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On February 9th, 2014 Michael Sam stated in an interview with ESPN's "Outside the Lines" that he is gay. Since he was drafted, Sam will become the first ever openly gay player in NFL history. The following study aims to explore ESPN’s coverage of Michael Sam, with a goal of identifying how their coverage shapes perspective on gay identity in the NFL. Because of the NFL’s impact and prominence, it is important to look at Michael Sam as the first ever-active openly gay football player in the National Football league. Since Sam is the first active, openly gay player to navigate this identity in the NFL, it is crucial to look at how Sam is portrayed in the media, and if media portrayed has any impact on public opinion. ESPN was the first to cover Sam coming out, and is one of the most influential sports news sources. Therefore focusing on their coverage will provide a consistent point of view, as well as an appropriate understanding of media coverage on gay athletes. This thesis analyzes the rhetorical strategies of ESPN’s coverage of Michael Sam, and the impact their coverage had on public perspective of gay athletes in the NFL. Utilizing
an interdisciplinary approach guided by a cluster criticism methodology, the analysis finds that ESPN did seek to shape public perspective on gay identity through their entrance into the national discussion on gay rights and the opportunity to address gay rights to a new public.
ESPN and the Construction of Gay Identity

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__________________________________________
Alexandra Cleo Cook, Author
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On February 9th, 2014 Michael Sam stated in an interview with ESPN's *Outside the Lines* that he is gay (Connelly). On May 9th 2014, Sam was drafted to the St. Louis Rams in the 7th round, as the 249th overall pick. Upon being drafted, Sam became the first ever openly gay player in NFL history. The National Football League has roots spanning as far back as 1869 but the first official championship game was played in 1933 (NFLStatistics.com). Since 1933 the league has grown tremendously, and is now one of the highest grossing revenue sports in the world, generating around $9 billion annually, with a goal of $25 billion annually by 2027 (Forbes.com). The NFL is a widely recognized and loved arena for sports, this year alone averaging 114.4 million viewers per minute on NBC’s Sunday night broadcast. The NFL, which has a policy prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, is the largest of the major sports leagues in the United States, with about 1,600 players on rosters at any time during the season. However, the NFL has never had an active, publicly gay player in the 80-year history. Because of the NFL’s large impact and celebrity, it is important to look at Michael Sam as the first ever openly gay, active football player in the National Football league. This issue is important historically because this is the first time an active player has publicly come out as gay in the NFL. The reason for looking specifically at ESPN is that Michael Sam originally came out on ESPN’s *Outside the Lines*, the first news source to cover the historic moment. *Outside the Lines* is an Emmy award nominated televised sports program covering some of the most breaking on and off field issues in U.S. sports. ESPN can also be justified, as it is a topic-specific credible source. Since ESPN was the first to break
the news on Michael Sam, focusing on their coverage is important in remaining consistent in my analysis and maintaining that the worldview/attitudes/beliefs I identify will be accurate.

The goal of this research is to analyze ESPN’s online coverage of Michael Sam to determine how their coverage shapes perspective on gay identity in the NFL. In order to conduct this research I must first review previous literature regarding gay athletes and ideologies pertaining to this topic. Since Michael Sam only recently came out as gay, and was the first active, openly gay player in the NFL there is to date no published academic research regarding him. In fact, research regarding any specifically gay athletes in the NFL or NBA, the two largest sports entities in the U.S., is limited because there are less than a handful of players who have come out after retiring, and only one player to come out as an active player in the NBA. Therefore, I am turning my attention to ideologies surrounding gay identity in athletics, to gain a better understanding of masculinity and its impacts. Each of the following categories will cover some aspects that all contribute to understanding gay identity. However gay identity is not a concrete definition; like sex and gender it is fluid and always changing. But understanding the concepts of sexual identity and gender identity are crucial to understanding gay identity. According to Wood, “Biology influences how we develop, but it doesn’t absolutely determine behavior, personality, and so on. Nor does biology stipulate the meaning that members of a culture assign to sex…related to gender is the concept of gender identity, which is a personal perception of one’s sex. Unlike sex, gender is neither innate nor stable” (Wood 21).
Therefore, sexual identity is how someone defines his or her biology, while gender identity is a perception of one’s sex, and this distinction is discussed further in the gay identity category. Through this literature review I am focusing on major themes of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, homophobia, language, communication norms, and media representation. As the literature review will demonstrate, these categories are separable and can be discussed separately, however, cross over between the categories is a sign that these constructs are not totally separate. Each of these categories is crucial to understanding gay identity in athletics.

**Masculinity**

Masculinity theory gives context and understanding to the male identity. This category is appropriate to discuss first because it gives context to the later categories of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, as it is discussed in both of those sections. Connell was one of the original authors to publish on masculinity theory within the context of sports, and contributed groundbreaking information on masculinity. Connell first defines masculinity as not just one masculinity—a singular concept-- but an idea that is associated with many masculinities, each connected with different positions in power. Connell argues, “men’s greater sporting prowess has become…symbolic proof of superiority and right to rule” (Connell 5). Kimmel adds that masculinity has historically been defined as the flight from women, meaning that masculinity suppresses traditionally feminine qualities. Kimmel discusses that masculinity is a socially constructed idea, that the roles, behaviors, and identities are constructed to represent the *ideal male*. However masculinity is not a constant; it
varies historically, cross-culturally, intra-physically, and contextually (Kimmel). How masculinity varies contextually is especially important for this study when looking at masculinities through sports. In regards to sports, Messner finds that males often view forms of aggression as a way to legitimatize their manliness. In addition, the aggressive sports, like football, act as almost a “safe” place to young boys because the aggressive sports create clear boundaries for boys. Anderson states that sports act as the construction and reproduction of masculinity; this is because sports maintain a rigid masculine and patriarchal orthodoxy (Anderson). Sports have served as a test of masculinity in Western societies, and have become a leading definer in mass culture for male rituals (Anderson). Adams et al. agree that sport is central to the promotion and maintenance of men’s dominance over women. Sports are embedding elements of competition and hierarchy among men, and lead to their idea of social dominance. Overall, masculinity theory contributes to many other factors when it comes to athletics, and the role of men.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Understanding masculinity is important because it is the foundation of hegemonic masculinity, which is a supplementary theory of masculinity. This concept originally came up during a study done in an Australian high school. Kessler et al. focused on the social inequalities in a high school looking specifically at adolescent boys. Kessler et al. (1982) documented local gender hierarchies in local cultures of masculinity in a high school. This study provided observations of multiple hierarchies in gender, as well as in the construction of gender (Kessler et al., 1982). However, Connell (1995) solidified this idea even more in showing masculinity as the
predominant gender order that in a circular way reinforces its predominance. According to Connell, this type of masculinity is homophobic, misogynistic, and heterosexual. Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity is the culturally idealized form of masculine character. In addition he finds that masculinity becomes hegemonic when it is widely accepted in a culture and when the acceptance reinforces the dominant gender ideology. Trujillo looks specifically at hegemonic masculinity in regards to the media. Trujillo summarizes five features of hegemonic masculinity in American culture, which are: physical force and control, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality (Trujillo 29). Trujillo’s study is important for understanding how power is defined through these different facets, and what entities such as the media portray when it comes to gender ideology. But an important aspect of masculinity is that it is not a description of the average man, but the representation of a masculine ideal. Hegemonic masculinity is understood as the pattern that continually allows men’s dominance over women to continue (Connell & Messerschmidt). It embodies the current honored way of being a man, and men receive the benefits of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity while enacting those desired male traits. Hegemonic masculinity also has a great influence on the thinking of men, gender, and social hierarchy. Hegemonic masculinity is important when looking at anxieties about men, the overwhelming patriarchal society of Western culture, and sociological models of gender (Hall and LaFrance 38). Donaldson argues that male norms stress values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body (Donaldson 644).
This norm is linked to the concept of hegemony, which is the ways in which the ruling, majority, or dominant group establishes and maintains its domination (Donaldson). Hegemony involves persuasion over populations, particularly through the media, and the organization of social institutions in ways that will conform to the dominant groups or dominant ideologies. Punishment for non-conformity, which can be verbal and physical, is involved in the process of reifying those norms and hegemonic practices (Donaldson 644).

Hegemonic masculinity can also be widely seen within athletics. Anderson asserts that sports, like contact sports such as football, are a place where hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and defined, because these athletes represent the ideal for what it means to be a man (Anderson 862). LaBerge and Albert add to hegemonic masculinity, by emphasizing that hegemonic conceptions of masculinity are oriented towards dominance over women (LaBerge & Albert). The dominance over women is an important aspect of hegemonic masculinity because it reifies the idea brought up earlier by Kimmel, that in fact a large component of masculinity is that it demonstrates power over women or feminine traits. LaBerge and Albert maintain that the exercise of power is culturally produced through signifiers through the form of masculinity. Anderson states that another fundamental element of hegemonic masculinity is that women exist as potential sexual objects for men while men are negated as sexual objects for men.

Another significant sub-point of hegemonic masculinity is the idea that being gay is a direct threat to the hegemony of being a masculine male. Pronger argues that gay athletes in particular, who are stigmatized as being feminine, are a direct threat to
the heterosexual male. Kimmel finds that American men are socialized into a very rigid and limiting definition of masculinity. He states that men fear being ridiculed as too feminine by other men and this fear perpetuates homophobic and exclusionary masculinity. This is because gay athletes can be just as strong and competitive as their straight teammates, which creates this paradox of the physicality with sports, but at the same time violates the masculine script with the same-sex desires (Pronger 223). Therefore the gay male athlete totally undermines the masculine orthodoxy by accessing the ideal male qualities, when coming out as gay.

*Heteronormativity*

Heteronormativity stems from the previous two areas of focus, masculinity and hegemonic masculinity. The idea of heteronormativity came up several times throughout the research articles; hence it needs to be categorized as a major theme in this study. Heteronormativity originally comes out of queer theory, which is a critique of conventional categories of identity and cultural views of “normal” and “abnormal” when it comes to sexuality (Wood 54). Queer theory argues that identities are not fixed, but they are changeable and fluid. Queer theory has two central points the first being that terms such as “women,” “men,” “gay,” and “straight” are not useful (Wood 54). Wood states that sex is defined as the designation of a person based on biology, while gender is socially constructed as expressed. Gender identity is a person’s private sense of, and subjective experience of, his or her gender (Wood 19). Wood states that gender is not innate or stable, meaning that gender must be taught and learned. Gender is seen as a binary, meaning that from infancy people are constantly being identified as either boy or girl (Wood 20). Hird states that in the U.S.,
masculinity involves being strong, ambitious, successful and mostly emotionally controlled, and it has been defined as a personality characteristic. Gender identity is defined as the personality characteristic, a concept of self, and a relationship to a group identity (Hall & LaFrance 38). Hall and LaFrance further the idea as they find that masculine gender identity is the degree to which a man believes the typical masculine ideal is influential, important, valuable, and meaningful to the self. Men who are highly gender identified are more likely to form their own behaviors to the masculine prototype. Individual’s identities are shaped by many different things, so naming somebody according to one factor like their sex or sexuality is misleading and fixed. Secondly, Wood states queer theory assumes that a person may perform identity one way during one time and context, and a completely different way during another time and context (Wood 55). Out of queer theory comes the ideology of heteronormativity, which is defined as a cultural bias in favor of opposite-sex relationships of a sexual nature (Sumara). Heteronormativity is defined as the cultural bias in favor of opposite-sex relationships of a sexual nature. However, not only is heteronormativity a cultural bias, it is also assumed. Schilt and Westbrook find that heteronormativity is the assumption that heterosexuality is normal and all other sexual identities are abnormal (Schilt and Westbrook). Heteronormativity is a term used by Pascoe in order to discuss the way in which gender and sexuality are separated into hierarchically organized categories.

Homophobia is important in understanding heteronormativity, because it is a direct result of heteronormativity (Anderson 866). Up until recent years there were social sanctions for coming out as gay, especially in the world of male sports.
Anderson finds that past research of gay athletes came mostly from closeted players, because current athletes rarely came out as gay because the stakes were simply too high. Kimmel defines homophobia not really as an irrational fear of gay men, but the fear men have as being perceived as gay. There is a fear of being a sissy that dominates manhood, and as young as 6, boys are ashamed of being *unmanly*. Kimmel argues that this fear of homophobia is deep-seated within masculinity and American men are socialized into a very limiting definition of what it means to be a man. A major fear that men face is the ridicule that comes from not representing the ideal masculine traits. Violence is a significant part of masculinity and in turn, homophobia. Kimmel references an old trick of young adolescent boys, where the way you looked at your nails as a young boy directly impacted whether or not the boy demonstrated feminine qualities. If a boy looked at his nails with his palm faced down and arm outstretched, then he is immediately called a sissy, which is deemed as weak, girly, or worst of all gay. **Heterosexual men’s gender identity can be threatened in several ways, because it acts as self-identity, and a great fear comes from misclassification.** The threats to men’s identity are related to sexually prejudicial attitudes and negative behaviors toward gay men. Hird states that men’s concern over appearing gay to others motivates men to perform behaviors that are hyper masculine, in order to not appear gay. In Western culture the norm is for a person to be one or the other, not both or neither, this creates the binary that they then must live in. With men who are gay, being stuck in the binary of being either a gay male with feminine traits, or a straight man with masculine traits is problematic and promotes a stereotype that is false.
The four previously discussed categories (masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity and homophobia) all intertwine and interlock, and though different they each play an important role in understanding gay identity. They link together in understanding a basis for masculinity and the construction of what it means fall under the category of “masculine”. However there is also ambiguity in these definitions, as these are social constructs and social constructs are always fluid, changing, and evolving. Using these categories in combination leads to a better understanding of gay identity because they each cover an important part of identities. While I tried to demonstrate the importance of each category and link them together, there are also holes within these categories that I seek to fill with my own research and addition to understanding gay identity. The following categories, however, provide insight into language, communication norms, and media representation which all play a part in this study.

Language

Language is a central focus of this literature review since a large portion of my own research will focus on ESPN’s online coverage, looking specifically at the language they used to describe Michael Sam. With male generic language, things such as activities, accomplishments, and positions typically define men, whereas women are defined by their appearance and relationships with others (Wood 103). During sporting events, commentators’ typically describe women by focusing on their outfits, bodies, and hairstyles, but with men the emphasis is placed on only their athletic skills (Wood 104). Wood states that there are two ways in which language organizes perceptions of gender, which are stereotyping men and women and also
encouraging polarized perceptions of sex and gender. A stereotype is a generalization about an entire class of phenomena based on some knowledge of some members of the class (Hall and LaFrance). Relying on stereotypes is problematic because it leads people to only see what they wish to see, and classify people based on their own perceptions and not on the actual characteristics of that person. Often women are stereotyped as emotional and weak and men are stereotyped as rational and strong (Wood 151).

Since men and women have this strict gendered language, when men use emotional language, which varies from the norm, they are associated with being weak or feminine. Another aspect about language is polarized thinking, which is the conception of things as absolute opposites (Wood 151). Something is either right or wrong, a person is either male or female, or masculine or feminine. This process of polarized thinking leads to a false dichotomy, meaning that someone can choose either this or that, but not both. Hall and LaFrance identify that language, specifically communication of homophobia, occurs in young men’s social environments often. Used as a way to mock or ridicule other people, homophobic language emphasizes people, things, or situations that are feminine or seen as gay. Using social identity theory (SIT) Hall and LaFrance state that self-categorization affects in-group and out-group processes of young men. Specifically the in-group is made up of self-categorized heterosexual males, and to maintain a membership within an in-group, homophobic language is used to reassure other males that he is heterosexual (Hall and LaFrance 37). In addition Hall and LaFrance find that homophobic language use differs in contexts that differ based on the ratio of sex present. Hall and LaFrance
found a strong relationship between gender identification and the use of homophobic slang to demonstrate a man’s allegiance to the expectations of their peers who they assumed to be heterosexual (Hall and LaFrance 38). According to Hall and LaFrance, a recent analysis of 1,135 self-identified heterosexual men demonstrated that members of all-male organization, for example athletic teams, are more likely to use homophobic slang use than men who are not in these groups (Hall and LaFrance). This demonstrates once again the importance of language use, especially in constructing the ideas of masculinity.

*Communication norms*

Homophobic communication is an important sub-point to focus under language, because homophobic language has been shown to have a large impact in stereotyping gay athletes. Pascoe focuses on the language specifically, looking at the term *fag* used in discourse. Homophobic teasing and insulting can be seen to characterize masculinity for young boys (Pascoe 6). Using the term *fag* serves as a way in which boys regulate and punish themselves, generally in a joking relationship. Being called *fag* has to do with failing at the major masculine trait of competence, which is heterosexuality or any sign of weakness or feminineness. The overall communication of homophobia is problematic because it includes derogatory terms and inferences about gay men (Hall & LaFrance 36). Hall and LaFrance found that most often homophobic language such as “that’s gay” is used by heterosexual males, and may be intended as harmless but in actuality is contributing to the atmosphere of bullying and masculine aggression against homosexuals (Hall & LaFrance 40). This is especially true when used against out-group males or non-prototypically *masculine*
males. Further, Messner finds that this type of behavior and language is epitomized in all-male environments like sports teams (Messner).

Media Representation

Media representation, finally, is an important sub-point to look at since my own research will focus on media representation. Hardin et al. focus two of their studies on the reactions to gay athletes both through sports reporters and through fan postings on the Internet. In 2007, John Amaechi became the first former basketball player to announce publicly that he is gay (Hardin et al. 183). A week after Amaechi came out; former NBA star Tim Hardaway made several homophobic remarks regarding Amaechi. Hardin et. al. conducted a contextual analysis to analyze the newspaper columns by prominent U.S. sportswriters about Amaechi's announcement. Hardin et al. found that although the columns could be read as progressive, they were not; they condemned individuals who expressed overtly homophobic views while reinforcing the status quo in a variety of ways. Hardin et al. expressed these findings as representing a new form of homophobia, which they compare to racism. As such, these columns effectively rendered Amaechi's announcement as having little value in addressing homophobia in the sports/media complex. Trujillo states that no institution in American culture has influenced the publics’ view of masculinity more than sport (290). Americans have been influenced to believe that sports builds manly characteristics, developments in physicality, order, justice, and even can prepare young men for war (Trujillo 292). And while sports have been continuing to reify ideal masculine traits, the media has been a key factor in sports hegemony. In the media, sports are presented as a “symbolic representation” of a social order that serve
to uphold dominant values and ideas. Trujillo argues that furthermore, media representations of sport privilege emphasize masculinity and positively portray cultural values. Media representations also embody hegemony by elevating individual athletes who embody a model for masculinity, and criticize individuals who don’t (Trujillo 292). Athletes who are criticized are often those who do not represent those ideal male qualities, athletes who play in less *manly* sports or who don’t fall under the category of the ideal masculinity.

This research all contributes to the understanding of masculinity and its impact seen through sports. However where this previous research lacks is on current players who have come out while still being an active athlete. Jason Collins in 2013 came out as gay while as free agent in the NBA, and Michael Sam in early 2014 came out before the NFL draft. Though homosexuality has become more accepted, there is still a gap in research regarding perspective on active, openly gay athletes. Through looking at previous literature surrounding masculinity and communication, in addition to articles regarding Sam, I formulated the research question: *How does ESPN’s online coverage of Michael Sam seek to shape public perspective on gay identity in the NFL?*
METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this thesis will aim to analyze articles gathered from ESPN.com regarding Michael Sam. In order to build a framework for this analysis I will discuss two main concepts of methodology: Kenneth Burke’s cluster criticism and social constructivism theory.

*Kenneth Burke A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives*

Burke’s arguments in both *A Grammar of Motives* and *A Rhetoric of Motives* are central to understanding his treatment of rhetoric. *A Grammar of Motives* focuses on the question “what is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?” Burke seeks to answer that question through looking at basic forms of thought through *dramatism*. Dramatism, according to Burke, “invites one to consider the matter of motives in a perspective that, being developed from the analysis of drama, treats language and thought primarily as modes of actions” (Burke xxii).

Dramatism is a philosophy of language, a study of language as a way of living and knowing. Burke, therefore, studies human motivation through an analysis of drama; i.e., he approaches language and thought dramatistically to understand motives. Burke identifies five key terms of dramatism: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. His treatment of the five key terms is important in understanding motives. The act determines what took place, in thought or deed. The scene is the background of the act, or situation. Agent looks at what person or kind of person acted. The agency is the means or instruments used. And finally the purpose asks the question, why did it happen? These five terms are significant in understanding rhetorical events. As Burke states, “even before we know what act is to be discussed, we can say with confidence
that a rounded discussion of its motives must contain a reference to some kind of
to background” (Burke xvii).

Another fundamental aspect in Grammar of Motives is Burke’s focus on
substance. Substance is derived from the stance family, which is a “concept of place,
or placement” (Burke 21). Viewed etymologically, substance (or sub-stance) “would
be something that stands beneath or supports the person or thing” (Burke 22). Burke
elaborates that substance “is used to designate what a thing is,” but it can also be
derived from understanding what a thing is not. He argues, “that is, though used to
designate something within the thing, intrinsic to it, the word etymologically refers to
something outside the thing, extrinsic to it” (Burke 23). Burke identifies three types
of substance: familial, directional, and geometric. Burke states that familial substance
“in its purity… stresses common ancestry in the strictly biological sense, as literal
descent from maternal or paternal sources” (Burke 29). Familial substance draws on
biological or ancestral ties, however it can also include social and national groups.
Therefore, groups can make connections through shared historical or cultural
understanding. The second type of substance Burke identifies is directional substance,
which is “biologically derived from the experience of free motion, since man is an
organism that lives by locomotion” (Burke 31). Directional substance is based on
human experiences and existence. The experience of “free motion” can drive an
individual’s motivation. Geometric substance is understood as “an object placed in its
setting, existing both in itself and as part of its background” (Burke 29). Geometric
substance can be grasped by combining a sense of dimensional space with directional
substance. Geometric substance works through looking at past experiences/history,
where we are now, with the hopes of understanding the future trajectory of where we are headed. Geometric substance focuses on a clear concept of beginning and end, which can be demonstrated through the examples of history, present, and future understandings. Burke’s conception of these three types of substance is in turn essential for his treatment of identification and consubstantiality in *Rhetoric of Motives*.

Burke’s treatment of substance helps clarify the concepts he brings attention to in *Rhetoric of Motives*, which are identification and consubstantiality. Identification is the idea that two parties share commonalities. Burke illustrates the identification process as:

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so (Burke 20).

Burke argues regarding identification, that in order for persuasion to function, the parties engaged through rhetoric must have some similarity. Burke argues that two parties can be identified through common interests, or they can be identified through interests that they perceive to be similar, or through persuasion that they are similar. In addition, he argues that identification goes through stages, which are the naming process, naming, association or disassociation, and the end result of what is identified. Next, consubstantiality is the status of two substances, which are joined through some common property (Burke 21). Burke states:
In being identified with B, A is “substantially one” with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. (Burke 21).

Consubstantiality describes the association between the two parties, since they are united through commonalities. However, consubstantiality can also describe the division between the two parties, and highlight the differences that they have. Like substance, which is defined as understanding what something is as well as what it is not, consubstantiality demonstrates what is being identified between the two parties and also the uniqueness that they individually have. Consubstantiality looks at two parties that can share identification, and can have commonalities, but are consubstantial in the fact that the two parties or entities are still separate and different. It is important to note with consubstantiality the two parties may share a commonality, but remain different in their entities. During his discussion of identification and consubstantiality, Burke defines the Rhetoric as dealing “with the possibilities of classification in its partisan aspects; it considers the ways in which individuals are at odds with one another, or becomes identified with groups more or less at odds with one another” (Burke 22).

Ultimately, these two texts serve as insight and background into Burke’s thoughts on rhetoric. It is helpful to first understand the terminology in order to conduct a rhetorical criticism on an event or events.
Kenneth Burke and Cluster Criticism

Burke’s influence in the field of rhetoric is extensive. Burke defines rhetoric as “the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents” (Foss et al. 173). No matter what the form, rhetoric is always rooted in language and language acts as the symbolic means for creating cooperation with aspects in nature (Foss et. al. 173). However to fully understand rhetoric, Burke emphasizes that understanding the larger category under which rhetoric falls, which is symbolic action, is crucial. Symbolic action “refers to the multiple levels of meaning involved in human activity” (Gusfield 6). Furthermore, humans’ ability to use symbols allows them to visualize, select, create, and define situations (Foss et al. 8). Humans are symbol-using beings, which in turn impacts how things and events can be interpreted, named or described. It is through this process of using symbols that meaning is created (Foss et al. 11). It is this idea of using symbols to create reality that leads into the cluster criticism, which is a means for identifying the uses of these symbols.

Burke’s contribution to theory and critical methodology encompasses many different facets; however, for this research I am using his cluster criticism method because this method is appropriate for analyzing a large set of artifacts. Cluster analysis groups together a set of objects in such a way that objects in the same group are more similar to each other than to those in other groups (Foss 63). Burke developed the cluster analysis with the focus of gaining insight into a rhetor’s worldview. Berthold states that Burke “argues that the charting of clusters gives ‘cues as to the important ingredients subsumed in symbolic mergers. Reveal[ing], beneath
an author’s official front, the level at which a lie is impossible” (Berthold 302).
Therefore the cluster analysis method of analysis is effective for identifying the
rhetor’s attitudes, worldviews, and motives. Foss states that one way in which rhetors
attempt to create identification is by naming or defining situations for audiences, and
even though a rhetor is perfectly conscious of the act of writing, conscious of
selecting a certain kind of imagery to reinforce a certain kind of mood, etc, he or she
cannot possibly be conscious of the interrelationships among all these equations (Foss
63). The unconscious motivation is an important part for this analysis; this is a major
difference between Burke’s idea for rhetoric and other traditional views (Foss et
al.176). While traditional views focus on the explicit language in regards to the
speaker and the audience, Burke finds it crucial to understand the unconscious
persuasion, because speakers may not be consciously aware of the identifications they
are making. Consequently a cluster analysis reveals, beneath the author’s official
front, the real character, which sheds light on their worldviews, attitudes, and
motives. Foss states that the unconscious words you use around or with key terms are
born out of how you view the world and your worldview.

A cluster criticism encompasses three main stages: identifying key terms,
charting clusters, and finding patterns. The cluster criticism method is done by
selecting key terms in an artifact and observing terms that cluster around them for the
purpose of learning how the speaker associates particular concepts to the key terms.
Starting with the selection of key terms, the key terms are determined based on the
frequency and intensity used. Frequency means how often the term is used, whereas
intensity is a term that might be seldom used, but the impact it has throughout the
artifact is crucial. If a rhetor uses a term over and over again throughout the artifact, that term should be selected as a key term since it is likely to be a key part in the rhetors thought. Intensity is more difficult to reveal because it may be seldom used in the text, however Foss states “it may be critical because it is central to the argument being made, represents an ultimate commitment, or conveys great depth of feeling” (Foss 66). This means, if the rhetor removed this term it would significantly change the meaning of the text. Another critical aspect of the identifying the key terms is the idea of the god or devil meaning that can be associated with these words. For example, the god terms used are meant to represent the ideal for the speaker, while the devil terms represent the negative or evil for the speaker (Foss 67). Berthold illustrates the idea of god and devil terms by quoting that they are the “expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and powers” (Berthold 303). The god and devil terms are important because their emergence can provide insight into what the speaker sees as either good or bad, and this juxtaposition with the key terms offers interesting understanding about what the rhetor associates with these meanings.

The next step in cluster criticism, after identifying the key terms, is to chart the clusters around the key terms. Identifying the key terms aims to associate what goes with what, or selecting the combinations of how the speaker will associate certain terms with the key terms (Berthold 303). Charting clusters involves carefully observing the artifacts, noting the occurrence of key terms and identifying the terms that cluster around each key term. There are two different ways in which the speaker can do this association, the speaker can have a direction connection or through
imagery. With a direct connection, the cluster can be associated through close proximity, or through using a conjunction like and (Foss 67). Burke states that another way for finding the relationship with clusters and key terms is through cause and effect, meaning that one term may depend on the other, or visa-versa. Berthold argues that there are several ways in which the critic can chart the clusters around the key terms, as long as each way is examined, supported, or accompanied by other terms (Berthold 303). Berthold also distinguishes a secondary means for charting the clusters, which she defines as the agon analysis. The agon analysis seeks to provide conflict by looking for terms that oppose or contradict other terms in the artifact (Berthold 304). Opposing key terms provide a symbol of conflict for meaning (Berthold 304). Like charting the clusters, the agon analysis seeks to identify terms that go with the key terms, yet this time focusing specifically on the god and devil terms. When charting the terms that go with the god terms, the goal is to determine the terms’ contexts and its opposition. Burke describes this idea as giving insight into the rhetor’s character:

If a man’s virtuous characters are dull, and his wicked characters are done vigorously, his art has voted for the wicked ones, regardless of his ‘official front.’ If a man talks dully of glory, but brilliantly employs the imagery of desolation, his true subject is desolation (Berthold 304).

What the agon analysis reveals may suggest areas of tension or conflict in the rhetor’s worldview, demonstrating some sort of internal struggles with what it means to be a god or devil term. However charting the clusters ultimately aims to find what terms go with what, and perhaps reveal how the rhetor unconsciously couples ideas.
The last step in the cluster analysis is to find patterns of clusters, which seeks to identify how a rhetor constructs his or her ideas for worldviews, attitudes, and motives (Foss 67). This step acts as finding out a dictionary for the rhetor’s key terms, which gives perspective on what meanings are ascribed to key terms, and also demonstrates the relationship that emerges among key terms and clusters (Foss 68).

As briefly discussed in methodology, language is important and carries meaning, Burke argues that first there are two approaches to the nature of language, which are “scientistic” and “dramatistic” The scientistic approach views language as definition, while dramatisim views language as act, or as symbolic action. Burke states “terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality, and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (Burke 21). Since humans live in a world full of words, the words that we use to perform acts of reality matter a great deal. Burke uses the metaphor of photography, “different photographs of the same objects, the difference being that they were made with different color filters. Here something so factual as a photograph revealed notable distinctions in texture, and even in form, depending upon which color filter was used for the documentary description of the event being recorded” (Burke 22).

Therefore, terministic screens are the words you choose are frames of experience, singling out terms for the focus of attention. The cluster criticism will expose multiple clusters, so distinguishing which are important and which are superfluous is a key part of this step.

Foss states that terministic screens are a means of reflecting and deflecting reality (Foss 64). They act as both simultaneous alienation and identification of terms.
Looking at terministic screens are a vital part to understanding the depth of a cluster criticism and its value for analysis. Burke further explains terministic screens as a set of symbols that acts as a *screen* for the reality that the rhetor creates (Stob 131). Language isn’t just the means for reflecting reality, but the means for constructing it. Terministic screens are important to note for this analysis because of how language can construct and reflect reality, which directly mirrors the second method for this analysis, which is social constructivism theory.

*Social Constructionism*

Social constructionism is a philosophical framework aimed at understanding and engaging social change and applies the philosophical ideology of constructivism into social settings (St. Pierre Hirtle 91). St. Pierre Hirtle states that social constructionism originally traces back to John Dewey’s Pedagogic Creed (91). Constructionism is concerned with the “the ways in which knowledge is historically situated and embedded in cultural values and practices” (91). According to social constructionism, meanings are socially constructed through actors and actions, and since these can constantly be changing, social constructionism is always fluid and dynamic. Social construction is therefore concerned with the relationship between descriptive language and the world it is designed to represent (Gergen). Barnett argues that reality doesn’t exist waiting to be discovered, but instead individuals give meaning to reality through their own historical and cultural knowledge (163). Knowledge, such as symbols, rules, concepts, and categories all shape how individuals construct and interpret their world. According to Barnett, “reality does not exist out there waiting to be discovered, instead it is historically produced and
culturally bound knowledge enables individuals to construct and give meaning to reality” (Barnett 163).

The goal of social constructionism is to identify where groups construct knowledge for each other, which creates a culture of shared artifacts and meanings, and the majority of the framework focuses on human interaction, and how human actions construct reality. In social constructionism there are several aspects of how reality is created and by what means; the means are the actors and actions. The cultural environment produces the actors, meaning that they can be drastically different. In addition, the actors then shape the reality, which in turn can shape their actions. How the actors act creates and gives meaning to our realities. A world that is socially constructed means that actors investigate the global change and transitioning. Language is a fundamental aspect for the process of knowledge production, it is not conceived of as describing and representing the world, but as a way of constructing it (Camargo-Borges & Rasera). Language gains its meaning from its use in context, therefore it can change and develop depending on the context. Social constructionism emphasizes that the ability to create realities through language is a continuous creation (Camargo-Borges & Rasera).

Kenneth Gergen developed a form of social construction that takes into account social aspects, focusing on language and social practices. Through his heavy focus on language and human relationship, he formulated a set of assumptions. These assumptions help guide an individual in understanding how social construction can be characterized. While not everyone who uses social construction uses this set of assumptions, Gergen argues, “there are advantages to a momentary solidification of
perspective. In these moments we glimpse the possibility for collective affinity, locate repositories of collaboration and contention, and foreground the *topoi* for further deliberation” (Gergen 48). Gergen identifies five suppositions essential to the understanding of social construction. Gergen’s first assumption argues: “(1) the terms by which we account for the world and ourselves are not dictated by the stipulated objects of such accounts” (Gergen 49). The first assumption looks at how descriptor words are used by individuals. It demonstrates that there are no real principled constraints over our characterization of states of affairs, meaning that “anything goes” when it comes to how individuals construct their world, and when creating their world can use any kind of representation or communication. Gergen’s second assumption moves the focus onto understanding the social world: “(2) the terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artifacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people” (Gergen 49). The second assumption states description and explanations are the result of human coordination and action. Gergen describes this as “words take on their meaning only within the context of ongoing relationships” (Gergen 51).

Gergen’s third assumption is “(3) the degree to which a given account of world or self is sustained across time is not dependent on the objective validity of the account but on the vicissitudes of social process” (Gergen 51). The third assumption states “accounts of the world and the self may be sustained without respect to perturbations in the world they are designed to describe or explain” (Gergen 51). The fourth assumption looks at how language acquires its significance from human affairs and actions, and how it functions in relationships: “(4) language derives its significance in
human affairs from the way in which it functions within patterns of relationship” (Gergen 52). Gergen uses a baseball metaphor to explain this assumption, using the terms “batter,” “pitcher,” “bases,” and “home run.” Each of these terms is essential in describing baseball, however in common terms they lose that definition. Therefore, the terms get their meaning through their function “within a set of circumscribed rules” (Gergen 53). The fifth assumptions focuses on discourse surrounding culture, and how current types of communication can demonstrate the patterns of a culture: “(5) to appraise existing forms of discourse is to evaluate patterns of cultural life; such evaluations give voice to other cultural enclaves” (Gergen 53). Gergen defines this as, “within a given community of intelligibility, where words and actions are related in reliable ways it is possible to appraise what we call the “empirical validity” of an assertion” (Gergen 53).

Overall social constructivism is concerned with human consciousness, such as how ideas are constructed through reification of human actions. This set of assumptions is beneficial in understanding human behavior and languages, and how these two factors are important in analyzing actions through a social constructionist lens.

Ultimately, using these two methodologies for analysis are important in creating a framework for analysis of this topic. Kenneth Burke’s cluster criticism combined with an understanding of social constructivism aims to provide an efficient means for analyzing ESPN’s online articles regarding Michael Sam. The cluster criticism will serve as the method for organizing and compartmentalizing content throughout the artifacts. Once these clusters have been charted, social constructivism
will aid in the understanding of how ESPN creates reality through the language used throughout their references to Sam. Therefore the analysis that follows will demonstrate how ESPN’s online coverage of Michael Sam sought to shape perspective on gay identity in the NFL by exploring this content through a rhetorical lens.

Methodology Application and Process

Since ESPN’s coverage of Michael Sam is extensive, I first selected a timeline to narrow my focus for analysis. The timeline is February 2014 (the original day that Sam came out) through August 2014 (after Sam was released from the St. Louis Ram’s practice squad). The timeline is appropriate because it covers Sam’s original announcement to the public through his time playing for St. Louis Rams. After setting the timeline for this study I did a search through ESPN’s online article archive to find all articles published by ESPN.com from February 2014 through August 2014. I further limited the study to include only ESPN published stories written by ESPN sports writers. This eliminated all blog-posts, videos, audio, and photo stories from the search, while this would have been an interesting aspect; the purpose of this study is to solely focus on ESPN’s written discourse. The refined search produced 93 total articles. In order to construct unbiased results while taking into account what could actually be accomplished for a master’s thesis, I did a random sample of the 93 articles. Every sixth article of the 93 was selected, which were in order of date published. The total amount of articles that the random sample produced was 15. However while this was a random sample, in order to accurately encompass all key moments in Sam’s NFL history, I reviewed the 93 articles a second time to pull in for
analysis any articles that would be important to note because of their relevance to the study, that random sampling excluded. Therefore, the total number of articles I reviewed for the analysis is 20, which includes the 15 articles produced from the random sample, and five additional articles which encompassed central points in Sam’s NFL timeline.

As described in the methodology section, the first step in a cluster criticism is to select key terms; these are selected either through frequency, intensity, or both. In order to avoid bias, I used a computer system called Terminal, which works by inputting an article into a text box and it outputs a list of each word used in the article, and the amount of times it is used. I used Python program run via terminal to select key terms in each random sample article, which produced a massive database of words for the articles. In order to make a workable database form all 93 articles, I created a master list of key terms from two significant articles, the original article when Sam came out (“Michael Sam of Missouri Tigers Say’s He’s Gay”), and the article published after he was drafted (“Michael Sam: ‘Overwhelmed’ By Pick”). These two articles were selected as the focus articles, among the 20 articles selected or analysis, since they cover two significant aspects in Sam’s NFL timeline. I selected frequent key terms from these two articles using the Terminal system. In total, I found 12 key terms that were frequently used in these first two articles: *gay, first, draft/drafted, players, football, moment, openly, out, people, statement, support/supportive*. Then, taking these 12 key terms, I verified their frequency by checking them against the 18 additional random sample articles. This search checked for the consistency of these terms in the random samples articles. The results of this
application will be discussed further in the analysis. In order for a key term to qualify as frequent it had to be either a noun, verb, adverb, or adjective and had to be used more than three times in each article. In addition, I excluded terms such as Sam’s name, team names, the NFL because those terms would of course come up often in a sports article about the NFL and Michael Sam. However, other player’s names, coaches, or celebrities were included because they could have been used for comparison to Sam or in commenting on Sam.

The second criterion for selecting key terms is based on intensity. As Foss states “a term my not appear very often in a rhetor’s work, but it may be critical because it is central to the argument being made, represents an ultimate commitment, or conveys great depth of feeling” (Foss 66). If the intense term were to be removed from the work, then the nature of the text would considerably change. Intense key terms I selected are appropriate for analysis because language is important and words have meaning. Joseph argues language is a social construct, meaning that it has the power to create social norms, influence ascribed identities, and impact or society just based on words. I selected key terms after reading each article and picking out words that were important to the article, or that had a commanding presence in the text. In total I found 20 intense words throughout the random sample articles.

Once I selected all key terms in the texts, I began to chart the clusters, which aims to understand what goes with what, or selecting the combinations of how the speaker will associate certain terms with the key terms (Berthold 303). This step is important because it reveals subconscious choices in word use that the author may have. Although the articles in this analysis are from several authors and each will
have different writing styles, I am treating ESPN as one entity, since all stories
published on their website represent ESPN as a whole and not the individual writers.
ANALYSIS

This analysis looks to explore if ESPN’s coverage of Michael Sam seeks to have an impact on the public perspective of gay identity in the NFL. Language is a social construct; meaning that it has the power to create social norms, influence ascribed identities, and impact society based on words (Joseph). It has the power both to unite and divide, by creating communities or “others” through a shared use of codes. As discussed in the methodology, Burke’s cluster criticism is a useful method analyzing language. Burke argues that language is symbolic, meaning that language is not simply a tool, but the basis for all humans acting together. Symbols create our reality; therefore social constructs are a consequence of symbol use. Burke furthers this argument by stating it is important to interpret humans’ symbol use in order understand attitudes (Burke). Attitudes determine what we say, which in turn determines what we act and do. Burke says that you can uncover someone’s’ motives, attitudes, and worldviews by looking at the language they use and how they order and arrange their language. By using a cluster criticism to analyze ESPN’s text as well as social constructionism to guide the interpretation, I seek to uncover ESPN’s attitudes, motives, and worldviews demonstrated through their online publications. The first portion of this analysis will examine the key terms present in the 20 total articles selected for the study. Next, clusters surrounding the key terms will be charted to uncover word choices. Finally, using social construction as a guide, I will interpret the language used by ESPN through their online publications.

The first step in the analysis is to select the articles for discussion. I mentioned in the methodology that this analysis would explore 20 articles total. From this
number, I selected the two focus articles, “Mizzou’s Michael Sam Says He’s Gay” and “Michael Sam: ‘Overwhelmed’ By Pick.” These two articles reflect key moments in the timeline, when Sam originally came out and when he was drafted, and thus warrant analysis despite not being in the random sample originally. They are crucial to include, ensuring that significant historical points in the timeline are covered. Since Sam was the first player to ever come out as gay publically before the draft, it is historically noteworthy. The 18 other articles cover the timeline from February 2014 through August 2014. It is important to note that included in the 20 articles are both news reporting articles and editorial pieces. Each article is discussed below; the discussion contains the type of article, date, and subject.

The news reporting articles include pieces that cover Sam’s originally coming out article, “Mizzou’s Michael Sam Says He’s Gay” (February 10), being drafted, “Michael Sam: ‘Overwhelmed’ By Pick” on May 10th, and his performance in the NFL “Michael Sam Mocks Johnny Manziel” from August 24th. Other news articles discuss both positive and negative media and public attention that Sam received. The positive media attention includes: “Wade Davis Addresses Rams on Sam” on May 14th, “Paula Deen Relates to Michael Sam” on February 27th, “Michael Sam Ready for NFL challenge” from February 22nd, “Barack Obama Applauds Michael Sam” on February 16th, “Michael Sam Wins Arthur Ashe Award” May 7th and “Dungy: Sam Deserves NFL Chance” from July 22nd. However Sam also received negative attention, which ESPN addressed, such as “Marshall Henderson: Tweet Research” May 12th, “CB: NFL Not Ready for Gay Player” February 12th and “Wrestler Aims Tweet at Michael Sam” on February 11th.
The editorials, expressing editorial opinion, do not focus as heavily on Michael Sam’s prospective career in the NFL, but rather on his media spotlight in general. These pieces look at the attention on Sam in “Reactions to Sam’s Moment is Telling” on May 16\textsuperscript{th}, “Michael Sam Will Be a Role Model” from February 11\textsuperscript{th}, “Michael Sam Chooses Truth From Start” from February 11\textsuperscript{th}, and “The Marketing of Michael Sam” on February 10\textsuperscript{th}. Three articles look at the impact of Sam coming out, seen in articles “Silver Linings Are Pure Gold in May” on May 28\textsuperscript{th}, “Why Covering Gay Athletes Is News” on February 26\textsuperscript{th}, and “Ultimately, This is a Football Story” from February 13\textsuperscript{th}. The last opinion piece selected discusses the NFL commissioner’s role in Sam coming out in “Goodell Should Draw a Clear Line” on February 14\textsuperscript{th}.

This set of articles covers all major events during the timeline for this study. From this list, the frequent and key terms were selected for the cluster criticism. Below is a general overview of both the frequent and intense key terms.

**Analysis of Key Terms**

**Frequency**

As outlined in the methodology section, key terms are selected based on frequency and intensity. Burke states that all language is inherently persuasive because symbolic acts do something as well as say something. Based on the frequency of their appearance, twelve key terms emerged from the two focus articles: gay, players, draft/drafted, first, football, moment, openly, out, people, statement, support/supportive, and team/teammates. These twelve key terms were then crosschecked against the other eighteen random samples of articles in order to prove
their frequency. In total, *gay* is used most often in the timeline, a total of 120 times in all 20 articles. *Gay* is used both as a specific label for Sam or as a general adjective. As a label, examples of how *gay* is used are: “Sam, the first openly gay active player in NFL history” (NFL.com), or “openly gay NFL prospect Michael Sam” (Fagan, 2014). Next, *players*, *player*, and *player’s* are used 105 times, *team/teammates* are each used 81 times in the articles, and *people* is used 42 times, which demonstrates a focus on how Sam’s sexual orientation will impact the players and his future teammates.

A concentration on the draft and his ability to be drafted was also highlighted; in total, *draft* or *drafted* is used 78 times and *football* is used 55 times. In regards to his sexual orientation, the term *out* is used 70 times and *openly* is used 35 times.

There is a strong focus on the historical significance of Sam coming out, *first* is used 62 times, *moment* is used 19 times, and lastly, *statement* is used 13 times.

Lastly, there is one frequent key term that focused on reactions to Sam coming out; the term *support/Supportive* is used 16 times.

**Intensity**

Intense key terms are selected after reading each of the 20 articles and picking out the words that had a significant impact on the overall message of the article. I grouped intense terms separately from the frequent key terms for charting the clusters in order to organize the results. As previously stated, intense key terms were selected from all 20 articles, so the intense key terms vary from article to article. Since terms inherently carry meaning, the terms that actors choose to use are an important part in identifying motives, attitudes or worldviews. While selecting *intense* key terms, I
looked for significant terms in the article message. Significant terms are defined as a term, which impacts the meaning of the overall message and in the context of the article the message would not be the same without it. In total, 20 intense key terms stood out for analysis which are: *Manziel, distraction, kiss, gay rights, tolerance, social significance, boyfriend, brotherhood, not a trailblazer, marketability, transcend sports, truth, ground-breaking, prejudice, acceptance, courage, queer, fag, ignorant, anti-gay.*

There are ultimately 40 key terms selected based on either frequency or intensity. In order to make sense of the key terms, I then charted the key terms in each article and looked for word associations with the key terms.

**Charting The Clusters**

The next step in cluster criticism is to chart the clusters, which is an examination of each key terms and the context that appears around them. The goal of charting the clusters is to observe what is repeatedly associated with the key terms, which “is a way of finding out what the term is associated with in the poet’s (or rhetor’s) mind” (Rueckert). In order to do this, I charted each of the key terms used in all 20 articles. For this step, I combined all frequent and intense key terms, and then looked for word associations with those key terms. By finding what is repeatedly associated with each of the key terms, I aim to explain subconscious meanings of the key terms (Foss).

After charting all key terms, I identified six main themes found throughout the 20 articles. The six themes include: label of gay, focus on current NFL members, support for Sam, media attention, football is behind the time, and comparison to other
athletes/people. Each of the themes is discussed below, and some themes also contain sub-themes.

*Label of “Gay”*

The first theme I identified is “label of gay,” which centers on the term *gay* and the word associations around it. In fourteen of the twenty articles, Sam is labeled as “gay,” “openly gay,” “out gay player,” or with some other label about his sexual orientation. *Gay* is the most frequently used term in all twenty articles, 120 times total, however in addition to its sheer amount of use, *gay* is also identified as an intense key term due to its powerful impact in the articles. Because *gay* is used so frequently and intensely in these articles, I focused heavily on the clusters around *gay* to uncover what word choices could be associated with this term. This theme demonstrates the clusters of key terms such as *openly, out, and first* all clustered around the term *gay*.

First, *gay* is often clustered with terms such as “openly gay,” “first openly gay player,” or “out gay player.” Similarly to how the term *gay* is found as both a frequent and intense key term, *label of gay* is both a frequent theme because of the amount it is used, but also intense in that Sam is always labeled as *gay*. For example, in the original article, Sam labeled himself as “an openly, proud gay man” (Connelly). The most common cluster around *gay* is “first openly gay player” or “first openly active gay player.” News reporting articles such as “Michael Sam: Overwhelmed By Pick,” “Michael Sam Mocks Johnny Manziel,” “Dungy: Sam Deserves NFL Chance,” and “Michael Sam Wins Arthur Ashe Award” all label Sam as *openly gay*.

When *gay* is continuously used as a descriptive word for Sam it communicates that
his sexual orientation is at the forefront of his identity, taking priority over his athletic abilities, and gay becomes the “deviant” label for Sam. In these article, other NFL players such as Johnny Manziel, Tim Tebow, A.J. McCarron, and Eric Decker are all referenced, but when referenced they are never labeled as straight, but instead are referred to by their teams or accolades. For example in the article “Michael Sam Mocks Johnny Manziel,” they are labeled as “Sam, the first openly gay active player in NFL history, mocked Manziel’s ‘money sign’ after sacking the Heisman Trophy winner” (ESPN.com). Or the other players mentioned, are labeled with nothing other than their names.

The editorial pieces also label Sam’s sexual orientation as well, such as in “Why Covering Gay Athletes Is News,” “Ultimately, This Is A Football Story,” and “Michael Sam Choose Truth From Start.” The editorial pieces, which include opinion by ESPN writers, also use the key terms openly, out, and first when talking about Sam. Even when writing about his athletic skills in “Ultimately, This Is A Football Story,” Sam is still referred to several times as the “first openly gay player” and an “openly gay teammate” (Fox). While Sam first made news for coming out prior to the NFL draft and becoming the first ever active, openly gay player, the label continues on for months, demonstrating the power of language.

Focus on Current NFL Members/The Locker Room

This theme appeared after looking for clusters of key terms such as players, teammates, people, brotherhood, draft, and football. The clusters around these terms paid attention to how Sam’s entrance to the NFL would impact these different facets of the league, such as his future teammates or current players. In total, there was a
focus on this in eleven of the twenty articles. The clusters around players, teammates, or players vary, but the major cluster seen around all of these terms focuses heavily on the locker room environment. In total, the cluster of the locker room is seen in 7 articles, first coming up in Sam’s original announcements. In “Mizzou’s Michael Sam Say’s He’s Gay,” Sam hopes “it will be the same like my locker room” (Connelly). And in the same article, Connelly argues, “that despite some comments from current players, he [Sam] doesn’t anticipate difficulty gaining acceptance in an NFL locker room” (Connelly).

However, while the original article shows hope for Sam’s acceptance in an NFL locker room that hope dissipates in later articles. In the article “CB: NFL Not Ready For Gay Player,” former NFL cornerback Terrell Thomas argues “you’re talking about playing in the NFL, the grind, the brotherhood, the joking that goes along with it. The locker room may not be ready for that, because it’s the kind of thing that changes everything” (Graziano). While Thomas was explicit in his feelings about Sam’s acceptance in the locker room, ESPN’s focus on the locker room environment in general shows the concern with it. In “Wade Davis Addresses Rams on Sam” there is an emphasis on the brotherhood of the NFL that Sam’s entrance to the locker room shouldn’t change for him. Davis states:

If you are walking on eggshells around him thinking you can’t say certain things to him then he knows he is being treated differently…I made fun of a lot of guys there from the team just to show ‘hey, gay guys have a sense of humor’. We can take a joke too. That’s one of the things I’ve learned from
working with a lot of athletes in college is that their straight teammates want to support them but they don’t know how (Wagoner).

While Davis is advocating support for Sam, there is still a clear divide between straight and gay players, which highlights the differences between Sam and his fellow straight teammates. The locker room in these articles proves to be a highly contested area, compared to football or the NFL in general. More so than his performance on the field, or presence in the NFL, the coverage by ESPN clearly focuses on how Sam will impact the current players, teammates, coaches, etc. by being in the locker room.

Support for Sam

The theme of support for Sam was apparent in twelve of the twenty articles, both in news reporting as well as in the editorial pieces. While the actual key term support was used only sixteen times, support for Sam was demonstrated other ways and could be seen when looking for clusters around the terms support, tolerance transcend sports, ground-breaking, acceptance, and courage. The total theme of support for Sam can therefore be broken down into two sub categories: outside support coverage and ESPN support.

Outside Support Coverage

This theme addressed ESPN’s news reporting articles, which covered support for Sam from people or entities outside of ESPN. When Sam originally came out he received support from a range of sources, including President Obama. In “Barack Obama applauds Michael Sam” he states “I really like the fact that Michael did it before the draft because his attitude was, ‘You know what, I know who I am. I know I
can play great football and judge me on the merits,’ Obama said of Sam who could become the NFL’s first openly gay player” (ESPN.com). ESPN covers this support in six news reporting articles, which include: “Mizzou’s Michael Sam Says He’s Gay,” “Michael Sam Wins Arthur Ashe Award,” and “Michael Sam Ready for NFL Challenge.” These articles covering Sam’s support focus mostly on the accolades he has received for coming out, and praise Sam for coming out when he did. Sam received the Arthur Ashe award, decided by ESPN, for “his courage and honest that resonates beyond sports” (ESPN.com). Other winners of the award, which honors individuals who transcend sports, include Jim Valvano, Muhammad Ali, Billie Jean King, and Nelson Mandela.

ESPN Support

In addition to covering the outside support, there was also support from ESPN directly in six articles. For example, in “Goodell Should Draw a Clear Line” ESPN author Johnette Howard argues that NFL commissioner Roger Goodell needs to make more of an effort to support Sam:

Sam’s impending arrival in the league (he’s projected to go anywhere from the third round to the seventh round of the draft) just makes it more incumbent on Goodell to make it clear to every last team official and every last player on every last roster in the league that creating a hostile environment for anything because of his differences won’t be tolerated… NBA commissioner David Stern did exactly that nearly three decades ago when women were still rather new to the sports writing profession and a few were covering his league full time. (I was one of them. I was the Detroit Free Press' beat writer for what
became the Bad Boy Detroit Pistons teams.) And the effect of Stern's proactive gesture was powerful. (Howard).

Again focusing on the locker room, female reporters had to endure the ugly locker room scene when trying to interview players, worrying about the distraction women would present to the players. While the comparison to women is discussed in a later theme, ESPN writer Howard urging commissioner Goodell to do more to support Sam demonstrates the significance of keeping Sam in the league. Howard suggests Goodell make it apparent that he publically supports Sam, which is exactly what Stern did with female reporters. Additionally, Dan Graziano in “Silver Linings are Pure Gold in May” sums up his overall thoughts on Sam coming out, stating:

I like that the Rams did draft Michael Sam, and that he kissed his boyfriend on ESPN, because I tend to like anything that might lead members of the human race to treat other members of the human race better. That was a watershed moment for anyone who fights or cares about gay rights and tolerance. For all that Sam and others have said about viewing him as ‘just a football player’ he is quite obviously more than that. The social significance of his arrival in the league should not be ignored, as it presents our society with a chance to get better (Graziano).

While the actual key term support wasn’t used frequently, it had an intense impact because it gives positive attention to Sam from ESPN, and with other negative media attention surrounding his decision to come out and embracing his boyfriend when drafted, direct support from ESPN shows that his decision was in fact significant and important to talk about.
Media Attention

Sam has been in the media spotlight since his original announcement, however throughout the twenty articles media continues to play an important role in his journey. In fifteen articles, media attention is specifically focused on in regards to Sam and the key terms. Key terms that were clustered around a theme of media attention are: marketability, moment, draft, queer, fag, ignorant, and anti-gay. Since media attention was such a substantial theme in all twenty articles, this theme is again categorized into two sub themes: coverage of Sam’s media attention, and ESPN response to public reaction.

Coverage of Sam’s Media Attention

When first charting the clusters for the key terms distraction, marketability, moment, draft, queer, fag, ignorant, and anti-gay, there was a clear theme focusing on the sheer amount of media attention Sam received. Since Sam’s announcement in February of 2014, he has received a plethora of media attention mostly surrounding his sexual orientation. Comparatively, since 2004 all but two SEC Defensive Players of the year (Sam 7th round and Demeco Ryans, 2nd round) were selected in the first round of the NFL draft (SEC Defensive). While Sam’s draft pick was considerably lower than other players with similar college accolades as him, the coverage from ESPN focused mostly on Sam’s sexual orientation. While several articles also covered his athletic abilities, or football performance, almost all of those articles also disclosed his sexual orientation when referring to Sam. As previously noted, almost all articles, both news reports and editorials, referred to Sam as an “openly gay football player.” The media attention first started when Sam originally came out and
continued through the draft, and his eventual release from the St. Louis Rams. The articles covering media attention include: “Michael Sam: ‘Overwhelmed’ by Pick,” “Dungy: Sam Deserves NFL Chance,” “Why Covering Gay Athletes Is News,” and “Paula Deen Relates to Michael Sam.” One of the intense key terms, distraction, appeared throughout the media attention theme through different clusters. Sam’s media attention is called a distraction, specifically by form NFL coach Tony Dungy who stated:

I do not believe Michael’s sexual orientation will be a distraction to his teammates or his organization. I do, however, believe that the media attention that comes with it will be a distraction…I wouldn’t have taken him. Not because I don’t believe Michael Sam should have a chance to play, but I wouldn’t want to deal with all of it (ESPN.com).

However, ESPN also points out that Dungy was a strong supporter and mentor to Michael Vick when he returned to the NFL after he was convicted in 2007 on dog fighting charges (ESPN.com). However Dungy’s comments about Sam’s media attention being a distraction were pale in comparison to some public reactions to Sam coming out and being drafted.

ESPN Response to Public Reaction

In several articles, nine total, ESPN focuses their attention on responding to outside critiques of Sam coming out. While negative comments appeared after Sam originally came out, most backlashes came when he kissed his boyfriend after being drafted. ESPN went to Sam’s house and showed the historic moment, which also showed their kiss on national television. In “Marshall Henderson: Tweet ‘Research’,”
and “Wrestler Aims Tweet at Michael Sam,” ESPN covers two responses to Sam’s kiss. Both tweets came from college athletes who voiced opinion on twitter such as “I can’t even watch Sports Center today cause all they are talking about is Marcus Smart of that fag from Mizzou” and “Boycotting sportscenter til this michael sam nasty [expletive, expletive] is off…My brothers are 7 and 11 and saw that!!! #sickening.” While both of these articles were strictly news reports, ESPN still makes it clear that the intolerance of Sam and other gay athletes is problematic.

ESPN also responds to public response in several editorial articles like “Why Covering Gay Athletes Is News” and “Reaction to Sam’s Moment Is Telling.” These editorial articles respond to negativity, demonstrating ESPN’s own support for Sam. Howard, as previously quoted in “Goodell Should Draw A Clear Line,” continues her support for Sam when responding to team officials from the NFL. Howard states:

Some folks thought…hope for Sam’s smooth transition was thrown into doubt by a Sport Illustrated article this week in which seven team officials who were anonymously quoted all questioned how well Sam would fit in or flatly said his draft status will be adversely affected. One went as far as to say Sam’s sexuality would make him a misfit in the ‘man’s man’ world of the NFL. As if manhood is defined by whom you sleep with rather than a constellation of other traits that speak to the quality of your character and the ability you bring (Howard).

In addition, in “Reaction to Sam’s Moment Is Telling” Spain lists a few of the reactions to Sam kissing his boyfriend after being drafted:
‘I’m sorry but that Michael Sam is no bueno for doing that on national tv,’ tweeted former Super Bowl champion Derrick Ward. ‘But for real though most of u need to read the bible. It’ll explain a lot in that book. #knowledge’.

‘I don’t call it a moment of celebration,’ said Amy Kushnir, before walking off the set of the Dallas TV show she co-hosts. ‘Its being pushed in faces. I wanna say get a room. I don’t want to see that.’

Fox News host Bill O’Reilly called the coverage of Sam’s kiss a ‘dog and pony show’ and said ‘the gay thing is way overplayed and its annoying’ (Spain).

In response to these specific quotes, Spain argues that the double standard is unfair, yet not surprising. While players such as McCarron, Bortles, and Decker all embrace their girlfriends on national TV with no reactions or aftermath, members of the NFL culture harshly received Sam and Cammisano’s embrace. This negative response by players, fans, or reporters led to the next theme that appeared which is that football and the NFL is behind the times compared to our society.

**Football is Behind the Times**

While this theme doesn’t occur as frequently as some of the previously noted themes, this is a significant theme because it demonstrates that the NFL hasn’t progressed with society. As noted in the literature review, sports, like contact sports such as football, are a place where hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and defined, because these athletes represent the ideal for what it means to be a man (Anderson). The NFL therefore is the ideal location for men to demonstrate their *ideal* male traits.
like strength, and aggression. As previously mentioned, Pronger argues that gay athletes in particular, who are stigmatized as being feminine, are a direct threat to the heterosexual male because they show that men can be both gay and successful athletes in an assumed heteronormative environment. *Football is behind the times* is present as a theme in five of the twenty articles. This theme occurs in “Mizzou’s Michael Sam Says He’s Gay,” “Why Covering Gay Athletes Is News,” “CB: NFL Not Ready For Gay Player,” “Michael Sam Will Be A Role Model,” and “The Marketing of Michael Sam.” This theme first came up in Sam’s original announcement article, however it continued to appear in a handful of other articles. It centers on the idea that the NFL or NBA are behind the times when it comes to accepting gay men, or supporting diversity in the workplace. ESPN sports writer Jason Whitlock mirrors this mindset stating:

Sam is riding a wave, not creating one. An overwhelming influx of cash stripped American sports and its superstars of their ability to be revolutionary catalysts for progressive change. The sports world is no longer a leader in the battle for social justice. It’s a follower. Sports are playing catch-up to the rest of American society (Whitlock).

While ESPN reporters Connelly and Whitlock both argue that society has progressed much further than NFL, actual players in the NFL also share the same mindset. As discussed in the theme on the *locker room*, former NFL player Terrell Thomas also states “I think society is ready for it and America’s ready for it, but I don’t think the NFL is. As a player, all you want to know is if he can play. That’s on the field. But in the locker room, it’s different” (Graziano). This theme really stood out because when
looking at key terms such as social significance and not a trailblazer, the NFL is no longer seen as pushing the barrier of social issues. In the original article in which Sam comes out, Connelly states “in 2014, ‘Gay Man to Enter Workforce’ has the everyday-occurrence sound of a headline in The Onion. But when the NFL is involved, it’s a first—and potentially a landmark moment—in the history of American sports” (Connelly). This theme is significant to note because of the NFL’s popularity. If the NFL, the largest major sports league in the U.S., is behind the times with social issues, what kind of example does that set for sports?

Comparison to Other Athletes/People

The last theme present is a comparison to other athletes in eight of the twenty articles. Sam is compared to other athletes both in and outside of the NFL, and the comparisons start in the original announcement article. This comparison covers athletic abilities, media attention, as well as sexual orientation. This theme again, is broken down into two sub categories: comparison to men and comparison to women. I argue these two sub categories should be analyzed separately because they highlight different areas of focus, and it is important to contrast how Sam is compared to both men and women and the disparities present.

Comparison to Men

As previously noted, Sam is compared to many athletes throughout the twenty articles, and these comparisons cover both athletics, as well as his sexual orientation. The comparisons begin in the original announcement article and continue throughout ESPN’s coverage of Sam. There are three main male athletes that Sam is connected to: Jason Collins, Johnny Manziel, and Jackie Robinson. First, Michael Sam is linked
to Jason Collins starting in the original announcement. Collins, a NBA veteran who came out in 2013 while a free agent, is compared to Sam solely on the fact that both men are openly gay. In the article “Michael Sam: ‘Overwhelmed’ By Pick” ESPN analyst Nick Wagoner stated: “Brooklyn Nets center Jason Collins, who this season became the NBA’s first openly gay player, said it is a ‘great day for the NFL and Michael and his family’” (Wagoner). Next, Sam is compared to Johnny Manziel as well as Manti Te’o. Both Manziel and Te’o are best known for negative media attention surrounding their off-field indiscretions. Sam and Manziel are both compared for being “a pair of high-profile NFL rookies” (ESPN.com). However Sam is also compared to them due to his media presence. Whitlock argues:

Most NFL executives are smart enough to realize the Sam-media circus will subside quickly. He’s not Tim Tebow, a wildly popular college quarterback who tapped into America’s religious zealotry. Sam isn’t even Johnny Manziel, a wildly popular college quarterback who tapped into America’s secular, reality-TV zealotry. Sam is Manti Te’o, a really good college player with an interesting story…Remember when we thought he would be some major distraction for the team that drafted him. No one cares about Manti Te’o (Whitlock).

While Te’o and Sam’s stories are completely different, Whitlock still thinks that Sam’s distraction will fade into the background and he will continue playing football in the NFL. Lastly, Sam is compared to famous baseball payer Jackie Robinson who made history becoming the first African-American to play professional baseball league in the 20th century. Their comparison is highlighted as “Michael Sam still has
to perform…Jackie Robinson isn’t Jackie Robinson just because he was black and he played” (Rovell). While these comparisons to fellow male athletes demonstrate a unique comparison, Sam is also compared to women throughout the twenty articles.

Comparison To Women

Sam is also compared to women in four articles, which can be described as a sub theme. This comparison to women, though rare, is intense because it mirrors arguments found in the literature review. Kimmel states that masculinity has been historically defined as the flight from women, meaning that masculinity is seen as suppressing those feminine qualities and perhaps devaluing women. Wood states, “for many men, the most fundamental requirement for manhood is not to be feminine…peer groups pressure males to be tough, aggressive, and not feminine” (Wood 151). Therefore, arguing that gay men are historically linked to those more female characteristics justifies the importance of identifying this as a theme. Most often, this theme was identified because Sam was compared to Brittney Griner, who is referred to as “openly gay WNBA player” (Rovell) or “who publicly acknowledged her sexuality before last year’s WNBA draft” (Michael Sam Chooses Truth, 2014). However, Sam was also compared to women through the struggle of gaining acceptance in the locker room. In the article “Goodell Should Draw a Clear Line” Johnette Howard argues that NFL commissioned Goodell should do more to help Sam, similar to what NBA commission David Stern did for women entering the sports writing profession. Howard states:

A lot of the things that were said then about female sports writers resemble the things being said about Sam now—or women and gays in the military, for that
matter. He’ll be a distraction…His mere presence will skew or destroy the work environment…He won’t be able to control his sexual impulses (Howard).

Lastly, Sam was compared to women through his relationship to his fiancé (then boyfriend) Vito Cammisano. While other heterosexual couples show displays of affection on national television with no backlash, Sam and Cammisano’s kiss received a flood of negative attention from the public as well as current NFL players. Spain argues that:

McCarron and Webb haven’t been accused of overexposure or of shoving their relationship in people’s faces, but a few kisses during an emotional moment have prompted people to accuse Sam of making his selection about being gay and not about football. Sam isn’t shoving his sexuality in people’s faces any more than any player who has smooched his gal after hearing his name called in the draft or embraced his girlfriend after a big win (Spain).

The comparisons to both men and women are an interesting theme present in the twenty articles, and are important to look at because of their frequency throughout. In addition, as mentioned in the literature review, gay men have been historically linked to having more female traits, which makes Sam’s comparison to women an intense theme in the ESPN coverage.

Media, as a powerful tool for news and entertainment, can have an impact on public perspective. ESPN as a popular sports media outlet therefore can shape perspective through their coverage and language choice. In order to answer my original research question: How does ESPN’s online coverage of Michael Sam seek to
shape public perspective on gay identity in the NFL? I looked at their coverage through a cluster criticism analysis. The analysis of the 40 key terms reveals a variety of themes present in ESPN’s construction of identity. These six themes demonstrate the common language clusters that ESPN used when covering Sam. However, in order to better understand the rhetorical implications of ESPN’s construction of public perspective on gay athletes, I turned to the function of rhetoric in shaping public perspective. The following section addresses rhetoric and public perspective, which I then applied to my own research question to better realize ESPN’s ability to shape public perspective on gay identity.
INTERPRETATION

The analysis revealed several key terms and themes present in ESPN’s coverage of Michael Sam, which demonstrate their attitudes, motives, and worldviews. However in order to make sense of these findings, it is crucial to first return to my original research question and address the relationship between rhetoric and public perspective. My research question, how does ESPN’s online coverage of Michael Sam seek to shape public perspective on gay identity in the NFL, seeks to understand the relationship between ESPN’s rhetoric and the impact it has on public perspective. Before discussing the relationship between the two, it is important to define the public sphere that ESPN is engaging, and the public problem being argued. To do this, I turn to Hauser’s summary of publics theory, which identifies three key concepts: publics, public sphere, and public opinion.

As Hauser explains rhetoric and the public sphere, “any discursive arena in which rhetorical action contributes to shared opinion on a public problem can qualify as part of the public sphere for that problem. A public sphere is a discursive sphere…and it is constituted by our rhetorical exchanges” (Hauser 87). A public sphere therefore needs rhetoric and discourse, but Hauser also argues that a public needs to have three main concepts in order to be called a public. First, publics are active, which can include voting behavior, sending messages, demonstrations, or speeches. Second, publics emerge, meaning, “it consists of those who are actively creating and attending to discussion of the problem” (Hauser 87). And third, publics require rhetorical competence, an ability to participate in the experience. I argue that with ESPN’s online coverage and the emergence of social media, the public can be
seen through instant response and discourse. On ESPN’s website there is a direct link to Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Email, and a comments section, making it easy for people to engage. While ESPN’s online coverage acts as a public where people can communicate and participate, it is important to also identify the public problem that is being addressed in this public sphere.

Hauser argues “there is a significant body of evidence that indicates people are not typically engaged by public problems until they see some connection to their lives” (84). As demonstrated through the literature review, there was a clear lack of focus on openly gay athletes, and no research on active openly gay players in the NFL because up until Sam there had not been any. Since no players had come out as gay before Sam, neither the NFL, nor ESPN’s press coverage of the NFL had a public reason to discuss gay rights. By Sam coming out before the draft, and publically interesting himself into the category of openly gay, the issue of gay rights has become more of a focus in athletics. The NFL is now directly connected to the issue of gay rights because of Sam, and ESPN in turn as the first entity to cover his announcement, became involved too. Therefore the public sphere that ESPN is inserting itself into is a national focus on gay rights.

Finally, once a public and public sphere has been established with a clear problem, public judgment and the relationship to public perspective can be addressed. “Participating in public decision making is the basic right and duty we share as citizens of a free society. A primary value of rhetoric lies in helping us arrive at sound decisions” (Hauser 94). Since ESPN’s involvement in a public sphere and problem is inherently rhetorical, as discussed above, the relationship between what they publish
and the public perspective can be analyzed through looking at public opinion. Hauser states:

Public opinion without discourse loses the sense of context and reasoning that provides the basis for holding an opinion in the first place, for interpreting its meaning to those who hold it, and for future courses of action. As an alternative to opinion polls, rhetoricians understand public opinion as referring to a discursive expression of civil judgment that reflects a common understanding among the members of a public. It is the expression of meaning and preference by the active members of society through assertions of affirmation, rejection, and concern or hope that frame the public experience of their common interests and how they should be protected (Hauser 94).

While polls can serve as an effective indicator of opinion, in the case of ESPN’s coverage, the public opinion as conceived in publics theory can be seen through ESPN’s publications. Opinion is a rhetorically formed understanding, which includes looking at a public’s shared sense of reality (Hauser 94). Publics theory places weight on emerging viewpoints, discourse and debate, from publics that lend to the understanding of how a public views ideas and actions.

My thesis focuses on ESPN’s coverage, and not on the public responses to their coverage. The analysis seeks to understand ESPN’s construction of gay identity in the NFL, and how that construction shapes public perspective. Having an understanding of Hauser’s publics theory helps guide the interpretation of the rhetoric used. In addition, as discussed in the methodology chapter, social constructionism is a useful tool in analyzing their coverage.
My analysis revealed six themes present in ESPN’s coverage: *label of gay, focus on current NFL members, support for Sam, media attention, football is behind the times, and comparison to other athletes/people*. Each theme was highlighted either due to the frequency or intensity in which it was found through the cluster criticism. The themes were defined and discussed in the previous chapter; this chapter will discuss how I interpret each theme’s language and how that language shapes public perspective.

The first and most prevalent theme both in terms of frequency and intensity was the use of the term *gay* or *openly gay*. While there was overlap in key terms in almost every article in the random sample, the term *gay* was used in almost every single one, and in the 20 random sample articles it was used a total of 120 times. By focusing on his sexual orientation, ESPN is constantly drawing attention to the fact that he is gay. Because the NFL has not had to navigate the reality of an *openly gay* active football player before, the new territory provides an opportunity for ESPN to shape the public’s perspective on this issue.

The American gay rights movement is a major discussion nationally, and ESPN inserted themselves into the conversation by focusing on Sam’s entrance to the NFL and his sexual orientation. Not only was Sam’s announcement historical for the NFL, it came at a pivotal point in the debate over gay rights nationally. In February 2014, at the time of Sam’s announcement, same-sex marriage was legal in 16 states, being discussed by several states, and still banned in many other states including Sam’s home state of Missouri (RYOT.com). Over a year later, in June 2015, same-sex marriage was passed nationally (NPR.org). Because the gay rights movement was
such a large focus nationally, ESPN’s coverage served as a voice for gay athletes in an underrepresented NFL at a prime time in the movement. With ESPN being the first to cover Sam’s original announcement, they solidified their place in the discussion in the national gay rights discussion. Their language use, therefore, is a central focus on how the public’s perspective is shaped.

Using language that clearly labels someone as the other further perpetuates the heteronormativity in the NFL, and draws attention to the fact that there is a clear absence of openly gay players. Moon describes the other or othering as the process by which an individual or group becomes classified as “not one of us.” The other group becomes dismissed and sidelined. Othering is a process that identifies those who are thought to be different from oneself or the mainstream, and it can reinforce and reproduce positions of domination and subordination (Moon). ESPN is engaging in a social action that influences public perception by labeling Sam as an openly gay player and drawing attention to his difference through the label of gay. When gay is continuously used as a descriptive word for Sam it communicates that his sexual orientation is at the forefront of his identity, not his athletic abilities or performance, which no other straight player has to experience. Sam’s sexual orientation in the context of football became a set agenda for ESPN to discuss, and ESPN used valuable article space to cover Sam because he is gay.

The second theme concentrated on current NFL members, meaning ESPN’s coverage had a specific focus on how Sam’s entrance to the NFL would impact other players, coaches, staff, etc. This theme deserved attention because it draws attention to a public problem; in this case the public problem was an absence of openly gay
athletes in professional male athletics and no active openly gay players in the NFL. As stated earlier, Hauser argues “there is a significant body of evidence that indicates people are not typically engaged by public problems until they see some connection to their lives.” Since Sam was the first ever-active player to come out as gay, his emergence created a direct connection between the NFL and gay rights. With this connection came a new public space, which was the highly contested area of the locker room. As discussed in the analysis, the cluster around the term locker room came up in seven articles. More so than his performance on the field, or presence in the NFL, the coverage by ESPN clearly focuses on how Sam will impact the current players, teammates, coaches, etc. by being in the locker room. While the direct issue of the locker room did not come up in previous literature, the focus on homophobia did. Kimmel argues that this fear of homosexuality is deep-seated within masculinity and American men are socialized into a very limiting definition of what it means to be a man. Heterosexual men’s gender identity can be threatened in several ways, because it acts as self-identity, and a great fear comes from misclassification. The threats to men’s identity are related to sexually prejudicial attitudes and negative behaviors toward gay men. This fear of homosexuality therefore became a center focus for the locker room, a seemingly sacred place for players. ESPN covers this fear in the article “CB: NFL Not Ready for Gay Player,” where former player Terrell Thomas argues “there’s a lot of talk and joking around, and some guys walk around completely naked all the time, and they might not want to do that anymore. When you add that situation to the mix, I think it’s going to make some people uncomfortable” (Graziano). While the quote comes from an individual player and not ESPN, the
network’s coverage of this worry that Sam’s entrance won’t be accepted still reinforces the fear of homophobia.

The theme support for Sam was an important theme discussed in the analysis section, which had two subcategories: outside support and ESPN support. These subcategories differentiated between support Sam received from outside entities, such as the White House or Sam winning the Arthur Ashe award, and the support that came directly from ESPN, such as support in editorial pieces. It was important to separate the two types of support to accurately analyze ESPN’s part in shaping public perspective. While there was not a section on support in the literature review, the previous literature did cover language use, communication norms, and media representation of openly gay athletes, which the theme support for Sam addresses. As discussed in the analysis section, the term support was only used 16 times in all twenty articles, but support was shown through other language. Language is a central focus on this thesis, which is why it was important to identify language that could be seen when looking for clusters around the terms support, such as: tolerance, transcend sports, ground-breaking, acceptance, and courage. The analysis chapter revealed that the clusters surrounding these key terms focused on encouragement for Sam, but also drew attention to the negative attention Sam received. In addition, ESPN also compared Sam to women’s struggles for acceptance in these articles that attempted to show support.

Most of the previous literature focused on the negative impacts language can have, however Hardin et al. conducted a contextual analysis of newspaper columns by prominent U.S. sportswriters about former NBA player John Amaechi’s public
announcement that he is gay. Hardin et al. found that although the columns could be read as progressive, they were not; they condemned individuals who expressed overtly homophobic views while reinforcing the status quo in a variety of ways. Analysis of ESPN’s coverage of Sam confirms Hardin’s conclusions. While the actual key term support is not used frequently in ESPN’s coverage, where it is used, it has impact because it gives positive affirmation to Sam from ESPN. In light of other negative media attention surrounding his decision to come out and embracing his boyfriend when drafted, direct support from ESPN shows that his decision was in fact significant and important to talk about. However, the issue with these articles that show support is that they also point out the negative attention. Giving attention to the homophobic reactions in the same article where ESPN is supporting Sam takes away from the impact the support has. The harmful and homophobic reactions stand out more because they reify the issues discussed in the literature review, that openly gay athletes encounter discrimination and ridicule for not representing the ideal masculine traits (Kimmel). In the article “Michael Sam: 'Overwhelmed' by Pick” ESPN acknowledges the historical moment, quotes President Obama’s congratulations to Sam, and highlights his teammates’ support. However the article also points out several negative comments made by other current NFL players on social media, such as Don Jones’ “OMG,” and “Horrible,” and Case McCoy’s statement "ESPN ... You serious right now?" Drawing attention to homophobic comments potentially overshadows the positivity and reinforces the status quo. Especially when fellow athletes and NFL players make homophobic comments on social media, such comments perpetuate the heteronormativity in male athletics and homophobia.
Secondly, as discussed in the analysis section, Sam’s struggle for acceptance is compared to the similar struggle female reporters faced 30 years ago when trying to report after games from males’ locker rooms. While ESPN does argue the NFL and commissioner Roger Goodell \textit{should} do more to support Sam and openly gay players, the author still equates Sam’s struggle to female reporters’ struggle. The association between the two isn’t a fair comparison to make, because it reinforces the arguments found in the literature review, which states that male gay athletes are stigmatized as being feminine. Kimmel states that men fear being ridiculed as too feminine by other men, and this fear perpetuates homophobic and exclusionary masculinity. Being labeled feminine is not an insult, but it still highlights the stereotype that a person must be one or the other, not both or neither. The binary of being either a gay male with feminine traits, or a straight man with masculine traits is problematic and promotes a stereotype that is false. Ultimately ESPN does support Sam in over half of the random sample articles, which impacts ESPN’s construction of gay identity, and their support for Sam is apparent. However, their focus on the negative response undermines to a degree their message of support. The theme \textit{media attention} was substantial in all twenty articles and is again categorized into two sub themes: \textit{coverage of Sam’s media attention}, and \textit{ESPN’s response to public reaction}. These categories are important to separate to show the difference between media coverage of Sam in general, and what ESPN actually said about Sam. Media representation was an important point in the literature review, which focused on the media’s role in reifying social norms. Sports have been continuing to reify ideal masculine traits; the media has been a key factor in sports hegemony. In the media, sports are presented as
a “symbolic representation” of a social order that serve to uphold dominant values and ideas. Media representations also embody hegemony by elevating individual athletes who embody a model for masculinity, and criticize individuals who don’t (Trujillo). ESPN shows that hegemony is still present in media coverage in the article “Reaction to Sam’s Moment is Telling,” which outlines the clear preference for heteronormativity in the NFL. As Spain states,

So months of leering at AJ McCarron’s fiancée and endless bikini pics of Blake Bortles’ girlfriend are welcome, but a few moments of Sam with his significant other constitute a ‘dog and pony show’? A kiss between Sam and Cammisano is an over-the-top affront to mortality, but the McCarron-Webb on-the-field, post-game kisses we saw so often are sweet? (Spain).

Heteronormativity is defined as the cultural bias in favor of opposite-sex relationships of a sexual nature. However, not only is heteronormativity a cultural bias, it is also assumed. In this article, ESPN discourages the assumed heterosexual preference displayed in media culture. ESPN seeks to shape public perspective on the assumed norm in this, and other articles such as “Why Covering Gay Athletes Is News,” “Goodell Should Draw A Clear Line,” and “Reaction to Sam’s Moment Is Telling.” These articles demonstrate the issues with the negative response Sam received and the double standard of the assumed culture norm of heteronormativity. While the heteronormative position in ESPN’s articles is still apparent in some media coverage, ESPN did not reinforce the hegemony in sports themselves.

The theme football is behind the times stood out as important throughout the analysis because ESPN was observing a clear separation between society’s
advancement on gay rights, and the NFL’s. One article in particular, “The Marketing of Michael Sam,” argued that sports used to be an important arena for human rights, pushing the boundaries for what was accepted in the U.S. For example, Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in the MLB was not only significant for baseball, but for the nation. However now, as ESPN points out, sports like the NFL are playing catch up with society. While gay marriage was just legalized, following Sam’s departure from the NFL in September 2014, there still is not an openly gay player in the NFL. As mentioned above, gay marriage was legalized nationally in June 2015, over a year after Sam first came out nationally. While Sam played in a preseason game, his football career was short lived, and to this day openly gay athletes in professional sports are slim (Waldron). Waldron states that

In men’s sports, the retirement of Jason Collins, the NBA’s first openly gay player, and the inability of Michael Sam, the first openly gay player taken in the NFL Draft, to land an active roster spot, has left Los Angeles Galaxy midfielder Robbie Rogers as the only open gay athlete in major American men’s professional team sports (Waldron).

In comparison to this statistic, about 73% of Americans support teams signing gay or lesbian players, demonstrating the advancement of society which is not reflected in male professional sports world (Waldron). “The Marketing of Michael Sam” is not the only article that addresses the disparity between the advancement in gay rights and in the NFL. In “Why Covering Gay Athletes Is News”, Spain states “such straightforward intolerance is less frequent these days, as gay men and women continue to gain acceptance in American society,” but “homophobia in sports is far
from gone, not matter how much some people would like to pretend otherwise”

(Spain). Additionally in the article “CB: NFL Not Ready for Gay Player,” former
player Terrell Thomas argues “I think society is ready for it and America’s ready for
it, but I don’t think the NFL is” (Graziano, 2014). These ESPN articles are notable
because they demonstrate the reality that the NFL is behind the times. Drawing
attention to this is an important step in creating knowledge about gay rights for public
understanding. I think these articles also contribute to ESPN seeking to shape public
perspective on gay identity.

The final theme focuses on a comparison between Sam and other current
athletes. Sam is compared throughout ESPN’s coverage to other high profile athletes
such as Johnny Manziel, Manti Te’o, and Tim Tebow. While they all received media
attention throughout their pre-draft journey, it was for different reasons. While Sam
was compared to these previously mentioned athletes, the most significant
comparison ESPN made was between Manziel and Sam. This comparison is most
noteworthy because of the inappropriate reasons for comparing the two opposite
football players. Sam was highly covered for coming out as gay, while Manziel
received media attention because of his partying, offseason arrest, and other illegal
activities (Khan Jr., 2013). These two players are extremely different, yet were often
compared because of their high profile off-field attention; they were compared
directly in four of the random sample articles. When the two players met during
preseason, ESPN.com stated “Sam, the first openly gay active player in NFL history,
mocked Manziel’s ‘money sign’ after sacking the Heisman Trophy winner in the
fourth quarter of the St. Louis Rams’ preseason victory over the Cleveland Browns”
Previous literature found that during sporting events, commentators usually described men using active nouns such as activities, accomplishments, and positions, whereas women are described using more personal descriptors, like their appearance and relationships with others. Wood (2015) states most often commentators’ talk about female athletes by focusing on their outfits, bodies, and hairstyles, but with men the emphasis is placed on only their athletic skills. As discussed in the previous theme *Sam and Comparison to Other Athletes*, this is seen throughout ESPN’s coverage, where Sam is described using a personal descriptor such as his sexual orientation, while other athletes are described using their previous accolades or their position in the NFL. While both players are talented athletes, Manziel is described as a *Heisman Trophy Winner*, while Sam is referred to as the *first openly gay active player*, instead of being described for his own athletic accolade as the 2014 SEC Defensive Player of the Year. This comparison is problematic because ESPN is again labeling Sam for his sexual orientation, while they label Manziel, a straight football player, for his athletic abilities. This use of language demonstrates a point made during the literature review, in which Wood (2015) states during sporting events, commentators’ typically describe women by focusing on their personal or physical traits, but with men the emphasis is placed on only their athletic skills. In this case, Manziel is described by his athletic skills while Sam is described using personal qualities. In addition, Sam’s identity as a gay man is at the forefront of ESPN’s coverage, and Manziel’s history of troublemaking is ignored. Ignoring Manziel’s history demonstrates ESPN’s acceptance of his identity, while labeling Sam by his sexual orientation is a form of rejection; ESPN is rejecting
Sam’s identity by drawing attention to him being an *other*. This comparison therefore creates a negative association with gay identity in the NFL.

In addition to being compared to other athletes, Sam was also compared to women in several articles, primarily for the struggle that female reports had to endure. Female reports struggled gaining acceptance and credibility in the locker room when covering male sports, which ESPN compares to the struggle Sam could face as well. ESPN reminds their audience that female reporters created a distraction for the athletes, and finds that Sam could create a similar feeling with other male athletes. This comparison reifies the assumption discussed in the literature review, that gay men are assumed to have female traits. As discussed in the previous literature, men fear being ridiculed as too feminine by other men, and this fear perpetuates homophobic and exclusionary masculinity (Kimmel, 2004). Being compared to feminine qualities is like being called a sissy, which boys as young as six are ashamed of being because it shows they are *unmanly* (Kimmel, 2004). While ESPN’s intentions with the comparison to females cannot be assumed, the comparison still perpetuates the findings in the literature review and the deep-seated association between gay men and feminine traits. Labeling Sam as *gay* and *openly gay* perpetuate the stereotypes for gay men, whether it is a conscious choice or not. According to social constructionism, meanings are socially constructed through actors and actions, and since these can constantly be changing, social constructionism is always fluid and dynamic. Social construction is therefore concerned with the relationship between descriptive language and the world it is designed to represent (Gergen, 1994). The reason the language used to label Sam is an issue is because it is othering him,
directly making known that he is different because he is a gay man. Since coming out, Sam now not only has the pressure of coming out but of balancing now two seemingly opposite identities. Additionally, what goes along with the label of gay, are assumptions about Sam’s masculinity and how he will fit into the NFL, specifically in the locker room. As previously discussed, Sam’s presence in the locker room was compared to female reporters in the locker room and the distraction it might cause. However, the focus on how Sam will impact the locker room environment is much more than that. The focus on the locker room looks at how Sam will be a distraction because he is a gay man in a locker room with other men. This argument promotes the stereotype that gay men are constantly checking out other men, or on the hunt. The added pressure of being called a *distraction* in the workplace also adds to the construction of what it means to be a gay athlete. By associating Sam with notorious athletes like Manziel or the struggle female reporters faced in the NFL, ESPN is actively engaging in constructing Sam’s identity. Since Sam was the first ever-active openly gay player, ESPN used the lack of past experience in the NFL to influence what his presence would mean for the league.

Overall through the analysis and interpretation of themes, I argue that ESPN’s coverage does seek to shape public perspective on gay identity in the NFL. The first part of my question looks for evidence that ESPN is constructing gay identity, which through my interpretations I have answered. As first discussed, ESPN inserted themselves into the national discussion on gay rights by covering Sam and his journey to the NFL. Since there are not any other openly gay NFL players, ESPN had the opportunity to shape the public’s perspective on Sam entrance to the NFL.
ESPN’s language use focused heavily on labels, specifically labeling Sam as gay in almost every article. The first part of the identity construction is this label, which draws attention to his sexual orientation over his athletic abilities. As seen in previous literature, homophobic language emphasizes people, things, or situations that are feminine or seen as gay. A recent analysis of 1,135 self-identified heterosexual men demonstrated that members of all-male organization, for example athletic teams, are more likely to use homophobic slang use than men who are not in these groups (Hall and LaFrance, 2012). This language use therefore can lead to in-group and out-group identity, specifically the in-group is made up of self-categorized heterosexual males, and to maintain a member of the in-group, homophobic language is used to reassure other males that he is heterosexual (Hall and LaFrance, 2012). The use of homophobic language is often times used in the locker room, which was expressed as a concern with Sam being able to fit into the locker room environment (Wagoner, 2014). By using labels such as gay so often, ESPN is therefore drawing attention to Sam’s sexual orientation whether intentional or not. I therefore interpreted their use of labels as othering language, which is problematic because it promotes an in-group and out-group mentality. By publicly acknowledging Sam’s difference in the majority of the coverage through label use, they are promoting the heteronormative attitude that is common in male sports, especially hyper masculine sports like football. While there are positives to ESPN’s coverage, such as agenda setting, I think the negatives of their label use outweigh the positive attention Sam received.

While my research did not extend to cover the impact of ESPN’s coverage of Michael Sam, I did answer my research question: How does ESPN’s online coverage
of Michael Sam seek to shape public perspective on gay identity in the NFL? I argue that yes, their coverage did seek to shape perspective through inserting themselves into the national discussion on gay rights, and addressing Sam’s entrance to the NFL. Since Sam was the NFL’s first ever-active openly gay player, ESPN created the opportunity to influence public perspective by following Sam’s story and how it would impact the NFL. Ultimately, ESPN’s language and construction of identity played a large role in determining whether their coverage shaped perspective. ESPN did make important and positive claims, like asserting that football is behind the times compared to society when it comes to supporting gay rights. ESPN also clearly demonstrated support for Sam in several articles and drew attention to the negative media attention male gay athletes often receive. However, I argue that ESPN’s focus was too concentrated on Sam’s identity as a gay athlete, which overshadowed his actual ability to play football. By labeling him as gay in the majority of their coverage, ESPN is contributing to the assumed heteronormativity by pointing out that Sam isn’t a heterosexual player, or the assumed norm. ESPN’s representation also plays a role in the hegemony in the NFL by elevating individual athletes who embody a model for masculinity, and drawing attention to those who do not. In summary, while I ESPN’s actual intentions cannot be assumed, their role in Sam’s entrance to the NFL was notable. Sam’s announcement was historic not only for the NFL, but for professional sports, however ESPN’s overwhelming focus on Sam as a gay athlete first and a football player second demonstrates that as hard as Sam worked, he is outshined by his sexual orientation. I will next turn to the implications and limitations of this study, as well as suggestions for future research.
CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore ESPN’s construction of gay identity in the NFL, focusing on their coverage of Michael Sam. The objective of this analysis was to uncover motives, attitudes, and worldviews through the use of Burke’s cluster criticism and using social constructionism as a lens for guiding my interpretations. My goal was to answer the research question; how does ESPN’s online coverage of Michael Sam seek to shape public perspective on gay identity in the NFL? I found that ultimately ESPN did seek to shape public perspective on gay identity through their entrance into the national discussion on gay rights, as the organization addressed gay rights to a public. ESPN created the opportunity to influence public perspective by following Sam’s story and its impact on the NFL. Approaching this topic from an interdisciplinary position was essential in addressing key aspects of ESPN’s coverage, and in understanding how ESPN’s coverage sought to shape public perspective. This chapter will discuss the conclusions, implications and limitations of the study, as well as suggestions for future research.

Cluster criticism of ESPN’s online publications shows six major themes present: label of gay, focus on current NFL members, support for Sam, media attention, football is behind the times, and a comparison to other athletes/people. The theme that was omnipresent is the label of gay, which appears in almost every single ESPN publication. From the time he came out as gay, Sam’s identity was fixed to being the first ever-active openly gay player. Though that identity was historical, labeling him as such throughout ESPN’s coverage of him not only draws attention to his difference, but also adds pressure with that label. This study affirms that language
plays a significant role in the hyper-masculine ideology and heteronormativity in the NFL. Labeling Sam as gay is directly reinforcing his difference in the hyper-masculine NFL. One implication of this labeling is the juxtaposition of ESPN reinforcing heteronormativity through their treatment of Sam, while the organization also calls for the NFL to be accountable for the homophobia evident in the NFL. While reinforcing heteronormativity hurts public acceptance of gay identity in the NFL, ESPN does also make important and positive claims about accepting gay rights. By showing this paradox extending from language use this study contributes to understanding how gay identity is shaped through media attention.

The main limitation of this study was time limitation in treating ESPN’s extensive coverage. In total, ESPN has close to 100 written online articles covering Michael Sam. Since analyzing each of these articles in my time parameters was not feasible I had to use random sampling to arrive at a manageable data set for cluster analysis. While the random sample still produced a wide variety of ESPN articles, given more time, I would have liked to analyze each written article on ESPN’s website. Looking at each of ESPN’s articles on Sam would have produced a richer set of data to analyze with more detail, and perhaps more themes would have surfaced. However ultimately, my study did cover a wide range of articles and topics, and produced a data set rich enough to uncover important language clusters.

Overall, I found the cluster criticism proved to be an effective method of measurement for addressing ESPN’s attitudes, motives, and worldviews and their construction of gay identity in the NFL. While Burke’s cluster criticism method is generally applied on one artifact, I tried to push this method’s utility by using it over
20 artifacts, instead of just one. This created a much larger set of data to analyze, since the key-terms count, based on frequency and intensity, was 40 total terms. The large-scale application of this method proved to be useful, but required more steps than a typical cluster criticism to ensure my analysis of the key terms was not biased.

Another limitation of this study, that can also be seen as an area for future study would be to analyze the public’s response to ESPN’s coverage. While my research question focused on how ESPN sought to shape public perspective, a future study could look at the public response to verify the findings of this study. This study could be done by looking at the comments section from each article ESPN published online. The public has an opportunity to respond to ESPN and create online public forums. This study did not look at the public’s response because its focus was on ESPN’s language use in shaping perspective. Studying the readers’ reactions would demonstrate ESPN’s success or failure in shaping public perspective.

My study also does not address the intersection Sam faced with being a black openly gay male athlete. Sam’s sexuality and racial identity are both significant aspects of his identity. However as this intersection does not emerge from this study’s data set of ESPN’s coverage, I did not focus on it in my analysis. But it is important to point out that homophobia within black culture is another layer that should be studied, and could be studied in the context of language use in sports coverage in the media. Kain and Anderson (2009) argue homosexuality is often viewed as a problem for and about White men, and cite a 1999 survey by sport agent Ralph Cindrich, where he interviewed National Football League players. Kain and Anderson (2009) report Cindrich found that 91.7% of White players said they felt comfortable playing with a
gay teammate, compared to 60% of Black players (Kain and Anderson, 2009). According to the NFL Census, over 68% of players in the NFL are black, which makes Sam’s intersecting identities a significant aspect to address. Understanding the implications of Sam’s intersecting identity as a black gay man should be a focus for future studies.

Sam’s announcement came at an important time in the national discussion on gay rights, and his entrance into the NFL was a historic moment. However, his time in the NFL was short lived, and since he came out, there has yet to be another current openly gay player in the NFL. There will be many opportunities for future studies about acceptance for openly gay athletes in the NFL.
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APPENDIX A

List of 93 ESPN articles, which cover Michael Sam, are listed by most recent publishing date.

Asterisk indicates the 20 articles selected for analysis.


“Michael Sam Still on St. Louis Rams Roster After 17 Cuts Made Friday”


Wagoner, Nick. “Michael Sam of St. Louis Rams Confident He’ll Make an NFL Team.” ESPN.com, 28 August 2014. Web

Wagoner, Nick. “Michael Sam Survives 1st Round of St. Louis Rams Roster Cuts.”

*“Michael Sam of St. Louis Rams Mimics Johnny Manziel’s Money Sign.”

“Chip Sarafin of Arizona State Sun Devils Surprised By Attention.” ESPN.com, 14 August 2014. Web


*Spain, Sarah. “Reaction to Sam’s Moment is Telling.” ESPNW.com, 16 May 2014. Web.


“Michael Sam Coverage by Networks was Business as Usual.” ESPN.com, 12 May 2014. Web.

Darren, Rovell. “Johnny Manziel of Cleveland Browns has NFL’s Top-Selling Jersey.” ESPN.com, 12 May 2014.


Chadiha, Jeffri. “Michael Sam, Rams are a Perfect Fit.” ESPN.com, 10 May 2014. Web.


*“Michael Sam Wins Arthur Ashe Award.” ESPN.com, 7 May 2014. Web.


*Fox, Ashley. “Ultimately, This is a Football Story.” ESPN.com, 13 Feb. 2014. Web.


APPENDIX B

List of key terms based on frequency

Gay—120
Player/Players—105
Team/Teammates—81
Draft/Drafted—78
Out—70
First—62
Football—55
People—42
Openly—35
Moment—19
Support/Supportive—16
Statement—13
APPENDIX C

List of key terms based on intensity

Manziel
Distraction
Kiss
Gay rights
Tolerance
Social significance
Boyfriend
Brotherhood
Not a trailblazer
Marketability
Transcend sports
Truth
Ground-breaking
Prejudice,
Acceptance,
Courage
Queer
Fag
Ignorant
Anti-gay