the differences in facilities”. This tweet was assisting Ali Kershner in bringing the weight room issue to a bigger stage. Sports Center currently has 39.9 million followers. The tweet was followed with side-by-side images of the men’s and women’s weight room. The tweet by Sports Center generated nearly 2,000 retweets and just over 7,500 likes. Since Sports Center has such a large following, this tweet gave space for many people of the sports and Twitter community to come together and discuss the weight room controversy.

Another tweet that is valuable in understanding how Twitter found a solution to the smaller problem of inequality rather than the root of it. The star basketball player who went viral for speaking about the equality issues stated on Twitter: @sedonaprince (Sedona Prince) “Let me put it on Twitter too cause this needs the attention [TikTok video in Tweet]”. The video that Oregon women’s basketball player, Sedona Prince, posted to Twitter, TikTok and Instagram took the internet by storm. This video is credited for generating conversations and had people questioning the NCAA. In the Twitter thread under Prince’s tweet many people were in support of the women’s teams and were fighting for change to occur. However, not everybody felt that way, many people were fighting back and bringing up the idea of revenue. Since the March Madness tournament is not funded with government assistance, the tournament is not enforced by the laws of Title IX. So, for many people this is seen in the way of the women’s tournament bringing in less money than the men’s tournament. This is the initial video that was posted to Twitter that began all the talk about inequality among the women competing in the tournament. The only issue with this is when Sedona stated, “If you aren't upset about this problem, then you're part of it” (Prince) at the end of the video. This is an issue because this issue does not come down to being the fault of someone but rather the fault of Title IX. Prince is attempting to place partial blame on people who are not upset about the inequalities during the tournament, but it doesn’t come down to a single person's fault. If we think about it, since people are working to

change the NCAA and not Title IX, they could also be a part of the problem. By placing blame elsewhere, she is removing the problem away from Title IX and placing the blame on people who had nothing to do with the weight room. The real problem lies with Title IX, which is not being called out for the inequalities that it allows. In the video Prince talks about the NCAA releasing statements about not having enough space for a workout facility, and Prince shows space that is available. The issue with this is that she is not recognizing that the NCAA is an organization that wants to make money and if Title IX is not going to legally force them to be equal, they won't do it. People can be upset about the issue, but they need to work to change Title IX, which allows the NCAA to continue to mistreat female athletes.

The narrative began to change when people started blaming the NCAA for the weight room inequalities. While yes the NCAA can take some blame but we need to be looking at how Title IX allows for the inequalities to occur. The tweets are preventing us from doing the actual work that needs done. Professional athletes are using their platforms to call out the NCAA and influencing other people to do so as well. Since Title IX only covers government funded activities, March Madness does not fall into the category so the NCAA can continue to use their money however they'd like. Although the NCAA should be looking to treat both the men's and women's tournaments fairly, it is Title IX that ultimately allows them to give the women significantly less than the men. The next tweet that was noticed by a large number of people was Natasha Cloud's. Natasha is a professional women's basketball player and has a large following on different social media platforms. @T_Cloud4 (Natasha Cloud) "Don't worry @ncaawbb @marchmadness @NCAA we see what and who yall value. Title 9". This tweet stood out to me and many others who found themselves scrolling through Twitter during the 2021 Women's March Madness Tournament because this professional female basketball player, Natasha Cloud, called attention to the NCAA and linked the inequalities back to Title IX. This link was seen through Cloud calling attention to Title IX, but for the wrong reasons. She is stating this in a way for the NCAA to realize that they are failing to acknowledge Title IX. This was seen in a specific way in her tweet. This is through her addressing who the NCAA values. Since they are discriminating against the women, they don't value them as much as the men's players. An issue with

Cloud calling out the wrong inequalities caused people who follow and look up to her to begin to fight against the NCAA rather than Title IX. What Cloud is calling attention to is causing people to not see the issue in the longstanding inequalities of Title IX. Although many people are seeing it this way, they are failing to recognize that the inequalities are occurring because of Title IX. Title IX does not protect women's sports when it comes to tournaments because they are not government funded. In the thread of Natasha Cloud's tweet, it seemed to have more people calling attention to the disparities through Title IX. People were backing up the women's tournament and discussed Title IX and how it is failing women's sports. One example of this is from @isaacfromFL (Isaac) "Because the men had a 40 year head start, women's basketball over the past decade has seen huge gains in attendance, ratings, 50 years after Title XI this crap should still not be an issue". This tweet is an issue because, like many others they are bringing up Title IX but failing to recognize that this is only happening because of it. Isaac's tweet is bringing up the idea that since Title IX has been around for 50 years that's this shouldn't be happening. This level of inequality will continue to happen until there are changes made to Title IX. Many people began calling out and tagging the NCAA in the post so they could see what they have done. Although this seemed promising to call out Title IX in a tweet, it didn't change any of the foundational issues to Title IX. All the tweet did was educate the people that were unaware of the situation of the inequalities during the women's March Madness Tournament and help pressure the NCAA into creating a new weight room for the women.

Another tweet that calls attention to Title IX is @JaworskiForTX (Joe Jaworski) "Yeah, I got a problem with this. Talented women and their families put as much time into their college athletics as men do. What's the cost of a first-class weight room? Affordable under the circumstances, I assure you. Oh, and then there's Title IX. The Law requires equality". This is important to see because it is another person calling out the NCAA but not understanding that Title IX is the root of the problem. This tweet is harmful because the author is stating that the law of Title IX requires equality, which is true but not entirely. It comes down to the lack of knowledge on the Title IX law, if people don't know what the law protects and when it protects, people will continue to fight for the wrong thing. The NCAA is not required to follow the laws of Title IX because

they are their own organization without federal assistance, therefore they do not need to be treating everyone fairly. People are expecting Title IX to be the solution to the inequality, but legally it can't change anything the NCAA does. This is because of the loopholes in Title IX that continue to allow the mistreatment of female athletes even 50 years after its creation.

During the time of the Twitter activism there were pictures of the two weight rooms surfacing. This is how people were able to see just how bad it was for the female athletes. By posting these pictures, people began to make the issue about just the weight room rather than how Title IX is the overall issue that allows the inequalities to occur. Another tweet that was noticed by thousands of people was by Sabrina Ionescu. Sabrina is a professional women's basketball player, currently playing in the WNBA. She was a success coming out of the Oregon women's basketball team. @sabrina_i20 (Sabrina Ionescu) "Women's @NCAA bubble weight room vs Men's weight room... thought this was a joke. WTF is this?!? To all the women playing in the @marchmadness tournament, keep grinding!". This tweet may be important but like many others, it doesn't look to change the foundational issues of the inequality in the NCAA that is allowed to occur because of Title IX. The tweet assisted in getting the new weight room but didn't do anything to help prevent an inequality like this from happening again. However, to push the NCAA to do better she tagged them in her post. She encouraged the women playing in the tournament to keep moving forward and to keep working hard despite the NCAA being against them. People were encouraged to join the conversation on Twitter under her post. In the thread, there were many people learning about the weight room issue and people were educating each other about Title IX. Attached to this tweet was a cropped picture of the men's weight room next to a picture of the women's weight room. This was useful in this tweet because it gave a representation of what is occurring if people didn't already know. The weight room pictures side by side puts it into perspective of just how big the inequality is. This was able to assist in putting to rest the idea of the inequality happening because of the revenue difference. Women's sports do bring in less money than men's sports, but women do generate enough money to get a weight room that is more than yoga mats and dumbbells. By tweeting pictures, it is able to give people an image of what is

occurring, but it changes the narrative to being solely about the weight room. People are worried about the women deserving more and that they are athletes who work out and need a better weight room. Which yes, that is all true, but the real issue is not just the weight room, it is Title IX. Title IX continues to allow the disparities to occur which is what the conversation needs to be about.

One way in which public conversations on Twitter about the weight room was twisted into the wrong idea was when people began telling Stephen Curry, an NBA point guard, that he should pay for the weight room equipment. An issue with people expecting Stephen Curry to pay for the weight room is because we begin to lose sight of the inequalities and make it all about the weight room. It becomes less about fixing the overall problem, but rather about fixing the weight room. By having Steph Curry pay for the weight room, it takes blame away from Title IX and the NCAA because if Steph bought it, nothing would be changed. It is not up to celebrities to fix the inequalities caused by Title IX and the NCAA. If Curry was to pay for the equipment it would be beneficial to the NCAA because they would no longer be held responsible for the disparities. They would then be able to do something like this time and time again if celebrities or professional athletes were there to bail them out. Also, the NCAA and Title IX would no longer be the focus. People would become more focused on Curry and how he was the reason women got the equipment they deserve. Title IX and the NCAA would no longer be held accountable. When Stephen Curry made this statement via Twitter, he was broader about it and called out the NCAA for the disparities.

@StephenCurry30 (Stephen Curry) “wow-come on now! @NCAA yall trippin trippin!”. Although, it seems like a great thing an NBA player is doing by calling out the NCAA, but what is the outcome anyone was expecting? Under this tweet it started a large conversation about Stephen Curry himself rather than the issue of the weight room. Many people told him to pay for the equipment or how it was great that a superstar male athlete was speaking up. An example of people telling Curry to pay for the weight room himself is from @GoneIn59Seconds (TheOnePercent) “hey don’t you have a couple million in the bank big baller??? Outfit that weight room for them ‘mr. all talk no action’ or better yet ‘mr. i got a couple hundred mil BUT i’ll tweet about it!’ ... cmon would cost \$200k max, wtf you wait” on??”. This is just one example where we can see people

expecting a male athlete to fix the problem that was created by Title IX and the NCAA. This is bad to think this way because it doesn't look to have the big organization, the NCAA, and Title IX to be held accountable. The conversation was immediately turned away from the women's weight room and began looking at Steph Curry. This was a pattern seen throughout tweets from other athletes. Narratives begin to switch when fans of the athlete begin commenting on the professional. While it may seem like a great idea for athletes to use their platform, you need to consider if it will help the conversation and fight for change or will it change the narrative to the athlete who tweeted.

Having celebrities and professional athletes speak out can be a good thing, but it can also be detrimental to the situation. Fans can flip the narrative away from the controversy and make it about the NBA players. Stephen Curry wasn't the only NBA player to speak out about the women's weight room. Another NBA player, Andre Drummond decided to use his platform to speak out as well. @AndreDrummond (Andre Drummond) "Unacceptable @NCAA @marchmadness ! Ladies you deserve so much better Smh". Seeing NBA players standing up for female collegiate athletes is a great push for women's sports, but are people hearing what these NBA players have to say? Drummond mentions are filled with comments about him as an NBA player and very few are pertaining to the 2021 Women's March Madness Tournament. This is going back to the idea of NBA players speaking out, but people flip the narrative to be about that specific player. This takes away the spotlight from Title IX, the tournament, and the NCAA. One fan wrote under Drummond's tweet @SilaMa60681509 (Silas Marner) "Come home Andre #Nets". Many other tweets were just like this one, telling Andre Drummond to come play for their favorite NBA team. It took the narrative away from the weight room inequalities and began to shine a light on Andre Drummond.

Among the tweets that were in the conversation thread for the wrong reasons because they were choosing to respond to the wrong people on Twitter. Dick's Sporting Goods replied to Stephen Curry's tweet. @DICKS (Dick's Sporting Good's) "Our teammates have trucks of fitness equipment ready to go for the @ncaawbb @marchmadness bubble to help these incredible women's players! @NCAA Lets get this done!". This stood out because it was one of the very few tweets by almost anyone

that was discussing the weight room. Not only is it one of the only tweets under Stephen Curry's initial tweet, it stood out to me that Dick's Sporting Goods decided to make that announcement under the tweet of a professional men's basketball player rather than a female who is participating in the tournament. This is surprising because it seems that Dick Sporting Goods is attempting to appeal to the male professional athletes, not the women that this is affecting. In fact, it says a lot about Dick's Sporting Goods deciding to make this tweet on a male professional athlete's Twitter account rather than a woman. This is telling us that when issues occur, we should be looking to male athletes to fix women's inequalities in sports. Along with people telling Stephen Curry to pay for the equipment and Dick's Sporting Goods choosing to make that statement on Steph's post it begins to seem like people think that it is a man's job to fix the disparities that the women are facing. This is one way in which it was more harmful for a professional athlete to get involved because people began looking to them to give updates, rather than the women's teams participating in the women's March Madness tournament.

Twitter was a big space on social media where people could interact and educate each other on the inequalities that occurred during the 2021 Women's March Madness Tournament. However, we were able to see social media activism work to get the women the weight room they deserve. This was a step in the right direction for women's sports. This burst of social media activism found a way to create a temporary solution to a bigger problem. The weight room controversy was just one small part in women's inequality in the NCAA. The bigger issue is the deep-rooted inequality that is allowed to occur due to Title IX. Following social media activism, there is nothing in place that can prevent this from happening to women's sports again. There were changes being made but those changes of getting the weight room was done to get the Women's March Madness Tournament out of the news for such a negative event. Since the weight room controversy during the 2021 Tournament, we haven't heard people talking about it nearly as much. Especially during the 2022 March Madness Tournament, they recognized the 50th anniversary of Title IX. Covering up the issue was the best solution for the NCAA and spending a little more money on the tournament to prevent them from creating a bad reputation for the organization.

The people who worked tirelessly on Twitter did not make any real changes and that is why I argue that the social media activism during the 2021 Women's March Madness Tournament did not make any real changes. The weight room was a step in the right direction, but the real issue is Title IX. People were calling attention to the NCAA but not Title IX. People were seeing Title IX as the solution to the problem when it is actually the problem itself. Professional athletes with a social media following did more harm than good. People were flipping the narrative to being about the professional athlete themselves, not the inequality of the women's tournament. The photos that were circulating were not being used to draw attention to Title IX but rather to show everyone what was happening. This was harmful because the narrative became about the weight room and only that, people just wanted the women to receive a better facility they didn't care about how they got it. The people who did bring up Title IX were calling out the NCAA for ignoring the laws set in place by it. They don't understand that the disparities are occurring because of Title IX. The real changes that need to be made are to Title IX to prevent this level of inequality from occurring again.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The 2021 Women's March Madness Tournament is something that many people will remember for years to come by many people. However, although there was a solution to the problem of women needing a new and improved weight room, there were no changes made at the level of Title IX. From analyzing different tweets on Twitter, it became clear that the people who were fighting for the inequalities of women's basketball were going about it the wrong way. The people on Twitter were attempting to make a change with the NCAA but not focusing on Title IX, which is allowing these inequalities to occur for over 50 years. This was done through celebrities and professional athletes changing the narratives, intentionally or unintentionally. This was seen through either the athlete or celebrity calling out the NCAA instead of the foundational issues that allows for the mistreatment of athletes, Title IX. Another reason no real change was able to occur was through the posting of the images of the male and female weight rooms. This is because it only allowed for people to see the inequality and didn't look to make any changes. It was only used for comparison reasons. This research is important because it is looking into how we can continue to push college athletics to begin treating female athletes better. Although, this does come down to the NCAA not being fair towards female athletes and change needs to be made there, but the real change needs to occur with Title IX to ensure that this level of inequality will never occur again.

This research will help us understand what type of work that needs to be done and remind us that we need to be looking at Title IX and why it continues to allow inequalities to occur 50 years after the law had been passed. If we push hard enough for a change to Title IX the NCAA may potentially have no choice but to be fair and equal with all of their student athletes.

If this research were to continue, I would investigate more into inequalities that occurred in the past. This would be useful to see if there was ever an inequality occurring in the NCAA that got as much attention as the 2021 Women's March Madness Tournament. Also, I would investigate how the issue of those inequalities were solved. This would help to find new ways to push for a solution to Title IX continuing to allow inequalities to student athletes. This would be able to link back to my research to

see what the most effective way of making change to Title IX and the NCAA is. Some limitations of this kind of research would be figuring out why the NCAA decided to make changes. The NCAA would never come out and say they made changes because they were in hot water with sports fans on social media platforms. They would never admit to that because they want everyone to think that they made changes because it was the right thing to do and because the organization wanted those changes to occur. So, by pushing the NCAA changes can be made but we may never know why they actually decide to make those changes.

This research is important to the study of communications because it allows us to see how effectively social media platforms can be used as a medium for people to converse about inequalities in the NCAA. Not only, can social media work to make organizational changes, but with time and the right type of activism there can be changes made to the institutional levels. Eliminating inequalities from the root of where it stems from will move female sports closer to equality.

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