

**Setting a Super Agenda: A Rhetorical Analysis of Mythical Framing
Messages in ESPN.com's Coverage of the NBA Finals**

**A thesis submitted to Southern Utah University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Professional Communication**

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Approval Page

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ABSTRACT

This grounded research project examines mythical messages in ESPN.com's coverage of the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals through the lens of frame and agenda setting theories. During the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals series combined, ESPN.com (including the ESPN-owned Grantland.com and FiveThirtyEight.com) published a total of 52 articles. The idea of studying the NBA Finals through the lens of mythical framing came from purely empirical observations gathered as a spectator of the television broadcasts of the series, as multiple instances were noted of broadcasters comparing physical attributes and the skillsets of the players participating in the finals to those of super heroes and mythological beings. The complete census of 52 articles published by ESPN.com was analyzed. These articles included game recaps, feature stories, and game previews. This study revealed that there was significant evidence of mythical framing messages in the articles published by ESPN.com in their coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals, but not the 2005 NBA Finals. The relationship between Walt Disney Company-owned properties ESPN and Marvel Comics is observed. It is the belief of the researcher that the mythological framing elements will continue to play a large role in reporting major sporting events, especially as the Walt Disney Company continues to acquire and create new intellectual properties.

Keywords: Framing, Agenda Setting, Sport, Basketball, Mythical, Superhero

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During game four of the 2008 Eastern Conference Semifinals, Cleveland Cavaliers basketball player LeBron James used his unbelievable quickness to soar by two defenders, then rose into the air, seemingly flying, as he threw down a thunderous dunk over another pair of helpless defenders. The crowd immediately erupted and long-time NBA announcer, Kevin Harlan, delivered the most iconic line of his career:

“LeBron James with no regard for human life!”

It was clear in that moment that LeBron James was no ordinary man. He had done something unbelievable. He had done something that normal people are not supposed to have the physical capacity to do. He clearly had super powers.

Over the course of my life, I have spent more time playing and watching basketball than any other activity. Whether I was shooting hoops with my brothers in the backyard or watching these seemingly invincible athletes, I was inspired by the likes of Michael Jordan flying through the air, Scottie Pippen stretching his arms the entire length of the court to defend multiple players, JJ Redick teleporting three-pointers directly from his hands into the basket standing 25 feet away, and the herculean Shaquille O’Neal move mountains on his way to throwing down a monstrous jam. These basketball players were gods standing amongst mere mortals. Nothing they did gave me any reason to believe they were human. Their actions on the basketball court made them seem invincible. As various players came and went, the one constant for me growing up was that these professional basketball players were the superheroes I aspired to be like.

The idea of studying ESPN.com’s coverage of the NBA Finals through the lens of mythical framing and agenda setting spawned from my childlike admiration of professional

basketball players, as well as from empirical observations I gathered as a spectator of the television broadcasts of the games. I noted multiple instances of broadcasters comparing the physical attributes and skillsets of the players participating in the finals to those of super heroes and mythological beings.

Studying messages delivered through ESPN.com-published articles (artifacts) is important because ESPN.com, Grantland.com, and FiveThirtyEight.com combine to register over 25 million visitors a day (Gaymoli, 2015). This number far surpasses the visitors from rival sports news websites SI.com and Yahoo Sports. It also makes ESPN.com frequented more often than major internet news outlets like CNN.com and The Huffington Post. The sheer mass of ESPN.com's audience provides enough reason for any of its published articles to be examined.

Likewise, due to the worldwide following of the National Basketball Association, articles published about the NBA are being read by a more diverse audience. In a 2012 article published by Forbes Magazine, NBA President of International Affairs, Heidi Ueberroth, said,

“Basketball’s popularity is at an all-time high. Fans want to see the very best compete and what’s unique in our sport is that the best players in the world play in a single league. Basketball is the number-two sport globally with an estimated 500 million people playing the game (Jessop, 2012).”

Following this introduction, a literature review, research questions and their relevance will be explained, as will the methods used in this study. An analysis and discussion of these findings will conclude this paper.

Theory

Framing is often used in discussing news media reporting. Gamson and Modigliani (1987) explain that a frame is a, “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning” (p.

143). Pan and Kosicki (1993) describe framing as a, “strategy of constructing and processing news,” in a way that reflects and operates in, “shared beliefs,” “meanings,” and “stories,” of the intended audiences (p. 56-60). To appropriately frame the grand spectacle that is the NBA Finals, news media have adopted a framing method through which their audiences can resonate with.

Agenda setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The two assumptions that lay at the front of agenda setting are that the media do not reflect reality, but instead filter and shape it, and that the media chooses to concentrate on a few issues and subjects, which in turn leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than others (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). The comparison of time frames is a critical aspect of agenda setting in news media communications.

The aim of this study is to analyze the most widely accepted sports media source (ESPN.com) and decipher the characteristics of the framing and agenda setting techniques adopted by the ESPN.com journalists. While very little research about mythical messages in sports media currently exists, this research is consistent with the current literature on media framing and agenda building.

The 2005 NBA Finals

The 2005 NBA finals featured the San Antonio Spurs of the Western Conference and the Detroit Pistons of the Eastern Conference. This series featured the first matchup of the previous two NBA champions since the 1987 Finals, which was only the third time in NBA history this had ever happened.

The San Antonio Spurs boasted a strong recent history of success, being perennial contenders for the NBA championship since 1998, winning in 1998 and 2003. Because the Spurs

were upset early in the 2004 playoffs, they added key pieces Brent Barry, Nazr Mohammed, and Glen Robinson to play alongside regulars Bruce Bowen, Robert Horry, Manu Ginobili, Tony Parker, and team leader Tim Duncan. The Spurs spent the 2005 season battling the Phoenix Suns for the best record in the west, and easily dispatched Phoenix in just five games in the Western Conference finals. The Detroit Pistons were the defending NBA Champions, having defeated the heavily-favored Los Angeles Lakers in 2004. The Pistons were led by Chauncey Billups, Richard “Rip” Hamilton, Tayshaun Prince, Rasheed Wallace, and NBA defensive player of the year, Ben Wallace. The Pistons' 2005 season was a tumultuous one, however, marked by major controversy, as well as distracting issues involving their head coach, Larry Brown. In the first month of the season, a brawl erupted during a game against the Indiana Pacers. Dubbed the “Malice in the Palace,” it was one of the largest fan-player incidents in the history of American sports, and resulted in heavy fines and suspensions for several players, as well as a great deal of NBA and media scrutiny. Meanwhile, head coach Larry Brown was forced to leave the team on two occasions due to health concerns.

In one of the most intense championship series in the history of the NBA, the San Antonio Spurs emerged victorious as they defeated the Detroit Pistons, four games to three.

Despite the excitement surrounding the series, the 2005 NBA Finals actually hold the second-lowest television ratings of any NBA Finals in the past 16 years. It averaged only 12.5 million viewers per episode (“TV by the Numbers, 2009). ESPN.com published 16 different stories in their coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals. This grounded research project examines those 16 articles, extracting mythical messages and other themes consistent across the 16-article census, through the lens of framing theory.

The 2015 NBA Finals

The 2015 NBA Finals were played between the Golden State Warriors of the Western Conference and the Cleveland Cavaliers of the Eastern Conference. The 2015 NBA Finals also held historical significance for the National Basketball Association as the head coaches for both franchises were in their first year as head coaches in the NBA, which was the first time this had happened since the conception of the league.

The Warriors were led by NBA regular-season MVP Stephen Curry, but featured a rotation much deeper than the typical NBA franchise, with up to eleven players seeing regular minutes on the court. The Cleveland Cavaliers were led by LeBron James, who has been generally accepted as the best player in the world for most of the past decade, and arguably the greatest basketball talent the world has seen since Michael Jordan. The coach of the Golden State Warriors, Steve Kerr, had relatively little coaching experience on his resume, while David Blatt, head coach of the Cleveland Cavaliers, had been a head coach for multiple years in Europe.

The series concluded after just six games, with the Golden State Warriors winning four games to two.

I was one of the estimated 28,744,000 people that tuned into the deciding game six of the 2015 NBA Finals (Gaymoli, 2015). I noted multiple instances of broadcasters comparing the physical attributes and skillsets of the players participating in the finals to those of super heroes and mythological beings. During the course of the 2015 NBA Finals, ESPN published a total of 36 articles through ESPN.com and the ESPN-owned Grantland.com and FiveThirtyEight.com. This grounded research project also examines those 36 articles, extracting mythical messages and other themes consistent across the 36-article census, through the lens of framing theory.

A Brief History of ESPN & ESPN.com

ESPN was founded in 1978 by Bill Rasmussen, Scott Rasmussen, and Ed Eagan (Rasmussen, 2010). Bill Rasmussen was recently fired from his job as the Communications Director of the New England Whalers (now the Carolina Hurricanes). Scott Rasmussen is Bill's son and Ed Eagan was an associate of Bill's from his time with the New England Whalers. Eagan once approached Bill with the idea of creating a monthly cable television program covering the New England Whalers. After he was fired by the New England Whalers, Bill reconnected with Eagan and began to discuss the idea of a cable television network that focused on covering all major sporting events in the Connecticut region. The Rasmussens and Eagan were later joined by Bob Beyus (Rasmussen, 2010).

Initially, the "Entertainment and Sports Programming Network" was met with much resistance. According to Bill Rasmussen, the concept of a total sports network operating around the clock in 1978 "defied imagination." He said, "...in 1978, the concept of a total sports network operating around the clock defied imagination, yet reached fruition in just 14 months. Naysayers abounded - especially among the broadcast giants of the day" (2010). Despite being faced with a lack of broadcast interest, the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network, then known as ESP, was incorporated on July 14, 1978, for a fee of \$91.00 (Miller & Shales, 2011).

However, the four men were still faced with the task of finding a way to broadcast their new sports channel. They began their search at United Cable, where they were introduced to brand-new means of television distribution known as satellite communication (Miller & Shales, 2011). They were then directed to RCA, which had experience in satellite communication. Al Parinello, who was hired by RCA to promote the new technology, agreed to meet with Bill. At the meeting, Bill explained they were interested in regional sports broadcasting, however

Parinello explained that with satellite communication their channel could be broadcast across the country. Furthermore, Parinello informed Bill that buying a continuous 24-hour satellite feed was less expensive than sending the signal across Connecticut via landlines. Bill and his partners then agreed to buy the transponder for the satellite (Milles & Shales, 2011).

With a wider audience to appeal to, the Rasmussens began to retool their original concept and on August 16, 1978, they agreed that the channel would feature all types of sports 24 hours a day, with a half-hour sports show every night. They purchased a transponder for \$30,000 and chose to buy a parcel of land in Bristol, Connecticut that had been built on a dump for \$18,000.

In February of 1979, ESP received financial assistance from Stuart Evey and George Conner of the Getty Oil Company (Rasmussen, 1983). With financial backing, Bill decided to concentrate his efforts on securing a contract with the NCAA to rebroadcast college sporting events (Miller & Shales, 2011). Bill figured that ESP would struggle to secure rights to professional sports and thought that having a contact with the NCAA would legitimize the ESP brand. ESP and the NCAA eventually came to an agreement to broadcast 18 different NCAA sports, including championship games, for two years (Miller & Shale, 2011).

ESP was still six months away from launching. At this time, the 1979 NCAA Men's Division I Basketball Tournament had garnered considerable attention, as it was watched by 24.1 million viewers. Featuring a matchup between Indiana State University's Larry Bird and Michigan State University's Magic Johnson, the tournament is regarded as having an instrumental part in ESP's eventual success due to the fact many viewers called their cable providers saying that they wanted, "that channel that has all the basketball" (Miller & Shale, 2011). In May 1979, the Getty Oil Company provided \$15 million to the company and Anheuser-Busch came to an agreement with ESP for the largest advertising contract in cable

television history at the time, valued at \$1.38 million (Rasmussen, 1983). Bill Rasmussen didn't stop there, however. Realizing that ESP needed additional sponsors and advertising, Bill decided to distinguish the network from the "Big Three three-letter networks," ABC, NBC and CBS, and renamed ESP as ESPN-TV (Miller & Shale, 2011). The name was shortened to just ESPN prior to the channel's launch.

Stuart Evey gradually gained control of the company through his financial backing and sought out ESPN's first president. Bill Rasmussen wanted to hire Dick Ebersol, who had been fired from NBC in January 1979, but Evey focused his efforts on Chet Simmons (Miller & Shale, 2011). At that time, Chet Simmons was running NBC Sports. Simmons had become increasingly frustrated with NBC, as his vision often conflicted with those of other NBC executives. Evey promised Simmons that he would face little interference from the Rasmussens, and without Bill Rasmussen's knowledge, Simmons agreed to become the network's first president (Rasmussen, 2010). With the Rasmussens gradually being pushed out of the company, Evey and Simmons continued to move forward, hiring a broadcasting team that included Jim Simpson, George Grande, Bob Ley, Lee Leonard, Chris Berman, and Dick Vitale (Miller & Shale, 2011).

On September 7, 1979, at 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time, an estimated 30,000 viewers tuned in to witness the launch of ESPN (Miller & Shale, 2011). Simultaneously, ESPN debuted its first SportsCenter telecast with anchors Lee Leonard and George Grande. The first words spoken were from Leonard who informed viewers: "If you love sports...if you really love sports, you'll think you've died and gone to sports heaven" (Miller & Shale, 2011).

In 1984, ABC reached a deal with the Getty Oil Company to acquire ESPN. ABC retained an 80% share, and sold a 20% interest to Nabisco (Miller & Shale, 2011). The Nabisco shares were later sold to the Hearst Corporation, which still holds a 20% ownership stake in the

channel today (Santoli, 2008). In May 1985, ABC was purchased by Capital Cities Communications in a \$3.5 billion deal that was finalized in February 1986. In February 1996, The Walt Disney Company purchased Capital Cities/ABC for \$19 billion, and assumed the latter company's 80% stake in ESPN at that time (Santoli, 2008). The purchase of ESPN, Inc. by the Walt Disney Company is an integral part of this study.

In 1995, ESPN launched ESPNNet.SportsZone.com (ESPN, Inc., 2016). Eventually rebranded as ESPN.com, the website attracts over 25 million visitors daily (Gayomali, 2015). This number far surpasses the visitors from rival sports news websites SI.com and Yahoo Sports. It also makes ESPN.com frequented more often than major internet news outlets like CNN.com and The Huffington Post (Gaymoli, 2015).

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica (2014), today ESPN currently broadcasts 65 different sports, 24 hours a day, in 16 different languages, in over 200 countries.

A Brief History of Marvel Worldwide Inc.

The company commonly referred to as Marvel Comics was started in 1939 as Timely Publications (Thomas & Busiek, 2014). By the early 1950s, the company grew to be known as Atlas Comics. It wasn't until 1961 that the company became widely-recognized as Marvel Comics, as the company was rebranded alongside the launching of The Fantastic Four and other superheroes created by Stan Lee (Sanderson, 2007).

Marvel Comics began to gain steam and increase its readership through appealing to older readers, such as college-aged adults, by introducing flawed superheroes (Thomas & Busiek, 2014). Instead of presenting the perfect, attractive, athletic heroes found in other comic books, many of the Marvel Comic heroes looked like villains and monsters. This naturalistic

approach even extended into politics. In his book, *Superhero comics of the silver age: The illustrated history*, historian Mike Benton explained,

“In the world of Superman comic books, communism did not exist. Superman rarely crossed national borders or involved himself in political disputes. From 1962 to 1965, there were more communists (in Marvel Comics) than on the subscription list of Pravda. Communist agents attack Ant-Man in his laboratory, red henchmen jump the Fantastic Four on the moon, and Viet Cong guerrillas take potshots at Iron Man” (p. 38).

As the company grew thanks to the popularity of Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four, Marvel Comics began publishing additional superhero titles such as the Hulk, Thor, Ant-Man, Iron Man, the X-Men, Daredevil, the Inhumans, Black Panther, Doctor Strange, Captain Marvel and the Silver Surfer, including memorable antagonists such as Doctor Doom, Magneto, Galactus, Loki, the Green Goblin, and Doctor Octopus (Boucher, 2009). What made it even more exciting to readers was every superhero and supervillain shared a common reality known as the Marvel Universe, with locations that mirror real-life cities such as New York, Los Angeles and Chicago (Boucher, 2009).

Marvel Comics continued to grow through the the 1980s. In 1991 Ronald Perelman, whose company, the Andrews Group, had purchased Marvel Comics’ parent corporation, the Marvel Entertainment Group in 1989, took the company public (New York Times, 1997). By 1995, however, the comic book industry began to slump, and in December 1996, Marvel Comics filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection (New York Times, 1997).

In 1997, the company Toy Biz merged with the Marvel Entertainment Group, which ended the bankruptcy. This merger also formed a new corporation, Marvel Enterprises (New York Times, 1997). With the new millennium, Marvel Comics emerged from bankruptcy and

again began diversifying its offerings through feature film franchises. Franchises such as The Men in Black starting in 1997, Blade starting in 1998, the X-Men starting in 2000, and Spider-Man starting in 2002 pushed Marvel Comics back into financial stability (Raviv, 2004).

On August 31, 2009, the Walt Disney Company acquired Marvel Comics' parent company, Marvel Entertainment, for \$4 billion (Barnes & Cieply, 2009). It was widely speculated that Marvel Entertainment was again facing dire financial trouble. Of the acquisition, *Fortune Magazine's* Matthew Ingram said,

“Measured by almost any standard, artistic or financial, Disney's acquisition is arguably one of the best things that (Walt Disney Company) CEO Bob Iger has ever done... At the time it was consummated, some investment analysts were skeptical about whether Disney's stock was a buy, but anyone who listened to them missed out on a huge run-up in value. Disney stock was \$26 just before the company acquired Marvel; it is now over \$100. There have been other factors involved in the increase, obviously—including ESPN and Pixar—but Marvel is a big part” (2015).

By 2015, Disney had generated box-office revenue of more than \$8 billion from Marvel-related movies and TV shows, according to one estimate (Ingram, 2008). That doesn't include merchandise or other revenues related to the franchise. One analyst stated that by the time the Walt Disney Company was finished with The Avengers, Iron Man 3 and the Captain America and Thor sequels, Disney already paid for the entire acquisition of Marvel Entertainment (Ingram, 2008).

As of January 2016, the Walt Disney Company has produced 12 films, with at least 12 more in development or planned (Patten, 2015).

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Framing Theory and Agenda Setting

American Journalist Walter Lippmann was the first scholar to introduce the concept of how the media can construct frames and set an agenda through which the audience interprets events (Lippman, 1922). In Lippman's publication, *Public Opinion*, theorized the view that the public responds not to actual events in the environment but to "the pictures in our heads," which he called the pseudo-environment. Of his work, Lippmann said,

"For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And altogether we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 16).

Through framing, the media is essentially offering a simpler model of news consumption by setting the agenda for the general public (Littlejohn, 2011). This illustrates how the concept of framing is closely associated with agenda setting, and both theories will be thoroughly utilized throughout this research.

Framing Theory

Renowned sociologist, Erving Goffman, introduced modern framing theory. In his article, "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience (published in 1974)," Goffman presented that frames are a set of concepts and theoretical perspectives that organize experiences and guide the actions of individuals. Goffman suggested that a given person interprets everything

that is going on around him/her (their immediate world) through a primary framework, which is taken for granted by said person (Goffman, 1974).

Durham (1998) explains “when successfully employed, as they generally are, frames make the world a more knowable and understandable” (p.100). According to Berkowitz (2005), the more “unusual and unexpected” an event is, the more journalists seek to explain it in a way that is “relatively familiar” (p. 608). The motive behind this method is the ability of journalists to make their stories better resonate with their respective audiences. Frames represent “ideological” positions and “social narratives” through which journalism “create meaning” (Durham 1998, p. 105). Stories with particularly spectacular content, such as athletes performing unbelievable feats, need a frame through which journalists can provide some type of meaning in order to aid their audience in understanding and coping with the event. Fuglsang (2001) argues that journalists rely on “readily understood, interpretive frames” found in “ritual, myth, and metaphor” in order to develop frames (p. 185).

Much of the media’s ability to utilize agenda setting and framing theories is predicated on their credibility of particular issues (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006, pp. 88-109). A media outlet that is thought of as highly credible has more power to guide the way an audience views an issue or event. Likewise, a media outlet with little credibility with a particular issue would have less ability to guide audience beliefs. For example, the Food Network, despite being a very credible source for all things cooking, would not possess the same ability as ESPN when people are looking for sports news.

Media Framing

More specifically, media framing refers to the process of putting a news story together, including the ways in which a story is organized and structured (Littlejohn, 2011). The way in

which the media depicts events (frames them) can constrain how audiences interpret these events. This can happen by various textual features of the event, such as headlines, audio-visual components, metaphors used, and the way in which the story is told (Rhee, 1997, pp. 26-48).

In the book, “The Art of Framing,” by Gail Fairhurst and Robert Sarr, the authors list seven popular techniques in which the media utilizes framing. These techniques are through: the use of metaphors, stories (narration), tradition, jargon, artifacts, contrast, and spin (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996, pp. 18-43)

A metaphor is used to frame a conceptual idea through comparison to something else. Stories, such as myths and legends, are used to frame a topic via narrative in a vivid and memorable way. Traditions are the cultural mores that imbue significance in the mundane. The use of artifacts, which is closely related to the use of traditions, involves objects with intrinsic symbolic value; a visual/cultural phenomenon that holds more meaning than the object itself. Slogan, jargon, and catchphrases are used to frame an object with a catchy phrase to make it more memorable and relatable. Contrast is utilized to describe an object in terms of what it is not. And lastly, spin is used to present a concept in a way to convey a value judgment (positive or negative) that might not be immediately apparent (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996).

Media Framing in Action

On April 16, 2007, a Virginia Tech (VT) student named Seung-Hui Cho shot and killed 32 faculty members and students on the campus and injured 25 more before taking his own life. An article titled, “Race in Media Coverage of School Shootings: A Parallel Application of Framing Theory and Attribute Agenda Setting,” investigated news media coverage of the race of the perpetrator in the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, using agenda-setting and framing perspectives. The first article that was studied featured an extensive interview with Wayne Lo, an

Asian perpetrator of a previous school shooting (Henig, 2007). Comparisons between the shootings that Lo had committed at Bard's College at Simon's Rock in 1992 and the 2007 VT shootings were made throughout the article, and Lo was asked multiple times to provide insight into the mind of the Seung-Hui Cho (the Virginia Tech shooter), even though they had never met. The second article which was studied critiqued undue attention paid to the race of perpetrators in previous media coverage of mass shootings committed by Asians and wondered whether that trend would be repeated in media coverage of the VT incident (Yang, 2007). The author's ultimate findings of this study showed that more than one-third of newspaper articles contained racial information. The agenda-setting analysis enabled comparison with coverage of the Columbine shootings, in which race was virtually absent; framing analysis revealed that the media framed the VT incident around the perpetrator's ethnicity and generalized criminal culpability to his ethnic group (Park, Holody, & Zhang, 2012).

Another study examined media framing of professional basketball player Jason Collins' coming out as a homosexual male (Kian, Anderson, & Shipka, 2014). This event was newsworthy because Collins became the first "active" (not retired) gay athlete in one of the four most popular American professional men's sports leagues (the National Football Association, Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, and the National Hockey League). Collins came out through an article published by Sports Illustrated on its website on April 29, 2013. Even though his season had already ended, Collins was still considered an "active" NBA player for the Washington Wizards because the NBA playoffs were ongoing. The authors analyzed all articles on Collins published over a four-day period in the five most circulated US newspapers and five most trafficked USA-based sport websites after he came out publicly, and then analyzed those same publications over a three-day period following his signing with and

playing for the Brooklyn Nets as an openly gay player. Their findings showed that journalists framed Collins' self-outing as a landmark for US sport, noting that both sport and the USA as now far more accepting of sexual minorities. The few media members and athletes who criticized Collins or homosexuality were framed as antiquated outliers. Sports journalists continued to frame Collins as a hero after he signed with the Brooklyn Nets. Upon his return to the NBA nearly 10 months after coming out, prominent African-American basketball players and Collins' teammates with Brooklyn were quoted as equating homophobia with racism in offering their support for Collins. Overall, media framed sport as an inclusive, accepting institution for gays, countering most previous research on homosexuality in sport media (Kian, Anderson, & Shipka, 2014). Additionally, they found that the NBA (with the help of the media) was expansive from heteronormativity to homonormative activity, or the accepting of gay perspectives through the application the same rules of heteronormativity to a gay audience (Duggan, 2002).

Media Framing in Sport

In recent years, both the ways in which media producers create stories and the values under which they operate have been explored by scholars in a variety of domains, including mass communication, journalism, and political science (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997). Although most media producers do not intentionally use specific frames over others, they must nonetheless select a certain number of stories and relevant features to report due to time and content restraints (McCombs, 2004). Indeed framing is a necessary journalistic tool used to reduce the complexity of the content (Gans, 1979).

In the wide world of sports, framing plays an important role. Over the past several decades, media coverage of both professional and nonprofessional athletes has reached unprecedented levels (Lewis & Weaver, 2013). A popular example of how stories can be framed

differently is in the media coverage of professional athletes who become rapidly popular among media audiences as their stories become prevalent in the media cycle. A well-known example of this phenomena is that of LeBron James. Coming out of inner-city Akron, Ohio, LeBron James was an 18-year-old high school senior who displayed the greatest amount of basketball talent and potential the world had seen since a young Michael Jordan. James became an overnight sensation as he graduated high school, announced that he would forgo college, and immediately jump to the NBA. Something out of a storybook, James was drafted by his hometown Cleveland Cavaliers. Over the course of his first seven seasons in the NBA, James enjoyed a moderate amount of success with the Cavaliers, reaching the NBA Finals once. It seemed like James could do no wrong as he frequently displayed dominance (winning two MVPs) as he played on a team considered to be a perennial underdog. This all changed, however, during the summer of 2010 when James announced that he would be leaving and “taking his talents to South Beach,” as a member of the Miami Heat. This act of “betrayal” to his hometown team was cause for James to immediately be labeled a villain. Instead of playing in front of adoring fans every game outside of Miami, James was greeted with “boos” and disdain. This narrative was driven further as James continued to win MVPs, and played in four consecutive NBA Finals with the Heat, winning in 2012 and 2013. But to change course once again, on July 11, 2014, James wrote a first-person essay in *Sports Illustrated*, announcing that he would be returning to Cleveland in order to lead the Cavaliers to an NBA title. This caused the media to again change the narrative in which they were describing James, now lauding him as a hero of the city. This coverage of LeBron James is a clear example of how stories about professional athletes can be crafted in a variety of ways.

Clearly, sports journalism content increasingly consists of a continuous overlap of sports coverage, entertainment, and celebrity (Lewis & Weaver, 2013). Because of this, it is important

to examine the specific frames the media utilizes to shift how the general public views professional athletes. This specific research aims to clarify the area between media framing and the usage of mythological themes in journalism. A better understanding of these effects will allow the audience of the National Basketball Association to better form their own opinions of professional athletes, while simultaneously allowing scholars to better comprehend framing effects on the attitudes, intentions, and enjoyment of this audience within the sports media domain.

Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda-setting can best be defined as how the influence of the news media helps to determine an issue or topic's importance in the audience's mind (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). In its core, agenda setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). There are two basic assumptions of agenda setting. The first assumption is that the press and the media do not reflect reality, but filter and shape it instead. The second assumption is the media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those specific issues as more important than other issues (Rogers & Dearing, 1998). In order to have a better understanding of this theory, it is important to understand Shannon and Weaver's model of communication (1948), where the media acts as the transmitter and the audience acts as the receiver. With this model in mind, there are two factors that are key in the Agenda-Setting Theory: the media's agenda and the public's agenda. The media agenda is measured by how much the media covers a topic and the public agenda is measured by what people think is important (Dearing and Rogers, 1992). Perhaps the most critical aspect in the concept of an agenda-setting role of mass communication is the time frame in which this phenomenon occurs.

The idea of agenda-setting has been around since the days of the printing press (Baran & Davis, 2011). However, Bernard Cohen is generally credited with refining Walter Lippmann's ideas into the theory of agenda setting. Cohen once wrote, "The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the tune in telling people what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." Cohen's writing became the basis for what is now known as the agenda-setting function of the media (Baran & Davis, 2011).

Modern studies on agenda setting were first introduced in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, as they built on Cohen's research and more fully developed those ideas. McCombs and Shaw were the first to use agenda setting theory to suggest that it is the media who sets a public agenda by telling their respective audiences what to think about (1972). Their study, which came to be known as the "Chapel Hill Study," developed agenda setting theory through the coverage of the 1968 presidential election between Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon. McCombs and Shaw surveyed 100 residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina about what the residents thought were the most important issues of the election, and compared the results to what the issues that the local and national media were reporting as the most important issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). More specifically, McCombs and Shaw explored Lippmann's idea of imagery by examining the media's agenda and comparing it to the key issues of the undecided voters. What they found was that the voter's agenda highly correlated to that of the news media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Since 1972, McCombs and Shaw, along with many other scholars, have expanded on this theory and have continued to produce unique research about the agenda setting function of the media.

In 1993, McCombs and Shaw claimed that media depictions can affect how people think about the news, and are “stunningly successful in telling us what to think about” (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). In other words, agenda setting establishes what the salient issues or images in the minds of the public really are.

According to Everett Rogers and J.W. Dearing, there are three basic types of agenda setting: public, media, and policy agenda setting (1998). Public agenda setting focuses on the agenda of a specific audience, while media agenda setting focuses on the influence of the media on public perception (Rogers & Dearing, 1998). Policy setting, on the other hand, deals with how media and public agendas influence the decisions of policy makers (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). This research will focus on the agenda setting function of the media.

Agenda Setting Function in the Media

In 1963, Bernard Cohen noted that the media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” Cohen made the observation that “the world will look different to different people depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors and publishers of the paper they read” (Cohen, 1963).

The agenda setting function of the media is a three-part process (Dearing & Rogers, 1997). First, the priority of issues to be discussed in the media, or media agenda, must be set. Second, the media agenda in some way affects or interacts with what the public thinks, creating the public agenda. Finally, the public agenda affects or interacts in some way with what policy makers consider important, called the policy agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1997). “In the theory’s simplest and most direct version, then, the media agenda affects the public agenda, and the public agenda affects the policy agenda” (Littlejohn, 2011).

The prevailing belief among current media researchers is that the media possesses the ability to have a powerful effect on the public agenda, but the media is not always guaranteed to have a powerful effect. The power of the media's impact depends on factors such as: media credibility on particular issues at specific times, the extent of conflicting evidence as perceived by individual members of the public, the extent to which values are shared among the media and the public, and the general public's need for guidance (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). The media is most powerful when media credibility is perceived as high, conflicting evidence is low, individuals share media values, and the audience has a high need for guidance (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006).

Agenda Setting in Action

The aforementioned "Chapel Hill study" of the media and public opinion by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw marked the formal development of agenda setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1968). In this study, McCombs and Shaw demonstrated a strong correlation between what 100 residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, thought was the most important election issue and what the local and national news media reported was the most important issue. By comparing the salience of issues in news content with the public's perceptions of the most important election issue, McCombs and Shaw determined the degree to which the media sways public opinion.

In their 2003 study, Julie Yioutas and Ivana Segvic applied agenda setting theory to the coverage of Clinton/Lewinsky scandal. Titled, "Revisiting the Clinton/Lewinsky Scandal: The Convergence of Agenda Setting and Framing," this posed the question: If polls show morality is important to the public, then why wasn't Clinton and Lewinsky's relationship (2003)? The researchers argued that public perception was effected by a case of compelling arguments, where

the media's choice of attributes negatively affected the public's salience of the story. Throughout the examined texts, the "sex scandal/adultery" attribute was frequently utilized by the media, but the public found it to be of low relevance (Yioutas & Segvic, 2003). The researchers speculated that because of its high use in the beginning of the scandal, the "sex scandal/adultery" attribute persisted in people's minds, and influenced the way they viewed continuing coverage of the scandal.

In another study centered on politics, a 2014 study focused on the agendas of specific networks in their coverage of the 2012 U.S. presidential election. This study, authored by McCombs and Shaw alongside Chris Vargo and Lei Guo, sifted through large datasets on Twitter in order to validate network agenda setting. The results demonstrated that during the 2012 U.S. presidential election, distinctive audiences "melded" agendas of various media differently (Vargo, Guo, McCombs, & Shaw, 2014). "Vertical" media best predicted Obama supporters' agendas on Twitter whereas Romney supporters were best explained by Republican "horizontal" media. Moreover, Obama and Romney supporters relied on their politically affiliated horizontal media more than their opposing party's media (Vargo et al., 2014).

Agenda Setting in Sports

One of the primary goals of the sports media is to bring information about the sporting world to its respective audiences. This information can take many different forms. For example, immediately following Super Bowl 50 (played on Sunday, February 6, 2016, between the Denver Broncos and Carolina Panthers), two major stories surfaced: Denver Quarterback Peyton Manning winning a Super Bowl and retiring to seemingly "ride off into the sunset," and legendary quarterback Peyton Manning being involved in a sexual assault case while in college. In short, the media has the task of moving information from those who have it to those who need

to be informed. However, the decline in publications of print newspapers, which has made those who consume the information from the sports media turn to the Internet for information (Krumsvik, 2014), does the media set the public agenda on what is important in the sports world in an attempt to gain and retain media consumers? Miami Herald columnist Dan Le Batard (2014) noticed the audience's need for information in regards to Cleveland Cavaliers' all-star LeBron James' decision on whether or not to return the Cavaliers or stay with the Miami Heat. Because of this thirst for information, Le Batard (2014) also noticed the media blowing seemingly unimportant news out of proportion. This trend Le Batard noticed may not be an isolated case and may reflect an agenda-setting process.

The majority of agenda setting research of major sporting events has focused on media coverage of the Olympic Games. Traditionally, media coverage of the Olympic Games has been shown to exhibit biases in terms of gender, nationality, and they specific sports which are covered, which can collectively lead to the contribution of negative societal consequences and inaccurate historical records of such events (Eagleman, Burch, & Vooris, 2014). Scholars have suggested that because of the internet's expanded spatial parameters, new media have the ability to provide more equitable coverage of events such as the Olympics.

In 2010, James Angelini and Andrew Billings used theories of agenda setting and framing to examine NBA's Americanized telecast of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Five sports (gymnastics, diving, swimming, track and field, and beach volleyball) received more than 90% of the prime-time coverage, which set an agenda about which sports were most relevant for Americans to watch. The limited scope within NBC's televised agenda, in turn, facilitated the gendered framing of Olympians through sport commentator accounts (Angelini & Billings,

2010). Gendered differences were statistically present in only four sports; diving had no significant differences, whereas beach volleyball contained the most difference.

In a more recent study, “A Unified Version of London 2012: New-Media Coverage of Gender, Nationality, and Sport for Olympics Consumers in Six Countries,” Eagleman et al. used agenda setting theory to employ a content analysis methodology to determine whether different constructions of the 2012 London Olympics were presented to media consumers on news websites in Australia, Brazil, China, Great Britain, Kenya, and the United States. Findings indicated that very few gender, nationalistic, or sport biases existed in any of the countries’ coverage, lending credence to the notion that the Internet affords media managers with an opportunity to provide more equitable coverage and thus a more accurate depiction of events.

Research Questions

Considering the literature analyzed, ESPN.com’s coverage of the NBA Finals meets the qualifications for being framed through mythical archetypes. The 2005 NBA Finals and the 2015 NBA Finals were chosen to examine because the Walt Disney Company purchase of Marvel Entertainment occurred during the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals’ ten-year separation. Prior research conducted on the topics of news framing and agenda setting, when coupled with the results of the pilot study of this research, led to the formation of the following research questions.

RQ1: How were the players framed through mythical, heroic, or superhuman archetypes?

RQ2: What other rhetorical themes were present throughout the coverage?

RQ3: How were the 2005 & 2015 NBA finals framed differently?

RQ4: How did agenda setting contribute to the framing of the 2005 & 2015 NBA finals?

CHPATER III

Methods

The practice of rhetorically analyzing texts is a study that dates back to ancient Greece. Rhetorical studies originated in Greek politics, thus is strongly rooted in the practice of persuasion. Rhetorical Criticism in communication studies can be defined as a descriptive analysis and evaluation of communication methods (Foss, 2009). A communication critic, in a rhetorical sense, would therefore actively seek out persuasive uses of communication and interpret what the messages are that are being communicated. As Bizzell and Herzber (1990) stated:

“Rhetoric is synonymous with meaning, for meaning is in use and context, not words themselves. Knowledge and belief are products of persuasion, which seeks to make the arguable seem to be natural, to turn positions into premises – and it is rhetoric’s responsibility to reveal these ideological operations” (pp. 14-15).

By understanding these “ideological operations” we may further realize the significance of the texts analyzed, especially for those involved in creating the message.

This study utilized grounded theory through the theoretical lens of mythical framing. Grounded theory is a qualitative research method utilized to develop theories by systematically gathering and analyzing field data. Rather than theorizing how a communicative process may work in practice, grounded theory evolves during actual research through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In their own words, Strauss and Corbin explained, “In this method, data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another...the researcher will begin with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data. Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the ‘reality’

than is theory derived by outing together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Gerianne Merrigan and Carole Logan Huston provided an example of grounded theory in practice in their book, “Communication Research Methods (2009).” They stated:

“Stamp (1999) examined 288 interpersonal communication research studies published in Human Communication Research between 1974 and 1999 and used constant comparison to place these articles into a 17-part category system... By examining the categories in relationship to one another, Stamp developed an overall theory, or model, of interpersonal communication. Thus, grounded theory begins with observed evidence, whereas many other theories begin with researchers’ ideas about how communication happens, ideas that are then tested in subsequent data collection and analysis, or in logical argument and reasoning” (pp. 127-128).

Specifically, this study will utilize grounded theory to extract mythological themes present in ESPN.com’s coverage of the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals. Each article that ESPN.com published about the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals was analyzed. I felt that grounded theory was best suited for this rhetorical analysis as subjectivism is not necessarily a data-corrupting issue. Instead of jumping into this study with a clear theory framework in mind, the initial stages of this study instead provided a sense of vision of where I would go with the research. In other words, the text and the extracted data guided this study, not the other way around

The complete 52-article census published by ESPN.com covering the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals was selected to serve as the texts for this study because they were delivered to a worldwide audience and received millions of views. As of Monday, April 25, 2016, all of these articles are live and readily accessible through ESPN.com. By analyzing the complete census of

articles ESPN.com published, this study can provide an accurate analysis of how ESPN.com's coverage of significant athletic sporting events is being framed.

After the grounded research was conducted, results were compared through the lens of agenda setting, drawing conclusions regarding the Walt Disney Company's ownership of ESPN and Marvel Entertainment.

Popular computer programs Adobe InDesign and Microsoft Office were used heavily in this project. InDesign was used to create coding sheets, while Microsoft Word and Excel were utilized to organize and compile this report in standard APA format.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

As previously mentioned, the artifacts (ESPN.com-published stories about the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals) were analyzed through the lens of mythical framing. The complete 52-article census of stories published by ESPN.com included feature stories, individual game recaps, and profile pieces.

The specific mythical archetypes present in the artifacts were organized into the following categories: Mythical Physical Attributes, Mythical Talent/Skillset, and Good vs. Evil. Open coding also led to the creating of additional categories, which were relevant specifically to the two different series. These additional categories will be discussed further.

Mythical Physical Attributes

The “Mythical Physical Attributes” theme represents a comparison or metaphor of a player’s physical attribute to any mythical, heroic, or supernatural archetype. The most common usage of this archetype was explaining how the players were moving around the court.

In the coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals, two strong examples exist of mythical framing of a player’s physical attributes. In the first game of the series, it was written that San Antonio Spurs guard Manu Ginobili “surged” into the lane by “bowling over (Detroit Piston center) Ben Wallace” (Associated Press, 2005a). Later in the article, again mentioned Ginobili, “driving the lane and again flattening Wallace” (Associated Press, 2005a). These instances were two of the only viable examples of mythical framing of a player’s physical attributes in the coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals.

In the 2015 NBA Finals coverage, the most common usage of this archetype was explaining how the players were moving around the court. Seth Curry was being assigned

supernatural speed when the articles described him as, “super quick,” and “darting” or “cruising” (Haberstroh, 2015a) his way to the basket. The most explicit description of this category came from the same article, which labeled LeBron James a physical, “freak (Haberstroh, 2015a).” One article even reached as far to label James a, “Modern day Goliath (Haberstroh, 2015b).” The physical attributes of LeBron James were the most frequently described using mythical archetypes.

Mythical Talent/Skillset

The other prevalent theme tied directly to mythical lore was the “Mythical Talent/Skillset” theme. This category included any mythical, heroic, or supernatural metaphor or representation of the talents and skills of any of the players participating in the NBA Finals.

Both teams participating in the 2005 NBA Finals were subject to receiving “perfection” labels attached to various aspects of the respective teams. Referring to the defensive capabilities of the Detroit Pistons, then-ESPN journalist Bill Simmons wrote,

“they reminded me more of...the middleweight champ whose astonishing defensive skills suck the life out of his opponents...you find yourself thinking things like, ‘Will anyone ever land a punch on him? And, ‘If everyone fought like this, boxing would go out of business in five years. The Pistons’ defense was like that. And it nearly worked to the tune of back-to-back championships” (Simmons, 2005).

The San Antonio Spurs received more blatant “perfection” labels, as multiple instances were recorded of journalists saying Spurs players did something perfectly. In the game recap of game seven of the 2005 NBA Finals, it was said, “...the Duncan-Ginobili combo clicked perfectly on two straight possessions. First, Ginobili drove the lane and drew Duncan's defender, zipping a pass to Duncan all alone on the baseline for a 19-footer. Next, Duncan had three

defenders collapsing on him when he saw Ginobili all alone at the 3-point line. The shot was perfect, and San Antonio led 72-65 with 2:57 left” (Associated Press, 2005g).

The coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals also had multiple uses of the “Mythical Talent/Skillset” theme. One article stated that the things LeBron James was called on to do during this series were “unfathomable” (Haberstroh, 2015c). But it was Stephen Curry’s basketball talents that were the most frequently described using mythical framing. A quote from an article stated that Curry can, “Catch and shoot without even seeing the basket (Friend, 2015).” In that same article, one of Curry’s teammates said, “Steph can see things on the court that no one else can” and Curry’s “rapid-fire” jump shot was also cited (Friend, 2015).

Good vs. Evil

The “Good vs. Evil” archetype is an examination of the classic narrative of the forces of good battling against the forces of evil. This category includes mentions of injustice or painting a picture of a team or player being inherently righteous and/or good, while another team or player is inherently bad and/or evil.

In the coverage of the 2005 Finals there was no evidence of this archetype being used. Instead, there were multiple mentions of the 2005 NBA Finals featuring the last two NBA Champions squaring off. The teams were treated more as equals, rather than one being inherently “good” and the other inherently “bad.”

The coverage of the 2015 Finals did feature multiple instances of this archetype being pushed. One of the recaps of the series mentioned Golden State’s Andre Iguodala being a “knight in shining armor (Holmes, 2015),” implying that he helped save the day and allowed good to triumph over evil in the 2015 NBA Finals. Another article labeled the officiated of one of the

games “criminal (McMenamin, 2015),” leading the reader to believe the wrong team won that specific game.

Other Themes of 2005 NBA Finals

Throughout the coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals, the San Antonio Spurs and the Detroit Pistons were commonly referred to as a reflection of each other. In his post-series profile, Scoop Jackson wrote, “It was about the teams being duplicates of each other...It was not about which team was better; but instead, which wanted it more...They paralleled each other. Possession for possession” (Jackson, 2005). Later in the article, Jackson again used this theme, writing, “The mirror image had finally found its reflection. The two best teams in the world had taken a seven-game series, turned it into a three-game series, and then turned it into a one-game saga.”

Closely related to the teams being parallels of each other, was the frequent mentioning of the defensive intensity, physicality, and aggressiveness of the series. Both teams boasted similar attributes in terms of their playing style. The San Antonio Spurs’ forward-center Tim Duncan was quoted as he spoke about the physicality of the series, saying, “We knew it was going to be like this; these guys are a heck of a defensive squad” (Associated Press, 2005a). After game four, a Detroit Pistons win, the San Antonio Spurs head coach Greg Popovich said, “It’s disappointing that their physical play and their defense has taken us away from everything that we normally do” (Associated Press, 2005d).

The last theme that emerged through coding was the historical impact of the series. As previously mentioned the 2005 NBA Finals were only the third time in NBA history in which the past two champions squared off in the finals. ESPN.com also did not fail to mention multiple times that the 2005 NBA Finals were the first finals series to go to seven games since 1994. Of the significance of a game seven, Bill Simmons (2005) wrote, “As basketball fans, we knew

Game 7 of an NBA Finals was the ultimate experience. Ninety minutes before tip-off, every fan has already found his or her seat... You can't possibly imagine the level of intensity, the overpowering electricity in the building, how it keeps going higher and higher.”

Other Themes of 2015 NBA Finals

The “Isolation of LeBron James” was a frequently used theme when describing why the Cleveland Cavaliers were struggling and losing games. This category included any rhetorical element that suggested LeBron James was playing on his own team, vastly outnumbered, or James being elevated in status above his teammates. One article stated, “LeBron James is not only the most single most important player to his franchise, no player has been leaned on to do more of the work for his franchise than James has throughout his career in Cleveland (Haberstroh, 2015c).” This is an example of LeBron James being isolated from the rest of his team. Another example of this was the frequent mention of LeBron James being forced to, “put his team on his back (McMenamin, 2015),” in order for the Cavaliers to succeed. The most frequent adjectives used to describe James’ teammates were: “Least-talented,” “Mediocre,” and, “Superfluous” (Pain, 2015).

The depth of Golden State’s roster and the amount of quality players on their team was another category that emerged during this study. In direct contrast to how the Cavaliers were being described, the Warriors were described as a great all-around team, where every player contributed. One article stated that the Warriors’, “boast on of the most talent roster from top to bottom that the NBA has ever seen” (Friend, 2015). Multiple articles also described the Warriors as a, “brotherhood,” and explained how they, “banded together to win an NBA Championship” (Friend, 2015).

The final category that emerged through analyzing these texts was the inexperience of the head coaches competing in the 2015 NBA Finals. Both head coaches, Steve Kerr of the Golden State Warriors and David Blatt of the Cleveland Cavaliers, were in their first season as head coaches in the NBA. This narrative played a significant role throughout the course of the 2015 NBA Finals as mistakes by both teams were frequently attributed to the fact that neither coach had much coaching experience. An article stating a veteran coach “wouldn’t make this type of mistake (Strauss, 2015),” is an example of this.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Mythical framing archetypes were present throughout the 52 articles that were analyzed. The mythical framing messages that were identified in the articles provided data and examples of how mythical framing contributed to the overall narratives of both the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals. However, there was a vast spike in the amount of mythical framing archetypes used in the coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals.

Specifically, I found that the mythical framing messages did not destroy the credibility of the article, nor did they distract from it. When used, the mythical framing messages served to more effectively explain a specific play or describe the state of the game. I found that these mythical metaphors caused me to have a greater interest in the game and play to which it was referring. One of the greatest advantages of utilizing mythical framing messages was the ability of the mythical messages to evoke feelings of emotion, which is especially powerful considering some of the articles that were analyzed were 10 years old.

Through the coding process, three categories that comprised all mythical archetypes present in the texts were identified as: Mythical Physical Attributes, Mythical Talent/Skillset, and Good vs. Evil. Coding also led to the identification of additional rhetorical categories, which were specific to the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals, respectively.

Mythical Framing

Assigning mythical or superhuman physical attributes was the most common mythical framing element that was extracted from the texts. The assigning of supernatural or mythical physical capabilities to professional athletes is likely attributed to the fact that they can do things physically that “normal people” cannot. In this mindset, claiming that LeBron James can fly,

instead of just being able to jump and leap very well, explains why James can do things that the journalist and his/her audience cannot. While everyone can acknowledge that LeBron James does not actually have superhuman abilities, it does offer an explanation (no matter how irrational it is) why he is so much more athletic than the general public. Throughout the 52-article census, LeBron James was by far the most frequent benefactor of this category. The vast majority of mythical physical attributes being assigned to a player were done in James' favor. Standing 6'8" and 260 pounds, it's not hard to imagine why he was described using mythical language. Aside from his grand stature, LeBron James can typically jump higher and run faster than anyone else on the court, as he is one of the most impressive physical specimens the NBA has ever seen. It is rare that the one of the biggest and heaviest players on the court is also the most athletic, to say the least.

Closely related to mythical physical attributes, the mythical talent or skillset category was utilized to describe the impressive way a player performs or performed on a certain play. The assigning of mythical talents to professional athletes gives readers a reason why these athletes can do things better than the rest of the public. There are likely people in this world who have played more basketball than LeBron James or Stephen Curry, yet they never made it to the NBA, just as there are those who have likely played and practiced piano more than Mozart, yet they never became famous pianists. Being able to point to the fact that Stephen Curry was somehow endowed with a superhuman ability to shoot three-pointers provided me with an explanation as to why he is in the NBA. Throughout the 52-article census, Curry was the athlete most frequently assigned mythical talents. His ability to shoot the basketball from great distances, as well as his ability to dictate the tempo of a game (court vision) could only be explained by his supernatural abilities.

Although it was present in multiple articles, the “Good versus Evil” archetype did not play as big of a role throughout the entire series as the other mythical framing categories. In fact, it was entirely absent in ESPN.com’s coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals. It wasn’t until the final game of the 2015 NBA Finals that this category emerged. It should be noted, however, that this theme continued on in the coverage after the series had concluded. This can likely be attributed to the fact that ESPN and its journalists should stay somewhat objective in their coverage of major sporting events. I felt ESPN did this for most of the series; however, I found there to be an underlying feeling during the later articles that the “right” team won. But perhaps this was because I also felt the “right” team won.

Other Prevalent Themes in the 2005 NBA Finals

A common narrative throughout the coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals was how similar the playing styles of the San Antonio Spurs and Detroit Pistons were. While both teams featured their own “superstars,” both teams boasted a very strong “team-first” personality that they carried throughout multiple seasons. In 2003, the San Antonio Spurs faced off against the Jason Kidd-led New Jersey Nets. In 2004, the Detroit Pistons defeated the Shaq and Kobe Los Angeles Lakers. In both 2003 and 2004, the NBA Finals seemed to feature a “team” versus an “individual(s).” The faceoff in 2005 was framed as a perfect match of two perfectly balanced teams. Likewise, the San Antonio Spurs and Detroit Pistons were the two top defensive teams in the 2004-2005 season (Basketball-Reference, 2005a). Their styles were very similar, which led to ESPN.com journalist Scoop Jackson writing, “(This series) was about the teams being duplicates of each other...It was not about which team was better; but instead, which wanted it more...They paralleled each other. Possession for possession” (2005).

As previously mentioned, the 2005 NBA Finals were all about defense, physicality, and aggressiveness. The scores of the games, respectively, were: 84-69, 97-76, 96-79, 102-71, 96-95, 95-86, and 81-74. With the exception of game five, in which the San Antonio Spurs won 96-95 in overtime, every game featured one team playing stifling defense, which led to the opponent recording an unusually low score for an NBA playoff game. Aside from just playing great defense, this series was framed as a very physical and aggressive series which resembled a boxing match more than a basketball game (Simmons, 2005). The 142 personal fouls recorded by the San Antonio Spurs was only eclipsed by the Detroit Pistons' 149 (Basketball-Reference, 2005b). This statistic certainly confirmed the appropriateness of the defense, physicality, and aggressiveness frame being applied to the 2005 NBA Finals.

Multiple times throughout the articles published about the 2005 NBA Finals by ESPN.com, the historical perspective of this series was brought to light. This series was just the third time in NBA history in which the previous two champions squared off in the finals. This fact was essential to the very identity of the 2005 NBA Finals, as it was framed to be a matchup of the two undisputed best teams in the world. There has yet to be another matchup of the two most recent champions since 2005. Another aspect of this frame being used was how frequently the articles about game seven and post-series articles mentioned the significance of the NBA Finals going to seven games. The NBA Finals going to seven games is a fairly rare occurrence, as it only happened three times in the previous twenty seasons (1984-2005). As ESPN.com journalist Bill Simmons said, "You can't put a price on game seven" (2005).

Other Prevalent Themes in the 2015 NBA Finals

LeBron James was often subject to a narrative of "LeBron versus the World." Multiple articles, including a statistical breakdown, stated that LeBron James had carried his team to the

2015 NBA Finals without receiving much help. This narrative only intensified as he lost his all-star teammates, Kevin Love and Kyrie Irving, to injury during the playoffs. James being isolated certainly wasn't slanderous to his abilities or character, but rather served to uplift him by demeaning the talents of his teammates. This served as an effective tool when describing how talented of a basketball player LeBron James is, going so far as to imply that he could lead any team to the NBA Finals. It also seemed to be used as an excuse for why LeBron James, who is widely regarded as the best basketball player in the world, did not win an NBA championship this year. Simply put, the Cleveland Cavaliers not winning the 2015 NBA Finals was not his fault; it was his teammates'. This theme almost served to make LeBron James look like a victim of tragic circumstances in the overall narrative of the 2015 NBA Finals.

The frequent mentioning of the Golden State Warriors' great depth was in direct contrast to the isolation of LeBron James. Instead of isolating Golden State's star player, Stephen Curry, the Warriors were celebrated for having so many players who were able to contribute meaningful minutes. In fact, even the fans of the Warriors were celebrated as the "sixth man" of the finals, and having a direct impact on the outcome of the series. The Warriors were truly celebrated as a team and lauded for their team-first culture. The combination of LeBron James being isolated and the Golden State Warriors' depth being celebrated painted the picture of a great player facing off against a great team, which has proven to be true.

The inexperience of the two head coaches facing off in the 2015 NBA Finals was also an attempt of the journalists to explain why certain events were transpiring. As previously mentioned, the 2015 NBA Finals marked the first time that two rookie head coaches were squaring off against each other since the NBA's inaugural season. While both coaches had been around the game of basketball for many years (Steve Kerr as a player and executive, David Blatt

as a coach in Europe), neither had any prior NBA coaching experience. This theme played a very important role in the overall narrative of the 2015 NBA Finals because it was a significant monument in NBA history, and something that will likely never happen again. It was interesting, however, that while both coaches were being celebrated for reaching this milestone during the first year of their careers, their inexperience was often pointed at to explain why their respective teams were struggling throughout the series.

Evidence of Agenda Setting

In his book, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Professor Bernard Cohen said, “(The press) may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963). This foundation of agenda setting theory was along the same lines of my observations in regards to ESPN.com’s coverage of the NBA Finals. There was a clear increase in the amount of mythological language and archetypes used in the coverage of the NBA Finals from 2005 to 2015. This shift was not as evident in the game recaps published by the Associated Press as it was in the feature articles written by ESPN.com journalists.

Media bias has been under scrutiny since the earliest beginnings of journalism. The frames used by those reporting news can have an effect upon the reader, further turning their viewpoint toward or away from that of the author. Davis and Kent state, “framing theory and research directly challenge the notion that news stories can and should be objective. Social constructionism asserts that there is no objective social reality that can be described using traditional reporting practices. The social world is constructed and this construction is constantly being negotiated” (2013). If objectivity cannot be achieved, then bias in ESPN.com coverage of major sporting events must also exist in some form or another.

This research strongly suggests that ESPN.com has made a conscious effort to use mythological language and archetypes in its coverage of major sporting events, such as the NBA Finals. While references to specific intellectual properties owned by the Walt Disney Company were not measured, it is my belief that the acquisition of Marvel Comics by the Walt Disney Company has directly impacted the language that is used by ESPN.com journalists. With little doubt, agenda setting contributed to the framing of ESPN.com's coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals by employing mythological archetypes throughout the series.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The mythical framing elements in ESPN.com's coverage of the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals were an effective tool in reporting these major events. This research leads me to believe that mythological framing elements will continue to play a large role in the coverage of major sporting events because mythological archetypes help describe why certain events transpire and create vivid images for readers of the articles. These elements, when combined with the readership and overall reach of ESPN.com, warrant further study.

RQ1: How were the players framed through mythical, heroic, or superhuman archetypes?

This research shows the players of the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals were framed by having their physical capabilities and basketball skills described as being unhuman and of mythical status. However, these comparisons were much more prevalent during the coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals, and the "Good vs. Evil" narrative was only used in the coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals.

RQ2: What other rhetorical themes were present throughout the coverage?

ESPN.com's coverage of the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals also featured other rhetorical themes that were found consistently throughout their articles. The strongest rhetorical themes found in ESPN.com's coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals were organized into three groups: 1) The teams being mirror images of each other, 2) The level of defensive intensity of the series, and 3) The historical perspective of the series. In ESPN.com's coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals, mythical language and archetypes were some of the strongest themes present. Three other themes not related to mythological language and archetypes were also organized into three groups: 1)

The isolation of LeBron James, 2) The depth of Golden State's roster, and 3) The inexperience of the head coaches participating in the finals.

RQ3: How were the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals framed differently?

I found the coverage of the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals were framed differently in that mythological framing played a prominent role in the coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals, but not in 2005. Not only did the number of mythological archetypes greatly increase in the coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals, but mythological language was common in the articles written by ESPN.com journalists.

RQ4: How did agenda setting contribute to the framing of the 2005 & 2015 NBA finals?

This research strongly suggests that ESPN.com has made a conscious effort to use mythological language and archetypes in its coverage the 2015 NBA Finals. While there was evidence of mythological framing found in the coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals, it was not consistent throughout the 16-article census, nor do I believe it would bear statistical significance if a content analysis were conducted. This data leads me to believe that ESPN.com made a conscious effort to force readers of the articles published about the 2015 NBA Finals to think about mythological themes, such as themes found in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and other intellectual properties owned by the Walt Disney Company.

The methods used in this study bring considerable strength as well as some limitations. This study was strictly rhetorical, which served to answer the research questions and purpose of the study. However, further research on the topic of mythical framing in ESPN.com's coverage of the NBA Finals should be conducted, starting with a content analysis of the texts examined through this study. In his 2009 publication, "*Arguing for a General Framework for Mass Media*

Scholarship,” James Potter argues that media scholars need to blend textual analysis (concerned with narrative arcs in stories) and content analysis (concerned with general patterns across large numbers of messages). This project could do precisely that, and I have every intention of doing so.

Sports media, specifically ESPN and ESPN.com, will undoubtedly continue to grow in popularity. For this reason alone, it is important to study the effect it has on the public. While sports media may not carry heavy implications, such as that of political developments or wartime coverage, that should not diminish its importance. ESPN and sports media as a whole are in constant competition with all other news outlets for relevance and the attention of the public. It is my belief that ESPN will continue to grow in popularity and will continue to successfully utilize its website, ESPN.com, in shaping what its audience should think about through framing and agenda setting theories.

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APPENDIX I**2005 NBA FINALS STORY BANK**

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