Race, Hegemonic Masculinity, and the “Linpossible!”: An Analysis of Media Representations of Jeremy Lin

Michael K. Park

Abstract
In February 2012, Jeremy Lin, the first American of Taiwanese and Chinese descent to play in the National Basketball Association (NBA), led the Knicks to seven straight victories while establishing an NBA scoring record. This study analyzes how U.S. mass media contextualized Lin’s meteoric rise in the NBA and explores assumptions grounded in the media coverage of Lin, including how race and masculinity are defined within a dominant ideological field and how notions of a hegemonic masculinity define the “other.” This article looks at mass media as a site of complicity for the construction and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity by examining media representations and sports media columnists’ coverage of Jeremy Lin’s meteoric rise in the NBA from February 5 to March 15, 2012. Critical discourse analysis reveals that the majority of mainstream news media outlets did not overtly racialize Lin’s meteoric rise to stardom. However, the research uncovered several instances of racialized coverage and the incorporation of emasculation discourse to reinforce and police hegemonic notions of masculinity. Furthermore, the intense “media mania” referred to as “Linsanity” operated to preserve the dominant discourse of...

1 Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Michael K. Park, USC ASC, 3502 Watt Way G6, Los Angeles, California 90089, USA.
Email: parkmk@usc.edu
masculinity by confirming the “low expectations” inscribed in Asian male bodies, making Lin’s success “miracular” and “warranting” intense media attention.

Keywords
masculinity, race, mass media, hegemony, Asian American

In early February 2012, the viral cultural phenomenon that became known as “Linsanity” was born when an undrafted, Harvard-educated bench player named Jeremy Lin, who was previously cut twice by National Basketball Association (NBA) teams, led a lowly New York Knick team to seven straight victories. Lin scored 136 points (including 38 against the Kobe Bryant-led Los Angeles Lakers) in his first five starts; establishing an NBA scoring record (“Jeremy Lin’s Starting Points,” 2012). Worldwide media attention ensued, along with the Lin-inspired puns that flooded popular culture for the next several weeks. During the first week of “Linsanity,” a Google search returned more than 2.1 million search results in over 6,700 news sources (Lariviere, 2012). Citing the social analytics site Topsy, a Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) journalist uncovered that “Jeremy Lin” had been mentioned 146,000 times, “Lin” 530,000 times, and “Linsanity” 42,000 times in the first 2 weeks of February (Ngak, 2012). For several weeks in February 2012, it appeared that the entire country was swept-up in Lin’s game-winning heroics. Even President Obama, a longtime basketball fan, publicly revealed that he was on the “Jeremy Lin bandwagon” (Zakarin, 2013).

As the first American of Taiwanese and Chinese descent to play in the NBA, Lin’s stardom was a watershed moment particularly for Asian Americans who have not witnessed such an Asian American–inspired cultural frenzy since Bruce Lee stormed the American cultural consciousness in the 1970s. Interestingly, Jeremy Lin’s meteoric rise to stardom parallels Bruce Lee’s journey to international acclaim. Lee was initially rejected for lead roles in American mainstream television and film before being vigorously courted by Hollywood after “proving” his star power with box office hits produced abroad. As Jachinson Chan (2000) notes, “Bruce Lee’s rejection by cultural producers in America marginalized not only Lee’s identity as a Chinese American but his representation of masculinity as well.” Similarly, Lin faced rejection on several levels during his journey to NBA stardom. He was named California high school player of the year but disregarded by major college programs, and after a stellar college career, was passed over in the draft. A few days from being released by the New York Knicks, Lin got his “shot” and captivated the world with his record-setting performances. After the conclusion of the 2011–2012 NBA season, Lin went on to sign (what seemed improbable just months earlier) a 3-year contract with the Houston Rockets for US$25.1 million (Roth & Martin, 2012).

Although Wat Misaka—an Asian American and the first non-Caucasian to play in the NBA—briefly played for the Knicks in 1947, the media’s coverage of Lin’s
stardom engendered a transcendent moment in American sports history. Never before did an Asian American player captivate the American public with the fervor and magnitude that “Linsanity” produced. Although there are no longer blatant discriminatory practices that prevented Jackie Robinson and Kenny Washington from playing in Major League Baseball and the National Football League (NFL) respectively, racial stereotypes still permeate society and Lin’s success has challenged the narrative that Asian American men are unable to excel in a physical sport like basketball. Unlike the tired media images of Asian American men as comical foreigners or unathletic and meek types that fill popular culture, audiences witnessed an Asian American male aggressively slashing through lanes, dunking, and outplaying some of the league’s elite athletes. Sports writers highlighted Lin’s improbable road to NBA stardom, but several media outlets also contextualized his success within the parameters of a hegemonic discourse.

While there have been Asian American sport stars in the past, such as tennis champ Michael Chang, and several high-profile figure skaters, team sports such as basketball and football personify and reproduce hegemonic masculinity while individual sports—tennis, figure skating—often reproduce a more subordinated masculinity (Griffin, 1998). Although previous research has analyzed how American sports media have valorized and reinforced heterosexism, hegemonic masculinity, and homophobia in team sports, research on how sports media contextualize and reinforce stereotypes and a subordinated and racialized masculinity with regard to Asian Americans has been relatively absent. This article contributes to existing sports communication research by analyzing media representations of Lin’s meteoric rise in the NBA in order to understand how such representations reinforce or challenge the dominant narratives on Asian American masculinity and race. Media coverage of Asian Americans in professional sports is especially important because so few Asian Americans consistently receive media attention as newsmakers.

Moreover, this article explores assumptions grounded in the media coverage of Lin, including how race and masculinity is defined within a dominant ideological field and how notions of a hegemonic masculinity define the “other.” Here, race and gender are viewed as social mappings that affect the construction of a racialized masculinity and demarcate differences between hegemonic and subordinated masculinity. I draw on Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity, where one dominant form of masculinity maintains its dominance over others masculinities deemed subordinate. While numerous studies of media portrayals of Asian American masculinity have highlighted the marginalization of Asian American men in film and television, I examine the extent to which sports media writers use emasculation discourse to legitimize and maintain the virility of hegemonic masculinity. As Stuart Hall (1996) points out, “identities are constructed within, not outside discourse” and sports media inscribe both implicit and explicit ideologies in its coverage of sports. In particular, I look to the sports media as a site of complicity and collusion for the construction and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity by examining media
Asian American Masculinity and Stereotypical Representations

Masculinity is an ideal that members of a society strive for, as opposed to a realized actuality. As MacKinnon notes, “men’s experience must always fall short. Masculinity is just out of reach. It becomes ideological, a goal to strive towards, but not ultimately attainable” (2003, p. 7). French philosopher Michel Foucault (1978) provides an analytical framework in unpacking the construction of gender and sexuality through discourse, whereby social norms are constructed by the way that they can be spoken of or conceptualized in language; discourse defines the boundaries of “normalcy.” Masculinity, like gender and sexuality, is also configured in discourse that defines “what it is to be a man.”

The relationship between race and masculinity has always been one vested with popularized stereotypes that categorize those who constitute “masculine” (e.g., White and heterosexual) versus “feminine” or the emasculated (e.g., Asian and gay). Stereotypes involve representational practices that classify and categorize members of another group, reducing those members to simplified and exaggerated characteristics, which are then communicated as fixed by nature (Dates & Barlow, Hall, 1997). For example, Zhang (2010) contends that the “nerd” and the “forever foreigner” are two of the most prominent stereotypes of Asian Americans. The “forever foreigner” stereotype holds Asian Americans to be foreign regardless of their fluency in the English language or their self-identification as Americans (Kurylo, 2012). Moreover, the “nerd” stereotype holds Asian Americans as intelligent and technologically talented, but clumsy and lacking social and communication skills (Zhang, 2010). The stereotype that Asian Americans possess great mathematical aptitude is so prevalent in society that it is used as a manipulation device in research studies of stereotypes (Smith & White, 2002).
The current state of Asian American masculinity has been largely shaped by racialized immigration and labor policies (Park, 2013) and media images (Hammamoto, 1994; Lee, 1999; Ono & Pham, 2009). The recruitment of Asian male laborers as a source of cheap labor during the mid-1800s led to xenophobic sentiments of Asians as the “Yellow Peril”—the fear that Asians would overpower Whites—which resulted in an atmosphere of hostility against Asians. The anti-Asian sentiments ultimately led to race-based exclusionary laws and gendered immigration practices that allowed entry for a sizable numbers of Asian male laborers but restricted entrance of Asian females, resulting in disproportionate sex ratios. Further policing Asian masculinity was the enforcement of anti-miscegenation laws that prevented Asian laborers from marrying White women. Moreover, many Asian American men performed work in “gendered positions” that included work as domestic servants and launderers (Park, 2013). Early media images from late 19th to early 20th century also depicted Asians as inferior races, depraved heathens, and Yellow Peril invaders (Lee, 1999; Ono & Pham, 2009).

Another popular stereotype of Asian American men involves the model minority myth, defined as “the belief that Asian Americans, through their hard work, intelligence, and emphasis on education and achievement, have been successful in American society” (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006). The model minority myth is founded on sexist and heterosexist notions that Asian American families instill “proper” values with an economically responsible father as head of the household (Chua & Fujino, 1999). This myth perpetuates stereotypes that Asian Americans love technology (Paek & Shah, 2003) and have narrow interests limited to academics (Ono & Pham, 2009). One study on perceived attributions of “good managers” indicated that assessors attached the term “nerd” to Asian American men (Cheng, 1996). Coupled with other model minority traits such as “shy” and “passive,” “nerd” signifies a weak and feminine masculinity (Cheng, 1996).

Like homosexuality, the Asian American male body has come to represent the abandonment of “authentic masculinity.” While Asian American men are attributed with the inability to exude masculinity and are categorized as socially “undesirable,” Asian American female bodies, on the other hand, have been socially constructed as exotic, ultrafeminine, and sexually available (Fong-Torres, 1995). Not coincidentally, there has been a rise in Asian American female roles in film and television (not to mention the conspicuous proliferation of Asian American female broadcasters), yet Asian American men are conspicuously absent or typecast or relegated to stereotypical roles. Popular cultural representations in film and television only confirm the emasculated construction of the Asian American male. Take, for example, the character of Han Lee, the Asian American male cast member of the CBS television series 2 Broke Girls. Han Lee is the Korean American manager of the dive diner where the two main female characters work. Han’s broken English is often mocked on the show, and his character personifies the most regressive of Asian stereotypes: “short, geeky, and non-sexual” (Goodman, 2011, p. 7). Moreover, the second installment of the popular Hollywood comedy franchise, The
Hangover, reinforces the emasculated image of the Asian American male with the character of Mr. Chow, who, as one critic notes, is the butt of the most cliché of penis jokes: “His naked man-handle is mistaken for a Shiitake mushroom” (Yang, 2011, p. 5). Author Frank Chin (1972, p. 68) notes that mainstream stereotypes depict Asian American men as “completely devoid of manhood” and “our nobility is that of an efficient housewife.” Regrettably, these media representations of the asexual and geeky nerd continue to appear in contemporary media representations. The cultural emasculation of the Asian American male also engenders internalized notions of inferiority and distress. Research shows that Whites viewed themselves as more attractive than U.S.-born Asian American men, followed by immigrant Asian men (Chua & Fujino, 1999). As Lu and Wong point out, given stereotyped media portrayals as passive, weak, and lacking hegemonic masculine norms, Asian American men receive minimal positive body imagery (2013). Unfortunately, this historical and cultural context has situated Asian American men against lingering racial stereotypes and elusive hegemonic norms.

**Hegemonic Masculinity and American Sports Culture**

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) contend that hegemonic masculinity is a concept that refers to a dominant masculinity that has been idealized in U.S. culture. Hegemonic masculinity also provides a mechanism by which men dominate others through privileged positions (Connell, 1995). This idealized notion of masculinity becomes hegemonic when it becomes widely accepted in a culture, and that acceptance then reinforces the dominant ideology of the culture (Connell, 1990). With regard to masculinity, MacKinnon (2003, p. 9) points out that “certain assumptions become popularized as common sense.” This often involves persuasion through cultural processes such as religious doctrine, legal discourse, and by the consumption of mass media content. These social institutions mold hegemonies of various forms in popular culture. “Common sense” within a culture is formed, above all, by “television, film, advertising, and sport as relayed to and received by huge audiences” (MacKinnon, 2003, pp. 9–10). The concept of hegemonic masculinity has aided researchers in uncovering the diversity and selectiveness of media images, as well as mapping representations of different masculinities (Hanke, 1992).

Hegemonic masculinity is also a racialized masculinity. It embodies the most honored way of “being masculine” and it requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Moreover, gender relations between men reflect a hierarchy of intragender relations and masculinities (Connell, 2001). According to Connell (2001), in order for hegemonic masculinity to maintain its cultural dominance, it must incorporate boundaries that contrast out-groups or subordinate masculinities. Subordinate masculinities, including effeminate heterosexual men, working-class men, and homosexual men bolster hegemonic masculinity as devalued categories that contrast hegemonic ideals (Connell, 1990). Compared to White or Black men, Asian American men are uniquely subordinated...
within the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity (Chen, 1999). As an out-group stripped of hegemonic ideals of masculinity, Asian-American men have historically been viewed as effeminate, asexual, and passive. Asian-American men are therefore branded with the inability to exude hegemonic masculinity. For this article, I include Asian-American males in the category of a subordinated masculinity that is situated in contrast to hegemonic masculine norms.

Messner (1992) points out that organized sports are an important social institution that inscribes masculinity. Organized team sports emerged at the turn of the 20th century as a means for symbolically reaffirming male physical superiority over women and subordinate men (Crosset, 1990). Kimmel (1994) holds that the intersection of hegemonic masculinity and the public sphere is the “marketplace masculinity” exemplified in platforms such as sports and the military. Particular types of sports can be labeled “hypermasculine” because they are integral to the construction and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. Team sports that involve direct physical contact (e.g., boxing, football, and basketball) have embodied the most dominant form of masculinity, while individual sports that emphasize grace (e.g., figure skating, tennis, and gymnastics) have been associated with femininity (Kane, 1988). High-contact and physically punishing sports such as football and basketball are therefore integral to defining a hypermasculine discourse of “how to be a man” (Wachs & Dworkin, 1997). Moreover, high-profile professional athletes may embody all that is valued in current cultural conceptions of hegemonic masculinity—”physical strength, commercial success, supposed heterosexual virility” (Messner, 1989, p. 85). Messner points out that analysis of sports should not be limited merely to the notion that it is a patriarchal institution affirming men’s power over women; the rise of sports in the last 150 years has had as much to do with the intersection of class and race as it does with gender. A variety of subordinated masculinities have been created by social factors that include ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and age (MacKinnon, 2003). Jack Johnson’s domination of professional pugilism (along with his consorting of White women) in the early 20th century led sports writers to proclaim that Johnson had “demonstrated that his race has acquired full stature as men” (Messner, 1992, p. 12). It is through sports mediation that such labels and constructions of “what it means to be a man” are promulgated and reinforced. One of the most powerful institutions for maintaining hegemonic masculinity in the United States has been sports media, and its representations of men and sport.

The popularity and importance of sport and its mediation are beyond reproach. As Sabo and Jansen (1992) point out, more print is devoted to sports in the United States than to national and international news. According to the Wall Street Journal, America’s most expensive cable television channel is the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN; Gara, 2012). ESPN is also the only cable channel ever to have more than 20 million households watching a regularly scheduled program—a feat it has accomplished several times (Sherman, 2011). However, mediated sport offers more than just entertainment spectacle; it has social and political relevance,
and as MacKinnon (2003) aptly points out, its “‘innocent’ absorption of masculine values in the time-out area of spectator sports has a peculiar significance, one that makes it a worthwhile research field” (p. 103).

Sports media is an integral component of not only promulgating patriarchal (and Protestant) values in its coverage, but it is also integral in its construction and preservation of idealized notions of masculinity. Sports media play an integral communicative role in legitimizing these values (MacKinnon, 2003). Previous sports communication research shows that sports journalists are complicit in preserving hegemonic masculinity while failing to acknowledge their own role in its preservation (Burstyn, 1999). Trujillo’s (1991) analysis of newspaper coverage of Nolan Ryan revealed how media coverage valorizes athletes who play within the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, research shows how sports columnists, charged with the safekeeping of hegemonic masculinity, reinforce sexual norms and engage in “neo-homophobia” (Hardin, Kuehn, Jones, Genovese, & Balaji, 2009). Foucault (1979) points out that power is both repressive and constitutive and that power operates to not only constitute the available discourse but to also police deviant behaviors. Drawing from this premise, authors Wachs and Dworkin (1997) contend that sports media operate as a policing mechanism with regard to social hierarchies and that dominant sports media frames are one of the material effects of power. Mass media offers a social and cultural mapping of the world, to address “who we are” and “what we value.” Embedded in sports media coverage are ideological frameworks that bolster hegemonic masculinity, such as linking hegemonic masculinity to positive cultural values and depicting hegemonic masculinity as desirable, while others (e.g., gay and Asian) are assigned subordinate value. The institution of sports, and the media covering sports, forms an integral symbiotic relationship in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity values.

Carrington (1998) aptly points out the “racial signification of sport” whereby sports contests act as a key signifier for wider questions about identity within racially demarcated societies where racial narratives are read both into and from sporting contests that are injected with racial meanings. Sports media outlets often use racially coded language to inscribe masculine norms or police subordinated masculinities. Ferber (2007) points out the naturalization of racial difference in sports discourse, where Black athletes are often assumed to be “naturally more athletic.” Terms such as “freakish” or “physically gifted” are often imputed on Black athletic success, further bolstering the myth that Blacks are more naturally athletic. As Kobena Mercer (1994, pp. 178) notes, “The spectacle of black bodies triumphant in rituals of masculine competition reinforces the fixed idea that black men are ‘all brawn and no brains’.” The existence of racialized masculinities underscores how hegemonic masculinity is also a means for certain men to dominate other men and not simply men’s dominance over women. Additional areas of sport research that have garnered scholarly attention include how sport media texts contribute to the social construction of race, ethnicity, and nationality (Kassing et al., 2004), how athletes of various ethnic groups are comparably portrayed in the media (McCarthy,

Scholarship on Asian-Americans to sports communication has been limited and has only recently emerged. Ladies Professional Golf Association golfer Michelle Wie’s ethnicity and gender have been examined (Billings, Angelini, & Eastman, 2008), and the narrative characterizing figure skater Kristi Yamaguchi as “foreign” during the 1992 Winter Olympics has also been analyzed (Fabos, 2001). King (2006) examines anti-Asian American sentiment in sport through performative and dialogic techniques to uncover how jokes and joking behaviors binds Asian-Americans to sport in the popular imaginary. Moreover, “Linsanity” evokes the media spectacle surrounding Yao Ming’s entry into the NBA, but previous media scholarship on Yao has mostly focused on his flexible marketability in the global marketplace (Oates & Polumbaum, 2004; Wang, 2004). Lavelle (2011) analyzed linguistic representations of Yao in game commentary to analyze the extent to which such representations reproduce and reimagine Chinese cultural identity. These studies focus on Yao’s global marketability and linguistic representations as a Chinese national and global spokesperson for China. However, this article extends previous discussions of sports communication research by analyzing media representations of Lin’s meteoric rise in the NBA—as an Asian-American—in order to understand whether such representations reinforce or challenge the dominant narratives on race and masculinity.

**Research Methodology**

The research here explores mediated coverage of Jeremy Lin’s meteoric rise in the NBA, and how mass media, including sports columnists and journalists—opinion leaders in sports media—contextualize issues of race, masculinity, and sport. How would Jeremy Lin’s meteoric rise be situated by mass media in relation to race and masculinity? How would mainstream print media, as opposed to online sports network coverage, situate issues of race and masculinity as it relates to the cultural phenomenon of “Linsanity.” This research inquiry investigates the extent to which Jeremy Lin’s meteoric rise in the NBA was situated by a cultural industry that operates within defined hegemonic boundaries in connection with race and masculinity. In this article, race and gender are viewed as social mappings that affect the construction of a racialized masculinity and demarcate differences between hegemonic and subordinated masculinity. To examine the extent to which sports media’s coverage of Lin’s meteoric rise contextualizes race and masculinity, this article employs a critical discourse analysis.

Critical discourse analysis provides a mechanism to examine and interrogate the racial narratives conveyed within media outlets by looking at themes from a variety of texts. This method of analysis is utilized to decipher meanings within a text, to analyze sports media columns and coverage (Fairclough, 2003; Hardin et al., 2009; Paek & Shah, 2003). Sports media texts offer a fertile space to examine the way ideologies about sports, race, and masculinity are being maintained or
contested. Here, textual analysis is therefore integral to the research, as it aids in articulating “the denotative meanings and make explicit the latent meanings” of racial representation in sports media (Paek & Shah, 2003, p. 231). This method was used instead of quantitative content analysis in order to understand how terms are used to create meaning (Hardin et al., 2009). Rather than giving special attention to only written terms or words over the image, each of these dimensions in sports text was open to analysis. Using critical discourse analysis, the aim of this research was to understand the way media messages were constructed, considering word selection, use of puns, and narrative, in situating race and masculinity.

Over 200 news articles, columns, and blogs covering Jeremy Lin’s rise from February 5, 2012, to March 15, 2012, including both popular print and online sources from national media outlets and national online sports blog sites were collected and analyzed. February 5th marks the start of “Linsanity”—the day after Lin’s breakout performance against the Utah Jazz—where he scored the then career high 25 points and for the first time in his career, played more than 20 minutes in a game. March 15th is claimed by several sports writers as the end of “Linsanity” when the then New York Knick coach Mike D’Antoni resigned. This date also overlaps earlier dates (e.g., March 5) that are also claimed to be the “end of Linsanity.”

This project employed a LexisNexis database search for the terms “Jeremy Lin,” published in U.S. newspapers from February 5 to March 15, 2012. The LexisNexis database indexes articles from over 50 major English-language newspapers from the United States and around the world. The scope of the inquiry was narrowed to major U.S. newspapers, which produced 607 articles in publications that include The New York Times, USA Today, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post. Articles with headlines that referenced “Jeremy Lin,” “Lin,” or Lin-related puns (such as “Linsanity” “Lin-vincible” “Lin-sane”) were then examined to determine whether Lin is just mentioned without comment or a central focus of the article. After discarding articles that did not comment substantively on Lin’s athletic exploits or cultural significance, 137 articles were analyzed. The articles subjected to analysis included 31 articles from The New York Times; 23 from USA Today; 30 from The New York Daily News; 14 from The New York Post; 13 from The Los Angeles Times; 5 from The Wall Street Journal; 7 from Washington Post; 5 from Washington Times; 4 from The Philadelphia Inquirer; 4 from Christian Science Monitor, and 1 from Tampa Tribune.

A limited number of media representations beyond print sources were also evaluated to measure the depth and extent of Lin’s cultural significance with regard to issues of race and masculinity. These media representations beyond print sources were collected via Google Alert news feeds and Google searches. Google Alerts, starting from February 10, 2012 to March 15, 2012, were used to track news stories or blog posts that contained the query of “Jeremy Lin,” “Linsanity,” and “Asian American.” The Google Alerts was set up to provide links to web pages, online articles, and blogs with this query, and the volume was set at “only the best results” and alerts were sent once a day from February 10 to March 15. This news feed resulted in
approximately 5.45 article links a day, for a total of 185 articles. However, most of these links mentioned Lin without much comment (e.g., the content focused on the playoff race, or just mentioned Lin’s name as a reference point without further comment). After discarding articles that did not comment substantively on Lin or that overlapped with print articles collected from the LexisNexis database, 42 articles from online news and web sources, including sports new networks such as ESPN.com, SB Nation.com, Foxsports.com, and CBSSports.com were reviewed for more in-depth analysis.

Furthermore, the Google search engine was used to conduct an Internet query with the words “Jeremy Lin” and “Asian-American.” This inquiry was conducted in June 2012 and the search was limited by duration dates of February 5 to March 15 and produced 12,400 results. The results emerge in order of popularity. Google uses a special (and secret) algorithm called PageRank to generate search results based on how many other sites link to it. Therefore, an examination of the first four pages of hits was made, as these pages reflected the most popular links about the words in the search query. These links provided additional grounds to collect artifactual data and explore popular media representations of Lin that may have been overlooked or underreported by major news outlets or were not included in the LexisNexis database or Google Alerts feeds. However, since only the first four pages of hits were reviewed, the Google search query is admittedly limited in its scope.

**Media Analysis**

A majority of the articles and sports media blogs that covered “Linsanity” from February 5 to March 15, 2012, appeared to contextualize Lin’s rise as consistent with the American myth narrative of “succeeding against all odds” or the Horatio Alger-esque “rags-to-riches” story. Of the 137 print articles examined, 43 of the articles specifically described Lin as an “Asian American,” “Chinese American,” or “Taiwanese American.” However, Lin’s ethnicity is specifically mentioned in 37 of the 43 articles between February 5 and 19—at the start and height of “Linsanity.” This disproportionate result is likely a reflection of the “newsworthiness” or novelty factor of having someone of Lin’s ethnic background dominating the competition on the grand stage of the NBA. After 2 weeks of the “Linsanity” media mania, the public was more familiar with the fact that Lin is Asian-American and therefore, media outlets were arguably less likely to highlight his ethnic background.

Overall, this research found that a predominant number of articles and coverage in mainstream or national newspapers did not overtly racialize Lin’s meteoric rise or reinforce classical Asian-American male stereotypes. This was an especially positive finding considering the lack of balanced media representations for Asian-Americans in popular culture and the dearth of Asian-American athletes in the NBA and other popular professional sport leagues such as the NFL. The results here suggest that mainstream sports media have become more sensitive to issues of race and portrayals of athletes than in years past. However, this research also uncovered
several media artifacts with subtle (and not so subtle) underlying racist tropes in its coverage.

**Instances of Racialized Coverage**

While the majority of the media coverage documenting Jeremy Lin’s rise to stardom did not overtly racialize Lin’s success, several instances of racialized coverage appeared from national media outlets. The *New York Post’s* February 15 front-page headline declared Lin’s game-winning shot against the Toronto Raptors as “AMASIAN” (New York Post’s, 2012). By combining the words “Amazing” and “Asian” for its headline, the *New York Post* explicitly categorized Lin as the “other” and racialized his success; it is unfathomable to think that such a racialized headline would be used to describe the feats of Black or White players. Responding to the Post’s headline, Jon Stewart of Comedy Central noted that “[i]t would be like when Sandy Koufax threw a perfect game, you just wrote on there ‘JEWTIFUL’” (as cited in McCarthy, 2012a). Moreover, after the first Knicks loss with Jeremy Lin in the starting lineup, an online news page in ESPN.com ran a photo of Lin along with a headline that read, “Chink in the Armor” (as cited in Fry, 2012). Although it is plausible that this insensitive selection of words was just a “benign” editorial oversight, as one writer commenting on the headline notes, “[a]s anyone who has worked in digital media knows, the headline is what draws attention and hits...

Unlike an on-air comment, most writers and editors obsess over the headline even after they click the publish button” (McNeal, 2012, ¶ 4).

Further analysis of Lin’s media coverage uncovers how several opinion makers were unable to look beyond Lin’s ethnic background in defining and framing his sudden success. Stereotypes of Asian-Americans as the “perpetual foreigner” or aliens incapable of assimilation have historically been pervasive in American society and resurfaced with media coverage of Lin’s exploits. A February 21, 2012, *Wall Street Journal* article headline read “LINmigration Service,” and the article references Lin and the positive impact of U.S. immigration policy when it “welcomes talented people” (“LINmigration Service,” 2012). Writing for the February 2012 issue of *The Atlantic*, Robert Wright posits that Jeremy Lin’s athletic success may have much to do with the “perceptual tendencies” of his “East Asian” heritage; making Lin therefore, a better passer and teammate (i.e., unselfish) due to his “East Asian” background. Wright (2012) quoted a psychologist’s claim that Asians perceive reality more “holistically” than Westerners. In line with the model minority myth, the author’s comments also seem to evoke the long-held perception that the “Confucian work ethic” of Asians is responsible for their success. Even Lin’s own team media network couldn’t resist categorizing Lin as a “foreigner” or ethnic “other.” During a game at Madison Square Garden (MSG), the MSG television network aired a spectator-made poster depicting Lin’s face above a fortune cookie with the slogan “The Knicks Good Fortune” (McCarthy, 2012b). Ice cream maker Ben & Jerry’s, eager to capitalize on the Lin media frenzy, began selling a limited-edition
flavor in honor of Jeremy Lin (Boren, 2012a). The ice cream named “Taste the Lin-sanity” contained lychee honey and fortune cookies, in “honor” of Lin’s Asian heritage.

Racially insensitive coverage of Lin even prompted the Asian-American Journalists Association (AAJA) to issue advisory guidelines for media outlets on February 23, 2012, after several instances of “factual inaccuracies about Lin’s background” and “an alarming number of references” that rely on stereotypes of Asians surfaced (2012, ¶ 2). The racialized media coverage and the double standard practiced by the sports media with regard to race and representation were cleverly underscored and satirized by the comedy sketch show Saturday Night Live (SNL). The SNL skit, in the form of a sports panel commentary by “New York Sports Now,” addressed the overuse of Lin puns, and racially insensitive remarks by the sports media (Tucker, 2012). After one of the White panelists makes a reference to Kobe Bryant and “fried chicken,” the other panelists collectively chastise the White panelist for his reference to the outdated African American stereotype. In a twist of irony, the skit even runs footage of Jackie Robinson to honor “Black History Month,” while the narrator concludes how Robinson’s legacy has made the sports world “more tolerant.” While the panel tries to downplay the issue of race in connection with Lin’s success, the panelists then continue to contextualize Lin’s success in a racialized manner. As the SNL skit highlights, the mass media’s representations of Jeremy Lin and his success reveal a continued framing of the Asian-American athlete as “foreigner” and a racialized “other,” while such coverage rarely surfaces for Black or White athletes.

**Policing Masculinity**

According to the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) at the University of Central Florida, Black males made up 76.3% of all NBA players, while Asians accounted for 0.2% (“Report,” 2013). As a sport dominated by Black males, basketball is a unique cultural arena (with the NFL a close second) in that it is one of the few spaces in American society, where, as Todd Boyd notes, “blackness, and specifically black masculinity, is always at the center of the conversation, even when it’s not . . . Because black masculinity is the norm in the NBA, it goes without saying. Concurrently, any conversation about race in the NBA is inevitably refers back to this norm” (as cited in Leonard, 2012, ¶ 3). Several instances of mediated coverage of Lin revealed the reinforcement of a subordinated masculinity manifested through an emasculation discourse that situates Lin in contrast to hypermasculine norms. One sports writer for The Washington Post surmised that very few professionals noticed Lin’s athletic ability “because Lin does not seem like your regular NBA basketball player” (Bowen, 2012). The writer further concludes, “Lin is a good reminder to kids that just because you don’t look like a player doesn’t mean you can’t play” (Bowen, 2012). Here, the writer alludes to the idea that a “regular” basketball player is one who is Black or White, but certainly not someone who shares the physical attributes of an Asian-American male.
The emasculation discourse that followed Lin’s mediation further prompted the AAJA to advise media outlets to “[u]se caution when discussing Lin’s physical characteristics, particularly those that feminize/emasculate the Asian male” (2012, ¶ 6). However, the discourse of hegemonic masculinity was maintained and reinforced through several instances of the sports media’s use of racially coded language to contextualize Lin’s athletic success. Even before Lin became a national sensation with New York, one sports writer summed up Lin’s talents by describing him as “deceptively quick” (Megdal, 2011, ¶ 6). After “Linsanity” swept the nation by mid-February 2012, a sports writer for SB Nation similarly commented on Lin’s success and how he “showed a deceptively quick first step, the basketball IQ to know what to do in the pick-and-roll . . . ” (Schroeder 2012, ¶ 11). During an ESPN interview, Lin made specific reference to how sports writers often describe his play: “Oh, he’s quicker than he looks. And I’m like, ‘what does that mean? Do I look slow?’ Or people are always saying, ‘He’s deceptively quick, deceptively athletic.’ I don’t know if that’s just because I’m Asian or what it is” (“Jeremy Lin convo,” 2012).

Here, the narrative of Lin’s athletic ability has been contextualized behind the backdrop of a hegemonic masculinity that is associated with blackness and hypermasculinity. Lin has been contextualized as not embodying the traits of hegemonic masculinity; the discourse of masculinity has been both racialized and policed by the sports media with code words such as “deceptively quick” or “deceptively athletic.” By incorporating layers of racial stereotypes, Lin’s athletic ability and quickness is situated as “deceptive” because as an Asian-American male, he does not embody the stereotypical definition of what it means to be athletic, masculine, or to “look like a player.” Rather, racial stereotypes hold that Asian-American males are by nature slow, weak, and unathletic. By employing such code words to describe Lin’s abilities, dominant notions of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities are further reinforced.

Published comments by a Fox Sports’ columnist regarding Lin’s performance during an upset win against the Los Angeles Lakers further bolstered the emasculation discourse surrounding Lin’s mediation. After Lin’s 38-point performance against the L.A. Lakers, Jason Whitlock posted a thinly veiled reference to a racist stereotype about Asian male genitalia when he tweeted, “Some lucky lady in NYC is gonna feel a couple of inches of pain tonight” (“Jason Whitlock,” 2012, ¶ 2). In a league where Black masculinity is the norm and has been mediated as hypermasculine, Whitlock’s statements, while misogynistic, also reinforce the notion that Asian men are thus void of authentic masculinity, and are situated within a subordinated category. Male athletes are often valued for their multiple sexual “conquests” (of women) and this narrative is consistent with the definition of being a heterosexual man (Wachs & Dworkin, 1997). Whitlock’s comments, as part of an emasculation discourse, help solidify the linkage between that which is masculine (i.e., sexual “conquests” of women) and those who are subordinated or void of it (i.e., Asian).

On one hand, Whitlock’s statements reinforce one of the core values in the discourse of hegemonic masculinity: the ritual of celebrating a sport (or military)
victory with sexual conquests of women. Masculinity is also hegemonic when heterosexually defined, and sexual relationships, or “conquests” of women embody “what it means to be a man” (e.g., Wilt Chamberlain’s assertion that he had sexual relationships with 20,000 women has been well documented and celebrated in sports media). As Wachs and Dworkin (1997) point out, “the media protect heterosexual male promiscuity from censure” while other subordinated groups are often blamed and sanctioned. Whitlock’s comments reinforce hegemonic masculine values with regard to heterosexual conquests of women while reinforcing the notions of racialized masculine boundaries. If the symbolism of male sexuality is centered on the penis as the ultimate symbol of male potency, asserting that Lin is unable to embody such a cultural conception therefore operates to police and further legitimate notions of hegemonic masculinity.

**Media Mania and the “Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations”**

The media fanaticism that followed Jeremy Lin’s incredible run with the Knicks blazed like a comet for several weeks in February 2012; almost overnight, Lin and the cultural phenomenon of “Linsanity” gripped the nation. “Linsanity” immediately went viral, and within a week from the start of “Linsanity” a Google search returned more than 2.1 million search results in over 6,700 news sources (Lariviere, 2012). According to the social web index site Topsy, “Jeremy Lin” had been mentioned 146,000 times, “Lin” 530,000 times, and “Linsanity” 42,000 times in the first 2 weeks of February (Ngak, 2012). Moreover, Ngak (2012) points out that YouTube highlights of Lin’s 38-point game against the Los Angeles Lakers had over 1.6 million views, and the Nielsen rating for the network that aired Knicks games had a 130 percent growth in viewership. Deadpsin.com, which tracks how often an athlete or team is mentioned during ESPN’s SportCenter’s broadcast, revealed that Jeremy Lin’s name was used 350 times during the height of “Linsanity” (February 13–20); comparatively, Lebron James was mentioned “only” 70 times (Burns, 2012).

However, I argue that the extraordinary media attention that followed Lin’s performances was culturally invested with much more than the popular underdog narrative. Although the majority of mainstream media outlets did not overtly racialize Lin’s success, the intense media attention of Lin’s breakout performances in early February 2012 gave rise to a media mania that operates to preserve the dominant discourse of masculinity and reinforce how improbable, unique, and “miraculous” it is for an Asian-American male to be athletically talented at such an elite level. This media mania had as much to do with Lin’s ethnic background as it did with the contagious narrative of the underdog. Boxing champion Floyd Mayweather commented that the sports/media frenzy following Lin was due to his ethnicity: “Jeremy Lin is a good player but all the hype is because he’s Asian. Black players do what he does every night and don’t get the same praise” (Boren, 2012b, ¶ 3). While Mayweather’s comments may be perceived as racially insensitive, they are not completely unfounded within the context of race and the discourse of masculinity.
Although Lin’s story deeply resonated with fans as it directly tapped into several powerful American myths regarding the “Protestant work ethic,” social mobility, and his journey “against all odds,” the fact remains that Lin is currently the only Asian-American player in the NBA. The exhausting media coverage of Lin points to an episode of racial exceptionalism; the mass media’s “celebration” of an Asian-American male succeeding in a sport where they are not expected to.

Lin’s race was undoubtedly a significant factor as to why he garnered very little interest from collegiate basketball programs. Lin was Northern California player of the year, first team all-state and captained his high school team to a state championship victory over national powerhouse Mater Dei. No school, neither Stanford nor San Jose State, recruited his services. After a stellar college career at Harvard, Lin also went undrafted by the NBA. Like the college coaches who likely discounted Lin’s abilities, many NBA scouts and managers likely dismissed Lin’s athletic talents because Lin did not embody the hegemonic masculine ideals that NBA professionals harbored and accepted as “prototypical.” As Sports Illustrated columnist Phil Taylor pointed out, “I knew on some level that part of the reason Lin was so quickly dismissed was that NBA people had a hard time believing that an Asian American could play point guard in the NBA, which is why I’m kicking myself—I didn’t question the conventional wisdom even though it didn’t go along with what I saw with my own eyes” (2012, ¶ 4). If the “conventional wisdom” of hegemonic masculine norms situates Asian-American men in a subordinated masculinity and void of athleticism, then Lin’s race was most likely a crucial factor in his potential being “discounted” by college and professional coaches.

The media mania that ensued with Lin’s success operated to confirm and reinforce ideal notions of masculinity; the intense coverage by the mass media displayed what one former presidential speechwriter coined “the soft bigotry of low expectations” (Wertheimer, 2006). His success perplexed many sports media writers, and the intense coverage of Lin’s exploits by the sports media confirmed how deeply entrenched the norms of masculinity is situated. In other words, Lin succeeded well beyond the low expectations that his body is culturally inscribed with (i.e., passive, weak, and unathletic). Although the narratives of “hard work” and “perseverance in the face of adversity” factored into his cultural appeal, Lin was the “underdog of underdogs” precisely because of his ethnicity, and his ability to compete and succeed at the highest levels of athletic competition conflicted with the subordinated masculine norms that Asian-American men are situated within. Lin’s performances therefore went beyond the “low expectations” inscribed in Asian male bodies and morphed into a media mania; his performances undermined the expectation that Asian men are not athletically fit to compete in a hypermasculine space such as the NBA.

The cultural by-product of such suffocating media coverage is the reinforcement of the dominant masculinity discourse that defines subordinated masculine groups such as Asian-American men. Lin’s presence and success is heralded as “miraculous” and the intense coverage reminds the masses how “unique” or “special” Lin
is in overcoming the “limitations” of the Asian body to perform at an elite athletic level. It is a long-standing stereotype that Asian men are not physically equipped, or somehow physically disadvantaged to succeed in hypermasculine sports like basketball or football; so when someone like Lin scores 38 points against the Lakers and gets the win—the sports media must highlight this “aberration” as “magical” but also “unimaginable” (or dare I say “Linpossible”) within the discourse of masculinity.

Conclusion

As Messner (1992) points out, the rise of sports in the 20th century had much to with issues of class and race, as it did with gender. Sports provide a space where individuals can assert masculinity and engage in practices that shape as well as reinforce masculine norms. Drawing from the work of Foucault, Woodward (2011) notes “the categories that organize people in sport are not just the result of the sort of body they have, but also of the social and historical circumstances, which means that bodies are the effect and not the cause of the particular categories that are used.” The emasculation discourse that linked Lin and his athletic success is also grounded in historical and legal constructions of Asian men as “other” (Park, 2013). Like the institutions of law and politics, the mass media has been an integral cultural apparatus in shaping and reinforcing hegemonic masculine norms.

As an Asian-American in a sport that features few such players, Lin’s success in the NBA has on one hand, helped to upend racial preconceptions of Asian men as weak and unathletic. The media spectacle that followed Lin’s meteoric rise in one of the world’s most popular sports also highlighted and expanded the discourse on sports, race, and masculinity. Overall, this study showed that the majority of sports writers in mainstream print news outlets avoided describing Jeremy Lin’s success in racialized or stereotypical terms. This research did, however, locate several instances of racialized coverage in mainstream news articles, popular online sports network sites, blogs, and popular cultural artifacts, and the analysis showed that such media representations still operate within a dominant ideological field in the construction and maintenance of a racialized and hegemonic masculinity. While Jeremy Lin’s presence and stardom in the NBA has been linked to the dismantlement of several stereotypes of Asian-American men, the fanatical coverage of Lin’s meteoric rise, on the other hand, also underscored the regulatory practices by which subordinated masculine bodies are configured and policed.

This article explored the extent to which to mass media contextualized Jeremy Lin’s rise to stardom, and analyzed assumptions that may have been grounded in the media coverage, including how race and masculinity is defined within a dominant ideological field. On one hand, the results of the research suggest that mainstream media representations have become more sensitive to racialized portrayals of athletes, even for an Asian-American athlete in a league devoid of them. This is undoubtedly a positive finding, and an important step in the mediated coverage of
sports. However, this article also documented how intense sports media coverage—the likes of which the world witnessed with the media mania known as “Lin-sanity”—can also operate to reinforce dominant and hegemonic masculine norms through the lens of racial exceptionalism.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. Misaka played a total of three regular season games for the New York Knickers in 1947, scoring a total of 7 points (Vecsey, 2009).
2. Howard Beck (2012) and Marcel Mutoni (2012) of the New York Times and SlamOnline, respectively, claim that the resignation of the then New York Knick coach Mike D’Antoni and the hiring of Mike Woodson as coach spelled the end to a system that fit Lin’s strengths and style of play.
4. There have been a small number of Chinese nationals who played in the NBA, most notably Yao Ming and Yi Jianlian. Yao retired from the NBA in 2011. Yi played for the Dallas Mavericks in 2012.

References


