

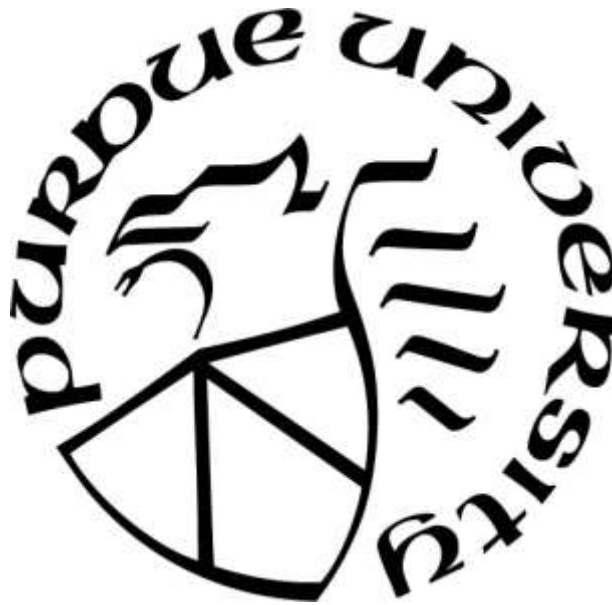
ATHLETE ACTIVISM ONLINE: AN EXAMINATION OF SUBSEQUENT FAN ENGAGEMENT

by
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to those who identify as more than an athlete. I hope it provides you with insights that empower your ability to be heard.

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First, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Brian Smith. Your insights and feedback have empowered me with the tools to see this project through. It is meaningful that you allowed me to choose a topic that I am genuinely passionate about and gave me the space to come into my own as an academic researcher. Thank you so much.

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ABSTRACT

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The impact of athlete activism online remains understudied in academic scholarship. To gain a better understanding for fan response to athlete activism online, this study examines the patterns in perception and response among sports fans with respect to politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes. The purpose of this study is to use this understanding of fan response to help athletes and their representatives manage fan reaction to athletes' politically-charged content. By examining fan response to politically-charged content, this study suggests principles for eliciting positive impact, fostering open discourse, and promoting awareness through social media. Patterns in perception and response among sports fans with respect to politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes were examined through in-depth interviews conducted with sports fans between the ages of 18 and 30 who follow the profiles of professional athletes on social media. An understanding of the potential benefits and drawbacks of athletes' use of social media for social movements has been gained through an analysis of the emergent themes among perception and response patterns revealed by study participants. The emergent themes of this study inform recommendations for professional athletes posting politically-charged content online. The findings of this study suggest that athletes who post politically-charged content online should do so with their goals and audience in mind. Knowing their goals as well as their audience grants athletes the ability to frame their content accordingly, rendering them more likely to receive positive responses to the politically-charged content they post. Based on the findings of this study, athletes who frame politically-charged content as a narrative highlighting their lived experience and employing appeals to emotion and humor yield the most positive responses from otherwise uninterested or hostile fans. The insights gained from this study stand to fill the gap in existing literature surrounding athlete activism online.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In granting fans access to professional athletes, social media expand the capacity for a mediated connection between athletes and the individuals who support them (Earnheardt & Haridakis, 2009). When an athlete is candid in his or her online self-presentation and posts content to social media aligning with the values held by his or her private rather than public identity, the potential for a disruption among fan-athlete relationships increases. When athletes take to social media to post politically-charged content and disclose partisanship on a hot topic, this disruption becomes almost certain. A disruption of this nature is likely to occur in the event that the content disclosed by the athlete does not match up with fans' expectations. This may result in the fans' loss of interest in the athlete, which may hold negative implications on the athlete's career trajectory. Due to the enhanced speed of escalation online, disruptions of this nature are more impactful when the offense occurs online than they would be if the disclosure had been delivered in a face-to-face interaction space and exposed through a more traditional media setting, such as via televised interview (Colapinto & Benecchi, 2014). Intuitively, then, one may argue that athlete activism online yields a different set of responses from fans than do the offline activist efforts of professional athletes. For this reason, studies which serve to improve our understanding of fan response to the online activist efforts of athletes are valuable.

Celebrities often find themselves under a greater degree of scrutiny than the average individual (Summers & Morgan, 2008). Because celebrity careers are built in the public eye and involve the constant display of the working individual, celebrity success is often dependent on the established and maintained relevance of the celebrity. As a result, the

opinions of fans are vital components impacting the longevity of celebrity careers. Professional athletes in particular are often considered role models and selected to be organizational representatives. As such, fans' social identities, which represent their senses of self in relation to others based on their group memberships, (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) are tied to the length and strength of athletes' careers. The respective social identities of fans of professional athletes are in part composed of an allegiance to the athlete (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Due to the fans' lack of familiarity with athletes' personal identities, reputation is formed based on athletes' publicized social identities as a means of filling in the gaps to form and maintain a mediated connection.

Additionally, the reach of professional athletes in terms of their various followings, may prove beneficial to the social movements they support. Assessing the behavioral responses of fans to politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes in direct connection to the movements addressed in the posts would allow for a deeper understanding of the degree to which the platform provided by social media is effective in helping to galvanize users to participate in social movements offline.

This study provides insight with regard to how and why fans perceive and respond to politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes in the ways that they do. The study addresses two research questions: RQ1: How do 18-30 year olds perceive politically-charged content posted by professional athletes on social media? RQ2: How do 18-30 year olds respond to politically-charged content posted by professional athletes on social media? The study employed a qualitative approach in order to access the level of depth required to gain a better understanding for the ways in which fans perceive and respond to the online activist efforts of professional athletes.

This study develops understanding of the effects of athletes' involvement in a cause via social media. This understanding stands to empower athletes, organizations, and social movement strategists to deliver effective social media communication.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, *activism* will be defined as conventional acts of resistance to influence societal change or hegemonic error (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 283; Bobel, 2007). These acts of resistance “promote social change” and can be enacted through a wide variety of behaviors, including communicating about an issue, “signing a petition, donating money, writing a letter, attending a meeting, being an active member of an organization, participating in a rally,” or posting politically-charged content online (Savas & Stewart, 2018, p. 2; de Lemus & Stroebe, 2015). This study will adopt Diani’s (1992) definition of a social movement as a “network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities”. This study recognizes that activism is often enacted through individuals’ participation in a social movement. The characterization *athlete* will reference individuals who play a sport at the professional level in the United States. The athletes discussed in this study are employed under contract by a team which is a part of either the National Football League (NFL) or the National Basketball Association (NBA). An individual who is supportive of a particular athlete, team, or sport, will be considered a *fan*. *Social media* will be characterized as online platforms that foster interaction and provide the opportunity for users to share and generate content. These platforms stimulate social dialogues and simultaneous feedback (Botha & Mills, 2012, p. 85).

Social Movements and Political Issues of Address

This study will specifically address social media activism regarding athletes, including the following topics:

Take a Knee

The take a knee movement began on August 14, 2016, when former NFL quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, chose to refrain from standing during the traditional pregame playing of the United States national anthem. Kaepernick cited his motivation for what became a consistent decision as being driven by the recent spike in incidences of police brutality in America, with excessive force often being directed toward African American citizens. In a postgame interview conducted by NFL Media in 2016 before the take a knee movement gained much traction, Kaepernick said, “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color.” While never viewed as the greatest football player of his era, before the 2016 NFL season, Kaepernick was ranked among the top current NFL quarterbacks, with many fans and analysts believing he had the potential to become one of the greatest quarterbacks to play football (Johnson, 2018; Rosenthal, 2013; Sando, 2015). By the season’s close, however, Kaepernick was essentially exiled from the sport. At the time of this study, Kaepernick remains unsigned to a team. The movement has since taken hold with endorsement from the Black Lives Matter campaign, as well as an increase in participation from other athletes across many sports at both the professional and amateur levels who have joined in peaceful protest on bended knee (Branch, 2017; Mindock, 2018).

With the strengthening of the take a knee movement has come fiery debate with regard to whether or not it is appropriate for professional athletes to use their platform as

sports stars to spark politically-charged conversation regarding the prevalence of inequality in the United States (Lewis, 2017). Those who oppose the movement claim that failure to stand during the playing of the national anthem constitutes a blatant disrespect of the American flag and the soldiers fighting for the freedom of American citizens. Additionally, the opposition takes issue with the capacity of professional athletes to become vocal outside of the athletic sphere and interject on issues of public policy unrelated to their respective sports (Mindock, 2018). In contrast, those in support of the movement contend that the decision to take a knee embodies the practice of the constitutional right of American citizens to speak freely and express discontent with injustice (Branch, 2017; Willingham, 2017).

The competing narratives of the take a knee movement involve communication issues related to the spheres of race and ethnicity as well as politics and nationalism situated in sport. By enacting his protest on the football field, Kaepernick has disrupted the ritualistic performance of the national anthem and the sense of national unity it brings about as the official start of American sporting events (Billings, Butterworth, & Turman, 2015). In kneeling rather than standing during the anthem, Kaepernick rejects to contribute to an illusion of national unity, which he feels is not representative of the reality of the contentious racial dynamic in America (Branch, 2017). The disruption of ritual created by professional athletes kneeling during the national anthem situates the take a knee movement as a particularly robust case study from which to evaluate the fan experience of politics in sport. The existence and popularity of social media at the time of the movement has granted athletes an even larger platform to utilize in their advocacy efforts. Similarly, social media grant fans access to the messages put out by athletes. Controversy surrounding

the take a knee movement both on the football field and in sports media has survived multiple football seasons, picking up steam in September of 2018 with Nike's selection of Colin Kaepernick as the face of their 30th Anniversary Just Do It campaign (Mindock, 2018).

Shut Up and Dribble

On Thursday, February 15, 2018, conservative talk show host, Laura Ingraham, told LeBron James and Kevin Durant to “shut up and dribble” on the air. During her segment, *The Ingraham Angle*, on Fox News, Ingraham was responding to an UNINTERRUPTED podcast featuring a conversation between James and Durant in which the two basketball stars openly critiqued the competence of President Donald Trump. In Ingraham's defense of the President, she deemed the podcast “ungrammatical” and “barely intelligible,” before noting that “it's always unwise to seek political advice from someone who gets paid a hundred million dollars a year to bounce a ball” (Ingraham, 2018).

In addition to taking issue with the stance taken by James and Durant, in her response to the pair, Ingraham denounced the notion that professional athletes have the capacity and right to speak freely about politics (Ingraham, 2018). Following Ingraham's criticism, Durant has remained relatively quiet. James, however, has voiced his opinions proudly, using Ingraham's words to his advantage. At a NBA All-Star Weekend event on the Sunday following Ingraham's commentary, the star stated, “the best thing she did was help me create more awareness. I get to sit up here and talk about social injustice. We will definitely not shut up and dribble” (James, 2018). Arguably the greatest basketball player of all time, LeBron James has been a recognized leader on the basketball court for many

years (Pelton, 2018). Ingraham's (2018) remarks have given him the opportunity to lead off of the basketball court as well.

James has taken the phrase "shut up and dribble" and turned it into the title for a documentary series which premiered on Showtime in November of 2018. The three-part series was a direct response to Ingraham's remarks and aimed to expose the flaw in her logic by "providing a powerful inside look at the changing role of athletes in our fraught cultural and political environment, through the lens of the NBA" (Bieler, 2018).

Stemming directly from an attack on the appropriateness of athletes speaking out about issues unrelated to athletics, shut up and dribble highlights the basis of this study. Evaluating the comments made by Laura Ingraham, the manner in which LeBron James has responded to them, and fan attitudes surrounding their exchange will provide further insight addressing the stated research questions for this study.

Study Purpose

This study examines fan response to politically-charged social media content posted by professional athletes. The purpose of this study is to understand fan response to help athletes and their representatives manage fan reaction to an athlete's politically-charged content. By examining fan response to politically-charged content, this study suggests principles for eliciting positive impact, fostering open discourse, and promoting awareness through social media.

This study employed a qualitative approach to access the level of depth required to gain a better understanding for the ways in which individual social media users interpret and respond to the online activist efforts of professional athletes. Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with sports fans between the ages of 18 and 30 who follow at

least one professional athlete on at least one social media platform as a means of addressing the stated research questions.

The findings of this study suggest that athletes who post politically-charged content online should do so with their goals and audience in mind. Knowing their goals as well as their audience grants athletes the ability to frame their content accordingly, rendering them more likely to receive positive responses to the politically-charged content they post. Based on the findings of this study, athletes who frame politically-charged content as a narrative highlighting their lived experience and employing appeals to emotion and humor yield the most positive responses from otherwise uninterested or hostile fans. The insights gained from this study stand to fill the gap in existing literature surrounding athlete activism online.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Activism

Activism is characterized by conventional acts of resistance which serve to correct societal or hegemonic error (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 283; Bobel, 2007). These acts of resistance are often political in nature and meant to further efforts of attaining various forms of equality (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 282). Activism can take many different forms and may be demonstrated publicly in an offline setting or online through the use of the internet. Activism can be enacted in any of the following ways: communicating about an issue, “signing a petition, donating money, writing a letter, attending a meeting, being an active member of an organization, participating in a rally,” or posting politically-charged content online (Savas & Stewart, 2018, p. 2; de Lemus & Stroebe, 2015). Additionally, activism is often enacted through individuals’ participation in a social movement. Social movements, which are defined as “networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities” (Diani, 1992) can be organized both in online and offline settings. Social movements that are organized on social media can sometimes emerge in offline spaces through protests or demonstrations that further the movements’ missions. Social media platforms sometimes serve as spaces through which individuals with similar beliefs come together to organize protests, which will then take place either online or onsite (Micó & Casero-Ripollés 2013).

Of the influences on activism addressed in scholarly research to date, (Bobel, 2007; Louis, Amiot, Thomas & Blackwood, 2016; Svensson, Neumayer, Banfield-Mumb &

Schossböck, 2015; Qazi & Shah, 2018) celebrity status has been under-examined in literature. Fan response to athlete activism has also received insufficient attention in scholarship. The following section outlines the literature on activism among celebrities and athletes.

Celebrity Activism and Fan Response

Although not a new phenomenon, celebrity activism in the form of issue politics is on the rise (Becker, 2013). The celebrity status of these individuals grants them a platform from which to reach the masses in their effort to garner support for the issues they care about (Bourdieu, 2001; Traub, 2008). Recognizing the occupation of most celebrities as being unrelated to the political sphere, many fans regard celebrity activism as simplistic and inconsequential (Babcock & Whitehouse, 2005; Nisbett & DeWalt, 2016; Weiskel, 2005). As such, these fans call the credibility of celebrity activists into question. Another area of concern for more critical fans lies in the motivation of celebrities who publicly advocate for particular issues, as celebrity political involvement may serve to enhance the brand of the celebrity above all else (Brockington & Henson, 2015). Having said that, not all fans view celebrity activism through such a skeptical lens.

Celebrity activism is celebrated by fans for its tendency to popularize otherwise unpopular social issues, making them more widely known and accessible to fans (Tufekci, 2013). In granting fans greater access to social issues, celebrity activists may inspire increased issue awareness and political engagement (Goodnight, 2005; Wheeler, 2012). In certain cases, celebrity activism in the form of endorsements for particular political candidates and social issues has been shown to impact public opinion as well as voting behavior (Becker, 2013; Garthwaite & Moore, 2013; Pease & Brewer, 2008).

As celebrities themselves, professional athletes who are involved in activist efforts are sure to face similar scrutiny and praise. Fan response to athlete activism specifically has received insufficient attention in scholarship. However, studies have been conducted recognizing fan reception of athlete involvement outside of the realm of athletics. Generally, when athletes step outside of the athletic realm and publicly comment on intellectually charged issues, they are met with disorientation and backlash, as the “dumb jock” stereotype prevails in the subconscious of sports fans (Haslerig, 2017).

Athlete Activism

Athlete activism initially surged under the athletic reign of individuals advocating for civil rights in the 1960’s and slowed down significantly following the 1980’s (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). Athletes like Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Bill Russell, Muhammad Ali, Jim Brown, and Arthur Ashe played a significant role in the civil rights movement through their use of the platform provided to them by their athletic excellence to speak out in support of racial equality (Edwards, 1969). Over the course of the last few years, it has become increasingly common for athletes to take part in activist efforts once again, especially as they pertain to issues of social justice. Athletes who speak out often do so from a sense of responsibility (Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010) and use the opportunity for global reach (Rowe, 2005), to advocate for the underrepresented.

The expansive reach of professional athletes uniquely positions them as effective influencers by expanding their potential to impact the attitudes and beliefs of fans, and ultimately spark social change within societies (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Frederick, Sanderson & Schlereth, 2017; Pelak, 2005; Melnick & Jackson, 2002; Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015). For example, the fact that Colin Kaepernick was a professional football

player and on display granted him a captive audience for his activist efforts. As such, the take a knee movement was immediately noticed and debated. The level of access athletes have to their fans is expanded exponentially by the presence of social media. Athletes are no longer dependent on media sources outside of their cellphones to engage with the public. As a result, social media plays a large role in the current wave of athlete activism (Edwards, 2016). For example, LeBron James capitalized on Laura Ingraham's derogatory remarks by posting about them on social media. In doing so, James was able to reclaim the narrative of the shut up and dribble exchange and garner support online, drawing from the millions of social media users who follow his pages. Few studies examine the impact of the role played by social media—outside of its success in mobilizing large groups (Yan, Pegoraro, & Watanabe, 2018)—in its exercised use by athletes in their activist efforts.

Fan Response to Athlete Activism

Activism is not without risk to athletes who use their celebrity status to endorse a cause. Most importantly, activism may not be received well by fans. Individuals sometimes have adverse reactions to athletes who publicly disclose their support of social issues (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015). These negatively charged reactions range in severity from fan disengagement to hostility. Oftentimes, athletes who openly engage in activist efforts and advocate for the underrepresented come under heavy criticism and even marginalization (Frederick, Sanderson & Schlereth, 2017; Kaufman, 2008).

Fan reactions to athlete activism efforts offline are often displayed online. For example, a Facebook page and Twitter hashtag denounced members of the St. Louis Rams who supported Michael Brown in 2014 (Sanderson et al., 2016). In a prior study, Sanderson (2013) found social media platforms to act as interactive spaces for users to come together

to manage negative reactions to athlete disclosure. Prior research has found that online fan reactions to athlete activism are sometimes centered around the intent to behave in a particular way toward the athlete who has spoken out or the organization representing that athlete (Kaufman, 2008; Sanderson, 2013; Sanderson et al., 2016; Schmittle & Sanderson, 2015). Many online fan reactions disclose intent to disengage with the athlete, the organization representing the athlete, or sometimes even the sport altogether as with fan reaction to the NFL in regard to player engagement with the take a knee movement. Of course, athletes' politically-charged commentary also elicits positive fan reaction. Although Colin Kaepernick faced mostly negative response to his initiation of the take a knee movement, his NFL jersey sales went up during the controversy (Murphy, 2016).

Understanding positive fan responses to online displays of athlete activism

Although research has yet to specifically address positive fan responses to online displays of athlete activism, prior research has addressed successful celebrity endorsement online (Chung & Cho, 2017). Successful celebrity endorsement requires positive fan reactions to endorsement-related content. As such, factors found to contribute to successful celebrity endorsement may also contribute to positive fan reaction to athlete activism online. Chung and Cho (2017) contend that celebrity-fan social media interactions, para-social relationships, and source trustworthiness contribute to successful celebrity endorsement online. As celebrity-fan social media interactions continue to become more “intimate, open, reciprocal, and frequent,” para-social relationships between fans and celebrities are strengthened (Chung & Cho, 2017, p.482). Source trustworthiness, which addresses the credibility of the celebrity and the inclination for fans to accept their messages as truth (Chung & Cho, 2017; Erdogan, 1999; Ohanian, 1990), is either

strengthened or diminished through celebrity-fan social media interactions. Fans who maintain strong para-social relationships with celebrities are inclined to believe their celebrity sources to be trustworthy (Chung & Cho, 2017).

Social media as a whole is considered to be “an effective tool in the fostering of para-social relationships with celebrities” (Chung & Cho, 2017, p. 489). Social media afford celebrities the opportunity to consistently interact with their fans, disclose information about themselves to their fans, and ultimately, build or diminish their trustworthiness as sources of information for their fans. Chung and Cho (2017) also found source trustworthiness to influence perceptions of brand credibility among fans with regard to celebrity endorsement. In addition to its application to products for common consumption, this trend may apply to social movements endorsed by professional athletes online.

Prior research has not specifically addressed fan reactions to online displays of athlete activism. Due to the combination of the level of access provided by social media, which serves to expand the already abundant reach of professional athletes, and the current resurgence in athlete activism, an examination of the response to the online activist efforts of professional athletes is necessary.

Social Media and Activism

Previous research (Chung & Cho, 2017) has demonstrated that in order for celebrity endorsement to be successful, factors such as social media interactions and para-social relationships must be prioritized in the online presence of the celebrity. As a means of connecting celebrities with their fans, celebrity-fan social media interactions have been found to drive social media engagement among fans (Chung & Cho, 2017). Additionally,

research has found that the identities of sports fans in particular are impacted by events taking place outside of athletic competitions (Sanderson et al., 2016). Wright and Li (2011) contend that behaviors and discussions that take place offline sometimes extend to social media as well. Thus, it is plausible that fan response to athlete activism online may be influenced by social media engagement, social media para-social relationships, and social media identity.

Social Media Engagement

Social media are online platforms that foster social networking and provide the opportunity for users to share and generate content. These platforms stimulate social dialogues, through which simultaneous feedback is provided and many individuals are able to interact with one another (Botha & Mills, 2012, p. 85). Social media comprise social networking sites (SNS) through which users “debate ideas, contextualize news, and connect with like-minded individuals” (Smith & Gallicano, 2015, p. 83).

Social media engagement differs from social media usage, as the former signifies a deeper level of participation by the user which sometimes occurs as a result of the latter. Social media engagement is characterized by “the absorption and immersive state of social media usage that may not always accompany social media usage” (Paek, Hove, Jung, & Cole, 2013; Smith & Gallicano, 2015; Smith & Taylor, 2017). Engagement represents a psychologically-driven feeling resulting from some stimuli (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011; Kang, 2014, p. 402; Smith & Gallicano, 2015; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Engagement can be embodied by a social media user liking, sharing, searching for, or commenting on content online (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2010; Nichols, Friedland, Rojas, Chos, & Shah, 2006; Smith & Gallicano, 2015) as well as by a social media user discussing content found online

in an offline setting. Smith, Men, & Al-Sinan (2015) studied engagement by associating social media activities with differing levels of engagement. A simple retweet with no added commentary represented the lowest level of engagement. An original tweet with a call to action represented the highest level of engagement. In this way, social media engagement can be measured by the behavioral outcomes driven by a user's psychological response to social media use (Oh & Sundar, 2016; Smith & Taylor, 2017).

This study evaluates fan response to politically-charged content posted by athletes online using engagement as a backdrop. This study will consider the ways an athlete's social media content may elicit different levels of engagement. Evaluating online and offline responses to social media stimuli as engagement will enable athletes, organizations representing athletes, and campaign strategists to effectively manage athlete disclosure online.

Social Media Para-social Relationships

Para-social relationships are strong one-sided connections between fans and celebrities (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These relationships "arise when individuals are repeatedly exposed to a media persona, and the individuals develop a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship, and identification with the celebrity" (Chung & Cho, 2017, p. 482). These relationships are developed as a result of spectators' attraction to and admiration for the individual in the public eye.

Fans who form para-social relationships with professional athletes often come to "believe they are part of the athlete's world" (Earnhardt & Haridakis, 2009; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Fans may feel such a deep connection to a performer, that the para-social relationship strengthens to the degree that a strong level of identification is developed as

well. Considering the degree to which fans feel attached to the professional athletes they admire as being embodied by their identification with the athletes, it becomes apparent that identification is directly related to fandom (Earnheardt & Haridakis, 2009).

A strong level of identification in a para-social relationship between a fan and an athlete has also been linked to the formation of an affective bond, which signifies higher levels of engagement and attachment to the athlete on the fan's side (Pan & Zeng, 2018). Fans who identify with the athletes they admire to the degree that an affective bond is developed are likely to "desire greater similarity to athletes and take athletes' perspective" on matters of importance (Pan & Zeng, 2018).

With para-social relationships and affective bonds intact, fans are likely to "become involved in the narrative" delivered by an athlete—or otherwise prominent media figure—and thus become more susceptible to persuasion (Schartel Dunn, 2018). Additionally, individuals' use of the humor appeal when posting news-related content online has been found to strengthen the connection between posters and their social media followers as well as drive follower engagement (Highfield, 2015; Holton & Lewis, 2011). In its address of variations of politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes, this study will indicate the impact of athletes' use of narrative framing and humor appeals on fan perception and response to athletes' politically-charged posts.

The strength of fans' para-social relationships to athletes has also been positively connected to fans' likelihood to forgive athletes' ethical transgressions (Lee, Simkins & Chowdhury, 2018). Specifically addressing scenarios in which fans may perceive athletes' advocacy for particular social movements to characterize ethical transgressions, this study will indicate how broadly applicable Lee, Simkins, and Chowdhury's findings (2018) are.

Social Media Identity

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals' respective identities are composed of both personal and social dimensions. A sense of personal identity comes from the "beliefs, abilities, and goals" (Barnes et al., 1988, p. 514) specific to the individual. Whereas a sense of social identity is developed through the individual's social ties, namely through their "group memberships, friends, and family" (Barnes et al., 1988, p. 514). Tajfel and Turner (1986) contend that individuals' organizational memberships and demographic classifications are strongly tied to their respective social identities. Threats to social identity comprise threats to value and distinctiveness (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). Value threats are characterized by actions or messages that diminish the value of group membership by "attacking shared group values, norms, and practices" (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 20016). Distinctiveness threats are characterized by changes in perception that diminish the uniqueness of the group (Branscombe et al., 1999).

In sports, fan identity can be impacted by events taking place both within and outside of athletic competitions (Sanderson et al., 2016). As such, the idea that fan identity may be impacted by politically-charged content from an athlete or team is plausible. Fans may react to this variety of athlete disclosure positively or negatively depending on the degree to which the content of the disclosure serves as reinforcement for or betrayal of the fan's idealization of the overall identity of the athlete in question. In the event that the nature of the athlete's disclosure online undermines or negates the fan's idealization of the athlete, a social identity threat is posed. It is imperative to understand the reasoning behind various patterns of fan response to various forms of athlete disclosure online in order to

avoid a scenario in which an athlete's fans may turn on him or her in response to a social identity threat. To preserve the empowering nature of the athlete's opportunity for online disclosure, we must recognize the simultaneous contentious nature of disclosure in general (Schmittel, & Sanderson, 2015) and understand motivating factors leading fans to react negatively to this disclosure to the degree that we may anticipate and avoid these reactions.

Research Questions

This study examines fan perception and response regarding politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes. Previous literature has demonstrated that fans are inclined to form para-social relationships with the athletes they admire. It is apparent that fans' social identities are tied to the athletes with whom they have formed para-social relationships.

The literature suggests that athlete disclosure may constitute a social identity threat to fans, but may also yield a positive result. More research is needed to understand the impact of athlete activism online on fans' perceptions of athletes and their social media behaviors, including their para-social relationships and identification with the athletes using social media. Therefore, the following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: How do 18-30 year-olds perceive politically-charged content posted by professional athletes on social media?

RQ2: How do 18-30 year-olds respond to politically-charged content posted by professional athletes on social media?

CHAPTER 3. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to access the level of depth required to gain a better understanding for the ways in which individual social media users interpret and respond to the online activist efforts of professional athletes. With the goal of understanding how and why these patterns in perception and response are formed, the framework of this study is aligned with qualitative imperatives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted as a means of addressing the stated research questions.

Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy, through which study participants were recruited based on the responses and insights revealed as the interviews progressed was employed by this study (Berg & Lune, 2012; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). The researcher recruited study participants by posting invitations to participate on social media as well as sending out personal emails to colleagues and acquaintances who actively engage with sports. The first six participants for this study were recruited via purposive convenience sample from the researcher's social network. As a means of increasing the diversity of the sample, the remaining nine participants for this study were recruited from the undergraduate and graduate student body of a large Midwestern university. The researcher sought to include participants from diverse backgrounds to ensure gender, racial, and ethnic diversity. The sample for this study includes American, African-American, Middle Eastern, Asian, and European participants. Of the fifteen study participants, nine are male and six are female. Participants' backgrounds varied with respect to socioeconomic status,

culture, religion, and political orientation. Of the fifteen participants, six participated, or are currently participating, in an NCAA sport at the collegiate level. All study participants were between 18 and 30 years old, considered themselves sports fans, and followed at least one professional athlete on at least one social media platform at the time of their respective interviews. No other criteria were used to recruit participants.

Recruiting continued until data reached a saturation point, that is, when new themes in responses ceased to emerge between interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Saunders, Sim, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam & Jinks, 2018). This study also employed theoretical sampling whereby each interview was analyzed prior to subsequent interviews, and participants were chosen based on their appropriateness for the “development of theoretical categories” (Saunders et al., 2018). Data was found to have reached a saturation point after the researcher conducted fifteen in-depth interviews.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews lasting between 42 and 89 minutes were conducted with fifteen study participants. Participants were given the option to meet in a public space for a face-to-face interview or to be interviewed via telephone. Two of the fifteen participants chose to be interviewed face-to-face. The remaining thirteen participants were interviewed via telephone. Participant permission for audio recording was obtained prior to the beginning of each interview. All interviewees consented to being recorded.

Interviews followed a semi-structured and open ended interview guide examining participant social media use, attitude toward politically-charged content posted by professional athletes, and anticipated or actual behavioral and attitudinal response to content. Examples of questions include: “How do you decide which professional athletes

to follow online? “When you see a politically-charged post put out by a professional athlete, what do you do?” “How do you feel about professional athletes using the platform they’ve been granted through athletic excellence to speak on issues unrelated to athletics?” and “Once you have seen a politically-charged post put out by a professional athlete, how does your opinion of the individual change?” The interview guide for this study can be found in Appendix A. Interviews followed the responsive interviewing model, allowing participant responses to dictate both the order and content of questioning (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 7).

In addition to answering questions about politically-charged content posted by professional athletes on social media, participants were provided examples of politically-charged content posted by professional athletes regarding take a knee and shut up and dribble. The purpose of including sample posts to show participants during interviews was to supplement their recall and ensure a real sense of their perceptions and responses was exposed. All study participants were shown the same examples of politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes. Examples of this content can be found in the interview guide in Appendix A.

This study examines socially constructed realities, so validity was sought via open discourse with participants, consistent with standards for validity in qualitative research (Kvale, 1995). In order to meet the standards for construct validity, a value was placed on acknowledging and understanding the specifics of each individual narrative and personal account of experience revealed by study participants during interviews (Kvale, 1995). Clarification questions were included when necessary throughout all interviews conducted as a means of attaining communicative validity (Kvale, 1995).

To ensure a shared understanding of participant responses and their implications on the study, the researcher took notes during each interview and used them as a source of reference for probes. After each interview was conducted, the researcher listened to the audio recording from the interview and transcribed it verbatim. All audio recordings and transcripts are being stored on a password protected computer. Participant names and other identifiable information have been excluded from the transcripts.

Data Analysis

A structured analysis of interview transcripts was performed initially based on the themes outlined in the literature review (i.e. engagement, para-social relationships). As a means of evaluating the connections between social media engagement, social media para-social relationships, and positive perception and response on the side of the fan, the researcher coded for levels of social media engagement as well as strength of identification with athletes among fans. A list of codes can be found in Appendix B.

Following this initial structured analysis, the researcher performed a thematic analysis on the data collected. This thematic analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2008) six step process. The researcher identified themes at the latent level (Boyatzis, 1998) with value placed on "the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualizations informing the semantic content of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p. 84). Additionally, the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) was used to ensure data analysis was exhaustive. Coding and analysis occurred simultaneously and continuously until saturation in theoretical sample and interview content was reached (Kolb, 2012).

In following the constant comparative method, this study inductively generated a "theory of process, sequence, and change which pertains to organizations, positions, and

social interaction” (Glaser, 1965, p. 444). Coding categories were inductively determined by the data collected (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). To gain a better understanding for the ways in which individual social media users interpret and respond to the online activist efforts of professional athletes, open coding (Straus & Corbin, 1990) was performed on each of the interview transcripts. Lists of codes were developed for each independent interview before being compared and condensed. Main themes for the study were named as a means of organizing the codes which emerged from the data collected. Supplementary analysis adopted a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1999), allowing the data collected to drive further findings addressing each research question.

In addition to seeking validity for this study through open discourse with participants during interviews (Kvale, 1995), the researcher sought to enhance the credibility of the study by implementing thick description and multivocality as verification procedures (Tracy, 2013). Thick description is offered in the findings section of this thesis as a means of aiding its audience in grasping the emergent themes from the study through participant examples. Direct quotations are supplemented with contextual information to ensure this is the case. With participant recruitment focused on the inclusion of participants from diverse backgrounds with diverse perspectives and voices, the researcher sought to provide multivocality.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The analysis regarding fan perception of (RQ1) and response to (RQ2) politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes revealed four major themes for each research question. With respect to fan perception, participants discussed their views on the responsibilities and rights of professional athletes as well as the qualities they respect and value in professional athletes and their online self-presentation. With respect to fan response, outcomes included increased interest, increased support, reinforced support, and disengagement.

RQ1: How do 18-30 year-olds perceive politically-charged content posted by professional athletes on social media?

This study uncovers the nuance among fan perception. No single participant in this study declared exclusively positive or negative perceptions regarding politically-charged posts put online by professional athletes during their interview, but rather perception was complex and varied. Patterns among sports fans' perceptions of politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes can be understood through the following themes and subthemes.

Perceiving Athletes' Posts Through the Lens of Athletes' Responsibility

Participants' sense that athletes hold a greater responsibility than the average individual was echoed throughout each interview conducted. This perception of a heightened responsibility largely stemmed from the platform obtained by the athlete. When using social media, the platform of the athlete expands further, as social media provide all users with enhanced reach and access at their fingertips. Participants' perceptions of the

heightened responsibility of professional athletes apply both to the fact that the athlete has a platform and to how participants feel the athlete should use his/her platform.

Participants' perceptions regarding the heightened responsibility of professional athletes concern the concepts of para-social relationships and social identity. Participants who argued that professional athletes have a responsibility to use their platform to advocate for the underrepresented often mentioned the connection between athletes and their younger or less fortunate fans. These participants emphasized fans' dependency on athletes for leadership and hope. Participants who argued that the large social media following of professional athletes burdens them with a greater responsibility with respect to the content they post, emphasized the maintenance of athletes' social identities on social media. During their interviews, these participants discussed their views on the criticism endured by athletes who post politically-charged content online.

Perceptions of the athlete's responsibility to advocate for the underrepresented

Participants noted their sense that athletes should use their platform to advocate for the underrepresented. Advocacy in this sense can be embodied by the athlete arguing for equality and the maintenance of civil liberties as well as equipping those who look up to him/her with hope and the motivation to overcome their circumstances. Participants emphasized the ability of the athlete to speak for and support those whose voices may be softened or muted and argued that athletes have a moral obligation to act on it.

Participant 3, who is a 28-year-old African-American former collegiate athlete and currently works as a personal trainer, stressed the importance of athletes providing hope for individuals facing tough times throughout his interview. His sense was that athletes have the ability to positively impact individuals who look up to them and that it is especially

important for athletes to utilize their platform to help mobilize individuals who feel stuck. When asked if he felt that athletes have a responsibility to advocate for the underrepresented, Participant 3 gave the following response:

I feel like it's something that they definitely should do to give hope to people in a situation they feel like they just can't get out of...it's very important. There are some athletes that did struggle growing up so they know...like in the case of LeBron...single mom...I know he had a lot of trouble with school and growing up in a rough neighborhood, so he knows what people in areas like that are going through in their own lives and with the police and all of that these days. So, he should speak up and post support for them. Give them hope!

Participant 3 repeatedly referenced the ability of professional athletes to provide their fans with hope during his interview. He regarded this act as “the most important thing athletes can do with their platform”.

Similarly, Participant 4, who is a 26-year-old African-American former collegiate athlete currently working as a medical sales representative, adamantly expressed his view that professional athletes have a moral obligation to advocate for the underrepresented. During his interview, Participant 4 emphasized his disappointment with athletes who do not speak out on behalf of underrepresented groups. When asked if he felt that athletes have a responsibility to advocate for the underrepresented, Participant 4 gave the following response:

Athletes are definitely advocates for the underrepresented because they have a platform that other people don't. When they identify with something but don't advocate for change or equality, it's disappointing. Like I feel like Michael Jordan let down the community and society and the black community and all minorities...he could have done more...people are going to see [what athletes post] on social media when they're scrolling through their feed and they're going to ask about it and it's going to get put out there. People will be more conscious of it than if a normal person said or did something. It's not the same. People that have cache are the people that help make change because everybody pays attention to them. The average Joe can make change, but there's a glass ceiling there that athletes don't have.

Throughout his interview, Participant 4 shared his view of athletes as potential leaders in sparking social change. His perspective is that because athletes have more visibility and greater reach than the average individual, it is their moral responsibility to use their influence to empower their communities.

Participants 5 and 8 shared the sentiment that although they themselves would not feel disappointed in an athlete who chose not to post politically-charged content online in support of underrepresented populations, they wouldn't blame fans who did. Participant 5, a 27-year-old Afghani-American pharmacist, regards himself as a sports fan and is generally supportive of athlete activism online. During her interview, Participant 8, a 27-year-old Israeli-American former collegiate athlete, emphasized the politics involved in competitive athletics and offered a greater understanding for athletes who choose not to discuss politically-charged topics publicly. Having said that, Participants 5 and 8 both agreed that in the case of professional athletes, advocating for the underrepresented is the right thing to do. When asked if they felt that athletes have a responsibility to advocate for the underrepresented, Participants 5 and 8 gave the following responses:

I would say that if you have the platform and you have the voice, your opinion does matter and it does impact a lot of people. So, it's really important, whether it be good or bad, for you to use that platform... it's very important for them to speak up for those people, especially because there are some athletes who kind of forget where they came from and that's a wasted opportunity to make a difference...I don't know if responsibility is necessarily the right way to put it because I don't think anyone has a responsibility to take care of anyone but themselves. I think it would be the right thing to do though. (Participant 5)

Athletes are people with big voices and...this isn't every athlete, of course...but you do have a certain percentage from very low income families who come from nothing and have created lives for themselves and their families. So, who better to represent the underrepresented than people who have come from those situations, who have lived through that and got out of it with a voice and power...It's hard to say they have a responsibility to do that. I think the right thing to do is to support the community that you

came from, but if someone decides to do something else with their wealth and success, you can't just be like how dare you, you can't mandate that they support everyone else...I think it's the right thing to do. (Participant 8)

Participants 5 and 8 both repeated these sentiments throughout their interviews, emphasizing the potential positive impact professional athletes can have on underrepresented communities.

Participants 1 and 10 offered a different perspective, as neither of them held professional athletes accountable for advocating for the underrepresented during their interviews. Participant 1, a 30-year-old Iranian-American lawyer, who regards himself as a sports fan and is generally supportive of athlete activism online, was careful to consistently draw the distinction between a right and a responsibility. In his interview, Participant 1 often qualified his statements in favor of athletes who post politically-charged content online with a statement emphasizing that athletes are free to choose what kind of content they would like to post to their social media profiles. When asked if he felt that athletes have a responsibility to advocate for the underrepresented, Participant 1 gave the following response:

Not necessarily, no. Just because you're good at a sport doesn't mean you owe it to where you came from to advocate on their behalf, but if they feel so inclined, I totally support it regardless of their education level.

Participant 10, a 21-year-old American undergraduate student who regards herself as a sports fan, also emphasized the choice of the athlete throughout her interview. When asked if she felt that athletes have a responsibility to advocate for the underrepresented, Participant 10 said, "that's their choice to either speak about things or not speak about things. They shouldn't feel obligated to have to just because they're on that platPerceptions of the athlete's responsibility given his/her number of social media followers

Regardless of their perspective of how athletes should use their platform, all study participants agreed that the platform professional athletes possess online burdens them with a greater responsibility. Throughout their interviews, participants emphasized that athletes are held to a higher standard than the average individual with respect to being held accountable for the content they post to their social media profiles. Many participants believe that this greater responsibility is a byproduct of the widespread reach of professional athletes online. Participants 5 and 9 especially echoed this sentiment during their interviews.

[LeBron] can literally say something and millions of people can either be really offended by it or be really inspired by it, but either way he will be heard. So, that alone is power. I think it's very important that athletes think through their posts before they hit that send button. (Participant 5)

During his interview, Participant 9, a 19-year-old European-American undergraduate student who currently plays a sport at the collegiate level, elaborated on the accountability of the athlete.

A popular athlete is representing the team they play for, they're representing their family...once they get signed to a team there's a huge spotlight on them and millions of people follow them and will follow their social media to see what's going on and try to get a leverage of any kind. So, they just need to think twice about how they represent themselves in the public eye and about how they're going to go about maintaining a good character.

Participant 8 expressed her belief that regardless of what an athlete says online, fan response will be a mix of support and criticism. "When [athletes] are addressing opinions or supporting causes, you're going to be supported and you're also going to be bashed. So, no matter what, you get both". Participant 8 further explained her perception on the matter by naming the widespread reach of the athlete and the varying backgrounds of fans as the source guaranteeing a mixed response to politically-charged posts put online by professional athletes.

During her interview, participant 6, a 27-year-old graduate student who regards herself as a sports fan, emphasized the certain scrutiny faced by professional athletes who post politically-charged content online. “If the athlete doesn’t want to face that public backlash or does not want to be disparaged by the public, then he or she has the responsibility to make a sound and coherent argument” (Participant 6). Recognizing that many individuals who do not make sound and coherent arguments on social media do not face nearly the same degree of backlash as professional athletes do, Participant 6 argued that “anyone who gains such a massive following will have to sign up for the scrutiny. So, it’s based on the individual to make the best argument”. When discussing our collective expectation with regard to the online self-presentation of professional athletes, Participant 6 said the following:

Are we almost expecting too much of the athletes? Are we demanding that they be perfect all the time, that they never make a joke, that they are constantly on message and on brand and not allowing them to be flawed and human? I think if Colin Kaepernick said something that deeply offended people, we would be really quick to discount all of the vocalizations he’s made and all of the moving elements that he’s produced from the take a knee movement. I think we hold especially black athletes to this much higher standard of constantly being correct and constantly being the ideal role model...I think everyone is fallible and does their best, but we come down hard on athletes when they make a mistake.

The questions raised by Participant 6 were validated by the concerns of Participants 3 and 4, both of whom took issue with a tweet posted by NFL player, Joshua Perry, referencing an incident in which an African-American man was pulled over for having vegetation on his windows. The tweet referenced above can be viewed in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Joshua Perry Tweet on Vegetation

After viewing this tweet during their interviews, Participants 3 and 4 expressed their frustrations with the athlete's use of his platform.

I feel like people listen to [athletes] and there's millions of people following them...they influence millions of people...I think it's important for some of them to do that, to talk about these things seriously and bring in actual facts. [Joshua Perry's] trying to make a joke out of it...that's what it looks like...I mean, it's a chance maybe for him to be more positive than just saying that. He probably squandered a good opportunity to actually say something. (Participant 3)

I think that [athletes] should use [their platform] if they are conscious about it and they can articulate themselves in a way that they can get the point across. He's kind of just trolling with that comment...it's not saying anything of substance...what he said just didn't do anything really productive. (Participant 4)

Later in their interviews, after seeing more serious, fact-based tweets posted online by Joshua Perry (see Figure 2), Participants 3 and 4 applauded his use of Twitter to advocate for the take a knee movement. Participant 3 responded to these tweets with a genuine excitement exclaiming, "I like that! See, that's much better...Because he's not making a joke out of it and he's actually backing it up with facts".



Figure 2: Joshua Perry Tweets on Take a Knee

Participant 7, a 26-year-old American currently working as a medical sales representative, had a different perspective on the responsibility of the athlete. Participant 7 regards himself as a sports fan who is generally not in favor of athletes posting politically-charged content to their social media profiles. During his interview, Participant 7 described the responsibility of professional athletes with large social media followings in relation to the power they yield over their fans. When discussing the reach of professional athletes on social media, Participant 7 said the following:

More people will probably see their posts, so they shouldn't just say crazy things. Some people don't know not to take their word for gospel like me, some kids just believe whatever they say and before you know it, if LeBron is out there saying that all white people are racist, there are going to be major issues because of it...They need to make sure they aren't spreading things that are incorrect.

Throughout his interview, Participant 7 consistently referenced athletes who post politically-charged content online as “dangerous” and argued that they should refrain from contributing to political discourse online. When asked about the impact of athlete activism online, Participant 7 offered the following response:

I think it can do a lot for people who take their word as gospel. That is why it is so dangerous for people like Joshua Perry to make statements like the one he made about Rosa Parks online. Did you see how many retweets and favorites that got? He is spreading bad logic and people are taking that

argument on and believing in it...there are a lot of kids out there who don't know any better and they listen to what the athletes have to say because they think they are cool and want to be like them.

Perceiving Athletes' Posts Through the Lens of Athletes' Rights

During their interviews, when evaluating whether or not it is appropriate for professional athletes to post politically-charged content online, participants discussed the rights of professional athletes as individual human beings versus as employees of private organizations.

Participants' perceptions regarding the rights of professional athletes concern the concepts of para-social relationships and social identity. Participants who revealed a high value for athletes' rights as individual human beings tended to disclose feeling connected to particular athletes during their interviews. These participants argued for the maintenance of athletes' civil liberty to speak freely and cited the candid nature of particular athletes' social media posts as a factor which serves to strengthen the bond between athletes and their fans. Participants who emphasized athletes' status as employees of private organizations argued that by signing contracts to play their sport professionally, athletes waive some of their individual rights. These participants often mentioned the importance of the maintenance of athletes' social identities on social media.

Athletes' rights as individual human beings

Participants who revealed a high value for athletes' rights as individual human beings expressed their belief that employer regulations should not infringe on civil liberties during their interviews. These participants believe that similarly to ordinary individuals, athletes should be able to post whatever they would like to on their social media profiles.

Many participants sharing this view mentioned athletes' right to the freedom of speech multiple times throughout their interviews.

I think athletic excellence is built through personal motivation and personal sacrifice and is very much grounded within the individual's self and with the individual's identity. So, to use their platform or to use their personhood for change or to advocate for something that they believe in, they shouldn't be penalized for that, because they've worked their entire lives to build up to this...they should have the ability to use their platform when it's given to them...an athlete shouldn't lose their rights to the first amendment or to their beliefs and opinions and experiences just because they have become a public figure (Participant 6)

I think [LeBron's] in every right able to post what he wants to talk about and I don't think that he should just shut up and dribble and I think her saying that is super stupid, because he's not...he can use his platform however he wants to use his platform and it's the viewers' choice to either pay attention to that or not. I could just as easily not follow LeBron James on Twitter and not know about his political stance on things and not know about his social life, but just know about his basketball life. (Participant 10)

Athletes' rights as employees of private organizations

Certain participants spent more time emphasizing athletes' position as employees of private organizations than they did acknowledging athletes' rights as individual human beings. These participants adopted the view that by signing a contract and accepting a position on a team in a professional sports league, athletes literally sign up for a restriction of their individual rights.

The NFL is a private company and they can make whatever rule they want. So, if they want to tell every single player to stand up, they can do so. There is no right to kneel. Just the same, if they want to tell players not to tweet about politics while under contract, they can do that. (Participant 1)

Freedom of speech, right, so they can talk about it, but I don't think they should do it publicly. That's just my opinion. They're getting paid millions of dollars to be athletes. That's what they should focus on. Plus, what about the clubs they're playing for? If the owners say they don't want players talking about this stuff anywhere, that's that. (Participant 7)

It's also up to the organization they play for, right...obviously, they can have a political opinion, but if you want to talk about that stuff, you should just bring it up in your personal time. Because anything they post online becomes very public, they're going to start something if they get political. (Participant 9)

Perceiving Athletes' Posts Through the Lens of Respect for the Athlete

When emphasizing a positive perception of athletes who post politically-charged content online, participants noted respecting athletes for their honesty and for the risk they choose to take by speaking out.

Participants' respect for professional athletes who post politically-charged content online concerns the concept of para-social relationships. Participants who mentioned respecting athletes for their honesty and for the risk they choose to take by speaking out tended to disclose feeling connected to particular athletes during their interviews. These participants cited the candid nature of particular athletes' social media posts as a factor which serves to strengthen the bond between athletes and their fans. Participants' respect for the honesty of the athlete

Certain participants described their tendency to gravitate toward athletes who display greater openness and honesty than expected online. These participants value being kept in the loop by athletes through their social media posts. Many of the participants who expressed their respect for the honesty of the athlete also revealed their lack of interest in engaging with athletes who appear closed off to the public. When asked what would make him want to follow or unfollow a professional athlete on social media, Participant 1 gave the following response:

If it's a professional athlete in particular, I've found that I'll sometimes follow guys who I feel like are being pretty candid. [Jamal Crawford and

CJ McCullum] gave a pretty honest opinion about something, so I was drawn to it and I followed them to see what else they had to say about things. (Participant 1)

When discussing his lack of interest in keeping up with Colin Kaepernick despite being interested in the take a knee movement, Participant 1 said the following:

I think that's part of the reason why I haven't actually kept up with [Colin Kaepernick] is because he's been silent. You know, other than his posts on social media, he doesn't—he doesn't engage with traditional forms of media. I don't think he has shown up on my explore page [on Twitter] at all, but I think the main reason why I'm not interested in what he's had to say is because nothing's been written about him because he doesn't talk to anybody. (Participant 1)

During his interview, Participant 1 emphasized his discontent with Kaepernick's evasiveness with respect to traditional media outlets. Although Participant 1 has both the genuine interest in the movement Kaepernick created and the ability to tune in to Kaepernick's commentary on the movement through social media, he chooses not to follow or search Kaepernick's Twitter handle to stay informed because he feels that Kaepernick is too selective about his disclosure.

During her interview, Participant 8 also expressed her appreciation for the openness and honesty of professional athletes. When asked what would make her want to follow a particular athlete's Instagram profile, Participant 8 said the following:

Honestly, what I've realized is that most of the athletes who I follow tend to show their normalcy. So, they'll highlight their family or their kids or their significant other in a very respectful and proud way. So, although they'll show clips of their sport and what they're doing, a lot of what they are profiling and putting on display is their real life and they are very open about what that entails. I don't love it when you can tell that athletes or celebrities in general are hiding part of themselves or only showing us part of themselves on social media. Just be yourself, that's what I like to see. I want to know what's going on with them and what they think and how they feel about stuff. It's like I get to know them better when I follow them on social media...if I was just looking for sports highlights and nothing else, I'd honestly just watch ESPN.

Throughout her interview, Participant 8 revisited this sentiment, recognizing that “nowadays, athletes, and in general a lot of celebrities, are so filtered in what they post because society is so conscious about being politically correct”. With this in mind, Participant 8 further emphasized her appreciation for the openness and honesty of professional athletes, as she said, “all of this really makes me respect the ones who aren’t filtered even more. More than just for my enjoyment and entertainment, they’re being themselves when other people are not. That’s respectable”.

Participants’ respect for the risk taken by the athlete

Recognizing the risk taken by athletes who choose to post politically-charged content on social media, many participants disclosed their appreciation for the athletes who do so. These participants mentioned respecting athletes who take on the extra burden of opening themselves up to harsh criticism and backlash. Participants also emphasized the moral value of athletes who stand up for what they believe in recognizing that their advocacy may cost them their athletic career. Participants described their respect for athletes who post politically-charged content on social media in the following ways:

I think it’s admirable that [LeBron] is willing to speak about a lot of things that previous players wouldn’t have spoken about. Especially pretty high profile guys like Kobe Bryant or Michael Jordan were not as outspoken as he is. (Participant 1)

You know, there’s always an argument about who’s better, LeBron or Jordan and...as far as outside of the basketball court, I think most people agree that LeBron is better because of stuff like this, because he stands up for things he believes in and puts himself out there on social media...he’s not just posting about cars and shoes. It is good to see someone like LeBron willing to take on that extra work and pressure. I’m sure it’s not too easy. (Participant 2)

[Colin Kaepernick] is a legendary athlete for what he did with the 49ers. The fact that he had enough guts to take a leap of faith and start the

movement and take a risk...as an athlete he's forever legendary no matter how successful his career was even though he was a very successful NFL quarterback, his career just got cut short. As a person, he is a rider. He's up there with all the great people, I mean he's not on the same level as a Dr. King, but he's definitely comparable to Muhammad Ali, you know they've risked a lot. As a person, he's brave, he's everything that you would want somebody to be...he's compassionate, he's level headed...somebody who does things like that is not just another person just living, you know, he's a deep person. (Participant 4)

I think it's really brave [for an athlete to post politically-charged content on social media], especially if it's an opinion that is counter to the public or might offend people or even the athlete's base, because they have seen people like Kaepernick face being blacklisted by the NFL and his authenticity and his personhood being called into question because of his decision. So, I think athletes who choose to adopt a political standpoint are doing so because they are putting the issue before themselves and I think that is brave...I like [LeBron] more than I did before because LeBron is often referred to as the greatest basketball player and that comes with a lot of responsibility. I think most people would want to preserve that legacy – that level of fame and that level of income and public approval, but to put it at risk to talk about racist mistreatment and to reject a news figure like Laura Ingraham suggests that he's willing to value the cause over his own fame. (Participant 6)

I kind of have a little more respect for any person who makes a political post who isn't in politics because they're going to get under fire regardless of what their stance is, especially if it's an athlete. That's just really respectable. (Participant 10)

Perceiving Athletes' Posts Through the Lens of Fans' Values

When discussing participants' perceptions regarding politically-charged posts put online by professional athletes, six main values were emphasized. These values included athlete modeling, athletes' consistent self-presentation, education through athletes' posts, athletes' lived experiences, athletes' focus on athletics, and the escape provided through sport.

Four of the six values emphasized by participants concern the concepts of parasocial relationships and social identity. Some participants who emphasized their values for

athlete modeling and athletes' lived experiences tended to disclose feeling connected to particular athletes during their interviews. These participants cited the candid nature of particular athletes' social media posts as a factor which serves to strengthen the bond between athletes and their fans. When discussing their values for athlete modeling and athletes' lived experiences, participants often emphasized the beneficial takeaways for fans who look up to professional athletes as role models. Other participants who emphasized their values for athlete modeling, athletes' focus on athletics, and the escape provided through sport often mentioned the importance of the maintenance of athletes' social identities on social media. These participants cited politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes as threats to the entertainment value of athletes' social media profiles.

Fans' value of athlete modeling

During their interviews, participants disclosed valuing athletes who act as role models to the youth and who use their social media profiles to model positive behavior. Recognizing that many committed fans of professional athletes are young children who now have extra access to the athletes they admire via social media, participants emphasized the importance of the content posted online by professional athletes. This value was shared by many participants regardless of whether their perception of politically-charged posts put online by professional athletes was positive or negative overall. When discussing their value for modeling with respect to professional athletes' online self-presentation, participants said the following:

I like when the athletes use their platform to you know help...because a lot of kids look up to these athletes, so I think it's good when they're good role

models and showing that they are more than athletes and they can do a lot of good things besides put a basketball in a basket. (Participant 2)

I think they should be role models for the kids growing up in the neighborhoods that they did and show them that they can live a nice life someday, but advocates? When they talk about politics they usually really just make things worse, so no, not advocates online or otherwise. (Participant 7)

I feel like they should just focus on being a role model to kids that look up to them and who also play the sport instead of getting into the political arena. I feel like it would become too much for them. (Participant 9)

I feel like anybody with a platform is definitely an advocate for underrepresented persons in any situation, especially athletes. Probably because of their athleticism and the fact that they're on that specific platform because, yeah, a movie star is one thing, but this athlete is living a healthy life and you have children looking up to them a lot more than they would look up to, say, Ryan Reynolds on a TV. (Participant 10)

Fans' value of athletes' consistent self-presentation

During their interviews, participants also expressed their value of the consistency of the self-presentation of professional athletes in varying settings. Participants disclosed that the credibility of athletes who post politically-charged content online is partially derived from the consistency displayed by the athlete online versus offline, on-camera versus off-camera, and publicly versus privately with respect to the athlete taking action to support a cause. Regardless of whether their perception of politically-charged posts put online by professional athletes was positive or negative overall, participants shared this value for consistency. When discussing their value for the consistency of the athlete's demonstration of care and commitment to a cause, Participants 1 and 7 said the following:

I'm not black, so I can't relate, but I'm sympathetic to it and I definitely support all the players, I mean white players, black players, whoever wants to kneel, I totally support that. Colin Kaepernick didn't vote in the most recent election, though, so that sort of effects my opinion of him...I find him much less credible on this issue now. (Participant 1)

I mean if you are getting paid millions of dollars to play a sport, I just think there is a time and place for everything and if you're going to go the easy way and post on social media then you better do real stuff to help out too. How many of the players in the NFL that kneel during the season make the news for community service in the offseason or make a difference? (Participant 7)

Participant 12, an 18-year-old American undergraduate student who considers herself a sports fan, was particularly vocal about her value for the consistency of the self-presentation of professional athletes throughout her interview. When asked what she thinks of athletes getting involved in activism on social media, Participant 12 gave the following response:

I think that it's definitely good that they get involved with activism and use their status to further that activism, but it is kind of weird when you see them only active on social media. I think they would be more credible as a political figure or activist if they were going out and doing things too. Like with Colin Kaepernick, I can really tell his activism is really prevalent in his life because he went out and made a speech and made that video to post. Whereas people that just tweet stuff...I don't disrespect it, but I don't respect it as much as I would an athlete with actual experience.

Fans' value of education through athletes' posts

During their interviews, many participants disclosed their value of the potential for athletes' posts to educate their fans. Regardless of whether their perception of politically-charged posts put online by professional athletes was positive or negative overall, participants shared this value for education. When discussing their value for educational content in athlete posts, participants said the following:

I think [on social media, LeBron] has a different audience from a lot of the traditional news outlets. So, he's speaking to people who otherwise might not be learning about this kind of stuff. I think that's a good thing. (Participant 1)

[LeBron] is letting everyone know that racism is still around all the time and even though he is very successful and very famous, he still has to deal with it and I think it's good for people to know that. (Participant 2)

I didn't think that something like that would ever happen out here...it was definitely something that shocked me and that's why it's so important that [LeBron] posted about it, because even though we've lived here forever and we think oh everybody's so open-minded here, we're still ignorant to some of the things that are really going on...after seeing that clip and how he responds to that situation...he's taking something that is very negative and offensive and turning it into an opportunity to say hey, this is something that we all should be aware of and using his own personal life problems and making it public to let everyone know what is going on. Which I think is very important because, again, his platform is highly valued and his opinion matters. (Participant 5)

I like the tweets [about the take a knee movement] because of the way in which [Joshua Perry] is taking it down to a kind of microscopic level. He's taking it down to something that someone who might not totally understand what the purpose is will be able to fully understand it. Especially, with the way in which he talks about Rosa Parks and that her protest wasn't a thing against the individuals, but something against a larger problem. (Participant 6)

I personally believe that if [Colin Kaepernick] put a video out there and educated people to be aware of and watch out for this and asked what we could do to fix this instead of just focusing on the black lives matter or disrespecting the flag and all that...if he just went to his social media platform and educated people, because honestly I know stuff, but I'm not educated enough to be like oh this is what's going on and everything, so personally, if I was educated and it was by him because he does have that platform, I would know more and I could possibly think differently. (Participant 11)

During her interview, Participant 11, an 18-year-old American undergraduate student who currently plays a sport at the collegiate level, placed great emphasis on the value of educational content in athlete posts. Participant 11 disclosed her opinion of the take a knee movement as “disrespectful” early on in her interview, as she feels strongly about the importance of standing and facing the flag during the national anthem. During her interview, she repeatedly mentioned that athlete activism online should serve to educate those who are uninformed about a particular issue. Recognizing her lack of familiarity with the main message of the take a knee movement, Participant 11 often said that she wished

Kaepernick would post more educational content regarding his movement on social media so she could better understand its purpose. Throughout her interview, Participant 11 argued that in order to use social media to successfully support a movement, professional athletes “need to continue to educate people on how to make a difference and how to stand up for what they believe in”.

Fans’ value of athletes’ lived experiences

During their interviews, participants expressed their value of the life experience of athletes as it relates to their support of a particular issue, cause, or movement. Certain participants recognized athlete experience as a form of credibility for the athlete. These participants disclosed feeling more inclined to accept the position taken by the athlete in his/her politically-charged post when the post included information about the athlete’s personal experiences. While discussing the value he places on the politically-charged posts put online by professional athletes, Participant 9 said the following:

It would depend if they have experience...if they’re just supporting the movement because they support it, then I wouldn’t really take their word for ground, but if it’s the people who actually have personal experience in whatever issue it is, I take that with more consideration...I would listen to them more if they had a personal experience to back up their support and sort of justify why they’re actually supporting it instead of just being like, because it’s right...I mean, why is it right...I want to know why they care about it.

During their interviews, participants were shown two tweets posted by LeBron James. The first was text-based and simply said “#wewillnotshutupanddribble”. The second was a video clip in which he and Kevin Durant discussed their frustrations with the current sociopolitical climate in America and referenced the racist graffiti spray painted on the

garage of LeBron's family home in Los Angeles. While discussing her views of these posts,

Participant 12 said the following:

I like that he is not really being super wordy about it. I feel like it's simple but effective... I like that he's expressing that he doesn't support that and that he wants to have a voice, but also not talking too much about things that he might not have a lot of experience with. It just seemed really simple and with the video of him in the car, I definitely think that he had the grounds to talk about what he was talking about and I think that he has the right to use what he has been through whether it is a lot or not, he still has the grounds to express what he feels and I like the way that he does it. He does put his thoughts out there and he has a voice.

Fans' value of athletes' focus on athletics

During their interviews, certain participants emphasized their value of athletes expressing a public interest and focus on athletics above all else. These participants tended to have more negative perceptions of athlete activism online and often would describe the politically-charged posts of professional athletes as a "distraction". Participant 9 had especially strong feelings about this. When asked to describe his view of athlete activism online, he said the following:

Once they cross that line from being an athlete and go into political activism, I feel like they're drifting away from their athlete career because they show more attachment to their opinions and the activists they support. That's when their careers probably start to dwindle out because they are losing focus and they are showing everyone that they want to focus on politics.

When asked how he feels about politically-charged posts put online by professional athletes, Participant 13, an 18-year-old undergraduate student who considers himself a sports fan, said the following:

I think those are fine, but I'm not looking for posts about political stuff from them...that's not really their job. Their job is to entertain us with athletic stuff. I guess as long as it doesn't seem like they don't care about their sport anymore or if you can tell they're still caring more about their sport than anything else it's fine, yeah.

When asked how he thinks professional athletes should use their social media platform, Participant 13 said, “they should just be posting stuff about their sports”. During her interview, Participant 15, a 20-year-old undergraduate student who considers herself a sports fan, echoed the opinion shared by Participant 13. When asked how she thinks professional athletes should use their social media platform, Participant 15 said the following:

I’d probably say that they should be more focused on their sports. I mean that’s what they’re getting paid to do, but I do understand that everyone has an opinion, but I feel like their platform on Instagram should be more directed toward sports than politics at all.

Participant 7 also demonstrated a preference for athletes who are solely focused on athletics during his interview. When explaining his decision to unfollow LeBron James on Instagram, he said, “I didn’t like that he was focusing more on his outside agenda than his sport”. Later in his interview, Participant 7 further emphasized his preference for a single focus among athletes as he stated, “they’re getting paid millions of dollars to be athletes. That’s what they should focus on”.

Fans’ value of the escape provided through sport

During their interviews, participants emphasized their value of the escape sport provides from the harsh realities of life, like politics. In their discussion of this value, participants noted that as sports fans, a primary gratification of engaging in the consumption of sports is the ability to decompress and passively consume the source of entertainment. During their interviews, these participants expressed their frustration with the disruption that politically-charged posts put online by professional athletes causes in

their ability to use sports as an escape from reality. Participant 9 gave a detailed explanation of his dissatisfaction with this kind of disruption at the end of his interview:

If you're in your free time maybe out in public or even on social media sometimes, I don't see a problem showing your support for your activism, but I'd say if you're at the arena to play a game and people paid money to see you play, I'd say that's the wrong time to bring up any problem. People are there to see the sport, they're not there to see politics. Even on social media, people are following these athletes for different reasons, but I don't think very many of them are looking for politics there. I think most people are looking for more sports talk or cool pictures and videos. Maybe some people are even getting away from politics to come see the sport and that's something they do in their free time. Even for myself, I'd say watching the game of hockey is a way to escape life for a little bit. It's like watching a movie or relaxing, it's a way to relax and recover from the day. So, when athletes bring politics into sports, on game day and on social media, it's restricting people from their free time to relax and get away from everything.

Participant 12 offered a similar perspective during her interview:

I kind of have mixed feelings about it, because I think that as a famous well known person, they should definitely be able to use that status to talk about whatever they want and support something or not support something else, but I also don't like how sometimes it disrupts an athletic game or something. I wish it were more off the field. Where they can use their status to talk about what they want to talk about, but I don't think they should be affected with the actual game day rituals even with their social media posts, like just post about game day stuff on game days and keep everything normal so we can enjoy and not get distracted I guess...it's weird to see things differently. I just wouldn't want any normal things to be disrupted.

Participants 9 and 12 share the view that athlete activism online, as well as in general, can serve to tarnish the overall experience of sports for fans. Although during their interviews both participants recognized the right of the athlete to use his/her platform to post politically-charged content, neither of them view this right as one without consequence.

RQ2: How do 18-30 year-olds respond to politically-charged content posted by professional athletes on social media?

Rather than simply assess whether sports fans respond positively or negatively to politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes, this study uncovers the various forms of positive and negative response exhibited by sports fans. No single participant in this study demonstrated a single and consistent response to politically-charged posts put online by professional athletes. As such, the findings of this study provide insight to the various forms of positive and negative response exhibited by sports fans. Patterns in response among sports fans to politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes can be understood through the following themes and subthemes:

Increased Interest

The first major theme in fan response that emerged from the data for this study was increased interest. This theme was found to apply both to athletes who post politically-charged content online and to social movements that are discussed in the politically-charged posts put online by athletes.

During their interviews, participants mentioned seeing a politically-charged post discussing an issue of interest and becoming more interested in the athlete who posted it. Additionally, some participants mentioned being successfully reached by athletes' appeals to humor. These participants described seeing athletes' posts containing humor cues (i.e. posts inclusive of a quick punchline or the laughing emoji) and clicking on links attached in the posts or even conducting independent online searches to read up on the topics discussed by the athletes in the hopes of understanding their jokes. In the event that these participants found athletes' jokes to be funny, they often developed an increased interest

in the athlete. In the event that these participants also identified with the politically-charged content discussed by these athletes, they often developed an increased interest in the social movement associated with that content as well.

Participants also discussed scenarios in which they saw a politically-charged post put online by an athlete they already admired and in turn learning more about the movement mentioned in the athlete's post. These participants tended to develop an increased interest in the content discussed by the athlete as a partial result of the strength of the para-social relationship between them and the athlete they admire. These participants cited their sense of closeness to a particular athlete as a reason for their inclination to read and attempt to understand the politically-charged content posted online by that athlete. The strength of the para-social relationships between these participants and the athletes they admire also seemed to increase the effectiveness of athletes' use of narrative framing. Because these participants care for the athletes they admire, they are interested in hearing stories about these athletes' life experiences and are particularly susceptible to athletes' appeals to emotion.

Participants' increased interest in the athlete

During their interviews, participants revealed an increased interest in a particular athlete stemming from their exposure to that athlete's politically-charged post on social media. Certain cases of increased interest among sports fans have contributed to their eventual increased engagement with the athlete. As such, there are potential positive implications on the athlete's brand equity stemming from the increased interest of sports fans. After viewing two tweets posted by Joshua Perry on Twitter during his interview, Participant 1 said the following:

He seems smart. I'd never even heard of him, but...I might even follow him...I'd have to see more, but that was a good start. I'll certainly take pause if his name pops up. I want to hear more from him.

Participant 1 disclosed being impressed by the logical reasoning and analogy used by Perry in his tweets. He also mentioned that his existing interest in the take a knee movement motivated him to think more deeply about the content presented by Perry than he may have if the topic of the post had been different.

During his interview, Participant 3 emphasized his appreciation for Colin Kaepernick after becoming aware of his involvement in the take a knee movement. When asked if he began to pay more attention to Kaepernick after seeing social media content covering the take a knee movement, Participant 3 said the following:

Of course I pay more attention to him now. I think everybody did, because that was something that, at least from my perspective, I had never seen before...these things weren't talked about on Instagram before...I still don't follow him on social media or anything like that, but I definitely take more notice because for him to do something like that and the reaction that people are giving...That's just pretty amazing to me.

Participant 5 also disclosed that he felt an inclination to pay more attention to athletes who post politically-charged content online. When asked what he generally does when he sees politically-charged posts popping up on his Instagram feed, Participant 5 responded by saying the following:

I actually usually if anything will follow [the athlete] more because I want to see more and more about what that person thinks...I'm usually drawn to that because I just want to understand what that guy's thinking and learn more about what he's saying.

Participant 8 also mentioned that after seeing politically-charged posts put out by professional athletes she generally paid more attention to them than she had before seeing their posts. Participant 8's discussion of her response to politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes revealed her tendency to develop more interest in the athlete

offline as well as online. Rather than exclusively mentioning a desire to follow these athletes on social media or seek out more of their posts, Participant 8 discussed watching more of their sports matches. When asked whether she has ever paid more attention to an athlete offline after being exposed to his/her politically-charged post on social media, Participant 8 said the following:

Yeah, I have had that pique an interest definitely with individual things like some tennis players who posted about women's equality recently, I was kind of surfing through channels and I wouldn't have known who they were otherwise, but I decided to watch their matches once I came across them because I remembered their posts and I was like, okay yeah let's see what they've got going on.

During her interview, Participant 6 followed suit, revealing that after seeing a politically-charged post put online by a professional athlete, she feels more inclined to pay attention to that athlete as well. Having said that, Participant 6 offered a unique response, in that she drew a distinction between specifically what motivates her to pay more attention to athletes who post politically-charged content online depending on whether she agrees or disagrees with the position taken by the athlete. When explaining her motivation for paying more attention to athletes who post politically-charged content online, Participant 6 said the following:

I would pay more attention [to the athlete] if I agreed with the sentiment shared [in his/her politically-charged post]. If I disagreed, though, I would still pay attention, but I would pay attention to see if they were facing backlash. So, I would want to see that they were getting their just desserts.

Similarly, Participant 12 emphasized her inclination to pay more attention to an athlete who has posted politically-charged content online in the event that she disagrees with the position taken by the athlete in his/her post. During her interview, Participant 12 was shown three tweets posted by Joshua Perry. Immediately after viewing the first tweet posted by the NFL player, Participant 12 disclosed that her feelings toward the athlete were

“definitely more negative than positive”. When asked whether she felt inclined to pay any more or less attention to Joshua Perry after seeing that tweet, Participant 12 said the following:

I would pay more attention because I would be interested now to see what he would say. You know the phrase any publicity is good publicity...just because I would recognize his name now, even though I don't necessarily like him or feel good about what I saw him say last, I would be interested at least to like compare what he's saying next.

Participants' increased interest in the movement discussed by the athlete

During their interviews, participants disclosed an increased interest in a particular social movement stemming from their exposure to a professional athlete's politically-charged post on social media. Certain cases of increased interest in the social movement among sports fans have resulted in a deeper understanding of the movement as well as eventual increased support for the movement. As such, there are potential positive implications on overall support for the social movement stemming from the increased interest of sports fans. When asked how effective athletes' use of social media is in general, Participant 10 said the following:

I think it has got a huge impact because I personally have been more aware about things that are going on and I've learned things from their posts. Maybe not always, but sometimes, I've seen an athlete's post and gotten new information from it and then sometimes I'll want to look into it even more, but in those cases it starts with the athletes, right...so I get to know more about what's going on kind of because of them.”

More specifically, Participants 1 and 11 disclosed gaining a better understanding for the intent of the take a knee movement after viewing Joshua Perry's tweets during their interviews. When discussing Perry's tweets, Participant 11 stated, “it made me more aware of the situation and see how people react to one another through it. I get it more now, like why they're doing it I mean”. Later in the interview, when asked to summarize the purpose

of the take a knee movement, Participant 1 referred back to Perry's tweets admitting that he was "probably swayed by the tweets from Joshua Perry that [he] saw" before summarizing Perry's argument and adopting it as his own.

After viewing a video clip posted on Twitter by Colin Kaepernick, Participants 6, 8, and 14 credited the former quarterback for providing them with a deeper understanding of the take a knee movement. Immediately after viewing Kaepernick's post, participants 6, 8, and 14 said the following:

I always supported the take a knee movement, but it seemed localized among professional athletes. This kind of video shows the way in which the take a knee movement transcends out of the athletic realm and into the everyday or average citizen realm.... I also recognized that they were also protesting for the people who couldn't have this public platform and I think that's one of the things that Kaepernick has done really well. He's vocalized his own privilege as a way to communicate that he is trying to speak for people who can't speak. (Participant 6)

It's a lot, but the situation is a lot. This post being a lot is not a bad thing. It's unfortunately a reality that I don't see because where I am around and where I grew up, what I grew up as, and the economic status of what I am now and was then...I didn't know it was this bad. (Participant 8)

His tweet has made me to be more interested in black lives matter now because he is not only talking about it now but he is actually taking some action that has made him less popular in the country and he is not playing in the NFL anymore but he has continued to take action and it is not for himself, but for African Americans in this country that are poorly treated. I respect him. (Participant 14)

Participant 14, a Korean undergraduate student who considers himself a sports fan, emphasized his inclination to become interested in social movements after seeing athletes post politically-charged content online throughout his interview. After viewing Joshua Perry's tweets about the take a knee movement, Participant 14 said, "I think it's good what he says and how he makes a comparison and I am getting more interested in what these NFL players are talking about now".

Increased Support

The second major theme in fan response that emerged from the data for this study was increased support. This theme was found to apply both to athletes who post politically-charged content online and to social movements that are discussed in the politically-charged posts put online by athletes.

Some participants mentioned being successfully reached by athletes' appeals to humor. These participants described seeing athletes' posts containing humor cues (i.e. posts inclusive of a quick punchline or the laughing emoji) and clicking on links attached in the posts or even conducting independent online searches to read up on the topics discussed by the athletes in the hopes of understanding their jokes. In the event that these participants found athletes' jokes to be funny, they sometimes developed an increased sense of support for the athlete. In the event that these participants also identified with the politically-charged content discussed by these athletes, they sometimes developed an increased sense of support for the social movement associated with that content as well.

Participants also mentioned developing an increased sense of support for the social movements discussed in athletes' posts as a partial result of the strength of the para-social relationship between them and the athlete they admire. These participants cited their sense of closeness to a particular athlete as a reason for their inclination to read and attempt to understand the politically-charged content posted online by that athlete. In the event that these participants identified with the politically-charged content discussed by these athletes, they often developed an increased sense of support for the social movement endorsed by these athletes.

The strength of the para-social relationships between these participants and the athletes they admire also seemed to increase the effectiveness of athletes' use of narrative framing. Because these participants care for the athletes they admire, they are interested in hearing stories about these athletes' life experiences and are particularly susceptible to athletes' appeals to emotion. In the event that an athlete disclosed a sense vulnerability or being negatively impacted by a particular incident, his/her inclusion of emotional appeals in the politically-charged narrative he/she delivered online often resulted in participants' increased sense of support for the athlete as well as the social movement endorsed by the athlete.

Participants' increased support for the athlete

During their interviews, certain participants revealed an increased investment in the success of a particular athlete after being exposed to a politically-charged post put online by that athlete. In addition to expressing an increased investment in the success of these athletes, participants disclosed an increased inclination to exhibit tangible online displays of support for the athlete. Tangible online displays of support for the athlete include following the athlete's profile as well as liking, favoriting, and retweeting the athlete's posts. Although most commonly found to apply when participants agreed with the position taken by the athlete, this form of a positive response to the politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes was found to apply in certain cases in which participants simply respected the athlete for standing up for what he/she believes in regardless of the stance taken. When asked how she decides which athletes she would like to follow on Twitter, Participant 10 said, "there are a lot of athletes that I follow because

they are kind of political at times...the players stay true to what they believe in and they're so logical with all of their reasoning—I love it”.

During their interviews, Participants 2, 3, 6, 10, and 12 disclosed their increased support for athletes who they were otherwise unfamiliar with after seeing their politically-charged posts on social media. When discussing their increased support for athletes whose politically-charged posts they saw on social media, Participants 2, 3, 6, 10, and 12 said the following:

I like what [Joshua Perry] is doing because a lot of the media is trying to turn the take a knee movement as far as people hating America or hating the military when that's not the point of the movement because the media is trying to twist it. So, what he's doing in this I think is very helpful and I do like him a little bit more now. I'll probably follow him when we get off the phone actually. (Participant 2)

I still don't know [Joshua Perry], but I really like what he said... especially if he kept with those views and maybe posted some inspirational or motivational things in addition to the stuff like this where he's standing up for what he believes...yes, I would definitely follow him. (Participant 3)

I really liked what LeBron did when he opened the school in Cleveland because while it doesn't systemically change the level of poverty that's in Cleveland, it draws everyone's attention to what's happening in Cleveland, which is systemic racism, under-education, police brutality...So, seeing this post too and knowing he is really dedicated to raising this kind of awareness across the board makes me like him more and respect him more and want to know what else he is doing. I would follow him because I want to stay up with the conversation. (Participant 6)

Okay, I get that. I get his point. I like that. I'm definitely following [Joshua Perry] now...I was probably going to follow him before because I liked that other post, but I physically just did it right now, because I am so eager to see his points of view now. In this post he totally logically reasoned his way around this fight and he did it so professionally and he didn't stoop low and go back to that level of the original hate comment. He talked about his views and processed them. (Participant 10)

The post made me like [LeBron] more because he was very gracious about it. Not disagreeing or agreeing, I just think he handled it in a very professional and simple way that doesn't cause a lot of controversy. He obviously cares about this cause, but he's not causing controversy to try to

make other people care about it too, he's just calmly telling us why he does and I like how he does that. (Participant 12)

During their interviews, Participants 2, 3, and 5 disclosed their increased support for athletes who they previously disliked after seeing their politically-charged posts on social media. When discussing their increased support for athletes whose politically-charged posts they saw on social media, Participants 2, 3, and 5 said the following:

I didn't like [Kaepernick] when he was in the NFL just because he was on the 49ers, but now I really like him because he gave up a lot to fight for what he believes in and I think that's an impressive thing to do...even when he was on the 49ers and he was [kneeling and posting] I started following him [on Instagram] even though I don't like the 49ers, but I respect someone bringing awareness to something like that, so I did start liking him. (Participant 2)

I like [Kaepernick]. You know it's weird because at first—he was a good quarterback, I'm not going to hate on him, but I just didn't like him because I didn't like the 49ers, but then he started doing this, kneeling on the field and posting on Instagram and Twitter about how messed up the police are treating black people, and my whole—everything just changed. For him to do that and lose everything and nobody wants to sign him even though he's been to the Super Bowl before and he's losing out on millions of dollars...that's admirable. He's literally sacrificing all of that to talk about this and to help change something. That's the ultimate. You're not going to find a lot of people who are going to be willing to do that. (Participant 3)

I didn't really like [LeBron] a while back just because of the team he played on, but I've started to appreciate him more and more because of his accomplishments on the basketball court sure, but even more so because of everything he does for society and the way he talks about the political injustices and stuff. So, I like the guy a lot now" (Participant 5)

During his interview, Participant 14 shared a story about a friend of his who transitioned from “hating” LeBron James to liking him after seeing his online response to Laura Ingraham's statement that he should “shut up and dribble”. When asked what he felt was the impact of the LeBron James tweets shown during his interview, Participant 14 said the following:

I know a great example. There is a friend of mine and a long time ago he and I saw the shut up and dribble thing at the same time and we talked about it and he used to hate LeBron...but then he saw the way he responded to the shut up and dribble thing and he said, "I hate LeBron as a sports player, but I like LeBron as a person now". So, same concept with me for this view. I like to see he is responding this way and it makes me like him a lot. I didn't hate him before like my friend, but same impact.

Participants' increased support for the movement discussed by the athlete

During their interviews, certain participants revealed an increased investment in the success of a particular social movement after being exposed to an athlete's social media post about that movement. This was often the case in scenarios in which participants lacked familiarity with the social movement before seeing the athlete's post. Participants often mentioned receiving new information about the social movement from the athlete's post when expressing their increased support for the movement. When asked his thoughts on the tweets posted by Colin Kaepernick and Joshua Perry during his interview, Participant 14 said the following:

I support the movement more than I did before because when black lives matter was introduced to me I was back in my home country where almost only Asians were living, so I didn't really know what it was about. But after seeing this example by Colin Kaepernick and hearing what he is saying, I know more information about black lives matter that I wouldn't have known about. (Participant 14)

In addition to expressing an increased investment in the success of the social movement, some participants disclosed an increased inclination to exhibit tangible offline displays of support for the movement. Tangible offline displays of support for the social movement include donating to the movement as well as attending marches and rallies for the movement. When asked whether he has participated in any of the social movements he has seen athletes discuss online, Participant 5 said, "I've donated money for sure...I have donated multiple times to things that LeBron posted links for" (p. 16). When asked how

effective athletes' use of social media is in actually galvanizing people to participate in social movements offline, Participant 10 said the following:

I've gotten involved in my own community and my own activist rights groups because of their posts because it's motivated me to do something...I never really got up and did anything about stuff until I got to college and started following these people and really got involved in my community (Participant 10)

Reinforced Support

The third major theme in fan response that emerged from the data for this study was reinforced support. This theme was found to apply both to athletes who post politically-charged content online and to social movements that are discussed in the politically-charged posts put online by athletes.

The strength of the para-social relationships between participants and the athletes they admire often led to participants' reinforced sense of support for those athletes. This was often found to be the case when athletes framed the politically-charged content they posted online in narrative form. Because these participants care for the athletes they admire, they are interested in hearing stories about these athletes' life experiences and are particularly susceptible to athletes' appeals to emotion.

Participants' reinforced support for the athlete

During their interviews, certain participants revealed a reinforced liking for a particular athlete after being exposed to a politically-charged post put online by that athlete. This was often the case in scenarios in which participants favored the athlete prior to seeing his/her post about the social movement. Participants 3 and 4 shared this response with respect to LeBron James. After seeing content about racism in America posted on Twitter by LeBron James during their interviews, Participants 3 and 4 said the following:

He's doing it right. He's using his platform to speak out on certain things. Things that matter and he's making a difference in society by being real about those things. I've always loved LeBron and this is exactly why! Every time I see him posting about these things I feel great...it just reminds me why he's the greatest...There's millions of people who follow him, so let's use the platform for something positive. (Participant 3)

I already felt a good way about him, so seeing his post didn't really change that, but it was like, yeah, that's what I expect from LeBron...nothing but positivity, nothing but a quality person. So, it doesn't change how I felt about him because I've already known what he's about and he's been very vocal about that, so it's good and I just still feel good about who he is and what he's doing. (Participant 4)

Participants who favored the athlete because of his/her athletic ability and agreed with the stance taken by the athlete prior to seeing his/her post about the social movement expressed their reinforced support for the athlete most emphatically. After seeing content about racism in America posted on Twitter by LeBron James during her interview, Participant 10 said the following:

I totally like him more! I already loved him because he's just so good at basketball and will continue to follow him, but this just made me love him even more. I didn't even know that could happen! Like I already loved him so much, wow. He did a good job. He stood up for what he believes in and he kept it classy and was very direct. He's great.

Participants' reinforced support for the movement discussed by the athlete

During their interviews, certain participants revealed a reinforced investment in the success of a particular social movement after being exposed to an athlete's social media post about that movement. This was often the case in scenarios in which participants were familiar with the social movement before seeing the athlete's post. Participants rarely mentioned receiving new information about the social movement from the athlete's post when expressing reinforced support. Rather, participants noted their admiration for the logical arguments and emotional appeals delivered in the politically-charged posts put

online by these athletes. Participants 5, 6, and 10 said the following in response to the video clip posted on Twitter by Colin Kaepernick:

That clip was very powerful...anything that Colin Kaepernick says, I'm always very moved by it. It's a very powerful thing to see all together. I don't know how to really put into words the affect a video like that has. I've always been a strong advocate for that movement, so the video didn't make me want to support it more or less, but that clip reminded me why I feel the way that I do. (Participant 5)

I always supported the take a knee movement...I still identify strongly with it. The video reinforced my stance...but there's also an element to the visual-ness of both the LeBron and Kaepernick videos...visualizing people expressing their frustration and their fear and their hope for change can be really powerful to motivating continuing support. (Participant 6)

My stance on the take a knee movement has been newly reinforced by this because I hadn't really heard about that in a while to be honest...I don't identify any more or less than I already did because I still stood behind it really like 100%. (Participant 10)

When asked how her perception of the take a knee movement was reinforced or altered by Joshua Perry's tweets, Participant 8 said the following:

I feel like it put into words what I already felt about it. Like I said, yeah, it wasn't about anti-America or anti-veteran, or he adds cops or the anthem, but it's about what's happening in society. He's exactly right.

Disengagement

The fourth major theme in fan response that emerged from the data for this study was disengagement. This theme was found to apply both to athletes who post politically-charged content online and to the sport played by those athletes. The forms of disengagement demonstrated by study participants include unfollowing athletes on social media and discontinuing to watch the sport played by the athlete altogether.

Participants' inclination to disengage with athletes who post politically-charged content online concerns the concept of social identity. These participants often emphasized the importance of the maintenance of athletes' social identities on social media and cited

politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes as threats to the entertainment value of athletes' social media profiles.

Participants' disengagement from the athlete

During their interviews, certain participants disclosed their inclination to disengage with particular athletes after seeing politically-charged content posted online by those athletes. This was often the case when participants disagreed with the position taken by the athlete and developed a strong distaste for the athlete as a result. When asked what red flags typically steer him away from following a particular athlete, Participant 3 said:

Their views on certain issues...I mean there's a lot going on in the world, so if they're...if they aren't for change, I wouldn't want to follow them. I would unfollow them...if they're just stuck in an old school mentality, I wouldn't want to follow that.

When asked to share an example of a time his opinion of a professional athlete was swayed based on a politically-charged post put out by the athlete, Participant 1 said the following:

Spencer Hawes, I remember had some political opinions that I disagreed with pretty strongly. I forgot exactly what they were, but they really turned me off from him. Not that I was a huge Spencer Hawes fan before, but it just—now when I see him on TV, that's the first thing that comes to mind...if he was speaking when I saw him on TV, I would definitely change the channel.

When asked if he has ever unfollowed a professional athlete on Twitter, Participant 13 said the following:

Oh, yeah...sometimes because of their political stance and sometimes I'm just feeling like I don't want to follow them anymore because their pages are boring. I've unfollowed a few...probably like five because of that. They were talking about current issues in our country...like the border issue and taxes...I didn't agree with them, so my liking for them decreased a little...not drastically, but enough to make me unfollow them...I don't take any of this against their game, but I hold it against them as a person a little.

During his interview, Participant 7 mentioned his frustration with LeBron James after seeing politically-charged posts put online by LeBron in which he aligned himself with Colin Kaepernick and the take a knee movement. When asked why he made the decision to unfollow LeBron James on Twitter and Instagram, Participant 7 said the following:

I unfollowed LeBron when he posted that Nike ad to support Kaepernick...he hadn't posted for a week or so before that and his last post was one of those snippets of his barbershop show and he was talking about how black people aren't respected in America or something completely irrelevant to sports, so that was annoying and then his next post was the Nike ad and I decided I didn't want to see what else he wanted to put out online after that...I didn't like that he was focusing more on his outside agenda than his sport.

Participants' disengagement from the sport played by the athlete

During his interview, Participant 7 revealed a strong distaste for Colin Kaepernick's delivery of the take a knee movement both online and offline. Participant 7 argued that Kaepernick's unwillingness to stand for the anthem coupled with the politically-charged posts he often put online tarnished the game of football. Participant 7 disclosed that after seeing many NFL players post politically-charged content in support of the take a knee movement online, he decided to stop watching football. In his description of this decision, Participant 7 said, "I stopped watching the NFL when all those players started kneeling and posting about it. It took over football...couldn't get away from it". After viewing the video clip posted on Twitter by Kaepernick during his interview, Participant 7 echoed this sentiment, referencing the post as "complete propaganda". When asked to elaborate, Participant 7 said the following:

That was just a compilation of isolated events that were put together to brainwash people into thinking that all white cops are shady. Come on. This is what I'm talking about with LeBron saying dishonest things too. Kaepernick is even worse though because he put this video together as if it

could be proof and I know there are going to be people somewhere who fall for it.

After viewing Joshua Perry's tweets regarding the take a knee movement during his interview, Participant 7 described the football player as "dangerous" and said, "this is very manipulative what he's doing. It's dishonest and it has a lot to do with why I stopped watching football".

The connections between the main themes found in this study and relevant theory and technique are displayed in Figure 3.

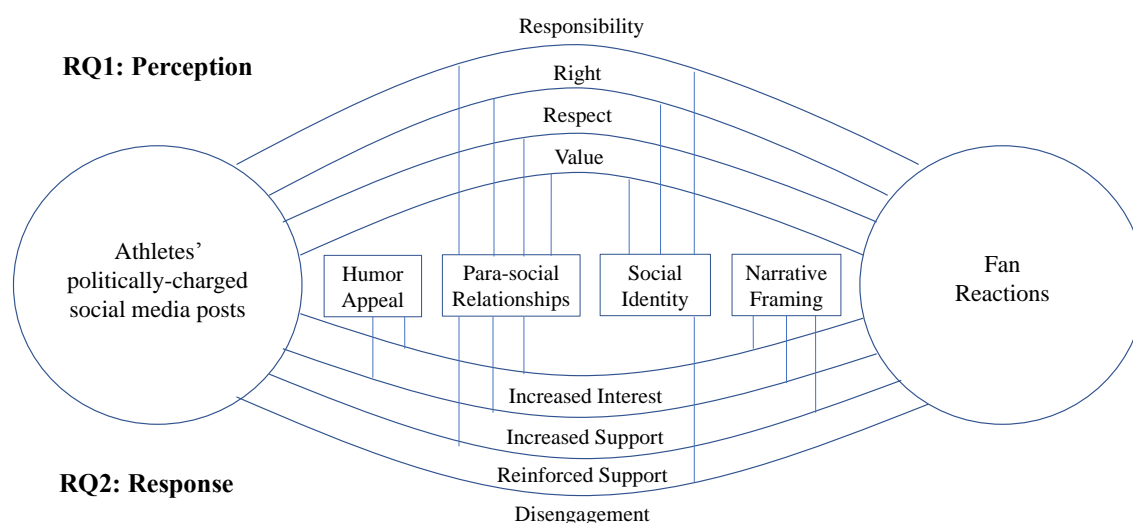


Figure 3: Diagram connecting study findings to theory and technique

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

This study's findings generate understanding of the ways fans might interpret and respond to the online activist efforts of professional athletes, including the benefits and drawbacks of athletes' use of social media for social movements. Recognizing the inconsistency in sports fans' responses to athlete activism online, an understanding of patterns in fan perception is vital to making sense of fan response. The findings of this study reveal that sports fans' perceptions of athlete activism online are informed by a combination of their sense of the responsibilities and rights of professional athletes and the qualities they respect and value in professional athletes and their online self presentation.

Fans who value the maintenance of the athlete's social identity tend to prefer that the content posted online by professional athletes represents the athlete's single focus, or commitment to their sport above all else, while serving to maintain the escape provided to fans through their consumption of sports. These fans also tend to place a high value on modeling and consistency in the online self-presentation of professional athletes. Many of these fans choose to follow professional athletes' social media profiles in order to gain further access to the athlete's training regimen and day-to-day sports related practices. These fans do not care to learn about the athlete's personal identity and believe that athletes' rights as employees of private organizations trump their rights as individual human beings. Regardless of whether or not the athlete's team or league has put formal regulations in place with respect to the athlete's online self-presentation, these fans believe athletes should avoid posting controversial content to their social media profiles. These fans typically perceive athlete activism online negatively and sometimes frame politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes as "dangerous" and "irresponsible"

due the athlete's reach and lack of formal education in the political realm. Although generally opposed to the politically-charged social media posts of professional athletes, these fans are more tolerant of this content when it includes a solution to the dilemma discussed by the athlete. Fans' main complaint regarding the politically-charged posts of professional athletes is that too often they are more problem than solution focused and serve to "cause a huge scene and a lot of chaos" (Participant 11).

On the other hand, fans who value gaining exposure to the personal identities of professional athletes tend to prefer that their online self-presentation is uncensored. Many of these fans choose to follow professional athletes' social media profiles in order to gain further access to the athlete as a whole person and are looking to build and strengthen parasocial relationships with the athletes they admire. In wanting to know more about the athlete as a whole person, these fans value the discussion of the athlete's lived experience in the content he/she posts online. These fans believe that athletes' rights as individual human beings trump their rights as employees of private organizations and view athletes as advocates for the underrepresented. As such, these fans are supportive of athlete activism online. In circumstances in which these fans do not necessarily align themselves with the position taken by the athlete in his/her politically-charged post, fans tend to remain supportive of the athlete's right to post politically-charged content. These fans typically will not perceive athlete activism online negatively unless an athlete posts offensive content revealing a racist or intolerant ideology.

Four themes emerged from data analysis with respect to fan response to athlete activism online. Three of these themes indicated positive fan response, while the fourth theme indicated negative fan response. Positive fan responses to athlete activism online are

embodied by the increased interest of fans, the increased support of fans, and the reinforced support of fans. All of which can be applied to the athlete as well as to the social movement discussed in the athlete's politically-charged post. Positive fan response typically comes from fans who value gaining exposure to the personal identities of professional athletes, as these fans perceive athlete activism online positively more consistently than fans who do not care to learn about the athlete's personal identity.

Negative fan responses to athlete activism online are embodied by the fan's disengagement either with the athlete him/herself, or in extreme cases, with the sport played by the athlete altogether. Most commonly, negative fan response comes from fans who value the maintenance of the athlete's social identity and is embodied by the fan disengaging with the athlete on social media, but continuing to follow his/her athletic performances. Scenarios in which fans disengage with the athlete offline as well as online tend to occur when the athlete's self-presentation includes his/her advocacy for a particular cause or social movement to the degree that the fan feels the athlete's identity is no longer grounded in athletics. Scenarios in which fans disengage with the sport played by the athlete altogether occur only when multiple athletes playing that sport participate in posting politically-charged content online and publicly advocate for a particular cause or social movement to the degree that the fan feels the sport is becoming a platform for political discourse.

This study's results suggest a framework for understanding fan perception of an athlete's politically-charged social media content. Fans who do not take issue with athletes' inclination to post politically-charged content online appear likely to respond positively to athletes' politically-charged posts. These fans may be likely to respond positively to posts

that discuss a social movement they identify with. Fans who use sports as an escape may prefer that athletes refrain from posting politically-charged content. For fans with this opinion, social media posts may be disruptive and lead to a negative response. The framework described above is illustrated in Figure 4.

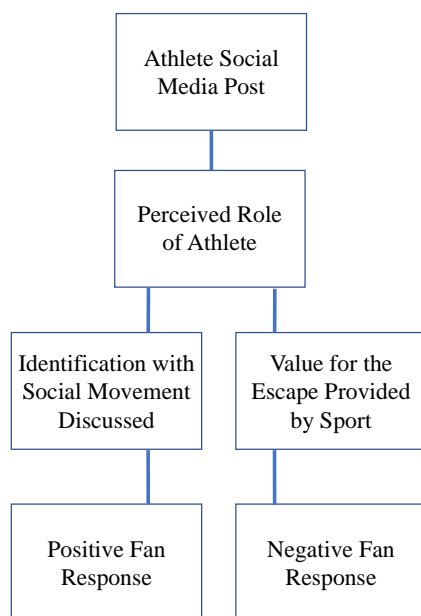


Figure 4: Framework for understanding fan perception of an athlete's politically-charged social media content

The eight emergent themes of this study provide a framework from which practical implications are highlighted to inform the future styles of delivery to be employed by professional athletes when posting politically-charged content online.

Practical Implications

Recognizing the unpredictable nature of fan response to athlete activism online, it is important to note that there is no universal norm to ensure positive fan response to politically-charged content posted by professional athletes online. Having said that, the

findings of this study provide insight with respect to the varying perception and response patterns of sports fans to this variety of content produced by athletes. The findings of this study suggest that in order to create impact and receive positive response from sports fans, athletes who post politically-charged content online must do so with their goals and audience in mind. Knowing their goals as well as their audience grants athletes the ability to frame their content accordingly, rendering them more likely to receive positive responses to the politically-charged content they post.

Goal Orientation

The degree to which athletes are committed to the social movements they support through their politically-charged social media posts varies. Athletes thinking about posting politically-charged content online must consider the potential consequences of their actions prior to publishing their posts. As individuals with vast reach, who are constantly on display, the impact of athletes' politically-charged posts is often felt by the athletes themselves equally or more than it is by society. Athletes must decide how committed they are to the social movement they are considering supporting online in order to weigh the costs and benefits of publicly declaring their support. An athlete with an unwavering commitment to the social movement, who has decided to put the movement first will have different goals with respect to the politically-charged content he/she posts online than an athlete who is only moderately committed to the movement. Due to the risk associated with athletes' decision to post politically-charged content online, it is likely that athletes with a greater commitment to the social movement will be willing to do and say more than athletes with lesser commitments to the social movement. As such, athletes with a greater commitment to the social movement are more likely to strategically strive to break through

the echo chambers of support for the movement existing online and reach individuals who do not yet value the movement. Ideally, athletes whose goal is to garner greater levels of support for the social movement, will strive to gain and maintain the attention of individuals who do not yet value the movement. These athletes will walk a fine line between raising the awareness required to sway individuals to support the movement and alienating their fans.

Based on the findings of this study, athletes who are only moderately committed to the social movement they support online are least likely to elicit negative fan response, as these athletes typically post politically-charged content online infrequently. Athletes who are only moderately committed to the social movement they support online are recommended to keep the public disclosure of their support online primarily. Athletes who feel strongly about serving their communities and participating in activist efforts offline, but who are not committed to becoming outspoken activists themselves should follow suit. While successful in making a difference offline, these athletes can avoid negative fan response by limiting their public disclosure of their commitment to a particular cause. This prevents a disruption in the escapism provided to fans through their passive consumption of sports related content.

As the commitment of the athlete to the social movement grows and the athlete's goals shift, recommendations regarding the public disclosure of the athlete's support change as well. Athletes who are committed to the social movement above all else and who strive to act as an outspoken activist are recommended to combine their approach to disclosure in offline as well online settings. The findings of this study suggest that the combination of offline and online disclosure is most effective in increasing the awareness

and support of sports fans with regard to the social movements supported by professional athletes. Having said that, combining offline and online disclosure also leaves the athlete more vulnerable to backlash, especially when their offline disclosure is delivered within the environment of their sport. Athletes are able to capitalize on the draw of their sport by making politically-charged statements in press conferences as well as before and/or after competing. Recognizing the increased reach of the athlete in the environment of their sport due to the audience size of that sport, this offline setting can be used to gain the attention of individuals the athlete may not otherwise have access to. Additionally, the athlete's combination of offline and online disclosure speaks to the consistency of the athlete in terms of his/her commitment to the social movement, which has been found by this study to increase fans' perceptions of the athlete's credibility with respect to the movement. However, this form of public disclosure almost certainly serves as a disruption to the escapism provided to fans through their passive consumption of sports related content and may have negative consequences on the athletic career of the athlete.

Audience Awareness

Athletes' awareness with regard to the specific audiences they are trying to reach with the politically-charged content that they post online is vital. This awareness allows athletes to frame their content to best reach the audiences whose attention they desire. The findings of this study provide insight with respect to how athletes can best reach uninterested and hostile audiences.

Many of the undergraduate students who participated in this study mentioned their inclination to tune out the politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes due to their lack of interest in politics. Fans also cited the controversial and divisive nature

of politically-charged social media posts as their reasoning for scrolling past this kind of content online. However, athletes' utilization of the humor appeal got through to these fans. The college aged demographic is generally more tied into what is considered cool and current on social media. During their interviews, college aged participants mentioned that a motivator in their decision to follow certain professional athletes on social media is to be kept in the loop with regard to what is going on in popular culture. These fans care about being in on the joke and want to understand jokes that are being made by the professional athletes they admire. These fans mentioned enjoying sharing these jokes with their friends and admitted to their inclination to do background research on the topic of these jokes when they are unfamiliar with the jokes' context.

In addition to raising the awareness of otherwise uninterested fans with respect to the social movement supported by the athlete, the athlete's use of the humor appeal has been found by this study to increase fans' interest in and support for the athlete. Multiple study participants disclosed that they decided to follow Joshua Perry on Twitter after viewing a comedic, yet politically-charged tweet posted to his profile during their interviews. None of these participants knew who Joshua Perry was prior to beginning their interviews.

Participants of this study whose overall perceptions of athlete activism online were overwhelmingly negative tended to view athletes as insufficient spokespeople for social movements. These participants disclosed feeling that athletes lack credibility in the political realm and are often skeptical of the validity of the politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes. However, these fans did disclose their value for the lived experiences of professional athletes. Additionally, these fans recognize the credibility

of the athlete when discussing his/her lived experience as it relates to a particular social movement.

Particularly when striving to reach a hostile audience, athletes who post politically-charged content online should frame this content as a narrative emphasizing their lived experience. In doing so, athletes overcome roadblocks, like the stereotype of the “dumb jock,” which would normally prevent hostile audiences from hearing them out. In telling a story about a lived experience, the athlete evades these fans’ inclination to question the intelligence and credibility of the athlete. Engaging in storytelling also gives the athlete the opportunity to employ the emotional appeal. Athletes’ use of the emotional appeal has been proven by this study to be effective in reaching their fans who fall on the opposite end of the political spectrum. Sports fans with any level of respect for the athlete are often touched by this approach, which increases the likelihood that the athlete will be able to gain their support for him/herself, for the social movement he/she supports, or for both him/herself and the social movement he/she supports.

Limitations

Although this study is successful in its initial development of an understanding of how sports fans perceive and respond to politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes, it is not without limitations. First, all participants of this study have self-selected to participate in interviews. As such, it is possible that the sports fans who have volunteered to participate in this study hold extremely positive or negative views with regard to athlete activism online. This could have created bias impacting the severity of the findings of this study. Additionally, all undergraduate students who participated in this study attend the same large Midwestern university. Although the sample of this study is

diverse with respect to the participants' gender, socioeconomic status, culture, religion, and political orientation, it may be beneficial to compare the patterns in perception and response exhibited by the undergraduate students in this study with undergraduate students attending different universities to see whether athletes' use of the humor appeal is effective in gaining the attention of undergraduate students across the board. Further, the age range of participants included in this study is limited to 18-30 year-olds. By excluding participants older than 30 years-old, it is possible that the study has missed further insights in its address of the stated research questions.

Future Directions

Future research conducted in this area should compare the patterns in perception and response exhibited by sports fans to athlete activism online versus athlete activism offline. Valuable insights are to be gained from an examination of the similarities and differences in fan perception and response to these different forms of athlete activism. Additionally, future scholarship should examine athletes' motivations for posting politically-charged content online and test the generalizability of the practical implications suggested in this study.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to answer questions regarding the ways in which sports fans perceive and respond to online displays of athlete activism. In addressing these questions, this study has developed an understanding for patterns in sports fans' perceptions and responses to politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes. As a means of gaining this understanding, this study engaged the social media

preferences and experiences of sports fans between the ages of 18 and 30. Although this study does not make a single universal suggestion ensuring positive response for athletes who post politically-charged content online, its findings suggest that athletes who post politically-charged content online should do so with their goals and audience in mind. Knowing their goals as well as their audience grants athletes the ability to frame their content accordingly, rendering them more likely to receive positive responses to the politically-charged content they post. Based on the findings of this study, athletes who frame politically-charged content as a narrative highlighting their lived experience and employing appeals to emotion and humor yield the most positive responses from otherwise uninterested or hostile fans.

Although the focus of this study is placed on individual athletes, its findings hold practical implications on the behavior of professional sports leagues and teams as well. Based on the findings of this study, it would be wise for league commissioners and team owners to proactively educate their players with respect to the patterns in sports fans' perceptions and responses to politically-charged content posted online by professional athletes. Although placing formal regulations on athletes' social media conduct may prove challenging, league and team standards should be set. Athletes should be encouraged to frame their politically-charged posts positively as often as possible and to highlight potential solutions to issues discussed in order to maintain positive or neutral fan response and avoid negative fan response. This study should serve as the first of many scholastic inquiries into the impact of athlete activism online.

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APPENDIX A. APPLICATION NARRATIVE FORM

Proposed Research Rationale

Celebrities often find themselves under a greater degree of scrutiny than the average individual (Summers & Morgan, 2008). The success and maintenance of careers that are built in the public eye involve the constant display of the working individual. As a result, the opinions of weak ties and the maintenance of para-social relationships are vital components impacting the longevity of careers of this nature. Professional athletes in particular are often looked to as role models and viewed as representative entities for the organizations and spatial locations they are associated with. The respective social identities of the individuals comprising the fan base of any one professional athlete are in part comprised by an allegiance to the athlete (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Due to the fans' lack of familiarity with the athlete's personal identity, idealizations are formed based on the athlete's publicized social identity as a means of filling in the gaps to form and maintain a para-social relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

In granting fans further access to athletes, social media expands the capacity for a mediated connection between athletes and their fans (Earnhardt & Haridakis, 2009). When an athlete is candid in his or her online self-presentation and posts content to social media aligning with the values held by his or her personal rather than social identity, the potential for a disruption among para-social relationships increases. This disruption would be characterized by a disparity between the nature of the content disclosed by the athlete and fans' expectations with regard to the athlete's disclosure. This may result in the fans' loss of interest in the athlete, which may hold negative implications on the athlete's career trajectory. Due to the enhanced speed of escalation online, disruptions of this nature are more impactful when the offense occurs online than they would be if the disclosure had been delivered in a face-to-face interaction space and exposed through a more traditional media setting, such as via televised interview (Colapinto & Benecchi, 2014). Intuitively, then, one may argue that athlete activism online yields a different set of responses from fans than do the offline activist efforts of professional athletes.

Alternatively, the reach of professional athletes in terms of their various followings, may prove beneficial to the social movements they support. Assessing the behavioral responses of social media users to politically charged content posted online by professional athletes in direct connection to the movements addressed in the posts would allow for a deeper understanding of the degree to which the platform provided by social media is effective in helping to galvanize users to participate in social movements offline.

The proposed study seeks to define the various interpretation and response patterns of social media users to politically charged content posted online by professional athletes. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of these patterns has the potential to ultimately empower athletes, organizations representing athletes, and campaign strategists for social movements to effectively deliver this variety of athlete disclosure online such that fan support for athletes, organizations representing athletes, and campaigns for social movements is not diminished in response to athletes' online disclosure.

Based on the reviewed literature, it is intuitive that athlete disclosure online may constitute a social identity threat in the event that the content of the disclosure undermines fans' values or the para-social relationships formed by fans. However, a gap in relevant research exists in studies centered around the impact of athlete activism online on fans' para-social relationships and degrees of identification with the athletes using social media to speak out. In order to better understand the various ways in which fans perceive and respond to athlete activism online, an examination of athletes' use of social media as a mechanism for the delivery of their disclosure with regard to taking a stance on politically charged issues and endorsing social movements is necessary.

This gap can be addressed by seeking answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do individuals perceive politically charged content posted by professional athletes on social media?

RQ2: How does politically charged content posted by professional athletes on social media influence individual users' perceptions of the athletes who have posted the content?

RQ3: How does politically charged content posted by professional athletes on social media influence individual users' perceptions of the issue being discussed?

RQ4: How do users' perceptions of politically charged content posted by professional athletes on social media, the athletes who have posted the content, and the issues being discussed come together to influence individual users' behaviors with regard to the issue being discussed?

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Specific Procedures To Be Followed

In this study, participants will respond to a series of interview questions about their view of athlete activism online. They will be shown select tweets that are political in nature and have been previously posted online by professional athletes. They will be asked to discuss their opinions with respect to the content of the tweets shown, the athletes who posted the tweets shown, and the social movements discussed by the tweets shown. They will also be

asked to discuss the degree to which they feel it is appropriate for athletes to publicly comment on events transpiring outside of the athletic realm.

A purposive and convenience sampling method of recruitment among individuals who consider themselves sport fans and follow professional athletes on one or more social media platforms will be used in order to speak with individuals who are easily accessible. Participants will be recruited through the investigator's professional network and from Purdue University's SONA system. All participants will be between 18 and 34 years old. Participants will not be recruited based on ethnicity or gender. Anyone who uses social media, considers him/herself to be a sport fan, and follows professional athletes on one or more social media platforms will be allowed to participate. Potential participants will be recruited via email. Up to 100 individuals between 18 and 34 years of age will be interviewed. Prior to beginning the interview, participants will be informed about the voluntary nature of their participation, that they may opt out of any part of the interview, and will be provided with an informed consent form (See Section M). The interviews will take place either over the phone or in person at a public place on campus, based on participants' convenience. Those who opt for a phone interview will be emailed the informed consent form prior to their interview. Interviews will last between 60-90 minutes. During the interview, participants will be informed that they will be asked a series of open-ended questions and that the interview will last approximately one hour. Sample questions include, "How do you feel about professional athletes using the platform they've been granted through athletic excellence to speak on issues unrelated to athletics?" "Once you have seen a politically charged post put out by a professional athlete, how does your opinion of the individual change?" "Once you have seen a politically charged post put out by a professional athlete, how does your opinion of the content discussed in the post change?" "To what degree would you say that athletes' utilization of the platform provided by social media helps to galvanize people to participate offline?" At the start of the interview, the investigator will read the informed consent form, which briefly explains the purpose of the study and informs the participants of their rights. After reading the script, in-person participants will be given the consent form and will be informed of the fact that the interview will be audio-recorded. Participants will have the right to decline being

recorded. All participation will be voluntary and participants may withdraw from participation at any time. Participant information will be kept confidential. No names will be recorded in transcripts or any other documentation. Participants may be identified by their voice on the audio-recording, but audio recording of the interviews will be secured in a locked file cabinet and destroyed after the project, but not earlier than five years from the completion of the project. A guide of open-ended questions will be used to conduct the interview. No deception will take place during the interview process.

This study seeks to define individuals' interpretation and response patterns to select stimuli. Therefore, the data collected in this study will consist of opinions, comments, and narratives shared during the interviews conducted via audio-recordings and transcriptions of said interviews. To analyze interview data, the researcher will use a grounded theory approach, which involves the constant comparison of data and the coding of data for themes and patterns. Additionally, the researcher will seek to protect the confidentiality of all study participants by never including participant names in the data, keeping data in locked and, where applicable, password protected files, and destroying the data 5 years after the study has been completed. The data collection will involve audio-recorded in-person and telephonic interviews.

Subjects To Be Included

Individuals who are 18-34 years old, consider themselves sport fans, and follow professional athletes on one or more social media platforms will be recruited for this study. Participants will be recruited from the professional network of the investigator and from Purdue University's SONA system. No other criteria will be used to recruit participants.

Anyone under the age of 18 will not be recruited for this study.

Special populations will not be recruited for this study.

The maximum number of 100 participants will be interviewed for this study. This will allow for a sufficient amount of data to be collected and will account for participants who

choose not to comment on particular questions pertaining to their views of athlete activism online.

Recruitment Of Subjects And Obtaining Informed Consent

Subjects will be recruited via purposive convenience sample. Individuals from the investigator's own professional network who consider themselves sport fans and follow professional athletes on one or more social media platforms will be invited via email to participate in an interview either over the phone or in person at a public location on campus. Additional participants will be recruited via Purdue University's School of Liberal Arts SONA system. Prior to beginning the interview, the investigator will explain that involvement is voluntary and that the participant may opt out of any part of the study. The participant will be told that their data will be collected, as well as informed of the minimal risk and the benefits of the study. Prior to participating in the study, participants will be provided with an informed consent form, detailing the study topic and procedures, and requesting their consent to collect and audio-record data. They will be informed that all data will be protected and kept secure. Once participants have read the form and consented to be included in the study, they will be invited to begin the study.

Procedures For Payment Of Subjects

No compensation will be offered for participation in the study to applicants recruited from the investigator's professional network. Subjects recruited through Purdue's SONA system will receive 1.5 credits for participation in the study.

Confidentiality

No names or other direct identifiers will be recorded or used in any way in this study or reports based on this study. Participants' online communications will be conducted using private, locked, and anonymous user accounts. Respondents voices will be recorded on audio-recordings, but audio files will be password protected.

Digital files will be stored and password protected on the investigator's password protected computer. All files will be deleted and destroyed within 5 years after the study has been completed.

Research records are limited to digital audio recordings of interviews and transcripts. All data will be destroyed 5 years after the study has been completed. Data will not be used for additional research purposes.

Potential Risks To Subjects

The risks created by this study are minimal and pose no greater risk than everyday interaction.

Because participants will be asked to participate in an interview which must be transcribed by the investigator for data analysis, participants' voices will be recorded. Digital-audio files will not be connected to participant names in any way, and all files (digital and print) will be secured in a locked file cabinet and password protected on the investigator's computer.

There are not alternative procedures or treatments that might be advantageous to the participants.

Breach of confidentiality is a risk related to the research. Although this risk is a possibility, safeguards are in place as listed in the confidentiality section above to prevent a breach from occurring.

This study presents minimal adverse effects to study participants, as it involves participants responding to interview questions and allows participants to opt out of any part of the interview. Participants will be informed that participation is voluntary, and that they may opt out of any or all sections of the study at any time, and for any reason, emotional or physical.

Benefits To Be Gained By The Individual And/Or Society

This study is designed to gain a comprehensive understanding of interpretation and response patterns of social media users to politically charged content posted online by professional athletes. The analysis produced by the study will empower athletes, organizations representing athletes, and campaign strategists for social movements to effectively deliver this variety of athlete disclosure online such that fan support for athletes, organizations representing athletes, and campaigns for social movements is not diminished in response to athletes' online disclosure.

Investigator's Evaluation Of The Risk-Benefit Ratio

The benefits exceed the risks. The risks created by this study are minimal and pose no greater risk than everyday interaction. Although there are no direct benefits to subjects, this study stands to benefit society at large by contributing to a growing understanding of the perceptions and response patterns of individual fans to professional athletes' online political commentary. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of these patterns has the potential to ultimately empower athletes, organizations representing athletes, and campaign strategists for social movements to effectively deliver this variety of athlete disclosure online such that fan support for athletes, organizations representing athletes, and campaigns for social movements is not diminished in response to athletes' online disclosure. Additionally, this understanding will provide insight with regard to the degree to which the platform provided by social media is effective in helping to galvanize users to participate in social movements offline.

Written Informed Consent Form

Informed consent form attached to this application.

Waiver Of Informed Consent Or Signed Consent

Request for a Waiver of Documented (signed) Consent for Telephonic Interviews:

- a. No, the research does not pose greater than minimal risk to subjects.
- b. Breach of confidentiality constitutes the principal risk to subjects.

- c. The signed consent form would be the only record linking the subject to the research.
- d. The research does not include any activities that would require signed consent in a non-research context.
- e. Subjects will be provided a written statement about the research. An information sheet will be provided containing all the elements of the consent form, but without the signature lines.

APPENDIX B. RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Athlete Activism Online: An Inquiry into the Subsequent Perceptions and Response

Patterns of Social Media Users

Brian G. Smith, Ph.D.

Department of Communication

Purdue University

Key Information

Please take time to review this information carefully. This is a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary which means that you may choose not to participate at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may ask questions to the researchers about the study whenever you would like. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this form, be sure you understand what you will do and any possible risks or benefits. The purpose of this study is to understand how social media users perceive and respond to political content online. The duration of the study will generally last approximately 1 hour to 90 minutes.

Additional explanations may be more detailed in the sections below.

What is the purpose of this study?

You are being asked to participate in this study so that we can understand how social media users perceive and respond to political content online. We would like to enroll 100 people in this study.

What will I do if I choose to be in this study?

You will participate in an in-person interview with the investigator. The subject of the interview will involve how you view politically charged content posted online by professional athletes. Interview questions will cover the following topics: athlete use of

social media to discuss concepts unrelated to athletics; athlete activism/advocacy online; the impact of online activism on offline behavior. This interview will take approximately 1 hour to 90 minutes. You may decline to answer any question and may opt out of the interview, if you so choose, at any time. You will have the option to have the interview audio recorded or not. This is a one-time interview.

How long will I be in the study?

The study will take approximately 1 hour to 90 minutes. You may decline to answer any question and may opt out of the interview, if you so choose, at any time. This is a one-time interview.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

All research carries risk. The standard for minimal risk is that which is found in everyday life. Breach of confidentiality is always a risk with data, but we will take precautions to minimize this risk as described in the confidentiality section. Your participation is voluntary and you can decline to answer specific questions or to end your participation at any time without penalty.

Will I be compensated?

If you are COM student, you will receive 1.5 credits for compensation.

Are there any potential benefits?

Though this study is not designed to benefit you directly, the findings from this study may help to shed light on the use of social media by athletes in an activist effort, possibly providing more attention to social media's effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, in activism, and possibly raising social media standards for athletes. Therefore, there may be some indirect benefit.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your participation in this project. I will keep all personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, I will keep all transcripts and recordings in a locked file cabinet. Digital files will be password protected on my computer. All information recorded in this study will remain confidential and will be destroyed after a five-year period after the completion of the study. Furthermore, your name will not be recorded in transcripts or in the final report. Confidentiality will be maintained within the legal limits. The project's research records may be reviewed by departments at Purdue University responsible for regulatory and research oversight.

Please check which of the following apply to your position:

☐ I accept to be audio-recorded and have the interviews transcribed. I acknowledge that this presents some risk to me, though the interviewer will keep my name and identity confidential.

☐ I decline to be audio-recorded.

☐ I am between 18 and 34 years of age.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or, if you agree to participate, you can withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Who can I contact if I have questions about the study?

If you have questions, comments or concerns about this research project, you can talk to one of the researchers. In such an instance, please contact Brian Smith, Ph.D., at 765-494-3321 or bgsmithphd@purdue.edu

To report anonymously via Purdue's Hotline see www.purdue.edu/hotline

If you have questions about your rights while taking part in the study or have concerns about the treatment of research participants, please call the Human Research Protection Program at (765) 494-5942, email (irb@purdue.edu), or write to:

Human Research Protection Program - Purdue University
Ernest C. Young Hall, Room 1032
155 S. Grant Street
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2114

Documentation of Informed Consent

I have had the opportunity to read this consent form and have the research study explained. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research study and my questions have been answered. I am prepared to participate in the research study described above. I will be offered a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

Participant's Signature

Participant's Name

Researcher's Signature

APPENDIX C. RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Athlete Activism Online: An Inquiry into the Subsequent Perceptions and Response

Patterns of Social Media Users

Brian G. Smith, Ph.D.

Department of Communication

Purdue University

Key Information

Please take time to review this information carefully. This is a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary which means that you may choose not to participate at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may ask questions to the researchers about the study whenever you would like. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this form, be sure you understand what you will do and any possible risks or benefits. The purpose of this study is to understand how social media users perceive and respond to political content online. The duration of the study will generally last approximately 1 hour to 90 minutes.

Additional explanations may be more detailed in the sections below.

What is the purpose of this study?

You are being asked to participate in this study so that we can understand how social media users perceive and respond to political content online. We would like to enroll 100 people in this study.

What will I do if I choose to be in this study?

You will participate in a telephonic interview with the investigator. The subject of the interview will involve how you view politically charged content posted online by professional athletes. Interview questions will cover the following topics: athlete use of

social media to discuss concepts unrelated to athletics; athlete activism/advocacy online; the impact of online activism on offline behavior. This interview will take approximately 1 hour to 90 minutes. You may decline to answer any question and may opt out of the interview, if you so choose, at any time. You will have the option to have the interview audio recorded or not. This is a one-time interview.

How long will I be in the study?

The study will take approximately 1 hour to 90 minutes. You may decline to answer any question and may opt out of the interview, if you so choose, at any time. This is a one-time interview.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

All research carries risk. The standard for minimal risk is that which is found in everyday life. Breach of confidentiality is always a risk with data, but we will take precautions to minimize this risk as described in the confidentiality section. Your participation is voluntary and you can decline to answer specific questions or to end your participation at any time without penalty.

Will I be compensated?

If you are a COM student, you will receive 1.5 credits.

Are there any potential benefits?

Though this study is not designed to benefit you directly, the findings from this study may help to shed light on the use of social media by athletes in an activist effort, possibly providing more attention to social media's effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, in activism, and possibly raising social media standards for athletes. Therefore, there may be some indirect benefit.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your participation in this project. I will keep all personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, I will keep all transcripts and recordings in a locked file cabinet. Digital files will be password protected on my computer. All information recorded in this study will remain confidential and will be destroyed after a five-year period after the completion of the study. Furthermore, your name will not be recorded in transcripts or in the final report. Confidentiality will be maintained within the legal limits. The project's research records may be reviewed by departments at Purdue University responsible for regulatory and research oversight.

Please verbally confirm which of the following apply to your position:

I accept to be audio-recorded and have the interviews transcribed. I acknowledge that this presents some risk to me, though the interviewer will keep my name and identity confidential.

I decline to be audio-recorded.

I am between 18 and 34 years of age.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or, if you agree to participate, you can withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Who can I contact if I have questions about the study?

If you have questions, comments or concerns about this research project, you can talk to one of the researchers. In such an instance, please contact Brian Smith, Ph.D., at 765-494-3321 or bgsmithphd@purdue.edu. To report anonymously via Purdue's Hotline see www.purdue.edu/hotline.

If you have questions about your rights while taking part in the study or have concerns about the treatment of research participants, please call the Human Research Protection Program at (765) 494-5942, email (irb@purdue.edu), or write to:

Human Research Protection Program - Purdue University
Ernest C. Young Hall, Room 1032
155 S. Grant Street
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2114

APPENDIX D. SUBJECT RECRUITMENT EMAIL SCRIPT

Athlete Activism Online: An Inquiry into the Subsequent Perceptions and Response

Patterns of Social Media Users

Brian G. Smith, Ph.D.

Department of Communication

Purdue University

Dear [Potential Participant Name],

I am currently conducting a study which seeks to contribute to a growing understanding of how social media users perceive and respond to political content posted by professional athletes online. I wanted to reach out to invite you to participate in the study.

If you choose to participate in the study, I will conduct a 60-90 minute interview with you either in person or over the telephone. During the course of the interview, you may decline to answer any question I ask and will have the opportunity to opt out of the interview, if you so choose, at any time.

To be eligible for participation in the study, you must be between 18 and 34 years old, consider yourself a sport fan, and follow professional athletes on one or more social media platforms. There is no compensation for participation in this study.

If you have any questions about participation in the study, feel free to reach out to me via email or telephone. The principal investigator of the study is Dr. Brian Smith. He can be reached at bgsmithphd@purdue.edu

I appreciate your time and consideration. Have a wonderful day!

Warm Regards,

Lilly

APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Research Questions

RQ1: How do 18-30 year olds perceive politically-charged content posted by professional athletes on social media?

RQ2: How do 18-30 year olds respond to politically-charged content posted by professional athletes on social media?

Interview Questions

General Social Media Use

1. How often do you use social media?
2. What is your favorite social media platform?
3. How do you use this platform?
 - a. How often do you check your timeline?
 - b. How do you engage with other people's posts?
4. How do you decide which professional athletes to follow on this platform?
 - a. Are there any red flags that typically steer you away from following a particular athlete?
5. Whose posts would you say you pay the most attention to?
6. What kinds of things do these particular athletes tend to post about?
 - a. Do they post about things unrelated to their sport?
 - b. Do they ever post about politics or issues of social justice?
7. Are you typically able to identify with the content of their posts?
8. Generally, how often do these athletes post?

- a. About their sport?
 - b. About things unrelated to their sport?
9. How interactive are you with the profiles of these athletes?
10. Have you ever unfollowed a professional athlete on this platform?
- a. How did you arrive at the decision to do this?
 - b. Did this individual ever post about politics or issues of social justice?
 - c. Were you able to identify with the position s/he took?

Attitude Toward Politically-Charged Posts on Social Media

11. When you see a politically-charged post put out by a professional athlete, what do you do?
- a. Keep scrolling?
 - b. Retweet it?
 - c. Reply to it?
 - d. Like/Favorite it?
12. Do you interact with these kinds of posts differently depending on whether or not you agree with the stance the athlete has taken?
- a. What would generally lead you to agree with a particular stance taken by an athlete?
13. How do you feel about professional athletes using the platform they've been granted through athletic excellence to speak on issues unrelated to athletics?
14. Do you feel that a professional athlete has the authority to publicly advocate for a particular political stance?
- a. Why or why not?

- b. Does your answer vary depending on the athlete?
 - i. Why or why not?
- 15. What value do you place on the opinion of a professional athlete when it comes to issues related to social justice?
 - a. Do you view athletes as advocates for the underrepresented?
 - i. Why or why not?
- 16. Once you have seen a politically-charged post put out by a professional athlete, how does your opinion of the individual change?
 - a. Do you start to like him/her more, or less, than you had before?
 - i. Does this sentiment match up with whether you agree or disagree with the position s/he has taken?
 - b. Do you start to pay more, or less, attention to him/her than you had before?
 - i. Does this sentiment match up with whether you agree or disagree with the position s/he has taken?



<https://twitter.com/KingJames/status/964705778199244800>



<https://twitter.com/uninterrupted/status/964199581595533314>

- c. How do you feel about LeBron James after looking at the above tweets, for example?
- i. Do you like him more, or less, than you had before? Why?
 - ii. Will you start to pay more, or less, attention to him than you had before? Why?



https://twitter.com/RIP_JEP/status/999621687036514304

- d. What do you think of this tweet posted by Joshua Perry?
 - i. Do you like him more, or less, than you had before?
 - ii. Will you start to pay more, or less, attention to him than you had before?

17. Once you have seen a politically-charged post put out by a professional athlete, how does your opinion of the content discussed in the post change?

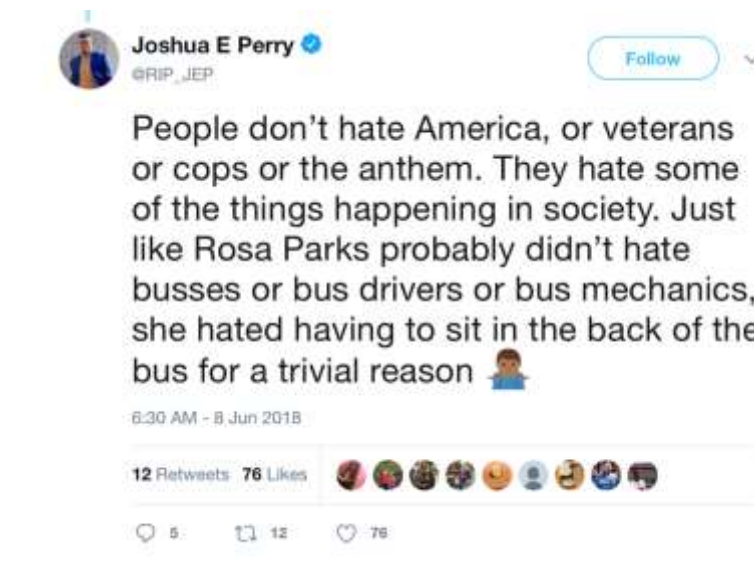


<https://twitter.com/Kaepernick7/status/994355781267943424>

- a. Looking at this tweet posted by Colin Kaepernick, for example, how is your perception of the take a knee movement at all influenced by the content of Kaepernick's tweet?
 - i. Do you identify any more, or less, with the movement after being exposed to this post than you had before seeing it?
 - ii. What is the take a knee movement?
 - 1. What is your stance on the take a knee movement?



https://twitter.com/RIP_JEP/status/1005079084433575937



https://twitter.com/RIP_JEP/status/1005079552870232064

- b. Looking at these tweets posted by Joshua Perry, how is your perception of the take a knee movement reinforced or altered?

Perception of Impact of Athlete Activism Online

18. What do you think of athletes getting involved in activism?
 - a. Do you think it is appropriate for professional athletes to publicly comment on politically-charged issues?
 - i. Why or why not?
 - b. Why do you think professional athletes use their public platform to discuss these issues?
19. How much of an impact do you feel a strong commitment to activism has on a player's athletic career?
 - a. Do you feel that this is fair?
 - i. Why or why not?
20. Do you think a player's athletic value can increase or decrease based on his/her involvement in activism?
 - a. How does this shift occur?
 - b. Do you feel that this is fair?
21. How much of an impact do you feel athlete activism online has on the movement the athlete supports?
22. What do you think of Colin Kaepernick?
23. Do you follow Colin Kaepernick on Twitter?
 - a. Did you before the TakeAKnee Movement gained traction?
 - b. Have you unfollowed him?
 - c. What do you think of his Tweets?
24. How do you feel about the way Colin Kaepernick's NFL career ended?

- a. Was it fair?
- b. Do you agree with how he handled himself?
- c. Do you agree with how the NFL handled him?

25. What do you think of the TakeAKnee Movement?

- a. What do you think its purpose is?
- b. Do you identify with its purpose?
- c. Do you think it is an important issue?
- d. Do you think the national anthem is the right time to protest police brutality?
- e. Do you find kneeling during the national anthem to be disrespectful to the American military?
- f. What do you think of the athletes participating in the movement?

26. If you were to design the ideal policy regarding what professional athletes can, or cannot, post about what would this policy look like?

- a. Do you think there should be some sort of universal policy of this nature in place?

27. To what degree would you say that athletes' utilization of the platform provided by social media helps to galvanize people to participate offline?

- a. Have you participated in any of the social movements you've seen athletes discuss online?
 - i. How so?
 - ii. How active were you before being exposed to athlete posts?
 - iii. How has your level of activity changed since seeing the posts?

28. How useful is social media as a tool for social movements?

29. How much does social media ultimately help or harm the individuals using it to take a stance?

Anything else?

APPENDIX F. LIST OF CODES

Fan Perception (RQ1)

Positive	Negative
Personal Relevance	Value Threat
Identification with the Athlete	Disruption of Escape
Identification with the Social Movement	Lack of Education
Value	Athlete First
Responsibility	
Freedom of Speech	
Honor	

Fan Response (RQ2)

Positive	Negative
Online Engagement with the Athlete	Disengagement from the Athlete Online
Online Engagement with the Social Movement	Disengagement from the Athlete Offline
Offline Engagement with the Social Movement	Disengagement from the Sport Altogether
Online Support for the Athlete	
Offline Support for the Athlete	
Online Support for the Social Movement	
Offline Support for the Social Movement	