Examining Professional Athletes’ Role as Political Opinion Leaders

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Examining Professional Athletes’ Role as Political Opinion Leaders

*The Effect of African American Professional Athletes’ Political Statements on Individuals’ Opinions About the Black Lives Matter Social Movement and Racial Injustice*

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Abstract

Should athletes shut up and dribble? Most academic scholars and pundits assume that contemporary African American professional athletes who engage in political activism do so to raise awareness about social issues and influence individuals' opinions. However, there has been no meaningful effort to quantify the persuasive impact of this activism, examine the nature and scope of such an impact, or compare it to the impacts of other actors on the national scene. Using a focused and quantitative approach backed by Twitter data from the accounts of every starting American professional basketball player in the NBA in 2017 and a nationally fielded survey experiment utilizing a preference-incorporating choice and assignment design, I examine the effect of African American professional athletes' political statements on individuals' opinions about the Black Lives Matter movement and racial injustice.

My findings paint a broad picture of contemporary African American professional athlete activism in America, demonstrating that African American professional athletes who feel self-motivated to use their platform to engage in political activism can play a significant role in national conversation about racial injustice by raising awareness and positively influencing their fans' opinions. They may even have a unique ability among opinion leaders to reach beyond political and demographic divides.

The first stage of my analysis suggests that professional athletes’ internal characteristics (such as their race, age, education level, and degree of outspokenness) are significant predictors of whether they will engage in political activism, while their external circumstances (such as their salary, all-star status, fans' ideology, and contract security) are not. The second stage of my analysis reveals that fans are significantly more likely to seek out professional athletes’ political views than non-fans, regardless of their demographic characteristics and political ideology. My analysis also shows that African American professional athletes’ statements have a persuasive effect on individuals who seek them out, and that professional athletes may wield more political influence over sports fans than politicians, but less political influence over non-fans.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................. 2

TABLE OF CONTENTS .............................................................................................................. 3

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .............................................................................................................. 4

INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................................... 5

LITERATURE REVIEW ........................................................................................................... 8
African American Athletes’ Historical Political Influence .......................................................... 8
Contemporary African American Athletes’ Return to Activism ............................................... 12
Examining Other Contemporary Non-Traditional Opinion Leaders’ Political Influence ........ 15
Two Remaining Questions .................................................................................................. 17

STAGE ONE: WHICH ATHLETES ADDRESS RACIAL INJUSTICE ................................. 22
Research Design (Stage One) .................................................................................................. 22
Hypotheses (Stage One) ......................................................................................................... 22
Data and Methodology (Stage One) ....................................................................................... 23
Results (Stage One) ................................................................................................................ 27

STAGE TWO: QUANTIFYING ACTIVIST ATHLETES’ INFLUENCE ............................. 32
Research Design (Stage Two) ................................................................................................ 33
Hypotheses (Stage Two) ......................................................................................................... 34
Data and Methodology (Stage Two) ....................................................................................... 37
Results (Stage Two) ................................................................................................................ 43

DISCUSSION .......................................................................................................................... 51

CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................................... 53

REFERENCES .......................................................................................................................... 54

APPENDIX ............................................................................................................................... 60
Survey Experiment Treatment Conditions and Question Wordings ....................................... 60
2016 ESPYS Awards Speech Full Text .................................................................................. 67
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“Team first. It allows me to succeed. It allows my team to succeed.” – LeBron James

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Introduction

On September 23, 2017, President Trump tweeted “If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL, or other leagues, he or she should not be allowed to disrespect our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem. If not, YOU’RE FIRED. Find something else to do!” President Trump’s tweet came more than a year after former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick first sat, and later kneeled, during the national anthem in protest of the oppression of people of color and police brutality in the United States (Griffiths 2017). The president’s clash with kneeling athletes quickly dominated media channels, sparking national conversation about racial injustice, police brutality, and the role of professional athletes as political opinion leaders.

Kaepernick’s protest is part of an ongoing series of political protests and statements about racial injustice made by African American professional athletes since the beginning of the Black Lives Matter social movement in 2012 (Gajanan 2016; Wulf 2019). Most academic scholars and pundits assume that these athletes affect national conversation through their political activism by raising awareness about racial injustice and influencing individuals’ opinions. However, there has been no meaningful effort to quantify the persuasive impact of this activism, examine the nature and scope of such an impact, or compare it to the impacts of other political actors on the national scene. Sports are one of the rare domains of American culture with the potential to transcend ideological, racial, and socioeconomic differences. A focused and quantitative analysis of the role of professional athletes in the current debate over racial injustice can offer a unique perspective on how national conversation is shaped and influenced in our society. In the following pages, I will contribute to academic scholarship investigating the role of non-traditional opinion leaders in American politics by examining the effect of African
American professional athletes’ political statements on individuals’ opinions about the Black Lives Matter movement and racial injustice.

I conduct a two-stage analysis to determine which African American professional athletes address racial injustice and how their professional athlete status conditions who receives and responds to their messaging. First, using Twitter data I collected from the accounts of every starting American professional basketball player in the National Basketball Association (NBA) in 2017, I examine which factors drive African American professional athletes to speak out about racial injustice. Second, employing a survey experiment utilizing a preference-incorporating choice and assignment (PICA) design fielded to a national sample, I examine the effects of African American professional athletes’ statements.

My findings paint a broad picture of contemporary African American professional athlete activism in America. The first stage of my analysis suggests that professional athletes’ internal characteristics (such as their race, age, education level, and degree of outspokenness) are significant predictors of whether they will engage in political activism, while their external circumstances (such as their salary, all-star status, fans’ ideology, and contract security) are not. Athletes who do decide to engage focus on the same issues with which athletes have historically engaged: racial injustice and police brutality. The second stage of my analysis demonstrates that when given an opportunity, fans and individuals who support athlete activism are significantly more likely to seek out professional athletes’ political views than non-fans and those who oppose athlete activism. This relationship holds regardless of the individuals’ own demographic characteristics, political ideology, or partisanship, signaling that professional athletes may be uniquely positioned among American political opinion leaders to influence a diverse group of citizens from both sides of the political spectrum. The second stage of my analysis also reveals
that African American professional athletes’ statements have a persuasive effect on individuals who seek them out. I find that African American professional athletes’ statements supporting the Black Lives Matter social movement and calling for racial equality have a positive and statistically significant effect on subjects who would opt to receive those athletes’ opinions when given the opportunity. This effect is especially pronounced among individuals who are unfamiliar with the Black Lives Matter movement and/or more likely to support it. Meanwhile, African American professional athletes’ statements do not have a significant persuasive effect on those who do not seek them out, and they may have a negative effect on those who want to avoid athletes’ views altogether. Finally, I find that professional athletes may wield more political influence over sports fans than politicians, but less political influence over non-fans.

Synthesized, my findings suggest that contemporary African American professional athletes who feel motivated to use their platform to engage in political activism may raise awareness and positively influence their fans’ opinions about political issues like the Black Lives Matter movement and racial injustice.

I begin my thesis by reviewing academic literature exploring the effects of historical African American athletes’ political activism. I also compare Civil Rights Era athlete activism to African American professional athletes’ political activism today and survey academic understanding of the role non-traditional opinion leaders play in American politics. This background literature informs my hypotheses about the amount of persuasive political influence contemporary African American professional athletes should be expected to wield. My literature review closes with a discussion of the gaps in academic knowledge about contemporary athlete activism that my thesis attempts to fill. From there, I dive into Stage One of my analysis, describing my use of Twitter data to examine which African American professional athletes
choose to speak out about racial injustice and why. Stage Two then centers around the results of an original survey experiment I administered to a nationally representative sample of 1,546 Americans to determine which individuals listen to African American professional athletes’ political opinions and how they respond. For each stage, I set forth my research design, hypotheses, data and methodology, and results. I conclude my thesis by tying the results of my two-stage analysis together, discussing implications of my findings and identifying potential areas of future study.

**Literature Review**

My thesis contributes to two main bodies of academic scholarship. First, it contributes to academic understanding of contemporary African American professional athletes’ influence on individuals’ opinions about the Black Lives Matter social movement and racial injustice. Second, it contributes more broadly to academic understanding of the role non-traditional opinion leaders play in American politics. I situate my analysis within these bodies of scholarship in the following literature review.

*African American Athletes’ Historical Political Influence*

Scholars agree that during the American Civil Rights Movement, many African American athletes used the voice and platform that they earned through sports to draw attention to racial injustice. Jackie Robinson challenged segregation across the country when he famously broke the baseball color line in 1947 (Joseph 2017). In a protest against discrimination that went on to become one of the most iconic images of the Civil Rights Movement, John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised their fists in a black power salute and wore human rights badges on their jackets as the national anthem played during their medal ceremony at the 1968 Summer Olympics (Joseph 2017; Perry 2017). Muhammed Ali became one of the most significant and
celebrated sports figures of the 20th century by setting an example of racial pride for African Americans through his protests and political commentary (Perry 2017). The list of other famous African American athletes whose voices are considered by historians to have shaped the Civil Rights Movement includes Arthur Ashe, Don Newcombe, Roy Campanella, Jim Brown, Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, Julius Erving, Reggie Jackson, Hank Aaron, Bill Russell, Willie Mays, Charlie Sifford, Althea Gibson, Jack Johnson, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (Jackson 2010; Joseph 2017; Wulf 2019).

Dr. Harry Edwards’ famous publication *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* in 1969 initiated a long line of scholarly work analyzing the influence of these Civil Rights Era athletes. Academic consensus suggests that athletes such as Carlos, Smith, and Ali played a noteworthy role in achieving equal rights for African American citizens by successfully influencing national conversation about racial injustice. Edwards concluded from a sociological study of African American athlete activism that athletes used their public platform during the Civil Rights Movement to evoke institutional change. He examined text from newspapers, letters, and press releases discussing African American athletes before and after historical athlete protests, observing shifts in their tone and message from hostile and uninterested in change to sensitive, socially conscious, and interested in participating in discussions about race. He highlighted policy changes adopted by universities, sports governing bodies, and state and local governments, along with the formation of unions and nonprofit organizations, that protected the rights of African Americans. He also credited athletes for their role in raising awareness of the “injustices and inequities which permeate our society” (Edwards 1969, 107). Finally, Edwards examined hiring rates of African Americans for sports management positions and endorsements and found significant increases following athlete protests. According to Edwards, “the results of
the revolt of Afro-American athletes have, [as of 1969], been nothing short of historic” (Edwards 1969). Similarly, Wiggins (1992) concluded from his review of African American athletes’ political protests during the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent news stories they generated that African American athletes “made the problems of racial discrimination in sport and the larger society more visible to the American public” (Wiggins 1992, 190).

After testing Edwards’ and Wiggins’ findings using a case study of the 1968 African American Olympic protest movement and the actions of John Carlos and Tommie Smith, Hartman (1996; 2003) concluded that sports “can make it possible for otherwise powerless racial and ethnic minorities to draw attention to their cause.” In his case study, Hartman created a historical narrative using extensive archival research and gathered oral histories that replicated the findings of his predecessors. Since the release of these initial historical analyses, numerous historians specializing in the Civil Rights Movement have echoed the conclusion that African American athletes played a predominant role in influencing national conversation about racial injustice across the news, in letters, in press-releases, and in interpersonal conversations (Bass 2002; Moore 2017; McGregor 2017).

Despite its apparent influence, African American athlete activism all but disappeared following the end of the Civil Rights Movement (Drier and Candaele 2004). During the 1970s and 1980s, “America finally publicly embraced the black athlete, looking past skin color to see athleticism and skill, rewarding stars with multimillion-dollar athletic contracts, movie deals, lucrative shoe endorsements and mansions in all-white enclaves” (Holland 2018). Meanwhile, most African American professional athletes stopped using their platform to advocate for policy change or endorse political candidates. The leading explanation for this sudden, prolonged silence is captured by former professional basketball star Michael Jordan’s reported statement:
“Republicans buy sneakers, too.” In 1990, Jordan refused to endorse Harvey Gannt, an African American Democrat and former mayor of Charlotte challenging an openly racist incumbent senator, because he was concerned that taking a political stance would negatively impact his brand (Granderson 2012). Although Jordan’s stance represented a complete reversal from those of the previous generation of African American athletes, his perspective was not uncommon in the years following the end of the Civil Rights Movement. Many scholars have documented African American athletes’ lack of activism during this period, theorizing that without the presence of a broader social movement such as the Civil Rights or Black Power Movements, athletes “stick to sports” (David and King 2009; Agyemang 2011; Cooper, Macaulay, and Rodriguez 2019).

Three leading experts on athlete political behavior analyzed African American athletes’ apparent lack of activism between the end of the Civil Rights Movement and the mid 2000s from a historical perspective. Roach (2002) tracked correlations between increasing contract offers and declining athlete activism. Rhoden (2006) evaluated the impact of Tiger Woods’ rise to fame and refusal to address polarizing topics such as race relations. Finally, Powell (2008) studied the aftermath of the New Orleans Jazz’s relocation to Salt Lake City to discover how African American athletes behave in predominantly white towns. All three scholars concluded that wealth and fame incentivized African American athletes to remain quiet, and Powell went as far as to say that, as of 2008, athletes no longer appeared interested in influencing national conversation about racial injustice. Kaufman (2008) and Henderson (2008) pushed academic understanding of athletes’ silence even further, using in-depth interview data and secondary accounts to demonstrate that lone athletes who take stands for social or political justice face public criticism, lower salaries, fewer endorsement deals, blacklisting, threats, in-game abuse
from teammates and opponents, and other forms of intense backlash that far outweigh any support they garner. Concurrent with Kaufman and Henderson’s findings, African American professional athletes did not return to political activism until the rise of another social movement for racial equality: the Black Lives Matter movement.

**Contemporary African American Athletes’ Return to Activism**

Although some political commentators still tell African American professional athletes to “shut up and dribble” (Yuscavage 2018), the rise of the Black Lives Matter social movement reversed these athletes’ trend of silence, prompting them to once again use their platform to draw attention to racial injustice (Vasilogambros 2016; Clarey 2017). The Black Lives Matter movement began as a Twitter hashtag following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator who shot and killed an unarmed African American teenager named Trayvon Martin in February 2012. Through social media, #BlackLivesMatter quickly grew into a social movement similar to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements that first inspired African American athletes to risk societal backlash and make political statements (Simon 2017). Just days after Martin’s death, professional basketball player LeBron James kicked off athletes’ return to political activism by posting a picture online of himself and his Miami Heat teammates wearing hoodies over their faces captioned “we want justice” in Martin’s honor (Wulf 2019). James has continued his political activism since, writing “we must address the violence, of every kind, the African-American community is experiencing in our streets” in his op-ed endorsing Hillary Clinton for president (James 2016).

Former National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick serves as the face of African American professional athletes’ political reemergence in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. During the 2016 NFL season, Kaepernick knelt as the national anthem played
before his games, telling NFL media he was “not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color” (Gajanan 2016; Wyche 2016).

Kaepernick’s silent protest sparked a national debate about racial injustice and police brutality so significant that he was honored with awards from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Amnesty International (Martin 2017; Gregory 2018). However, Kaepernick also faced the consequences for speaking out that Kaufman (2008) and Henderson (2008) enumerated. Kaepernick was effectively fired by the San Francisco 49ers following his political protest, and he was not given another opportunity to play in the league despite the overwhelming endorsement of his offensive abilities in a poll of NFL defensive players conducted by The Athletic (Maske 2018; Chiari 2019). Kaepernick also endured public criticism and threats from President Donald Trump and many other Americans (Griffiths 2017).

Despite potential backlash, hundreds of contemporary African American professional athletes have joined Kaepernick and James in taking public stands against racial injustice and police brutality under the Black Lives Matter movement’s umbrella. On the Sunday after President Trump tweeted criticism of Kaepernick, more than 200 NFL players knelt during the national anthem before their respective games (Coastan 2018). Meanwhile, NBA players Chris Paul, Carmelo Anthony, and Dwyane Wade joined James on stage at the 2016 Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly (ESPY) Awards to deliver a joint speech calling for racial equality and denouncing police violence. Anthony also showed his support for the Black Lives Matter movement by marching to Baltimore City Hall with demonstrators to protest the death of Freddie Gray, an African American man who suffered fatal spinal injuries while in police custody (Wulf 2019). The 2018 Golden State Warriors and Philadelphia Eagles both raised similar concerns by publicly declining invitations to visit the Trump White House following their respective national
championship victories. The Warriors opted instead to visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture and meet with former U.S. President Barack Obama, while Eagles safety Malcom Jenkins held a press conference during which he stood silently and held up signs displaying facts about racial inequality and criminal justice reform (Shear 2018; Stites 2018; Bonesteel 2019). Jenkins also penned an op-ed about racial injustice in the Washington Post and teamed up with NFL wide receiver Anquan Boldin to discuss race relations with legislators on Capitol Hill (Stites 2018).

Many of today’s activist athletes utilize the same strategies that Civil Rights Era athletes like Carlos and Smith used to share their political opinions, engaging in silent but visible protests through their body language or clothing. In addition to kneeling NFL players, notable examples of contemporary African American professional athletes following their predecessors’ footsteps include Maya Moore and her teammates on the WNBA’s Minnesota Lynx wearing t-shirts bearing the phrases “Black Lives Matter” and “Change Starts With Us”, Saint Louis Rams and Washington Redskins players running onto the field making “hands up, don’t shoot” gestures following the police shooting of another unarmed African American teenager named Michael Brown, Cleveland Browns wide receiver Andrew Hawkins running onto the field wearing a t-shirt decrying the shooting deaths of John Crawford and Tamir Rice, and numerous NBA players including LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, and Derrick Rose warming up for games in t-shirts reading “I can’t breathe,” the last words of an African American man named Eric Garner who was choked to death by police officers (Chow 2014; Bembry 2016; Ganjan 2016; Vasilogambros 2016; Wulf 2019). Other athletes share their views more directly like Ali did. Numerous African American athletes including Serena Williams, Steph Curry, Eric Reid, Cam Newton, and many of those listed above have spoken out or tweeted about racial injustice and police brutality. Even
Michael Jordan (2016) found his voice during the Black Lives Matter movement, publishing a statement on the numerous police shootings of African Americans entitled “I can no longer stay silent.”

Journalists assume that contemporary African American professional athletes are influencing national conversation about racial injustice in the same way that Civil Rights Era athletes did by raising awareness and influencing individuals’ opinions (Ryan 2016). However, this claim has not been tested empirically. Far less is known about the effects of today’s athletes’ protests than the protests of athletes from the Civil Rights Era.

**Examining Other Contemporary Non-Traditional Opinion Leaders’ Political Influence**

Academic scholarship investigating the role of non-traditional opinion leaders in American politics can inform hypotheses about the amount of political influence contemporary African American professional athletes should be expected to wield. In 1969, Edwards wrote “on the national and state levels, athletics also are a source of potential power for black people” (Edwards 1969). Although there has been little scholarly analysis of the direct impact that African American professional athletes’ political statements have on national conversation about racial injustice today, scholarship examining the influence of other non-traditional opinion leaders provides reason to believe that African American athletes’ voices can be as significant today as they were in the 1960s.

I draw on Street’s (2004) definition of non-traditional political opinion leaders for the purposes of my analysis. According to Street, a non-traditional political opinion leader is an “entertainer who pronounces on politics and claims the right to represent…causes, but who does so without seeking…elected office” (Street 2004, 438). Street’s depiction acutely captures the role contemporary African American professional athletes adopt when they protest or speak out
about racial injustice. I compare African American professional athlete activists to celebrity activists, another group represented in Street’s conception of non-traditional political opinion leaders whose political influence has been studied more extensively.

Harvey (2018), a leader in the field, discusses the mechanisms through which celebrities influence individuals’ political perceptions in his formative book *Celebrity Influence: Politics, Persuasion, and Issue-Based Advocacy*. According to Harvey, celebrities have two specific kinds of power as opinion leaders: 1) the ability to “spotlight” issues in the media, and 2) the ability to persuade audiences to accept their policy positions. By analyzing news sources in a number of case studies, Harvey determined that celebrities such as Bono and Angelina Jolie derive their ability to spotlight issues in the media from the fact that they receive disproportionately more coverage than politicians. Likewise, by administering a series of psychological survey experiments, Harvey found that celebrities can persuade audiences to accept their policy positions because they have loyal fanbases who look up to them as credible role models (Harvey 2018). Becker (2012, 2013) and Nownes (2019) corroborate Harvey’s findings using their own survey experiments. They both demonstrate that celebrities can raise awareness about specific political issues and influence individuals’ opinions.

Other studies examine celebrities’ ability to inspire individuals to vote. Garthwaite and Moore (2013) published a notable case study in which they found that Oprah Winfrey’s endorsement of then-presidential candidate Barack Obama netted him more than one million additional votes in the 2008 Democratic presidential primary. Oprah’s following may be so large that she is an outlier among celebrities, but other scholars similarly have found that celebrity endorsements can motivate young voters. Austin et al. (2008), Nownes (2011), Morin, Ivory, and Tubbs (2012), and Jackson (2018) each conducted pretest-posttest experiments comparing
subjects exposed to celebrity endorsement of a political party or candidate to others who were not, and all four found that celebrity endorsements can indeed influence citizens’ political views. None of this research has been replicated to study African American professional athletes’ influence. Few scholars have thoroughly investigated contemporary African American professional athletes’ role as political opinion leaders, and none have examined the effect African American professional athletes’ political statements on individuals’ opinions about the Black Lives Matter social movement and racial injustice. Andrews and Jackson (2002) found that professional athletes do not generate the same amount of interest in political causes as celebrities, however they conducted their analysis before athletes’ widespread return to political activism. An experiment conducted by Harrison and Michelson (2017) found that showing football fans a statement supporting same-sex marriage attributed to Brendan Ayanbedejo, a little-known NFL linebacker, influenced those fans’ views on the subject. However, they found this effect after priming survey respondents’ identity as football fans. Towler, Crawford, and Bennet (2020) conducted the most recent study of African American professional athlete activism, using the 2017 Black Voter Project Pilot Study to show that African Americans who approve of Colin Kaepernick’s protest engaged in politics at elevated rates during the 2016 election, but measures of electoral participation cannot fully approximate athletes’ persuasive influence.

Two Remaining Questions

1. Which Athletes Address Racial Injustice?

Scholars are unsure why some African American professional athletes choose to address political issues, while others opt to remain silent. Very little academic research exists examining the factors that influence whether potential opinion leaders choose to use their platforms. This
gap in scholarship can partially be filled by studies examining which internal characteristics correspond with political engagement among regular citizens. Voters and political activists generally are older, more educated, and wealthier than the general population (Paletz, Owen, and Cook 2011). In addition, African American citizens are more likely to engage with race-related political issues than white or Hispanic Americans (Anderson and Hitlin 2016). However, there is no evidence to suggest whether these characteristics can serve as accurate predictors for which African American professional athletes engage in activism.

Identifying the types of African American professional athletes who choose to speak out about politics is especially important because of the unique position they hold within the African American community. While scholars like Kaufman (2008) and Henderson (2008) warn of potential consequences athletes face for their activism, others argue that African American professional athletes have a responsibility to use their platform to raise the voice and concerns of African American people (Raymond 2015). African Americans rise into positions of power in sports faster than in other professions, thus offering athletes greater opportunities to be heard than other African Americans. As of February 2018, African Americans made up roughly 13 percent of the U.S. population, but they only made up 8.5 percent of Congress, 3.8 percent of college/university tenured faculty, and 3 percent of executives at tech firms such as Apple, Uber, Google, Facebook, and Amazon. Meanwhile, African Americans made up the vast majority of players in the NFL, NBA, and WNBA, and held positions of power in those leagues – general managers, owners, presidents, and vice presidents – at rates near parity with their overall percentage in the U.S. population (Bryant 2018).

The costs and benefits athletes face for speaking out about politics can vary widely based on the issues they address and their individual circumstances. During the 2020 coronavirus
pandemic, professional sports leagues and governors called upon professional athletes to spread messages about the importance of social distancing (Campbell and Ruiz 2020; Zillgitt 2020). However, leagues and governors criticized and punished athletes for speaking out about police brutality (Maske 2018; McKewon and Nohr 2016). Coombs and Cassilo (2017) and Bacon (2018) examined LeBron James’ political activism to identify external circumstances that help him succeed as an activist athlete. They found that James has been able to speak out without facing many consequences because he has mostly Democratic fans, is often joined by other players when he engages in activism, uses cautious and deliberate political tactics moderating a message of consideration rather than revolution, and maintains a high level of contract security as one of the best players in the NBA. Further study is needed to determine how African American professional athletes’ internal characteristics and external circumstances influence whether or not they decide to address political issues. I begin to bridge this gap in academic scholarship in Stage One of my analysis.

2. **What Effect Do Athletes’ Political Statements Have?**

Scholars are unsure of the effect contemporary African American professional athletes’ political statements have on individuals’ opinions about the Black Lives Matter social movement and racial injustice. Many scholars theorize that contemporary African American professional athletes wield similar amounts of political influence as Civil Rights Era activist athletes and other non-traditional political opinion leaders (Towler, Crawford, and Bennet 2020). Like Civil Rights Era activist athletes, African American professional athletes who speak out about racial injustice today engage in issue-congruent activism – they speak out about issues in which they have clear and sincere involvement. Like celebrities, African American professional athletes have loyal fan bases, generate high levels of media coverage, and are viewed as role models.
Together, these factors suggest that contemporary African American professional athletes can act as credible in-group messengers for sports fans (Kuklinski and Hurley 1994).

However, contemporary African American professional athletes differ in kind from the historical athletes and celebrities studied by scholars. Compared to historical athletes, contemporary African American professional athletes speak to broader, more ideologically sorted audiences due to the rise of social media and increased access to information. Many of the individuals contemporary African American professional athletes reach through social media may not be seeking out their political opinions (Settle 2018). Compared to celebrities – who Daniel J. Boorstin (1962, 212), a renowned American historian, famously defined as people who are “well-known for their well-knownness” – contemporary African American professional athletes are identified by fans and the media for their identity as athletes when they speak out about political issues. While a few contemporary African American professional athletes like Michael Jordan and LeBron James are “‘well-known for their well-knownness,’” most of the African American professional athletes engaging in activism today are not. For example, outside of some NFL fans, most Americans had never heard of Colin Kaepernick when he began protesting, and most still have never heard of Malcom Jenkins or Maya Moore. Furthermore, sports fans often develop affective attachments to professional athletes based on the teams for which those athletes play rather than the fact they are athletes in general, and some fans root against athletes who play for teams they dislike. Studies show that the extent to which individuals identify with specific messengers influences those messengers’ persuasive influence (Basil 1996). These factors all make estimating contemporary African American professional athletes’ role as political opinion leaders more complicated.
Political opinion leaders attempt to build support for social movements by mobilizing supporters and persuading opponents while also minimizing opposition to their cause (Benford and Snow 2000). There is need for additional data on the persuasive influence contemporary African American professional athletes have on diverse, real-life audiences to determine whether these athletes can build support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Recent data from Pew Research Center shows that 62 percent of Americans believe it is acceptable for professional athletes to speak out about political issues, while only 22 percent say it is important for athletes whom they support to share their political views (Gramlich 2019). This suggests that Americans may be receptive to hearing political messages from athletes even if they do not agree with them. Nonetheless, this data does not reveal anything about the effects those athletes have when they share their political views.

New research must examine which individuals are most receptive to hearing from activist athletes. Sports fans occupy both sides of the political spectrum and hold different opinions about racial injustice and the Black Lives Matter movement (Paine, Enten and Jones-Rooy 2017). Do activist athletes reach all of these fans, or are they only speaking to those with whom they agree? Can activist athletes extend their influence beyond sports fans? New research is also needed to investigate contemporary African American professional athletes’ persuasive impact on both individuals who seek out their opinions and individuals who attempt to avoid them. Are activist athletes mobilizing supporters, persuading opponents, or both? Does their activism incite opposition and contribute to polarization? Lastly, new research should compare the persuasive effects of contemporary African American professional athletes’ political statements to the effects of traditional opinion leaders’ statements. Which individuals are more responsive to
messages coming from African American professional athletes as opposed to from high-profile political elites? I tackle this set of unanswered questions in the second stage of my analysis.

**Stage One: Which Athletes Address Racial Injustice?**

I begin my analysis by examining which factors drive contemporary African American professional athletes to speak out about racial injustice using Twitter data I collected from the accounts of every starting American professional basketball player in the NBA in 2017.

**Research Design (Stage One)**

I analyze Twitter data to test my Stage One hypotheses because it provides a well-rounded picture of athletes’ political behavior. According to NBA Hall of Famer Dominique Wilkins, Twitter has amplified athletes’ voices and provided them with a platform to address political issues (Holland 2018). Schmittel and Sanderson (2014) support Wilkins’ claim empirically, evaluating NFL players’ use of the platform to discuss the verdict in George Zimmerman’s murder trial through a descriptive textual analysis. The scholars concluded “Twitter is a viable mechanism for African American and other minority athletes to engage in activism and initiate important conversations about social justice issues” (Schmittel and Sanderson 2014, 332). Twitter data is especially useful for characterizing which athletes engage in political activism because it allows scholars to examine the behavior of athletes who do and do not speak out about politics. Most athletes are active on Twitter, and a majority of those who choose to speak about political issues do so using the platform (Pegoraro 2010).

**Hypotheses (Stage One)**

Academic scholarship suggests that contemporary African American professional athletes’ decisions to speak out about racial injustice are influenced by their internal
characteristics and external circumstances. I expect the results of my study align with scholars’ assumptions. First, I expect contemporary African American professional athletes who speak out about racial injustice to share internal characteristics with American citizens who are more likely to engage in politics; I predict that they will be older, more educated, and more outspoken on Twitter than athletes who do not engage. Second, I expect these athletes’ external circumstances to resemble those that scholars believe allow LeBron James to engage in political activism; I predict that they will make more all-star games, earn higher salaries, have more Twitter followers, have longer-term contracts, and play for teams with more Democratic fans than athletes who do not engage. Finally, I expect African American professional athletes to speak out about racial injustice at significantly higher rates than their white counterparts.

**H1a:** Contemporary African American NBA starters who are older, college graduates, and more frequent tweeters will be more likely to address racial injustice.

**H1b:** Contemporary African American NBA starters who are all-stars, earn higher salaries, have more Twitter followers, are not in the final year of their contracts, and play for teams in liberal states will be more likely to address social or political issues.

**H1c:** Contemporary African American NBA starters will be more likely to address racial injustice than their white counterparts.

**Data and Methodology (Stage One)**

I collected Twitter data between 8/1/17 and 10/31/17 from the accounts of every American NBA player who started for their team during the 2016-2017 NBA season. I recognized players who started in at least 41 of the 82 regular season games or 75% of the regular season games in which they played as “starting players.” I collected Twitter data from
8/1/17 to 10/31/17 because it was a period that featured especially high levels of athlete activism (Clarey 2017), and I examined every public tweet posted by a qualifying player during that span. I focus on NBA players as the subject of my analysis because the NBA has the most visible superstars of any major American sports league, historically has been home to many activist athletes, and has the fewest starting players of any league, making it feasible to collect data from the entire universe of cases. Altogether, I collected tweets from the accounts of 94 players.

After collecting my Twitter data, I used keywords to identify which tweets reference racial injustice. Researchers analyzing Twitter data follow a common methodology to select their keywords by looking for patterns within their sample of the tweets. First, they inspect a subset of their sample of tweets to identify which words and phrases tweeters use to address relevant topics. Next, they analyze the use of those words in their larger datasets to make inferences. Schmittel and Sanderson (2014) relied on this approach in their study of NFL players’ tweets about the Zimmerman verdict, and I apply it here. I took a sample from the pool of NBA players’ tweets I collected and identified the following keywords that players used when they were discussing racial injustice: “Trump,” “president,” “MAGA,” “America great,” “Obama,” “Pence,” “White House,” “invite,” “Kaepernick,” “kneel,” “race,” “racism,” “KKK,” “Charlottesville,” “Virginia,” “VA,” “police,” “feds,” and “brutality”.

I used my Twitter data to construct an original dataset containing information about contemporary NBA players and their political behavior. Each observation in my dataset is one of the 94 American players who started for an NBA team in 2017. The first variable in my dataset is a dummy variable I call “political tweet,” which I set equal to one if a player posted at least one tweet containing a political keyword from the list I identified. The next variable in my dataset is a similar dummy variable I call “political reference,” which I set equal to one if a
player posted a tweet containing a political keyword or if a subsequent manual review identified other references to racial injustice. Examples of tweets which I deemed to be political references include “Our youth deserves better!!” and “I will not be silenced.” Overall, 12 players (12.8 percent) posted “political tweets” and 33 players (35.1 percent) posted “political references.”

I rounded out my dataset by adding demographic variables containing information about each of the players’ internal characteristics and external circumstances. My variables containing information about players’ internal characteristics were age, race, education, and outspokenness on Twitter. I measured education using a dummy variable set equal to one if a player graduated from college. I measured outspokenness on Twitter using a dummy variable set equal to one if a player posted an above average number of tweets during the three-month window. Notably, most players posted either far greater or far fewer than the average number of tweets. My variables containing information about players’ external circumstances were salary, Twitter followers, all-star status, contract security, and fans’ ideology. I measured all-star status, contract security, and fans’ ideology using dummy variables respectively indicating whether players made the 2017 All-Star Game, were entering the final year of their contract, and played for a team in a state whose Electoral College delegates voted for Trump during the 2016 election.

Once I finished collecting my data, I log-transformed my variables containing players’ salaries and number of Twitter followers, which were both positively skewed, to prepare them for analysis. Then I conducted five probit regressions using the dummy variables “political tweet” and “political reference” to determine which internal characteristics and external circumstances serve as statistically significant predictors of whether contemporary athletes post tweets about racial injustice. I dropped the variable indicating whether a player graduated from college from my probit models because an F-test with a statistic of 0.046 revealed that
graduating college is collinear with player age. This makes sense, as NBA starters who graduated college instead of entering the NBA in their late teens are more likely to be older.

My first model (Model A), regresses whether a player posted a “political tweet” (my dependent variable) on their age, race, and whether they were a frequent tweeter (my independent variables) to examine the effects that athletes’ internal characteristics have on their decisions to speak out about racial injustice. My second and third models (Model B and Model C) add independent variables measuring salary, number of Twitter followers, whether a player made the All-Star Game, whether a player was playing under the final year of their contract, and whether a player was playing in a state whose Electoral College voted for Trump in the 2016 presidential election to examine the added effects of athletes’ external circumstances. My fourth and fifth models rely on the same independent variables as my third model, but they differ in that my fourth model (Model C MFX) presents the marginal effects of each variable after probit so that it is easier to interpret, while my fifth model (Model D) regresses whether a player posted a “political reference” rather than a “political tweet” on my independent variables. Although Model D is impossible to replicate because my variable “political reference” relies on my own subjective judgement of whether a tweet references racial injustice, it provides a complementary measure to Model C that is not influenced by limitations that accompany keyword selection.

I also conduct a brief descriptive analysis utilizing the Twitter data I collected to observe which words, phrases, and emojis occur most frequently in the text of contemporary athletes’ political tweets. This analysis provides a compelling look at the ways in which contemporary African American professional athletes talk publicly about racial injustice and police brutality. I visualize the most frequently occurring words in a word cloud and present some of the tweets from my sample that I found particularly interesting.
Results (Stage One)

My Stage One findings support $H_1a$ and $H_1c$ but refute $H_1b$. I find that contemporary African American professional athletes’ internal characteristics (and beliefs) drive their decisions to speak out about racial injustice, while their external circumstances have little influence. I also find that contemporary African American professional athletes are more likely to address racial injustice than their white counterparts. Specifically, my models show that starting American NBA players who are older (and more educated) and more outspoken on Twitter are more likely to tweet about racial injustice than their peers. Meanwhile players who earn higher salaries, have more Twitter followers, played in the All-Star Game, are on long-term contracts, and are playing in states that voted for Hillary Clinton as opposed to Trump in 2016 are not more likely to tweet about racial injustice. This suggests that contemporary African American professional athletes’ decision whether or not to tweet about politics is driven more by their internal characteristics and beliefs than by their external circumstances. No white American 2016-2017 NBA starters tweeted about racial injustice during the period of heightened athlete activism.

Summary statistics provide preliminary support for $H_1a$ and $H_1c$, as they show that starting American NBA players who tweeted about racial injustice were all racial minorities and on average were 1.8 years older, 37.2 percentage points more likely to be frequent tweeters, and 11.5 percentage points more likely to have graduated college than players who did not tweet about racial injustice. However, summary statistics do not appear to support $H_1b$. On the one hand, players who tweeted about racial injustice had more average Twitter followers than players who did not, as hypothesized. On the other hand, all-star players were 8.9 percentage points less likely to tweet about racial injustice than their peers, and there is no clear difference in the likelihood of tweeting about racial injustice among players playing in states that voted for
Athletes as Political Opinion Leaders

Trump, players entering the final year of their contracts, or players earning higher annual salaries. Summary statistics from my dataset can be viewed below in Table 1.

Table 1: Every 2017 American NBA Starter on Twitter (8/1/2017-10/31/2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>All Players</th>
<th>Political Tweeters</th>
<th>Non-Tweeters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Age</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Minorities</td>
<td>92.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>91.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Graduates</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent Tweeters</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing in States Carried by Trump</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entering Final Year of Contract</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>24.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Stars</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Annual Salary</td>
<td>$14.27 Million</td>
<td>$13.77 Million</td>
<td>$14.02 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Followers</td>
<td>301,500</td>
<td>544,000</td>
<td>280,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regression analysis provides a clearer indication of which factors influence contemporary African American professional athletes to tweet about racial injustice. First of all, white American starting NBA players were dropped from all five of my models because none of them tweeted about politics, supporting \( H_{1c} \). The coefficient representing both age and education (these variables were collinear) is statistically significant at the ten percent level in Model A, but it becomes statistically significant at the five percent level after I control for more variables in Models B and C, supporting \( H_{1a} \). Furthermore, starting American NBA players who were more frequent tweeters were significantly more likely to tweet about racial injustice in all of my models, providing additional support for \( H_{1a} \). Interpreting my results using marginal effects after probit reveals that an additional year of age corresponds with an estimated two percentage-point increase in the likelihood that a player will tweet about racial injustice, and frequent tweeters are an estimated 18.2 percentage-points more likely to tweet about racial injustice than infrequent tweeters. My models clearly refute \( H_{1b} \), however, as none of the variables that I include to represent players’ external circumstances were significant predictors of whether a player would
tweet about racial injustice. Moreover, some relationships trend in the opposite direction from that which I hypothesized, such as the negative relationships between playing in the NBA All-Star Game and earning a higher salary and tweeting about racial injustice. The complete output of my regression analysis is presented below in Table 2, and I visualize scaled results from Models C and D below in Figure 1. My models are slightly underpowered due to the scarcity of starting American NBA players, but I compensate for this by examining data from the entire universe of cases during a period of heightened political activism.

Table 2: Likelihood of Tweeting About Racial Injustice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model A</th>
<th>Model B</th>
<th>Model C</th>
<th>C MFX</th>
<th>Model D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>0.0930+</td>
<td>0.100*</td>
<td>0.103*</td>
<td>0.0200+</td>
<td>0.000676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.052)</td>
<td>(0.047)</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(0.050)</td>
<td>(0.989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequent Tweeter (d)</strong></td>
<td>0.803*</td>
<td>0.847*</td>
<td>0.824*</td>
<td>0.182*</td>
<td>1.322***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td>(0.024)</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.040)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Log Salary (millions)</strong></td>
<td>-0.0343</td>
<td>-0.0761</td>
<td>-0.0148</td>
<td>-0.0263</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.900)</td>
<td>(0.798)</td>
<td>(0.798)</td>
<td>(0.922)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Log Twitter Followers</strong></td>
<td>0.0137</td>
<td>0.0285</td>
<td>0.00556</td>
<td>-0.0456</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.913)</td>
<td>(0.834)</td>
<td>(0.832)</td>
<td>(0.708)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Star (d)</strong></td>
<td>-0.495</td>
<td>-0.524</td>
<td>-0.0857</td>
<td>-0.606</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.381)</td>
<td>(0.381)</td>
<td>(0.254)</td>
<td>(0.169)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>State Trump Support (d)</strong></td>
<td>-0.136</td>
<td>-0.0270</td>
<td>-0.286</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.725)</td>
<td>(0.732)</td>
<td>(0.374)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final Year of Contract (d)</strong></td>
<td>-0.145</td>
<td>-0.0272</td>
<td>-0.139</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.711)</td>
<td>(0.701)</td>
<td>(0.740)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-white</strong></td>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>(.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo $R^2$</td>
<td>0.120</td>
<td>0.138</td>
<td>0.136</td>
<td>0.136</td>
<td>0.178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marginal effects; p-values in parentheses;
(d) for discrete change of dummy variable from 0 to 1
+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
I also visualize the most frequently occurring words in contemporary African American NBA players’ tweets about racial injustice and highlight notable tweets below in Figure 2. Examining the most frequently occurring words in NBA players’ political tweets over a three-month period cannot yield any causal inferences, but it does provide a compelling look at the manner in which contemporary African American professional athletes talk publicly about racial injustice and police brutality. In order, the keywords starting American NBA players used most frequently in their tweets about racial injustice were “Trump,” “America/country,” “White House/invite,” “kneel,” “racism,” “police/feds,” “president,” and “Charlottesville.” Many players also used an emoji depicting “the black fist,” a logo generally associated with black nationalism
used during the Black Power Movement and by historical athlete activists John Carlos and Tommie Smith (Edwards 1969).

**Figure 2: NBA Players’ Frequently Used Words and Notable Tweets About Racial Injustice**
Obviously, the specific words players were using were dictated by events that occurred during the window in which I collected data. Players only mentioned “Charlottesville” in their political tweets because they were discussing a white supremacist rally that occurred there. Similarly, players used the word “kneel” because they were referencing Kaepernick’s protest. Nonetheless, this visualization provides evidence that players continue to follow the path blazed by historical activist athletes when they speak out about racial injustice.

I ran three follow-up regressions using my Twitter data to inform further research. While exploratory and suggestive, these regressions revealed that that all-stars and players with more Twitter followers received significantly more comments, retweets, and favorites on their tweets about racial injustice. This suggests that highly accomplished and admired athletes have greater opportunities to influence individuals’ opinions. Additional research is necessary to quantify the nuanced effects of contemporary African American professional athletes’ political statements on individuals’ opinions about racial injustice.

**Stage Two: Quantifying Activist Athletes’ Influence**

After examining which contemporary African American professional athletes speak out about racial injustice and what they say in Stage One of my analysis, I shift my focus to examining the nature and scope of those athletes’ persuasive influence. In Stage Two, I describe the results of an original survey experiment utilizing a preference-incorporating choice and assignment (PICA) design to assess the effect of African American professional athletes’ political statements on individuals’ opinions about the Black Lives Matter social movement and racial injustice. Specifically, I investigate which individuals are most receptive to hearing contemporary African American professional athletes’ political opinions, and I quantify the persuasive influence contemporary African American professional athletes’ political statements
have on both individuals who seek them out and individuals who attempt to avoid them. I also compare the persuasive influence of activist athletes’ political statements to the influence of statements made by politicians.

**Research Design (Stage Two)**

I assess the effect of contemporary African American professional athletes’ political statements on individuals’ opinions about the Black Lives Matter social movement and racial injustice using a survey experiment designed to incorporate both free choice and forced exposure. Inspired by Testa (2018), my preference-incorporating choice and assignment (PICA) experimental design provides some subjects with the opportunity to choose whether or not they receive a statement about the Black Lives Matter movement and racial injustice from an African American professional athlete (basketball player Chris Paul). Subjects who opt out may receive the same statement from a different African American professional basketball player (LeBron James) or a politician (Senator Cory Booker). This allows me to determine the effect of an African American professional athletes’ political statement on those likely and unlikely to encounter it, and it lets me examine whether the same message, provided by a different source, might be more effective at persuading individuals who try to avoid athletes’ views.

Dynamics of choice and self-selection are central features of politics but absent from most experimental designs (Testa 2018). While political opinion leaders attempt to build support for social movements by mobilizing supporters and persuading opponents (Benford and Snow 2000), individuals targeted by social movement messaging have considerable control over the messages they receive in the current information environment (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). Many individuals have prior beliefs influencing which opinion leaders’ statements they will seek out and which they will avoid. Furthermore, if individuals perceive certain opinion leaders as
self-interested or less credible on certain issues, they may prefer to avoid those opinion leaders’ views and seek out the views of an alternative opinion leader (Stoker 1992; Testa 2018).

The effects of political opinion leaders’ attempts to build support for social movements are thus best studied by experimental designs that incorporate choice and allow researchers to understand how individuals choose to encounter, process, and avoid political statements. Survey experiments allowing subjects to choose whether to encounter political statements from certain opinion leaders provide a more complex picture of who those opinion leaders are likely to reach, how individuals will respond to them, and how individuals who are less likely to encounter those opinion leaders’ statements can be persuaded (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2019). As a result, these experiments allow researchers to estimate treatment effects and detect heterogeneity more substantially, with more power, and with greater ecological validity than they would have been able to had they used an experiment with a standard design (Gaines and Kuklinski 2011; Leeper 2017; Testa 2018; Knox et al. 2019).

**Hypotheses (Stage Two)**

I preregistered my Stage Two hypotheses and methodology with the Center for Open Science (Lasker 2020). Once again, I ground my hypotheses in the findings of previous research. First, in accordance with data from Pew Research Center (Gramlich 2016), I predict that sports fans will be more likely to support professional athletes’ involvement in politics than non-sports fans. Likewise, controlling for sports fandom, I also predict that racial minorities, liberal Democrats, and those with greater levels of support for the Black Lives Matter movement each will be more likely to support professional athletes’ involvement in politics (Horowitz and Livingston 2016).
**H2a:** NBA fans will be significantly more likely to say they believe that professional athletes should get involved in politics by endorsing candidates or speaking out on causes than non-fans.

**H2b:** Democrats (compared to non-Democrats), racial minorities (compared to whites), and those who support the Black Lives Matter movement (compared to those who do not) will be significantly more likely to say they believe that professional athletes should get involved in politics by endorsing candidates or speaking out on causes.

Academic scholarship suggests that contemporary African American professional athletes speaking out about racial injustice wield similar amounts of political influence as Civil Rights Era activist athletes and other non-traditional political opinion leaders, acting as credible in-group messengers for sports fans. Accordingly, I expect that sports fans will be more receptive to hearing contemporary African American professional athletes’ opinions about the Black Lives Matter social movement and racial injustice than non-sports fans, and that this relationship will hold regardless of fans’ race, gender, education, income, and ideology. Controlling for sports fandom, I expect that racial minorities, liberal Democrats, and those with greater levels of support for the Black Lives Matter movement will each be more open to hearing athletes’ opinions about the movement when given a choice.

**H3a:** When given a choice, NBA fans will be significantly more likely to opt into seeing professional basketball player Chris Paul’s opinion about the Black Lives Matter movement than non-fans, holding other variables constant.

**H3b:** When given a choice, Democrats and racial minorities, and those who support the Black Lives Matter movement each will be significantly more likely than others to opt into seeing Chris Paul’s opinion about the Black Lives Matter movement.
Collectively, I predict that individuals who are randomly exposed to a contemporary African American professional athlete’s statement endorsing the Black Lives Matter movement will report greater levels of support for the movement than subjects who are not exposed to an athlete’s endorsement. However, I expect the persuasive effects of exposure to an athlete’s endorsement of the Black Lives Matter movement to be greater among those who seek out athletes’ opinions as opposed to those who avoid them. I also expect the persuasive effects of exposure to an athlete’s endorsement of the Black Lives Matter movement to be greater among sports fans than among non-sports fans. I do not think individuals who would avoid hearing an athlete’s statement about the Black Lives Matter movement when given the choice will report greater levels of support for the movement after hearing those opinions from another athlete. On the contrary, I think that individuals who would avoid hearing athletes’ opinions will be more open to considering the same opinions from a politician if the politician identifies as a member of their political party.

**H4:** When individuals are randomly exposed to Chris Paul’s endorsement of the Black Lives Matter movement, the average treatment effect will be positive and statistically significant.

**H5:** The average choice-specific treatment effects of being exposed to Chris Paul’s endorsement of the Black Lives Matter movement will be greater and more significant among individuals who are more likely to seek out his opinion than among those more likely to avoid it. Higher effects will be concentrated primarily among sports fans.

**H6:** Exposure to LeBron James’ endorsement of the Black Lives Matter movement will not have a significant persuasive effect on individuals who opt out of seeing Chris Paul’s opinion when given the choice.
**H7:** Exposure to Senator Cory Booker’s endorsement of the Black Lives Matter movement will have a greater effect than exposure to LeBron James’ endorsement of the Black Lives Matter movement among Democrats who opt out of hearing Chris Paul’s opinion when given the choice. However, exposure to Senator Booker’s endorsement will have a smaller effect than exposure to LeBron James’ endorsement of the Black Lives Matter movement among Republicans who opt out of hearing Chris Paul’s opinions.

**Data and Methodology (Stage Two)**

The stages of my PICA design are presented in Figure 3. Subjects are initially told that the researcher is interested in learning their opinions about the Black Lives Matter social movement, and they begin by self-reporting their familiarity with the movement. Next, subjects are randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Roughly 40 percent of the subjects are assigned to the experimental condition, and the other 60 percent are assigned to the choice condition.

The experimental condition (depicted in the bottom branch of Figure 3) mirrors a standard survey experiment: half of the subjects in this condition are randomly assigned to a treatment where they are told that before providing their own opinions about the Black Lives Matter movement and racial injustice the researcher would like to share the views of professional basketball player Chris Paul. Those subjects then see an image of Paul and read a brief persuasive argument attributed to him supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and advocating for racial equality. I drew most of the text for this argument from the speech Paul gave with fellow NBA players LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, and Carmelo Anthony at the 2016 ESPY awards (James et al. 2016). I added the following sentences at the beginning and end of the argument to make it cleaner: “I think the Black Lives Matter movement is really important” and “We have a long way to go, but Black Lives Matter seems like a step in the right direction.”
I drew these sentence structures from a vignette Testa (2018) used in the survey experiment upon which mine is based. Full text of the treatment is provided in the appendix. The remaining half of the subjects in the first condition proceed directly to providing their own opinions about the Black Lives Matter movement and racial injustice without receiving any other information. They are members of the control group.

The choice condition (depicted in the top branch of Figure 3) allows subjects to opt into or out of treatment. Before providing their own opinions, subjects are given a choice: would they like to hear professional basketball player Chris Paul’s opinions on the Black Lives Matter movement? Those who opt to hear Paul’s opinions receive the same persuasive argument as subjects receiving treatment in the first condition of the experimental branch. Those who opt out are randomly assigned to one of three other conditions: 1) they could receive no further information and proceed directly to providing their own opinions, 2) they could be randomly assigned to receive the same persuasive argument attributed to professional basketball player LeBron James supporting the Black Lives Matter movement before proceeding to providing their own opinions, or 3) they could be randomly assigned to receive the same persuasive argument attributed to U.S. Senator Cory Booker supporting the Black Lives Matter movement before proceeding to providing their own opinions. Subjects are shown images of Paul, James, or Senator Booker before reading their views. I used Paul and James’ NBA headshots and Senator Booker’s Twitter profile picture for these images. My experiment ends by surveying every subjects’ opinions about the Black Lives Matter movement and racial injustice using a six-question battery. I also ask a series of demographic questions at the end, thus avoiding bias resulting from priming.
My triply randomized PICA experimental design allows me to determine which individuals are most receptive to hearing an African American professional athletes’ views about the Black Lives Matter movement and racial injustice, and it allows me to estimate five treatment effects identified by Testa (2018). I outline these effects in the lower half of Figure 3. First, using only subjects assigned to the experimental condition, I can estimate the average treatment effect (ATE) of a traditional experiment. This effect measures the general influence of an African American professional athletes’ views about the Black Lives Matter movement and racial injustice.

**Treatment Effects:**

- **ATE**: $ATE = E[Y|C = Exp, T = A] - E[Y|C = Exp, T = C]$  
  
- **ACTE Select**:  
  
- **ACTE Avoid**:  
  
- **CATE Athlete**: $CATE_{Athlete} = E[Y|C = Ch, S = A, T = A] - E[Y|C = Ch, S = A, T = C]$  
  
- **CATE Politician**: $CATE_{Politician} = E[Y|C = Ch, S = A, T = P] - E[Y|C = Ch, S = A, T = C]$  

**Legend:**

- **Condition (C)**
  - Choice (C=Ch)
  - Experiment (C=Exp)

- **Selection (S)**
  - Choose to receive treatment (S=S)
  - Choose to avoid treatment (S=A)

- **Treatment (T)**
  - Athlete (T=A)
  - Control (T=C)
  - Politician (T=P)

→ Random assignment of treatment  
→ Selection into/out of treatment
injustice, and it serves as a weighted average of two treatment effects among those most likely to seek out an athletes’ views and those most likely to avoid them (Gaines and Kuklinski 2011).

Next, by offering subjects in the choice condition a decision about whether to receive treatment, my design produces an estimate of the proportion of subjects likely to seek out or avoid athletes’ views. I can use these quantities to estimate the average choice-specific treatment effects of receiving an African American athletes’ political views on those likely to seek them out (ACTESelect) and those likely to avoid them (ACTEAvoid). I calculate the ACTESelect by taking the difference between the average outcome in the choice condition and the average outcome in the control, then dividing by the proportion of people likely to select treatment. I calculate the ACTEAvoid by taking the difference between the average outcome among those assigned to the treatment in the experimental condition and the average outcome in the choice condition, then dividing by the proportion of people likely to avoid treatment (Knox et al. 2019).

Finally, I can estimate the effects of receiving an athletes’ views (CACTEAthlete) or a politician’s views (CACTEPolitician) on individuals who previously avoided the views of a different athlete. I calculate these effects by comparing the outcomes of subjects who opted out of receiving Paul’s views in the choice condition but were randomly assigned to receive those views from either James or Senator Booker to the outcome of subjects who opted out of receiving Paul’s views and received no further treatment. The CACTEAthlete provides an alternative measure of the effect an African American athletes’ political statements have on individuals who avoid them, while the CACTEPolitician estimates the effect of receiving the same statements from a more traditional political opinion leader. The CACTEs provide valuable information about which combinations of opinion leaders and statements work for eager and reluctant recipients (Testa 2018).
I intentionally attribute the statements included in my treatments to real-life athletes and politicians rather than unnamed or fictional ones to best capture the effects fame and influence have on spreading political messages. Previous research demonstrates that successful celebrity and athlete endorsements link celebrities’ and athletes’ likeability or achievements in other areas with the messages they endorse (Erdogan 1999). I need to examine this mechanism in my study of athletes as political opinion leaders. My study would not maintain ecological validity using unnamed or fictional opinion leaders because unnamed or fictional opinion leaders do not spread their messages to wide audiences using the same mechanisms in the real world.

I chose to use Paul and James as the contemporary African American professional athletes in my experiment because they are each prominent athletes whose activism I studied in Stage One of my analysis (both players tweeted about racial injustice between 8/1/17 and 10/31/17). Their shared statement from the 2016 ESPYs also allowed me to use their real-life statements of support for the Black Lives Matter movement in my treatments. I chose to make Paul the central athlete of my experiment because he is generally identified for his athlete status rather than his “well-knownness” when he speaks out about political issues. On the other hand, I used James, who meets Boorstin’s (1962) definition of a celebrity and has the highest profile of any contemporary activist athletes (ESPN 2019), as my secondary athlete. I chose to use Senator Booker as the traditional opinion leader in my experiment because he is a high-profile African American male like Paul and James, and he is a politician who similarly has voiced public support for the Black Lives Matter movement.

I use limited deception by attributing slightly edited versions of Paul and James’ statement supporting the Black Lives Matter movement to them. I also use deception by attributing the edited version of Paul and James’ statement to Senator Booker. I use a slightly
edited version of Paul and James’ statement to ensure that it clearly conveys support for the Black Lives Matter movement and advocates for racial equality. I attribute the statement to Senator Booker so that I can compare the effects of hearing from different opinion leaders without bias caused by different statements. I obtained IRB approval for this deception and debrief respondents at the end of the survey experiment. Full text of my debrief is provided in the appendix.

I fielded my survey experiment in March 2020 to 1,546 Americans from Qualtrics’s online panel. The subjects were recruited via quota-based sampling to be nationally representative by race, gender, age, and education, and they each received roughly $1.25 for participating. Testa (2018) demonstrates that triply randomized PICA experimental designs maintain statistical power using sample sizes greater than 1,500 subjects. To mitigate noncompliance concerns, I force subjects to remain on pages featuring treatment vignettes that they are assigned to read for at least 15 seconds. I treat other potential noncompliance as a reflection of real-world behavior since certain kinds of people also click through information they encounter in real life, and different treatments have varying effects on different respondents.

The primary outcome variable for my analysis is a measure of subjects’ support for the Black Lives Matter movement and racial equality. I constructed this measure by taking the first component from a principal component analysis of a six-question battery based on Testa’s (2018) questions analyzing support for social movements. The questions included in my battery ask subjects to indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with the following statements using a 7-point scale: 1) I support the Black Lives Matter social movement; 2) The Black Lives Matter social movement raises awareness about racism, racial injustice, and police brutality; 3) The Black Lives Matter social movement can sometimes go too far (reverse coded); 4) Racial
injustice and police brutality are still far too common in the U.S.; 5) In general, African Americans have the same rights and opportunities as white Americans (reverse coded); 6) Concerns about racial injustice and police brutality are overblown (reverse coded). The statements appear in a random order in my survey experiment.

My other measured variables include race, gender, age, education level, income, ideology, partisanship, familiarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, NBA fandom, and support for professional athlete activism. I use most of these variables as covariates in my analysis, but I do examine which subjects are more likely to state that they believe professional athletes should get involved in politics by endorsing candidates or speaking out on causes. A full list of questions from my survey experiment is provided in the appendix.

**Results (Stage Two)**

My Stage Two findings quantify the effect that contemporary African American professional athletes’ political statements have on different individuals’ opinions about the Black Lives Matter social movement and racial injustice. To best contextualize my findings, I begin by reporting which individuals in my sample support professional athletes’ involvement in politics. Altogether, 61.15 percent of subjects in my sample say that they believe professional athletes should get involved in politics by endorsing candidates or speaking out on causes, closely replicating the 62 percent estimate made by Pew Research Center (Gramlich 2019). Figure 4 describes the differences between individuals who support and oppose athlete activism for my entire sample, and for NBA fans and non-fans, respectively.

Concurrent with $H2a$, subjects who identify as NBA fans are significantly more likely to say that they support professional athlete activism than those who do not identify as fans. Partisan identity and support for the Black Lives Matter movement also condition subjects’
support for athlete activism, partially supporting $H2b$. However, after separating individuals in the lower half of Figure 4 based on NBA fandom, I find that the effects of being a Democrat are muted among NBA fans. This suggests that fans on both sides of the political spectrum and non-fans who identify as Democrats are the primary supporters of athlete activism, signaling that professional athletes may have a unique ability among opinion leaders to reach audiences across the political spectrum. Individuals’ race does not appear to be a consequential predictor of whether or not they support athlete activism, pushing back against $H2b$. Finally, my results show that younger and more educated individuals are each significantly more likely to support athletes’ involvement in politics, especially among fans.

**Figure 4: Which Individuals Support Professional Athletes' Involvement in Politics?**
Next, I identify which subjects seek out or avoid a statement from professional basketball player Chris Paul about the Black Lives Matter social movement and racial injustice. This allows me to compare individuals’ stated support for athlete activism to their actual behavior, providing a more well-rounded picture of who contemporary African American professional athletes reach when they make political statements. Overall, 75.6 percent of my respondents opt to hear what Paul has to say about the Black Lives Matter movement when given a choice. Broken down further, 85.8 percent of NBA fans and 63.55 percent of non-fans opt to hear Paul’s views, and 84.74 percent of Democrats and 70.13 percent of Republicans opt to hear Paul’s views. Figure 5 describes the differences between people who seek out and avoid Paul’s opinions about racial injustice for the entire sample, and for NBA fans and non-fans, respectively.

Figure 5 reveals that NBA fans and individuals who support athlete activism are significantly more likely to opt into seeing professional basketball player Chris Paul’s opinion about the Black Lives Matter movement than non-fans, holding other variables constant. This directly confirms H3a. Support for H3b is not as clear, however. On the one hand, familiarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and support for the movement appear to drive some individuals’ decision to seek out Paul’s views, particularly among non-fans. On the other hand, an individual’s race cannot significantly predict whether or not they seek out Paul’s views, and if anything, race appears to have an opposite effect of that which I hypothesized. White subjects who are NBA fans are slightly more likely to seek out Paul’s views, possibly suggesting that contemporary African American professional athletes are distinctively positioned among African American political opinion leaders to share the voice and concerns of African American people with majority white audiences. Finally, I find that factors like political party, age, and education, which I show above strongly condition whether individuals support professional athletes’
involvement in politics, are unrelated to seeking out Paul’s views. This lends additional support to the idea that contemporary African American professional athletes may wield unique political influence by demonstrating that they reach diverse audiences across the political spectrum when they share their political statements.

**Figure 5: Which Individuals Seek Out Chris Paul’s Opinions About Racial Injustice?**

After investigating which individuals are more likely to seek out or avoid African American professional athletes’ political opinions, I examine those individuals’ responses. Figure 6 presents the five treatment effects from my design with 90% and 95% confidence intervals for the full sample (left panel) and for NBA fans and non-fans separately (right panel).
Point estimates and confidence intervals are provided in Table 3. Most notably, I find that the overall ACTE_{Select} is positive and statistically significant (p<0.01), increasing subjects’ support for the Black Lives Matter movement and racial injustice by 0.16 points on my standardized scale. This reveals that exposure to Chris Paul’s statement about the Black Lives Matter movement has a substantial persuasive influence on individuals who would seek it out when given the choice, supporting \( H5 \). Exposure to Paul’s statement does not carry the same influence among all subjects, however. The overall average treatment effect (ATE) is positive but non-significant, somewhat refuting \( H4 \). The ATE’s insignificance is explained by the non-significant but negative ACTE_{Avoid}; Paul’s statement about the Black Lives Matter movement is not convincing to individuals who would attempt to avoid it.

The CACTEs are non-significant, but suggestive of polarizing heterogeneity. Turning to the right panel of Figure 6, the effect of receiving a statement about the Black Lives Matter movement after attempting to avoid it is positive among NBA fans and negative among non-fans when that statement is attributed LeBron James (CACTE_{Athlete}). Meanwhile, the opposite is true when the statement is attributed to Senator Booker. The CACTE_{Politician} has a negative effect on NBA fans and a positive effect on non-fans. This suggests that professional athletes may wield more political influence over sports fans than politicians, but less political influence over non-fans. The non-significant ACTE_{Avoid} and CACTE_{James} confirm \( H6 \), demonstrating that African American professional athletes’ statements do not have a significant persuasive effect on those who do not seek them out. The right panel of Figure 6 also shows that the positive effect of Paul’s statement on those who seek it out is primarily concentrated among NBA fans.
Figure 6: Treatment Effects on Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement

Table 3: Treatment Effects on Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>NBA Fans</th>
<th>Non-fans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ATE</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[-0.04, 0.25]</td>
<td>[-0.08, 0.31]</td>
<td>[-0.11, 0.32]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTE</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>0.14+</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Select Treatment</td>
<td>[0.04, 0.28]</td>
<td>[-0.01, 0.29]</td>
<td>[-0.05, 0.30]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[-0.17, 0.07]</td>
<td>[-0.20, 0.12]</td>
<td>[-0.11, 0.26]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CACTE</td>
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<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete Treatment</td>
<td>[-0.48, 0.26]</td>
<td>[-0.56, 0.76]</td>
<td>[-0.60, 0.30]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician Treatment</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Point estimates; 95% confidence intervals in brackets
+ p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001
Figure 7 and Table 4 break down differences in the treatment effects of my persuasive argument on certain individuals’ support for the Black Lives Matter movement based on those individuals’ familiarity with the movement, political affiliation, and support for athlete activism. Beginning in the left panel of Figure 7, I find that the positive effects of receiving Chris Paul’s statement about the Black Lives Matter movement are concentrated among subjects who are not familiar with the movement. This suggests that prior knowledge about the Black Lives Matter movement may limit the impact of receiving an athlete’s views, which makes intuitive sense since individuals who are familiar with the movement are more likely to have well-established views that will not vary based on others’ opinions. The left panel of Figure 4 also reveals that athletes’ views may have a backfire effect on individuals who want to avoid them. Among subjects who are familiar with the Black Lives Matter movement and would avoid hearing Chris Paul’s statement when given the choice, the $\text{ACTE}_{\text{Avoid}}$ is negative and significant, decreasing subjects’ support for the Black Lives Matter movement and racial injustice by 0.30 points.

Turning to the center panel of Figure 7, I find that the positive effects of receiving Chris Paul’s statement about the Black Lives Matter movement are concentrated among subjects who are Democrats. This finding also makes intuitive sense since Democrats are more likely to support the Black Lives Matter movement in general (Horowitz and Livingston 2016). While athletes share their opinions with a diverse group of fans from both sides of the political spectrum, they are most likely to influence individuals who are more likely to agree with them. Among Republicans, receiving a statement supporting the Black Lives Matter movement from LeBron James does not have a greater effect than receiving it from Senator Booker, refuting $H7$.

Finally, turning to the right panel of Figure 7, I find that the positive effects of receiving Chris Paul’s statement are concentrated among subjects who support athlete activism.
Figure 7: Treatment Effect Estimates on Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement Conditional on Familiarity, Partisanship, and Support for Athlete Activism

Table 4: Treatment Effect Estimates on Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement Conditional on Familiarity, Partisanship, and Support for Athlete Activism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Familiar</th>
<th>Unfamiliar</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Oppose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ATE</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.21*</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[-0.19, 0.25]</td>
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<td>[0.03, 0.43]</td>
<td>[-0.27, 0.25]</td>
<td>[0.02, 0.32]</td>
<td>[-0.22, 0.24]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTE</td>
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<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>-0.17+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>[0.08, 0.38]</td>
<td>[0.04, 0.39]</td>
<td>[-0.19, 0.24]</td>
<td>[0.06, 0.30]</td>
<td>[-0.36, 0.01]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid Treatment</td>
<td>-0.30**</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>0.34***</td>
<td>0.25*</td>
<td>0.11+</td>
<td>0.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[-0.48, -0.11]</td>
<td>[0.01, 0.34]</td>
<td>[0.20, 0.48]</td>
<td>[0.02, 0.48]</td>
<td>[-0.00, 0.23]</td>
<td>[0.04, 0.45]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CACTE</td>
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<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete Treatment</td>
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<td>[-0.52, 0.32]</td>
<td>[-0.93, 0.45]</td>
<td>[-0.19, 1.01]</td>
<td>[-0.43, 0.26]</td>
<td>[-0.69, 0.17]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician Treatment</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.53+</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[-0.84, 0.48]</td>
<td>[-0.33, 0.48]</td>
<td>[-0.64, 0.67]</td>
<td>[-0.03, 1.09]</td>
<td>[-0.59, 0.29]</td>
<td>[-0.22, 0.56]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Point estimates; 95% confidence intervals in brackets, *p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001
**Discussion**

Using a diverse array of data and a series of interrelated questions, the analysis presented here produces a portrait of contemporary African American professional athletes as political opinion leaders that suggests they should not “shut up and dribble.” Much as they did during the Civil Rights Era, African American professional athletes who feel self-motivated to use their platform to engage in political activism can play a significant role in national conversation about racial injustice by raising awareness and influencing their fans’ opinions. They may even have a unique ability among opinion leaders to reach beyond political and demographic divides.

Stage One of this analysis investigates which African American professional athletes address racial injustice using Twitter data collected from the accounts of every starting American professional basketball player in the NBA in 2017. It reveals that contemporary African American professional athletes are driven to speak out about politics by their internal characteristics. Race, age, education, and outspokenness predict whether professional athletes will engage in politics, while external circumstances like all-star status, fans’ ideology, or contract security have little predictive value. Athletes who do choose to speak out about politics predominantly discuss racial injustice and police brutality, just like the activist athletes who came before them.

Stage Two of this analysis measures the nuanced persuasive effects of African American professional athletes’ political statements on individuals’ opinions about the Black Lives Matter social movement and racial injustice using results from a nationally fielded survey experiment featuring a preference-incorporating choice and assignment (PICA) design. It first reveals that fans and individuals who support athlete activism are significantly more likely to seek out professional athletes’ political views than non-fans and those who oppose athlete activism. This
relationship holds regardless of the individuals’ own demographic characteristics, political ideology, or partisanship, signaling that African American professional athletes may be uniquely positioned among American political opinion leaders to influence a diverse group of citizens from both sides of the political spectrum. Stage Two subsequently reveals that African American professional athletes’ statements have a substantial persuasive effect on individuals who seek them out. African American professional athletes’ statements supporting the Black Lives Matter social movement and calling for racial equality have a positive and statistically significant effect on subjects who would opt to receive those athletes’ opinions when given the opportunity. This effect is especially pronounced among those who are unfamiliar with the Black Lives Matter movement or more likely to support it. Meanwhile, African American professional athletes’ statements do not have a significant persuasive effect on those who do not seek them out, and they may have a negative effect on those who want to avoid athletes’ views altogether. Finally, Stage Two hints that professional athletes may wield more political influence than politicians over sports fans, but less political influence over non-fans. Additional research is needed to further explore this potential relationship. My experiment exposed subjects to a statement from an athlete or politician in a controlled setting, preventing me from fully approximating the effect of athletes’ statements in real life where they are surrounded by other individuals’ statements.

Future research should build on this study’s methods and findings. Twitter data provides scholars with valuable opportunities to study large groups of individuals’ real-time behavior, while experimental designs incorporating choice and self-selection provide more complete answers to questions about how individuals choose to encounter, process, and avoid political information. Employing these methods and others, scholars should examine how athletes’ political influence fits within the broader array of factors influencing national conversation.
Conclusion

Professional athletes have a unique platform in our society, with fans who idolize them across all sides of the political spectrum. Over the years, a number of African American professional athletes have used this platform to speak out on issues important to them, most notably in the area of racial justice. The question remains, however, whether this platform translates into the ability to broadly influence the public discussion in what is often viewed as an over-polarized society. Some political commentators believe athletes should “shut up and dribble,” while others believe they can use their platform to spotlight social issues and influence public opinion. In my analysis, I conclude that contemporary African American professional athletes can positively influence their fans’ opinions about the Black Lives Matter movement and racial injustice, suggesting that athletes can inspire social change and do more than just dribble.
References


ESPN. March 12, 2019. “ESPN World Fame 100.” ESPN.


Wyche, Steve. August 27, 2016. “Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat During the National Anthem.” NFL.com


Appendix

Full text of the Stage Two survey experiment’s treatment conditions and question wordings are included below. The transcript of Chris Paul, LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, and Carmelo Anthony’s 2016 ESPY Awards speech about racial injustice is also included.

Survey Experiment Treatment Conditions and Question Wordings

Q1 – INFORMED CONSENT

The general nature of this study entitled “Black Lives Matter Attitudes” conducted by Dr. Jaime Settle and Carl Lasker (xxxxxxxx@email.wm.edu) has been explained to me. I understand that I will be asked to answer a series of questions about myself and my behavior. My participation in this study should take a total of about 5 minutes. Participation in this study may involve some risks of boredom, frustration, anxiety, or anger. To minimize these risks, you may choose to not answer any of the questions or to stop the survey at any time. I understand anonymity will be preserved and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I know that I may refuse to answer any question asked and that I may discontinue participation at any time. I also understand that any payment for participation will not be affected by my responses or by my exercising any of my rights. Potential risks resulting from my participation in this project have been described to me. I am aware that I may report concerns or dissatisfactions with any aspect of this study to Dr. Jennifer Stevens, chair of the WM Protection of Human Subjects Committee (PHSC). Local telephone: (xxx) xxx-xxxx, Toll free line: x-xxx-xxx-x. I am aware that I must be at least 18 years of age to participate.
- I consent to participate in this study
- I do not consent to participate in this study

Q2 – FAMILIARITY

We are interested in your views about the Black Lives Matter social movement. How familiar are you with the Black Lives Matter social movement?
- Extremely familiar
- Very familiar
- Moderately familiar
- Slightly familiar
- Not familiar at all

** CONDUCT FIRST LAYER OF RANDOMIZATION **
EXPERIMENTAL CONDITION

40% of subjects are assigned to the experimental condition. Half of those subjects receive a persuasive argument supporting the Black Lives Matter movement attributed to professional basketball player Chris Paul. They are shown the following:

Before asking you about your views, we'd like to give you the opportunity to hear some thoughts that a professional basketball player has on the Black Lives Matter social movement.

Here's what professional basketball player Chris Paul had to say about the Black Lives Matter social movement:

> I think the Black Lives Matter movement is really important. We cannot ignore the realities of the current state of America. Recent events have put a spotlight on the injustice, distrust and anger that plague so many of us. The system is broken. The problems are not new. The violence is not new. And the racial divide definitely is not new. But the urgency to create change is at an all-time high.


> Generations ago, legends like Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, John Carlos and Tommie Smith, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Jim Brown, Billie Jean King, Arthur Ashe, and countless others set a model for what athletes should stand for. So I choose to follow in their footsteps.

> The racial profiling has to stop. The shoot-to-kill mentality has to stop. Not seeing the value of black and brown bodies has to stop. But also, the retaliation has to stop. The endless gun violence in places like Chicago, Dallas, not to mention Orlando, it has to stop. Enough is enough.

> It’s on us to challenge each other to do even more than we already do in our own communities. And the conversation, it cannot stop as our schedules get busy again. It won’t always be convenient or comfortable, but it is necessary.

> We all feel helpless and frustrated by the violence. But that’s not acceptable. It’s time to look in the mirror and ask ourselves what are we doing to create change. Speak up and renounce all violence. We all have to do better. We have a long way to go, but the Black Lives Matter movement seems like a step in the right direction.

The other half of the subjects in the experimental condition see nothing and proceed to Questions 3-5.
CHOICE CONDITION

The other 60% of subjects are assigned to the choice condition. They are asked whether they want to read a persuasive argument supporting the Black Lives Matter movement attributed to professional basketball player Chris Paul. They are shown the following:

Before asking you about your views, we'd like to give you the opportunity to hear some thoughts that a professional basketball player has on the Black Lives Matter social movement.

Would you like to hear professional basketball player Chris Paul's opinions?

- I’d like to hear Chris Paul’s opinions
- I’d rather not hear Chris Paul’s opinions

IF subjects select: “I’d like to hear Chris Paul’s opinions” they are shown the persuasive argument displayed above.

IF subjects select “I’d rather not hear Chris Paul’s opinions” they are shown one of the following:

1) The persuasive argument displayed above attributed to professional basketball player LeBron James;

2) The persuasive argument displayed above attributed to Senator Cory Booker;

3) Nothing.

The third paragraph of the persuasive argument displayed above is slightly modified when it is attributed to Senator Booker. It reads:

Generations ago, legends like John Lewis, Martin Luther King Jr., James Farmer, Rosa Parks, Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, Whitney Young, Dorothy Height, Jesse Jackson, and countless others set a model for what activists and leaders should stand for. So I choose to follow in their footsteps.

The following images appear next to statements attributed to James or Senator Booker:
Next, all participants are shown the following:

Now we would like to hear your views about the Black Lives Matter social movement.

**Q3-5 – OPINIONS (Random Order)**

Using a 7-point scale where 4 means you neither agree nor disagree, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

- I support the Black Lives Matter movement.
- The Black Lives Matter movement raises awareness about racism, racial injustice, and police brutality.
- The Black Lives Matter movement can sometimes go too far.

**Q6-8 – OPINIONS CONTINUED (Random Order)**

Using a 7-point scale where 4 means you neither agree nor disagree, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.

- Racial injustice and police brutality are still far too common in the U.S.
- In general, African Americans have the same rights and opportunities as white Americans.
- Concerns about racial injustice are overblown.

**Q7-16 – DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS**

What is your age in years?

What is your gender?
- Male
- Female
- Other

Which of the following racial or ethnic groups best describes you? Please select all that apply.
- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Hispanic or Latino
- Other

What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- Less than high school
- High school graduate
- Some college, no degree
- 2 year associate degree from a college or university
- 4 year college or university degree
- Postgraduate or professional degree (including master’s, doctorate, medical or law degree)

Which of the following best indicates how much money your family's total income was this past year?
- Less than $10,000
- $10,000 - $19,999
- $20,000 - $29,999
- $30,000 - $39,999
- $40,000 - $49,999
- $50,000 - $59,999
- $60,000 - $69,999
- $70,000 - $79,999
- $80,000 - $89,999
- $90,000 - $99,999
- $100,000 - $149,999
- More than $150,000

In general, how would you describe your political views?
- Very conservative
- Conservative
- Moderate
- Liberal
- Very Liberal
- Prefer not to answer

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a...
- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- Other

Would you call yourself a… (IF subjects selected: “Democrat”)
- Not very strong Democrat
- Strong Democrat

Would you call yourself a… (IF subjects selected: “Republican”)
- Not very strong Republican
- Strong Republican

Would you consider yourself closer to… (IF subjects selected: “Independent”)
- The Republican Party
- The Democratic Party
- Neither
Q17 – SPORTS FANDOM (Random Order)

Please indicate whether you consider yourself a fan of the following sports / leagues:
- Football / NFL
- Basketball / NBA
- Baseball / MLB
- Hockey / NHL

Q18-19 – ATHLETE ACTIVISM OPINIONS

How effective do you think it is when professional athletes protest for political reasons? Is it…
- Very effective
- Somewhat effective
- Not too effective
- Not at all effective
- Don’t know or undecided

Which of the following statements comes closer to your opinion -- even if neither is exactly right?
- Professional athletes should get involved in politics such as endorsing candidates or speaking out on causes
- Professional athletes should not get involved in politics such as endorsing candidates or speaking out on causes

Q20 – DECEPTION STATEMENT

Thank you for your participation! To complete this survey, please acknowledge that you have read and understand the following statement about the use of deception in this study.

Some of the statements you saw in this study may have been altered or attributed to individuals who did not directly say them. The text from the statement you may have seen attributed to Chris Paul, LeBron James, or Senator Cory Booker was condensed from a speech given by Paul and James at the 2016 ESPY awards. The full text of the speech is available at https://time.com/4406289/lebron-james-carmelo-anthony-espy-awards-transcript/. Senator Booker did not issue any of the statement attributed to him, however the statement approximates his views. Senator Booker lists “provide better training for law enforcement officers on implicit racial bias, de-escalation and use-of-force” and “prohibit racial and religious profiling and improve the reporting of police use-of-force incidents” among his policy priorities on his website. Senator Booker also has posted public tweets condemning racial injustice and police brutality and challenging Americans to create change. He has directly mentioned many of the victims whose names appear in the statement in his tweets. A collection of tweets demonstrating that the statements I attribute to Senator Booker approximates his views is included below. You can find a list of Senator Booker’s criminal justice policy priorities at https://corybooker.com/issues/criminal-justice/.

- I understand deception was used in the statements provided during this study.
Cory Booker Tweets:

Today on what would've been Nipsey Hussle’s 34th birthday, we honor his life & legacy of art & community empowerment. His death was a tragic reminder that far too many Black men’s lives are cut short by gun violence. So today we celebrate his life & recommit to this urgent fight. 8/15/19

5 years ago, Michael Brown was killed by a police officer. His body lay on the street for hours before he was treated with humanity. I have been thinking all day about Mike and his family, and my prayers are with them. 8/9/19

Gun violence cannot be normalized, regardless of where it happens. El Paso. Dayton. Chicago. We’re in a crisis. To my colleagues who say that now isn’t the time for politics—American lives are at stake. We need to act. 8/5/19

Today marks 5 years since Eric Garner’s tragic death. May he rest in peace; may he one day see justice; and may we find the courage to fix the failures of our broken justice system—one that failed Eric again yesterday when it was reported his killer would not be held accountable. 7/17/19

Tamir Rice would be 17 today. But at 12, he was unjustly killed by a cop whose biases made him see Tamir as a man instead of a child. We need police oversight. We need racial bias training. We need to do more to protect Black children—they deserve to live and be kids, too. 6/25/19

Significant racial disparities persist in the criminal justice system. 7/17/15
Enclosed below is the full transcript of a televised speech given by NBA stars LeBron James, Chris Paul, Carmelo Anthony, and Dwyane Wade at the 2016 ESPY (Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly) Awards. The speech calls for athletes to use their platform to denounce racism, injustice, and gun violence. I drew from the text of this speech to create the persuasive argument in my study.

SPEECH FULL TEXT:

CARMELO ANTHONY: Good evening. Tonight is a celebration of sports, celebrating our accomplishments and our victories. But, in this moment of celebration, we asked to start the show tonight this way — the four of us talking to our fellow athletes with the country watching. Because we cannot ignore the realities of the current state of America. The events of the past week have put a spotlight on the injustice, distrust and anger that plague so many of us. The system is broken. The problems are not new. The violence is not new. And the racial divide definitely is not new. But the urgency to create change is at an all-time high.

CHRIS PAUL: We stand here tonight, accepting our role in uniting communities, to be the change we need to see. We stand before you as fathers, sons, husbands, brothers, uncles — and in my case, as an African American man and the nephew of a police officer, who is one of the hundreds of thousands of great officers serving this country. But, Trayvon Martin. Michael Brown. Tamir Rice. Eric Garner. Laquan McDonald. Alton Sterling. Philando Castile. This is also our reality. Generations ago, legends like Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, John Carlos and Tommie Smith, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Jim Brown, Billie Jean King, Arthur Ashe and countless others, they set a model for what athletes should stand for. So we choose to follow in their footsteps.

DWYANE WADE: The racial profiling has to stop. The shoot-to-kill mentality has to stop. Not seeing the value of black and brown bodies has to stop. But also, the retaliation has to stop. The endless gun violence in places like Chicago, Dallas, not to mention Orlando, it has to stop. Enough. Enough is enough. Now, as athletes, it’s on us to challenge each other to do even more than we already do in our own communities. And the conversation, it cannot stop as our schedules get busy again. It won’t always be convenient. It won’t. It won’t always be comfortable, but it is necessary.

LEBRON JAMES: We all feel helpless and frustrated by the violence. We do. But that’s not acceptable. It’s time to look in the mirror and ask ourselves what are we doing to create change. It’s not about being a role model. It’s not about our responsibility to the tradition of activism. I know tonight we’re honoring Muhammad Ali. The GOAT. But to do his legacy any justice, let’s use this moment as a call to action for all professional athletes to educate ourselves. It’s for these issues. Speak up. Use our influence. And renounce all violence. And most importantly, go back to our communities, invest our time, our resources, help rebuild them, help strengthen them, help change them. We all have to do better. Thank you.