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“IT IS IN OUR DNA”: ATHLETE ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE
DURING THE 2020 WNBA SEASON

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes the athlete activism in the WNBA, the use of social media for activism, and the social media discourse during the 2020 basketball season. I applied Critical Discourse Analysis to a defined set of texts including social media posts from Instagram and Twitter, user comments on social media, news articles from sports and non-sports publications, and a documentary, all related to the activism of the WNBA athletes. I chose the 2020 season because it is an exceptional case study of athlete activism and the use of social media for activism because the season was played in a single site location due to the global pandemic. Other cultural and political factors made the season unique such as the increasingly apparent systemic racism in the United States and the impending elections in 2020. Throughout the season, the WNBA athletes devoted their activism to Breonna Taylor, the #SayHerName campaign, Black women victims of police violence, Jacob Blake, Black Lives Matter, and the Georgia Senate race between Atlanta Dream co-owner Kelly Loeffler and Rev. Raphael Warnock. The athletes used their platform and social media to immerse themselves in the political, social, and cultural events happening at the time, fought for social justice issues, and became a “voice for the voiceless” during the 2020 season. Through the social media discourse, I found there was a backlash towards the activism throughout the season, including consistent themes of racism, white supremacy, misogyny, and patriotism. Even though the athletes’ activism contributed to Warnock winning the Senate race and becoming the first Black Senator in Georgia, there have been significant impacts of their activism seen in the changes to social media platforms that may make it more difficult for athletes’ voices to be heard and for social media to be a place for activism.

For Kenley and Crosby, you can do hard things.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAPF – African American Policy Forum

ABC – American Broadcast Company

BLM – Black Lives Matter

CDA – Critical Discourse Analysis

ESPN – Entertainment and Sports Programming Network

IOC – International Olympic Committee

MLB – Major League Baseball

MLS – Major League Soccer

NBA – National Basketball Association

NCAA – National Collegiate Athletics Association

NWSL – National Women’s Soccer League

NASSS – North American Society for the Sociology of Sport

QR – quick response

WNBA – Women’s National Basketball Association

WNBPA – Women’s National Basketball Players Association

INTRODUCTION

The 2020 Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) basketball season was a critical case study of athlete activism during a pivotal and unprecedented time in the country. In the weeks leading up to 2020, the first global pandemic since 1912 was on the brink. In December 2019, a novel coronavirus (2019-nCov or Covid-19) was identified in Wuhan, China causing alarm as the world rang in a new year. In the United States (U.S.), President Donald Trump was going into his fourth year in his first term as President and was hopeful to win another term in the November 2020 election. As the year progressed, cases of Covid-19 made their way to the U.S., and we were heading into uncharted territory. To make matters worse, there were many instances of racism and police shootings of Black Americans in the country resulting in protests in major cities across the U.S. in the summer of 2020. The social, political, and cultural events of 2020 made for a remarkable and historic year in the U.S. As these events unfolded as the year went on, they also had a profound impact on the world of sports. The year 2020 would change everything we knew about sports, athlete activism, and the role of social media in both.

Due to safety concerns and the global pandemic, the WNBA season tipped off later than expected at a single site location in Bradenton, Florida. The single site location allowed the WNBA players to become a united front to intentionally bring attention to the social justice issues facing Black Americans in the U.S. The athletes made a collective decision to dedicate the season to police shooting victim Breonna Taylor and the #SayHerName campaign. The WNBA athletes stated that they were a “voice for the voiceless” during the season shining light on cases of police violence against Black and brown women. As the season continued, the WNBA

athletes continued conversations of systemic racism in America and protested basketball games following the police shooting of Jacob Blake. The athletes also showed their support of Rev. Raphael Warnock who eventually defeated incumbent and co-owner of the Atlanta Dream, Kelly Loeffler, to become the first Black Senator in the state of Georgia.

By analyzing the acts of activism by the WNBA athletes and the discourse on social media during the 2020 season, I answer the following research questions in this dissertation:

1. How did the athletes of the WNBA use the affordances of social media sites Twitter and Instagram to assume the role as activists during the 2020 season?
2. How has the 2020 WNBA season impacted the public discourse of athletes as activists evaluated through social media engagement on Twitter and Instagram?
3. How did the successes and challenges of athlete activism by the WNBA athletes during the 2020 season reframe our understanding of the role of athletes as activists?

To better understand how the cultural, political, and social events of 2020 set the scene for the athlete activism during the 2020 season, I will specifically discuss how the global pandemic impacted the sports world which caused the WNBA season to be played in what was known as “the bubble.” Additionally, I will discuss how police violence and the killings of Black Americans created the Black Lives Matter movement, and how the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd by police officers in 2020 impacted the athletes of the WNBA.

A global pandemic and the halt of sports

The 2020 WNBA season tipped off three months later than expected, on July 24, 2020, at a single site location in Bradenton, Florida, in a “bubble.” The WNBA athletes gathered in

Bradenton for this unusual season for the first time in the history of the league due to the Covid-19 virus. The unknown aspects of the virus and the rapid spread across the borders of the world halted all aspects of life. People all over the world, including in the U.S., were forced to implement social distancing to stay away from others, self-quarantine to attempt to stop the spread of the virus, and stay in their homes. The virus forced the rapid closure of schools, universities, businesses, places of worship, and social engagements, taking us into unprecedented times (Grix et al., 2021). The abrupt changes caused by the virus halted sports and completely removed them from our everyday lives. Sports may be viewed as a luxury or trivial compared to the Covid-19 virus taking the lives of people across the world, but sports also offer a powerful cultural force that help people get through difficult times, such as the social implications brought on by a global pandemic (Grix et al., 2021). The Covid-19 had significant impacts on all facets of the sports industry.

Over the span of just three days in March 2020 in the U.S., the world of sports headed into extraordinary times. In the weeks and days leading up to March 11, 2020, there were rumblings about what was happening to international sporting events and in sports leagues in the U.S. and neighboring countries. League officials from various sports continued to monitor the news and talked with trusted officials. National Basketball Association (NBA) commissioner Adam Silver discussed with each team the possibility of moving forward with league games without fans. However, that possibility did not last long. On March 11, it was confirmed that one Utah Jazz player tested positive for Covid-19. An official who refereed the Utah Jazz game earlier that week was scheduled to officiate the New Orleans-Sacramento game that evening.

Silver made the decision to cancel that game before deciding to put the whole NBA season on pause (Blinder & Drape, 2021).

The news of the NBA postponement spread through different sports leagues. Most pressing, the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) men's and women's basketball tournaments were starting in just a few days and the country was gearing up for March Madness. The following month, the Boston Marathon was scheduled to take place bringing in runners from all over the world. Athletes who were training for various events, leagues, and teams, were all over the world and had to find their way home as borders were being closed. By the end of March 12, the NCAA decided to cancel the basketball tournaments. The cancellation of March Madness resulted in an immediate loss of a \$375 million payout for Division I universities, thus having major financial implications on collegiate sports and athletic budgets (Swanson & Smith, 2020). As the days and months went on, local, amateur, and professional sports leagues all suffered losses of some kind, some more than others. Certain events and leagues were forced to dissolve completely as a result of the global pandemic (Pedersen et al., 2021). College and universities dealt with extreme budget cuts, having to cancel sports seasons in 2020 or were forced to cut sports altogether which deeply impacted athletes and coaches alike (Swanson & Smith, 2020).

The pandemic affected all stakeholders of the sports industry including the athletes, fans, marketers, sponsors, policymakers, ownership, sports media, and sports journalists. However, the impacts of the pandemic on sports were disproportional for women's and girls' sports, low to middle-income countries, and athletes with disabilities, having more significant negative impacts than on men's sports (Nauright et al., 2020). In turn, the WNBA also felt the impacts of the

pandemic on their upcoming season. While the league was not currently in season at the time, the 24th season of the WNBA was scheduled to start on May 15, 2020. The major sports leagues across the U.S. had to get creative if they wanted to continue or start their seasons in 2020. Without sports and while people were staying home and keeping their distance from one another, people were paying close attention to the news about the events happening in the U.S., such as the repeated police violence against Black Americans.

Police violence and killings of Black Americans

In addition to the disproportionate stress and concerns about the global Covid-19 pandemic, Black Americans in the U.S. were also facing continued racism as many Black Americans were publicly dying at the hands of police officers. There were two key examples of police violence during 2020 that sparked outrage and gained national media attention. First, on March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old emergency medical technician, was fatally shot by police officers in Louisville, Kentucky during a botched narcotics raid of her apartment. Officers linked Taylor to an ex-boyfriend who they claimed had been sending packages to Taylor's residence, which prompted the search warrant. However, Taylor's current boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, who was also in her apartment at the time of the raid, indicated that the officers did not identify themselves and he shot his weapon at the intruders in self-defense because he feared for his and Taylor's lives. No drugs were found in her apartment and one of the three officers that shot and killed Taylor in her apartment had been fired, but no criminal charges were filed (Oppel, Jr. et al., 2020).

Just over two months later, on May 25, 2020, the Minneapolis Police Department was called on George Floyd who attempted to pay for items at a convenience store with an apparent counterfeit bill. The police officers arrived at the convenience store to arrest Floyd. Minutes later, Floyd was being forcefully held down by three police officers. Floyd could not breathe and ended up laying lifeless on the ground next to the police cruiser. The murder was caught on video by bystanders and immediately went viral. In the following days following Floyd's death, all four officers were fired from the Minneapolis Police Department. The white officer that held his knee on Floyd's neck was charged with third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter charges (Hill et al., 2020). The killing of George Floyd sparked protests all over the country during a time where it was advised to stay at home and social distance from those around you. Following the death of George Floyd and during a global pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement came back into the spotlight as protesters used this phrase as a cry for help in the U.S. (Crary & Morrison, 2020).

Prior to the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, there has been a long history of Black Americans dying at the hands of police officers which prompted the creation of a global movement called Black Lives Matter (BLM). The BLM movement can be traced back to the murders of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012 and 18-year-old Michael Brown in 2014. Martin was walking through his neighborhood in Sanford, Florida wearing a hoodie when he was shot and killed by George Zimmerman. A year later, on July 13, 2013, Zimmerman was acquitted of the charges making this day a pivotal moment in highlighting the systemic racism in the United States (Ince et al., 2017). In response to the shooting and eventual acquittal, three Black organizers, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created #BlackLivesMatter, a Black-

centered political movement (Garza, 2014). After Zimmerman was acquitted in the murder of Martin, the words “Black Lives Matter” first appeared on Facebook and the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter, #nojustice, and #RIPTrayvonMartin began to appear on social media (De Kosnik & Feldman, 2019). The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was not as popular in the first year of inception but has since become one of the best examples of hashtag activism and in-the-streets activism to date. The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag took off the year following Zimmerman’s trial during the Ferguson protests after the death of Michael Brown (Burgess & Baym, 2020). Brown was an unarmed teenager in Ferguson, Missouri who was shot and killed by police officers. Shortly after his death, a bystander posted on Twitter “I just saw someone die,” along with a photo of Brown’s body, thus beginning the huge role of social media influence within the Black Lives Matter movement (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). The Black Lives Matter movement has continued to grow over the past decade as more Black Americans are killed each year. While the Black Lives Matter movement continues to grow strong, there is also a larger movement for Black lives that has become a broader topic of conversation. Both BLM as an organization and the movement for Black lives have become a focus of athlete activism among athletes of many professional sports leagues, including the WNBA. The 2020 season was a pivotal moment of activism by the WNBA athletes.

WNBA season in the bubble

One of the main factors that played into the uniqueness of the 2020 season was that for the first time ever, all 12 WNBA teams from all over the U.S. participated in training camp, a 22-game regular season, and a traditional playoff at a single location at the IMG Academy in

Bradenton, Florida, from July until October. The WNBA league officials, along with the Women's National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA), decided on the single location for the basketball season to be able to implement and control health and safety protocols to keep the players, coaches, and staff safe from Covid-19 (WNBA, 2020a). In addition to the uniqueness of the season in the single location due to Covid-19, the 2020 WNBA basketball season quickly became a critical space for social justice initiatives and the BLM movement. The 2020 season was dedicated to social justice through the formation of the inaugural Social Justice Council and the launch of a new platform called *The Justice Movement*. The mission of the Social Justice Council was to be continue the necessary conversations about race, voting rights, LGBTQ+ advocacy, and gun control, along with other important issues in society. Through *The Justice Movement*, the WNBA league and players association aimed to design a space for conversations among players and community members, host virtual roundtables, release podcasts, and address the country's history of implicit bias, systemic racism, and inequality of Black and brown communities. With the plan to educate, amplify, and mobilize, the league and players association planned to bridge the gap between community leaders, educators, activists, and players, teams, league staff, and fans (WNBA, 2020b).

In addition to the formation of the Social Justice Council and the *The Justice Movement*, the WNBA athletes also dedicated the 2020 season to Breonna Taylor and the #SayHerName campaign (Hurd, 2020). The support of the #SayHerName campaign and the larger Black Lives Matter movement by the WNBA league and athletes was not supported by all members of the WNBA community. Co-owner of the Atlanta Dream and U.S. Republican Senator of Georgia, Kelly Loeffler, wrote a letter to the WNBA Commissioner, Cathy Engelbert, to express her

disappointment in the league's stance to bring a political platform into the league. She stated that there should be "less – not more politics in sports" and that players, coaches, and team owners share differing opinions on these issues (Bluestein & Felicien, 2020). Throughout the season, the WNBA athletes remained committed to the #SayHerName campaign, Breonna Taylor, and the BLM movement by protesting basketball games following the police shooting of Jacob Blake. The WNBA players also involved themselves in the 2020 Georgia Senate race taking place in November 2020 by openly supporting Loeffler's opponent, Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock. The WNBA athletes donned "Vote Warnock" warmups prior to their nationally televised games and then featured the shirts on many social media accounts (Thomas & Wright, 2021).

Social media and sports media played a critical role in the amplification of athlete activism of the 2020 WNBA season. Due to the location of the WNBA games and the regulations surrounding the global pandemic, there were no fans or media allowed inside the "bubble" in Bradenton, Florida. The league relied on social media to spread information about what was happening inside the "bubble" which included athlete activism. The official WNBA social media accounts on Twitter and Instagram were used as a critical means to share information about the Say Her Name campaign, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the stance of the WNBA athletes on the critical issues in the U.S. at the time.

Methodology

I applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the set of defined texts collected to answer my research questions. The texts include social media posts from Twitter and Instagram, user comments on various social media posts, news articles, and a documentary. Within the texts

collected, I analyzed various aspects of the data through the lens of CDA. The social media posts collected from Instagram and Twitter are from the official @WNBA accounts on both social media platforms related to the #SayHerName hashtag, as well as images of athlete activism posted on Instagram. I analyzed both the language of the text in the social media post, as well as the image posted. In addition to the posts generated by the WNBA, I collected the replies to tweets on Twitter and comments on Instagram which are user-generated and provide insight into the public discourse on social media related to the activism shown in the original social media posts. The news articles were collected from the Nexis Uni (formerly LexisNexis Academic) database using the search terms “WNBA”, “Warnock”, and “Loeffler.” I chose 18 total articles from sports and non-sports publications between the dates of July 1, 2020, to February 28, 2021. Finally, I analyzed the athlete discourse in the documentary, *144*, related to the WNBA, Rev. Raphael Warnock, and Kelly Loeffler to provide additional insight not reported in the news articles. In each chapter, I provide greater detail about the texts that were used, how the texts were collected, and the number of texts analyzed.

CDA aims to “systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relationships and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power” (Fairclough, 132). When interpreting the data, there are three dimensions of discursive practice: (1) its manifestation in linguistic forms (‘texts’); (2) its instantiation of social practice, such as political or ideological; and (3) the socially constructed processes of production, distribution, and consumption which determine how the texts are made, circulated, and used (Locke, 2004). Using

CDA is appropriate for this case study as language is a social practice and influenced by those who are socially situated in power (Kress, 1990). CDA is useful to help illustrate how word choice and language further our understanding of topics like racism, police brutality, and the role of sport and sport stakeholders in addressing social justice issues (Sanderson, 2023). This methodology brings light the role of politics, the reproduction of racism and sexism in discourse, and structure and power dominance that is reproduced in texts (Kress, 1990), which is why I have chosen CDA for this dissertation to investigate the discourse on social media surrounding the 2020 WNBA season.

Researchers in sports media have used CDA as a methodology which is another reason why it is appropriate for this study. CDA has been used to identify Black masculinity in commentary during NBA games to examine media representations of identity (Lavelle, 2010). Additionally, related to activism in sport, CDA has been applied to the NFL owner's response to then President Trump's comments about athlete activism on the field. Trump directed NFL owners to respond to activism on the playing field and questioned the character of the NFL players who participated in such activism. Through CDA it was found that the owners' responses to Trump's comments maintain white privilege and appealed to their white fan base (McGannon & Butryn, 2020).

Additionally, Feminist CDA "aims to advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements" (Lazar, 141). Looking at the data through a feminist lens is crucial for this study since I identify the role of athletes in the WNBA as activists. Lazar argues for the need for feminist research in CDA due to the overreliance on the research of straight, white males over

the years. There is a need for diversity of feminist women from all over the world. Boling studied the #ShePersisted hashtag on Instagram following Senator Elizabeth Warren's speech and Mitch McConnell's subsequent statement "Nevertheless, she persisted" to apply feminist CDA showing how political power impacts women. Additionally, she found that a digital environment like social media can change when marginalized communities connect and spread information (Boling, 2020).

Literature Review

Lack of coverage in women's sports

Since the inception of the league, the athletes of the WNBA have consistently been overshadowed in the media by men's sports. Research shows there is a significant difference in the television and media coverage given to athletes depending on which sports league they play in. Televised sports news and ESPN's *Sportscenter* broadcasts cover men's sports leagues nearly all of the time, even featuring stories that cover men's sports that are out of season showing that women's sports are less interesting, less important, and less valued than men's sports (Cooky et al., 2015). Since 2009, sports coverage has been mostly devoted to the "Big Three" which includes men's college and professional basketball, men's college and professional football, and men's college and professional baseball. The Big Three consisted of 68% of sports covered in 2009, 74.5% in 2014, and 75.2% in 2019 (Cooky et al., 2021). Over the years, the coverage of the Big Three has increased, leaving less time for coverage of diverse sports, including women's sports leagues. Additionally, in 2019, of the 251 broadcasts analyzed, five broadcasts opened with a story related to women's sports equating to 2% of the total. All five opening stories were

in July 2019 and were related to the U.S. Women's National Team (USWNT) winning the soccer World Cup (Cooky et al., 2021).

While men's sports still dominate airtime on both TV news and *Sportscenter*, there have been some improvements in the quality of coverage of women's sports leagues. Over the past 25 years, there has been growth in the way that athletes of women's sports leagues have been portrayed and discussed in news segments. It was previously common for female athletes to be joked about or treated as sexual objects during news coverage or sports highlights by commentators (Cooky et al., 2015). In the news stories, these athletes were often the punchline of a joke rather than receiving actual coverage on their sporting event. One positive aspect of the evolving coverage of women's sports leagues is that the oversexualizing, insulting, and disparaging remarks towards athletes of women's sports leagues has significantly declined over the years and is nonexistent now. One small victory in the coverage of women's sports is that it has become more respectable, even if there isn't much of it (Cooky et al., 2015).

In addition to sports media coverage, there are significant differences in most aspects of men's sports leagues and women's sports leagues. Men's sports leagues are the default league and assume the role as superior to women's sports leagues which can be seen by simply observing the names of the leagues. The National Basketball Association or NBA is the name of the men's basketball league, though there is no mention of "men" anywhere. The men's league is inherently the default league while there must be a designation in the women's league name. The Women's National Basketball Association or WNBA is the "other" to the NBA. Similarly, this is the case outside of basketball. Major League Soccer (MLS) is the professional soccer league for men in the U.S. while the women's professional league must be labeled as the National

Women's Soccer League (NWSL). Therefore, it is not surprising that sports media tends to cover the default men's sports leagues over women's sports leagues and the same goes for the coverage of athlete activism. Cooky et al. (2021) found that there are frequently feel-good stories about professional athletes of men's sports leagues, and sometimes collegiate sports, that show the athletes giving back to the community. However, the athletes of the WNBA have a long history of community involvement as seen in the WNBA Cares initiative, though it is not being covered in the media. Additionally, the athlete-activists of the WNBA have been trailblazers for social justice causes, though there has been far less coverage of these athletes who bring a unique and diverse set of experiences and characteristics (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Lavelle, 2019).

Access to and the use of social media offers many affordances to athletes of women's sports leagues and is a critical component to this dissertation. Social media provides these athletes with an avenue for discourse and activism that allows them to circumvent the traditional sports outlets that do not give them the coverage they deserve (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012). Athletes in women's sports leagues have used social media as a more accessible way of creating their own narrative and spreading pertinent information about inequalities in sports. Athletes of women's sports leagues have turned to social media for self-promotion, marketing, publicity, social interactions with fans and fellow athletes, and for more explicit political reasons (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). A recent example was during the 2021 NCAA women's basketball tournament when photos and videos were released of the weight room and amenities at the single site location of the tournament. Sedona Prince, forward for the University of Oregon, recorded a video of the weight room and amenities provided by the NCAA comparing the weight room, which consisted of a single rack of dumbbells, to footage of the expansive and elaborate weight

room at the site of NCAA men's basketball tournament location. The video was posted to TikTok and Twitter sparking outrage and a greater conversation on the social media sites of the inequalities in sports (SEDONA [@sedonaprince_], 2021). Many news outlets then picked up the story sharing side by side photos of the two weight rooms and highly inequitable conditions, forcing the NCAA to address the differences. These differences are not surprising, but they wouldn't have been discovered or reported on without Prince speaking out. The NCAA men's and women's basketball tournaments are one of the few examples where the men's and women's tournaments are played at the same time, offering a good opportunity for comparison. Past studies, including the study in 2019, found that the term "March Madness" used to promote the NCAA tournament was only used for the men's basketball tournament (Cooky et al., 2021). Only recently did the NCAA decide to include the women's basketball tournament in the March Madness brand (G. Johnson, 2021). In response to the 2021 NCAA tournament conditions, many former NCAA and current WNBA players chimed in on social media in support of the collegiate athletes, calling out the NCAA for disrespecting the women's teams, citing Title IX, and accusing the NCAA for playing favorites with the men's teams (Coleman, 2021). WNBA athletes are no stranger to using social media to promote their league. Social media was critical once the athletes entered the bubble for the 2020 season. Thanks to Sedona and many of the other athlete activists, the NCAA was forced to respond and provide equitable solutions to the issues raised on social media.

Social media in sports

Social media is used in sport at many different levels by the leagues, teams, athletes, and fans. The official WNBA social media accounts on Twitter and Instagram are used to share information about the league, teams, and athletes to generate excitement of the fans. Hull and Abeza's 2021 study of 26 professional sports teams from four major leagues in North America found that the teams' objectives for using social media can be categorized into one of six categories: interaction, team news updates, ticket sales, sponsorships, public relations, and customer service. The WNBA and WNBA teams rely on social media for each of these six categories.

Since 2008, the WNBA and Twitter have grown into a thriving partnership. The WNBA has continued to look to Twitter to create community and amplify the voices of the league's athletes. Prior to the 25th season in 2021, the WNBA and Twitter created the first-ever wearable technology in the form of a hooded sweatshirt (*How the WNBA Got the W on Twitter*, 2021). The hoodie included a "W" which was a QR code leading directly to the #WNBATwitter community. The launch tweet from the @WNBA account stated,

"Not "just" a hoodie. Co-created with @Twitter, this hoodie includes a "hidden" QR code that gives the #WNBA community a direct line for sparking conversation about the game and causes they stand for." (WNBA [@WNBA], 2021).

Once the QR code is scanned, users are redirected to a pre-populated tweet that allows the user to post to their Twitter account. The tweet states,

"With this Tweet, I'm standing with the WNBA and the entire W community to elevate women in sports and shine a light on the social justice causes they're fighting for.

Retweet or Tweet using #WNBATwitter, and watch on WNBA Twitter Live. #CountIt” (Terrika [@SheKnowsSports], 2021).

The WNBA capitalized on the popularity of QR codes to give fans a direct line of communication to the conversation surrounding the 2021 season. The hoodie turned into a platform for fans and the total number tweets about opening day doubled from the prior season (*How the WNBA Got the W on Twitter*, 2021).

Social media sites, such as Twitter and Instagram, have allowed fans to consume media from their favorite sports teams, leagues, and athletes differently than they have in the past. Social media allows for instant access to news and the latest information as soon as it’s available. Game scores, statistics, photos, and videos can be accessed during the competition, and the final score, and post-game interviews are available immediately after the competition (Hull & Abeza, 2021). This is particularly important due to the lack of mainstream media coverage given to women’s sports leagues. Social media platforms also allow fans to engage and connect with one another more than ever before. The use of the hashtag (#) allows like-minded fans to click on a topic and receive all the posts about that topic in one place. For example, fans and WNBA enthusiasts use the #WNBATwitter hashtag on the platform to create a community that exists year-round whether the WNBA is in the regular season or not. Since 2008, Twitter has been the place for all things women’s basketball. Due to the lack of coverage in traditional sports media, Twitter has evolved into a place where dynamic conversations happen between players, fans, special guests, and experts, allowing fans to find many ways to interact with the WNBA and women’s basketball (*How the WNBA Got the W on Twitter*, 2021). The 2020 season was no

different, as the athletes and league continued using the platform and relied on the platform to promote their social justice initiatives.

Athlete Activism

Waves of Athlete Activism

Sport sociologist, Dr. Harry Edwards, outlined four waves of athlete activism in his 2016 keynote speech at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) conference titled “The Fourth Wave: Black Athlete Protests in the Second Decade of the 21st Century.” The first wave of activism which occurred between 1900-1945 focused on gaining legitimacy. Jack Johnson became the first African American heavyweight boxing champion in 1908 when he defeated Tommy Burns. This victory demonstrated Black legitimacy in boxing which was previously a white dominated sport. The success of Black boxers continued with Joe Louis in the 1930s when he defeated German boxer Max Schmeling (Cooper et al., 2019). In addition to the Black athletes who were fighting for legitimacy in American sports, there were many groups of people who contributed to this effort such as the Black baseball teams in the Negro National League and the Eastern Colored League, and the eight all-Black intercollegiate athletic conferences which are known now as the historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU).

The second wave of athlete activism occurred from 1946 to the early 1960s and focused on acquiring political access and positional diversity. Two key athletes during this wave were Jackie Robinson and Althea Gibson. Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947 by becoming the first African American in Major League Baseball (MLB). In 1956 and 1957, Althea Gibson became the first African American woman to win grand slam tennis tournaments

when she won both the French Open and Wimbledon (Cooper et al., 2019). Along with many other sports, both baseball and tennis were predominately white-controlled sporting events and these athletes helped with the desegregation of American sports during this wave of activism (Edwards, 2016).

The third wave of athlete activism was from the mid-1960s to 1970s and focused on demanding dignity and respect. Notable athletes during this wave which coincides with the Civil Rights Movement include Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and Muhammad Ali (Edwards, 2016). In 1966, Muhammad Ali, a Black, Muslim world champion boxer, was stripped of his championship status and sentenced to five years in prison for speaking out against the Vietnam War. Ali had been drafted to go to the war and refused to do so citing the treatment he received as a Black man living in Louisville, Kentucky. He questioned why he would go fight for a country that doesn't treat him with the simple rights of an American citizen. Though he never served time in prison, the standard sentence for this offense is 18 months, not five years (Kaufman, 2008). This act of athlete activism by Ali sparked a movement among Black athletes that would inspire athletes of the 1960s and those of future generations.

The following year, in 1967, Black athletes in the U.S. formed the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) which was part of the larger Civil Rights Movement at the time. The OPHR had six demands in December 1967, prior to the Olympics which were going to be held the following year. These demands supported Muhammad Ali and dealt with racism and racial injustices athletes in the Olympics (Boykoff, 2017; Zirin, 2008). In their attempt to have these demands met, the athletes threatened a boycott of African Americans at the 1968 Olympics. The goal of the organization and proposed boycott was to expose the United States for how they use

and treat the Black athlete. As the games approached, the boycott gained national attention and was the center of many debates. Many athletes did not follow through and as a result there was no boycott at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, Mexico.

However, participating in the 1968 Olympics provided an opportunity for two African American Olympic athletes to use their stage to bring awareness to the ongoing poverty, discrimination, and inequality that was plaguing Black Americans at the time. Track and field athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos stood on the podium to receive their respective gold and bronze medals. Their attire for the medal ceremony was chosen specifically by the athletes for symbolism. The athletes each wore a black glove on one hand that represented strength and unity, the beads around their necks symbolized poverty, the half-zipped jackets and black socks with no shoes were for the blue-collar workers in America (Boykoff, 2017). As the American flags were raised into the air for the medal ceremony, both athletes bowed their heads and raised their glove-covered fist in the air in the Black Power salute (Zirin, 2008).

Within hours of the medal ceremony, both athletes were expelled from the Olympic village for their act of activism. It was rumored that they would also be stripped of their medals, but the International Olympic Committee (IOC) never followed through on that threat and the athletes were allowed to keep their hard-earned medals. The response at the event by the IOC and Olympic officials compounded the coverage of the protest and act of activism (Zirin, 2008). Initially, upon returning to the U.S., the reception of Smith and Carlos was not welcoming. The reaction and criticism from the media outlets were harsh. Comments about the athletes ranged from accusing them of doing a “Nazi-like salute,” to calling them an “embarrassment” and “extremists,” as well as “a pair of dark-skinned storm troopers” (Zirin, 2008, pg. 171-172).

Smith and Carlos both suffered financially in the years after the Olympic Games. They lost sponsorship opportunities and struggled finding work. As time went on, Smith and Carlos became known for their roles as athlete-activists and finally received the dignity and respect they were demanding as part of the third wave of activism. In 2016, President Barack Obama welcomed the former athletes to the White House stating that their controversial, yet powerful protest woke up those in the country and created the opportunity for athletes to follow in their footsteps (Boykoff, 2017). As the third wave of activism came to an end in the 1970s, it would be a while before the fourth wave would begin.

Edwards (2016) found that the period between the 1970s and 2005 was a period of Black athlete activism stagnation. Black athletes like Orenthal James (O.J.) Simpson, Michael Jordan, Bo Jackson, and Tiger Woods were known to “transcend” race made it clear that they were “apolitical” focusing more on their own endorsements and sponsorships (Cooky, 2017; Cooper et al., 2019). As these athletes continued to take on an “apolitical” posture, there were very few athletes who participated in activism during this time, mostly because it would hinder their business opportunities, sponsorships, and salaries (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). While asked why he was not endorsing Black Senate candidate Harvey Gantt of North Carolina, Jordan responded with his now famous quote “Republicans buy shoes too” showing that sponsorship dollars were the top priority in during this time (Cooper et al., 2019). While Smith and Carlos used their medal podiums to bring awareness to social injustices, Jordan did the opposite on his own medal podiums during the Olympics. Rather than speaking out against the sweat shops in Asia where his sponsor brand, Nike, was produced, Jordan intentionally covered up the Reebok logo on his USA Dream Team uniform with an American flag during the 1992 Olympics to not hurt his own

partnership with his sponsor brand, Nike (Powell, 2007). Focusing on the potential money that could be earned from endorsements and sponsorships silenced many athletes during the time between the third and fourth waves of activism.

The fourth wave of activism, according to Edwards (2016) began in 2005 and continues to the present time. This wave focuses on securing and transferring power via economic and technological capital. The enormous economic capital of the Black athlete during the 21st century could be a potential reason for the revolutionary activism during this time. Along with economical capital, technological capital in the form of social media increases visibility, awareness, engagement, organization, and response to social justice issues (Edwards, 2016). Due to the extensive media coverage, the most notable athletes of the fourth wave of activism come from the men's professional leagues in the NFL and NBA. The key athletes of the fourth wave from the NFL and NBA will be covered in more detail later in this dissertation. As Edwards (2016) noted, Black athletes have a long history of challenging and disrupting hegemonic norms in American sports and there is one group of athletes who have been trailblazers in their activism from the inception of their league. The WNBA athletes have consistently spoken out about social justice issues ranging from reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ issues, and racism in the U.S.

Athlete Activism in the WNBA

Situated in the fourth wave of athlete activism, the WNBA athletes have continued to respond to social justice issues with athlete activism. During the 2016 WNBA season, the WNBA athletes responded to the killings of two African American men with acts of activism. The athletes discussed gun violence and policing practices in the U.S. on social media and with

the press following the deaths Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. Alton Sterling was killed on July 5, 2016, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Philando Castile was killed on July 6, 2016, in St. Paul, Minnesota. Subsequently, on July 7, 2016, during a peaceful protest in Dallas, Texas, five Dallas police officers were ambushed and killed, later to become known as the Dallas 5 (Lavelle, 2019). Immediately after these events, in the WNBA, four captains of the Minnesota Lynx wore black t-shirts to a press conference with the saying “Change Starts with Us.” This was a bold statement coming from a group of WNBA athletes during a time when athlete activism was not as prevalent as it is today. The following day, players on three different WNBA teams in New York, Seattle, and Phoenix wore black Adidas t-shirts with phrases #BlackLivesMatter and #Dallas5 on them. Consequently, the league officials in the WNBA asked the players to stop wearing the shirts. The players stopped wearing those specific shirts but compromised with solid black Adidas shirts so they could show sponsor support, but also continue the conversation about gun violence. The league was not pleased with this decision and began issuing fines to the players and the teams that ranged from individual fines of \$500 to team fines of \$5,000 citing violations of the dress code policy (Lavelle, 2019). In response, players from the Indiana Fever and New York Liberty decided collectively that they would not talk about anything except gun violence and officer-related shootings in their respective press conferences with the media. The WNBA eventually rescinded the dress code policy fines from the players and teams after much backlash (Lavelle, 2019). One notable difference in the athlete activism in the WNBA from 2016 to the 2020 season is the league response. In 2016, the league was issuing fines to the athletes for speaking out, while in the 2020 season, the league not only supported the athletes and how they

choose to use their platform for activism, but they provided the athletes with a space to showcase their activism on the official WNBA social media accounts.

Another aspect of the athlete activism that makes the WNBA stand out is the number of white athletes that are involved. In both the NBA and NFL, most of the athletes involved in activism efforts are the Black athletes. Prominent white WNBA athletes like Sue Bird, Stephanie Dolson, and Lindsey Whalen participated in protests, spoke out about gun violence and policing issues, posted to social media, talked to the press, and wore Black Lives Matter apparel. Black and white players alike in the WNBA consider themselves to be a part of a community of activists and advocates. Though women are often taught to keep quiet about certain issues, the WNBA athletes make a point to speak up about gun violence and racial injustices happening in the country (Lavelle, 2019). The athletes participate in athlete activism because their platform allows them to make an impact on critical issues related to race in the U.S., especially since the WNBA athletes have shared experiences with racism and violence in their own lives. In 2016, just under 70% of the athletes in the WNBA identified as African American (Lavelle, 2019). Becoming an activist within the WNBA during the 2016 season created a space for Black athletes to discuss their own experiences with racism and violence, not only for themselves, but also for their families, as well as situated themselves in the Black Live Matter movement during a time that they had the platform to do so.

One prominent Black WNBA athlete that was heavily involved in the Black Lives Matter protests during the 2016 WNBA season was Maya Moore. As a member of the Minnesota Lynx, Moore donned the “Change Starts With Us” shirt, as well as shirts with the sayings “Black Lives Matter” and “Justice and Accountability” that season. However, Moore did not get much

coverage until a few years later when she decided to sit out of the twenty-third season of the WNBA in 2019. In February, at the height of her basketball career, Moore announced that she would not play that season so she could focus her time on her family, ministry, and family friend, Jonathon Irons. At the time, Irons was serving a 50 year sentence in the Missouri state prison after being convicted of burglary and assault at the age of 16 by an all-white jury, despite there being no evidence (McClearen & Fischer, 2021).

Moore's approach to athlete activism is one that is far different from the other examples covered so far. The decision of the four-time WNBA champion to leave the sport altogether to fight for the justice of a Black man who was wrongfully sentenced to prison is the ultimate act of selflessness and activism. As a result of Moore's activism, in 2020, the judge vacated the 1998 conviction and Jonathon Irons walked out of the Missouri state prison a free man (McClearen & Fischer, 2021). Moore's decision to walk away from the WNBA was picked up and covered by the media, but not by traditional or mainstream sports media like ESPN or *Sports Illustrated*. This shows that the coverage of athlete activism for athletes of the WNBA is still lagging behind that of their counterparts (McClearen & Fischer, 2021). Though Moore did not play in the 2020 WNBA season, and eventually retired from the sport in 2023, the coverage of her story amplifies the coverage of the activism of other WNBA athletes.

Black Feminism

The athlete activism of the WNBA is part of a feminist and anti-racist movement with a long history. After an encounter with a legal case of an African American woman, Emma DeGraffenreid, Kimberlé Crenshaw (2016) coined the term intersectionality. DeGraffenreid's

legal case against a car manufacturer for race discrimination and gender discrimination was dismissed by a judge after the judge failed to see the full picture of DeGraffenreid's case. DeGraffenreid sought a job in the car manufacturer plant and believed she did not get the job because she was an African American woman. The judge dismissed the case because he found that the company hired both African Americans and women. However, the judge did not see the point that DeGraffenreid was trying to make that she was both African American and a woman. The company hired African Americans for manufacturing jobs, but they were typically African American men. The company also hired women, but typically for secretarial or clerical jobs and these women were all white. The judge did not allow DeGraffenreid to combine these two claims together though she was experiencing both race and gender discrimination. The judge felt that she would have had an unfair advantage by being able to bring forth her race and gender to get the job, whereas neither African American men nor white women had an issue with racial or gender discrimination. Crenshaw was drawn to this case because the law failed to protect African American women from discrimination and by the fact that there was not a name for it. It wasn't until years later that Crenshaw started to see the problem that DeGraffenreid was facing more clearly. Crenshaw found that a new framing of the problem was needed, a frame to see both race discrimination and gender discrimination in the legal case (Crenshaw, 2016).

Crenshaw came up with an analogy of an intersection where one road is the racism that DeGraffenreid experienced, and the other road is the sexism she experienced. DeGraffenreid sat directly at the intersection of these two roads but was unable to identify the one road that caused the harm because she encountered discrimination at the intersection. However, she was not offered the help she needed because the law was framed in such a way that required her to

identify the one road where discrimination occurred. Crenshaw found that the term “intersectionality” was the best way to describe what happened to DeGraffenreid and would later find out that the same thing was happening to others in marginalized groups. Intersectionality is found in unique situations in social groups all over the world that include racism and sexism, but also ableism, heterosexism, xenophobia, and classism (Crenshaw, 2016). Crenshaw explains, “My objective there was to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women’s race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately.” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). The Black and brown athletes of the WNBA are faced with experiences that other white athletes in the league are not faced with, nor the other athletes of the male sports leagues, whether those athletes are Black or white. The athletes of the predominately Black WNBA league bring their own unique experiences to their activism, and it should be viewed differently than the activism by athletes of other sports leagues.

Chapter Summaries

The remaining chapters in this dissertation each focus on a specific type of activism or timeframe during the 2020 WNBA season and are organized as follows:

The first chapter highlights the decision by the WNBA athletes to dedicate the 2020 WNBA season to Breonna Taylor and the #SayHerName campaign in partnership with the African American Policy Forum (AAPF). I collected social media posts from the official WNBA

accounts on Twitter and Instagram that used the #SayHerName hashtag from July 1, 2020, through February 28, 2021. In my analysis, I discuss the continuation of hashtag activism with the use of the #SayHerName hashtag on Twitter and Instagram, the types of activism conducted by the WNBA athletes during the season, and the use of social media for the activism. Due to the uniqueness of the season, social media played a greater role in connecting the fans to what was happening inside the bubble. Additionally, through social media discourse on the gathered posts, I evaluated the public reaction to the athlete activism during the season. The WNBA athletes continuously faced misogynist and patriotic tweets and comments directed towards them, showing overtly nationalist commentary arguing that sports and politics should be separate. However, the athletes of the WNBA and the league's involvement in the activism during the 2020 season show that athlete activism is here to stay, it is supported, and politics and sports will continue to be entwined.

The second chapter focuses on the four-day span during the season where the WNBA athletes protested regularly scheduled games following the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The athletes protested games and had a "day of reflection" to discuss important social justice initiatives that could be done by the WNBA athletes to make the most of their time. I collected nine Instagram posts from the official WNBA Instagram account between August 26, 2020, and August 31, 2020, that were dedicated to the protest of games, conversations about Jacob Blake, and social justice awareness. There was a total of 2,459 comments on the nine posts which allowed me to analyze the response to the athlete activism during this time of the season. I focus on what type of athlete activism occurred, the public response to the activism, and the role of social media during the activism. The posts on

Instagram provided insight into what was happening in the bubble during this critical moment of the WNBA season. I found four key themes in the public discourse of the athletes as activists in this dataset: racisms towards the shooting victim, Jacob Black; personal attacks of the WNBA athletes because of their decision to speak out about systemic racism and police violence; attacks on the perceived viewership and fandom of the WNBA; and praise for the WNBA athletes as activists.

The third chapter focuses on the relationship between the WNBA athletes and the co-owner of the Atlanta Dream and Senator at the time Kelly Loeffler (GA-R). Following Loeffler's racist comments about "mob rule" the athletes used social media to speak out against the Senator. Loeffler continued to use the WNBA athletes for her own political gain in her campaign for the Senate seat, so the athletes openly backed her opponent Rev. Raphael Warnock. The WNBA athletes made the decision to wear "Vote Warnock" shirts which had a financial impact on the Warnock campaign, giving him the boost needed to continue the campaign into the November election. Once the election results were in, Loeffler and Warnock had a special election runoff in January 2021 where Warnock was voted the first Black Senator of Georgia. Through the analysis of news articles and the documentary, I discuss the activism of the athletes and their impact on the election in Georgia.

The final chapter focuses on why the 2020 WNBA season in the bubble in Bradenton, Florida, is a unique case study of athlete activism in the WNBA and how social media played a critical role. In bringing the athlete activism in the three previous chapters together, I answer the three research questions for the dissertation in the final chapter. I also discuss the political and technological implications of athlete activism in the WNBA during the 2020 season and what is

being done to prevent this activism from happening in the future. I end the chapter with suggestions for future research in the field.

WNBA ATHLETES #SAYHERNAME DURING THE 2020 SEASON

For decades, athletes have assumed the role of activists speaking out against racial injustices in the U.S., and for many years, the WNBA has been a consistent site of athlete activism. The 2020 WNBA season was no exception and quickly became a critical space for athletes to support the #SayHerName campaign as part of the larger Black Lives Matter movement. The #SayHerName campaign and hashtag was intentionally designed by law professor, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) to raise awareness about the Black women victims of police violence who often go unrecognized. Like Black men, Black women are killed at the hands of police officers but are not discussed or memorialized as prevalently as the men, becoming invisible in the larger movements (*About the #SayHerName Campaign*, n.d.). As many WNBA athletes are Black women, the #SayHerName campaign is close to home, particularly during the 2020 season, following the death of Breonna Taylor in March 2020.

The WNBA athletes' activism can be viewed through the lens of intersectionality to show how the structures set in place impact people differently. Intersectionality considers power relationships that go beyond sex differences and takes into account the identities of race, class, sexuality, and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). The athletes of the WNBA bring their own experiences to shape the conversation of gun violence and police policies to include both race and gender (Lavelle, 2019). The death of Breonna Taylor at the hands of police officers deeply impacted the athletes going into the 2020 season and the athletes made it their mission to speak out against the injustices that Black and brown women face in our country through their athlete activism.

The primary medium of the athlete activism in the WNBA for the #SayHerName campaign during the 2020 season was social media. Social media is an essential part of the sports culture and has rapidly evolved over the past two decades (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022). Due to the uniqueness of the 2020 season, social media sites, such as Twitter and Instagram, played an integral role in showcasing the role of these athletes as activists due to the lack of fans in the stands and the role of social media at the intersection of sports, politics, gender, and race. Social media sites have offered athletes of women's sports leagues an opportunity to circumvent traditional media outlets who do not offer the same level of coverage as their male counterparts (Coche, 2016; Piché & Naraine, 2022). This chapter shows how the athletes used the affordances of social media to assume the role of athlete activists and continued the use of #SayHerName through hashtag activism. Additionally, this chapter reveals misogyny and patriotism in the public discourse of the WNBA athletes as activists evaluated through social media engagement on Twitter and Instagram.

Background

As the teams and players gathered in a single location for the 2020 season for the first time in history, the WNBA and WNBPA took advantage of this opportunity to further their commitment to social justice. The key WNBA players in the formation of the Social Justice Council included Layshia Clarendon, Sydney Colson, Breanna Stewart, Tierra Ruffin-Pratt, A'ja Wilson, and Satou Sabally, who worked with other external champions for advocacy, such as Alicia Garza, Carolyn DeWitt, and Beverly Bond. Alicia Garza is a political activist, founder of Black Future Labs, and co-founder of Black Lives Matter. DeWitt is the CEO of Rock the Vote,

and Bond is the founder and CEO of BLACK GIRLS ROCK!, as well as a Celebrity DJ (WNBA, 2020b). Together, the players and activists used the 2020 season and the single location in Bradenton, Florida to educate, amplify and mobilize action to create substantial change.

On July 25, 2020, the WNBA season tipped off at 12:00 PM on national television with a game between the New York Liberty and Seattle Storm. Prior to the game, Liberty guard Layshia Clarendon and Storm forward Breanna Stewart gave a speech announcing the season-long commitment by the league to social justice, which was also aired nationally on ESPN. Clarendon stated, "We are dedicating this season to Breonna Taylor, an outstanding EMT who was murdered over 130 days ago in her home. Breonna Taylor was dedicated and committed to uplifting everyone around her. We are also dedicating this season to 'Say Her Name' campaign, a campaign committed to saying the names and fighting for justice for Black women. Black women who are so often forgotten in this fight for justice, who do not have people marching in the streets for them, we will say her name. Sandra Bland. Atatiana Jefferson. Dominique "Rem'mie" Fells. and Breonna Taylor. We will be a voice for the voiceless." (West, 2020; WNBA [@wnba], 2020b). The WNBA athletes were determined to keep Breonna Taylor's case at the forefront of the season with the hopes that an arrest would be made in her murder. The athletes also proudly wore the name Breonna Taylor on the back of their jerseys for the entire season. The phrases "Black Lives Matter" and "Say Her Name" were painted on the basketball court and displayed boldly on the player warmup shirts for all to see (West, 2020).

In addition to the speech, the teams held a moment of silence for 26 seconds, the age of Breonna Taylor when she was shot eight times and killed on March 13, 2020, by Louisville police officers. To end the 26-second moment of silence, Clarendon stated "we will be a voice

for the voiceless.” Before the game, both teams decided to leave the court in protest preceding the playing of the national anthem. Breonna Taylor is one of many Black women who are victims police violence, who are often forgotten in the fight for justice. By partnering with the ‘Say Her Name’ campaign, the WNBA players planned to bring to light names and faces of many Black women victims throughout the course of the season. Each week the WNBA athletes highlighted and honored a different Black woman (cis or trans) who was a victim of police violence in attempts to remember their story.

Literature Review

#SayHerName Campaign

The #SayHerName campaign was founded in December 2014 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the AAPF, and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (CISPS). The campaign brings awareness to the often-forgotten names of the Black women who are victimized by racist police violence. Crenshaw found that the level of knowledge surrounding police violence that Black women experience is exceedingly low (Crenshaw, 2016). Therefore, the campaign tells their stories, as well as providing support to their families. In order to better understand why Black women are disproportionately subject to police violence, the #SayHerName campaign is committed to finding out who the women are, how they lived, and why they suffered at the hands of the police (*About the #SayHerName Campaign*, n.d.).

The #SayHerName hashtag was intentionally designed by the AAPF to “emphasize the personhood of women of color who risk abuse while in police custody” (Losh, 2019, p. 36). The hashtag has been prevalent on Twitter for many years and is part of the larger Black Lives Matter

movement, seeking to bring light to the names and faces of the Black women who are victims of police violence, who are too often forgotten and become invisible in the BLM movement. From the beginning, the #SayHerName hashtag has included and embraced a diverse group of women of color including LGBTQIA and nonbinary Black people, such as Mya Hall, a Black trans woman, who was included in the 2015 AAPF report titled *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women* (Jackson et al., 2020). Along with the #SayHerName hashtag, there are often other hashtags that include the name of the deceased, such as #SandraBland. Prior to the death of Breonna Taylor in 2020, Sandra Bland was the most visible victim mentioned in the #SayHerName hashtag and an exemplar for the #SayHerName campaign (Jackson et al., 2020; Norris & Rodriguez, 2019).

Within the first year of the #SayHerName campaign being launched, the hashtag reached its tipping point in visibility with the death of Sandra Bland (Jackson et al., 2020). In Texas, Sandra Bland was pulled over by a police officer for failure to use her turn signal. What should have been a routine traffic stop ended with an arrest and Bland behind bars. Three days later, Texas state troopers announced that Bland committed suicide in her jail cell, which was disputed by her family. The mystery of Bland's death sparked commentary on both Facebook and Twitter, including the use of the hashtags #SayHerName and #SandraBland. Various celebrities and high-profile figures tweeted about Bland's death bringing the total number of tweets including the #SandraBland hashtag to 200,000 on July 15, 2016, alone (Jackson et al., 2020). Additionally, Norris and Rodriguez (2019) found that social media users that shared information about Bland's death fell into one of four categories: Messengers, Derailers, Fragmenters, and Resolvers. The Messengers used #SandraBland to relay the messages put forth by the AAPF pointing out how

the police profile African American women, especially in the case of Sandra Bland's death. Derailers did not support the AAPF and found other reasons why Bland must have committed suicide, thus criminalizing her and other Black victims of police brutality. The Derailers attempted to overtake the #SandraBland and #SayHerName hashtags to avoid putting the blame on the police officers. The Fragmenters expressed empathy but were reluctant to assign blame to either Bland or the police officers in this instance. Finally, the Resolvers responded to the Derailers' comments or posts and attempted to reemphasize the message of the AAPF in attempts to redirect the hashtags back to the original narrative (Norris & Rodriguez, 2019). The use of the hashtags on Twitter were found to summarize or affirm the message of the AAPF supporting Sandra Bland and blaming the police for her death, while the use on Facebook showed that users focused the blame on Bland as a "criminal" and turned the narrative to those protesting police brutality as "racists" (Norris & Rodriguez, 2019). The #SayHerName hashtag is an example of hashtag activism that brings awareness to the police brutality of Black women and continues to the stories of Black women victims of police violence.

Hashtag Activism

Intersectionality as a theoretical framework is now the driving force of fourth wave feminism online, especially on the social media platform, Twitter (Zimmerman, 2017). Hashtag feminism and feminist Twitter have evolved over the years as an avenue to bring women together to fight for women's rights and bring awareness to feminist issues; however, many women from marginalized communities are often left out of these conversations. The controversial hashtags #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen and #YesAllWhiteWomen were created to

show that many feminist movements are often focused on only white women, leaving out many others (Daniels, 2016). On the other hand, movements that are specific to Black men and women, such as Black Lives Matter, often focus more on Black men than Black women. However, Black feminists play an integral role in marginalized communities on Twitter. In addition to #SayHerName, hashtags like #FastTailedGirls and #YouOKSis focus specifically on the importance of the lives of Black women and show a prominence of Black feminist politics online (Jackson et al., 2020).

The hashtag #YouOKSis was created by Twitter user @FeministaJones to teach intervention for street harassment and violence against Black women. The initial tweet and hashtag sparked a discussion on Twitter among Black women about their experiences of street harassment and intervention. The hashtag teaches and encourages others to stand up for women whom they witness getting harassed by men on the streets, asking #YouOKSis. These women know they are part of a larger sisterhood of Black women who understand sexual violence (Jackson et al., 2020). From the inception of #YouOKSis, the hashtag has continued by getting attached to stories of street harassment and by Black women using the hashtag alongside other hashtags, such as #StreetHarassment, #WeGotYouSis, and #YesAllWomen, signaling broader conversations about violence towards women (Jackson et al., 2020).

Like #YouOkSis, the hashtag #FastTailedGirls was also created to show how Black women and girls experience sexual violence and street harassment and how they are not considered victims and often blamed for their own violence. Following an R. Kelly performance at the American Music Awards and a Twitter debate surrounding Kelly's continuous and questionable celebrity status, Mikki Kendall tweeted, "If I did a chat for #FastTailedGirls as part

of a greater discussion of Black women's sexuality would ya'll participate?" (Jackson et al., 2020, p. 35). The hashtag appeared in over 20,000 tweets and was trending within 24 hours. The term "fast-tailed" in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is used to describe young women who are supposedly overeager, sexually curious, or promiscuous. Using this language allows men to engage with underage girls without any fault and perpetuates victim blaming. Ultimately, the #FastTailedGirls hashtag contributed to larger conversations about Black girls, sexual violence, rape culture. #FastTailedGirls is an example of legitimating Black women's experiences and the politics of intersectionality (Jackson et al., 2020).

Another example of hashtag activism related to violence against women is the #WhyIStayed hashtag, which was first tweeted on September 8, 2014, by Beverly Gooden, an activist, writer, and more importantly, a domestic violence survivor. The tweet read "I stayed because I thought it would get better. It never got better. #WhyIStayed" (Clark, 2016, p. 795). The tweet was on the heels of the domestic violence controversy with then-NFL running back, Ray Rice, and his fiancée at the time, Janay Palmer. Both individuals were arrested following an altercation and charged with mutual assault of one another in February 2014. Four days after the initial arrest, video footage was leaked showing Rice dragging Palmer's unconscious body from the elevator of the hotel. Over the next few months, the charges against Palmer were dropped, Rice and Palmer got married, and Rice was suspended for two NFL games. On the morning of September 8, additional video footage was released from inside the elevator showing Rice physically abusing Palmer knocking her unconscious. After all of this, the incident that sparked Gooden's tweet was how the media on *Fox & Friends* framed the event. Anchors pointed out how Palmer "still married" Rice after this event and how this sends a "terrible message" to

women (Clark, 2016, p. 794). Gooden sought to change the narrative of this event and the media coverage to the abuser, instead of the victim. After her initial tweet, she shared her story and a long list of reasons why she stayed in an abusive relationship, which ended up being retweeted hundreds of times.

Within the #WhyIStayed hashtag, participants shared their own personal stories with domestic violence; and second, participants offered support to those sharing their stories, showing the immense power that a single hashtag holds. Many participants started their tweet with “because” as if they were answering the media’s question of “why would you stay with your abuser?” Other participants used direct quotes from their abuser along with the hashtag to show a small snippet into conversations within their relationship. Another group offered intrapersonal narratives showing how their own thoughts played a role in their decision to stay (Clark, 2016). Additionally, participants used the #WhyIStayed hashtag to show how the criminal justice system was ineffective and how the reporting police officers were complicit (Havard, 2019).

As the hashtag began to spread, there was a shift in the narrative with the addition of the #WhyILeft hashtag that was being used alongside #WhyIStayed. The use of these hashtags showed many powerful stories of the survivors who eventually got out of the harmful relationships with their abuser. There is both power and hope in these hashtags which is why #WhyIStayed shifted the blame from the victim to the abuser and offered a survivor-centered space for victims to share their experiences and be supported by others (Clark, 2016; Havard, 2019). As a survivor of relationship violence herself, Havard draws on her own account of what it felt like reading the tweets and experiences of those women who eventually found the courage

to leave their abuser in the #WhyILeft hashtag. She explains how she experienced “a sense of togetherness with the thousands of other survivors sharing our stories” (146). The hashtag formed a space for hurting, suffering, pain, inaction, and stillness, as well as a space for feeling, believing, imagining, dreaming, and reflecting (Havard, 2019).

To showcase another example of Black feminism and hashtag activism is through the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen. In 2013, the hashtag was created by Mikki Kendall in response to white female feminist bloggers who continuously praised and defended Hugo Schwyzer, a white male feminist, despite his blatant racism and attacks on women of color. Kendall argued that solidarity excludes women of color and their prospective in feminist movements (Zimmerman, 2017). The hashtag brought attention to practices that claim one definitive identity (feminism) but excludes the practices of other identity categories (race) (Losh, 2019). Not only are women of color left out of feminist solidarity, but Kendall was criticized for calling out the white feminists and for starting a “Twitter war” online. The response of this hashtag was centered more around how white women made mistakes or how “one tweet” can ruin their career, but there was no condemning racism online or recognizing that feminism doesn’t simply mean white feminism (Daniels, 2016). The hashtag also shows how America’s feminism and solidarity is often centered around the comfort and well-being of white women at the expense of women of color (Loza, 2014). The same is seen in the activism of Black athletes in women’s sports leagues versus the athletes of predominately white women’s sports leagues.

Methodology

For the analysis of this chapter, I collected tweets through the Advanced Search function on Twitter with specific parameters. The tweets collected were posted from the WNBA account and included the hashtag #SayHerName. For each tweet, I collected the original tweet from the account and the replies to each tweet, as well as tweets that included links to external websites. The search parameters of the tweets collected were from the dates of July 1, 2020, through February 28, 2021. The total number of original tweets collected is 37 which ranges from July 6, 2020, through February 19, 2021. On the 37 original tweets, there were 300 total replies to the tweets. Of the 37 original tweets, there are only three tweets that include only text. All other tweets had an image, video, or link shared as part of the tweet. There were 18 tweets that included a video, 12 tweets that included at least one image, either a photograph or a graphic, and four tweets that included a link to an external site. The additional content, video, photograph, image, or link that were included in the tweet was also used for analysis in this chapter.

Additionally, I collected Instagram posts from the official WNBA Instagram account that included the #SayHerName hashtag with the search parameters of the dates set to July 1, 2020, through February 28, 2021. There were 15 posts that include the hashtag #SayHerName and I found one additional post that I included that had the phrase “Say Her Name” in the caption of the post. All 16 Instagram posts were published between July 21, 2020, and February 15, 2021. The photos in the Instagram posts and the comments posted by users on the posts were used for analysis in this chapter. The total number of comments on the 16 Instagram posts totaled 1,001 comments. The findings are divided into three main sections including the league-wide activism, the activism of individual WNBA athletes, and the public response to the activism as evaluated

through social media discourse. I apply CDA to these three areas to determine how the athletes utilized the affordances social media and the language used for their activism and how there are perpetual examples of misogyny and patriotism in the public responses.

Findings

League-wide athlete activism

Social media played a more important role in the athlete activism of the WNBA athletes during the 2020 season than ever before. Social media allowed fans and spectators outside of Bradenton, Florida, to see what was happening inside the WNBA bubble during the season. The league utilized the official WNBA social media accounts on Twitter and Instagram to highlight the AAPF and the #SayHerName campaign throughout the season and the postseason. With the use of the already established #SayHerName hashtag, the league and athletes continue to expand the reach of the hashtag and the stories of the Black and brown women victims of police violence through hashtag activism utilizing the official WNBA accounts on social media.

The first Instagram post following the announcement of the dedication of the 2020 season to Breonna Taylor and the #SayHerName campaign shows a brief clip of an ESPN segment where analyst LaChina Robinson is speaking about the WNBA athletes collectively. She indicates how intentional the WNBA athletes were in honoring the life of Breonna Taylor during the 2020 season. While the social justice initiatives were wide-ranging during the season, Breonna was so important because she is one of the women that were victims to police violence. Robinson notes that at the time many of the WNBA athletes spoke out and said, “Breonna Taylor could have been me.” (WNBA [@wnba], 2020a). Each Black athlete knows that as a Black

woman, they too could have been a victim of racist police violence, just as Breonna Taylor was. This is evident in an interview with Candace Parker that was posted to the official WNBA Twitter account on July 25, 2020. In the interview, Parker is wearing a shirt that states “We Are Breonna Taylor” (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020c). In the Instagram video, Robinson continues to discuss how the #SayHerName campaign is also important as it reminds everyone to not forget about the women. With Breonna Taylor’s name on the back of the WNBA jerseys that season, Breonna Taylor was not going to be forgotten (WNBA [@wnba], 2020a). The Black athletes of the WNBA related to Breonna Taylor and understand that they too could be victims of racist police violence.

Simply stating, “Breonna Taylor could have been me” highlights how the activism of the athletes in the WNBA is a great example of the importance of the #SayHerName campaign to the league. It also shows how athletes from different backgrounds come together within the league for a common goal. According to the 2019 Racial and Gender Report Card for the WNBA, the league comprised of 82.7% players of color and of that, 67.4% were Black or African-American players (Lapchick, 2019). The Black female and nonbinary athletes of the WNBA bring their own experiences of systemic racism to their activism. These athletes are daughters, sisters, and mothers themselves. They are the same women whose experience Crenshaw is fighting to recognize through the theory of intersectionality. The athletes whose experiences are not taken into consideration because they are the “other”, they come from marginalized communities, they are women, and they are Black. The WNBA athletes live and feel this every day.

The WNBA Twitter account posted two tweets with videos on July 25, 2020, featuring interviews with two Black athletes, Nneka Ogumike and Candace Parker, providing insight

into their own experiences as a daughter and a mother as it relates to the murder of Breonna Taylor and #SayHerName campaign. Ogwumike states that she is a daughter of a “girl dad” and a sister so she hopes to celebrate Breonna Taylor and bring awareness to her and the Black women that are so often forgotten in this world. Ogwumike states that in this league where over 70% of the athletes are Black women, this is their reality, being forgotten. Ogwumike also discusses speaking with Ms. Tamika Palmer, Taylor’s mom, and how Ogwumike’s own mom is a role model of her, so it is such an honor to speak out for Breonna (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020b). Speaking to and about Breonna Taylor’s mom brings Taylor’s story back into the forefront of the season and the interview. Ms. Palmer has lost her daughter at the hands of a police officer and that pain is unimaginable. Ogwumike sharing this information during the interview humanizes the victim and the victim’s family members.

The second video that was posted features Candace Parker, discussing the importance of young boys, young girls, adults, men, and women watching the WNBA game on the day of the season opener and the games all season long to see Breonna Taylor’s name. Parker also highlights speaking with Taylor’s mom that week and indicates that she looks at this situation with a different perspective. As a mother and an African American woman herself, she never wants something so horrible as what happened to Breonna Taylor to happen to her own child. (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020c). Like Ogwumike, Parker intentionally tries to have the fans and spectators put themselves in Ms. Palmer’s horrible situation in losing her daughter to police violence. The activism of the WNBA athletes this season and the dedication to Breonna Taylor and the ‘Say Her Name’ campaign is so important. Not only are the athletes speaking out for

Breonna Taylor, but they are speaking out for other women just like themselves and are a “voice for the voiceless” for the women victims who can no longer share their own stories.

In addition to Ogwumike and Parker’s interviews, the WNBA continued to highlight the connection between the Black athletes in the league and the #SayHerName campaign. In the tweet posted on August 10, 2020, the caption quoted Seattle Storm guard Jewell Loyd and featured a photo of the back of Loyd’s jersey showing her name and the name of Breonna Taylor. Loyd’s quote stated,

““In a league with all women, predominately black, it’s important that we take a stand together.” - @jewelloyd #MotivationMonday #SayHerName @AAPolicyForum @sandylocks” (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020f).

Loyd makes a point to highlight the fact that the WNBA athletes are standing together supporting a great cause in the #SayHerName campaign and standing up for the Black women who are often forgotten. This cause is so important to all the athletes of the WNBA because of the makeup of Black athletes of the entire league. The WNBA athletes regularly reminded us that they are Black athletes playing in a professional women’s sports league and they matter, just like the Black women victims and their stories matter.

Throughout the season, the WNBA athletes collectively not only kept Breonna Taylor’s story in the forefront, but they also utilized their platform on the court and the WNBA official social media accounts to revisit the stories of other Black women who were victims of police violence. Between Twitter and Instagram, there were three posts that were dedicated to telling the story of the death of Sandra Bland during the week of August 4, 2020. As mentioned, Bland was found hanging in her jail cell in Texas following her arrest in what should have been a

routine traffic stop. Prior to the WNBA game on August 4, 2020, the athletes held a moment of silence for Bland and retold the story of her death from 2015. A powerful photo was shared on August 4, 2020, on both WNBA Twitter and Instagram accounts of the athlete activism. An additional tweet was posted to Twitter showing video footage of the athletes before the game and of the commentators discussing the social justice initiative, a brief history of Bland's story, and the WNBA athletes who are not allowing the public to forget about the Black women who fall victim to police violence (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020e). The photos shared on both social media accounts of the moment of silence is powerful. The photo of Sandra Bland on the jumbotron shows her beautiful smiling face while the body language of the WNBA athletes facing her photo shows sadness and a somber mood. The athletes have their heads bowed and you can read "Say Her Name" on the back of their warmup shirts. Some athletes have their hands clasped behind their back while others are standing with their arms over the shoulders of the player next to them.

The following week of August 10, 2020, the players of the WNBA honored the life of Michelle Cusseaux during pregame ceremonies, moments of silence, and on the WNBA official social media accounts. There was a total of four posts between Twitter and Instagram dedicated to sharing the story of Michelle Cusseaux. On both official WNBA accounts on Twitter and Instagram on August 10, 2020, the league featured a video of the pregame footage of the moment of silence and a video of Cusseaux playing on the jumbotron. In the video posted on social media, the announcers discussed the life and death of Cusseaux, a 50-year-old Black woman killed by Phoenix police in the doorway of her home in 2014 after police were called to her house on a mental health check. After Cusseaux declined help, an officer forced their way into the

home and killed her during the brief encounter. While the footage returns to the game, the announcers continue to discuss how every Sunday during the WNBA season, a different Black woman victim is honored through the #SayHerName initiative (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020g). The pregame footage shown on the social media sites is especially important since this footage is not normally shown on the game broadcast. The players are taking time to honor these victims and tell their stories, but during this season, there are no fans in the stands to see these pregame ceremonies. These social media posts are so important for fans to see what is happening inside the bubble and for these stories to be shared.

Two additional tweets were shared on the WNBA Twitter account on the anniversary of Cusseaux's death on August 14, 2020, providing additional information and context surrounding her death. There were two photos shared, one of Cusseaux, smiling and holding a bunch of roses, and the other photo was of a loved one of Cusseaux surrounded by reporters and news channel microphones wearing a shirt that says "Justice for Michelle" (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020h). In the final tweet of August 14, 2020, the WNBA linked out to the AAPF website featuring her story through the #SayHerName campaign encouraging others to learn more about her story (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020i). Dedicating time and space to share Cusseaux's story on the official WNBA Twitter and Instagram accounts continues to expand the #SayHerName hashtag through hashtag activism. The WNBA athletes continued to be a "voice for the voiceless" while telling a different story of a Black woman victim of police violence each week.

Additionally, one team in particular, the Atlanta Dream, used their official team account on Twitter to amplify the league-wide commitment to the #SayHerName campaign. During time-outs of the Atlanta Dream games, each score update tweet included the hashtag #SayHerName

and says the name of a Black woman victim of police violence. The first score update of each game was dedicated to Breonna Taylor (Hurd, 2020) stating,

“Timeout: ATL 14, DAL 9

#SayHerName: Breonna Taylor, an EMT and aspiring nurse, was shot and killed when plainclothes police broke into her apartment, unannounced, and shot her eight times in a botched drug-warrant execution. Taylor received no medical attention.” (Atlanta Dream [@AtlantaDream], 2020).

For every time-out of every game of the entire season, the Atlanta Dream amplified the names, faces, and stories of Black women victims of police violence. Social media allowed the league and teams to continue the conversation of racist police violence even when the athletes are not using their own voices because they are playing a basketball game.

WNBA athletes as activists on social media

The league-wide commitment to remembering Breonna Taylor and telling the stories of other Black women victims of police violence through the ‘Say Her Name’ campaign was a collective agreement by the athletes in the WNBA. Throughout the season, there were also examples of individual athletes telling their own stories and showcasing why activism for this cause was so important to them. The athletes used their voices, amplified on the official WNBA social media accounts on Twitter and Instagram, to share why this season was bigger than basketball. One example was Seattle Storm forward Breanna Stewart who stood next to Clarendon prior to the season opener and asked for a 26-second moment of silence for Breonna Taylor. As a white athlete from the University of Connecticut (UCONN) and a member of the

Social Justice Council, Stewart is an ally for her fellow teammates in the league. Posted on the official WNBA Twitter account on December 29, 2020, and again on January 8, 2021, Stewart is quoted, stating:

“It’s not something that’s going to be fixed overnight. As unfortunate as it is, we know that. And we know that we’re going to be here for the long haul.” (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020).

The tweet also contained a clip of Stewart discussing her experience with using her voice and how it didn’t happen overnight when she came into the league. As a rookie in the league, coming from her collegiate days at UCONN, Stewart released an essay on her experiences as part of the #MeToo movement. The response from speaking out during the #MeToo movement showed her Stewart that her voice matters, and it can have an impact on others (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020). Going into the 2020 season, Stewart and the other athletes in the league made a commitment to use their voices to amplify the cause. In the video, Stewart takes time to address that the WNBA is made up of a diverse group of athletes with different backgrounds and different beliefs. She states that 80% of the league is Black and since she is white, her experiences are very different than others. It is important for her to educate herself and the people around her since she does not go through what her Black teammates go through. Stewart provides tips on how to become a better white ally for others through voting, educating family and friends, and calling out racism (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020). This message is an important type of activism in the WNBA. While the majority of the league is made up of players of color, the white athletes acknowledge their own experiences are far different and they are standing up for their teammates in the league.

On October 8, 2020, the official WNBA Twitter account shared a video of Sydney Colson, Black guard for the Chicago Sky with the tweet “.@SydJColson hopes that she can inspire others, just like her great-grandmother inspired her. #SayHerName #SeeMe #ShareBlackStories” (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020j). In the three minute and 21 second video, Colson, wearing a shirt that says, “Arrest the cops that killed Breonna Taylor”, speaks about the athletes in the WNBA, their activism, the importance of voting, and her great-grandmother who has inspired her. Colson starts the conversation by saying that there hasn’t been an election that has gone by that she hasn’t exercised her right to vote, but while she voted, she has not been as involved in the issues that Black people are facing until the 2020 basketball season. She discusses the diversity of the league, which is continuously brought up in the activism of the WNBA athletes this season, and how each athlete brings something different to the table. They all have different backgrounds and thoughts and even though they may not always agree on everything, they still come together to speak up about important social justice issues (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020j).

She also discussed the public perception of the WNBA league indicates that their league is not always talked about in a positive way and that they are used to the backlash that they constantly receive from spectators, but she says the athletes of the WNBA are strong and united. They constantly are backing one another and fighting for the issues the Black community is facing as a collective group. The white athletes are not “sidelined” during this time because they have each other’s backs (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020j). Finally, Colson states that she hopes to inspire others the way her great-grandmother has inspired her. Colson’s great-grandmother was the first woman voter in her family in 1968. Her great-grandmother showed her family that it

was important to be involved as a Black person and while Colson spent most of her adult life not being involved, it is better to get involved now and she hopes the 2020 WNBA season can be an inspiration to others (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020j).

Colson uses powerful language in her video describing the activism of the WNBA athletes this season. She reinforces the diversity of the league several times in the video and describes how the athletes present a united front for their activism, whether it's the Black players fighting for issues that are affecting them, or the white athletes are who their allies in this activism. The different backgrounds of the athletes allow them to all bring something different to the table. Viewing their activism through the lens of intersectionality is a consistent theme this season. She also discusses the power of voting which will be discussed in later chapters as a key component of the activism of the WNBA athletes during the 2020 season.

The following week, on October 14, 2020, the WNBA Twitter account posted a video of Los Angeles Sparks guard, Tierra Ruffin-Pratt, with the tweet stating, "Tierra Ruffin-Pratt has made it her duty to be an advocate for change within her community #SayHerName #SeeMe #ShareBlackStories" (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020k). Ruffin-Pratt talked in the video about the loss of two of her cousins to gun violence, the activism of the WNBA athletes during the 2020 season, her foundation, and making a difference in her community. When Ruffin-Pratt first got into the league, one of her cousins was shot and killed by an off-duty sheriff in Alexandria, Virginia, and a few years later another cousin was shot and killed by a peer that grew up in their neighborhood. She understands firsthand the impact of gun violence on the Black community and states that having a group of people with her that are going through the same battles makes it a little bit easier and empowers her because she knows they're all going through this together and

she's not alone. When discussing the group of WNBA athletes, she uses the terms "active," "passionate," and "stepping up" to discuss their activism this season. She also shares about her own activism through the TRP Foundation which gets youth involved in activities and off the streets with the hopes to give them an outlet and keep them out of trouble (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020k). Ruffin-Pratt recalls on growing up in Alexandria, Virginia, and seeing firsthand the disparities in the communities from the lack of education, technology, and safety that leads to potential jail time, homelessness, or being killed due to gun violence. She affirms that as a member of the Black community, "we hear you, we see you, and we're here for you." There is a way out and she hopes that her foundation can help in these instances (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020k).

Ruffin-Pratt, through the official WNBA Twitter account, is speaking directly to the systemic racism in America by recounting what it was like for her to grow up in Alexandria, Virginia. This is an important message being shared by the athlete using her platform to speak up for the members of the Black community and speak out against these disparities. Like Colson, Ruffin-Pratt sharing her story has an impact on others, whether it is encouraging people to speak up and speak out on their own, or showing other members of the Black community that she is here for them. As a member of the WNBA in 2020, Ruffin-Pratt, along with Stewart and Colson, have used their platforms for their own activism, which is a small piece of the larger collective activism of the league this season. By sharing their stories and speaking out on social media through the #SayHerName hashtag this season, this certainly allowed for the opportunity for fans, and anti-fans alike, to share their opinions on the athlete activism in the WNBA.

Response to athlete activism on social media

As the WNBA athletes continued to be a voice for the voiceless on the court during the 2020 season and through the social media posts on the official WNBA accounts on Twitter and Instagram, there were mixed reactions in the replies to tweets on Twitter and the comments on Instagram from both fans and anti-fans of the WNBA. Anti-fans are part of anti-fandom defined as the opposite of fandom which includes dislike, disinterest, disgust, and hate (Click, 2019). Three common themes emerged in the responses to the activism in the WNBA on social media and fit broadly into the categories of race, gender, and patriotism.

Throughout the season, the athletes have celebrated and acknowledged the diversity of the WNBA league in their activism with the #SayHerName campaign. However, in response to the tweet quoting Jewel Loyd posted on August 10, 2020, where the tweet states, “In a league with all women, predominately black, it’s important that we take a stand together.” (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020f), there were responses and tweets suggesting that the WNBA should be more diverse or questioning why there is no diversity in the WNBA. One user asked, “maybe it’s important for the WNBA to diversify?” and another asked, ““Predominately black” where’s the equality?” suggesting that there should be more white athletes since the league is predominately Black. Once Black women are in the majority, there is a problem with the makeup of the league and there is a cry for “more diversity” so there can be more white athletes in the mix. Since the makeup of the league is “predominately Black”, it was no surprise to find racist comments directed towards the athletes. In a response to a tweet posted on July 26, 2020, where the tweet read “This weekend, and this season, is about more than basketball. #SayHerName #BLM”

(WNBA [@WNBA], 2020d), one user called the players “dumb nappy headed sisters” which is completely disrespectful and perpetuates the racism in this country.

In addition to race, tweets regarding gender were also included in the responses to the activism that were directed towards the WNBA athletes. There were replies to tweets that discussed the financial statements and viewership of the WNBA. There were seven instances of “NBA” in the dataset from Twitter that suggested that the NBA alone is keeping the WNBA afloat. The first tweet posted on the official WNBA Twitter account on July 6, 2020, announcing that the season would be dedicated to social justice issues honoring BLM and #SayHerName had a reply to tweet stating “welfare nba! How lame the nba has to continue to support you! Black privileged!” Another user indicated as such in response to a tweet posted by the WNBA on July 25, 2020 stating “The WNBA is a league that exists solely because of men. Your ratings are a disaster and it’s a national joke. In essence, nobody watches the “WNBA” and nobody knows who the players are.” Another response on a tweet posted the following day on July 26, 2020, the user suggest that they know the financial intricacies of the WNBA, stating that “The WNBA operates at a loss each season. Without NBA subsidies the league would fold. This allows the foolish women players to make a "statement" instead of focusing on delivering a product people actually want to watch. What a luxury.”

In addition to tweets about the NBA supporting the WNBA, users turned their attention to the lack of fans of the WNBA and the athletes. Responses the tweets posted on the official WNBA account on Twitter within the first two days of the season on July 25, 2020, and July 26, 2020, include statements like “barely had any fans before this” and “real smart the WNBA hardly has any fans and now they will have even less real smart” regarding the athlete activism at

the start of the season and the #SayHerName campaign. Another Twitter user said it would “rush the narrative more if they actually had fans.” These comments are only directed towards the WNBA athletes because they play in a women’s professional sports league. Their counterparts in the men’s professional sports leagues do not receive or have to deal with comments directed towards them based on gender.

The third trend in the response to the WNBA athletes and their activism as it relates to Breonna Taylor and the #SayHerName campaign is the intense level of patriotism in the reaction on Twitter. This was identified by the references to the country, the U.S. flag, the military, and the veterans in the responses to the tweets with the #SayHerName hashtag. Prior to the start of the season opener on July 25, 2020, the players of the Seattle Storm and New York Liberty left the court prior to the playing of the national anthem. Upon returning to the court, the teams held the 26-second moment of silence and dedicated the season to Breonna Taylor and the #SayHerName campaign (Graham, 2020). However, none of the tweets in the dataset that include the hashtag #SayHerName mention opening night or the national anthem. Yet, many of the responses on the tweets in the dataset within the first week of the WNBA season reference the national anthem, the American flag, and other patriotic statements.

Many of the tweets imply that kneeling or protesting during the national anthem is disrespectful to the country, the military, and the veterans. In response to the tweets on July 26, 2020, just two days into the season, there were several examples of patriotism. One response stated “Maybe they should say the names of WNBA players since 99% of America couldn’t name one. Too bad I don’t watch the WNBA because i wouldn’t watch this garbage after they walked out on the national anthem. I’m for saying the name of fallen soldiers and police

officers” which is an example of both gender related and patriotic commentary towards the athletes. In response to the same tweet, other users were “speechless”, and indicated that “the world is doomed” because these athletes walked out on the national anthem and said that “all lives matter” and that the athletes should “not come back” to the country if they were going to walk off during the national anthem. One went as far to say “FUCK THE WNBA!! LONG LIVE THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA!!”

One response to the first tweet including the #SayHerName hashtag on July 6, 2020, weeks before the season began preemptively suggested that “No more kneeling it looks so bad when you kneel against the flag and the song you're always kneeling against our awesome military and veterans who put their lives on the line every day” and “I always stand for our great country and our military.” Since Colin Kaepernick first sat, then kneeled during the national anthem of the NFL games in 2016 (Hartman, 2019; P. Johnson, 2019), fans continue to associate kneeling during the national anthem as an embarrassing, disgraceful, and anti-American stunt, though kneeling during the national anthem has nothing to do with the flag, veterans, military, or police officers. One Twitter user indicated that the WNBA’s stunt is “continuing to turn away Patriots.” The perception of the activism to these anti-fans is that these acts of activism are just “stunts” to bring attention, and unwanted, hateful comments to the athletes, where the activism is meant to draw attention to the issues that Black Americans are facing in our country. The Twitter users that are yelling at the athletes through social media are intentionally taking the attention off the social justice issues and putting it on the athletes.

The patriotic comments quickly turned into hatred towards WNBA athletes and Twitter users quickly began to choose sides between the WNBA and the U.S. like these two things are

mutually exclusive. For example, one tweet read, “We choose the flag. Take a hike.” in response to a tweet posted on August 8, 2020. While there is no need to choose the WNBA over America or vice versa, these “Patriots” on Twitter are making it known that they strongly disapprove of the protest of the national anthem and find it offensive. One user said their games were “garbage” and they refuse to watch after the “foolish”, “ingrate freaks” walk out on the national anthem. Ironically, amid the hateful comments towards the WNBA athletes, one user called walking out on the national anthem and their activism a “proud display of HATRED for America” and that their optics were not helpful and downright disgusting in a response to a July 26, 2020, tweet. Despite all of the Twitter responses above where it is obvious that people certainly do care what the athletes are doing, there were claims on Twitter that “no one cares” about the politics or the antics. In response to the tweet on July 25, 2020, one tweet was directed towards the league instructing them to “get your players in check” and that “walking out on the national anthem is no way to act in the USA.”, even though free speech would apply to the athletes in this instance. It is apparent that in these responses, people forget that the WNBA athletes are first people and citizens of the same country as they are before they are paid athletes. The athletes are not required to first focus on “delivering a product that people actually want to watch.” Performing and entertaining is not the only reason these athletes play basketball in the WNBA. The WNBA athletes have every right to voice their opinions just as the users on social media are doing as they hide behind their screens.

Conclusion

The 2020 WNBA season is a prime example of how social media sites amplified the voices of the WNBA athletes as activists through hashtag activism and the #SayHerName hashtag. The WNBA athletes prove that during the global Covid-19 pandemic and during a time of heightened racial tensions, police violence, and racism in America, athletes can utilize social media sites, such as Twitter and Instagram, to speak out against social injustices. The role of Twitter and Instagram and the use of the #SayHerName hashtag during the 2020 WNBA season shows how the affordances of social media can assist in the sharing of pertinent information surrounding social justice issues. The athletes and league officials utilized the official WNBA accounts on the social media platforms to highlight acts of activism taking place in the bubble-like atmosphere in Bradenton, Florida. Player interviews and commentary surrounding the 2020 season and the commitment to social justice initiatives were highlighted throughout the season. The WNBA athletes kept Breonna Taylor's name and story at the forefront of their efforts, but also highlighted the names and faces of other Black female victims of police violence each week, such as Sandra Bland and Michelle Cusseaux. The league continued to share relevant information about their cases, as well as #SayHerName resources and initiatives through their social media platforms.

Due to the uniqueness of the 2020 WNBA season, social media played an even greater role in communicating this information to fans. Since fans were not in the stands to witness the activism firsthand, the league and players relied on their social media accounts to share information. Photos of athletes wearing "Say Her Name" and "Black Lives Matter" shirts were shared on the platforms showing the athletes physically using their bodies to speak out for

Breonna Taylor and the Black lives that are taken too soon by police officers around the country. Game footage showed the name of Breonna Taylor on the back of the players' jerseys to ensure those watching were continuing to say her name. Player interviews, quotes, and pre-game ceremonies were shared so the athletes could continue to use their platforms to be a voice for the voiceless. By putting the death of Breonna Taylor at the forefront of the 2020 WNBA season, the WNBA athletes continued to keep race, gender, and politics in their sport always despite being consistently told that their voices do not matter, and no one cares. Throughout the season there was a consistent discourse of misogynist and patriotic tweets and comments directed towards the athletes showing overtly nationalist commentary about how sports and politics should be separate. The WNBA athletes show that the longstanding argument that athletes should keep politics out of sport is no longer possible. Over the years, athletes have continued to speak out against racial injustices and the role of social media has contributed to allowing their voices to speak louder, farther, and faster. It is impossible for the WNBA athletes to separate themselves from the politics surrounding race and gender when they identify with the female victims of police violence like Breonna Taylor. Finally, the league's acknowledgement, involvement, and engagement with the athlete activism on social media during the 2020 WNBA season shows an overwhelming support that athlete activism is here to stay. Those who believe that politics and sports should be separate are living in the past.

WNBA ATHLETES PROTEST THE SHOOTING OF JACOB BLAKE

A pivotal moment during the 2020 WNBA season occurred following the horrific shooting of a 29-year-old Black man, Jacob Blake, in Kenosha, Wisconsin on August 23, 2020. Professional athletes across different sports leagues began to speak out and it did not take long before athletes and teams refused to play regularly scheduled games. The same occurred in Bradenton, Florida, inside the WNBA bubble. This incident forced the WNBA athletes to grapple with yet another police shooting and continued reminders of ongoing racist police violence in America. Upon reviewing the Instagram posts of activism during the 2020 season, this moment during the 2020 season when games were halted and athletes responded to the shooting created a lot of discourse and contention on social media, much like what was happening in America at the time. This chapter will focus on the athlete activism following the shooting of Jacob Blake and the subsequent protest and stoppage of play of regular season games during the WNBA season. Between August 26, 2020, and August 31, 2020, the WNBA Instagram account dedicated nine posts to the protest of games, social justice awareness, or conversations about Jacob Blake. The posts included photos, videos, and interviews with athletes inside the bubble. There were 2,459 collective comments on these nine posts that provide great insight into the reaction to the protest.

In this chapter, I examine the role of Instagram and discuss how it was used to showcase the athlete activism that was happening inside the bubble during this critical moment of the season. The social media posts allowed for greater discussion of social justice issues within the comments. In my analysis, I found four key themes in the public discourse of athletes as activists including racism towards the shooting victim, Jacob Blake; personal attacks of the WNBA

athletes because of their decision to speak out about systemic racism and police violence; attacks on the perceived viewership and fandom of the WNBA; and praise for the WNBA athletes as activists. Finally, I found that the athletes used Instagram to amplify their voices and their activism during the protest of games and the day of reflection following the shooting of Jacob Blake.

Background

The August 23, 2020, shooting of Jacob Blake was followed by protests in the streets around the country. These protests were joined by protests held by the players of the WNBA and other sports leagues that were in season. Jacob Blake, a 29-year-old Black man, was shot seven times in the back by a white police officer in Kenosha, Wisconsin. As a result of the shooting, which occurred in front of three of his children, Blake was left partially paralyzed. A neighbor recorded a video from their cellphone which showed a police officer shooting Blake in the back seven times as he walked back to his car. The video then went viral sparking outrage and protests all over the country, some of which turned violent as protesters burned cars and buildings (Morales, 2021). Others threw fireworks, water bottles, and bricks at police officers who donned riot gear and responded by shooting rubber bullets and using tear gas on the demonstrators. Two days following the shooting of Jacob Blake, two protesters were shot and killed, and a third protester was injured in Kenosha, Wisconsin, by Kyle Rittenhouse, a then 17-year-old white man who claimed to be protecting the area from looters (Morales, 2021).

Following the shooting, athletes from various professional leagues showed an unprecedented collective display of power when it came to the decision to participate in their

scheduled games. On Wednesday afternoon in the NBA, the Milwaukee Bucks players refused to take the floor for their playoff Game 5 against the Orlando Magic; as Milwaukee is located 30 miles from Kenosha, Blake's killing was literally close to home for them. The league eventually postponed three league games on Wednesday night in the NBA bubble at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida (Gregory, 2020). Inside the bubble at IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida, the athletes of the WNBA held a protest of their own. The four teams that were scheduled to play the first two games of the evening got together for an hour-long discussion. Initially, the teams thought they were going to play and wanted to stage a protest during the games. Discussions were held around putting the ball down on the court at the seven-minute mark of each quarter for the seven shots in Jacob Blake's back. However, as discussions continued, the Mystics players decided that they could not take the court (Maloney, 2020). Eventually, the three regularly scheduled basketball games for Wednesday, August 26, 2020, were postponed as part of the protest, which included games between the Washington Mystics and Atlanta Dream at 7:00 PM airing on ESPN 2; the Los Angeles Sparks and Minnesota Lynx at 8:00 PM airing on CBS Sports Network; and the Connecticut Sun and Phoenix Mercury at 10:00 PM airing on CBS Sports Network.

Another Milwaukee team also decided to take a stand. The Milwaukee Brewers MLB team was scheduled to play the Cincinnati Reds on Wednesday evening. After a team-wide meeting in their clubhouse, the players voted not to play. Since the players on the Reds agreed, the game would be postponed rather than forfeited. The two MLB teams released a joint statement surrounding the events: "With our community and nation in such pain, we wanted to draw as much attention to the issues that really matter, especially racial injustice and systematic

oppression” (Nightingale, 2020). Two other scheduled games in the MLB were not played, the Seattle Mariners decided not to play against the San Diego Padres, and the San Francisco Giants and Los Angeles Dodgers game was also postponed. In the MLS, five games were canceled on Wednesday, August 26, 2020 (Voepel, 2020). Finally, tennis organizers paused play in the Western and Southern Open tennis tournament for Thursday, August 27, 2020, which included a semifinal match featuring social justice advocate Naomi Osaka. Osaka said in a statement, “As a Black woman I feel as though there are much more important matters at hand that need immediate attention, rather than watching me play tennis” (Gregory, 2020). Athletes from various leagues made a collective decision among themselves to protest play in the wake of the shooting of Jacob Blake sending a statement to Americans that these issues are far greater than sports and entertainment.

Literature Review

The response from athletes following the shooting of Jacob Blake in 2020 was not the first instance of athletes responding to the shootings of Black Americans by law enforcement officers. There is a long line of athletes in the previous years who had spoken out against the racial injustices in the country. The death of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2013 sparked one of the first modern instances of athlete activism in the NBA. Basketball stars Dwyane Wade and Derrick Rose wore hoodies during warm-ups of a regular-season game to bring attention to the case against Zimmerman. The significance of the hoodie was to imitate Martin the night he was shot and killed and to call out the stereotyping that young Black men as dangerous or threatening simply by the clothes they wear (Coombs &

Cassilo, 2017). Later, one of the most notable players in NBA history, LeBron James, joined his Miami Heat teammates and donned the hoodie himself. James, Wade, and other Miami Heat teammates all sported the hoodies to pose for a photo in response to the shooting. In the photo, James and his teammates were wearing the hoodie with the hood up and looking down. He posted the photo on social media with the hashtags James #Stereotyped #Hoodies #WeAreTrayvonMartin #WeWantJustice (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). In 2014, the NBA players wore t-shirts stating “I Can’t Breathe” during pre-game warmups in honor of and to bring attention to another victim of police violence after another Black American, Eric Garner, who was killed by police in New York City (Lavelle, 2019). Based on the status and prominence of the NBA athletes, the simple act of wearing a hoodie or a t-shirt allows for awareness of and a continued conversation of the events that are at the root of the activism.

Like the NBA athletes, NFL athletes had been speaking out against police violence as well. On August 9, 2014, 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. At the time, the St. Louis Rams football team played at Edward Jones Stadium, only 12 miles from Ferguson. In the days and weeks following Brown’s death, there were many protests and unrest in the area. The Rams allowed local high school football teams affected by the protests to use their practice fields (Wagoner, 2014). The organization also donated 200 tickets to three Ferguson-area high school football teams for the preseason game against the Green Bay Packers. A few months later, on November 19, the Rams were scheduled to play a regular season game against the Oakland Raiders. During pregame warmups, five Rams players, Jared Cook, Kenny Britt, Tavon Austin, Stedman Bailey, and Chris Givens, demonstrated the “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” gesture on the field. The Rams players were bringing

awareness to the death of Michael Brown but also the Black Lives Matter movement in which protesters had adopted the “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” mantra following the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Brown. In addition to the pregame demonstration, Tre Mason and Britt held their hands up during the game following Mason’s first quarter touchdown (Gill, 2016). The Rams players, who later became known as the “Ferguson Five”, showed their support of the movement during this game by the symbolic reference, and it was quickly picked up in the media after the game. The response from fans and the media was mixed. Fans in the stands at the games held up signs stating “Rams fans know Black lives matter on and off the field”, while the St. Louis Police Officers Association “condemned” the actions by the Rams players and called the act “tasteless” and “offensive” (Zirin, 2014). The demonstration and activism of the St. Louis Rams players showed that athletes have the chance to reach millions, especially young people when they are still trying to figure out their social values. While many don’t agree that athletes should use their platform to speak out about critical issues, others were impressed and supportive of the activism surrounding Brown’s death (Gill, 2016).

During the 2016 Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly awards (ESPYs), four of the most visible NBA players and leaders of their respected teams continued their activism by using their physical platform on stage to speak out. The ESPYs are hosted by ESPN and broadcast nationally each year to millions of viewers. During their speech, LeBron James, Dwayne Wade, Chris Paul, and Carmelo Anthony took turns discussing current events of police brutality and dividedness in the country and calling for change. Anthony discussed the racial divide in the nation and police violence. Paul spoke out for the recent victims of violence and how important it is for athletes to follow in the footsteps of other activists before them. Wade discussed the

issue of racial profiling, as seen in the case of Trayvon Martin and so many others, as well as the value of Black lives in the country. James concluded the speech discussing the influence that athletes have to give back to their communities (E. Frederick et al., 2018). This act of activism by the NBA athletes is significant because of the measurable visibility of their platform on that stage. The 2016 ESPYS was broadcast nationally on ABC and reached 5.6 million American viewers, as well as garnering attention from many other news media outlets (E. Frederick et al., 2018).

As a result of the continued killings of Black Americans and just after the previously mentioned ESPYS speech in 2016, Colin Kaepernick made a decision that would forever change his course in history as an athlete. Now a prominent face of athlete activism, Kaepernick, quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers at the time, sat during the national anthem in protest of how Black people are treated in the United States. He indicated that he did not feel like he could stand for the anthem of a country who allowed Black people to be murdered (Hartman, 2019; P. Johnson, 2019; Serazio & Thorson, 2020). This act of activism was on the heels of racial turmoil that was going on in the country and following the deaths of several Black men at the hands of law enforcement agents. In the act of kneeling during the national anthem at the NFL games, Kaepernick was very clear that the protest was because of how Black and brown Americans are treated in the United States and to bring light to the racial inequalities they face. After Kaepernick had a conversation with an Army veteran about sitting during the national anthem, Kaepernick decided to kneel instead of sit in an attempt to ensure was not disrespecting the military (Serazio & Thorson, 2020). However, both sitting and kneeling were viewed as Kaepernick disrespecting the military and the U.S. flag.

Kaepernick's protest followed the demonstrations in the NBA and WNBA with the hoodies, t-shirts, and ESPYs speech, but the response to Kaepernick's kneeling during the national anthem spread far and wide. The act of activism of Kaepernick was very similar to those in the NBA but the culture within the professional sports leagues of the NBA and NFL is far different. The NBA athletes protested by wearing shirts during pregame warmups and posted photos to the social media accounts. Kaepernick decided to kneel during the national anthem which is a pregame ritual held in front of NFL fans. Kaepernick was not following the "rules" set forth by the culture of the NFL and he was scrutinized for it. When Black athletes step out of line, misbehave, or behave in a way that is not expected of them, the white fans and white media representatives often turn violent (P. Johnson, 2019). Kaepernick was the target of death threats, racial slurs, and harassment both verbally and online. There were demonstrations of fans burning his jersey and fans tackling a dummy wearing his jersey performing acts of violence towards Kaepernick (P. Johnson, 2019). These violent fan reactions to Black athletes speaking up, kneeling, and bringing awareness to racism have continued over the years of athlete activism and are signs of the prevalence of white supremacy in the U.S. Ben Carrington (2010) states that the sports arena "operates as an important symbolic space in the struggles of Black peoples for freedom and liberty, cultural recognition and civic rights, against the ideologies and practices of white supremacy" (55). While there are horrendous responses to acts of activism that cannot and should not be tolerated, Kaepernick is credited with providing a new rhetorical space for athletes to bring politics into sports again. Athletes have an opportunity to participate in activism in ways that they previously have not been able to (Hartman, 2019).

There is an inherent risk when athletes speak out against social injustices, especially in leagues like the NFL and the WNBA. Kaepernick was up against a predominantly white fan base that did not accept his activism. At the end of the 2016 season, Colin Kaepernick became a free agent and went unsigned for the 2017 season. Eric Reid, who was one of the first players to kneel beside Kaepernick during the national anthem, also ended up as a free agent and was unsigned in the 2018 season. Both athletes eventually filed a grievance against the NFL claiming that they remained unsigned because collusion between the NFL owners because of their activism (Hartman, 2019). Though Kaepernick remained unsigned and was no longer an NFL player, he became the face of athlete activism and continued the conversation about police brutality off the field. Even President Donald Trump had something to say about Kaepernick's activism and kneeling during the national anthem. On September 22, 2017, Trump criticized the kneeling athletes during a Republican rally in Alabama. Trump spoke directly to NFL owners and directed them to punish the Black athletes stating, "Wouldn't you love to see one of the NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now...out. He's fired. He's fired!'" (McGannon and Butryn, 2020). All 32 NFL owners responded to Trump's comments in the two days following citing the athletes' rights to free speech, but the owners never outwardly supported the players, nor did they denounce Trump for his comments. The statements from the owners were apolitical in nature reaffirming their power and privilege over the Black athletes (McGannon & Butryn, 2020). Due to Trump's comments and the owners' lack of support, over 200 NFL athletes kneeled during the national anthem in the first three weeks of the 2017 NFL season (McGannon & Butryn, 2020).

There have been many instances of Black men and teens being shot and killed at the hands of police officers. During this time, athletes have continued to speak out about critical social justice issues by way of the clothes they wear, body language on the field, with their voices during press conferences and at award shows, and on social media. The reactions of these acts of activism vary significantly, but the athletes have begun to get more and more attention for their actions, even from the President of the United States. The shooting of Jacob Blake in August 2020 also became a significant instance of athlete activism across many sports leagues, but especially in the WNBA. While individual athletes have spoken out on issues of race and police violence against Black men in the U.S., the reaction and protest of games following the shooting of Jacob Black in 2020 was unprecedented. Rather than one or two key Black athletes speaking out against the violence, entire teams and entire leagues protested play to bring awareness to the systemic racism plaguing the country.

Methodology

Each of the nine Instagram posts between August 26, 2020, and August 31, 2020, related to the shooting of Jacob Blake, athlete activism, protests, and postponement of games following the shooting provide an insight into what was happening inside the bubble in Bradenton, Florida, and how the WNBA athletes responded to the event. Each post also contains public user comments which provide insight to how these acts of activism were perceived at the time. In total, there were 2,459 comments on the nine posts during this timeframe. I collected the comments from each of the posts by hand and put them into an Excel spreadsheet. The comments that contained words, rather than only emojis, were analyzed using Orange Data

Mining (Demšar et al., 2013). The widgets used to help analyze the data included word cloud, keyword extractor, and concordance. Using CDA, I found four themes that emerged from the comments. First, attacks on the shooting victim Jacob Blake's character; next, attacks on the WNBA athletes as activists and the reason for their protest; third, attacks on the perceived viewership of the WNBA league and athletes; and finally, thankfulness of the WNBA athletes, both positive and negative, in relation to the athlete activism.

Findings

Activism in the WNBA on social media

Though the WNBA athletes were not alone in deciding to forgo playing their games on Wednesday, the NBA and WNBA athletes were in unique positions to be able to discuss their activism as a collective group at their single locations in the bubbles. The four WNBA teams that were playing the first two games of the night were together in at the IMG Academy having meaningful conversations about the recent events and whether they would take the court. As the news started to come out about the protest of games, news and updates were shared on the official WNBA Instagram account. The first post on August 26, 2020, related to the protest was a developing story following the shooting of Jacob Blake and what would happen with the scheduled games that evening. In the video posted on the Instagram account, fans are informed that the slate of games have been canceled as ESPN reporter, Holly Rowe, was standing with Atlanta Dream's Elizabeth Williams on the court inside the IMG Academy. Rowe stated that the players arrived at the facility thinking they would play but have since changed their minds and

will not play. Elizabeth Williams then reads a statement from her phone given on behalf of the WNBA teams and players.

“After speaking with representatives from teams playing tonight as well as our WNBPA leadership, the consensus is to not play in tonight’s slate of games and to kneel, lock arms, and to raise fists during the national anthem. We stand in solidarity with our brothers in the NBA and will continue this conversation with our brothers and sisters across all leagues and look to take collective action. What we have seen over the last few months and most recently with the brutal police shooting of Jacob Blake is overwhelming. And while we hurt for Jacob and his community, we also have an opportunity to keep the focus on the issues and demand change. These moments are why it’s important for our fans to stay focused, hear our voices, know our hearts, and connect the dots from what we say to what we do. We encourage everyone to go and register to vote now, today. If you truly believe that Black lives matter, then vote. Go and complete the 2020 census now. Don’t wait. If we wait, we don’t make change. It matters, Your voice matters, your vote matters. Do all you can to demand that your leaders stop with the empty words and do something. This is the reason for the 2020 season. It is in our DNA. We have been saying her name. We are lifting the names of the Black and brown women whose murders have been forgotten. We will continue to use our platform to speak to of these injustices that are still happening and demand action for change. Black Lives Matter. Say Her Name. Say His Name. Tonight, we stand. And while we have heavy hearts, we stand with strong and determined voices and ask all our fans to vote, to engage, and to make that difference.” (WNBA [@wnba], 2020d).

In announcing that the teams were not going to play the slated games for the evening, Williams used the phrase “kneel, lock arms, and raise fists during the national anthem” as a nod to the activism demonstrated by athletes who use their bodies to protest and draw attention to unjust treatment of Black Americans in the country. The WNBA athletes continue this activism in the wake of the shooting of Jacob Blake while they are protesting the games that evening. In contrast to kneeling, Williams stated that the athletes are “standing in solidarity with their brothers in the NBA” to show the protests were a collective action between the two basketball leagues. Additionally, Williams used the phrase “brothers and sisters across all leagues” to show that the professional athletes of all leagues represent a family and as horrific, racist events continue to happen in America, the family of professional athletes came together to make collective statements. As Black athletes, the racist events happening in America, most recently with the shooting of Jacob Blake, are “overwhelming”, as Williams stated. The protest by the WNBA athletes shows that they cannot process these events and focus on playing basketball at the same time. There were far greater things happening in America that needed to be addressed than playing sports. Rather than playing the regularly scheduled basketball games, the athletes chose to focus on the issues and demand change. Williams called on their fans to “stay focused, hear our voices, know our hearts, and connect the dots from what we say to what we do.” This is an argument that the WNBA athletes do not make empty promises, they are committed to making change. In addition, the official statement encouraged everyone to register to vote. If their fans truly believe that Black lives matter, they are making it clear that now is the time to act. The statement also encouraged everyone to complete the 2020 census, empowering everyone to use their own voice because “your voice matters and your vote matters.” Even though the

protest was about the shooting of Jacob Blake, Williams further brings Breonna Taylor back into the conversation. The athletes are not forgetting Taylor and continue to say her name, as well as the names of other Black and brown women whose murders and names have been forgotten. This initiative has been the reason for the season since early July and athletes are continuing to stand with their brothers and sisters of other sports leagues, kneel during the national anthem, and protest regular season games for the Black victims of senseless police violence. The athletes continued to use their platform to speak out and demand change. As a final call to action, Williams stated, “Black Lives Matter. Say Her Name. Say His Name.” This was the time for the fans to demand change by using their voice and their vote. The WNBA athletes continued to use their platform to remind everyone that they can make a difference, especially in the upcoming elections during 2020.

In addition to the first interview with Holly Rowe and the statement from Elizabeth Williams, additional footage inside the bubble and further commentary with the players was posted to the Instagram account on August 26, 2020. The second post related to the protest was video footage of Holly Rowe interviewing players from the Washington Mystics after they held out and did not play the regularly scheduled game. The video begins by showing the backs of the Mystics players wearing homemade white t-shirts with seven red dots on the back signifying the seven bullet holes Jacob Blake received in his back, while wearing a white shirt, from the police officers in Kenosha, Wisconsin. This powerful introduction clip to the video is the first instance of these t-shirts on Instagram from inside the bubble. The front of the t-shirt donned by a different player each had a large letter to spell out the name J-A-C-O-B B-L-A-K-E if the players were to line up with one another. This is a moment during the 2020 season where the intersecting

factors of being inside the bubble and the access to social media allows for the activism to be amplified. Due to the bubble, the activism this season encompasses all WNBA athletes rather than one or two teams at a time. Social media affords the athletes additional coverage that they would not have normally received. At this time, it is very likely that much of the focus on the protests of the sports leagues were focusing on the NBA and the protest of the playoff games inside their own bubble in Orlando, Florida. The WNBA athletes are demonstrating their activism with their homemade t-shirts and using social media to spread their message quicker.

In the video clip, Rowe is speaking directly to Ariel Atkins who is standing among her teammates, including Tianna Hawkins and her young son, Emmanuel, both who self-identify as Black. Having Emmanuel in the shot with the players shows that these athletes are standing up and fighting not only for Jacob Blake and the other victims of police violence, but they are thinking about and fighting for their own family members, their fathers, brothers, cousins, and sons. In the clip, Rowe asks Atkins what factors went into the decision to not play the games that evening and provides a space for dialogue about how the players ended up deciding not to play the games that evening. Atkins answers her question on camera and indicates how important it was for the players to feel like they are supported during this time and with the decision to not play basketball. The athletes understand that this situation is bigger than basketball and when they go home to their families, they're "still Black." Atkins brings attention to Emmanuel stating how his life matters and he needs to know that it matters as he is growing up. Emmanuel and other young Black boys should be able to leave their house without fear of being shot by police officers. Atkins also mentions that the athletes are supporting one another, especially the Black athletes in the league, which make up about 80% of the league. In the video, Atkins, Hawkins,

and Emmanuel are surrounded by teammates showing how they are supported. It is apparent that the athletes are standing together, supporting one another during this tragic time. By the end of the interview, Atkins is pleading and restating that Black people matter, Black lives matter, and each one of the WNBA players matters. If fans do not accept that then they need to check their privilege and watch another sport (WNBA [@wnba], 2020c). The WNBA athletes are used to negative feedback both about their league and about their activism. Atkins is making a point while she is speaking directly to the fans and anti-fans about what is important to the athletes. If their fans do not support them as Black athletes, then they can find another sport to watch. This is an impactful statement coming from a league that hopes to grow their fanbase, however, if it's not for the support they deserve, then the WNBA athletes don't want more fans. The issues the athletes are speaking up about are far bigger than basketball and the WNBA athletes want their fans to know what is important to them.

To wrap up the events of the first day of postponed games on Wednesday, August 26, 2020, the third post and final post from the WNBA account on Instagram included both a photo and a video with one simple word as the caption, "United." The photo shows Washington Mystics players kneeling center court over the WNBA logo that is on the hardwood floor and "WNBA" with the logos of the 12 teams underneath the giant letters on the wall behind them. Since each person in the photo is kneeling, the wall behind them is perfectly visible showing the WNBA and the logos of the 12 teams giving more of a sense of a united front. There are ten players kneeling in the front row, center court, each wearing a white t-shirt with large letters on the front that spell out J-A-C-O-B B-L-A-K-E as the athletes are kneeling next to one another. Many of the other athletes, coaches, and team staff members that are visible in the photo are on

the court kneeling are wearing black which make the white t-shirts with the letters stand out even more. Though not pictured in this post, the backs of the white t-shirts have the seven dots for the bullet holes where Jacob Blake was shot which was shown in the previous Instagram post. The players and other members of the photo are all linking arms as they are kneeling next to each other which is also providing a sense of a united front. The faces of each person in the photo are solemn. Additionally, Tianna Hawkins' son, Emmanuel, is also kneeling with the team donning a red shirt located in the photo between the players wearing the "A" and the "K" shirts. Having Emmanuel in the photo and participating in the protest reminds us that these athletes are not just athletes. They have families of their own and must think about their own wellbeing considering the racist events that have taken place in the recent days and months. Tianna Hawkins must consider raising Emmanuel in a world where there is still racism and systematic oppression taking place.

The video in the Instagram post spans the athletes, coaches, and team staffers gathering to become united on the court, kneeling or getting ready to kneel, and linking arms for a photo, which was used for the first photo of the Instagram post. The audio of the video is the game announcers depicting what they are seeing on the court live as the players are mobilizing and actively protesting the games. The announcer states in the voiceover of the video, "now looking at a live shot in Bradenton, all four teams that are in the arena that are supposed to play tonight are there, Washington, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Minnesota supposed to play at 8. Connecticut and Phoenix scheduled to play at 10, they have not yet arrived. And you see all taking a knee, that is Tianna Hawkins with her little boy Emmanuel in the red shirt. You see the Mystics wearing the shirts that spell out on the front the name of Jacob Blake, and on the back the graphic of bullet

holes depicting where Blake was shot by police in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Up until about 10 minutes ago, we thought we were going to have a game, that Washington was going to play Atlanta as scheduled. But the Washington Mystics held out and decided not to play. The other teams have now got on board and there will be no WNBA games tonight.” (WNBA [@wnba], 2020e). The video footage allows us to see more closely who is in the first photo and what was happening on the court leading up to the photo being taken. Many of the black shirts that the players and staff members are wearing have the saying “Black Lives Matter” and “Arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor.” There are other players in the back of the photo that have on homemade white t-shirts with a large number “7” on the front, signifying the seven shots in Jacob Blake’s back. This Instagram post with the simple caption of “United” allowed us to get a good sense of what was happening inside the bubble and showed how players from four different teams united and made a collective decision to take a knee rather than play their regularly scheduled games. As I’ll discuss later, this post also provided an additional perspective of the fan reaction as it garnered the most comments of the nine posts between August 26, 2020, and August 31, 2020.

A day of reflection

In the WNBA, the protests continued into the following day. The WNBA released a statement that the players decided that August 27, 2020, would be "a Day of Reflection, a Day of Informed Action and Mobilization." The WNBA players were clear that the protest was about giving time for conversations, discussions, and reflection for the players (Pickman, 2020). The WNBA released a statement which was posted on the official Instagram account stating “As the

WNBA players continue discussions and reflection on recent events, the WNBA announced that the three games scheduled for this evening (Chicago Sky vs. Indiana Fever; Dallas Wings vs. New York Liberty; Las Vegas Aces vs. Seattle Storm) have been postponed. Information regarding rescheduling of yesterday and today's games will be provided when available.” (WNBA [@wnba], 2020f).

As of August 27, there was no indication if or when games would resume in the WNBA. It wasn't until the following day that it was announced that the athletes would resume play in the regularly scheduled games for Friday, August 28, 2020. The post on the official WNBA Instagram account included the photo from August 26 of the four teams united, kneeling center court and the Mystics players wearing the J-A-C-O-B B-L-A-K-E shirts. The caption of the post stated “Games resume tonight. The fight for justice and equality never stops.” (WNBA [@wnba], 2020g). In addition to this announcement, the conversation surrounding social justice continued. WNBA President, Nneka Ogwumike, spoke to CBS This Morning virtually on the decision to continue the season and the social justice efforts by the athletes in the WNBA. The interview of Ogwumike and the hosts of CBS This Morning, Gayle King, and Anthony Mason, was posted to the WNBA Instagram account on August 28 in advance of games resuming that day which allowed us to gain insight into what went on inside the bubble when it came to making the decision to protest the games and declaring a day of reflection. The interview with CBS This Morning helps us understand the emotional turmoil the athletes were going through inside the bubble and the impact of the activism of the athletes.

Prior to the interview, King provides context to the WNBA games resuming after the unprecedented walkout over racial injustice and the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Wisconsin. She adds that in addition to the two days of protests by the WNBA players, baseball and hockey games were also postponed as teams from other leagues joined the protest. King introduces Nneka Ogwumike as the WNBPA President and Los Angeles Sparks forward who has been at the forefront for the cause for justice and asks her to take them behind the scenes about what went into the decision to return to play. Ogwumike starts off the conversation speaking about the tenacity and determination of the WNBA athletes and provides insight into what the athletes and WNBPA leadership has gone through this year from negotiating their collective bargaining agreement to figuring out how to play a basketball season safely in the middle of a global pandemic in Bradenton. Ogwumike sets the scene for these athletes having to make difficult decisions and coming together as a united front on issues not related to social justice. She then discusses what it was like to arrive at the gym two days prior to find other teams and players deciding on whether they would take the court for the regularly scheduled games following the shooting, not only because of the other sports leagues who were announcing their decisions, but also because of the role of these athletes as women in this country. The added emphasis on the women's role in the country shows that there is an added layer of consideration for these athletes than many of the other athletes of the male sporting leagues at that time. Ultimately, the WNBA athletes decided not to play, which is known, but Ogwumike also includes that there was a vigil amongst the athletes on campus, as well as an all in-person player meeting. An all in-person player meeting for all the WNBA athletes was unprecedented and afforded by the single site location in the bubble in Bradenton, Florida. Upon the conclusion of the meeting, the players

decided collectively that the following day after the protest and stoppage of play would be a day of reflection. King also makes note in the interview how the athletes all got to sit down together for a discussion which is not a conversation that they've ever been able to have before and how very powerful it is what the athletes are doing. She asks about the conversations that the WNBA athletes have been having amongst themselves and why they think it's so important? She also brings up the common phrase surrounding athlete activism "shut up and dribble." Ogwumike follows up with insight on how the athletes made the decision to continue. For the WNBA athletes, playing basketball during the season is what gives them their voice. They chose to play the 2020 season so they could focus on the social justice issues so it was important to the athletes to continue the season so they can continue addressing social justice issues. With that being said, it didn't mean that the athletes didn't need the time for themselves to deal with the shooting of Jacob Blake. They used that time during the stoppage of play to sit with themselves, reflect, mourn, and consider how they can recommit to really what the season was dedicated to which is social justice issues.

Mason follows up with the next question about what the athletes would like to see happen when they are looking for "actionable items for change"? While Ogwumike doesn't have a specific answer at that moment, she indicates that more conversations are needed and that's what they intend to do. She had been having conversations with Chris Paul from the NBA and discussing what exactly they can do to bring the conversations to both the NBA and WNBA unions and how they can use both of their platforms to bring a greater impact and demand change from leaders and politicians in the communities. Ogwumike notes that the WNBA players' greatest strength is their voice, but on their day of reflection, the players did have action

items that they were addressing. The players provided a QR code to their family and friends outside of the bubble. The QR code that was a quick way for those people to check their voter registration status. While this action item may be considered small, the athletes hoped this was strength in numbers as they were reaching out to their own communities to encourage them to get registered and plan to vote in the upcoming 2020 election. Since Ogwumike was speaking of voting, Mason follows up with comments from then-President Donald Trump who called the NBA a political organization and doesn't think athlete activism and politics are good for sports. In the interview, Ogwumike smirks and shrugs her shoulders stating, "we're citizens, too." She is speaking for all WNBA players and professional athletes across the country when she says this. The social justice issues that the players are addressing are not political issues, they are human issues. Ogwumike states that rather than trying to win elections and pick sides, it is important to see these issues as human issues and the polarization of such issues in the country truly affects the athletes deeply. She uses the metaphor of the bubble in Bradenton as an example. The WNBA athletes are fierce competitors on the court, but they're required to coexist with each other in the bubble. They are banding together as a unified group while still playing together on the court. Politics are no different as there are two parties, but the issues that are dividing the parties are human issues that need to be addressed collectively. King follows up with indicating that this is really not a sports story, it's an American story of human beings and human citizens, not athletes (WNBA [@wnba], 2020h).

Games resume, the fight for justice continues

As regularly scheduled games resumed on Friday, August 28, the Connecticut Suns took the opportunity to make a statement prior to the start of their game. This is shown in the August 29 post on the WNBA Instagram account which contained two videos and two photos of the team. The caption on the post reads “The @connecticutsun make a statement pregame.” The video shows the Connecticut Suns players making their statement silently before the game. Each player or coach is kneeling and holding an 8.5x11 inch sheet of paper containing one word. The players and coaches have one knee down with their heads bowed. Some players are holding hands with one another while holding the sign in their other free hand. As the players and coaches are kneeling next to each other, the video spans the team and the words on each paper form a sentence which is quote that reads: “In the end, we will not remember the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends. – Dr. MLK, Jr.” The voiceover in the video repeats the text, “In the end, we will not remember the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends, said Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The Connecticut Sun players and coaching staff putting that out before pre-game, as coach Curt Miller was very emotional during our pregame availability.” The video then shows a clip of Coach Miller during a pre-game interview, visibly upset with tears in his eyes. He looks down to gather his thoughts and says, “so, it’s bigger than basketball for all of us, and because of that, we continue to talk about things other than basketball as a team” (WNBA [@wnba], 2020i). The second photo in the post is a still shot of five of the players kneeling and looking down with eyes closed. The players are each holding the signs that make up the middle of the quote, “end, we will remember not.” The next photo is another still shot which is more zoomed out showing nine players and coaches kneeling, holding

their signs “of our enemies, but the silence of our”, the last person in the photo is visible but the sign which contains the word “friends” is just out of the shot. Finally, the fourth photo of the post is a silent video spanning the whole team showing each of the words in the MLK, Jr. quote. The players are down on one knee, some are bowing their heads, others are speaking to one another, and some are looking straight ahead. Every face in the photo is solemn. The last person in the video is Coach Curt Miller holding his sign that reads “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”. The statement made by the Connecticut Sun players and coaches is meaningful because it shows a team united. The white players and coaches are allies, kneeling alongside their Black fellow teammates and coaches, all supporting one another. The powerful quote also brings attention to the fact that these “friends,” teammates, and coaches are not going to stay silent. They are willing and able to speak out for the Black community against systemic racism, police violence, and for social justice.

The following day, the WNBA posted a compilation video to Instagram narrated by Indiana Fever’s Natalie Achonwa. The video addressed that this season was agreed upon by the players to play in the middle of a global pandemic because they wanted the season to have a significant purpose. As the athletes paused to reflect on that purpose of the last few days, they decided to continue to raise their voices. Their voices are for hope, for change, for solidarity, for those who have been forgotten, and for those who do not have a voice. The league and the athletes show that they are going to continue to play, but they’re playing for something bigger than basketball (WNBA [@wnba], 2020j). The images and video clips used in the short compilation video on Instagram are powerful and provide a good summary of the activism that has already happened during the season already. There are clips of players standing with their

heads bowed wearing Black Lives Matter shirts. There is footage from the candlelight vigil for Jacob Blake where Layshia Clarendon is quoting Maya Angelou: “just like hope springing high, still I rise.” There is a clip from the previous day’s interview with Connecticut Sun coach, Curt Miller, visibly emotional, discussing how systemic racism in our country is bigger than basketball. There is footage of players kneeling with shirts showing Breonna Taylor’s face and the words “Say Her Name” clearly visible. Finally, there is footage of 18 names displayed of the Black women victims of police violence as part of the #SayHerName campaign. This short video was meant to remind everyone why the athletes have decided to return to the court following the shooting of Jacob Blake.

The final post related to Jacob Blake on Instagram during this timeframe came on August 31, 2020. The photo posted was a snapshot from the interview and conversation on August 26 between Holly Rowe and Ariel Atkins, surrounded by Mystics players, including Tiana Hawkins and her son, Emmanuel, when the players decided to protest the regular season games following the shooting of Jacob Blake. The caption of the post is a quote from Atkins that reads, “We understand that these moments are so much bigger than us.” with the hashtag #MotivationMonday (WNBA [@wnba], 2020k). Even though games are resuming in the WNBA and the other sports leagues currently, the WNBA wants to ensure that Jacob Blake and his shooting is not forgotten since the protest has ended. These athletes still must deal with this, especially those who are mothers to Black boys just like Jacob Blake once was.

Without basketball and social media, the athletes would not have a platform to speak out against social injustices and speak up for victims of shootings across America. Social media

allows the athletes to share the footage of their activism inside the bubble, especially the pregame activism that would not normally be covered by traditional media. However, social media also provides a public forum for the backlash of the activism to easily take place. The comments section on each of these photos allows for participants online to freely share their response to the activism whether they agree or disagree.

Coding the response to activist discourse

The public response on social media to the protest of basketball games in the WNBA and the posting about the events on social media was conflicted. The first theme that emerged in the comments was about the perceived character traits and flaws of Jacob Blake. Leading up to the shooting, a warrant for Blake's arrest had been issued in July for charges of third-degree sexual assault, criminal trespass, and disorderly conduct (Morales, 2021). On the day of August 23, the woman who initially filed the complaint that led to the arrest warrant called the police to report that Blake was at her residence. The police arrived in response to the domestic complaint and tried to arrest Blake. In the arrest attempt, police used a Taser on Blake and later made a statement that Blake forcefully resisted arrest, admitted he had a knife, fought police officers, putting one in a headlock, and repeatedly ignored demands to drop the knife. Blake's lawyer denied that Blake had a knife, though one was found on the passenger's side floorboard of his vehicle. Blake's lawyer indicated that Blake had been attempting to break up a fight between two women when the police arrived at the scene (Morales, 2021). Resisting arrest, or resisting an officer, is a crime of preventing or hindering arrest in many states (*Resisting Arrest*, 2021). Even

if the arrest is unlawful and there is no legitimate reason for the arrest to begin with, resisting the arrest is still a crime.

There were many instances of racism and white supremacy in the comments related to the shooting. Users claimed that the shooting it was “justified” by what Blake had done. There were nine instances of the word “justified” being using the comments on the Instagram posts. The most popular phrase being “the justified shooting” because of what Blake had done or because he “had a knife.” There were also personal attacks on Blake calling him a “pedophile”, “rapist”, “felon”, and stating how he tried to “resist arrest” thus trying to justify the shooting more. Again, even though the arrest was not warranted in the first place, Blake resisting arrest is a justifiable reason for the violence against him according to the comments. The attempt to justify the shooting of a Black men based on his actions is preposterous. There is never a circumstance in which shooting a Black man in the back seven times while he is walking away is a justified scenario, yet a user claimed that Blake is “someone who should be permanently removed from this world” reaffirming white supremacy and a belief that Black men and women deserve what they get when they are shot and/or killed by police officers. This also shows that the police officer is presumed innocent because Blake’s actions justified the violence, when all the previous comments indicate that Blake is guilty without any presumption of innocence until proven guilty.

Many months later and well after the WNBA season had ended, Jacob Blake appeared in court virtually in November 2020 and pleaded guilty to two counts of disorderly conduct, thus allowing one count of criminal trespassing to be dropped. Prosecutors in Kenosha County Circuit Court dropped one count of third-degree sexual assault since the woman who initially accused Blake did not cooperate with the prosecution. Blake had maintained his innocence in the case

and it ultimately could not be proved in court that Blake committed sexual assault (Morales, 2021), contrary to what the users claimed in their comments on the WNBA Instagram account just a few months prior to Blake's court appearance.

Since many users decided that Jacob Blake was a horrible person who deserved to be shot in the back seven times based on his reported actions, the attacks on and questions about the WNBA players as activists emerged as another theme. The term "WNBA" was used for both positive and negative comments on Instagram. Many users used the comments section of these posts to share what they perceived happened in Kenosha, Wisconsin and how Blake asked for this by what he had done. There were 29 instances of the word "rapist", 12 instances of the word "rape", and 12 instances of the word "pedophile" being used, many of which were directed at the WNBA athletes asking why they are supporting a "rapist" or kneeling for a "pedophile child rapist." The comments that are directed towards the athletes claiming that they are just trying to bring attention to a "rapist" show that they are missing the entire point of the protest, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the violence towards the Black community by police officers. Many users asked how the WNBA athletes are supporting men who rape and abuse women, claiming the activism was for the wrong person, not considering the full purpose of the activism to begin with. Users questioned why the name of the victim was not spelled out on their shirts rather than Jacob Blake's name, as well as why they are focusing on Blake and not the girl that he "sexually assaulted." Again, these comments reaffirm that the purpose of the protest is lost on many of the commentators. The protest was not about this single instance and Jacob Blake, but this instance as one of many instances of brutal police violence to Black men and women. The reason for the entire WNBA season was to speak out against police violence against Black

women and speaking up for those victims who do not get a chance to speak for themselves now. Yet, the commenters on the social media posts focus solely on the details of this specific instance, Blake as a threat to the police officers, and how the WNBA players are wrong for standing up for him. Rather than looking at this instance as another example of systemic racism in America, it is viewed as the case of Jacob Blake, his character, and his actions in Kenosha, Wisconsin. This example perpetuates white supremacy in America and the continual failure to see the big picture issues of systemic racism and brutal police violence towards Black Americans.

Additionally, there were many comments about how the activism of the WNBA athletes was misplaced to the Black Lives Matter movement, Jacob Blake, and police brutality. Comments asking why the athletes are not supporting “more important causes” such as child trafficking. If the WNBA athletes are going to be standing for something, the comments claim that the activism should be for causes that the commenters deem worthy, not the Black Lives Matter movement. The Black Lives Matter movement was also noted to be a “Marxist” organization or movement which was stated five times in the comments. The comments regarding the Black Lives Matter movement as a “Marxist” organization continue to perpetuate white supremacy. A prominent law enforcement training group, the International Law Enforcement and Trainers Association (ILEETA), published a long research document full of inaccurate information regarding Black Lives Matter activists and encouraged local law enforcement to treat activists as terrorists. The group released the document titled “Understanding Antifa and Urban Guerrilla Warfare” that contained misinformation and inflammatory rhetoric that would be harmful for protesters and people of color (Foley, 2020).

The same inflammatory rhetoric as was used in this document for local law enforcement continues to be seen in the comments on social media against the Black Live Matter movement. While the document is clearly disturbing, there are many that believe the outlandish conspiracy theories that the activists, including the WNBA athletes, are inciting extreme violence, and planning to overthrow the government. The document itself perpetuates cultural ignorance by conflating the BLM movement with antifa, promoting violence, and dehumanizing people (Foley, 2020).

The third theme in the comments was directed at the WNBA athletes focused more on the athletes and the league fan base and viewership and less about the activism surrounding the Jacob Blake case and the Black Lives Matter movement. There were 26 instances of the word “watches” and 31 instances of the word “watch” claiming the lack of viewership of the WNBA games and in turn the WNBA athlete activism. Comments such as “nobody watches the WNBA”, “no one watches y’all”, “nobody even watches this shit”, and “I’m surprised anyone watches these females...so boring!!!!” show sexism towards the athletes of the WNBA. Users also pointed out the perceived lack of fan base which is shown in comments on 32 occasions. Comments such as “bro your 5 fans really care”, “all 12 WNBA fans?”, and “7 holes for the 7 fans way to support your fan base” consistently point to the perceived lack of fanbase and lack of viewership of the league. Other comments indicated that the activism is the reason there are no fans. One user did not even acknowledge it as activism, they simply called it “bitching” and that the athletes are “driving away all of their fans.” Another user commented how there won’t be professional sports for much longer since athletes are protesting for “stupid crime committing individuals” and that the “fans” are realizing this and will stop supporting athletes and sports

organizations they once admired. She indicated that she used to be a fan of the WNBA but now she knows she should have been admiring the women wearing soldier, firefighter, and police uniforms instead. Resistance to athlete activism is prevalent in the comments as people continue to believe that sports, politics, and social justice issues have ever been or should be separate. There is a consistent theme of anti-fandom of the WNBA in the comments on social media, especially when the athletes are using their platform to speak out against systemic racism and police violence, but it is interesting that so many of the anti-fans are on the official @WNBA Instagram account viewing the posts and commenting which has an impact on the algorithm of the social media platform.

Finally, the word “thank” was the number one keyword with 82 different occurrences. Unlike the previous three themes, this term had both instances of positive and negative comments directed towards the WNBA athletes and the league. To determine the meaning of the word “thank”, I did a close reading of each of the comments to gain context of whether the use of the word was positive or negative. There were many comments directed towards the athletes, even individual athletes like Elizabeth Williams and Ariel Atkins, thanking them for using their voices, for their support of BLM, for their activism, for leading the way, for being good examples, for inspiring social change, for doing their part, for taking a stance, and for always showing up. These comments resist the previous notions that no one watches the WNBA or cares that they are speaking out for Jacob Blake and the Black Lives Matter movement. There are powerful descriptive words used in these comments like “queens,” “amazing women,” “strength,” “leaders,” “powerful ladies,” “courage,” and “leadership.” These comments show that what the WNBA athletes are doing with their platform inside the bubble and on social media

is meaningful. WNBA athletes in their uniforms should still be looked up to and admired by young girls and boys for not being afraid to speak out against social injustices.

Of course, not all the comments that include the words “thank” or “thanks” were positive comments towards the athletes. There were several instances where these words were used in derogatory or sarcastic comments towards the athletes and the league. One user wrote an entire paragraph about how they had supported the league since it started in 1997 but now professional athletes have gotten entitled, and everything has gotten out of hand. They believe that the job of the athlete is to play the sport and asked what would happen if other workers just decided to not show up for their job. They believe that if they want to protest, it needs to be outside of the court instead of spending time dancing and showing off their shoes on social media. They continued to discuss “Black on Black” crime which reaffirms that there is a severe lack of awareness as to why these athletes are protesting in the first place, but the user continues to talk about how they pay money to watch basketball and the athletes need to be focusing on finishing their layups because they are professionals, and the lack of scoring is embarrassing for women’s basketball. The user ends the rant with “Refund my money, thanks.” This single post touches on many of the other themes as well from the attacks on the WNBA athletes and the blatant racism that continues to be perpetuated online.

Based on the themes presented in the comments on the Instagram posts of the official WNBA account related to the activism surrounding the shooting of Jacob Blake, we can gain insight into the perception of athlete activism, especially in the WNBA. As athletes speak out against important social justice issues facing America, they are met with racist remarks and comments that perpetuate white supremacy. Even in instances where the activism is accepted,

there are comments that the activism isn't for the right issues. Instead of the athletes supporting Jacob Blake and bringing attention to another senseless shooting of a Black man, comments indicated that the activism should have been for the alleged victim. It may be acceptable for athletes to speak out, but only for the "right" reasons, not for systemic racism in America because that was clearly not the issue in the case of Jacob Blake. It is hard enough for Black athletes to face these issues daily, but when they do speak out, they're met with comments that these issues either don't exist or they aren't important enough to gain the attention of the audience.

Conclusion

The events that took place between August 26, 2020, and August 31, 2020, inside the bubble in Bradenton, Florida, demonstrate that politics, social justice issues, systemic racism, and sports are inseparable for the athletes of the WNBA. Following the shooting of Jacob Blake, the WNBA athletes, along with other professional athletes across the country, spoke out and protested the continuous violence towards Black people in the country. The single location of the already abnormal 2020 season which was already dedicated to social justice causes, helped the athletes unite as a league for social justice issues that are much greater than their sport of basketball. The athletes of the four teams that were scheduled to play on August 26, 2020, came together to make a unified decision that the games would not be played. This protest of games allowed the athletes to grieve together and support one another during this hard time.

The role of social media was critical during this pivotal moment during an already unique season. Instagram allowed the league and players to communicate this information outside of the

bubble in Bradenton and allowed the world to see the activism that these athletes were focusing on rather than playing their regularly scheduled games. The players gave interviews to reports inside the bubble and joined news broadcasts virtually outside the bubble to share the decision making that occurred and why it was so important for the athletes to take time away from basketball and pause and reflect. As seen in several posts on Instagram, many of these athletes are Black, and they are mothers raising Black children in a world full of systemic racism and police violence. The photos and videos posted with Tiana Hawkins and her son, Emmanuel, and her teammates show this relationship and shows the athletes in a different light. These athletes committed to playing basketball during a pandemic in a single location which meant that their families had to come too. The commitment to play the 2020 season hinged on the social justice issues that could be addressed by the athletes during this time. The WNBA athletes found that protesting the regularly scheduled games after another senseless shooting occurred was the best way to raise awareness to the continued issue of police violence against Black Americans. The other photos and videos that were posted to the WNBA Instagram account show the athletes in various acts such as wearing homemade shirts with seven bullet holes drawn on the back to signify the seven shots fired at Jacob Blake. The front of the shirt spells out his name for the world to see on social media. There was footage posted of the athletes kneeling, locking arms, bowing their heads, and holding up homemade signs that read “In the end, we will not remember the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends. – Dr. MLK, Jr.”. There are interviews of players and coaches alike, Black and white, that continue to speak on the fact that these issues are far bigger than basketball. These athletes have every right to use this platform to speak up for themselves, their family, and their friends.

However, not all believe this to be the case. These posts on social media sparked much debate over the role of the athlete when it comes to social justice issues, politics, and activism. There were four themes that emerged in the comments of the Instagram posts from August 26, 2020, through August 31, 2020, and many of the comments perpetuate white supremacy and racism in America. Users quickly attacked the WNBA athletes for protesting games over the shooting of Jacob Blake and attacked the Blake's character as well. Many believed that shooting an unarmed Black man in the back seven times was somehow justified because of the stories they were hearing about Blake himself. There were frequent uses of the words "rapist", "rape", "pedophile", "felon", and "knife" in the comments thus stating how the shooting was "justified." Others attacked the WNBA players themselves asking how they could be kneeling, standing up, or speaking out for Blake after what he had done and what about his victim? There is a constant misunderstanding about the purpose of the activism to begin with and the support of the Black Lives Matter movement. These comments show that many are still missing the point about these movements and the activism if they believe that the protest was solely about the shooting of Jacob Blake. The entire season up until this point has been dedicated to Breonna Taylor and the #SayHerName campaign after Taylor was murdered by police officers. These athletes are forced to relive this reality every single day and after Blake's shooting, they had enough. Additionally, users took this time to not only point out that the WNBA athletes' activism was for the wrong thing, but that it doesn't matter anyway because "no one cares" about their league. Additionally, there is a continuous stream of misogynistic comments towards the athletes about their league, their lack of viewership, and lack of fans. Ironically, all these comments are on the official WNBA account where these users are willingly going to view the posts and take the time to

comment. Finally, the comments were not all negative about this pivotal moment in the season. There were many comments thanking the athletes for speaking out about these issues and for supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. These athletes are leaders when it comes to athlete activism, and they continue to lead the way even though they are continuously berated for doing so. However, when there are comments about how these athletes are powerful, amazing, and strong leaders, it shows that these athletes are role models for some many young athletes and fans, and they are not backing down just because of hateful, racist, and sexist dialogue directed towards them.

WNBA ATHLETES' ROLE IN GEORGIA SENATE RACE

Many of the athletes playing in the 2020 WNBA season deeply felt the turmoil happening in America, from racist police violence to the global pandemic that forced them into the single site location. In addition to carrying the weight of 2020 with them in the bubble, they also publicly dealt with turmoil with one of their own WNBA team co-owners, Kelly Loeffler. This chapter examines the activism of the WNBA athletes during the season surrounding Kelly Loeffler, Rev. Raphael Warnock, and the 2020 Senate race in the state of Georgia. I find that the involvement of the WNBA athletes in Rev. Warnock's Senate campaign helped him propel from polling at just 9% to winning the election in Georgia that allowed the Democrats to gain majority control of the U.S. Senate in 2020. This shows that sports and politics are more entwined now than ever. The WNBA athletes have continued to fight for social justice issues and in 2020, their voices have political implications.

While athletes, particularly in women's sports leagues, continue to face harsh criticism about activism and those oppose athlete activism continue to shout "stick to sports," the WNBA athletes' involvement in the 2020 Senate race in Georgia provides us with a different perspective of the impact of athlete activism. The WNBA athletes faced adversity and turmoil head on and placed themselves in the middle of a heated political race during the 2020 season. The athletes made a conscious and calculated decision to publicly support Loeffler's opponent by wearing "Vote Warnock" shirts as pregame warmups prior to nationally televised games inside the bubble. The athletes then used social media as an avenue to continue to share photos of their "Vote Warnock" shirts and information about the Democratic candidate. The athletes' involvement at that moment in the season propelled the Warnock campaign forward, keeping

him in the Senate race. After the athletes wore the t-shirts, Warnock's campaign saw an increase in donors and a significant increase in donation dollars. In a special runoff election on January 5, 2021, Rev. Raphael Warnock defeated incumbent Kelly Loeffler for a second time, making him the first Black Senator in the state of Georgia. The WNBA athletes continued to use their voice throughout the 2020 season, much like they've done since the inception of the WNBA league, but this moment shows the activism of the WNBA athletes has critical implications on political events in the country. Warnock's Senate seat was one of two seats that the Democrats won in Georgia during the special runoff election, giving the Democrats the majority in the U.S. Senate in the early days of 2021. While sports and politics have truly never been separated, the election between Loeffler and Warnock, and the WNBA athletes' involvement proves that the voice of the WNBA athletes made a difference, not only in the state of Georgia, but in the U.S. Senate in Washington.

Background

Kelly Loeffler's Political Views

Since 2011, Kelly Loeffler and Mary Brock have co-owned the WNBA team, the Atlanta Dream, as part of Dream Too LLC. For most of that time, many didn't know who Kelly Loeffler was or that she was a co-owner of a WNBA team. However, in December 2019, Kelly Loeffler was named to succeed the incumbent Senator Johnny Isakson (R-GA) in the United States Congress. Since Isakson's resignation was due to health concerns, Governor Brian Kemp (R-GA) had the right to appoint his successor. Loeffler assumed her position in Congress on January 3, 2020, and there would be a special election for the seat in Congress in 2020.

Since Loeffler had successfully flown under the radar for most of her ownership days in the WNBA, it was unclear what her political views were at the time of her appointment. As an owner of a WNBA team that is majority Black women athletes, it was assumed that she aligned herself with the league whose athletes have been openly vocal about progressive political policies since she had not been publicly vocal about her views. However, she attended the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup Final in July in France when the US Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT) won the World Cup as part of President Donald Trump's Presidential Delegation (Staff reports, 2019). Now that Loeffler was no longer silent about her political ties, no one could assume anymore that she supported the same causes as the WNBA athletes.

Upon the announcement that she became a GOP Senator, Loeffler made clear her political ideals in a tweet on December 4, 2019.

“What people will learn about me is that I'm a proud patriot, a devoted wife, & a devout Christian. A life-long Republican who is unapologetically pro-2nd Amendment, pro-military, pro-wall, & pro-Trump. I am strongly pro-life & make no apologies for my conservative values. #gapol” (Kelly Loeffler [@KLoeffler], 2019)

Following the announcement of Loeffler holding a seat in Congress, there was no public discussion about this among any members of the Atlanta Dream or the WNBA. However, Loeffler's views put the WNBA athletes in a position that speaking out and advocating for human rights issues pose a threat, especially for players of the Atlanta Dream under her ownership. Speaking out about social justice issues as a Black athlete in a women's sports league has inherent risks, especially when the owner of the team is openly against the social justice

issues being raised. However, as the events of 2020 unfolded in the coming months, athletes found it hard to keep quiet about statements and comments from Loeffler herself.

Only a few weeks after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Loeffler found herself responding to the aftermath of yet another racist police shooting, this time in her home state of Georgia. On June 12, 2020, Rayshard Brooks was shot and killed by Atlanta police officers outside an Atlanta Wendy's drive-through. Brooks' death was caught on video from multiple sources and resulted in a wave of protests in the city. Prior to the shooting, Brooks failed sobriety tests after his car was parked in the Wendy's drive-through. There was a struggle between the victim and the police officers and Brooks was ultimately shot three times while running away with the police officer's Taser gun. Brooks was transported to the hospital where he died after surgery (Aleem, 2020). After nationwide protests surrounding the death of George Floyd, another round of protests started in Atlanta following Brooks' death. As protests sparked, changes inside the Atlanta Police Department were also taking place. The death was ruled a homicide and one officer was charged with felony murder while the other was charged with aggravated assault. Both men surrendered by the following Thursday and the police chief also resigned (Aleem, 2020). However, Loeffler didn't address the racist shooting of Rayshard Brooks by police officers. In an interview with Fox News on June 24, 2020, Loeffler was concerned with the protests following the shooting. After the news anchor asked "It is not every day that you see people carrying long guns in big cities in America. What is happening in the city of Atlanta this morning?", Loeffler responded with "Well Ed, this is totally unacceptable, we cannot allow mob rule. We're a nation of the rule of law and this is exactly what will happen if we defund the police. And that's exactly what the Democrats want to do. They have a move to

defund, to dismantle law enforcement. I have stood strong with law enforcement from day one, I've recently introduced legislation that penalizes states and municipalities that move to defund without a budgetary reason by withholding federal highway safety transportation funds. So, I stand strong with law enforcement, we need to bring the justice act to the floor, we need to have that debate, our country expects us to do that.” (Fernandez, 2020). In addition to the interview, Loeffler posted on her own Twitter account on June 26, 2020,

“We must not allow mob rule.

We must not defund the police.

And we must protect the Constitutional rights of law-abiding Americans. I am continuing to take action on these issues. #gapol #gasen” (Kelly Loeffler [@KLoeffler], 2020a).

I want to highlight again that Loeffler mentions herself in her tweet from December 2019 that she is “unapologetically pro-2nd Amendment”, yet references “mob rule” when armed Black and African Americans are protesting in the streets of Atlanta after police officers have yet again shot and killed another Black American. This statement from Loeffler did not go unnoticed and spread quickly.

Jemele Hill opened the floor for discussion on Twitter stating, “Loeffler is co-owner of the Atlanta Dream so I wonder how these comments are going to go over with the players.” (Jemele Hill [@jemelehill], 2020). Many current and former players began to start speaking out against Loeffler on their own platforms. Atlanta Dream player, Renee Montgomery, responded with “The second amendment is part of the Bill of Rights. The problem some may be having is who is bearing the arms. #MomentsEqualMomentum” (Renee Montgomery [@ReneeMontgomery], 2020). Montgomery, then an 11-year veteran, had just announced earlier

in the month that she would forgo the 2020 WNBA season to focus on her own social justice reform and the Renee Montgomery Foundation (Staff, 2020). Though Montgomery wasn't playing for the Dream during the 2020 season, she continued to publicly monitor the happenings of Loeffler and the current WNBA players for the duration of 2020.

By the end of June before the 2020 season tipped off, journalists, current and former players, and fans were questioning why Loeffler was still a co-owner of the Atlanta Dream considering her stance on so many controversial issues and her "Donald Sterling vibes" (Manza Young, 2020). Donald Sterling was the former owner of the NBA team the Los Angeles Clippers until it was revealed that he was making racist comments to his mistress at the time, instructing her to not bring African Americans to the Clippers basketball games and to not advertise on her Instagram account that she hangs out with African Americans. The comments were caught on tape and released to the public, prompting an outrage in the NBA among other owners, coaches, and players, including Magic Johnson who posted on his Twitter account that he and his wife will not be attending any future Clippers games because Donald Sterling doesn't want him or any other African Americans to attend the team's games (Golliver, 2014). As the new NBA commissioner, Adam Silver forced Sterling to sell the team and banned him from the league moving forward (Manza Young, 2020). At this point, Loeffler carefully kept her distance from the WNBA and the Atlanta Dream, unlike Sterling, but that wouldn't last for long. The WNBA athletes observed Loeffler as she continued to speak out, so did the athletes.

Athlete Activism in Women's Sports

The WNBA players' opposition to Loeffler is not the first instance of athletes disagreeing with team owners, especially in women's sports. In the NWSL, Bill Lynch, owner of the Washington Spirit, made every effort possible to prevent any sort of athlete activism to occur during a 2016 NWSL game. In early September 2016, Seattle Reign and USWNT soccer star, Megan Rapinoe, took a knee during the national anthem prior to the Seattle Reign's game against the Chicago Red Stars. Rapinoe took the knee in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick who had just began his activism a few weeks prior to protest the oppression of Black people and people of color in America (Gibbs, 2016). While Rapinoe's move was controversial, both the NWSL and the Seattle Reign supported her decision to kneel and her right to peacefully protest. However, the following game for the Reign was played against Lynch's Washington Spirit in their home stadium in Boyd, Maryland. In advance of the game, Lynch decided to intentionally keep both teams in the locker room while the national anthem was played preventing Rapinoe from taking a knee during the national anthem on the Spirit's home field. In an official statement from ownership that was released by the club, Lynch admitted to intentionally playing the national anthem ahead of schedule to prevent Rapinoe from "hijacking our organization's event to draw attention to what is ultimately a personal – albeit worthy – cause" (SI Wire, 2016). Lynch also stated that he is a veteran and that the national anthem honors the military and shows their patriotism prior to the game. He uses the word "hijack" again later in the statement, and Rapinoe later points out in an interview that it is a poor choice of words considering this was just days before the anniversary of September 11 (Gibbs, 2016).

This incident was not uncommon for Lynch, who has had a reputation of being a controversial team owner. At the same time, the Washington Spirit were the only team in the NWSL who did not have a designated LGBTQ+ Pride night. They also were the only team to not openly celebrate marriage equality following the June 26, 2015 announcement when the Supreme Court of the United States ruled gay marriage legal in all 50 states (Yang, 2015). For an owner of a women's sports team to refuse to acknowledge such a victory the LGBTQ+ community is incredibly hurtful to the players and the fans who identify as such. In an interview following the "hijacking" incident, Rapinoe acknowledged that she is a lesbian and that she believes this was also an attack on her because of such. She stated, "I do think that Bill Lynch is homophobic" and that part of the reason she supports Kaepernick is because as a gay person, she also has felt conflicted about the national anthem since her liberties are not protected (Gibbs, 2016).

Fortunately for Rapinoe, Bill Lynch's stunt gave her the opportunity to continue to speak out against racial injustices. There were many soccer players and fans that opposed Lynch's statement and openly supported Rapinoe. In October 2016, Rapinoe published an article in The Players' Tribune titled "Why I Am Kneeling" to fully explain the reasons she has decided to perform this specific act of activism. The first sentence states, "I am kneeling because I have to do *something*. Anything. We all do." (Rapinoe, 2016). This is a powerful statement because though she is a white female, she understands that it is her responsibility to speak out. She addresses as much in her statement discussing how she is the same "American hero" who has worn the stars and stripes on her uniform proudly and how she has never had to deal with racial profiling or police brutality for herself or anyone in her family. However, she's still going to take

a knee and while people may believe that is disrespecting the flag and American freedom, she has the upmost respect for the flag to “ensure that freedom is afforded to *everyone* in this country” (Rapinoe, 2016). Rapinoe acknowledges that kneeling and raising awareness is not enough and she plans to get involved every way she can. She also uses this article to encourage others to get involved in tough conversations, to show empathy, and to listen to those who are being oppressed. For those who have the platform, now is the time to influence others to become more educated and more empathetic and to demand the same of those around you. Rapinoe is an example of an athlete who is willing to and has chosen to do something whether it is to bring awareness to hard topics, start conversations, or show others how it is to be an ally for the Black community.

Following the article in The Players’ Tribune, a study found that Facebook comments about Rapinoe and comments on Rapinoe’s site showed disdain towards the athlete kneeling during the national anthem. As women athletes and athletes of color started using their platform to speak out about social justice issues and inequalities, there was suddenly a problem with sports and politics being discussed together. Athletes were told that it’s not their role to discuss politics and they should “stick to sports.” Unsurprisingly, Rapinoe’s representation on the USWNT brought out comments about nationalism. Commenters argued that her role as an athlete was to represent America, not become a disgrace while kneeling during the national anthem. Finally, many believed that Rapinoe did have the freedom to speak her thoughts since this is America and she was afforded the freedom of speech, but she should not attempt to control the speech of others related to these issues (Schmidt et al., 2019). Many of these themes

were mentioned in previous chapters and remain arguments today regarding athletes, sports, and politics.

Various athletes have also used their platform to speak out for and against political figures, much like the WNBA athletes have spoken out against Kelly Loeffler. During the USWNT's run for the 2019 World Cup in France, Rapinoe was asked by a reporter if she would go to the White House if they won, Rapinoe responded with "I'm not going to the fucking White House," adding on "we're not going to be invited." Following the video released of the footage, Donald Trump went to Twitter expressing his thoughts and opinions on the matter (E. L. Frederick et al., 2020). In the series of tweets, Trump invokes a strong sense of nationalism which is often seen in the arguments against athlete activism, seen in the previous chapter. Trump uses phrases such as "be proud of the flag you wear" and "USA is doing great" which are ways of sidestepping the actual point of the activism and shifting the focus to the American flag, the nation, and the U.S. Military. It was not until Kaepernick's kneeling during the national anthem and Rapinoe's comments about Trump that strong nationalism and anti-military rhetoric started, even though American sports have always been politicized through the militarization of sports. There is a strong tie to the military in the NFL through "Salute to Service" campaigns, military homecomings, camouflaged ribbons, and military appreciation games, to name a few (Serazio & Thorson, 2020). While Trump continues to argue that athletes should "stick to sports," he is combining the two for his own benefit, calling out athletes who choose to kneel during the national anthem and firing back at Megan Rapinoe after her comments about the White House. Like Trump, Kelly Loeffler also used her Twitter account to call out the WNBA athletes for her own political gain.

Methodology

Rather than using social media for the defined texts for this chapter, I used news articles and a documentary to apply CDA. The documentary, *144*, presented by ESPN Films and the WNBA, aired in May 2021 on ESPN and followed the 144 athletes of the WNBA inside the bubble during the 2020 season. The documentary is relevant to this chapter because it allows for analysis of the athletes' discourse while they shared their point of view and the thought process following Loeffler's statements about the players and the league and ultimately, the decision to support Rev. Raphael Warnock in the 2020 Senate race in Georgia. The clips of the documentary used for analysis were only related to the discussion of Loeffler and Warnock. To gather the other texts for analysis, I used the Nexis Uni (formerly LexisNexis Academic) database to find news articles for analysis with the search terms "WNBA", "Warnock", and "Loeffler" during the timeframe of July 1, 2020, through February 28, 2021, that were written in English. The publication types include newspapers or web-based publications or newswires and press releases or magazines and journals that are published within the United States. The total number of articles was 145. To ensure I found articles that covered the entire season and through the run-off election in January 2021, I selected at least one article from each month from July 2020 to February 2021 related to the activism in the WNBA and the Georgia Senate race from a variety of sources. There was a total of 18 news articles to analyze from diverse sports and non-sports sources including: The Atlanta-Journal Constitution (AJC), The McGill Tribune, CNN Wire, Rolling Stone, USA Today, The Pan American, The Atlantic, Forbes.com, and the Tampa Bay Times. Using close reading of the content, I applied CDA to the texts to identify the key

moments in the season related to Kelly Loeffler, Rev. Raphael Warnock, and the 2020 Georgia Senate race and the common themes of activism and discourse of the WNBA athletes.

Findings

As mentioned in earlier chapters, the WNBPA and WNBA announced on July 7, 2020, that the upcoming WNBA season played in Bradenton, Florida, would be dedicated to Breonna Taylor and the #SayHerName campaign. Additionally, the phrase “Black Lives Matter” would be on the basketball court in the single location where all games would be played. The phrase, as well as “Say Her Name” would also be on the warmup shirts for each of the players. Since the season would be dedicated to Breonna Taylor, her name would be on the players’ jerseys (Lowe & Shelburne, 2020). Upon this announcement, Loeffler wrote an open letter to the WNBA Commissioner, Cathy Engelbert, and opposed the support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Instead, she asked if the American flag could be displayed on the jerseys instead of Breonna Taylor’s name to promote a more united front. Loeffler, a known Trump supporter, wrote, “I adamantly oppose the Black Lives Matter political movement, which has advocated for the defunding of police, called for the removal of Jesus from churches and the disruption of the nuclear family structure, harbored anti-Semitic views, and promoted violence and destruction across the country. I believe it is totally misaligned with the values and goals of the WNBA and the Atlanta Dream, where we support tolerance and inclusion.” (ESPN, 2020). She goes on to include “though I was not consulted about – nor do I agree with the League’s decision in this matter, I am proposing a common-sense recommendation to ensure we reflect the values of freedom and equality for all. I believe we should put an American flag on every jersey. Include it

in our licensed apparel for players, coaches and fans” (ESPN, 2020). Later, Loeffler stated that she felt that support of Black Lives Matter by the WNBA would drive away fans and make them feel excluded. She stated, “The truth is, we need less – not more politics in sports. In a time when polarizing politics is as divisive as ever, sports has the power to be a unifying antidote.” (Bluestein & Felicien, 2020).

Much like Loeffler’s early statements about being adamantly pro-2nd amendment but calling it “mob rule” when Black and brown people are the ones with the guns, she’s yet again spinning the narrative for her own favor by trying to win voters over her other opponents. The attack on the WNBA, Black Lives Matter, and Say Her Name are meant for her right-wing conservative voters that she’s hoping to gain in the November 2020 election. She is deliberately talking about the Black Lives Matter political organization as a scare tactic to appeal to conservatives, subverting the intention of the athletes and league. Loeffler states that there should be less politics in sports, yet she’s using sports in her own political game. Her “stick to sports” sentiments make it clear that she believes the athletes should not discuss political matters, yet she is using the athletes as political pawns in her political campaign. Through CDA, we can see that Loeffler’s comments about the WNBA, Black Lives Matter, and Say Her Name are meant for a certain group of people. She is deeming these areas as “too political” for sports while the other topics she frequently covers, such as the American flag or church, are not political at all. Rightfully so, the athletes spoke up following her public statement and attack on the WNBA and the Atlanta Dream organization.

After news got out about Loeffler’s statements and stance on the issues, there were responses from both sides on Twitter. Social media was a critical space at the time for

conversations about the issues that Loeffler is addressing and the apparent tensions between the players, league, and the co-owner. On July 7, 2020, the union for WNBA players tweeted from the @TheWNBPA account “E-N-O-U-G-H! O-U-T!” with a link to a news article posted online by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC) (WNBPA [@TheWNBPA], 2020). Within the hour, the WNBA stepped in to make an official statement regarding Loeffler and her role with the Atlanta Dream. Posted on Twitter, the statement read,

“The WNBA is based on the principle of equal and fair treatment of all people and we, along with the teams and players, will continue to use our platforms to vigorously advocate for social justice. Sen. Kelly Loeffler has not served as a Governor of the Atlanta Dream since October 2019 and is no longer involved in the day-to-day business of the team.” (WNBA [@WNBA], 2020a).

In response later that day, Loeffler tweeted the same article as the WNBPA in her tweet stating,

“.@WNBA should stand for and unite around the American Flag - not divisive political movements like BLM that unapologetically seek to defund the police. #gapol #gasen” (Kelly Loeffler [@KLoeffler], 2020b).

In her response, Loeffler intentionally uses the hashtags #gapol (tweets related to politics in Georgia) and #gasen (Georgia Senate race) showing that she’s using this statement about the WNBA players as part of her political campaign. Her goal is to gain voters based on her statements on about the WNBA players and the Atlanta Dream. She also indicates in her tweet that the WNBA should stand for and unite around the American Flag, which is apparently not political, while she is calling the BLM a divisive political movement. She continues to bring up the same “concerns” about the WNBA players and their activism.

The Atlanta Dream players issued a public statement on the team Twitter account on July 10 following these events. The tweet contained an image of the statement with the signatures of the 12 players on the team in the bubble at the bottom of the image. The statement read,

“Black lives matter.

We are the women of the Atlanta Dream.

We are women who support a movement.

We are strong and we are fearless.

We offer a voice to the voiceless.

Our team is united in the Movement for Black Lives.

It is not extreme to demand change after centuries of inequality.

This is not a political statement.

This is a statement of humanity.

Black lives matter.

- The players of the Atlanta Dream” (Atlanta Dream, 2020).

Though Loeffler believes that the players and the WNBA league made the first political move by dedicating the season to the #SayHerName campaign and putting Black Lives Matter on the court and warmup shirts, the players and the league make it very clear that Loeffler is grasping at straws when she claims that this is about the Black Lives Matter organization. We see how she continues to use this as a scare tactic and spin the phrase “Black Lives Matter” for her own benefit in the hopes that the conservative voters will be scared enough to speak out against the WNBA and BLM along with her. It is very clear what the players mean when they are making the statement that Black lives matter, and the players believe that Loeffler was the

first to make this political when she wrote the letter to the commissioner and opposed the fact that Black lives matter. The statement by the players of the Atlanta Dream is powerful because it shows that the players are strong and fearless and willing to take on their co-owner, the person who they work for, in order to stand up for change, speak out against inequality, show that Black lives matter, and state publicly that their intentions are not political. The players use the phrase that they will be a “voice for the voiceless” which has been a consistent statement throughout the season since opening night when the players announced that the season would be dedicated to Breonna Taylor and the #SayHerName campaign. Loeffler continues to fight the athlete and league’s dedication to these causes instead of considering that these athletes are choosing to dedicate an entire WNBA basketball season to an organization that their sole mission is bring light to Black women victims of police violence. Not only are there that many Black women victims of police violence, but their stories are being overshadowed by the Black male victims of police violence in America. The real problem in this country is the systemic racism and Black people dying at the hands of police officers, yet Loeffler was so upset about WNBA athletes bringing awareness to this that she focused on using BLM as a scare tactic for white people to gain votes.

The documentary *144*, presented by ESPN Films, in association with the WNBA, also covered the issues that arose during the season with Kelly Loeffler. The title of the film itself speaks volumes about the amazing athletes of the league as there were 144 athletes that stood together during the 2020 season, 12 teams comprised of 12 athletes, inside the bubble. Every time these athletes took the court this season was a chance for them to be in front of an audience and in front of that audience, they wanted to educate them about the #SayHerName campaign,

Breonna Taylor, and other Black women victims of police violence. Victims who can no longer speak for themselves, so the athletes are speaking for them and sharing their stories.

Additionally, as discussed in chapters two and three, the athletes also used their platform to show their support of the larger Black Lives Matter movement and protest games in response to the shooting of Jacob Blake.

Additionally, the players saw Kelly Loeffler's opposition to the #SayHerName campaign as an issue that season that needed to be addressed publicly. When a co-owner of the Atlanta Dream, a team within the WNBA, speaks out publicly in opposition to the league and athletes supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, the very essence of the season itself, the athletes were sure to find a problem with that. Loeffler was also incorrectly tying their efforts to the BLM organization for her own political gain rather than digging deeper into the reasons behind the activism on behalf of the athletes. In a clip in the film, Loeffler indicated that she will not let a political movement tear the country apart. She also thought the social justice messaging on the jerseys would convey a "message of exclusion" and that this activism would drive away fans rather than bring fans in to support the athletes, teams, and league (Contreras & Stowell, 2021).

Ultimately, the players were disappointed in Loeffler's response and wanted to show that they are not defined by the owner of the Atlanta Dream. In the film, Sue Bird stated that their collective support for the Black Lives Matter movement was about "Black lives mattering, period" (Contreras & Stowell, 2021). The players felt like Loeffler sold them out and used them to appeal to the white conservative voters, so they strategically thought about how they were going to respond to her statement. As these conversations were happening, they discovered another candidate in the Georgia Senate race, Rev. Raphael Warnock, pastor of Atlanta's

Ebenezer Baptist Church where he had preached since returning to Georgia in 2005. Ebenezer Baptist Church is also the church where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once shared his ministry. A year after King's death, Warnock was born in Savannah, Georgia, and over the years of his life, Warnock aimed to align himself with King's style and substance. Warnock eventually gave the unity prayer during Barack Obama's second inauguration and was chosen as the spiritual leader who presided over John Lewis' funeral (Stuart, 2020). Rev. Warnock also delivered the eulogy of Rayshard Brooks at his funeral in Ebenezer Baptist Church in June 2020.

Warnock, Loeffler, and many other candidates would be battling against one another on November 3 for Loeffler's current seat in the Senate. In the midst of their frustrations with Loeffler, the athletes spent hours talking, debating, and planning their next steps to address issues of social justice. Sue Bird, a white ally and member of the executive committee of the WNBPA, stepped up for the Black teammates and players and started scheduling conference calls. The toll that Loeffler was taking on the Black athletes was unbearable. Layshia Clarendon and Nneka Ogwumike called on Bird because of the hurtful statements like "mob rule" that Loeffler was spouting off to the media (Shelburne & Barnes, 2020). Bird scheduled calls with the other teams to discuss strategy and a call with Warnock to vet the candidate. During the calls, the athletes found that Warnock's values aligned with their own and saw an opportunity to support the candidate. Without the players association or league officials, the players assembled and tossed around the idea of getting shirts made that said "Vote Warnock" and they all agreed that this was the best path forward. At the conclusion of the conference calls, Bird ordered 144 t-shirts for the players on all 12 teams to wear before their games on August 4 and August 5.

On August 4, players from the Atlanta Dream, Seattle Storm, Chicago Sky, and Phoenix Mercury filed off the busses prior to their nationally televised games that evening wearing black t-shirts with white letters that read “Vote Warnock” on the front (Associated Press, 2020). Most of these players could not even vote in the state of Georgia but felt an intense sense of ownership over their league and the social justice movements they decided to support this season. Also at this time, the players decided that as they were shifting their focus to Warnock, they were removing Loeffler’s name from the narrative and not giving her the press or coverage that she wanted. Every time there was engagement between the players and Loeffler, statements shared on social media in response to one another gave Loeffler the press coverage she wanted. As Loeffler continued to use the WNBA athletes as talking points in interviews on television and with newspapers and in tweets featuring #gapol and #gasen, she was using the athletes in her own political campaign. The athletes recognized this and decided they were going to focus their attention on bringing more awareness to Warnock, which was a calculated effort on their part. Since the media was allowing Loeffler to amplify her voice about the WNBA athletes, they would not give her any additional talking points. Instead of responding to Loeffler and continuing the narrative between the co-owner and the athletes, they were shifting their focus from Loeffler to Warnock. This showed that they were not willing to battle with her in public and on social media. Instead, they wanted everyone to learn more about her opponent and show why he needed the press more than she did. If the media was going to cover the WNBA athletes, they were forced to talk about Warnock since Loeffler was no longer mentioned by the athletes. According to the WNBA athletes, Warnock was fighting for the same social justice issues as the athletes and Loeffler had already made it clear that she was not.

The Atlanta Dream players ultimately felt responsible to speak out against their owner, but the other teams and players made it their responsibility too. The single site location in the bubble this instance helped for a wider spread of the “Vote Warnock” message once other teams and players donned the shirts as well. What could have been confined to one team and just their games were now a much bigger production when the three other teams showed up to their games in the shirts. If the teams were outside of a single location in their team’s own facilities, they would not have felt so connected to this cause or unified on the support of Warnock. The Atlanta Dream would have been fighting the battle against their owner alone in Georgia. The bubble allowed for intimate conversations and the other teams to wear the same shirts as the games were all held in the same location and the media was covering the entire league instead of just one or two teams per game.

The players and teams also took the opportunity to spread this message through social media, which played a great role in sharing the message beyond the standard media coverage in the bubble. Elizabeth Williams from the Atlanta Dream posted to her Twitter account on August 4, 2020, a photo of herself wearing the “Vote Warnock” shirt and a black mask covering her face. The tweet states,

“We are @wnba players, but like the late, great John Lewis said, we are also ordinary people with extraordinary vision. @ReverendWarnock has spent his life fighting for the people and we need him in Washington. Join the movement for a better Georgia at Warnockforgeorgia.com.” (Elizabeth Williams [@E_Williams_1], 2020).

The following day, Seattle Storm star, Sue Bird, posted the same tweet as Williams to her own account with a photo of 11 players of the Storm wearing their “Vote Warnock” shirts (Sue Bird

[@S10Bird], 2020). Bird and Williams intentionally connect the WNBA players to the words of the late civil rights activist, John Lewis, who fought for social justice issues just as the players are doing this season. They then connect him to Rev. Warnock, encouraging people to vote him to Washington to make sure he can continue to fight for the people of Georgia. This is a meaningful election for Williams as she was a current resident of Georgia as a member of the Atlanta Dream at the time.

In contrast, teams outside of the state of Georgia began to use their social media accounts as well hoping to continue to spread the message of support for Warnock even though many of their own players and fans cannot vote in the election. The Phoenix Mercury posted a five second video of Diana Taurasi in a “Vote Warnock” shirt walking next to Britney Griner wearing a “Black Lives Matter” shirt walking into their game with a tweet stating “Clocked in. Locked in. #4TheValley” (Phoenix Mercury [@PhoenixMercury], 2020). The Chicago Sky tweeted four photos of players Sydney Colson, Stefanie Dolson, Kahleah Cooper, and Gabby Williams individually stepping off the team bus to enter the facility in Bradenton wearing their “Vote Warnock” shirts. The tweet stated,

“Don’t boo...VOTE. Register to vote at rockthevote.org/online/#Vote2020” (Chicago Sky [@chicagosky], 2020).

Even though most could not vote for Warnock or Loeffler, their tweet sends the message about how important it is for everyone to cast their vote in the upcoming 2020 election. At a critical time in our nation between the racist police violence, the global pandemic, and the elections on the horizon, there is a clear message from the WNBA athletes, the teams, and the league that to enact change, everyone must vote. This is seen not only in the t-shirts that the athletes are

wearing but, in the tweets, and consistent messages coming from the athletes themselves. They believe it's important for everyone to know their rights as voters and have a plan for election day.

The decision to wear the t-shirts inside the bubble turned out to have a major impact on Warnock's campaign in the following two days. Warnock's campaign raised \$183,000 and gained 3,500 new donors immediately after the debut of the shirts (Sandler, 2020). On August 6, Rev. Warnock tweeted,

“BREAKING: In the last 48 hours, we have raised: Over \$183,000 in online donations. Gained over 3,500 grassroots donors. Because of your support, we can win the election in November and flip GA blue!” (Reverend Raphael Warnock [@ReverendWarnock], 2020)

Just the initial response in the first two days following the pre-game t-shirts which were shown on the traditional media coverage of the games and the additional dissemination through social media, including the tweets referenced, shows the impact that the athletes have on political and social justice issues outside of sports. The athletes came together with a unified voice to make the decision to turn their attention from Loeffler to Warnock and in just two days, 3,500 additional donors contributed to Warnock's campaign.

Amid the WNBA players' push for Warnock at the end of August, the players were also grappling with the shooting of Jacob Blake and the protest of games in the WNBA as well as many other sports leagues, as discussed in the previous chapter. Loeffler also used this event as another talking point at one of her political rallies. She criticized the Atlanta Dream players for refusing to play, stating, “I tend to believe that walking away from problems and walking away

from a dialogue is not the right approach. Walking away from that moment prevents us from having those important dialogues. I don't think they have a place in sports. Sports need to be about unity and bringing us together." (Bluestein, 2020). Loeffler continues to discuss sports and bring up the WNBA athletes as part of her political campaign at rallies and on social media while stating that politics should not be a part of sports. The athletes are constantly being told "stick to sports" but the co-owner continues to use sports to further her political agenda. As Loeffler continues to bring up the WNBA, she is faced with the question about her relationship with the team at any given moment. Loeffler continues to state that she is not interested in selling the team, however, towards the end of August, Dream officials confirmed that financial information had been provided to potential buyers. Among the potential buyers at that time, former Los Angeles Clippers players Baron Davis again compared Loeffler to Donald Sterling, the former owner of the Clippers who was banned from the NBA for making racist comments to his girlfriend about Black fans attending Clippers games (Bluestein, 2020).

By the end of September, Warnock had skyrocketed in the Senate race taking his first lead in the race polling at 31% in front of Loeffler at 23%. Much of the credit had been given to the WNBA players in early August when they sported the "Vote Warnock" shirts and the donations and donors jumped in just the first two days. Before the WNBA players' action, Warnock was polling at just 9% in the crowded Senate race. Because of the increase of donations to the campaign, Warnock's team was able to put money towards advertising to continue to ride the momentum started by the WNBA players. As a result, Warnock raised \$12.9 million from July to September, triple of that from the previous quarter (Negley, 2020). At the end of October, just days before the election, Warnock stated himself that the WNBA's endorsement was useful,

and it gave everyone a chance to look closer at him and ask who he was and what he was about. He also indicated how inspired he was by the WNBA athletes and how much courage it took for them to speak out against a co-owner in their league to support his campaign (Armour, 2020).

On election day in the state of Georgia, Warnock brought in 1.5 million votes beating Loeffler's 1.2 million, but forcing a runoff between the two candidates because he did not reach a majority. In January 2021, Raphael Warnock defeated incumbent Kelly Loeffler in Georgia's Senate runoff, becoming the first Black senator in the state's history. Not only that, but there has also never been a Black government official to hold a state office in the state of Georgia. The fact that the win for Warnock came during a runoff election is even more important considering the history of the runoff election in the state. In 1963, state legislator Denmark Groover, who had been elected and removed from office four times in 50 years, set out to suppress the Black vote in the state. Instead of a common sense method to elect into office the officials with the most votes, Groover introduced the runoff to "prevent the Negro bloc vote from controlling the elections" and to avoid Black people, pressure groups, and special interest groups from manipulating the state and taking charge (Stuart, 2020). Groover proposed that a candidate had to earn more than 50% of the votes to win the election. If no candidate earns 50% of the vote in the first election, the top two candidates advance to a runoff election. The thinking was that in the runoff, if a Black candidate and a white candidate ran against one another, the white voters had another chance to get behind the single white candidate remaining thus pushing out the Black candidate. This explicitly racist practice has prevented 35 Black candidates who had won their first election to ultimately lose the election in the runoff in 20 different counties in the state. In 1990, the Justice Department filed a suit against the state of Georgia, which was ultimately

dismissed and Warnock was required to runoff against Loeffler in January despite earning a higher share of the votes in November (Stuart, 2020).

A month later, the WNBA approved the sale of the Atlanta Dream from Kelly Loeffler and Mary Brock to an investor group that included Renee Montgomery, the first former player in WNBA history to become both an owner and executive of a franchise, as well as Larry Gottlesdiener and Suzanne Abair (Vivlamore, 2021). The Atlanta Dream got their name as a nod to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. which is fitting for a group of WNBA athletes who saw their dream come true with a Senate win for Rev. Warnock and the sale of their team, in part to a former Black player who understands deeply the values of the players, team, and league, and their fight for social justice issues.

Conclusion

Fighting for social justice from LGBTQ+ issues to racial issues has been at the core of the WNBA since the inaugural season in 1997 (Mathewson & Asmelash, 2020). This moment in the 2020 season when the players spoke out against co-owner of the Atlanta Dream, Kelly Loeffler, was another instance of the WNBA athletes taking great risks to speak out for what they believe is right. After initially speaking out on social media against Loeffler, the WNBA athletes decided to take a different approach. Instead of giving Loeffler the press coverage she wanted in the ongoing battle, the athletes decided to stop saying her name altogether, which was an interesting turn of events considering the entire season was dedicated to the #SayHerName campaign. The athletes certainly did not want to continue saying the name of Kelly Loeffler. Instead, they decided to shift their focus and efforts to one of her opponents in the Georgia

Senate race. The athletes found Rev. Raphael Warnock and vetted the candidate to ensure his values aligned with those of the players, teams, and league. On August 4, players from four WNBA teams showed up to their games wearing t-shirts that stated “Vote Warnock.” The games were nationally televised, giving them as much coverage as possible during pre-game. Following the games, individual players and teams used Twitter to continue to share photos of the athletes wearing the “Vote Warnock” shirts, as well as share information about the candidate. Some tweets focused on Warnock specifically, so the audience was able to be introduced to the candidate that was currently lagging in the Senate race polling. Other tweets focused on voting in general, especially those whose primary audience was outside of the state of Georgia.

Since Loeffler decided to bring the athletes into her political campaign, the WNBA athletes decided they would also get involved in the campaign, but for reasons opposite of Loeffler’s. If Loeffler can stand up at her political rallies and argue that the WNBA athletes need to keep politics out of sports, then the athletes were going to get even more involved in politics. Loeffler brought the WNBA athletes into the middle of the Georgia Senate race and the athletes capitalized on that by supporting Warnock. The athletes in the WNBA, as well as other leagues, have consistently spoken out against racism in America and other politically charged social justice issues, but this time, the WNBA athletes went all in on one candidate. Specifically, a candidate that was running against a co-owner of the league they currently play in. This unprecedented case of athlete activism certainly opened the eyes of Americans. The athletes wore “Vote Warnock” t-shirts and spread information about the candidate, and the American people listened.

The athletes' involvement impacted the Raphael Warnock campaign throughout the 2020 election when he was fighting for Loeffler's seat in the U.S. Senate. Within just two days following the debut of the "Vote Warnock" t-shirts, the Warnock campaign raised \$185,000 and gained 3,500 new donors. Between the months of July and September, the campaign brought in \$12.9 million (Negley, 2020). In an interview, Warnock stated that he credits WNBA athletes for the boost he needed to carry the campaign forward. Because of the additional fundraising dollars brought in following the t-shirts, the campaign was able to purchase advertising space to keep the momentum and the campaign moving forward. By the end of September, Warnock was polling at 31% after being only at 9% prior to the "Vote Warnock" t-shirts worn by the WNBA players. The role of the t-shirts by the athletes came at a critical time in the campaign and obviously had significant contributions in the polls.

The "Vote Warnock" t-shirts were a visible and calculated form of activism that allowed fans and viewers to see who the WNBA athletes were supporting and introduced this new candidate to many. In addition to the t-shirts, social media played a significant role in spreading additional information after the launch of the t-shirts. The players, teams, and league used their social media sites to post photos of the players wearing the "Vote Warnock" t-shirts throughout the remainder of the season. Social media also became an avenue to share information about Warnock, as well as voting information for Georgia residents. For the other 11 teams outside of the state of Georgia, teams used their social media accounts to share pertinent information about voting in their respective states. While the Georgia race between Warnock and Loeffler was the focus of the activism, athletes were clear that voting matters no matter where you live and to enact change, citizens must use their voice and vote.

Through their activism with the “Vote Warnock” t-shirts, the WNBA athletes prove that athlete activism is not just performative. The WNBA athletes’ role in the 2020 Georgia Senate race proves that despite the “stick to sports” arguments, voters in Georgia listened to the WNBA athletes during the 2020 season. Following the continuous racism from co-owner of the Atlanta Dream, Kelly Loeffler, and her blatant lack of respect for the Black athletes of the Dream and the rest of the league, the WNBA athletes came together with a unified voice and introduced the country to Rev. Raphael Warnock. The ongoing efforts of the WNBA athletes had a significant impact on the election of the first Black Senator in the state of Georgia and the Democrats gaining the majority in the U.S. Senate. In the two runoff Senate races in Georgia, both Warnock and Jon Ossoff defeated their Republican opponents, which flipped the state of Georgia blue as well as the U.S. Senate. This effort is arguably the high point in this recent wave of athlete activism. While athletes continue to receive negative criticism about athlete activism, especially those playing in women’s sports leagues, this moment in history shows us that while there will continue to be critics of athlete activism, there are also those out there who are noticing the activism and putting the words to action. The voters in Georgia are a testament that people are listening to the WNBA athletes and not just to criticize and patronize them like we’ve seen in the previous two chapters. The response to this instance of activism during the 2020 season had critical political implications both in the state of Georgia and in the U.S. Senate.

The WNBA athletes showed that they would not “stick to sports” during the 2020 season but instead insert themselves into the Senate race in the state of Georgia to inform the public about the candidate that was the best choice for their state and the Democratic party. These actions came at a critical point in American history and ended up having great implications in

Washington proves that athlete activism is incredibly impactful. The voice of the athlete is important and is being heard over the noise of those who continuously argue that athletes should “stick to sports.” For many years, athletes have not been treated like individuals or citizens with a voice, rather they have been dehumanized for entertainment purposes only. While athlete activism has long been happening and politics and sports have continuously been intertwined, the WNBA athletes have humanized the athlete in sports again and prove that sports and politics more intertwined than ever. After being used as political pawns themselves, the athletes fought back. The athletes backed a specific political candidate by wearing “Vote Warnock” shirts and spreading important information about the candidate on social media. Their chosen candidate was then elected the first Black senator in the state of Georgia which in turn allowed the Democrats to take majority control of the U.S. Senate. Athlete activism from athletes of an incredibly diverse female sports league helped flip the Senate of the United States of America.

CONCLUSION

The 2020 WNBA basketball season in the bubble in Bradenton, Florida provided a unique perspective of athlete activism and the use of social media by the league and athletes to amplify the coverage. As the WNBA athletes assumed the role of activists, they faced many challenges during the unusual, shortened season played during a global pandemic and in the face of overt racism in America. The athletes of the WNBA prove that while there are still many challenges for athletes taking on the role of activists, there are also many successes, as seen in the results of the activism during this season. While the WNBA athletes continue to pave the way for a new wave of activism for athletes, there have been many changes to social media because of their activism. The data I gathered was a set of determined texts which included Instagram posts from the official WNBA account that exhibited cases of athlete activism and the comments on each post, tweets posted from the official WNBA Twitter account that included the hashtag #SayHerName and the responding tweets on each tweet; the *144* documentary by the WNBA and ESPN Films; and 18 news articles related to the athlete activism and the Georgia senate race, Kelly Loeffler, and Rev. Raphael Warnock. I chose to use a cross-platform approach to maximize the types of data collected to answer my research questions. Collecting data from two different social media sites allowed for analysis of two different social media sites and provided diversity in the user-generated content. The news articles and documentary provided different view of the athlete activism than what was gathered from social media and showed how the impact of the activism during the 2020 Georgia Senate race was portrayed in mainstream media. Using CDA, I examined three specific cases of activism of the WNBA athletes during the 2020 season through the mentioned texts to answer the following research questions:

1. *How did the athletes of the WNBA use the affordances of social media sites Twitter and Instagram to assume the role as activists during the 2020 season?*
2. *How has the 2020 WNBA season impacted the public discourse of athletes as activists evaluated through social media engagement on Twitter and Instagram?*
3. *How did the successes and challenges of athlete activism by the WNBA athletes during the 2020 season reframe our understanding of the role of athletes as activists?*

Research Question #1

How did the athletes of the WNBA use the affordances of social media sites Twitter and Instagram to assume the role as activists during the 2020 season?

Social media played an incredible role in the activism of the WNBA athletes during the 2020 season as presented on the official WNBA league-wide social media accounts. Athletes from all 12 WNBA teams traveled to Bradenton, Florida, to participate in the shortened WNBA season inside a “bubble” due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While the single site location allowed for more focused media coverage of the entire league, fans were not allowed to attend the basketball games inside the bubble. Because of this, the league and WNBA athletes relied on social media accounts to disseminate information to the world outside of the bubble. By using the official WNBA accounts on Twitter and Instagram, the athletes were able to showcase their activism by continuing the use of the #SayHerName hashtag. Through hashtag activism, the athletes kept Breonna Taylor’s story at the forefront of the conversation the entire season by using the hashtag on Twitter and Instagram. Additionally, the athletes used the #SayHerName hashtag to tell the stories of other Black and brown victims of police violence throughout the

season. As the athletes honored and told the stories of the victims inside the bubble, the league used social media to share the stories, photos of the victims, photos of the activism inside the bubble, and links to websites to educate fans and raise awareness about the Say Her Name campaign. Since Black and brown female victims of police violence are often forgotten or left out of the conversation in the larger Black Lives Matter movement, the WNBA athletes continued to be a “voice for the voiceless” throughout the season. Though the #SayHerName hashtag has been around for many years, the WNBA athletes made a conscious effort to continue the conversation, not only for Breonna Taylor, but for so many other Black and brown female victims of racist police violence.

In addition to the #SayHerName hashtag, the athletes used social media during another crucial point in the season. Following the shooting of Jacob Blake by police officers in Kenosha, Wisconsin, the WNBA athletes protested their regularly scheduled basketball games in Bradenton, Florida. The athletes used the official WNBA social media accounts to amplify their voices and the activism surrounding the shooting. Social media posts were used to discuss the reasons for the protests and share interviews of various athletes the night of the protest and the following day. An interview previously aired on national television was also shared to continue the conversation about racist police violence against Black Americans in our country. The social media sites allowed us to have a glimpse inside the bubble and to hear the conversations that were happening in real time amongst the athletes of various teams and the social justice council. The single site allowed for important conversations to happen in person amongst the athletes and social media allowed us insight into the decisions behind the protests.

Finally, at another crucial point in the season, the WNBA athletes also used social media to speak out against one of their own co-owners in their league. The athletes released public statements on social media in response to Kelly Loeffler's disagreement with the WNBA season being dedicated to Breonna Taylor and the phrase "Black Lives Matter" being painted on the court. As a current U.S. Senator, Loeffler had quite a following of her own and used the WNBA athletes for her own political gain in the upcoming Senate election that year. The athletes initially used their own personal social media sites to speak out against Loeffler and league officials used the official WNBA accounts to release statements about the ever-evolving dispute between the athletes and Loeffler. However, once the decision was made by the athletes to no longer speak publicly about Loeffler, the athletes turned their attention to her opponent in the Senate race, Rev. Raphael Warnock. The activism surrounding Warnock was two-fold. The athletes wore "Vote Warnock" shirts prior to nationally televised games to publicly declare their support of Loeffler's opponent. The athletes then used their social media accounts to continue the spread of their support of Warnock. The "Vote Warnock" shirts continued to be shared on Twitter and Instagram by the individual athletes, the WNBA teams, and the WNBA league. Additionally, social media were used to share more pertinent information about voting both in Georgia relevant to the Senate race with Loeffler and Warnock, but also across the nation leading up to the 2020 election. The 2020 election was critical in the state of Georgia and had major implications nationally. The WNBA athletes used social media to push out information about Warnock's campaign and voter registration information to encourage residents in the state to use their own voices in the election. The use of social media was pertinent to the activism of the

WNBA athletes, and it was also crucial for providing insight into the reactions of users and fans to the activism.

Research Question #2

How has the 2020 WNBA season impacted the public discourse of athletes as activists evaluated through social media engagement on Twitter and Instagram?

Due to the use of social media in the athlete activism of the WNBA athletes during the 2020 season, public discourse on the social media sites allowed for ample data to determine how the public responded to the athletes as activists during a crucial time in the nation. In collecting data from both Twitter and Instagram, I found common themes among the comments on Instagram posts and responses to tweets on Twitter. Not surprisingly, the negative commentary towards the athletes and their activism took on several different forms which included misogyny, patriotism, racism, and white supremacy. However, through the negative commentary, there were positive and hopeful remarks that show that the athletes of the WNBA are role models for younger generations of athletes.

As seen in many years of athlete activism, kneeling during the national anthem has been deemed a disrespectful form of activism across both men's and women's sports leagues. During the first game of the WNBA season, the athletes chose to leave the court prior to the playing of the national anthem. Though the athletes weren't kneeling during the national anthem, their absence sparked the same response in the comments on Twitter and Instagram. There was a great sense of patriotism in the comments and those who were opposed to this activism argued that walking off the court for the national anthem, as well as kneeling during the anthem, is

disrespectful to the country, military, and the veterans. Though the activism had absolutely nothing to do with any of those things, comments indicated that the athletes were a disgrace, an embarrassment, and anti-American. There was a strong sense of loyalty to the country in the comments indicating that if they had to choose, many would choose the United States of America over supporting the WNBA, like these two things are mutually exclusive. Hiding behind the mask of patriotism allowed for the commentators to ignore the true reasons for athlete activism, which was to bring awareness to the Black lives lost at the hands of racist police officers in their beloved United States of America.

Like patriotism, there were many comments that were overtly racist towards both the athletes and the victims of police violence. As the athletes were protesting the shooting of Jacob Blake, there was an overwhelming number of comments defending the police officer and attacking the character of Jacob Blake. The comments indicated how the shooting was “justified” because of what Blake had allegedly done and there were personal attacks about him including the terms “pedophile,” “rapist,” and “felon.” For those who thought that Blake should have been shot seven times in his back as he was walking away from police officers, they also thought that protesting the shooting was completely out of line for the athletes to be doing. While the athletes were protesting, many thought that they should be directing their attention to some other area of activism that was deemed more worthy. The commentators argued that instead of drawing attention to the “rapist” they should be drawing attention to the alleged victim. However, Blake was the victim of a racist police shooting so this is another instance of a complete misunderstanding of why the protests were taking place to begin with. In addition to this instance, there were many other examples where people thought that the athletes should be

bringing attention to something else, such as another cause that was more important than this one, showing that athlete activism would be acceptable if it was activism towards an allegedly more important initiative, just not Black Lives Matter.

The WNBA athletes also have another level of commentary that the athletes of the men's sports leagues do not encounter. There were plenty of misogynistic comments towards the WNBA athletes that had absolutely nothing to do with their activism or speaking out for Black Americans in the country. Many comments revolved around the league itself and how "nobody" watches the WNBA anyway or how their viewership is so low, so their activism doesn't really matter. Others commented on the financial side stating that the WNBA doesn't make any money, is not profitable, or that it only exists because of the NBA. One particular comment stated that instead of saying the names of the Black women victims during the season that they should say the names of the WNBA athletes because no one knows who they are anyway. Not only are these misogynistic comments blatantly incorrect, but they are not comments that the athletes of the men's sports leagues must deal with. The argument that athletes should "stick to sports" is a common trope among all sports leagues, but the athletes of women's sports leagues have the added sexist comments about their league and being female athletes that make it more challenging for these athletes to take on the role of an activist.

While majority of the commentary regarding the athlete activism in the WNBA was misogynistic, racist, and inappropriate towards the athletes, there were some powerful statements about the athletes as role models. The term "thank" was seen many times in the commentary, with both positive and negative connotations. There were many instances of powerful descriptive words used in comments and tweets like "queens," "amazing women," "strength," "leaders,"

“powerful ladies,” “courage,” and “leadership.” The instances prove that the WNBA athletes using with their platform inside the bubble and on social media is meaningful. WNBA athletes in their uniforms should still be looked up to and admired by young girls and boys for not being afraid to speak out against social injustices even though the overwhelming majority do not believe their voice matters.

Research Question #3

How did the successes and challenges of athlete activism by the WNBA athletes during the 2020 season reframe our understanding of the role of athletes as activists?

The WNBA athletes of the 2020 basketball season reframe our understanding of the role of athletes as activists. The 2020 season was already on track to be the most unique, and challenging, seasons in the history of the WNBA league, but the athletes went to great lengths to make it even more memorable by their intentional activism. The WNBA athletes faced great challenges throughout the 2020 season, but their activism was incredibly impactful and allows us to view athletes as activists in a new light.

Even before the start of the season, the athletes were already getting to work. The WNBA announced that the 2020 season would be dedicated to social justice. The WNBA and the WNBPA launched a new platform called, *The Justice Movement*, which would be used to amplify the voices and leadership of the WNBA players, as well as the first-ever Social Justice Council. These initiatives, supported by the WNBA leadership, showed that the athletes were committed to their activism this season. In the inaugural season of the council, the WNBA

athletes extended beyond working with others in the league and worked directly with leaders of top organizations dedicated to social justice initiatives.

The WNBA players decided to travel into the bubble to play the 2020 WNBA season knowing that they could use their voice and speak up against social justice issues that impact the Black and brown Americans in our country, especially the Black and brown women victims of police violence. With that in mind, the athletes dedicated the entire 2020 WNBA season to Breonna Taylor and the #SayHerName campaign. The #SayHerName campaign focuses on the Black women victims of police violence who are often forgotten in the fight for social justice within the larger Black Lives Matter movement. With this dedication, Breonna Taylor's name was placed on the back of all 144 WNBA jerseys for the entire season. WNBA viewers were forced to say the name, or at least see the name, of Breonna Taylor throughout the season which kept her name and story at the forefront of the WNBA season. Additionally, the phrase "Black Lives Matter" was painted on the single basketball court that each team used for all the games during the 2020 season.

While the WNBA athletes have been trailblazers in their activism and fight for social justice issues, the creation of the Social Justice Council, *The Justice Movement*, and the dedication of the entire 2020 season to Breonna Taylor and #SayHerName was a monumental moment for athlete activism. These acts of activism show that the athletes were not only committed to play inside the bubble for the WNBA season, but that basketball was not the only reason the athletes chose to show up. The athletes made a commitment to the #SayHerName campaign, Breonna Taylor, and all the other female victims of racist police violence. These athletes showed up to prove that the 2020 season was more than sports. The 2020 season was

about racism, inequalities, politics, and social injustices in America that majority of the WNBA athletes and their families face every day.

As both the season and the consistent criticism of athlete activism continued, the WNBA athletes continued to show up and use their voices. Following the police shooting of Jacob Blake, the athletes arrived at the facility prior to a regularly scheduled game wearing homemade t-shirts depicting bullet holes where Blake was shot seven times in the back. The athletes joined many other professional athletes of other leagues by protesting play and games were halted for two days. Instead of playing basketball, the athletes used their time to discuss important social justice issues with one another inside the bubble. In their roles as activists, the athletes held a day of reflection and used social media to share information about voting with the hopes of making a change in the country. The athletes ultimately decided to resume play for the remainder of the season because they understood their role as an athlete allowed them to have a role as an activist too. Being an athlete does not preclude them from being an activist, rather it allows the athletes, especially athletes of women's sports leagues, an avenue to speak out and about important social justice issues and that is exactly what the WNBA athletes continued to do.

Arguably the most consequential act of activism this season was the WNBA athletes' role in the 2020 Georgia Senate race. The WNBA athletes' involvement in the election both had immediate impacts and also provides a framework for how we view athletes as activists moving forward. Following Kelly Loeffler's statements regarding her opposition to the dedication of the 2020 WNBA season to the #SayHerName campaign and Black Lives Matter, the athletes made very calculated decisions in turning their attention to Loeffler's opponent, Warnock. The "Vote Warnock" t-shirts worn by the athletes as pre-game warmup shirts came at a pivotal time in

Warnock's campaign. Warnock claimed that the WNBA athletes' involvement in his campaign caused an increase in both donors and donations which turned into additional advertisements and a continued momentum for his campaign.

The athletes' support of Warnock contributed to the number of votes he received on election day in November 2020. As a result, the incumbent, Loeffler, and Warnock were set to have a runoff election on January 5, 2021. Their race was one of two runoff Senate races in the state of Georgia and the result of the elections would determine if the Republicans or Democrats would have majority control of the Senate. This election not only had implications in the state of Georgia, but for the entire country. People from outside of the state of Georgia were invested in this race because of the WNBA athletes and their "Vote Warnock" shirts. Rev. Raphael Warnock had become a national name during the 2020 WNBA season. In both runoff Senate races, Rev. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff defeated their Republican counterparts, Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, giving the Democrats majority control of the U.S. Senate. Additionally, Rev. Raphael Warnock became the first Black senator elected in the state of Georgia.

The WNBA athletes played a significant role in electing the first Black senator in Georgia and flipping the U.S. Senate during the 2020 elections. Because of these incredible feats, the WNBA athletes have reframed our understanding of the power of the athlete, especially a group of athletes, when they choose to speak out against social and racial injustices. The 2020 WNBA season proves that the argument that politics and sports should be separate is no longer a reasonable argument to make. While sports and politics have never been separated, the 2020 WNBA season and the athletes' intentional involvement in the 2020 Georgia senate race between Loeffler and Warnock prove that there is no separation. Loeffler used the WNBA

athletes for her own political gain in her election campaign, and the WNBA athletes fought back by supporting her opposition, Warnock, who defeated her in two separate elections in the state of Georgia with national implications in the U.S. Senate. WNBA athletes continue to blaze the trail for athletes in both men's and women's sports leagues, showing them that the voice of the athlete matters and people are listening.

Implications

This moment of athlete activism during the 2020 WNBA season has significant implications in sports and media studies. The activism of the athletes in the WNBA in 2020 is having implications on the social media platforms and politics of the present day. While the candidate that the WNBA athletes campaigned for in 2020 won the Senate race in Georgia, their campaign also opened the eyes of how impactful athlete activism can be especially with the use of social media sites studied in this dissertation, such as Twitter and Instagram. One major change that occurred since 2020 was that Elon Musk acquired Twitter in October of 2022, quickly creating chaos and making significant changes to the platform both with employees and users of the social media site (Milmo et al., 2022). Since then, there have been changes implemented to the social media platforms to prevent such activism from occurring and spreading on the sites. Though not studied in this dissertation, the social media platform Tik Tok, has been under the watchful eye of the U.S. government for the past several years. The Chinese-owned video social media platform has been accused of trying to “manipulate America” and steal sensitive data from its users and U.S. politicians have been trying to ban the app for several years (Bordelon, 2023). Conservative political party members and platform owners realized that

they need to make changes to ensure their voices are heard rather than the voices of the athletes who are campaigning for and standing up for issues that do not align with their views. Social media platforms are intentionally and continuously making changes to their algorithms to block future activism from occurring and suppressing the voice of Black and brown athletes. This polarizing moment in the 2020 WNBA season has had significant impacts on the policies surrounding social media platforms and the algorithms that are used on the platforms to silence athletes.

What I would deem to be positive results in this dissertation, especially the WNBA athletes' role in the Georgia Senate race where their desired candidate won the election, have created a strong backlash against athlete activism and the role of the athlete in political campaigns. There was significant national media coverage of the WNBA athletes and the Georgia Senate race, as seen in the previous chapter. Many national news outlets, such as CNN, *USA Today*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Forbes*, covered the 2020 Senate race, specifically mentioning the WNBA athletes. This coverage is great for both women's sports and for athlete activism, however, it brought light to the fact that athletes are using social media to amplify their voices and policy makers are doing everything they can to stop this from occurring in the future. The voice of the Black athlete is important and makes a significant impact on important issues in America and that certainly scares the conservative political party and owners of these social media platforms.

Limitations

Using the 2020 WNBA season as a case study provided me with a great opportunity to answer the research questions above, but it also came with limitations. The uniqueness of the 2020 WNBA season inside the bubble in Bradenton, Florida, due to the global pandemic, was the first and, hopefully, last instance of all WNBA teams and athletes playing in the same location for the entire season. The timeframe of the case study was very narrow, defined only to the WNBA season and following months, which impacted the sample size of the data collected. During this same timeframe, there was also activism happening in other sports leagues. While the WNBA athletes have been trailblazers in their efforts of athlete activism and social justice initiatives, there were other instances of athlete activism in the NBA, MLB, and MLS, that could have been included. Limiting the research to the 2020 WNBA season showed excellent use of social media and impact of the activism, but the activism has continued both online and in-person since the WNBA returned to regular business operations following the pandemic. There are additional opportunities to study the role of social media outside of the uniqueness of the 2020 WNBA season.

Research on social media also proves to have its own limitations. Social media posts on the internet have the possibility of only being viewed by certain users and only for a short period of time in some cases. While I gathered the data used for analysis, I noticed that there were instances where tweets and comments were deleted and social media accounts that had been deleted or suspended either by the user themselves or the platform due to violating the platform policies. The absent posts and comments from the data sample could have provided another level of analysis on that specific moment in time. Social media platforms are also continuously going

through changes which possibly impacts the data collected from the site. Changes to the Application Programming Interface (API) could also impact how the data is obtained from the social media sites, which can significantly impact conducting research on the platform.

Additionally, I chose to use the official WNBA social media accounts on Twitter and Instagram to collect my data, as well as use the documentary that the WNBA helped in creating. While this data was great for analysis, I would be remiss if I didn't address that the WNBA's direct involvement in the content creation of the social media posts and the documentary has a level of bias. The WNBA certainly wants to highlight the great examples of athlete activism of the athletes in their league and the impact of this activism, so they had the ability to choose what content was featured. The WNBA social media accounts allowed everyone a glimpse inside the bubble in Bradenton, but it was through the lens that the WNBA wanted everyone to see. Finally, the official WNBA accounts were not the only places the WNBA activism occurred or was featured. Individual athlete accounts also could have provided an excellent source for data, but for the scope of this dissertation, I chose to focus solely on the official WNBA accounts on Twitter and Instagram for analysis.

Suggestions for future research

Continuing research on the WNBA, athlete activism in women's sports, and the role of social media in the coverage of women's sports leagues is critical for the field. As the athletes left the bubble after playing their most challenging season to date, there is an opportunity to research the long-term impacts of the 2020 season in the bubble in Bradenton, Florida. The 2020 WNBA season was the 24th season in the history of the league and the players faced the biggest

adversities of their careers during that time. Some players had to travel to the bubble with their family members, like Dearica Hamby who brought her four-year-old daughter and her mother with her into the bubble. In an interview with ESPN, Hamby noted how hard it was living inside the bubble both for herself and for her family. Everything about the season was harder than ever before. Not only was Hamby trying to focus on playing basketball while running into her opponents in the hallway, she was also trying to raise her daughter and keep their routine as normal as possible outside of their home and inside the bubble (Hamby et al., 2021).

Additionally, athletes also indicated how the shortened season was not only physically exhausting, but mentally exhausting. The 22-game season was held over the span of 50 days inside the bubble in Bradenton which meant games were played every other day for about 70% of the season in 2020 whereas only 20-30% of the previous season had games this close together in 2019. Due to the rigorous schedule, the athletes suffered from both fatigue and injuries (Contreras & Stowell, 2021). The long-term impacts of the bubble and the 2020 season on the mental and physical well-being of the athletes is an area for future research.

Continued research on the athlete activism since the 2020 season is another suggested area for further research. As the athletes traveled back to their respective cities and states, research on whether the athletes have been able to work together to speak out for social justice initiatives as a league is an area that could be studied. It would be interesting to know if the 2020 season provided a new frontier for activism within the league and what is the role of social media in the activism since leaving the bubble. Finally, research on and about Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms and the relationship with sports, politics, gender, and race is constantly evolving. The intersection of all these areas provides many opportunities for

additional research in coming years. It is safe to say that athlete activism is here to stay. While access to technology and the affordances of social media have allowed athletes to amplify their voices in the most recent wave of athlete activism, it will be interesting to see if the social media platform changes silence athletes or if the athletes will find other ways to make sure their voices are heard.

APPENDIX: APPROVAL LETTER



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Institutional Review Board

FWA00000351
IRB00001138, IRB00012110
Office of Research
12201 Research Parkway
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

NOT HUMAN RESEARCH DETERMINATION

June 6, 2022

Dear [Kendra Gilbertson](#):

On 6/6/2022, the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Athlete Activism in the WNBA
Investigator:	Kendra Gilbertson
IRB ID:	STUDY00004384
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gilbertson HRP-251- FORM - Faculty Advisor Scientific-Scholarly Review fillable form .pdf, Category: Faculty Research Approval; • Gilbertson Data List.docx, Category: Other; • Gilbertson HRP-250-FORM- Request for NHSR.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;

The IRB determined that the proposed activity is not research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations.

IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human in which the organization is engaged, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination. You can create a modification by clicking **Create Modification / CR** within the study.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jonathan Coker".

Jonathan Coker
Designated Reviewer

Institutional Review Board

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@ReverendWarnock has spent his life fighting for the people and we need him in Washington. Join the movement for a better Georgia at <http://Warnockforgeorgia.com>
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