POWER AND IDEOLOGY IN CNN'S ONLINE NEWS: A SOCIO-COGNITIVE CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MISTY COPELAND'S REPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT This study examines how power and ideology operate in CNN's online news representation of Misty Copeland, using Teun A. van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis (SCA) framework. The research explores how linguistic choices and discursive strategies simultaneously empower and constrain the portrayal of race, gender, and success within liberal media narratives. Data were drawn from selected CNN articles covering Copeland's achievements and analyzed through textual, cognitive, and social dimensions to reveal how language, cognition, and ideology interact in shaping media representation. The findings indicate that CNN constructs Copeland's identity through a discourse of "contained empowerment," which outwardly celebrates diversity while subtly reproducing liberal and post-feminist ideologies. Linguistically, terms such as "trailblazer," "breaking barriers," and "making history" elevate Copeland as an exceptional figure. Cognitively, these expressions activate shared mental models grounded in meritocracy, reinforcing beliefs that upward mobility stems primarily from individual effort. Ideologically, the coverage depoliticizes issues of race and gender by transforming structural inequalities into narratives of personal perseverance. The study concludes that CNN's portrayal of Copeland naturalizes inequality through celebratory empowerment discourse. While promoting diversity, the narrative obscures institutional power and social asymmetry. This research contributes to Critical Discourse Studies by integrating socio-cognitive and intersectional perspectives, highlighting the need for critical media literacy in understanding how digital news both emancipates and regulates meaning in contemporary culture.

Keywords: Power and Ideology, online news, sociological cognitive, critical discourse analysis, Misty Copeland

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, news consumption has shifted significantly from traditional print media to online platforms, transforming how information is produced, accessed, and interpreted. Online news functions not only as a medium for information transmission but also as a dynamic social arena where ideologies, identities, and power relations are constructed through linguistic choices (Hasmiati et al., 2025; Wodak, 2020). As digital journalism increasingly shapes public consciousness, examining its linguistic and ideological dimensions becomes crucial for understanding meaning-making, representation, and bias in contemporary media discourse. News language is inherently ideological, embedded within institutional power structures and cultural norms that influence how events and individuals are framed (Fairclough, 2022). Fowler's (2021) recent reinterpretation of news discourse highlights the ways in which lexical and framing strategies construct a "socially produced reality" that legitimizes dominant perspectives while marginalizing others. Through such mechanisms, news media subtly reproduce asymmetrical power relations under the guise of objectivity (Kinsun, 2024).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) remains a central framework for uncovering the ideological processes embedded in news language. Fairclough (2022) and Wodak (2020) emphasize that CDA reveals implicit assumptions and discursive strategies that sustain social inequalities. Complementing this perspective, van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach (SCA) (van Dijk, 2019; 2023) integrates textual analysis with cognitive mechanisms by examining how ideologies are reproduced through shared mental models, knowledge structures, and social cognition. This approach is particularly relevant in digital news environments, where ideological meanings circulate rapidly and become normalized through repetitive discursive patterns amplified by algorithmic distribution.

Media representation of public figures provides a significant site for examining how ideology operates within news discourse. Misty Copeland, the first African American principal dancer in the American Ballet Theatre, is widely portrayed in global media as a symbol of racial and gender advancement. Her representation intersects with broader socio-cultural narratives concerning race, identity, and structural inequality. As one of the most influential digital news organizations, CNN shapes public perception through its narrative framing and linguistic construction of social actors. Recent studies demonstrate that media representations of Black women continue to be shaped by intersecting systems of oppression, which intersectionality theory conceptualizes as overlapping forms of racialized and gendered discrimination (Clark et al., 2022; Collins, 2023). Although digital journalism often promotes narratives of empowerment, subtle forms of bias remain visible, including the framing of Black women's achievements as exceptional individual accomplishments rather than as challenges to structural inequities (Al-Ghamdi, 2025; Aisyah et al., 2024; Salehi & Razavi, 2023). Such patterns reinforce neoliberal ideologies of meritocracy while obscuring persistent systemic barriers.

Although research on racialized and gendered representation in the media has expanded substantially in recent years, studies focusing specifically on the portrayal of Misty Copeland remain limited. Existing scholarship primarily investigates broader patterns of bias toward Black women or general ideological framing within news discourse (Clark et al., 2022; Collins, 2023). Furthermore, previous CDA-based studies tend to focus on textual surface features without integrating socio-cognitive layers that account for audience interpretation and ideological internalization. To date, no study has conducted a systematic analysis of CNN's representation of Misty Copeland using van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach to uncover both linguistic structures and the underlying ideological mental models. This gap highlights the need for a more comprehensive analysis that connects textual strategies, cognitive structures, and broader sociopolitical contexts. Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in its integration of socio-cognitive analysis with the representation of a culturally influential Black female figure within global digital news discourse.

To address this research gap, this study formulates the following research questions: how CNN linguistically constructs the representation of Misty Copeland in its online news coverage; what ideological meanings are embedded in CNN's discourse as revealed through van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach; and how cognitive mental models shape readers' interpretations of race, gender, and success in the portrayal of Misty Copeland. In line with these questions, the objective of this research is to identify the linguistic strategies used by CNN, uncover the ideological structures embedded within the discourse, and explain how shared mental models contribute to the reproduction of ideology related to race, gender, and cultural identity in digital media.

This study has theoretical and critical significance. It extends Critical Discourse Studies by integrating a socio-cognitive and intersectional perspective in the analysis of online news representation. The study also offers empirical insight into how liberal digital media construct empowerment narratives that may simultaneously challenge and normalize inequality. Furthermore, the findings contribute to critical media literacy by revealing how celebratory representations can function as subtle ideological mechanisms in contemporary digital journalism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has long been established as a methodological and theoretical approach to examining how language functions as a social practice of power, control, and ideology (Fairclough, 2015; Williams et al., 2025; Wodak, 2015). Rooted in critical linguistics, CDA views discourse not merely as a reflection of reality but as a means of

constructing and reproducing social relations, particularly those involving dominance and inequality (van Dijk, 2018). Language, in this sense, becomes a tool through which institutions legitimize authority, shape cognition, and influence how people perceive the world. Recent studies in digital discourse analysis confirm that news language plays a decisive role in shaping ideological common sense by repeatedly framing social issues through normalized lexical patterns and evaluative strategies.

Fairclough (2015) conceptualizes discourse as a dialectical relationship between language and social structures. Every act of communication reflects and reproduces power (Ummah & Waeno, 2024; Williams et al., 2025) relations while simultaneously opening possibilities for resistance. Similarly, Wodak (2025) emphasizes that critical discourse analysis must interrogate the contextual dimensions of discourse, social, political, and historical, to uncover the ideological forces embedded within language use. In contemporary contexts, CDA has expanded beyond traditional print media to include digital and online discourse, recognizing that digital journalism has become a dominant site where ideologies are circulated and contested (Kinsun, 2025; Salehi & Razavi, 2023). Empirical research on online journalism shows that algorithmic news environments intensify ideological reproduction by privileging affective and inspirational narratives over structural critique.

The online news environment, characterized by immediacy, interactivity, and global reach, amplifies the ideological potential of discourse by shaping not only what audiences know but also how they come to know it (van Dijk, 2014). Audience-based discourse studies demonstrate that repeated exposure to ideologically framed news contributes to the stabilization of shared cognitive schemas across social groups.

The Socio-Cognitive Approach and Ideological Reproduction

The Socio-Cognitive Approach (SCA) developed by Teun A. van Dijk offers a powerful framework for understanding how discourse, cognition, and society interact in the reproduction of power and ideology (van Dijk, 2014). According to this model, ideologies are not only embedded in language but also internalized through mental models and social cognition, the shared beliefs, norms, and values that guide interpretation and justify social hierarchies. Recent socio-cognitive research confirms that media discourse systematically constructs mental models that legitimize dominant social hierarchies by presenting them as natural and inevitable.

Van Dijk (2017) argues that ideological power operates most effectively when it becomes cognitively naturalized, meaning that people perceive certain social arrangements as normal or common sense. Through repetitive discursive patterns, media institutions contribute to this process by shaping collective understanding of events, identities, and moral values. This process, which van Dijk calls ideological reproduction, ensures the stability of dominant worldviews without requiring overt coercion (van Dijk, 2014). Recent scholarship has extended SCA to explore digital media environments, where discourse is increasingly multimodal and algorithmically mediated (Aisyah et al., 2025; Clark et al., 2021; Hasmiati et al., 2025). Multimodal discourse research indicates that the combination of visual and verbal cues in online news strengthens ideological persuasion by activating emotional and cognitive responses simultaneously.

Media Representation, Identity, and Power

Applying SCA to the representation of Misty Copeland allows for an analysis of how CNN's linguistic constructions activate shared mental models of empowerment, race, and femininity, revealing how ideology operates both in language and in thought. Media discourse is a primary site where social identities and power relations are negotiated and reproduced (Akbarizadeh & Khodadadi, 2025; Fowler, 1991). Studies on media representation reveal that

news discourse frequently individualizes structural inequality by foregrounding personal success narratives.

Representation is never a transparent mirror of reality; it is a selective process of meaning-making shaped by institutional interests, cultural norms, and ideological assumptions. According to Hall (2019), representation involves both construction and circulation of how images, words, and narratives are encoded with meaning and how audiences decode them through shared social frameworks.

In the context of news media, these representations often serve hegemonic purposes, subtly legitimizing dominant ideologies such as neoliberalism, patriarchy, and racial hierarchy (KhosraviNik, 2023; O'Halloran, 2021; Salehi & Razavi, 2023). Recent studies in arts and cultural journalism confirm that racialized performers are frequently framed as exceptional individuals, reinforcing meritocratic ideology rather than challenging institutional exclusion. Media narratives that appear neutral or celebratory can still perform ideological work by framing individual achievements as evidence of equality, thereby masking systemic injustice (hooks, 2015). Audience reception research suggests that celebratory media framing significantly reduces public awareness of structural inequality.

Discourses of empowerment in contemporary digital media

Contemporary media frequently deploy discourses of empowerment, diversity, and inclusion that appear progressive but are deeply intertwined with neoliberal and post-feminist ideologies (Aisyah et al., 2025; Bayat & Hadaegh, 2021). Post-feminist media discourse reframes empowerment as personal confidence, visibility, and self-branding rather than collective political struggle. Similarly, racial representation in the media often follows the logic of exceptionalism, celebrating individual figures who "make it" despite the odds, while erasing structural racism (Crenshaw, 2019; Collins, 2021). Intersectional media studies demonstrate that narratives of Black excellence often reinforce meritocratic ideology and obscure systemic racial inequality.

In the case of Misty Copeland, media coverage frequently constructs her as a symbol of empowerment and racial progress, yet this representation risks reproducing what Collins (2021) calls "symbolic inclusion," where diversity is celebrated in rhetoric but marginalized in reality. CNN's framing of Copeland as a "trailblazer" or "first African American woman" exemplifies how inclusion can coexist with ideological containment, reinforcing the myth of a post-racial society. Online journalism functions not merely as an information source but as a discursive mechanism that shapes public perception and ideological consensus. Critical discourse studies confirm that inspirational media narratives stabilize dominant ideologies while limiting space for structural critique.

Digital journalism and ideological reproduction

Van Dijk (2020) argues that the digital sphere amplifies ideological reproduction because of its immediacy, repetition, and algorithmic personalization. Algorithmic news distribution intensifies ideological reinforcement through repeated exposure to ideologically aligned content. CNN, as a globally influential network, constructs narratives that blend emotional appeal, inclusivity, and commercial logic. Such representations contribute to what Couldry and Mejias (2020) describe as "data colonialism," a process in which human attention and emotion become commodified, reinforcing corporate and ideological dominance. In this sense, media discourse operates not only at the linguistic level but within a larger network of socio-economic power.

Research gap and theoretical contribution

Several scholars have examined the intersection of discourse, ideology, and media representation. For example, Machin and Richardson (2020) analyzed the linguistic and visual strategies used by Western media to normalize neoliberal ideologies. Gill (2022) explored how post-feminist discourse in media representations constructs women's empowerment as an individualized and aestheticized pursuit. KhosraviNik (2022) investigated how online media employ socio-cognitive mechanisms to frame migration, gender, and identity within ideological boundaries. However, few studies have specifically applied the Socio-Cognitive Approach to analyze intersectional representations, particularly how race and gender intersect within neoliberal news narratives. The case of Misty Copeland, a globally recognized Black ballerina, provides a unique lens to explore how media discourse constructs empowerment while maintaining ideological control. Therefore, this research fills a gap in current scholarship by combining socio-cognitive discourse analysis with feminist and intersectional frameworks, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how power and ideology operate in digital media narratives (Azlan, 2025).

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically Teun A. van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach (SCA) (2014, 2018). This design is appropriate because the aim of the study is to interpret how language in online news constructs and distributes ideologies, rather than to quantify variables or test hypotheses. As Creswell and Poth (2023) emphasize, qualitative inquiry prioritizes the exploration of meaning-making within natural contexts, allowing the researcher to analyze discourse as a site of ideological negotiation. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model guides the overall analytical orientation by integrating the discursive, cognitive, and social dimensions of news production. Within this framework, discourse is understood as both shaped by and shaping mental models; journalists rely on shared beliefs and ideological knowledge in producing news stories, while readers interpret these stories through cognitive schemas influenced by race, gender, and cultural norms. This design, therefore provides a comprehensive foundation for examining how CNN constructs Misty Copeland's identity through narratives of representation, empowerment, and diversity.

Data Source and Sampling

The data were drawn from CNN's official online news portal, focusing on articles published between 2015 and 2024 that discuss Misty Copeland. This period captures the height of Copeland's public visibility following her historic promotion as the first African American principal dancer at the American Ballet Theatre, along with her subsequent cultural and media influence. Articles were identified using keywords such as "Misty Copeland," "ballet," "African American dancer," "representation," and "diversity." Purposive sampling was employed to select feature stories, cultural reports, and in-depth profiles, as these genres typically contain richer ideological and narrative elements compared with short news briefs. The final corpus consists of ten articles that explicitly or implicitly address intersections of Copeland's race, gender, and professional identity.

The selection of this sample size is methodologically justified within a qualitative socio-cognitive discourse framework, which prioritizes analytical depth over numerical representativeness. As van Dijk (2014) argues, ideological patterns and shared mental models can be systematically identified through a limited yet information-rich corpus, particularly when the data originate from a single influential media institution. The selected articles provide sufficient thematic variation while maintaining discursive coherence, enabling rigorous cross-

textual comparison and the identification of recurring ideological patterns. Each article was archived in PDF format and catalogued with metadata including publication date, URL, and thematic focus. Non-discursive elements such as advertisements and navigation bars were removed, whereas headlines, subheadings, captions, and other textual components were retained because they function as integral parts of news discourse.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved systematically retrieving articles that matched the sampling criteria and preparing them for discourse analysis. All texts were extracted directly from CNN's website and compiled into an organized database. Each article was read holistically to identify discursive features related to representation, empowerment, and racialized identity. The material was then cleaned and standardized for analysis by removing irrelevant visual elements while preserving the textual architecture that contributes to framing and interpretation. The collection process was guided by CDA principles, emphasizing attention to linguistic detail, intertextual cues, and ideological signals embedded in news narratives.

Data Analysis Procedures and Validation

Data were analyzed using the three-level structure of van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework: textual, cognitive, and social. The textual analysis examined micro-structural features such as lexicalization, thematic organization, transitivity patterns, modality, and evaluative language to uncover how CNN discursively constructs Copeland's identity. The cognitive analysis explored implicit assumptions, shared beliefs, presuppositions, and mental models activated through linguistic choices, especially those invoking narratives of meritocracy, racial progress, and exceptionalism. The social analysis situated these discursive and cognitive patterns within broader ideological contexts, including neoliberal individualism, post-racial narratives, and feminist empowerment frames, thereby connecting linguistic findings with structures of race and gender power in American media.

To enhance the validity and credibility of the analysis, triangulation was applied in three forms. First, theoretical triangulation was conducted by systematically comparing the findings with prior scholarship in *Critical Discourse Analysis*, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, and intersectional media representation studies. Second, intertextual triangulation involved identifying recurring discursive patterns across multiple CNN articles to ensure representational consistency and to avoid reliance on a single text. Third, contextual triangulation was achieved by situating the findings within broader ideological and socio-political contexts, particularly those related to the construction of race, gender, and representation in American media discourse.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Findings

The analysis of CNN's online news articles on Misty Copeland reveals complex interactions between language, cognition, and ideology. The findings demonstrate that Copeland's representation is constructed through linguistic choices that emphasize empowerment, exceptionalism, and diversity, while simultaneously reinforcing neoliberal and individualist ideologies. Through van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework, these representations can be interpreted as discursive acts that both challenge and reproduce dominant social structures related to race, gender, and power.

Linguistic Construction of Empowerment and Exceptionalism

At the textual level, CNN's discourse constructs Misty Copeland as a figure of empowerment and exceptional achievement. Common lexical patterns include words and

phrases such as *"trailblazer," "defying odds," "breaking barriers,"* and *"making history."* These linguistic choices foreground Copeland's agency and resilience, positioning her as an emblem of personal triumph against systemic obstacles. For instance, one article states:

"Misty Copeland has redefined what it means to be a ballerina, breaking barriers in an art form long dominated by white tradition."

The transitivity structure of this sentence assigns Copeland an active, agentive role, highlighting her as the actor of transformation. However, the use of the phrase *"white tradition"* implicitly signals the racialized history of ballet, positioning her success as an act of symbolic disruption. This dual framing, celebratory yet exceptional, creates a discourse of empowerment through exceptionality rather than structural change.

According to Fowler (2020) and Fairclough (2015), such linguistic constructions often naturalize ideological positions. By framing Copeland's story as one of extraordinary perseverance, CNN simultaneously promotes a neoliberal notion of self-made success that emphasizes individual agency over collective or institutional reform. In this way, empowerment is linguistically realized but ideologically constrained within the boundaries of meritocratic discourse (Gill, 2022).

Cognitive Models and Ideological Framing

From a socio-cognitive perspective, these linguistic choices activate shared mental models that shape how readers interpret Copeland's identity. Van Dijk (2018) explains that discourse producers and consumers rely on shared schemas, mental representations of social roles, values, and norms to make sense of texts. In CNN's coverage, Copeland's success is cognitively framed through the schema of the "American Dream", where hard work and talent guarantee upward mobility, regardless of structural inequality.

For instance, another CNN article reads:
"Her journey from a modest background to the pinnacle of the ballet world embodies perseverance, passion, and belief in oneself."

The lexical combination of *"journey," "pinnacle,"* and *"belief in oneself"* reproduces a familiar cognitive model of self-reliance and moral worth. This narrative aligns with what van Dijk (2014) identifies as ideological square strategies, emphasizing the positive actions of the in-group (hard work, determination) while backgrounding the negative aspects of the system (racial discrimination, institutional barriers). In other words, while CNN acknowledges Copeland's racial identity, it frames her success within a universalist discourse of personal virtue, thereby minimizing structural critique.

The underlying cognitive implication is that systemic inequality can be overcome through individual excellence, a belief that resonates strongly within neoliberal ideology (Lazar, 2018). Thus, while readers may interpret Copeland's story as inspirational, the discourse simultaneously reinforces an ideology that locates responsibility for success or failure at the level of individual agency rather than societal reform.

Representation of Race, Gender, and Identity

The representation of race and gender in CNN's discourse reveals the intersectional dynamics of power at play. Although the articles celebrate Copeland's identity as a Black woman, the linguistic construction often oscillates between visibility and containment. Descriptions such as *"the first African American principal dancer"* highlight racial achievement but also reify difference, situating Copeland as an exception within a white-dominated cultural sphere.

For example:
"As the first African American woman to achieve this honor, Copeland stands as a beacon of hope for young girls of color everywhere."

This representation carries dual ideological effects. On one hand, it affirms diversity and challenges racial exclusion by acknowledging a breakthrough in representation. On the other hand, it risks tokenizing the subject by isolating her success as a singular exception rather than a reflection of systemic transformation. As Crenshaw (2019) and Collins (2021) emphasize, such discourses can unintentionally reinforce the "burden of representation," where individual success is expected to symbolize progress for an entire marginalized group.

Gender representation in CNN's coverage further intersects with neoliberal feminism, a discourse that equates empowerment with individual success and visibility. Expressions like *"grace under pressure," "strong yet delicate,"* and *"redefining femininity in ballet"* reflect ambivalent gender ideologies. These linguistic constructions celebrate Copeland's strength while maintaining traditional gendered connotations of elegance and beauty. The discourse thus negotiates between empowerment and conformity, aligning with what Gill (2022) terms postfeminist sensibility, where empowerment is framed through self-discipline, ambition, and aesthetic control rather than collective political struggle.

Socio-Ideological Context and Institutional Power

At the macro level, CNN's representation of Misty Copeland must be understood within the institutional and ideological context of global media. CNN, as a transnational news corporation, operates within a commercial logic that privileges narratives of inspiration and positivity over structural critique. As Machin and Richardson (2020) observe, media institutions often engage in ideological storytelling that aligns with dominant cultural values such as optimism, individualism, and progress while avoiding confrontation with systemic inequality.

In this regard, CNN's portrayal of Copeland reflects a form of "celebratory diversity", where inclusion is acknowledged but depoliticized. The coverage frames diversity as a cultural achievement rather than a social demand, reinforcing what Wodak and Meyer (2021) describe as symbolic inclusion, a strategy that recognizes marginalized figures without challenging existing power hierarchies. Through this lens, Copeland's story becomes a site where ideology operates subtly: she is celebrated as a symbol of change, yet the discourse leaves the deeper structures of racial and gender inequality unexamined.

From a socio-cognitive standpoint, this pattern illustrates how institutional ideologies are reproduced through mental models of normalization. The repeated framing of success stories like Copeland's as "proof" of equality fosters a collective cognition that the system is fair and meritocratic. Van Dijk (2018) argues that such ideological reproduction occurs not through overt persuasion but through habitual discourse patterns that align personal narratives with societal myths. Thus, CNN's language does not merely report reality it constructs a cognitive and ideological space where certain meanings of race, gender, and power become common sense.

Ideological Ambivalence and Discursive Implications

The findings indicate that CNN's discourse embodies a form of ideological ambivalence. On the surface, the representation of Misty Copeland appears progressive, inclusive, and empowering. Yet, beneath this surface lies a subtle reinforcement of dominant ideologies, particularly neoliberalism, post feminism, and colorblind multiculturalism. This ambivalence is typical of what Fairclough (2015) calls "hybrid discourse", where emancipatory language coexists with conservative ideological structures. For example, while CNN celebrates Copeland's success as a challenge to racial exclusion, it simultaneously frames that success as an individual journey of perseverance rather than a collective struggle for equality. This tension reflects a broader media tendency to domesticate dissent by translating systemic issues into personal narratives of resilience. Consequently, readers are positioned to admire Copeland's

individual determination without questioning the institutional mechanisms that continue to marginalize others. At a deeper level, this finding underscores the cognitive role of media discourse in maintaining ideological consensus. By circulating emotionally resonant yet ideologically safe narratives, CNN fosters what van Dijk (2018) describes as socially shared cognition, a set of beliefs and attitudes that appear natural and universal. This normalization process illustrates how language functions as a vehicle of power: it shapes how people think about identity, success, and justice without overt coercion. Thus, even in celebrating diversity, the discourse subtly reproduces hierarchies by maintaining the status quo of symbolic power. Misty Copeland's representation becomes a "safe site" of empowerment celebrated enough to suggest progress, but not radical enough to disrupt dominant ideological formations.

Synthesis of Findings

In synthesis, the socio-cognitive analysis of CNN's coverage of Misty Copeland reveals a nuanced interplay between empowerment and containment, visibility and ideology, progress and normalization. Linguistically, CNN constructs Copeland through positive and celebratory expressions, emphasizing agency and achievement. Cognitively, these texts activate shared schemas of meritocracy, self-reliance, and moral virtue, aligning with neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies. Socially, the discourse operates within an institutional framework that promotes symbolic inclusion while avoiding structural critique. In van Dijk's (2014, 2018) terms, this represents the full operation of ideology at the textual, cognitive, and social levels where language, thought, and power intersect to produce socially acceptable meanings. Copeland's media representation, therefore, functions as a site of ideological negotiation: it simultaneously challenges exclusionary norms and sustains the belief in a fair, meritocratic system.

Table1: Findings and Discussion of Misty Copeland's Representation in CNN

Aspect Analyzed	Findings (Textual Evidence)	Socio-Cognitive Interpretation	Discussion/ Theoretical Implication
Empowerment & Exceptionalism	CNN repeatedly uses phrases like "trailblazer," "breaking barriers," "making history," and "defying odds." Example: "Misty Copeland has redefined what it means to be a ballerina, breaking barriers in an art form long dominated by white tradition."	These lexical choices activate cognitive models of individual heroism and resilience. Readers interpret Copeland as an exceptional individual rather than as part of a collective struggle.	Reflects **neoliberal ideology** of self-made success (Gill, 2022). The discourse empowers but isolates, celebrating the individual over structural reform (Fairclough, 2015).
Cognitive Model of Success	"Her journey from a modest background to the pinnacle of the ballet world embodies perseverance, passion, and belief in oneself."	The sentence evokes the American Dream schema, reinforcing beliefs that hard work ensures success regardless of social barriers.	Supports van Dijk's (2018) idea that shared mental models in news discourse reproduce dominant ideologies by naturalizing meritocracy and moral virtue.
Representation of Race	"As the first African American woman to achieve this honor, Copeland stands as a beacon of hope for young girls of color everywhere."	Highlights racial identity while positioning it as exceptional and symbolic. Constructs Copeland as a token of diversity rather than a symptom of systemic change.	Reinforces **tokenism** (Crenshaw, 2019). Shows celebratory diversity, acknowledging race but depoliticizing it (Wodak & Meyer, 2021).
Representation of Gender	Descriptions include "grace under pressure," "strong yet delicate," and "redefining femininity in ballet."	These expressions create dual cognitive frames: empowerment through discipline, but still confined	Reflects **postfeminist sensibility** (Gill, 2022): empowerment framed through aesthetics and

Aspect Analyzed	Findings (Textual Evidence)	Socio-Cognitive Interpretation	Discussion/ Theoretical Implication
		within feminine ideals of beauty and grace.	individuality, not collective gender struggle (Lazar, 2018).
Ideological Framing	Coverage focuses on success stories, inspiration, and personal triumphs while minimizing discussion of racism or institutional barriers.	CNN's cognitive and editorial frame privileges positive emotions, aligning with institutional ideologies of optimism and progress.	Illustrates **symbolic inclusion** (Wodak & Meyer, 2021): diversity is celebrated as brand value, not as a social justice agenda.
Institutional Power and Media Logic	CNN, as a global corporate media, presents Copeland as proof of equality and opportunity.	Readers form shared beliefs that society is fair and inclusive, supporting the myth of equality.	Confirms van Dijk's (2014) theory that ideology reproduces through socially shared cognition, not overt persuasion. The media legitimizes power through "inspirational" narratives.
Ambivalence in Representation	The discourse appears progressive but simultaneously supports neoliberal and colorblind ideologies.	Cognitive dissonance: readers perceive empowerment but overlook structural inequality.	Demonstrates **hybrid discourse** (Fairclough, 2015): emancipatory and conservative meanings coexist, sustaining the status quo of symbolic power.
Overall Ideological Effect	Copeland's story symbolizes empowerment within accepted norms of success and diversity.	Constructs a cognitive model where empowerment = individual achievement + institutional validation.	Media representation becomes a tool of **ideological reproduction**, turning social critique into personal narrative (van Dijk, 2018; Machin & Richardson, 2020).

This finding highlights the importance of critically engaging with media discourse, not only for what it says but also for what it silences. As Fairclough (2015) reminds, the task of critical discourse analysis is to uncover "the invisible power of discourse" that shapes our perception of truth and justice. The case of Misty Copeland in CNN demonstrates that even narratives of empowerment can become instruments of ideological reproduction subtle, persuasive, and deeply embedded in the language of celebration.

Discussion

The analysis of CNN's online coverage of Misty Copeland reveals how the representation of an African American ballerina is discursively constructed through the intersection of race, gender, and ideology. Using van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach (SCA), the findings demonstrate that CNN's language choices, narrative framing, and evaluative patterns do not merely describe Copeland's achievements but actively shape readers' mental models of empowerment, diversity, and meritocracy. These representations, while ostensibly progressive, subtly reproduce neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies that depoliticize structural inequalities.

Ideological Framing of Empowerment

At the surface level, CNN's discourse constructs Misty Copeland as a symbol of empowerment and resilience. Recurrent lexical choices such as *"trailblazer," "history-maker,"* and *"inspiring icon"* emphasize her individual determination and exceptional talent. These lexicalizations activate positive mental models within the reader's cognition, associating

Copeland's success with personal agency and perseverance (van Dijk, 2018). However, this discursive framing aligns with what Gill (2022) terms post-feminist sensibility, where empowerment is redefined as a matter of personal choice rather than systemic transformation. By focusing on Copeland's triumphs rather than the institutional racism within ballet, CNN's discourse reproduces a neoliberal logic that individualizes success and obscures social barriers. The text, therefore, constructs empowerment as a marketable narrative rather than a political struggle. Furthermore, the use of metaphorical constructions such as "breaking the glass ceiling" or "dancing beyond barriers" reinforces the perception of equality already achieved. These metaphors serve an ideological function by implying that discrimination is a past obstacle rather than an ongoing reality. This aligns with Foucault's (2020) notion of discourse as a mechanism of power that governs what is thinkable and sayable in public space. Through these discursive strategies, CNN frames Copeland's story as evidence of post-racial progress, legitimizing the illusion of inclusivity within elite cultural institutions.

Racial Representation and Symbolic Inclusion

The representation of race in CNN's articles reveals a subtle form of symbolic inclusion (Collins, 2021). Copeland is celebrated as the "first African American principal dancer" at the American Ballet Theatre, yet her racial identity is primarily invoked as a marker of exceptionality. This framing aligns with Crenshaw's (2019) critique of intersectional invisibility, where Black women are made visible only in moments of extraordinary achievement, while their everyday struggles remain invisible. The socio-cognitive implication of this pattern is that readers internalize a limited schema of racial success, one that equates visibility with equality. By highlighting Copeland's singularity rather than systemic change, CNN's narrative reinforces the ideology of meritocracy, suggesting that racial advancement depends on individual excellence. This cognitive framing naturalizes inequality by portraying structural barriers as personal challenges to be overcome. Moreover, the repeated emphasis on Copeland's body described as *"muscular," "powerful,"* and *"gracefully different"* reflects racialized aesthetic discourses that both celebrate and exoticize Black femininity. This mirrors Hooks (2020) and McRobbie's (2020) observations that neoliberal media often commodify diversity, turning difference into a spectacle that serves institutional branding. In this way, CNN's discourse simultaneously affirms inclusion and reproduces subtle otherness.

Gender and the Postfeminist Media Paradigm

Gender representation in CNN's portrayal of Copeland operates within the logic of postfeminist media culture (Lazar, 2018; Gill, 2022). The articles repeatedly frame her as a role model who balances strength and beauty, discipline and grace, an embodiment of the "empowered feminine subject." This framing rearticulates patriarchal ideals under a modernized rhetoric of self-realization. The narrative celebrates Copeland's ability to "defy stereotypes" while maintaining elegance and humility, reinforcing the dual expectation that women must excel professionally yet remain socially acceptable. As Lazar (2018) argues, post-feminist discourse frequently disguises gendered power relations under the language of empowerment, transforming resistance into aesthetic performance. In CNN's coverage, Copeland's femininity becomes a site of ideological negotiation: she is both a subject of empowerment and an object of admiration. This reflects van Dijk's (2020) view that media discourse operates through subtle cognitive framing, where ideology works not by explicit persuasion but through repeated, familiar patterns that align emotions with social hierarchies. The emotional appeal of Copeland's story, her struggles, humility, and gratitude, evokes empathy that conceals the structural critique of gender inequality in the ballet industry.

Media Power and Cognitive Reproduction

The socio-cognitive dimension of the analysis reveals that CNN's discourse operates as a mechanism of ideological reproduction. Through repetition of empowering yet depoliticized narratives, the media guides readers to interpret social reality in ways that maintain institutional legitimacy. Van Dijk (2018) explains that media discourse functions as a bridge between elite power and public cognition, ensuring that dominant ideologies are internalized as "common sense." CNN's representational choices thus perform what Couldry and Mejias (2020) term "discursive capitalism", where diversity narratives are used to sustain audience engagement and corporate credibility. The emphasis on inclusion, achievement, and positivity constructs a feel-good discourse that prevents critical engagement with systemic inequality. In this context, language becomes an instrument of soft power not coercive but cognitive shaping the parameters of social thought and emotional response.

Intersectional Implications

By examining race, gender, and ideology together, the study highlights how intersectionality functions discursively within online media. Copeland's identity as a Black woman is framed through intersecting ideological narratives empowerment, beauty, and exceptionalism that collectively reinforce neoliberal inclusivity. As Crenshaw (2019) and Collins (2021) argue, intersectionality reveals how structures of oppression operate not in isolation but in combination. CNN's representation of Copeland simultaneously celebrates her visibility and limits her political significance. Her story becomes a vessel for neoliberal values of hard work, individual resilience, and inspirational success ideologies that align with Western capitalist notions of progress. Thus, while the discourse appears empowering, it functions ideologically to neutralize critical awareness of institutional racism and gender hierarchy.

Summary of Key Discussion Points

Table 2. Summary of Key Discussion Points

Analytical Focus	Discursive Findings	Ideological/Cognitive Implications
Empowerment Framing	Lexical choices (trailblazer, history-maker); metaphorical "breaking barriers."	Promotes postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies that individualize success and obscure structural inequality.
Racial Representation	Emphasis on Copeland's uniqueness as "first African American."	Reinforces symbolic inclusion; internalizes meritocracy as a racial progress narrative.
Gender Construction	Framing of grace, beauty, and discipline as feminine virtues.	Reproduces postfeminist ideals; merges empowerment with aesthetic femininity.
Media Power	Positive framing through repetition, normalization, and emotional appeal.	Naturalizes institutional authority; creates cognitive alignment with dominant ideologies.
Intersectionality	Race and gender are portrayed as individual triumphs, not systemic struggles.	Conceals intersectional oppression under celebratory representation.

Theoretical Reflection

Overall, this discussion underscores van Dijk's (2018, 2020) assertion that media discourse is not merely descriptive but performative; it constructs social reality by activating mental models consistent with dominant ideologies. CNN's representation of Misty Copeland, while seemingly empowering, operates as a discursive strategy of ideological containment, transforming structural inequality into consumable inspiration. Through the Socio-Cognitive lens, the study demonstrates that ideology functions most effectively not through overt propaganda but through linguistic naturalization, the normalization of certain beliefs as "common sense." In digital media, this process is accelerated by repetition, emotional

resonance, and multi-modal reinforcement. Therefore, Copeland's portrayal exemplifies how contemporary online journalism, even when progressive in tone, remains embedded in hegemonic structures that define empowerment within capitalist and patriarchal terms.

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed how power and ideology shape CNN's online news representation of Misty Copeland using Teun A. van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis (SCA). By examining textual, cognitive, and social dimensions, the research shows that seemingly empowering narratives of achievement can simultaneously reinforce dominant neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies. CNN constructs Copeland through a discourse of "individualized empowerment," celebrating her success while subtly depoliticizing the structural realities of race, gender, and inequality. Lexical choices such as "trailblazer," "breaking barriers," and "making history" foreground meritocracy and personal triumph, promoting the belief that upward mobility results primarily from individual effort. This framing aligns with broader ideological tendencies within liberal media that favor inspirational narratives over structural critique.

The study contributes to Critical Discourse Studies by demonstrating how socio-cognitive mechanisms, particularly shared mental models of meritocracy and empowerment, mediate between media discourse and the reproduction of social power. It also highlights the importance of critical media literacy in recognizing how inclusive narratives may conceal ideological control and maintain existing hierarchies.

Despite its contributions, this research is limited in several ways. The corpus is restricted to CNN articles, which may not represent wider media patterns. The study also focuses solely on textual discourse, without analyzing visual, multimodal, or audience reception dimensions. Additionally, the analysis centers on a single public figure, which limits generalizability across racialized and gendered representations in the media.

Future research should examine multiple news outlets to compare ideological framing across media institutions, incorporate multimodal analysis to explore how images reinforce or challenge textual representations, or investigate audience interpretations to understand how readers cognitively process empowerment narratives. Comparative studies on other racialized or gendered figures would also deepen insights into how ideology shapes media representation in the digital age.

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