

You Have Started Following: Basketball Fan Support of Athlete and Team Activism on
Instagram

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of team and player identification on basketball fan attitudes towards social media posts regarding a political issue, specifically the Black Lives Matter movement. An experimental design was used to create Instagram posts shared by three National Basketball Association (NBA) teams: Phoenix Suns, Los Angeles Lakers, and Detroit Pistons along with one player from each team: Chris Paul, LeBron James, and Cade Cunningham, respectively. A total of 157 basketball fans were recruited for the study. Results show that fans who identify strongly with certain players and teams are more likely to show support for politically involved Instagram posts shared by the aforementioned entities. Additionally, sports fans are more likely to gain knowledge and information regarding events shared via social media by athletes and teams.

Keywords: Sports fan identification, Black Lives Matter, social media, politics, sport

Introduction

Sport provides a lens through which social issues, political empowerment, and corruption are able to emerge centrally and offer a platform for which to further analyze these phenomena. Similar to those found in political spheres, sports are ripe with institutions, groups, and actors which can provide insight into political workings at large (Gift & Miner, 2017). Modern political activism in sport is hallmarked by athletes that function almost as institutions themselves, due to their ever increasing reach through social and traditional media platforms. The ability for athletes to spur social change is not a new phenomenon, and has been occurring since the 19th century (Agyemang et al., 2020). What is different, however, is the ability for sports fans and spectators to now directly respond to any statement made by an athlete in regards to politics. Through social media interactions, fans and athletes are more connected than ever, and the rapid commercialization of sports has also generated significant coverage from traditional news outlets and emerging sports media outlets alike.

Studying the interaction between sports fans and athletes or teams has significant implications for financial, political, and sociological theater. Athletes have been considered to be the “greatest contemporary messengers of opposing political views” due to their large reach and ability to influence the beliefs, values, and appraisals of their fans (Warren, 2021). Understanding how and why American sports viewers respond to political activism can present insightful themes into how American politics are discussed in general. Social media has provided platforms where athletes and sports fans alike can share their thoughts and reactions to current happenings—with politics being a significant topic. In the past few years, there has been an increase in notable moments in which athletes use social media to share opinions regarding political events. With the immense popularity of various athletes, many of these instances picked

up steam in traditional news media outlets as well, not only sports media. For example, LeBron James posted a series of tweets critiquing President Trump, which the Fox News network directly responded to by telling James to “shut up and dribble” (Warren, 2021). The instantaneous nature of social media has also allowed for actions taken by athletes on field to gain attention quickly, such as Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem as a form of protest in 2016. As a result, social media has amplified the role of contemporary politics in sport in three ways: generating awareness through use/exposure, increased fan/athlete interaction and perceived closeness, and the increasing use of social media by sports media platforms (Warren, 2021).

Celebrity activism has been met with skepticism by some fans, questioning the authenticity of celebrity endorsement and motivations for engagement with specific issues (Feder, 2019). Although there has been limited research on fan reaction to athlete activism, previous literature finds that athletes are met with backlash and disorientation after commenting on intellectually charged issues, as many sports fans maintain the stereotype of the “dumb jock” in their subconscious (Feder, 2019). Individuals who identify themselves as fans of an athlete or team may have positive or adverse reactions to the involvement of those sports entities in matters that could be considered political. Engagement with sports teams and athletes via social media has been established as a predictor of identification levels, and potentially increases these levels as well (Meng et al., 2015). Social media works as an effective tool in “fostering parasocial relationships with celebrities” (Chung & Cho, 2017, p. 489) and increasing levels of source trustworthiness and celebrity-fan interactions. Previous literature has established that these three factors contribute significantly to successful celebrity endorsement and by extension, positive fan reaction to athlete activism (Feder, 2019).

The purpose of this study is to determine any significant changes in fan response to political posts of athletes and sports teams based on their levels of athlete and team identification. By analyzing themes of fan response to politically involved posts shared by athletes and sports teams on Instagram, differences in response between various identification levels can be explored and analyzed to reveal larger messages about fan response to political activism of sports entities. While all social media platforms allow celebrities to create perceived senses of closeness to their fans, Instagram has a special function by nature of its role as a photo sharing platform. By sharing photos of their everyday life, celebrities use Instagram to provide sports fans with coveted, intimate “insider information” and the “truest behind the scenes look a fan can experience” (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016, p. 134). The ability for the formation of a more ‘authentic’ bond is why Instagram was selected as the social networking site for this study. Information collected using the Sports Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) to determine levels of identification can be extrapolated to social media users replying to and engaging with (likes, reposts, etc.) posts on Instagram regarding political topics. This study can have implications regarding the engagement of sports fans and their perceptions of certain teams or players after viewing these posts and can provide insight into how these perceptions potentially change.

This research will provide important insights into fan perceptions of athlete and team activism on Instagram, along with potential subsequent effects of said activism. In the current celebrity-centric social media era interactions with fans and celebrities on social media are more open, intimate, and frequent, narrowing the distance between audience and celebrities and altering the role of audiences from spectators to admirers or friends (Chung & Cho, 2017). The ever changing relationship between celebrity and fan as a result of social networking sites give cause to studying the phenomenon of ‘influencer-activists’ and the specificities of athletes as

influential activists in media. This research can contribute to established findings regarding celebrity politics and the impact of celebrity endorsement on various political issues. While the field is widely studied, there is very little literature focusing on athletes as celebrities, and the effects of their endorsements.

Literature Review

Sport as a Platform for Politics

Athletic institutions have become forums for large-scale, patriotic theater with the intention of promoting national unity (Jenkins, 2013). Nationalistic tendencies promoted by American sporting events have become increasingly problematic for fans and athletes as expected blind obedience and excessive valuation of a nation has come to be normalized (Schmidt et al., 2019). The constructed ideals of these institutional forums have given rise to increased feelings of national pride and placed the expectation upon fans and athletes alike to participate in overt patriotic displays (Smith & Tryce, 2019). Research now discusses whether strong attachments to a national identity predispose individuals to hostile responses towards public expressions drawing attention to the nation's shortcomings. Dominant ideologies of nationalism in sports fans may lead them to view athletes who engage in activism to communicate the demand for social change as 'deviants,' and would previously garner notably more negative attention than other activist figures (L. R. Smith, 2019). By nature of their efforts, "athlete activists [have] exploded forever the myth that sport is an innocent pastime that exists outside the realm of economic and political forces" (Kaufman et al., 2008, p. 218).

Historical instances of athlete activism and the modern day resurgence have been motivated by matters involving racial injustice and inequality in the United States. As determined by Dr. Harry Edwards, athlete activism can be categorized into four distinct waves,

contextualized within broader social movements in United States society dating back to the 19th century (Agyemang et al., 2020). The first three waves took place between 1900-1945, 1946-1960s, and the 1960s-1970s, respectively. The earliest defined wave was characterized by individual Black athlete activists and organizations such as Negro Leagues and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), that largely fought for recognition and legitimacy in “an openly racist, apartheid society and sport industry” (Agyemang et al., 2020, p. 955). Notable activists in the second wave include Jackie Robinson and Althea Gibson, who fought for desegregation and access in the sports industry and society as a whole. The third wave coincided with the Civil Rights Movement, and fueled demands for dignity, respect, and social justice, led by sports figures such as Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (Agyemang et al., 2020). The stagnation of Black athlete activism was seen throughout the 1970s until roughly 2005, proposed to be due to increased access for racial minorities in primarily White owned spaces, creating the illusion of racial equality. During this time period, it was suggested that Black athletes were more interested in protecting economic interests than engaging in acts of resistance (Agyemang et al., 2020). The resurgence of athlete activism present in today’s society is considered to be the fourth wave. High-profile Black athletes function “as mini-corporate entities and social media maestros who espoused the ideologies of BLM and other social justice causes in efforts to secure and transfer power through economic and technical capital” (Agyemang et al., 2020, p. 955).

The Black Lives Matter movement was created in 2013 as #BlackLivesMatter after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin (Rickford, 2016). The founders of Black Lives Matter are Black women who engaged in grassroots efforts to engage activists and participants in supporting the movement, although the media has contributed much

of the spread of awareness of the movement to celebrities. Celebrity activity and engagement with Black Lives Matter had a major effect on the support and spread of the movement's ideologies. Celebrities can bring public attention to specific issues, boost public interest, mobilize new activists and shape how we feel about certain topics (Johnson et al., 2020). However, it has been established that Black celebrities often had to fight to have their voices included in political discourse and accepted by the public. Within sports specifically, preconceived stereotypes made this more difficult even though Black male athletes have long been vocal in their political opinions.

Black male athletes were found to be among the most influential and notable voices during the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). Since then, their role has remained important as then and now, athletes serve as agents of social change who can affect the attitudes of their fans even though stereotyping of Black athletes leads fans to believe that they are “brawny rather than being brainy” (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017, p. 429). Black male athletes face unique challenges when it comes to engaging in politics due to long existing stereotypes and the “transfiguration of Black [people]” in which they become “characters, icons, symbols, or caricatures... something other than human beings” (Lane, 2007, p. 66). The actions of notable Black male athletes garners prominent media attention, to the extent that they often receive credit for founding social movements they did not start (Johnson et al., 2020).

Sports and Media

The current landscape of sports media presents the evolution of the sports industry as one of the key components of an ever evolving global media industry. The “cultural fusing of sport with communication” (Billings, 2014, p. 213) that explained the increased social, economic, political, and cultural influence of sport was aptly named *MediaSport*. The advent of social

media and the transformation of the sports spectator from a passive to active audience resulted in the creation of the *SocialMediaSport* era, where fans actively create and seek out meaningful connections with their favorite sports entities: athletes, organizations, media, and other fans (Billings, 2014). Fans not only engage with sports content on social media, but also create their own sports-related content as well. They are able to quickly and easily share their own opinions about sport-related topics through platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, and also engage with other fans about happenings in games and leagues.

With regards to sports and media, the selective exposure theory posits that fans who enjoy consuming mediated sports will seek them out in considerable quantities, as an extension of the idea that people seek out media that is congruous with prevailing attitudes (Raney & Bryant, 2006). Similarly, the uses and gratifications theory assumes that individuals expect media to address and fulfill certain physiological and sociological needs faced in everyday life. As a result, individuals may turn to sports media programming to satisfy these needs, with previous literature identifying these motivations as emotional, cognitive, and social or behavioral needs (Raney & Bryant, 2006). Social media allows for more direct connections of fans to athletes and teams, allowing for a “glimpse behind the celebrity curtain” and bolstering their fandom (Lewis et al., 2017).

Celebrity Presentation of Self on Social Media

The idea of ‘celebrity’ constitutes “an image that has been established by an individual that is heavily in the media spotlight in which cultural or social connections have been made” (Dobias, 2011, p. 5). Celebrity status relies on the formation of a brand, which thus places these figures outside of a normal realm, and attaches these figures to various entities. Their status allows them to be considered influential individuals who seem to exist in a separate universe,

while still maintaining great influence over people's perception of products, actions and world issues (Dobias, 2011). The formation of connections in which celebrities seem down to earth and relatable allow for the development of parasocial relationships, where the trust and admiration of the public is gained.

A parasocial relationship refers to the phenomenon in which a viewer feels like media personalities are individuals with whom they have a relationship (Dobias, 2011). As media figures are more accessible via social media, exposure to celebrity posts can strengthen this perceived bond between the user and celebrity, giving followers a perception of 'knowing.' Parasocial relationship theory, developed by Horton and Wohl (1956), further defines a parasocial relationship as one-sided, non-reciprocal relationships that media users develop with mass media characters or personalities to whom the user is exposed to on a frequent basis (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In the current media-centric celebrity-focused society, there has been a rise in a greater emotional and psychological attachment to media figures. Previously, parasocial relationship theory solely focused on the idea of celebrity as a performer, but the advent of social media provides a unique environment in which celebrities are both themselves while simultaneously embodying a media personae. It provides a platform in which celebrities can construct themselves as 'authentic' and assert themselves as regular people, in an effort to create a relatable image for fans to easily identify with (Dobias, 2011).

Similarly, the media coverage of sporting events and athletes creates a way in which fans can feel close to their favorite athletes. Players of teams can become 'constant virtual companions' due to the repetitive nature of sporting events. Sports coverage now includes up-close and personal profiles of sports stars as journalists place emphasis on personalities along with athletic abilities (Hartmann et al., 2008). As a result, spectators and fans feel close to

televised athletes by way of televised sporting events and related media coverage and forge strong parasocial relationships.

Presentation of Self

Social networks are considered to be a constitutive, organic production of self as much as they are about the exchange and dissemination of thoughts and information (Marshall, 2010). As established by Erving Goffman in his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), the performance of self is a conscious act of the individual, and requires careful staging to maintain the self. Through social media, the staging of self has become a balance between both a character and a performance. Celebrity presentation of self on social media is “highly conscious of a potential audience as much as it is a careful preening and production of the self” (Marshall, 2010). As established by the Social Penetration Theory (SPT), human relationships are found to develop through revealing the self, and the voluntary sharing of personally relevant information (Kim & Song, 2016).

The public perception of athletes was largely dictated by media portrayal before the widespread use of social media. Now, “athletes can exert more control over their self-presentation and disseminate identity aspects directly to fans” (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Social networking sites now function as an arena for celebrities to exchange and disseminate information as an organic production of the self. This self-production is considered to be at the forefront of celebrity activity, and now serves as a template for the presentation of the online self (Marshall, 2010).

Smith & Sanderson (2015) conducted content and textual analyses of athletes' Instagram posts to discover themes and patterns in relation to how athletes express themselves on social media. From images and captions, researchers determined six prominent themes that emerged.

The first was “humanitarian” which came in the form of athletes doing charitable work or advocacy. Secondly, athletes shared intimate glimpses into their home life and family moments, creating the theme of “family driven” content. The third theme gave fans insight into the non-athlete persona of these figures, deemed “personality traits and interest.” The “dedicated athlete” theme was also seen, which involved athletes sharing workout regimens and practice routines. Theme five saw athletes posting about their sponsors, and was named “endorser.” Finally, the “socialite” theme showcased athletes at high profile events such as parties or galas (L. R. Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

As fans identify with celebrities and media figures, they are more likely to seek out information and media focused on that persona, in an effort to increase their identification and gain more exposure (Dobias, 2011). Identification and parasocial relationship formation now develop hand in hand due to the nature of social media. Social media posts from athletes and celebrities appear in Instagram feeds alongside those of close friends and family, with no distinction. As audiences are exposed to this content in their feeds, they are able to move along the identification process and engage with multifaceted views of celebrity social media accounts on different platforms, providing new information to guide impressions of celebrities (Dobias, 2011).

Celebrity Politics and Fan Response

At its most basic level, celebrity politics involves celebrities using their social capital and status to encourage and influence politicians, organizations, and ordinary citizens to support causes they advocate for (Becker, 2013). As a result, their advocacy efforts provide added visibility and attention to issues and can potentially strengthen the public’s agreement with previously unpopular political statements, especially among their fan bases. With regards to

young voters, it has been established that celebrity involvement can have a significant impact on politics as these audiences tune into celebrity culture more (Becker, 2013). Most importantly however, is the idea that celebrity involvement in politics seems more appropriate when the celebrity acts as a ‘credible source’ on the issue they are advocating for, where their involvement seems plausible, genuine, and realistic (Becker, 2013).

Previous literature has established that celebrity involvement in politics seems more appropriate when the political issue is perceived as ‘less important.’ Presentations of activist behavior have evolved as the increased presence of technology and social media has influenced society. Using social media platforms, athletes are able to take more of an active role in their public presentation, sharing more aspects of their identity than would otherwise be portrayed in mainstream media (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). As a result, fans begin to view athletes they identify with as credible sources in regards to endorsements and information. When an athlete shares opinions or information about current events via social networking sites, fans with stronger parasocial relationships are likely to place more value on the thoughts of the athlete and subconsciously integrate them into their own personal ideologies.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory focuses on the way individuals perceive and categorize themselves based on their social and personal identities (Jacobson, 2003). This theory emphasizes the ideas of in-group and out-group relations, and views identity as a function of the “value and emotional attachment placed on a particular group membership” (Jacobson, 2003). Social identity theory posits that “(1) one socially identifies with a group when they perceive feelings of belonging with the group; (2) social identification occurs through categorization of other groups; and (3) as one identifies with a group, one tends to take on the attitudes and actions of the group” (Billings,

2014 p. 201). Sport functions as a major social environment that can trigger an ‘accentuation’ of people’s identity (Guo et al., 2019).

Sport functions as a target of social identification as fans form strong connections with other sports fans through symbols, traditions and rituals associated with the team. Sport fans who identify with a specific team are more likely to have positive attitudes towards fans of the same team, and be more critical of rival teams and organizations (Billings, 2014). These in-group and out-group comparisons allow fans to cultivate stronger identities and differentiate themselves. Most importantly, the behavioral assimilation of fans who identify with sports teams is seen through the internalization of values and emotions shared by the group (Billings, 2014). To ensure group identification, many highly identified members will adopt beliefs and behaviors of their team, and are likely to replicate these behaviors and attitudes.

Team Identification

One of the most important factors of social identity theory is the idea of team identification. Defined as “the personal commitment and emotional involvement customers have with a sports organization,” team identification represents a fans psychological connection to a sports team (Guo et al., 2019). Major factors influencing team identification include the social nature of sports spectating, family ties to certain teams, and players themselves who play a major role in the continued identification with sports teams (Wann et al., 1996). Highly identified fans are more likely to see their team as an extension of themselves, and react differently when presented with any negative information regarding their group compared to fans with low levels of identification (Fink et al., 2009). Additionally, highly identified fans are less likely to decrease their association with a team or denounce their loyalty than moderately or less identified fans, and remain committed to their team in face of adversity (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Fans are

more likely to identify with organizations that represent attributes they assign to themselves. Therefore, it is important to consider the role of team identification and its intersection with contemporary politics in sport. Based on previous literature, fans that strongly identify with certain teams are likely to share similar political opinions and ideologies with the team, and have favorable attitudes towards the on-field and off-field actions of their team.

H1: Fans with higher levels of team identification are more likely to support politically involved posts shared by sports teams on Instagram.

H2: Fans with higher levels of team identification are more likely to support posts shared by athletes on Instagram.

H3: Fans with higher levels of team identification would be more likely to express support towards team involvement in politics on social media.

H4: Fans with higher levels of team identification would be more likely to express support towards player involvement in politics on social media.

Player Identification

Also deeply rooted in the social identity theory is the idea of player identification. Similarly to team identification, player identification is understood as an individual's emotional connection with a certain social group or specific person (Jang et al., 2020). Player identification is oftentimes stronger than team identification due to the interpersonal nature of social media and the formation of parasocial relationships with athletes. Athletes have access to large platforms through which they can foster these relationships and extend their influence over certain opinions and ideas. If fans are exposed to the ideas of celebrities or athletes they strongly identify with, they are likely to adopt some of the same ideologies and support the actions of the player.

H5: Fans with higher levels of player identification are more likely to support politically involved posts shared by athletes on Instagram.

H6: There is a significant positive correlation between higher levels of player identification and support for politically involved posts shared by sports teams on Instagram.

H7: Fans with higher levels of player identification are more likely to express support towards team involvement in politics on social media.

H8: Fans with higher levels of player identification are more likely to express support towards player involvement in politics on social media.

Methods

This study employs a quantitative approach to assess the level of depth required to analyze the present themes in which individuals react to politically involved posts shared by sports teams and athletes.

Participants

157 self-identified basketball fans were recruited for this study. Only study participants who identified themselves at a level of at least a 4 out of 5 on a basketball fanship scale were included in the study. The survey was administered using the Amazon M-Turk service, and participants were paid \$0.80 for completing the survey.

Participants were first presented with a demographic questionnaire including gender (62.42% male, 36.31% female, 1.27% non-binary/third gender), age ($M = 37.55$; $SD = 9.74$), race (33.54% caucasian, 50% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5.70% Black/African American, 5.70% Hispanic/Latino, 2.53% Native American/American Indian, 2.53% Other), which region of the United States they are from (9.35% New England, 17.76% Mid-Atlantic, 11.21% East North

Central, 3.74% West North Central, 19.63% South Atlantic, 7.48% East South Central, 7.48% West South Central, 4.67% Mountain, 14.02% Pacific, 4.67% Other), and educational level (0.64% no schooling completed, 1.27% some high school, 7.01% high school graduation/diploma/equivalent, 8.92% college student, 54.78% undergraduate degree, 26.11% masters degree, 0.64% doctoral degree, 0.64% other).

Measurements

Questions measuring perceived issue importance and participants' politics were also asked as control measures. Participants responded to a series of questions on a 5-point Likert Scale measuring their attitudes towards Black Lives Matter as an important political movement ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.19$), economic movement ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.52$), and social movement ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.19$) as well as their current interest in political affairs ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.97$) and attention towards political affairs ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.93$).

Fanship. Participants were first presented with a modified version of Reysen and Branscombe (2010) fanship scale to measure general basketball fanship with eleven, 5-point Likert-type items (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Mean values of scores were used to represent individuals' fanship. Higher scores represented higher levels of basketball fanship. Cronbach's α was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.967$); mean and standard deviation for this scale were calculated ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.10$).

Team Identification. Team identification was measured using a modified version of Wann and Branscombe's (1993) Sports Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS). Participants were presented with seven items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Mean values of scores were used to represent individuals' team identification. Higher scores indicated higher levels of team identification. Cronbach's α was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.934$).

Player Identification. Player identification was measured using a modified version of Wann and Branscombe (1993) and Guo et al's. (2019) Sports Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) .

Participants were presented with seven items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Mean values of scores were used to represent individuals' player identification. Higher scores indicated higher levels of team identification. Cronbach's α was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.921$).

Current NBA standings at the time of the study were used to determine teams at the top, middle, and bottom of the league to be included in the study. The most notable players from each team were also selected to use in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three teams and players, and their response to the 7-point Likert scale SSIS questionnaire for team and athlete was recorded. The scales were modified for each team, including the Phoenix Suns (N = 50), Los Angeles Lakers (N = 50) , and Detroit Pistons (N = 49), who at the time of the study were 1st, 16th, and 29th in league standings respectively, and each player, Chris Paul (N = 49), LeBron James (N = 48), and Cade Cunningham (N = 48). Politically involved Instagram posts were created for each team and player and shown to participants (Appendix).

Instagram Post Influence. After viewing the Instagram posts for a specific team and player, participants were presented with a four questions, 5-point Likert-type scale questionnaire measuring their attitudes towards the Instagram posts they were presented with (Table 1).

Table 1. 5-Point Likert Scale Measuring Attitudes Towards Instagram Post Influence (Park, 2021)

Item	Anchor
The Instagram post was an effective way to influence public opinion.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
The image shared by the team offers insights on social issues.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree

The Instagram post was a waste of time. 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree

The Instagram post shared by the team brings the issue to my attention. 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree

Attitude Towards Politics and Sports. Participants then answered questions on two separate 7-point Likert scale questionnaires, measuring their attitudes towards the presented posts and sports team and athlete involvement in political events (Table 2).

Table 2. 7-Point Likert Scale Measuring Attitudes Towards Politics and Sports (Nam, 1996; Thorson & Serazio, 2018; Park, 2021)

Item	Anchor
The sports team/athlete should involve itself/himself in politics.	1 = Absolutely Disagree; 7 = Absolutely Agree
The sports team/athlete is qualified to share its/his opinion on political topics.	1 = Absolutely Disagree; 7 = Absolutely Agree
The sports team/athlete should be expected to use its/his platform to share messages regarding positive social change.	1 = Absolutely Disagree; 7 = Absolutely Agree
I became more knowledgeable of current events based on posts shared by the sports team/athlete.	1 = Absolutely Disagree; 7 = Absolutely Agree
I am more likely to seek out knowledge regarding political events shared by the sports team.	1 = Absolutely Disagree; 7 = Absolutely Agree
Sports should be seen as an escape from politics.	1 = Absolutely Disagree; 7 = Absolutely Agree
Sports are political.	1 = Absolutely Disagree; 7 = Absolutely Agree
Politics have no place in sports.	1 = Absolutely Disagree; 7 = Absolutely Agree

Instagram Post Attitude. Participant's attitudes towards the Instagram posts were measured with a three question, 5-point Likert-type scale questionnaire (Table 3).

Table 3. 5-Point Likert Scale for Measuring Attitudes Towards Instagram Posts (Park, 2021)

Item	Anchor
Overall, my attitude towards the team's/athlete's Instagram post for social injustice is good.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
Overall, my attitude towards the team's/athlete's Instagram post for social injustice is favorable.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
Overall, my attitude towards the team's/athlete's Instagram post for social injustice is positive.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree

Team/Athlete Image Perception. Participant's perception of the team and athlete image after viewing the politically involved Instagram posts was measured using a six question, 5-point Likert-style scale (Table 4).

Table 4. 5-Point Likert Scale Measuring Team/Athlete Image Perception (Park, 2021)

Item	Anchor
I have a very positive attitude towards the team/player who shared the Instagram post I just saw.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
I have a very favorable attitude towards the team/player who shared the Instagram post I just saw.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
I have a very good attitude towards the team/player who shared the Instagram post I just saw.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
I have a very positive attitude towards the team's/player's participation or public stance for social-political issues for society.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
I have a very favorable attitude towards the team's/player's participation or public stance for social-political issues for society.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree
I have a very good attitude towards the team's/player's participation or public stance for social-political issues for society.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree

Data collected from the survey was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. All of the variables measured through survey questionnaires were continuous, so bivariate correlations were used throughout the study.

Results

H1 states that levels of team identification would be positively related to support for politically involved posts shared by sports teams on Instagram. Mean values of team identification and standard deviations for each team are shown in Table 5. Mean values of fans' opinions towards team Instagram posts are shown in Table 6. Team identification for the Phoenix Suns had no significant correlation with fans' opinions towards team Instagram posts ($r = 0.11, p = .458$). Similarly, there was no significant correlation between team identification for the Los Angeles Lakers and fans' opinions towards the team Instagram post ($r = 0.19, p = .20$). There was a significant positive correlation between Detroit Pistons team identification and fans' opinion towards team Instagram posts ($r = 0.30, p = .043$). Based on these results, H1 is only partially supported.

Table 5. Mean and Standard Deviations of Team Identification

Team Identification					
Phoenix Suns		Los Angeles Lakers		Detroit Pistons	
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
4.57	1.97	4.47	1.87	4.29	2.21

Table 6. Mean and Standard Deviations of Fan Opinion towards Team Instagram Posts

Team Instagram Opinion					
Phoenix Suns		Los Angeles Lakers		Detroit Pistons	
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
3.92	0.70	3.76	0.99	3.88	0.85

H2 states that levels of team identification are positively correlated with support for politically involved posts shared by athletes on Instagram. Mean values of fans' opinions towards players' Instagram posts are presented in Table 7. Team identification for the Phoenix Suns showed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.356, p = 0.019$) with support for player Instagram posts showing support for Black Lives Matter. A significant positive correlation was seen between team identification for the Los Angeles Lakers and opinions towards an Instagram post shared by LeBron James ($r = 0.31, p = .045$). Detroit Pistons team identification also showed a significant positive correlation with fan opinions ($r = 0.44, p = .003$). H2 is fully supported based on these results.

Table 7. Mean and Standard Deviations of Fan Opinion towards Player Instagram Posts

Player Instagram Opinion					
Chris Paul		LeBron James		Cade Cunningham	
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
3.72	0.70	3.62	0.99	3.68	0.91

H3 states that levels of player identification will have a positive correlation with support for politically involved posts shared by sports teams on Instagram. Mean values of player identification and standard deviations for each player are shown in Table 8. Identification with Chris Paul showed no significant correlation ($r = 0.11, p = .462$) with team Instagram opinion. There was a significant positive correlation between identification with LeBron James and subsequent support for a team Instagram post about Black Lives Matter ($r = 0.29, p = .046$). Identification with Cade Cunningham was also significantly positively correlated with support for the team Instagram post ($r = 0.294, p = .05$). As a result, H3 was only partially supported.

Table 8. Mean and Standard Deviations of Player Identification

Player Identification					
Chris Paul		LeBron James		Cade Cunningham	
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
4.50	1.92	4.38	1.76	4.29	2.11

H4 states that levels of player identification would be positively correlated to support for politically involved posts shared by athletes on Instagram. Identification towards Chris Paul showed a significant positive correlation towards player Instagram opinion ($r = 0.265, p = 0.086$). Identification towards LeBron James showed a significant positive correlation towards player Instagram opinion ($r = 0.419, p = 0.006$). Player identification with Cade Cunningham showed a significant positive correlation with player Instagram opinion ($r = 0.387, p = 0.009$). H4 was completely supported by these findings.

H5 states that higher levels of team identification would indicate a significant positive correlation with support towards team involvement in politics on social media. Mean values of team involvement opinions and standard deviations for each team are shown in Table 9. Phoenix Suns team identification supported this hypothesis and showed a significant positive correlation with team involvement opinions ($r = 0.396, p = 0.009$). A positive correlation was also seen for the Los Angeles Lakers for team ($r = 0.537, p < 0.001$) involvement, and the Detroit Pistons as well—($r = 0.590, p < 0.001$) for team and involvement. These results support H5.

Table 9. Mean and Standard Deviations of Fan Opinion towards Team Involvement in Politics on Social Media

Team Involvement Opinion					
Phoenix Suns		Los Angeles Lakers		Detroit Pistons	
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
5.03	0.90	4.81	0.95	4.87	1.29

H6 states that higher levels of team identification would indicate a significant positive correlation with support towards player involvement in politics on social media. Mean values of player involvement opinions and standard deviations for each team are shown in Table 10.

Phoenix Suns team identification showed a significant positive correlation with player involvement opinions ($r = 0.434, p = 0.002$). Team identification for the Los Angeles Lakers was also significantly positively correlated with player involvement opinions ($r = 0.682, p < 0.001$). Fans who identified with the Detroit Pistons also showed a significant positive correlation with support for player involvement in politics on Instagram ($r = 0.589, p < 0.001$).

Table 10. Mean and Standard Deviations of Fan Opinion towards Player Involvement in Politics on Social Media

		Player Involvement Opinion					
		Chris Paul		LeBron James		Cade Cunningham	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
		4.91	0.94	4.78	0.97	4.91	1.11

H7 states that higher levels of player identification would indicate a significant positive correlation with support towards team involvement in politics on social media. Chris Paul player identification supported this hypothesis and showed a significant positive correlation with team involvement opinions ($r = 0.355, p = .019$). Stronger positive correlations were seen for identification with LeBron James and team involvement ($r = 0.601, p < .001$). Cade Cunningham player identification and team involvement opinions also showed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.632, p < .001$). H6 is supported by these results.

H8 states that higher levels of player identification would indicate a significant positive correlation with support towards player involvement in politics on social media. Phoenix Suns team identification showed a significant positive correlation with player involvement opinions (r

= 0.390, $p = 0.006$). Team identification for the Los Angeles Lakers was also significantly positively correlated with player involvement opinions ($r = 0.566, p < 0.001$). Fans who identified with the Detroit Pistons also showed a significant positive correlation with support for player involvement in politics on Instagram ($r = 0.589, p < 0.001$). H7 is supported by these results.

Discussion

The current study focused on examining the relationship between team and player identification and subsequent support of politically involved posts on Instagram shared by teams and athletes. The results supported the proposed hypotheses, as there were significant relationships between opinions towards Instagram posts shared by teams and athletes and levels of player and team identification. Each of the seven hypotheses were at least partially supported.

Previous literature has supported the idea that celebrities, and in this case athletes, have credible influence over the opinions and actions of their fan bases (Becker, 2013). Similar to the case of celebrity endorsements, athletes sharing their opinions regarding political issues and influencing their fans comes as a result of the constructed parasocial relationships with their fans, and subsequent self-disclosure on social media platforms (Chung & Cho, 2017). Chung & Cho (2017) examined the role of parasocial relationships, self-disclosure, and source trustworthiness as influencing factors of endorser effectiveness. The study found that parasocial relationships mediated interactions between social media interactions and source trustworthiness, social media interactions influenced parasocial relationships via self-disclosure, and that source trustworthiness had a positive effect on brand credibility.

The consistent and continued use of social media by athletes helps foster parasocial relationships with their fans, as increased familiarity and accumulated knowledge with notable

sports figures creates a sense of understanding within fans of the values and motives of the celebrity (Chung & Cho, 2017). In this study, fans responded positively to the question “Sports teams/athletes are qualified to share their opinions on political topics.” Highly identified fans see teams and players are credible sources for news and information, and perceive this information as more valid. As a result, fans can internalize this information and it can positively influence future opinions, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes (Chung & Cho, 2017). Self-disclosure has been found to be an imperative part of building and maintaining the ‘pseudo-relationships’ that develop between fans and celebrities in mediated environments. When athletes share personal details or thoughts via social media, fans interpret this as a sign of friendship, and this perceived openness and vulnerability results in the strengthening of parasocial relationships (Chung & Cho, 2017).

Mudrick et al. (2019) used Balance Theory to explain shifts in response towards athletes who support political opinions that differ from that of a fan. When opinions of fans and athletes were in balance, or aligned, Mudrick et al. (2019) found that fans were significantly more likely to engage with news media regarding that player. Similarly, increased levels of player identification and strengthened parasocial relationships also lead fans to monitor news and media coverage of the athlete they identify with. Balance theory and identification work in tandem in this case, where fans are more likely to support the opinions of players and teams they strongly support since they initially identify with entities that seem to share their common values and beliefs.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is not without limitations, which must be acknowledged. First, the limited sample size and population of participants due to the nature of the survey distribution. In the

future, larger and more diverse audiences should be examined to determine any significant differences between participants of different genders, races, or age. The timing of the research comes after the initial height of NBA player activism in regards to Black Lives Matter during the summer of 2020, meaning opinions could have shifted over time as the topic has faded from popular media coverage. As participants self-reported their opinions in regard to controversial social movements, they may not have been entirely truthful with regards to their support for the Black Lives Matter movement, or team and athlete involvement in politics.

Future research should focus on looking at specific differences in support between fans with high and low team and player identifications. Additionally, expanding the research to focus on fans of all major North American sports leagues including the NFL, NHL, MLB, MLS, WNBA, and NWSL should be explored to see if there is a significant difference in support between fans of different sports. Researchers could also conduct a content analysis of Instagram comments posted by fans on images shared by athletes to identify any major themes of fan support immediately after the athlete shares their opinion. Focusing on other social media platforms, such as Twitter or Facebook, could also yield interesting results as user demographics change largely between the three platforms.

Conclusion

As society focuses more on the culture of celebrity and social media allows for the fostering of parasocial relationships, athletes have access to enormous platforms to reach audiences. These platforms act as a medium through which public figures can make statements, share opinions and ideas, and bring attention to issues they deem important (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). It has been established that social groups form a foundation for identity, and personal identities of fans coincide with social group memberships (Fink et al., 2009). The results of this

study support this notion, as fans with higher levels of player and team identification largely supported the ideas and opinions of the teams and athletes they follow regarding the Black Lives Matter Movement.

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Appendix

Instagram posts created for each player and team which were presented to participants.



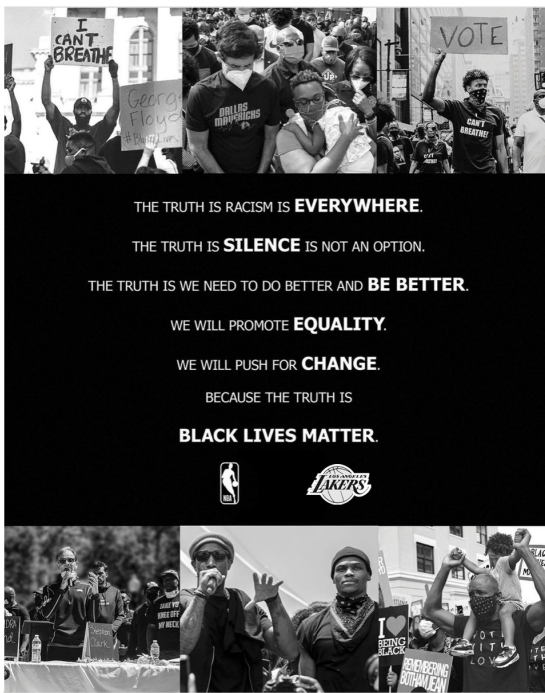


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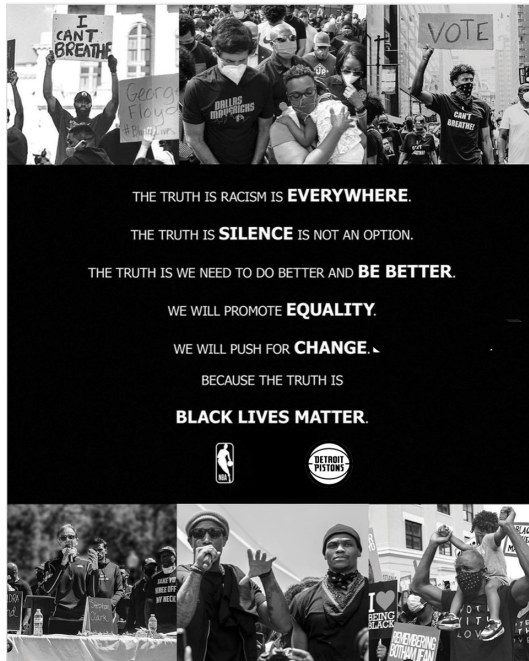



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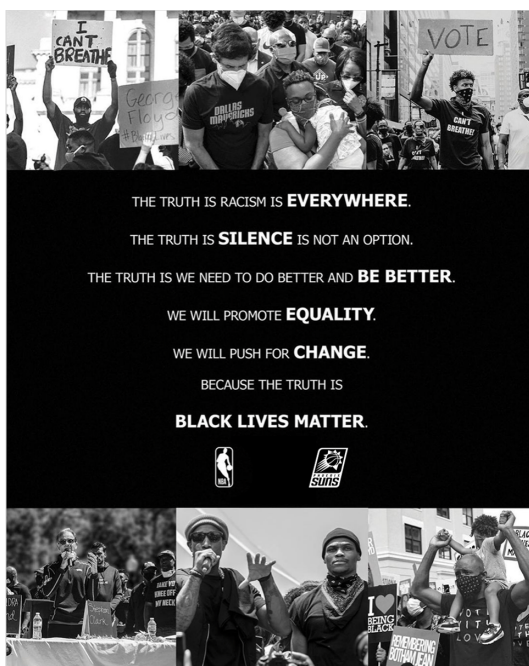



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