When Athletes don’t “Stick to Sports”: The Relationship between Athlete Activism and Sport Consumer Behavior

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A historical perspective provides a number of memorable examples of athletes steeped in political activism, such as Muhammad Ali, Arthur Ashe, and Tommie Smith (Gill, 2016). Recently, there has been a strong reemergence of the role of athlete as activist. Players within the NFL, WNBA, NBA, MLB, and NHL have all protested racial injustice and police brutality in some form over the last year. Athletes are today “politically active in a way not seen in decades” (Zaru, 2017, para. 2). This rise in athletes making political statements has received varying reactions in the popular press (Creech, 2017), but within the academic literature, the investigation of how athlete activism affects sport consumer behavior is a relatively unexplored area. A few studies have shown evidence of fans viewing athlete activism in a largely negative light (Giardina & Newman, 2011; Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016) or with mixed regard (Gill, 2016), but no experimental testing was performed. Cunningham and Regan (2012) used racial identity as a variable to evaluate political activism and endorser-product fit, but did not examine consumer attitudes and consumption behaviors. Darnell (2013) noted that “consideration also needs to be given to the barriers or consequences athletes face if their actions slide towards the more politically radical” (p. 4).

Given that sport and politics involve identification with a certain group and its ideals, social identity theory is a relevant framework for this topic. Social identity theory is rooted in the concept of group membership, the value one places in said affiliation, and its consequential corresponding behaviors (Tajfel, 1979). Naturally, individuals categorize themselves with social groups and behave as a product of such affiliation (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It is through these classifications that individuals tend to define themselves (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). From a sport or political perspective, individuals may characterize themselves as a fan of a team or member of a political party. Each stakeholder in said unit (e.g., player or political representative) would then be considered a part of one's "in-group" by association. To understand the role that the interplay between these two identifications may have with respect to attitudes and behaviors, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What effect does the direction of an athlete’s political activist message (e.g., support or criticism) have on sport consumers' 1) identification to a team; 2) attitude toward the athlete and team; and 3) intended consumption behaviors related to the athlete and team?
RQ2: What effect does the congruency or dissonance between sport consumers’ political views and an athlete’s political activist message have on consumers’ 1) identification to a team; 2) attitude toward the athlete and team; and 3) intended consumption behaviors related to the athlete and team?

Participants (N = 453) were recruited through Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk (mTurk). This allowed for diversity of participants, including fans of different teams and varying identification levels. The sample was predominately male (60.5%) and White (64%), with a mean age of 33.8. Participants appeared to demonstrate a moderate degree of both identification to their favorite sport team (M = 3.7 out of 5) and to a president that they liked (M = 3.2 out of 5) or lack of identification to a president that they disliked (M = 2.9 out of 5).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. All participants answered questions on team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), attitudes (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008) and consumption behaviors (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002) related to their favorite sport team and an athlete they like on that team. They were also asked a series of questions to measure their level of political identification (Green, 1999) related to a president whom they have either liked or disliked, depending on the condition. A scenario followed, asking participants to imagine that the athlete they liked on their favorite team made critical or supporting comments, depending on the condition,
about that president. Participants were told that the athlete had been politically vocal through traditional and social media, and they read an excerpt that the player wrote as an op-ed piece, expressing either support or criticism toward that president. Thus, the four conditions to which participants were randomly assigned were as follows: 1) Participant supports president; message from athlete supports president; 2) Participant supports president; message from athlete criticizes president; 3) Participant does NOT support president; message from athlete supports president; and 4) Participant does NOT support president; message from athlete criticizes president. Participants then took a post-test relating to the same variables as the pre-test. Paired samples t-tests and factorial ANOVA were used to analyze the data.

Results suggest that activist messages from athletes elicit varied reactions from sport consumers. For example, when an athletes’ political views aligned with participants’ political views AND the athlete’s message was supportive of the president (Condition 1), there was an increase in the participants’ level of intended consumption behaviors with respect to both the athlete, \( t(124) = -3.17, p = .002 \), and the team, \( t(126) = -2.18, p = .031 \). However, when participant and athlete views aligned, but the athlete’s message was critical of the president (Condition 4), there was a significant increase in participants’ team identification following the message, \( t(103) = -2.09, p = .040 \), and a corresponding decrease in participants’ attitude toward the athlete, \( t(102) = 2.25, p = .026 \). When fans’ and athletes’ views of the president were at odds with one another, (Conditions 2 and 3), there were significant decreases in participants’ attitudes, respectively, \( t(98) = 6.02, p < .01 \), and \( t(118) = 6.35, p < .01 \), and intended consumption behaviors towards the athlete, respectively, \( t(98) = 3.19, p = .002 \), and \( t(117) = 4.54, p < .01 \). In Condition 2, in which the athlete criticized a president whom the fan supported, there was also a significant decrease in attitudes, \( t(99) = 3.12, p = .002 \), and intended consumption behaviors with respect to the team, \( t(96) = 2.04, p = .044 \). A GLM test also found that identification to the president did not have a significant relationship with any of the dependent variables. This demonstrated the salience of the athlete's message on consumer attitudes and behaviors.

These results, and others that will be shared in the presentation, suggest that athlete activism may indeed cause a clash of social identities for sport consumers, which, in turn, has implications for their attitudes and intended consumption behaviors with respect to the athlete and team. In most cases, these implications were exemplified by more negative attitudes and intended behavioral consumption directed towards the athlete after an incident of activism. This lends support to the notion that fans may dislike such banter and prefer that athletes "stick to sports". Interestingly, in some cases, athlete activism also appeared to elicit changes in sport consumption related to the team, most notably when the athlete shared a message critical of a president. However, as is typified by the results in Conditions 2 and 4, changes with respect to the team can be in either a positive or a negative direction depending on the context. This study thus serves as an initial empirical investigation into the complex relationship between athlete activism and fan attitudes and consumption behaviors, which is both of academic value and practical significance.