

More Than an Athlete

by

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Abstract

Background: Social movements have been a prominent part of American history for decades. One modern example of how intertwined social movements are with our daily lives is sports, more specifically professional sports. Professional athletes have found their voices and used their platforms to stand up for what they believe in.

Objective: The goal of this study is to research and analyze how sports and social movements have been connected over time.

Design and Method: The research for this study is based on articles, other research papers, and books written on the subject matter. The research questions are as follows: *What criticisms do Professional athletes face after speaking on social injustice? How are the moral stances of the brands the Professional athletes are associated with influenced by the athletes? Can social media both strengthen and weaken a movement that started offline?*

Results: The results of this study show that sports and social movements have been interconnected for decades and that athletes will continue to use their growing platforms to stand up for what they believe in. Many fans and media members have access to criticize these professional athletes freely on social media. Many criticisms contain bias and or hurtful language.

Conclusions: Media members and fans should be aware of the implications their negative comments may have and the possible negative effects they could impose on the mental health of the athletes. Athletes are people too and should be treated as such.

Keywords and Phrases: Social media, Pre-Social media, social movements, social justice.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“We will definitely not shut up and dribble. ...I mean too much to society. I mean too much to the youth, I mean too much to so many kids that feel like they don’t have a way out and they need someone to help lead them out of the situation they’re in.” – LeBron James.

In our most prominent media era as a society, athletes have found various ways to make their voices heard. Sports and social movements have become interconnected. Though this is not a new phenomenon, athletes now have more power than ever in the messages they choose to share with the media and their fans. In the 1960s, after Muhammed Ali won an Olympic gold medal. Soon after, Ali said, *“In my own life, there were places I couldn’t go, places I couldn’t eat. I won a gold medal representing the United States at the Olympic Games, and when I came home to Louisville, I still got treated like an-----.”* Black Lives Matter might not have been around in the ‘60s, but social movements certainly were. According to TheUndefeated.com, some prominent social movements in African American history are the civil rights movement, Congress of Racial Equality, and the Black Panthers. Some fans resent athletes for bringing social and political matters into sports, and others applaud them for it (Bembry, 2018). Some athletes realize the power and platform they have, and they use it to shine a light on issues they deem relevant to them.

Not only do athletes influence their fans, but they have the ability to influence the people they work for. The way NBA players have influenced team owners, and the commissioner of the league to listen to their plights have been no small feat. Nike supported Kaepernick and his choice to silently protest, which cost him his job, was no small achievement. Many athletes across sports are learning to channel their voice and learn to express their thoughts; athletes are learning that they have a form of power through their voices, and they are trying to navigate a way to use their voice for their beliefs.

Athletes today face a whole new aspect of criticism that athletes in a pre-social media era did not have to face. Sure, athletes living in a pre-social media had media in the form of tv or newspapers and magazines, but athletes today have that too, as well as, social media platforms. Athletes today are dealing with everything the athletes of the past dealt with, plus a little bit more. Criticisms affect people, we well as simply having thousands of people avidly disagree with something you might have felt strongly about. Sports and social movements have been around for decades, and so have the reactions of the fans and their peers. LeBron James told the New York Times,

I am inspired by Brown, Ali, Russell, Abdul-Jabbar, and the like. - Guys who stood when it was way worse than it is today. Hopefully, someday down the line, people will recognize me not only for the way I approached the game of basketball but the way I approached life as an African American man (Bunn, 2020).

Athletes are aware of both the past and current social climates and movements. Some athletes not only view their platform as an opportunity but also the act of standing up for what they believe in as their duty. LeBron stated in an interview with TheUndeatead.com that he believes that “athletes have power beyond their sports” (Bembry, 2018, np). Though LeBron is a current outspoken leader in sports, he is not the only athlete to use his voice in hopes for change.

This research paper focuses on the dynamic of social movements and sports, as well as the effect of online criticisms from fans and media members after having spoken up for the cause of a movement. The history of racism and sports will be analyzed, as well as key figures in sports who chose to speak up for what they believed in. Sports, social matters, and social movements have always been interconnected and seem as if they will always continue to be as long as people face forms of inequality or stereotypical treatment. The research questions that this research paper is based on are as follows:

RQ1: *What criticisms do Professional athletes face after speaking on social injustice?*

RQ2:*How are the moral stances of the brands the Professional athletes are associated with influenced by the athletes?*

RQ3:*Can social media both strengthen and weaken a movement that started offline?*

Racism and inequality have been significant problems in America for centuries; this is a problem that America must face as a whole, head-on; otherwise, nothing will change. Racism in America should continue to be studied, as well as, racism in specific groups and or organizations. America must admit that there is a problem and that there are inequalities as well as forms of unfair treatment to begin to fix the problem. As a former athlete and an African American woman, this topic is very important to me, and I believe that it should be important to every other American, regardless of their race and gender.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In our most popular and important era of media as a society, athletes have used their platforms and large followings as a way to make their voices heard. Sports and social movements have been interconnected for decades, and seem as if they will continue to be tethered to one another.

The topic of social movements in professional sports is a topic that has been around for some time and does not seem to be going anywhere anytime soon. This topic highlights a vast array of biases and disparities in regards to how different athletes are treated differently after and because they chose to take a stand on their platform. There are three questions I have chosen to focus on, in regards to this topic:

RQ1:*What criticisms do Professional athletes face after speaking on social injustice?*

RQ2:*How are the moral stances of the brands the Professional athletes are associated with influenced by the athletes?*

RQ3:*Can social media both strengthen and weaken a movement that started offline?*

Bias by the Media

Some people who are opposed to mixing social and political matters with entertainment might question the motives and longevity of the movement. Those who are in opposition tend to not see these celebrities or athletes as real people, just as a mere form of accessible entertainment. Athletes are more than just a ball and a net or goal; they are real people who deal with real-life problems. Awareness is the first step to creating change. You cannot begin to fix a problem until you acknowledge that there is a problem that needs tending to. There are people in positions of power who try to censor ideologies or messages they do not agree with. A prime example of a blatant attempt at censorship would be this quote from Laura Ingraham: *“Keep the political commentary to yourself, or as someone once said... shut up and dribble.”* (Duarte, 2020). Ingraham said this statement towards LeBron James and Kevin Durant, two popular superstars in the NBA, who both had spoken out against social injustice in the past. (Duarte, 2020) The same newscaster, Laura Ingraham, had a completely different take on whether or not Drew Brees is allowed to share his political opinions and ideas (Duarte, 2020). Drew Brees is a well-known white, star-quarterback in the NFL. Laura stated the following in regards to quarterback Drew Brees: *“He’s allowed to have his view about what kneeling and the flag means to him. I mean he’s a person, he has some worth, I would imagine. This is beyond football.”* (Duarte, 2020). There is a clear disparity between the two statements made by Ingraham. Why?

Backlash from Social Media and Fans

Not only do athletes and celebrities face backlash from the media and news reporters, but they also receive it from their “fans.” Professional athletes are susceptible to everything a regular person is. When there are hundreds of thousands of fans online saying slanderous things because you stood up for what you believe in, it could get to you. The vile comments made online are a

form of cyberbullying. Like everything in life, every action has a reaction. When an athlete takes a stance on an issue or supports a movement with various stances, there are opportunities for movements that oppose the athletes' stance to form or strengthen. A blatant example would be the Black Lives Matter movement forming, and the All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter movements forming as a direct response.

Organizations for the Cause

It may be hard to figure out what an organizations' stance truly means or if the organization is genuine. This begs the question of what other ulterior motives may be present. A perfect example would be The Washington Football Team and their recent name change. The NFL and the specific team organization, formerly known as the "Redskins," knew the implications and repercussions of having a name of that origin, but did not address the issue until the year 2020. This particular team has been around since 1932. The NFL and the Redskins organization did not feel that there needed to be a change until almost a century later. Why did they change the name now, in 2020, and not in 2005 or 1995 or earlier? Another example would be the brand of Aunt Jemima. As of 2020, Aunt Jemima's logo was said to be inspired by an African American slave stereotype. The logo is over 130 years old and has faced criticism in the past for similar reasoning. The Aunt Jemima brand only made minor changes to the logo, to evade backlash, but did not feel that the whole logo was a problem. The brand decided that it was time to change the logo, because of its origin, in the year 2020. Over a century passed without the brand removing the image. Why did it take so long, why now?

Chapter 3: Method

The design of this study was intended to be both qualitative and explicative. I investigated the connection between sports and social movements between the time period of

when professional sports first became popular to current modern times. The connection between sports and social movements has been around for decades and doesn't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon. This research focuses on how long social movements regarding race have been interconnected with sports, some of the most prominent and popular speakers, and the impact of said speakers' messages on themselves, their peers, the media, and their fans. This study is based on the past as well as the present. The structure of my research is designed and intended to create a clear and concise review of recent and or past scholarly articles and as well books on the topic of social movements in regards to race and sports. Scholarly peer-reviewed articles, transcribed interviews, transcribed quotes and or statements, and renowned books are the immediate sources of my information. The majority of the research was found and accessed through the Purchase College library of databases. The direct quotes and transcriptions were found on reputable news websites. I explored the following research questions:

RQ1:*What criticisms do Professional athletes face after speaking on social injustice?*

RQ2:*How are the moral stances of the brands the Professional athletes are associated with influenced by the athletes?*

RQ3:*Can social media both strengthen and weaken a movement that started offline?*

To help with my search for information, I used specific terms. The terms I searched included: *social justice and sports, social movements and sports, sports and activism, shut up and dribble, more than an athlete, racism and sports, and celebrities and social movements.*

After finding the articles, videos, and books of my choice, I then categorized them into broadly chronological order. Some of these events or statements overlapped each other time-wise, as well as some of the events or stances are still currently going to this current day.

As both a student and a researcher, I chose this topic because I felt that I am personally affected by what the athletes were taking a stand for. The topic of social movements and sports

intrigued me, as a fan of sports and as an African American woman. Athletes take on the role of being a public figure when they step into the spotlight, they might not want or choose that role, but it's innately given to them. Children look up to them as role models, and sometimes even their older fans look to them for guidance or their opinions. The media and fans will always be there; whether it be negative or positive, criticism will always find its way to these popular athletes. Athletes are people too. Sometimes we forget that they have beliefs, feelings, and thoughts. Their purpose is not just for entertainment; they are people too.

I plan to use this research to provide an understanding of how sports and social movements are and always have been interconnected.

Chapter 4: Results

RQ1: *What criticisms do Professional athletes face after speaking on social injustice?*

Athletes receive criticism from people of all statures, professions, and platforms. Athletes are championed for their professionalism and their support of certain stances or figures. When they oppose the stance of some of their critics, they receive backlash and are told “politics have no place in sports.” A blatant example of how these criticisms are only applied to certain athletes who support certain people and or stances would be how UFC fighter Colby Covington displayed and voiced his support for president trump both pre- and post-fight to the media. He was simply seen as a patriot who loved his country, it was not deemed political. According to theguardian.com, Covington mentioned the names of other famous athletes like LeBron James who is known for his opposing views and support of Black Lives Matter. Covington stated in a post-fight interview: *“I’m sick of these woke athletes, and these spineless cowards like LeBron James.”* (*“UFC’s Colby Covington takes call from Trump, rips ‘coward’ LeBron after TKO”*, 2020). Guardian Sports also wrote that Covington also spoke about the upcoming presidential

election, Covington stated *“If you thought that was a beating, wait until November 3rd when Donald Trump gets his hands on Sleepy Joe. That’s going to be a landslide.”* (*“UFC’s Colby Covington takes call from Trump, rips ‘coward’ LeBron after TKO”*, 2020). That seems like a very political thing to say, to say the least. Covington did not receive widespread backlash or criticisms from the news or media.

Laura Ingram’s infamous *“shut up and dribble”* quote was not the first dismissive statement from a tv personality towards African American athletes and their beliefs (Duarte, 2020). Another athlete who has received a lot of backlash for their peaceful protest is Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick became a mogul by not being afraid to speak up for what he believes in. According to usatoday.com, Kaepernick stated:

“I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.” (Curtis, et al. 2020).

“This is not something that I am going to run by anybody,” he said. “I am not looking for approval. I have to stand up for people that are oppressed. ... If they take football away, my endorsements from me, I know that I stood up for what is right.” (Curtis, et al. 2020).

Even though there are direct quotes from Kaepernick himself, people still misconstrue his reasoning for choosing to kneel as his form of exhibiting his right to a peaceful protest.

According to usatoday.com, President Trump’s reaction to Kaepernick’s decision to kneel was as follows: *“Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when someone disrespects our flag to say, ‘get that son of a (expletive) off the field right now’? Out. He’s fired.”* (Curtis, et al., 2020). According to Sports Illustrated Drew Brees, an NFL star quarterback also weighed in on the kneeling topic. Drew stated he *“would never agree with anybody disrespecting the flag of the United States of America”* (Zaldivar, 2020, para.8). Many people, like President Trump and NFL star, Drew Brees, do not take the time to understand what the act of kneeling represents, instead

people deem the notion as un-American and disrespectful. According to Sports Illustrated, Brees later released a statement after receiving backlash from NFL fans, his statement reads:

To Donald Trump, through my ongoing conversations with friends, teammates, and leaders in the black community, I realize this is not an issue about the American flag. It has never been. We can no longer use the flag to turn people away or distract them from the real issues that face our black communities" (Zaldivar, 2020, para. 8).

Apologies are meaningful, but Kaepernick was still essentially banished from the NFL after his protests gained more notoriety amongst the league and media. According to usatoday.com, John Lynch, the general manager of the 49ers confirmed that had Colin Kaepernick not opted out of his contract on his own that Lynch would have cut him from the team (Curtis, et al., 2020). Kaepernick had very little choice, either way, he was going to be out of a job. The NFL even removed Kaepernick from their game, as well as removed his name off of a song from their soundtrack of Madden 18 (Diaz, 2018). There's nothing Brees or TV reporters can say to fix the way Kaepernick was treated. The NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell, even released a statement, but the statement did not bring Kaepernick's job back, nor did it bring about the major change that is needed from society. Goodell stated,

We, the National Football League, condemn racism and the systematic oppression of black people... We, the National Football League, admit we were wrong for not listening to NFL players earlier and encourage all to speak out and peacefully protest (Zaldivar, 2020).

This could truly be a heartfelt statement, by the NFL's commissioner, but why did it take so long to be said? Kaepernick took his stance and was forced out of the NFL in the spring of 2017 (Curtis, et al., 2020). Goodell took three years to make a statement to admit the NFL was wrong... Why? The criticisms and stigmas following Kaepernick's decision to take a stand against police brutality inevitably cost him his job and Kaepernick cannot get that time back.

The backlash from speaking up for what you believe in is not just a modern problem, athletes and celebrities of the past dealt with this issue too. Renowned boxer Muhammad Ali was not foreign to backlash. Ali was known on several occasions to speak his mind, no matter how blunt his words may have seemed. Muhammad Ali refused to enlist in the US Army in 1967 in objection to Vietnam, famously saying, “*No Vietcong ever called [him] nigger.*” (Towler, Crawford and Bennett, 2019, p. 111). Other athletes who also faced backlash for standing up for black people in America were John Carlos and Tommie Smith, Olympic medal winners at the 1968 summer Olympics in Mexico (Towler, Crawford and Bennett, 2019.p 111). The phenomenon of standing up for what you believe in and being chastised for it has gone on for decades. Muhammed Ali was unable to box from 1967 to 1970 because no state would give him a license following his refusal to enlist in the army and John Carlos and Tommie Smith were stripped of their gold medals shortly after the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico (Towler, Crawford and Bennett, 2019, p. 115). The implications that the backlash for participating in activism cause for black professional athletes could and has threatened their livelihood, both in the past decades and during modern times.

RQ2: *How are the moral stances of the brands the Professional athletes are associated with influenced by the athletes?*

Brands like Nike, Ben & Jerry’s, Lego, NBA, NFL, and many others have chosen to support calls for social justice (Mainwaring, 2020). Nike faced an extensive amount of backlash via social media for continuously supporting Colin Kaepernick and his stance against police brutality. Nike released an ad that was narrated by Kaepernick as well as released a shoe named “True to 7” that was a collaboration with Kaepernick and Nike (Setty, 2019, para. 1). Nike released a short film titled “For Once, Don’t Do It.” which brought attention to people choosing

to be silent in the face of injustice and racism Paragraph 5, (Setty, 2019). Nike also released a statement on its news website on August 27th, 2020. The statement reads: *“Nike stands in support of NBA and WNBA players and athletes across the sports community in their response to the senseless shooting of Jacob Blake. We remain committed to addressing the issue of systemic racism experienced by the Black community.”* (Setty, 2019, para 1). Nike, Jordan, and Converse also made a four-year \$40 million commitment to invest in and support organizations focused on social justice, education, and economic empowerment to address racial inequality, according to news.nike.com (para. 7). Many brands are taking steps to back up their words of support with action. Other brands seem to only make changes when the spotlight turns to them followed by a flood of criticisms.

As stated previously in Chapter 3: Methods, brands like Aunt Jemima or the NFL team that was formerly known as the redskins, only seem to make changes when they are called upon, as opposed to making changes they see as necessary. These brands could truly have a change of heart and see their actions or logos as inappropriate and wrong, or they could simply make the changes to keep from losing money or tarnishing their businesses’ reputation. Timing is important in regards to trying to figure out a brand’s reasoning, or if they have ulterior motives other than the ones they choose to display as their reasoning.

RQ3: *Can social media both strengthen and weaken a movement that started offline?*

Social media can help accelerate a movement’s momentum, but it can also cause a movement’s image. Social media can also create movements. Some movements started as a simple hashtag on Twitter and flourished into something much more powerful as time went on (Freelon, McIlwain and Clark, 2016). Some movements form in response to other movements. an example of this would be Blue Lives Matter and All Lives Matter forming in response to

Black Lives Matter, there would be no Blue or All Lives matter without the Black Lives Matter movement happening first (Freelon, McIlwain and Clark, 2016). Social media has become a news source, all of the news channels, websites, and newspapers can be found on social media. When live protests, riots, or speeches happen, they can most likely be found and streamed or viewed via social media. Social media can both strengthen and weak a movement due to their presence online.

Hashtags play a tremendous role in helping a movement trend online. Some of the popular hashtags from the past from Twitter are #BlackLivesMatter, #BLM, #AllLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter, #MyKidsMatter, #NoJusticeNoPeace, #WeStandWithYou, and many more (Leonard, George and Davis, 2017). Social media can be used as a tool to help mobilize and encourage people to participate in a social movement (Freelon, McIlwain and Clark, 2016). The accessibility of the internet has made it much easier to find and dissect information. This is true in regards to the presence and events a social movement may plan or have online. Organization and communication seem to be the key conditions for the formation of social movements found in social networks and the media (Rohr Lopes, 2014). Social media provides massive networks that connect people around the country or even around the world, but it also allows people to easily share their opinions to an audience (Rohr Lopes, 2014). Social media has both aided popular athletes and social movements. Social media provides people with the ability to share information as well as the ability to create or respond to statement, ideas, or issues. Social media will continue to be a major tool in our society.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study aimed to analyze the relationship between sports and social movements and the effects the media and fans can have on professional athletes. Athletes have the opportunity to

have the biggest platforms for their professions in sports history. Social media has reached heights that only seemed imaginable, and now it can be used against the professional athletes who choose to speak out. Social media presence can cause a large impact; having a message that can spread quicker and further than ever. Social justice and social movements are a prominent part of American society in today's world, the messages of these movements must be heard regardless of the platform they may be delivered on.

Athletes face backlash from every angle imaginable. Whether the backlash is from the media, the fans, their peers and teammates, or the league's owners it can have a large impact. Most backlash seemed to have come from the media and the fans from the research conducted, though there are instances where the backlash came from one of the other listed sources. People, both on social media and regular media, must realize that these professional athletes are people too, with feelings, goals, hopes, and things that trouble them too. People should be able to have respectful dialogue and be open to listening to the opposing side, too often people feel defensive and want to silence anyone who opposes their argument and or stance. Disrespectfully shunning someone's statement simply because you may not agree with it is not going to help us move forward as a society.

In 2018, LeBron James spoke about the relationship between athletes and companies during an interview with TheUndefeated.com. Here's what James said:

"I think by athletes being able to use their voice for the greater good has given a lot of these companies a notion of "you know we should listen to what these athletes have to say." – "The athletes have a voice and their voice carries more than just dribbling a basketball or swinging a racket. I think these athletes have so much more power than their respective sport and what we see them in, their uniform. Because we are educated, and we do have feelings, and we do have passion about things that go on, and we have opinions." - Video on web page.

James has been a very vocal professional athlete who has received criticism on multiple occasions for various things, which include both his career and his choice to stand up for what he believes in (Bembry, 2018).

What the Future Holds – Plans for Society

Individuals of all professions should be encouraged to stand up for what they believe in, respectfully. Athletes should not have to fear whether or not they will lose their job if they choose to stand up for what is right. Media members on sports channels and in organizations like ESPN, NBA TV, Sports Center, Bleacher Report, CNN, and other news channels should be held responsible when they display clear bias and prejudice towards these athletes. Reprimanding the cruel and biased backlash from media members would encourage more athletes to speak up and speak out. The fans cannot necessarily be controlled, in regards to cruel or disrespectful comments, but media members can and should be held to a higher standard. There should be more research on how the media covers professional athletes who choose to speak out about social justice and how the media covers athletes who are patriotic and political. The end goal should be that the media respects and treats every athlete the same. Athletes should not be demeaned simply because the media member does not agree with them or align with their stances. I believe that if the media members treat athletes with respect and encourage them, respectful behavior will trickle down to the fans.

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