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From Stardom to Stunted: The Rise and Fall of Sports Icons

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Abstract

This case study is an examination of Aaron Hernandez’s professional and personal life as it was portrayed in the media. This study seeks to examine how the media narrative changed for Hernandez after his criminal activities came to light and how sports media contributed to the rise and fall of Aaron Hernandez’s professional career. The study also aimed to examine how stars like Hernandez can be held accountable for their actions outside their respective sport. To accomplish these goals, the researcher examined media coverage surrounding Hernandez to uncover how media frames corresponded with and contributed to the rise and fall of Hernandez’s football stardom. This study also draws connections to other celebrities whose professional lives were impacted by media coverage to illustrate the role of media in holding celebrities accountable for their actions outside of their work.

Keywords: Athlete, Celebrity, Media-Framing, Crime, Accountability
Many professional athletes have been involved in instances of criminal behavior (e.g., Oscar Pistorius, Brian McGhee, Tiger Woods). Historically, criminal activity outside of their respective sports has had little impact on athletes’ professional careers. Those who demonstrate excellence in their sport often do not bear repercussions for their bad behaviors such as Tyreek Hill. Tyreek Hill is a star wide receiver for the Miami Dolphins, and he was accused of allegedly breaking his three-year-old son’s arm back in 2019 (West & Caron, 2019). Hill is currently still on the Dolphins and plays in the NFL. Because of the “public hero-worship” of professional athletes, and the teams/coaches’ desire to retain top talent, athletes’ bad behavior has often gone unpunished. Furthermore, sports media often cater to audience interest. So, the media frenzies that emerge around athlete misbehaviors usually die down quickly, especially when the athlete continues to perform well and maintain their fandom. However, this was not the case for Aaron Hernandez.

Aaron Hernandez was an American football player who was a star tight end for the New England Patriots from the years of 2010 to 2013 (Haislop, 2020). He was born in Bristol, Connecticut, and attended college at the University of Florida (UF) where he played college football (Haislop, 2020). He was at the top of his game when it all came crashing down after he stumbled into hot water with police for different crimes, ultimately affecting his football career. What made this case different from other cases that came before him?

In the past decade, there has been a significant cultural shift, with more audience members demanding accountability of professional athletes and other celebrities for their bad behaviors (Brown, 2016). As such, there has also been an evident shift when it comes to the
media coverage of athlete misbehaviors (Brown, 2016). Media outlets have met audience demands for accountability by adapting their media coverage.

It is important to examine more specifically how media coverage reflects and/or contributes to the rise and fall of professional athletes, yet this remains largely understudied. Therefore, the goal of this study is to examine media coverage reflecting and/or contributing to the downfall of professional athletes’ careers who find themselves in hot water off the field. This study will focus primarily on the case of Aaron Hernandez, as his case is one of the most well-known cases of a star athlete whose off-field behaviors ultimately led to the downfall of his professional football career (Rafferty, 2017). To accomplish the goals of this study, the researcher conducted a case study analysis of the media coverage of Aaron Hernandez to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How did the media narrative for Aaron Hernandez change after his criminal activities came to light?

**RQ2:** In what ways did sports media coverage contribute to the rise and fall of Aaron Hernandez’s professional career?

Because this is a case study analysis, the literature review will be incorporated into the analysis, as opposed to being presented as a stand-alone literature review. This allowed the researcher to examine the media coverage of Aaron Hernandez while using existing literature and examples from the press to guide the analysis.

**Methods**

This study is a case study analysis of Aaron Hernandez’s career as covered by the media. Specifically, this study focuses on the media coverage that contributed to the rise and fall of Hernandez’s stardom. A case study is a real-life story that examines a specific problem or
situation and is used to understand and analyze a topic practically (Cherry, 2024). Aaron Hernandez was selected because his case changed the narrative for these sports figures after they committed crimes and how the media portrays them. It was one of the most influential cases that showed fans the sports figures they idolize are not untouchable. As such, Hernandez serves as an ideal case for examining how media narratives change in response to events outside of one’s professional sport or activity.

For this study, the researcher examined the media coverage (mostly news articles) of Aaron Hernandez as he rose to stardom when his criminal behaviors became known, and during the fall of his professional career. In the analysis, the researcher drew connections to various bodies of literature (e.g., fandom, media frames). The literature search was conducted using web search engines, and academic databases such as Academic OneFile and Academic Search Complete. The findings of the analysis are organized thematically, and chronologically.

Analysis

Aaron Hernandez was a star football player and during his career found himself in hot water after he committed counts of murder. These murders changed the media narrative for him and showed fans a different side of him. The narrative for Hernandez went from a talented NFL football player to a killer. A celebrity status for these athletes is heavily influenced by the media. This shift in media coverage is not only a result of his actions but also the media presence that was focused on the New England Patriots at the time of his crimes especially Tom Brady as their star quarterback.

Aaron Hernandez: The Football Star

Growing up in Bristol, Connecticut (CT) Aaron Josef Hernandez had his sights set on becoming a pro football player from a young age. He played the position of tight end at Bristol
Central High School where he earned first-team All-State honors and led his high school football team to a divisional championship (Bertram, 2020). However, his senior year was tainted by his father’s death after complications from a routine hernia surgery. He continued his football career at the University of Florida (UF) where he became a star tight end for the Gators. He stood 6’2 at 245 pounds and set a school record for tight ends after completing 111 catches during his three years at UF (Bertram, 2020).

Despite Hernandez’s stardom talent, NFL teams did not take the big-name tight end in the early rounds of the 2010 draft. He was in the hot seat with teams after admitting that he failed a drug test (Bertram, 2020). Behind closed doors, NFL teams also worried about his association with gang types and violence from his hometown in CT (Bertram, 2020). He was drafted in the fourth round 113th overall by the New England Patriots. He was the youngest player in the NFL when the 2010 season started and set a team record off the bat after completing 45 catches during his rookie season with the Patriots (Bertram, 2020). He quickly became a lead tight end for the New England Patriots playing alongside Rob Gronkowski. Hernandez signed a five-year contract extension in August of 2012 during his second season with the Patriots (Bertram, 2020).

A huge part of Aaron Hernandez’s story is the media and how he was portrayed in it during his time with the Patriots. The media can shift and influence consumers' views and opinions about celebrities (Sanderson, 2010). This is no different with sports. For professional athletes, these larger-than-life figures often gain a following by stepping into the spotlight. Professional athletes tend to have strong fan bases behind them and, in today's day in age, these superstars can, in real-time, interact with said fan base through social media. Sports media has the power to produce national, as well as commercial, heroes/celebrities (Dumitriu, 2018).

*Celebrity* is often earned through one’s accomplishments. However, not all accomplished
athletes attain the same level of celebrity. As explained by Hellmueller and Aeschbacher (2010), media play a substantial role in creating celebrity. How people (e.g., actors, and athletes) are represented in the media, the degree of coverage they receive from media, and the way consumers respond to this coverage function together to build celebrity (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010). This is what we saw with Aaron Hernandez, a talented athlete who acquired celebrity status.

Relevant to this study, during the early years of Aaron Hernandez’s NFL career, sports media both covered and contributed to, his growing stardom. Aaron Hernandez was highly covered by sports media during the early years of his NFL career. Headlines were generally very positive, which functioned to further build on his athletic stardom. For example, shortly after joining the Patriots, Hernandez was celebrated in sports media for “making a quick impact” on the team (ESPN, 2010). Media coverage only grew more favorable from there. For example, an article in the Boston Herald was titled, “Aaron Hernandez Can Do It All.” NFL.com also praised Hernandez, reporting, “Hernandez and fellow 2010 draft pick Gronkowski have combined to form one the most productive tight end duos in NFL history, though the versatile Hernandez frequently lines up at wide receiver and even running back” (McIntyre, 2012, p.2).

During the years Hernandez was on the New England Patriots, the team was amid their dynasty with Tom Brady as their quarterback. This drew a heavy media presence to the team, not only in New England but across the nation. Therefore, the media and eyes were on the star players of the team, such as Hernandez and Gronkowski. This fandom also helped to build up Hernandez’s star power. For example, Pats Pulpit, which is the SB Nation Patriots blog (i.e., a New England Patriots fandom website) devoted to publishing “all things New England Patriots,” helped to build Hernandez’s personal stardom within the Patriots’ already large fanbase,
publishing stories and fan posts such as, “Aaron Hernandez: A 'Tight End That Can Do A Few Things’” and “How Rob Gronkowski & Aaron Hernandez Have Revolutionized New England's Offense.”

Interestingly, even though Hernandez had a concerning past (part of why he was not drafted in an earlier round), the coverage of his past was largely forgiving, painting Hernandez as a rehabilitated man and a hard worker. For example, in 2012, an article was published by NBC Sports (2012), titled, “Aaron Hernandez says Belichick and ‘the Patriot way’ changed him,” which framed Hernandez as a positively changed man. The article concluded with, “Everyone in New England is feeling good about Hernandez’s future with the Patriots” (NBC Sports, 2012, p.3). This is not uncommon for rising stars in sports, or in Hollywood. The coverage of Hernandez’s past further demonstrates how the media frames functioned to preserve, and even build upon, his athletic stardom.

While Aaron Hernandez’s celebrity stardom was built up nationally via major sports media organizations, as well as locally within the Patriots fandom communities, coverage of Hernandez changed after the player was arrested in 2013.

Aaron Hernandez was a prime example of what not to do when someone has fame and money in the spotlight. The actions that took place in 2013 would change the course of his life forever and the media would never see him as the same as well as his fans. This shift in the media after he committed murder changed the media narrative. An example regarding a German NFL player is used to show how media narratives can change for each athlete, especially in the sport of football.
Changing Media Narrative

Aaron Hernandez’s career came to a halting stop in 2013 when he found himself in hot water with the police for a crime that occurred a year prior. Hernandez was charged with first-degree murder against Daniel de Abreu and Safiro Furtado (Rafferty, 2017). This murder took place in Boston’s South End at a nightclub and was a drive-by shooting. This drive-by shooting stemmed from an altercation in the nightclub earlier that night (Rafferty, 2017). In addition to this double murder, Hernandez was also facing charges for allegedly shooting Alexander Bradley after a night out at a Miami strip club. Bradley was a former friend and drug dealer at the time when this incident occurred after he attempted to censor Hernandez about the murders in South Boston (Haislop, 2020).

The star Patriot’s tight end was put on trial for two counts of murder in the first degree in the year of 2013. In addition to murdering Daniel de Abreu and Safiro Furtado as well as shooting his friend Alexander Bradley, there would be, yet another crime Hernandez finds himself involved in. In June 2013, the body of Odin Lloyd, a semi-pro football player, was found in an industrial park in North Attleboro, Massachusetts (MA), near Hernandez’s home (Haislop, 2020). The finding of this body led police to search Hernandez’s North Attleboro home within days. He was arrested and escorted out of his house in handcuffs on June 26, 2013, and charged with the murder of Odin Lloyd (Haislop, 2020). His arrest led police to dig deeper into his past and find him in connection with the double murder that took place outside a Boston nightclub just a year prior.

Unfortunately for Hernandez, his criminal past would not stop there. After he was arrested in June of 2013, Gainesville police released a 51-page report on a 2007 double shooting in which Hernandez was questioned. This shooting may have been provoked after an argument...
about a gold necklace and occurred at the time Hernandez was a freshman at UF playing tight end for the Gators (Haislop, 2020).

After this information shed light on Hernandez’s involvement with criminal activity, fans of his started to see a clearer picture painted regarding his violent past. With Hernandez heading for a murder trial and amid the off-season for football, the New England Patriots released the star tight end from their roster and organization. The team released this statement after terminating Hernandez’s contract,

a young man was murdered last week, and we extend our sympathies to the family and friends who mourn his loss. Words cannot express the disappointment we feel knowing that one of our players was arrested as a result of this investigation. We realize that law enforcement investigations into this matter are ongoing. We support their efforts and respect the process. At this time, we believe this transaction is simply the right thing to do. (Jones, 2023, p.1)

The NFL also commented on this case against Hernandez during this time and did not shy away from addressing the matter. NFL spokesman Greg Aiello released a statement saying,

the involvement of an NFL player in a case of this nature is deeply troubling. The Patriots have released Aaron Hernandez, who will have his day in court. At the same time, we should not forget the young man who was the victim in this case and take this opportunity to extend our deepest sympathy to Odin Lloyd's family and friends. (Jones, 2023, p.1)

This is not the first time the Patriots organization, under the ownership of Robert Kraft, has cut ties with football players involved in legal trouble (Jones, 2023). In the year of 1996, the team released Christian Peter, a rookie defensive tackle, who had a history of arrests at the University of Nebraska, including a sexual assault charge (Jones, 2023).
A theory by the name of media framing was used in this research to demonstrate the media coverage of Aaron Hernandez. Media framing is an action where media members (e.g., reporters, journalists, editors) decide which people and events are worthy of coverage and then use these people’s direct words in the media to create a narrative for fans to absorb. (Love, Deeb, Dzikus, 2021). For print media, writers put facts and information into a narrative for fans to read and see about their favorite athletes.

An NFL player by the name of Moritz Böhringer is a German international player drafted into the American Football League and plays the position of tight end (Love, Deeb, Dzikus, 2021). His story is unique in the way that fans observed him in the media and his performance overall. Being from Germany, he was scouted out by the NFL through a different process which allowed the media to present him to fans in a different manner through media framing.

His story began in London after the NFL office in the UK emphasized to the NFL to scout out more international players to expand the sport around the world. Soon, NFL scouts had their eyes on Moritz Böhringer. A sports-illustrated article first came out about Böhringer and how he was trying out for NFL scouts. The article detailed his life story both personally and in his professional career.

Another article published by the Associated Press about Böhringer revealed that he was framed as a great player, but the level of play from German football compared to even the college level in America is drastically different presenting challenges for NFL scouts when evaluating his skill set (Love, Deeb, Dzikus, 2021). Despite this drawback to his scouting process, these two articles were positive media frames and some of the first articles that fans read about Böhringer. This shed a positive light on him and started to grow his fan base here in America where he would later be drafted by the Minnesota Vikings (Love, Deeb, Dzikus, 2021).
This is very similar to how Aaron Hernandez’s career started. He had a lot of media attention on him at the UF and gained traction in the media for his skill set. This all shifted when he was convicted of murders in 2013. Not like Moritz Böhringer, who performed well in the NFL for the Vikings and continued to be seen in the media in a positive light, the media quickly shifted the narrative about Hernandez, and fans jumped on board. Fans were not happy with Hernandez being on trial for murder as it negatively affected the team and brought negative media coverage to an already hot team. The media frames that existed during this period were negative and mostly bashing Hernandez for his actions, some even digging up dirt and diving into his criminal past dating back to his early days in CT. This painted Hernandez differently, to his fans, allowing them to see the whole picture and learn more about his dark past which affected the University of Florida and the New England Patriots organization as well.

In another case, an NBA player by the name of Jason Collins was the first “active” gay NBA player to come out while playing this men’s sport at the pro level back in 2013 (Kian, Winchester, Shipka, 2015). The media heavily analyzed this and covered his story since it was truly breaking news in the sport, one the NBA had never seen before. He was painted as a hero after signing with the Brooklyn Nets and used his platform to speak out about his sexuality and being the minority in a men’s pro sports league (Kian, Winchester, Shipka, 2015). Few media members criticized Collins’s actions of putting his personal life out in the public for fans to see, but these media members were labeled as the exceptions. Overall, he received positive feedback and the media frames regarding his sexuality were positive for both the fans taking it in and the journalists reporting on it. In addition, Collins was an African American basketball player on the Nets. He received much support from his teammates during this time that the media was covering him and looking into his life for fans to see (Kian, Winchester, Shipka, 2015). His
teammates were quoted saying, “we equate homophobia with racism while offering support for Collins during this time” (Kian, Winchester, Shipka, 2015, p.3).

Unlike Aaron Hernandez, whose teammates on the Patriots were not supportive of his criminal actions. When the media questioned players on the New England Patriots in 2013, many of them refused to comment on the matter to quiet the media noise around this subject (CBS News, 2013). In a sit-down interview in 2013 with his brothers and father, Rob Gronkowski was asked about Aaron Hernandez and refused to answer the question. He even stated he would walk off the interview if the interviewer, Don Dahler, asked him about it again (CBS News, 2013). This shows the negative media frames that were associated with Hernandez and the Patriots during this time. His criminal actions affected not only himself but affected his team and the players on it as well. It was no secret that Hernandez was a star football player who had a criminal past, but once he was put on trial for these murders his NFL career was over (Haislop, 2020). He was never seen the same in the media and fans felt this way as well.

Aaron Hernandez was convicted for the murder in the first degree of Odin Llyod on April 15, 2015, and was sentenced to life in prison without parole (Haislop, 2020). About three weeks later, Hernandez was indicted related to the shooting of his former friend Alexander Bradley back in 2013. He was sent to Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center in Lancaster, MA, where guards would later find a shank in his cell (Haislop, 2020). He was transferred to an isolation unit within the facility and away from the general prison population as he was seen as a threat to the facility. While he was in prison, the media received updates on him periodically, but most of the media frames and information published in the tabloids about him were negative. This completely changed the narrative from the start of his NFL career in 2010 to then the end of his career in 2013 following his arrests for his criminal history.
It is important to always separate the art from the artist regarding these larger-than-life figures. This goes for celebrities in Hollywood, athletes on a professional sports team, and everything in between. When these types of people are in the hot seat in the media, for crimes specifically, fans must separate the art from the artist to understand and see the whole picture. According to the theory of parasocial interaction, fans connect to celebrities who share similar beliefs, attitudes, and likenesses as them (Frederick et al., 2012). There are many examples of this with both celebrities and professional athletes.

The most well-known example, and one that took the media by storm, involves the #MeToo movement. This involved many different celebrities and well-known people in Hollywood and the sports world (Ralston, 2022). The most well-known case in this movement centered around Harvey Weinstein who was a film producer (Ralston, 2022). Weinstein was an excellent film producer whose work was consumed by many until he was charged with sexually assaulting many women. Fans of Weinstein’s work were confused and saddened to learn of the crimes that he had committed (Ralston, 2022). This affected many of their opinions on Weinstein and his work overall (Ralston, 2022). Not only did it taint his image in the film industry, but his image was also tainted across the world for his crimes (Ralston, 2022). This started to also affect his work in the film industry with fans protesting and not wanting to watch his work. This is a prime example of how fans did not separate the art from the artist. Once Weinstein committed those crimes regarding sexual assault, his work was affected and would never be seen the same again in the eyes of his fans and people who once liked him. Due to the nature of his crimes and how many people it affected, there was no saving his reputation in Hollywood and with his fans. It was over for him, and he was sentenced to 16 years in prison (Ralston, 2022).
A case where fans could separate the art from the artist involves USA gymnastics and the #MeToo movement. The USA Gymnastics program was under the rule of Martha and Bela Karolyi. The best gymnasts in the country would go to a ranch in Texas, owned by the Karolyis, and practice under them in hopes of making the US national and Olympic teams. While these young gymnasts practiced at this facility, they were treated by an on-site USA gymnastics team doctor that is known by the name of Larry Nasar. Nasar was kind to the girls and treated them for injuries when needed.

After years and years of silencing these girls and pushing them to their breaking point, Nasar was accused of sexually assaulting hundreds of these USA gymnasts multiple times (Ralston, 2022). He would assault these girls while he was treating them for injuries. Most girls were too afraid to speak up and say something because they would be terminated from the team and their dreams stripped away from them (Ralston, 2022). When gymnastics fans found out about Nasar’s doings they were outraged. Fans did not stop watching gymnastics; the sport gained more fans due to this unfortunate incident within the program (Ralston, 2022).

This case is different in terms of separating the art from the artists because fans knew how much these gymnasts had been through once the Larry Nasar case became public knowledge. They still loved and cheered these gymnasts on including some household names (e.g., Simone Biles, Gabby Douglas, Aly Raisman). Fans knew that Nasar’s actions were his own doing and did not associate the gymnast’s performances with the USA gymnastics program and Nasar as a whole (Ralston, 2022). This is a prime example of fans separating the art from the artist. The USA gymnastics program is no longer under the rule of the Karolyi’s and Nasar was sentenced to 175 years in prison for the crimes he committed involving these USA gymnasts (Ralston, 2022).
This can be related to Aaron Hernandez and his time on the New England Patriots. Fans of his did not separate the art from the artist which in his case would be himself as a tight end for the Patriots and his crimes off the field. The crimes Hernandez committed tarnished his career, just as Weinstein tarnished his. There was no coming back for both people in terms of career and reputation. Unlike the gymnasts at USA Gymnastics, fans were saddened for them and cheered them on even more. For USA Gymnastics, Nasar’s crimes brought fans closer to these gymnasts. Hernandez pushed and, in the end, turned his fans against him. He was unable to regain their support and trust after he was sent to jail.

With Aaron Hernandez’s actions during his career, there was no coming back from the damage he had done. These actions affected not only himself but his teammates and everyone around him. Once the media portrays any athlete in a negative light there is no coming back from it and fans’ views on this said athlete have changed forever.

**The Fall of Aaron’s Professional Career**

The downfall of Aaron Hernandez’s professional career was on his shoulders and in the end, was due to his actions off the field. He was the one who murdered Daniel de Abreu and Safiro Furtado and shot his former friend Alexander Bradley. His NFL career was short-lived after only being in the league for just under three seasons and went on to spend the remainder of his time behind bars (Burney, 2010). His case is a prime example of how the media can build celebrities and public figures up just as quickly as they can tear them down.

This rise and fall in media coverage related to athletes and celebrities has happened for decades. The media is a business and needs to make money. The only way to keep people entertained and hooked is by reporting on hard news that involves their favorite public figures (Burney, 2010). People cling to these celebrities due to how they perceive them in the media and
what the media tells fans about these figures. This feeds into the idea that celebrities are these larger-than-life figures and gain a following in the media (Burney, 2010). The rise of social media also did not help these public figures’ cases when they would be in the media for crimes they committed. Fans were quick to find out what was happening, and some even investigated the case themselves with the help of internet sleuths (Burney, 2010). In the sports world, social media technologies provide new ways for fans to interact with sports celebrities (Sanderson, 2010). One social-media platform that is currently affecting fan–athlete interaction is X, as mentioned earlier in this paper.

Sports figures are constantly being scrutinized in the media especially if it is in season and these professional athletes are playing in games every other night. This is no different for NHL players along with other professional athletes in other major league sports. In ice hockey, more goes in terms of physicality and sometimes the lines can be blurred (Heckelman & Yates, 2003). A check to the head can turn into a major injury. These players are skating around at a fast pace throwing themselves into one another at a high rate of speed and it is important to distinguish between infractions and penalties (Heckelman & Yates, 2003). This idea can be used to look at felonies and serious crimes that these athletes commit during their time in their respective sports. The media is quick to publish a story about an athlete getting cited for a DUI, but that is drastically different than an athlete murdering someone. Both stories will be in the media because both will grab fans’ attention and shed negative light on these players. This is what gets sports media clicks and fans tuning in to learn more about the situation (Heckelman & Yates, 2003). Overall, no matter the magnitude of the crime the media will report on it.

These larger-than-life figures have a lot of influence on their fans. Big events (e.g., Superbowl, World Series, Oscars, Golden Globes) pull fans in and the media. Not all media
coverage on these types of people is negative and a lot of times these people can make a difference and have change happen. They can mobilize a wide range of people (Partzsch, 2018). For example, in one of his Oscar acceptance speeches, Leonardo DiCaprio urged his international audience to work collectively to combat climate change (Partzsch, 2018). These “calls to action” are what hold these celebrities and professional athletes accountable in their line of work.

This was unfortunately not the case for Aaron Hernandez, as the messages the media spread about him were not positive ones. His actions led to him being held accountable for the crimes he committed. This is something fans do not always see in Hollywood and the sports world. At times, these professional athletes and celebrities get away with crimes as they slip through the cracks. An example of this is, as mentioned earlier in this paper, Tyreek Hill broke his three-year-old son’s arm while Hill was still playing in the NFL. His team, the Miami Dolphins, did not punish him and even allowed him to stay on the team due to his football skill level (West & Caron, 2019). This is an example of how these types of people were not held accountable for their actions, unlike Aaron Hernandez. The media shapes fans’ perceptions and opinions of these people to some degree, even if fans attempt to block them out.

The media reaches fans in many ways and, in today’s day in age, social media has a huge influence on fans across the nation. Social media is calculated when it comes to the audience it targets (Gutpa, 2019). A fan of a movie star is going to have a different timeline than a fan of a sports team or professional athlete. A concept called retargeting displays this idea (Gutpa, 2019). Social media retargeting is a marketing tool electronic retailers use based on a mathematical algorithm tracking mechanism (Gutpa, 2019). The concept of retargeting is based on behavioral targeting where advertisers use website browsing history or interest to customize the ads (Gutpa,
2019). This allows the media and social media to dictate the narrative for fans concerning these larger-than-life figures. When a negative news story breaks about one of these people, it takes social media by storm and spreads like wildfire.

Aaron Hernandez’s career ended in 2013 when he was sent to jail, and he died in 2017 in prison when he took his own life (Haislop, 2020). His story was all over the news in the following weeks and overtook the media. The narrative heavily influenced how fans would remember him going forward. This is the case when celebrities die as well. Whether it be from something tragic or old age, the media will report on it. For example, a celebrity who died from a heart-related condition was Carrie Fisher. This framed health narratives in the media differently as she was only 60 years old at the time of her death (Van Den Bulck, 2017). This shows how framing is affected by prior knowledge (Van Den Bulck, 2017). This idea is the same regarding Aaron Hernandez and his personal life. Fans knew of this criminal past through the media and that affected how they reacted to the news of him being on trial for murder while actively still playing for the New England Patriots under Bill Belichick. The prior knowledge about his criminal activity at UF and even in his hometown of Bristol, CT allowed fans to connect the dots and form an opinion on him when he was put in jail and no longer a professional football player.

Hernandez’s professional life was stripped away from him due to his actions off the field and the media did not let up on him. He was portrayed as a bad person and was held accountable for his actions when he was sent to jail. The different media frames after his arrest allowed fans to see him in a different light.

**Discussion**

Many fans can agree that Aaron Hernandez’s case was essential in NFL and sports media history. With analyzing the media coverage of him pre and post-crime, there is a big difference
in how he was perceived by fans. This shift was caused by the crimes he committed and his actions off the field.

**Implications**

Overall, Aaron Hernandez’s professional football career, which rose and fell between 2010 and 2013 is an important case to study because it shows fans that these larger-than-life figures can not only be held accountable for their actions off the field but also lose their fan base due to these actions with the help of who the media frames them to be. Media framing and parasocial theory allow fans and followers of any professional athlete or celebrity to look at how the media portrays these stars and their love for them. It also allows fans to see if the media is portraying these figures in a positive or negative light. This also allows fans and followers of a certain professional athlete or celebrity to form their own opinions on them and decide whether they want to continue to support, and watch said person.

As more cases like Hernandez’s occur in the sports and entertainment world, fans are starting to push back on these stars and demand that they be held accountable for their actions such as terminating their contracts, going to jail, or getting justice for the victims involved in these crimes.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

There are limitations to this study including data collection. Due to these crimes occurring over 10 years ago and Aaron Hernandez being deceased, there are not many updated news articles and information about the victims, their families, and Aaron Hernandez’s family. Since these crimes and Hernandez’s death happened in a short amount of time, the media has stopped reporting on it unless it is on the anniversary of his death. Another limitation in this case study was not being able to access all data related to Hernandez’s personal life such as how his
teammates felt about him, both in college and while he was on the Patriots. It was also not possible to interview his former teammates and analyze the relationship Hernandez had with them while he was playing football. This goes the same for his friends off the field and his family. The researcher could not contact people close to him to gather more data, the data used for this case study was secondary and from both news articles and scholarly, peer-reviewed sources. Tying back to the research questions, these limitations did not hinder this case study but rather provided a secondary analysis of Aaron Hernandez’s personal and professional career.

For future studies, the researcher’s goal is to have the case of Aaron Hernandez pave a path for celebrities and professional athletes to be held accountable for their actions outside of their jobs, no matter what their status or how much money they have. Movements like #MeToo have helped hold these types of people accountable and this research paper adds to that movement as well. It allows victims to have their voices heard and helps shift the media narrative overall. For future research, this topic should continue to be researched and investigated with other celebrities and professional athletes who have committed crimes outside of their field. There are hundreds of these types of people who have stories like Aaron Hernandez’s that, as a society, we should investigate and not brush under the rug.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the narrative displayed in the media was a key factor in the rise and fall of Aaron Hernandez’s professional career and personal life which tragically ended in prison in 2017. By holding professional athletes and celebrities accountable for their actions outside of their work, it can help shift the media narrative and allow victims' voices to be heard. Most of these actions include crimes, but the Aaron Hernandez case is a quintessential example of this idea. It shows fans how fans can idolize a figure like this and then quickly turn on them or even
hate them. It also shows fans how the media is a huge factor in their decision-making when deciding to continue to support these types of people pre and post-crime. The media affects these fans' ideas and perceptions of these professional athletes and celebrities both consciously and subconsciously. This case study of Aaron Hernandez also shows how media narratives can change about these public figures in an instant and paint them in a negative light for good. In Hernandez’s case, it was both the news and sports media that contributed to his downfall in his personal and professional life.
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