

The Journey of Digital Journalism from Field to Feed: How Digital Sports Journalism Amplifies Social Justice Narratives and Influences Athlete Activism

Sherral Joseph¹, Dr. Abhishika Sharma²

¹MAJMC, Manipal University

²Supervisor, Manipal University

Abstract—Background of the Study: Overview of sports journalism and its evolution. Deeply rooted in the rapid growth of modern media, the symbiosis between sports and journalism evolved most naturally. From historical times of newsprint to today's 24/7 digital news cycle, sports journalism has played a crucial role in moulding public perceptions, fostering national identities, and drawing global audiences together. In the beginning, sports garnered only a niche audience but now has grown into a huge multi-media industry as diverse as television broadcasts, radio commentary, blogs, and social media coverage.

- Even from the earliest times sports journalism played a more dynamic role than just providing the world with scores and events. It also evolved into a medium through which a societal lens could be examined, and societal issues such as politics, race, gender, and economics became more transparent.
- In this study, we look at the evolution of sports journalism, from its ancient beginnings to its current stature as a driving force in global media. Further, it will also explore how the portrayal of sports by digital media influences and amplifies social narratives through athlete activism and contributes to the globalization of the media and sports industry.
- By going back through history to study the force of sports journalism, this study will hold a microscope not only to the entertainment dynamics but also examine it as a powerful tool for social change, communication, and the emulation of cultural values across the world.
- Numerous industries have been transformed by the rapid emergence of digital journalism, and the sports industry is no exception to this change. In recent years, however, the role of digital journalism in sports has gradually increased with the inclusion of several dynamics that have never been seen before.
- Now, the industry uses digital journalism to reshape how sports are played, analysed, and consumed,

putting forth a whole new era of innovation. Digital Journalism helps improve personalized content offerings, fan experiences, and is transforming every corner of the sports world.

Sports as a platform for athlete activism

Sports evolved naturally as a great platform where all athletes from diverse backgrounds can stand together as equals. Therefore, it emerged as a strong medium to highlight critical social issues like racism, gender inequality, sexual abuse, economic disparities, discrimination, and the impact of commercialization and globalization on sports and society.

In 2020, ESPN was responsible for ordering a survey on social issues in sports following an incident of protest by sports fans that were related to police shootings. According to the survey:

- Seventy-one percent spoke for athletes, standing strongly against racial inequality.
- Sixty-three percent NFL fans stood up for social justice messages in end zones.
- Fifty-five percent of NBA fans advocated for Black Lives Matter
- Fifty-one percent advocated for athletes who spoke about social issues during games.

The rise of social issues in public discourse.

India, being the second most populous country in the world, is bound with numerous social challenges. These issues range from healthcare access to gender inequality and discrimination. All these issues over the years, with the help of rapidly growing technological trends, have emerged to the forefront through public discourse.

In India, the caste system dominated many social dynamics, building barriers that were responsible for many social issues. Throughout our history, from the fight for independence and even now to modern day, gender inequality has been at the forefront of all our issues while facing the brunt of discrimination in various sectors.

Over the years, sports have emerged as a strong platform to bring to light ongoing debates on climate and increasing threats to extreme weather, including floods, fires, and rising temperatures, and how they will impact sporting events and the well-being of athletes.

In 2022, there was great emphasis on the connections between climate change and respect for fundamental human rights. Reports show that almost three hundred sports federations and members of the wider sport ecosystem signed up for the UN's Sport for Climate Action initiative and committed to reducing their climate impact.

Besides this, sports have also emerged as the platform where athletes have over the years discovered the freedom to speak about genuine issues that impact their performance and their lives. From mental health to racial discrimination, athletes are talking about it without inhibition.

The increasing intersection of social issues and sports.

As sports became more popular and a largely visible platform, it became easier to use it as a medium to tackle systemic issues including discrimination and sexual abuse. It called on leadership that was both empathetic and respectful to create fair, inclusive and enabling cultures within sports governance.

Conversations on fair inclusion, the rights of transgender athletes or athlete with variations in sex characteristics has become a trending human rights topic in the sports area since 2022. In this regard IOC released a framework to address discrimination and fairness based on gender identity. In 2021, events that targeted athletes who racially abused spurred investigations into institutional racism.

Another concern joining the watch list in the sporting area is mental health that came to the fore when high-profile athletes spoke openly during major sporting events.

Post-COVID-19 brought to light mental issue across many countries. One of the much-debated incidents during the pandemic was the deportation of Novak Djokovic from Australia. This highlighted issues like vaccination requirements, health inequalities in society, and exemptions for sporting events.

I. INTRODUCTION

With the blazing popularity of the internet, social media outreach, we are sitting on the edge while we get instantaneous feed directly from the field. This is why we know about the tiny, weird things about our sports idols. Like the fact that gymnast Stephen Nedorscik can solve a Rubik's cube under ten seconds, just before he performs the pommel horse at the

Olympics. Or that Simone Biles wears a diamond 'goat' pendant with a necklace, and South Korean shooter Kim Ye-Ji wears a stuffed elephant given to her by her daughter while she is shooting for the Olympics.

Can we ever forget the recent iconic picture of Brazil's Gabril Medina flying mid-digital journalism while he scored the highest wave score in Olympic history? These little nuggets of entertainment keep us riled up in the lives of famous athletes. We no longer live in an era where sports media is just limited to scores and highlights.

Digital platforms create real impact when used by our idols as conduits for social messages that impact and change lives. Let us briefly take a glance at some of the social justice narratives that were initiated by athletes and influenced athlete activism worldwide.

In 2020, Naomi Osaka advocated for the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, wearing a black mask with the names of every victim who died against police brutality. This act of advocacy was extensively reported on all media platforms, including digital news portals and social media platforms, bringing attention to black rights and racial discrimination.

Similarly, following the 2001 incident at the Indian Wells Masters, the Williams sisters boycotted the event for 14 years. This act amplified the message on racial discrimination against athletes. However, in 2015, they returned to the event after sending out a strong message to the public, impacting their perception and behaviour towards coloured athletes.

In general, leagues like the NBA and WNBA prominently portrayed their stand on racial equality, while athletes like Colin Kaepernick advocated for it by kneeling during the national anthem of his game.

Gradually, the shift from field to feed gained more prominence and even importance, garnering a new role in digital journalism. Extending outreach and impacting audiences in powerful ways that traditional reporting could not achieve. That unique quality of digital reporting gave it the added essence, and over the years we have watched it grow in popularity.

II. MAJOR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS THAT SHAPED SPORTS COVERAGE

In 1921, Alice Milliat set up the Federation Sportive Feminine Internationale (FSFI) to lobby against the IOC for the inclusion of women in Track and Field

events. As a result, in 1932, the first women's Olympics were held with remarkable success.

- Athletes or sports that played a crucial role in bringing social issues to light through sports journalism.
- In 1968, at the Mexico City Summer Olympic Games, athletes advocated for the civil rights movement in the United States by protesting during the US national anthem. All three athletes, Peter Norman, Tommy Smith, and John Carlos, were highly condemned by the USOC.

In the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the relay itinerary became the site of political protests in favour of Tibet's autonomy from China; these protests were against exploitative working conditions for workers in sporting goods manufacturing industries, child labour, and for the promotion of human rights in China. On the eve of the 2012 Olympic Games, hundreds of NGOs, global unions, human rights organizations, and workers' organizations came together to protest working conditions in factories where all the game merchandise was being produced. These incidents were inspired by broader social movements: the resistance movement influencing sport and sports journalism.

These movements had sports as an instrument to support a larger cause. Protests, boycotts, demonstrations, campaigns, petitions, town hall meetings, coalitions, lobbying, counter-initiatives, any form of resistance to sport social order. Historically, as an institution, modern sport has always been challenged for having to deal with different forms of discrimination and negative social impact. As a result, sports, social activists, along athletes.

Mohammad Ali- 1967

Renowned for his expertise in the boxing ring but also for his fearlessness in the way he managed his beliefs and advocated for them. It was in 1967 during the Vietnam War, Ali is said to have refused to serve in the U.S military due to religious reasons. Ali won this battle when the Supreme Court ruled in his favor in 1971, stating that he had a First Amendment religious freedom right not to serve.

Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the Olympics (1968)

During the medal ceremony of the 200-meter sprint event, both Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who won gold and bronze respectively, made several visible gestures to show their support for the Black empowerment and human rights movement. Both just wore black socks and no shoes, bringing to light the extent of Black poverty.

U.S. boycott of Moscow Olympics in 1980

In 1980 a lot of war were happening in the world. The Soviet Union was about to host the summer games in Moscow, but during this time, the Cold War was going on with the United States, and the Soviet Union was about to invade Afghanistan. That summer, the US led a boycott of the summer games and was joined by more than sixty countries.

Four years later, it was the United States' turn to host the summer games in Los Angeles, and the Soviet Union led a boycott of 14 countries, including East Germany.

Colin Kaepernick and the US Women's National Soccer Team – 2016

It was in 2016 that Colin Kaepernick decided not to participate in the NFL games and sit down during the national anthem to protest police brutality. He later went on to kneel, making it a historical symbolic gesture worldwide.

Taking a cue from Colin, the U.S. Women's National Team also used the kneeling gesture to advocate for LGBTQ+ causes. The team was led by Megan Rapinoe also spoke about unequal pay as compared to the pay received by the U.S. Men's National Team.

LeBron James, Milwaukee Bucks, and Black Lives Matter – 2020

LeBron James used the sports platform to advocate for Black people and protest police brutality. Later that year, the Milwaukee Bucks team refused to play a playoff game after Jacob Blake, a Black man, was shot by a police officer in Kenosha.

This dissertation explores three interconnected dynamics:

1. The paradigm shift: from traditional journalism to digital journalism

Historically, the focus on sports coverage has been on the scoreboard, match results, and statistics have

remained the foundation for sports journalism for as long as we can remember. In the 1920s, newspaper circulation grew, but the focus on sports coverage was solely match-centric. In the 1930s, radio entered the scene, and soon in the 1950s, commentary on television took over.

As the field of journalism expanded and technologies advanced, sports coverage progressed to more compelling reports on athlete profiles, giving fans a glimpse of what happens behind the scenes and then highlighting social issues that were invariably intertwined with the lives of athletes and sports.

This paradigm shifts reflected transformation within society as the audience began seeking diverse perspectives, and media were compelled to portray different stories to meet changing viewership needs and demands.

In 1979, ESPN launched its first 24-hour sports network globally, and in India in the mid-1990s, Doordarshan launched its first resolute 24-hour sports channel. The popularity of 24-hour channels enabled more platforms to offer nuanced storytelling. With the emergence of the internet, sports fans now had access to platforms like YouTube, social media, Podcasts, blogs, and vlogs.

Now fans have direct access to athletes, journalists are able provide instant information and constant coverage often providing wider coverage of athletes. From mid-20th century Jackie Robinson began using his position as a baseball player to bring attention to social justice and civil rights problems. He was one of the first African American players to leverage the attention of the media to advocate for something important.

Over the years, the audience has begun to expect sports coverage to include topics on equality, discrimination, and mental health. The true watershed moment for journalism was when the digital wave hit us, revolutionising the way what was happening on the field appeared in our feed.

Stay relevant in today's fast-paced news coverage, journalists must represent diverse narratives around sport, and the evolution of digital journalism emerged from this strong need to cover athletes from diverse backgrounds, different experiences, struggles, and stories.

In these modern times, nuanced storytelling has taken over, and the need to narrate powerful stories is stronger than ever. *'Changing Public Perception: Digital Journalism has influenced the way society*

perceives journalists and news' (Cate & Carraccio, 2019) ("Changing the Paradigm of Traditional Journalism to Digital Journalism ...") Cate & Carraccio, 2019)

2. Prioritizing Justice:

The crossroads between sports and social justice have emerged more prominently with athletes not shying away from activism and their access to audiences through media platforms.

Over the years, digital journalism has highlighted issues on racial equality, LGBTQ + rights, and mental health. LeBron James, Colin Kaepernick and Step Curry are some of the athletes that have used digital platforms to prioritize justice. In the beginning, with traditional media, athlete activism witnessed the Civil Rights movement from the 1960s and later in 2010s, it witnessed the Black Lives Matter movement.

In his study, Harry Edwards, an American Sociologist and civil rights activist, proposed a framework to understand the timeline and journey of athlete activism throughout history, suggesting that it presented itself in waves.

The first occurrence between 1900 – 1945 was led by Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Jesse Owens who sought acceptance through their international sporting achievements as they struggled with racial segregation in society.

The next period occurred between 1946 to the early 1960s, led by Jackie Robinson, Kenny Washington and Althea Gibson worked as advocates for the removal of segregation.

The third period of athlete activism occurred between the 1960s to 1970s witnessed the Civil Rights Movement that was driven by the increased influence of the Black Power Movement.

Jim Brown, Bill Russell, and Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali) initiated narratives and conversations around the rights of the Black Community, encouraging the next generation of athletes to express themselves through engagement with the media, demanding social justice and dignity.

An iconic gesture was the Black Power Salute in 1968 at the Mexico Olympics given by Tommie Smith and John Carlos. The image emerged as one of the most iconic images in history. Both athletes faced severe consequences for their actions, having been stripped of their Olympic medals and forced to withdraw from the Olympics.

Following this, athlete activism declined. However, the 'I can't breathe' incident that occurred in 2021, while digital journalism was in full bloom, gained prominence with several athletes protesting the incident.

3. Athlete Activism Feedback Loop:

In this segment, we look at how the use of digital platforms by athletes to share their experiences or views loops back into the news coverage, giving way to discussions, debates, and even garnering responses from important stakeholders in the sporting industry.

In 2021, Naomi Osaka announced that she was taking a break from tennis after her breakdown on the court. Later, she shared on her Instagram profile her reflections on her behaviour and her internal struggle, which looped back into the news feeds. In 2020, Simone Biles spoke about her mental health struggles and withdrew from the team competition at the Olympics in Tokyo.

INTRODUCTION TO SPORTS JOURNALISM:

Sports journalism refers to the coverage of sports events, athletes, teams, and associated stories through various media channels, including newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and online platforms. The field has evolved significantly over the past century, with changes in technology, audience expectations, and the role of media in shaping public perceptions of sports.

Historically, sports reporting began in the 19th century, with major newspapers and publications covering popular sports like baseball, cricket, and horse racing. Early coverage often focused on results, scores, and statistics, but over time, sports journalism expanded to include in-depth analysis, athlete profiles, and the growing spectacle of sports as entertainment.

1. The Evolution and Growth of Sports Journalism:

The history of sports journalism can be traced back to the emergence of daily newspapers in the 1800s. Early sports journalism was often confined to score reports and results, with minimal analysis or narrative surrounding the events. As sports became more integrated into national and cultural identity (e.g., baseball in America, football in Europe), media outlets began to feature more detailed coverage. This growth of sports journalism paralleled the development of

modern sports leagues and events such as the Olympics, World Cup, and Super Bowl.

The 20th century saw a shift toward specialized sports media. Magazines like *Sports Illustrated* (founded in 1954) and television programs such as ESPN (launched in 1979) became influential platforms for sports coverage, providing both live event broadcasts and behind-the-scenes access to athletes, coaches, and sporting organizations. Sports reporting also embraced the role of storytelling, evolving from merely reporting facts to creating narratives around athletes and teams that resonated with fans on an emotional level.

2. The Impact of Sports Journalism on Society and Culture:

Sports journalism has a significant impact on society. It not only informs fans but also shapes cultural norms, values, and identities. According to Hall (2008), sports media contributes to national pride by promoting athletes and teams as symbols of a nation's values and aspirations. This phenomenon is most evident in global events like the Olympics, where media coverage elevates athletes to international status.

Moreover, sports journalism has been a driving force in the diversification of media, providing platforms for marginalized groups, such as women in sports. Women's sports journalism, for instance, has grown exponentially over the last few decades, with female athletes gaining more visibility and recognition, especially in the context of major global events like the Women's World Cup or the WNBA.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1780, James Augustus Hickey launched *The Bengal Gazette*, also known as the *Calcutta General Advertiser*, in India. However, in two years, the newspaper was seized by the British administration for being outspoken in its criticism of the Raj. This was followed by a chain reaction with several other newspapers like *The Bengal Journal*, *Kolkata Chronicle*, *Madras Courier*, and *Bombay Herald* sprouting up. What followed were the Registration act, the Vernacular Press Act of 1878, the Newspapers act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908, the Press Act of 1910, and the prevention of seditious meetings act of 1911.

The Salt Satyagraha led by Mahatma Gandhi against the British created some tension for the press, and

when Gandhi was arrested, the government enacted The Press Act of 1931. Furthermore, when the Second World War broke out in 1939, it brought further restrictions for the press. This controlled and filtered news was coming in. Amidst this chaos, an All-India Newspaper Editors conference was planned to protect the press rights of the country.

The earliest forms of sports journalism were attributed to cricket, which was a favourite pastime for the British soldiers and sailors. Then the coverage extended to horse racing, which was a passion, as garnered from the coverage in the earliest sporting journals. From the 1860s, there were gradual sightings of football coverage.

It was the Bengal Quarterly Sporting Magazine, and the India Sporting Review began in the 1830s and 1840s. The early publications printed scorecards and statistics of games that were played in Kolkata during that time. The Indian Sporting Review lasted for a decade. It was much later that Cricket began to get more popular, and other sports magazines like Indian Cricket and Sport Pastime started to sprout up in the late 1930s and 1940s, respectively. 56L

Literature Review - Books that specifically talk about athlete activism and social change.

Social Justice and the Modern Athlete: Exploring the Role of Athlete Activism in Social Change (Mia Long Anderson, ed.)

In this edited volume, Mia Long Anderson offers a layered perspective on how athletes of this time have transformed into agents of social change. There is a convergence of views among various scholars who have contributed to this volume, analyzing how athletes exert influence on different platforms, advocating for issues ranging from gender equality to racial acceptance.

The key takeaways from the book include:

- a) An overview of how athlete activism overlaps from various dynamics, and there is an effort to place everything into one perspective. This framing becomes essential for understanding athletes as a whole and the power of their influence on the public.
- b) A significant amount of attention should be given to highlighting how social media has played an integral role in impacting the change in outreach and visibility of athletes' voices and views on various issues.

c) This has become more relevant in the post-2010 period, where platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn emerged as a platform for athletes' voices to be heard.

d) The book highlights many real-life examples portraying important sports figures like Colin Kaepernick, Naomi Osaka, Simone Biles, and Megan Rapinoe.

IV. LIMITATIONS

There are too many examples of American athletes, leaving the rest of the world feeling neglected, therefore giving us a limited perspective. The literature largely focused on athletes with an already large audience, therefore not representing athletes who participate in activism at the grassroots level.

Extent of accessibility online: The e-book was released in December 2022 and is available on retail platforms like OverDrive, Barnes & Noble, Bloomsbury, Amazon, and other library outlets online.

Book two - Why We Kneel, How We Rise – Michael Holding - A review.

- a) The book is narrated through the voice of legendary cricketer Michael Holding with strong nuances from his individual experiences and the athletes around him. Deeply personal and authentic, the book explores racism and the role of sport in garnering change.
- b) The book highlights strong voices from other prominent athletes offering different perspectives and dynamics on racism. The voices of Usain Bolt, Michael Johnson, and Thierry Henry add authenticity and offer unique perspective to athlete activism on social issues.
- c) Holding leverages on his position as a prominent athlete to bring the spotlight on difficult issues like white privilege, colonization, and historical erasure in a way that informs and educates the audience.
- d) The books also are retrospective, tracing the roots of racism historically, exploring how slavery, colonization, and education systems impacted society and fostered stereotypes and biased conversations.

V. METHODOLOGY

Content Analysis

In 2021, Naomi Osaka came out and spoke about her mental health struggles. She used social media platforms and engaged with the media to openly discuss this issue. At that time, Serena Williams, Usain Bolt and Michael Phelps were quick to voice their support.

A mental wellness app called 'Calm' became the rage after this as they offered to pay Naomi's fines. A few months down the road, Simone Biles sparked global discussions on mental as she voluntarily stayed out of several events at the Tokyo Olympics.

Following these incidents, Harvard Business Review published an article called "Athletes are Shifting the Narrative Around Mental Health at Work." The article stated, "These instances of high-profile athletes prioritizing their mental health, along with organized efforts from the sports industry, have triggered an important shift in the narrative of mental health in sports." - HBR

In 2023, Serena Williams posted on her social media handles, 'I am not ok today, and that is ok'd to not be ok. No one is ok every single day.' Serena Williams' tweet was covered extensively by the media, both digital and traditional, and narratives on mental health issues in sports took over every conversation over the coming months.

Following this disclosure, Serena Williams was covered extensively on this issue by essentially sports, mental health leadership alliance, Weqip, the Indian Express, People.com, Wondermind, OnlyMyHealth, Construction Sport,

The Mending Playbook, Deccan Chronicle, and several other digital platforms. She was interviewed extensively so that mental health and Serena Williams became synonymous. Her advocacy on the topic garnered a lot of attention, with media outlets labelling her as the 'mental toughness icon.'

The Sage Journals wrote – 'Mediated Narratives of Women Athletes and Mental Health' The article covered extensively social media posts from five professional athletes – Simone Biles, Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka, Chloe Kim, and Gracie Gold. It highlighted the individual narratives around athletes, how it impacted their performance and goals.

It also threw light on the intersections between the two. The article speaks in detail about each professional's

struggle with mental health and their journey in going public. It highlights that the advocacy and speaking publicly of one athlete influenced other athletes and encouraged others to speak openly too.

In 2019, HBO released a documentary featuring Phelps and other athletes who sought to address and advocate for mental health struggles. The article cited: "Unfortunately, sports topics are considered 'outside' of scholarly work in journalism and communication. But online media and social media are important avenues for discussions of mental health and the ways these stories are told merits analysis." – (Bissell, Chou, Dirks, 2024)

The New York Times wrote in 2021 – 'Naomi Osaka and the Changing Power Dynamics in Sports. In 2016, Britannica wrote a biography on Colin Kaepernick, which extensively covered his activism through the 'kneeling' gesture during the national anthem of the NFL games in 2016.

The written work discusses police brutality, racial justice for African Americans, and the journey of Colin Kaepernick's sports career. In the article, Colin is quoted as saying about the kneeling event 'I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of colour. To me, this is bigger than football,' – Colin Kaepernick, as stated by The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica in his biography.

Following Colin's activism, many of his peers joined him in kneeling as the season progressed. Time Magazine also covered Colin's advocacy on October 3, where on it is cover it featured a picture of Colin kneeling.

This coverage sparked a global debate 'about privilege, pride and patriotism.' As cited by The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. The Washington Post wrote – 'A timeline of Colin Kaepernick's protests against police brutality, four years after they began.' Taylor & Francis Online wrote – 'Taking the star-spangled knee: the media framing of Colin Kaepernick.

VI. QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ATHLETE ACTIVISTS

According to statistics by Opendorse's 2020 analysis of 7000+ athletes across major sports in North America:

- Athletes with followers ranging from 1,000 – 10,000 generated sixty-eight posts a year.
- Athletes with followers ranging from 100,000 to 1 M generated 280 posts a year.
- Athletes with more than a million followers posted at least 269 times a year, which amounts to a post once a day.

Looking at the top five hundred athletes according to Instagram growth, there were about forty-nine feed posts in a year, while the top one hundred growth accounts average about 33 Instagram posts a year.

The top one hundred growth accounts on Twitter posted about 191 tweets a year.

A closer look at activism posts:

1. #TakeAKnee Campaign pioneered by Colin Kaepernick and NFL

- The hashtag #TakeAKnee generated about four million tweets in 2017 amid President Trump's open disapproval.
- The hashtag #TakeAKnee frequently appeared in stories and posts along with related hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter, #BoycottNFL

2. #BlackLivesMatter Movement

- #BlackLivesMatter had about thirty million tweets from 2013 to May 2018.
- The average number of tweets grew to 3.7 million tweets a day; on peak days, it touched close to 8.8 million tweets. These numbers belong to the period from July 2020 and June 2020.
- From July 7-17, 2016, the number of daily tweets reached 500,000.

VII. IMPLICATIONS

- The volume of posts by athletes represents that athlete activism via digital feeds is significant. This supports this dissertation which talks about the transfer of sports stories from the field to the feed.
- It draws visibility and importance to hashtag campaigns that reinforce a message through greater outreach. Hashtag campaigns like #TakeAKnee and #BlackLivesMatter amplified and scaled athlete activism to millions of engagements every day.
- The stories that quickly transfer from field to feed are from high-profile athletes like LeBron James, Jaylen Brown, Serena Williams, Naomi Osaka, and

Simone Biles, and these stories rapidly shape public discourse, garnering real-time engagement and content control. Thus, shaping social narratives around issues like mental health, racial discrimination, and gender equity.

Case Study

Colin Kaepernick

A renowned name for his unwavering support and advocacy for Black rights, specifically police brutality, Colin Kaepernick is a former NFL quarterback. He pioneered the 'kneeling' gesture and is historically one of the few athletes who influenced social narratives on Black rights in an impactful manner, causing many political leaders to be uncomfortable with his solidarity in advocating for what he believed in.

His activism is said to be one of the most visible social justice movements of the 20th century. Colin Kaepernick had initially started to sit out of his games, refusing to stand up during the national anthem.

He later proceeded to kneel in protest during the national anthem during the NFL games in 2016. A symbolic gesture that sparked global debates, outrage, and transformed the narrative between sports, politics, and the media.

Colin influenced many of the other athletes to join in, and many years later, after the death of George Floyd by police brutality, other athletes adopted this symbolic gesture to advocate their support towards black rights, in turn reiterating Colin's message and reinforcing the fact that Colin wasn't taken seriously and had in fact, faced severe repercussions.

This case study explores how digital sports journalism amplifies Colin Kaepernick's activism, influences public conversations, and has a powerful impact on broader athlete-led social movements through framing, narrative construction, and platform-based dissemination.

1. Field: The Act of Protest

- In 2016 – Colin was recovering from surgery, it was during this time that he took to social media to voice his concerns about the police killings of Alton Sterling, Philando Castille, Charles Kinsey and Freddy Gray.
- Following this, he refused to get ready for the 49ers for the first two preseason games and it is here that he began sitting during the nation anthem.

- He releases a statement: *“I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of colour. To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.”* (History.com Editors)
- This press release was widely covered by numerous digital publishing outlets, social media, and traditional media.
- Sept 1st, 2016 – After being convinced by a former NFL player, Green Beret to kneel instead of sitting, Colin knelt for the first time during a preseason game. This time, he was not alone; his friend and teammate Eric Reid joined him. As the game progressed several other players from around the league began to join in.

Motivation:

The deaths of several Black Americans as a direct consequence of police brutality.

Media:

Initially traditional media began coverage with a large focus on Colin’s disrespect to the flag or the military. The movement gathered coverage on all platforms extensively covering the reason behind Colin’s symbolic gesture.

Athlete’s Voice:

During this time, Colin leveraged on post-game interviews to articulate his strong feelings about the killings of Black Americans, he also leveraged on social media platforms like Instagram/ Twitter to throw more clarity on his stance, his statements and quotes that were published by media.

2. Feed: Digital Journalism Takes Over

a) Initial Media Framing

- Mainstream media: The Guardian reported Ruth Bader as saying that ‘Colin Kaepernick’s protest is dumb and disrespectful.’ Teen Vogue published a story on the support of an entire Seattle High School football team kneeling during the National Anthem in support of the athlete. His friend and athlete Eric Reid, released a statement saying: *“I was taught growing up that you always do what you believe ...*

For me, it is learning how to follow before learning how to lead.” (As reported by the Washington Post)

“Patriotism comes in many forms ... Colin Kaepernick however imperfectly, is doing a patriotic thing.” – Quoted Bob Costas (NBC veteran)

“This is a backup quarterback who became the center of attention Yet he chose a time where suddenly, he became the center of attention.” ESPN.com – Trent Dilfer, former NFL quarterback

“He’s exercising his constitutional right ... he cares about some real, legitimate issues he’s generated more conversation.”

- Conservative outlets: Some media houses like Fox and Sports focused on his actions as being ‘controversial’ and ‘divisive.’ While more progressive sports media like *Deadspin, SB Nation, The Undeclared* highlighted racial justice framing and athlete agency.

b) Rise of Alternative Digital Platforms

- The Players’ Tribune and Bleacher Report allowed athletes and fans to bypass the traditional filter. It was during this time that hashtags like #TakeAKnee and the reposting of Colin’s images turned the protest into a bigger social movement. Twitter threads went into minute detail about the historical context of Black athlete activism.

The impact on Colin Kaepernick’s Digital Media presence:

- Colin’s social media following increased by 35,394%. Since he began sitting, there were about 16,825 posts per day between the period Aug 26-Sept 8.
- He gained 40,372 followers on Twitter, and during this period, his posts were commented, shared, or liked on an average of 46,553 times per post.
- He was either tagged or mentioned on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook 235,549 times, ten times more than before his symbolic gesture.
- Colin also took to social media to announce that he would donate \$1 million to community organizations with social injustice as their main work. He further added that he would donate the royalties from the sale of his jersey, which turned out to be the best-selling jersey in the NFL. Following his

announcements, the NFL also decided to donate \$1 million.

c) Multimedia and Participatory Journalism

- It triggered responses from other media platforms, like YouTube vloggers, Instagram infographics and podcasts like *Pod Save the People* and *I AM ATHLETE* displayed nuanced discussions of race, patriotism, and protest in sports.
- The emergence of citizen journalism and real-time reaction videos made a powerful impact on fans, influencing their understanding and perceptions.

Case Study No.2 – Dutee Chand – Highlights digital amplification of LGBTQ+ rights in Indian sports.

Background

Dutee Chand received a lot of attention when she released a statement acknowledging that she was in a same-sex relationship. This public disclosure marked a landmark moment in Indian sports and the LGBTQ+ community, giving the group the much-needed visibility. A professional Indian sprinter and national champion in the one hundred meters, Dutee Chand has received many accolades for sporting acumen since 2013. In 2019, she made history when at the World Universiade in Naples, she became the first Indian to bag the gold in a 100 m event at a global meet. In 2016, she qualified for the 2016 Rio Games and became the fifth Indian to take part in the women's one hundred meters at the Olympics.

Dutee Chand comes from Odisha and belongs to a weaver's family. She was inspired by her sister to accept running. Throughout her life, Dutee Chand faced a lot of criticism owing to hyperandrogenism and found herself in the middle of a controversy. She faced a lot of backlashes for coming out in the open about being gay in a conservative society in India, where a large part of the population is still biased about gay relationships, Dutee Chand had a brave move.

Dutee once quoted: *"From a girl who used to run barefoot around a lake to becoming a sportsperson recognized across the world, it's been a long, hard journey," Dutee says. "People now see me for my sport, for my hard work and for what I stand."*(biography by *Olympics.com*)

Athlete Activism by Dutee Chand

In May 2019, Dutee Chand garnered national and international media attention, and this was not for a

sporting accomplishment. Dutee Chand decided to openly talk about her relationship with a woman from her village, marking her as the first openly gay athlete in Indian history.

- In a country where homosexuality is still frowned upon and only been decriminalised in 2018 (section 377 ruling), Dutee Chand declaring her relationship status was certainly a personal act of courage.
- Dutee Chand had access to media platforms, she used interviews and media appearances to advocate for issues on equality, privacy, and rights of LGBTQ+ people in sports.

Digital Journalism and its role in amplifying Dutee Chand's case

Analysis Dutee Chand's story it is evident that digital platforms played an integral role in widening the audience to her story, amplifying the narrative around LGBTQ+ rights. This framed it within a broader human rights and gender equality narratives. Her disclosure also emerged during the beginning of COVID, where people had begun to spend a lot of time on social media. Therefore, her story spread to millions of fans around the world.

• News Portals

Several platforms like The Quint, Scroll.in, India Today and HuffPost published in-depth stories on her disclosure. Her interviews and statements were widely published and scrutinized. This wide coverage positioned her as an icon that shaped LGBTQ+ narratives in a powerful way. She began to be seen as an icon of resistance and pride.

- Isha Malhotra and Raj Thakur published an academic journal: 'Atypical Athletic Corporeality and Clinical Embodied Deviance: A Case Study of Dutee Chand.' The paper studies the politics of gendered athleticism and was widely published in 2021. (<https://rupkatha.com/V13/n3/v13n341.pdf>)

- In 2022, The Indian Express wrote "Dutee Chand opens up about being ragged in hostel; experts on how it may affect mental, physical health." The publication came after it became public that Dutee Chand was being harassed by her hostel mates after her disclosure.

- In 2020, The Bridge reported: 'People look at me and my partner differently, but it doesn't matter:

Dutee Chand' (<http://thebridge.in/athletics/people-look-and-my-partner-differently-but-doesnt-matter-dutee-chand/>) The article explored Dutee's life and the consequences she faced in a largely conservative society in India.

- In 2019, immediately after her disclosure, ESPN headlines screamed, "If you love someone, there is no need to fear" – Dutee Chand. The article explored her disclosure and Dutee Chand's discovery about her sexuality and her qualification for the sport and how people perceived her. (https://www.espn.in/athletics/story/_/id/26793969/if-love-there-no-need-fear-dutee-chand)
- Indian Today published: 'Ace sprinter Dutee Chand reveals she is in same-sex relationship with 'soulmate.' This article too explores Dutee's disclosure and what it meant to her. (<https://www.indiatoday.in/sports/athletics/story/dutee-chand-same-sex-relationship-soulmate-1528532-2019-05-19>)
- The Indian Express spoke about her uncertain career in an article titled "Staring at an uncertain future, Dutee says she is ready for another fight." (<https://indianexpress.com/article/sports/staring-at-uncertain-future-dutee-says-she-is-ready-for-another-fight-doping-8392388/>)
- The New York Times published her story in 2014 and titled it- "Fighting for the Body She Was Born With". – (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/07/sports/sprinter-dutee-chand-fights-ban-over-her-testosterone-level.html>)
- In 2021, a book titled 'Fiercely Female: The Dutee Chand Story' was published. Written by Sundeep Mishra, the book explores Chand's story with a large focus on gender identity controversy.

Social Media

- Dutee used social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter to reach out to her fans. She leveraged these platforms to advocate for equality and her place in the sports arena.
- During this time, hashtags like #LoveIsLove and #DuteeChand trended, bringing to the fore a social movement through solidarity that grew from widespread digital journalism.

Framing Analysis

The role of digital journalism in Dutee Chand's story helped to frame her story in a humane perspective, evoking positive and empowering sentiments from her fans. Headlines like:

"Dutee Chand: India's First Openly Gay Athlete Breaks Barriers"

This positioned her story in an empowering angle, giving hope to the suppressed LGBTQ+ community in India. Other headlines include:

"Facing Backlash, Dutee Stands Firm: Love is Not a Crime."

This article positioned Dutee as a heroic icon, giving her disclosure and story an angle of courage and bravado. Another article said:

"Fighting Patriarchy and Prejudice, One Sprint at a Time"

Public & Institutional Reaction

- All the media coverage garnered Dutee Chand a lot of empathy and sympathy. Digital media amplified her cause, garnering her a lot of love and support from netizens, fellow athletes, and celebrities.
- On the other hand, digital journalism also brought her a lot of backlashes, bullying, trolling and abuse. This highlighted the double-edged nature of digital news coverage.

Impact of Dutee Chand's story

- Her story created a lot of controversy and brought to light widespread feelings of homophobia in Indian sports.
- Many digital platforms published featured of queer athletes, gender identity, mental health in sports, offering support and creating a powerful influence on social narratives on the topic.
- Dutee Chand's disclosure and her narrative created a wave of awareness in India and around the globe on gender identity issues in sports. She inspired and triggered many stories, petitions, documentaries, and college debates surrounding diversity in sports.

3. Amplification & Narrative Building

Various framing devices used in digital Journalism:

With Entman's Framing theory, several common frames came into play.

a) Diagnostic frame –

Here, media houses engaged in narratives that portrayed racism in general as a systemic issue. The digital publication 'The Undefeated' wrote: 'Kaepernick kneels against police brutality.'

b) Prognostic frame –

In this analysis or portrayal, Colin's symbolic gesture was linked to social change mechanisms that influence social movements to bring about change in societies through sport. The Bleacher Report published: 'How sports can confront racial injustice.'

c) Motivational frame –

In the media reactions here, Colin's activism garnered solidarity and action from among fans and athletes. SB Nation published 'Take a Knee: Why it still matters in 2020.'

d) Counter-frame –

This frame highlights adverse reactions to Colin's gesture, framing his protest as anti-American. Fox Nation published 'NFL Fans Turn Away from Anti-Patriotism, Anti-Sport.'

Narrative Devices

The impact of the act of kneeling from Colin Kaepernick during the national anthem triggered a vast array of reactions ranging from Hero/Villain dichotomy to a redemption angle. Let us take a close look:

- Hero/Villain dichotomy: Several social media platforms and published articles in traditional media did not hesitate to portray Kaepernick as either a courageous activist or an ungrateful disruptor. For example, he garnered Mr. Barack Obama's support and, on the other extreme, Mr. Donald Trump's criticism.
- Redemption arc: Colin Kaepernick faced severe backlash for his advocacy of black rights. He was unceremoniously removed from the team, and he found himself without a single game for years. It was only later, after the death of George Floyd, which triggered protests from other athletes who mimicked the kneeling gesture, did the NFL reach out to him with an opportunity.
- Many fans empathized with Colin's sacrifice and his attitude towards walking the talk by donating \$1million to social welfare groups that supported

Black American rights. Many published stories in traditional media and digital media have been published about his solidarity, his kindness, and his unwavering commitment to the cause.

- Silencing/Exile trope: It is sad that Colin's symbolic gesture did not receive recognition for what it really was. He was an outstanding quarterback and an asset to the team. Yet, his actions were not given credit by the league. He continued to remain out of work for years.
- During this time, journalists began to focus on him being out of work until the 'George Floyd' incident which turned things around for Colin. This out-of-work phase made it seem like a sort of exile for athlete that did not get the opportunities he deserved on the playground, even though he continued to train extremely hard.

4. Feedback Loop: Influence on Activism and Public Perception

Impact on Athletes

- Athletes across leagues replicated the gesture (NBA, WNBA, EPL). From Terrell Suggs, Leonard Fournette, Ravens, Jaguars, Rico La Velle, and many other athletes took the knee. Along with Colin, Eric Reid, and Eli Harold replicated the symbolic gesture. Then the Beaumont Bulls, a high school team, took the knee. It gradually transformed into a social movement, especially after President Trump made a derisive remark mocking athletes engaging in politics.
- This triggered several reactions from fellow athletes and several NFL franchise owners. In a few days, there were more than one hundred players taking the knee, and the drama was widely covered, making Colin Kaepernick a symbol of activism. After the hashtag #TakeAKnee went viral, the protest garnered numbers, marking it as a historical moment in sports.
- President Trump also made matters worse by taking to Twitter to express his disapproval where he said "If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL, or other leagues," he wrote, "he or she should not be allowed to disrespect ... our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem. If not, YOU'RE FIRED. Find something else to do!" (The Atlantic)

- What followed was that Kaepernick became a symbol of Black athlete resistance; he was featured in Nike's Dream Crazy ad campaign (2018). Then there was no turning back. Today, Colin Kaepernick continues to be actively involved in social justice projects and leaning toward media initiatives as well.
- He founded the 'Know Your Rights Camp' and Kaepernick Publishing, which focuses on empowering people of colour. He is also involved in producing documentaries and finishing his memoir.
- Following this, several NFL teams and players supported his gesture. Later, Players from other sports like LeBron James and other NBA players advocated for the Black Lives Matter movement.
- Moving forward Megan Rapinoe garnered attention for kneeling during the national anthem and has been an active advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and social justice. A few years down the line, athletes like Naomi Osaka, Serena Williams, and Simone Biles leveraged platforms with the media to throw light on mental health issues.
- In Aug 2022, the World Economic Forum published an article that read 'From Carson Pickett to Colin Kaepernick, these activist athletes are making a change.' Carson Pickett became an internet sensation after a picture of her arm bumping a 2-year-old fan who was also missing part of his left arm went viral. Carson is the first player with a limb difference and is an advocate for limb difference.

Public & Policy Reactions

- Colin's social movement, followed by his extraction from the team, garnered a lot of mixed fan reactions that were polarized but deeply engaging. There were online petitions, boycotts, and fundraisers.
- Digital journalism's reach influenced public debates on free speech and patriotism.
- Some police departments banned NFL viewings; others knelt in solidarity.

Institutional Response

- NFL initially distanced itself; eventually reversed stance in 2020, with Roger Goodell stating, "We were wrong."
- Influenced league-wide social justice pledges, funding for racial equity programs.

5. Lessons from the Digital Ecosystem

- a. The protest garnered global attention within 48 hours and became a large part of social justice narratives during that time.
- b. It provoked certain kinds of behaviour and reactions from the public at large and from fans, giving way to a whole new genre of hashtags, memes, and other stories that had nuances of the social movement. This is how it fostered a participatory culture from the public, shaping social narratives around social justice issues.
- c. There was a large polarization on the types of coverage on media, both traditional and digital media, with each narrative either supporting or disapproving of the athlete. Each representation impacted social conversations and narratives; this impact would last for years, including the athlete himself. Diversified narratives offered a platform for plurality on the issue.
- d. Photos of Colin Kaepernick kneeling were circulated worldwide, with social media and digital news portals spreading with great speed. This had a powerful visual impact, creating visual symbolism for the social movement.
- e. The role of the media and the rise of journalism enabled Colin Kaepernick to bypass gatekeepers, gaining direct access to his audience on his terms. Thus, making it easier for me to articulate his advocacy and be the harbinger of a major social movement in the world today.

6. Significance to this dissertation

- "From Field to Feed": The journey of events travelling at lightning speed from the field to feed is evident by the extent of coverage and the fact that it grew into a movement in a brief period.
- The timeliness of the news coverage and the detail in which it was presented helped shape social narratives and influence audiences worldwide, even provoking political reactions.
- Therefore, this case study highlights how digital sports journalism functioned as both translator and amplifier, helping frame, contextualize, and mobilize the protest into a global movement.
- The case shows how athlete activism no longer needs institutional backing to gain traction—the feed is the new front line.

VIII. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY: FIELD TO FEED

How digital sports journalism amplifies social justice narratives and influences athlete activism.

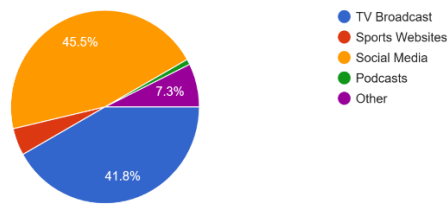
A survey was conducted with a diverse group of respondents aged primarily between 40 and 59, spanning professions such as writers, doctors, homemakers, and IT professionals. Despite varying levels of direct sports engagement, their interactions with digital sports content revealed notable trends relevant to the study’s central thesis.

1. Digital Platforms as Primary Gateways

The Survey that garnered 110 responses highlighted that:

- 45.5% of respondents consumed sports content on social media.
- 41.8% on TV Broadcast, with the rest opting for sports websites and other channels like podcasts.

How do you primarily consume sports content
110 responses

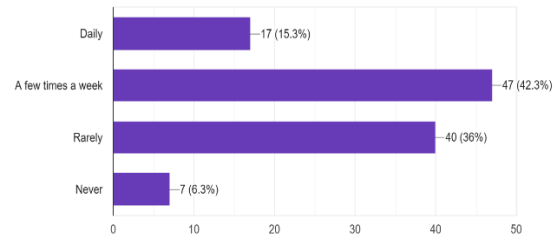


2. Frequency and Nature of Content Consumption

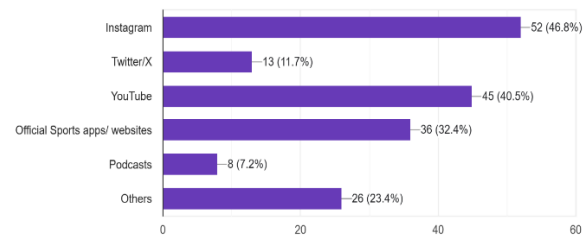
- 42.3% voted for a few times a week, giving many opportunities to be exposed to digital journalism coverage and be aware of strong social narratives or athlete activism.
- 46.8% of the respondents agreed to watching sports content on Instagram. 38.7% agreed that digital journalism covers more stories on athlete activism than traditional media.
- 57.7% agreed to occasionally read stories of athlete activism on digital platforms.
- 40.5% agreed that digital journalism has covered more stories on sports and athlete activism in recent years.
- 48.5% believe that athlete activism is amplified by digital journalism.
- 34.2% said that ‘Gender Equity’ was the most common issue that digital journalism highlighted.

- 48.6% think that public opinion is influenced when athlete activism is amplified by digital journalism.
- 49.5% believe that athlete activism would not receive as much attention if it were not for digital journalism.

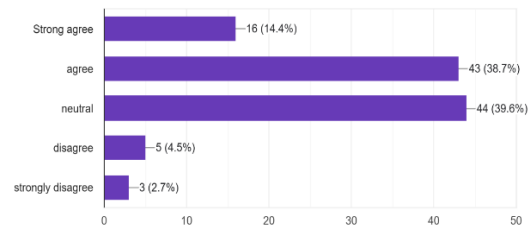
How often do you consume digital sports journalism content?
111 responses



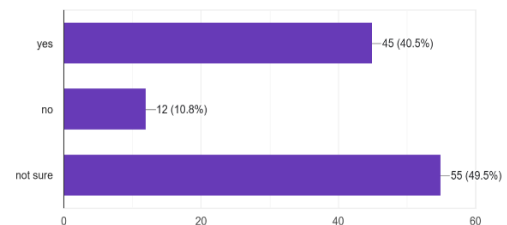
Which platforms do you use most for sports news?
111 responses



Do you believe digital sports journalism offers more comprehensive coverage than traditional sports media?
111 responses

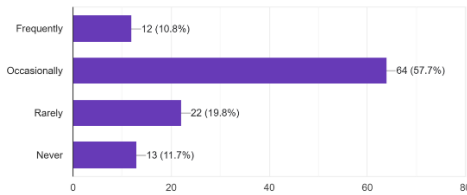


Have you noticed more coverage of social justice issues in digital sports journalism in recent years?
111 responses

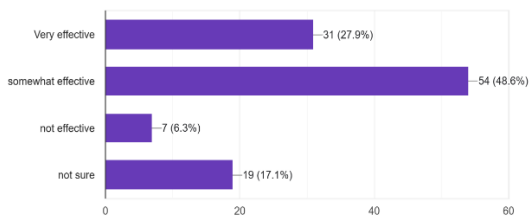


3. Perceived Impact of Athlete Activism

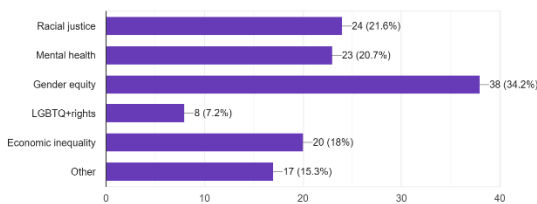
Have you encountered stories of athlete activism (e.g., racial justice, gender equity, LGBTQ+ rights, mental health) through digital sports media?
111 responses



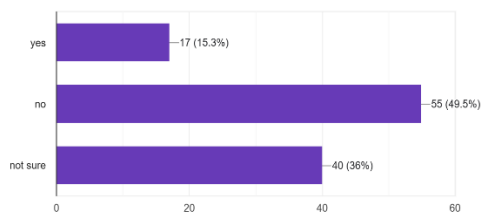
How effective do you think athlete activism is in influencing public opinion when amplified by digital media?
111 responses



Which issues do you most commonly see addressed by athlete activism in digital sports journalism?
111 responses



Do you believe that athlete activism would receive as much attention without digital journalism platforms?
111 responses



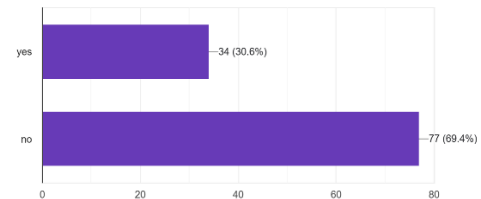
4. Trust and Authenticity in Digital Journalism

An important takeaway from the survey is that respondents exhibited a moderate to elevated level of trust in digital sports journalism, relying on these channels to report fairly on activism-related stories. Further, many respondents agreed that digital journalism offers a more 'authentic' and 'unfiltered' portrayal of athlete issues compared to traditional media.

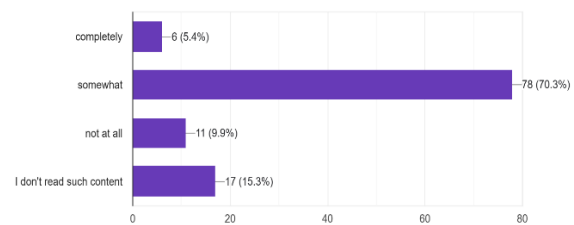
This supports the narrative that digital storytelling or journalism is a more sought-after platform that

challenges traditional media's conservative approach, often drawing a veil over sensitive issues. Thus, digital sports journalism has emerged as a space where athlete activism is welcome, it portrays emotions, beliefs, and value systems without hesitation or sanitized editing that often hides the true story.

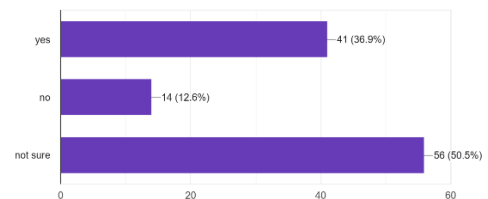
Have you ever shared or reposted a digital sports journalism article or video related to a social justice issue?
111 responses



How much do you trust digital sports journalists to fairly report on athlete activism and social justice issues?
111 responses



Do you think digital journalism provides a more "unfiltered" or authentic portrayal of athlete voices compared to traditional media?
111 responses



5. Engagement Gap

The survey results portray a certain passivity in digital civic participation, as it highlights a gap where respondents are aware of these stories but do not actively share or repost content. This translates to the fact that awareness does not always mean amplification or activism.

While this may suggest a limit to digital journalism's impact on behaviour, it also points to the latent potential of these platforms if mobilized more intentionally.

6. Memorable Moments and Suggestions for Improvement

Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka's advocacy on mental health seemed to have a powerful impact on the respondents with most of them citing these examples. This could be indicative of the fact that stories like these remain relevant to the audience for a long time. While others mentioned other athletes like Riley Gaines and the incidents surrounding the Indian boxers. The respondents also indicated that only some stories made a lasting impact, depending on the emotional appeal of the story and how relevant it was in general to the world.

In terms of improvement, participants advocated for greater compassion, sensitivity, and realism in how social justice stories are managed—emphasizing a desire for human-centered journalism over sensationalism.

Interpretation

This audience-level analysis demonstrates that digital sports journalism does indeed amplify social justice narratives, particularly by expanding reach, increasing authenticity, and shifting power towards athlete-driven storytelling.

However, it also reveals structural gaps—most notably, a lack of participatory amplification from audiences—which point to areas where digital journalism must evolve if it is to translate awareness into sustained social impact.

IX. THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES

We can group the responses into key thematic categories to identify patterns in public perception.

1. Awareness and Reach (High Frequency)

Key Insight:

Most respondents acknowledged that digital journalism improves reach, speed, and awareness of social justice issues in sports.

"It reaches a larger audience", "More accessible", "Reaches too many people too quick", "More awareness, more reach", "Digital platforms have enabled athletes to become more vocal and visible."

Interpretation:

This suggests digital journalism has democratized access to athlete voices and activism. This supports

your thesis that digital journalism amplifies narratives by removing traditional gatekeeping.

2. Framing and Credibility (Medium Frequency)

Key Insight:

Concerns were about misinformation, clickbait bias, and loss of credibility.

"Stories are more dramatized", "Sensational", "Everyone has become a journalist without any credibility", "Credibility of the delivered news has been a question."

Interpretation:

While the public appreciates reach and immediacy, there's scepticism about the quality and trustworthiness of digital journalism. This reflects a potential gap where amplification may come at the cost of journalistic integrity.

3. Representation of Issues (Medium Frequency)

Key Insight:

Respondents recognized the breadth of issues covered, especially gender, race, economic inequality, and mental health.

"Sports journalism is dominated by men, but digital platforms allow for a more neutral say", "Gives a wider scope of coverage", "Social justice stories are more immediate and visible."

Interpretation:

Digital platforms are enabling intersectional activism to be more visible than in traditional sports journalism, aligning directly with your research on amplified narratives.

4. Engagement and Dialogue (Low to Medium Frequency)

Key Insight:

Some responses acknowledged interactive potential and audience empowerment.

"Encourages readers to take action", "Fans can engage in dialogue and hold organizations accountable", "We receive a more unfiltered opinion."

Interpretation:

This reinforces the idea that digital sports journalism fosters participatory journalism—people are not just passive consumers but active participants in the discourse.

5. Disruption vs Status Quo (Low Frequency)

Key Insight:

A few responses reflected scepticism about real-world impact due to commercial and political barriers.

"Unless political systems change, these dramas will go on", "These issues are not spread or reach respective hands due to big players."

Interpretation:

This points to a limitation: while digital media can highlight issues, the systemic sports-business nexus may dilute activism's real-world effects. This is an important counterpoint you can use in your discussion.

6. Neutral/Unsure Responses

A considerable number of responses were:

- "Not sure"
- "NA"
- "Don't know"

Interpretation:

This indicates a knowledge or engagement gap among some sections of the audience. It may reflect digital fatigue, topic unfamiliarity, or media oversaturation.

X. KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR YOUR DISSERTATION

Implications of the research:

Convincing evidence from the analytics that digital journalism boosts awareness and reach. It also reiterates memory recall and leaves a last impression on audiences that relate to the story. It therefore plays a powerful role in amplification and reiteration.

The results frame/ portray digital media as a double-edged sword, empowering athletes, and audiences yet it also highlights how vulnerable athletes can be to the public's distortion of the message or the story. The overcrowding of the internet has largely made audiences into passive consumers, who most of the time are doom-scrolling and not really paying attention to what they read. This raises credibility concerns with relevant stakeholders.

The results of the survey indicate that social issues related to gender, race and mental health are more visible digitally than on traditional media. This can be attributed to the large audience that has access to the internet and social media platforms across all age

groups and demographics. That is why the survey has a diverse dataset that has responded to the survey.

The survey indicates that the rise of digital journalism supports the idea of participatory journalism with fans as co-narrators. This also aids in broader coverage with more minute details given importance.

The survey also brings to light a certain scepticism about the level of impact of digital journalism on social narratives. But, having said that, the widely diverse dataset may have led to diverse responses as the survey had about one hundred respondents. Many of these respondents did not hold any interest in sports or social media. Perhaps a more specific dataset would throw more light on the actual level of impact.

The engagement gaps that the survey portrays highlight the diversity of digital media audiences in awareness and interest.

1. Thematic Analysis – Key Themes Identified

Theme 1: Authenticity & Truthfulness

- *Frequency: Extremely high*
- *Key phrases: "Just put the truth out there", "authentic and genuine", "thorough verification", "don't tweak narratives", "not embellished for views", "I want facts."*
- *Insights: Respondents overwhelmingly want truthful, transparent, and fact-checked reporting. Mistrust in the current content is evident, with many feeling that stories are shaped for engagement metrics or biased agendas.*

Theme 2: Unbiased & Balanced Reporting

- *Frequency: High*
- *Key phrases: "cover both sides", "unbiased coverage", "displaying both sides", "balanced view", "fair narrative", "not portrayed for the numbers."*
- *Insights: Many seek impartial journalism that avoids sensationalism and provides context from multiple perspectives, especially when dealing with sensitive social justice issues.*

Theme 3: More Coverage & Representation

- *Frequency: High*
- *Key phrases: "cover all sports", "regional activities", "topics TV doesn't cover", "more depth", "cover lesser-known athletes", "don't jump to next hot story."*

- *Insights:* Respondents desire *increased and sustained coverage*, especially on *less mainstream sports, diverse voices*, and *continued follow-up* on social justice issues rather than episodic coverage.

Theme 4: Sensitivity & Compassion

- *Frequency:* Moderate
- *Key phrases:* "more compassionate", "be sensitive", "respect privacy", "handle carefully."
- *Insights:* A call for *empathy and ethics in storytelling*, especially when involving athletes' subjective experiences or social struggles.

Theme 5: Accountability & Regulation

- *Frequency:* Moderate
- *Key phrases:* "fact-checking process", "auditing body", "mechanism to control false narrative", "official blogs."
- *Insights:* Respondents are asking for *better systems of accountability, fact verification*, and possibly *standardized ethical guidelines* for digital sports journalism.

Theme 6: Education & Depth

- *Frequency:* Moderate to low
- *Key phrases:* "context", "long-term impact", "historical background", "educates audience."
- *Insights:* Some responses emphasized the need for *educational and in-depth reporting* that explains the structural and historical significance of the issue being reported.

Theme 7: Accessibility & Inclusion

- *Frequency:* Low
- *Key phrases:* "accessible to people with disabilities", "equal gender importance", "no discrimination", "diverse newsroom voices"
- *Insights:* Calls for *more inclusive representation*—not just in coverage but also in who gets to tell the story.

2. Noteworthy Observations

- Around 20% of the responses were either unsure, blank, or NA, indicating either a lack of clarity on the issue or a hesitancy to suggest change.
- Some respondents expressed satisfaction with current coverage, saying "It's good now" or "I don't follow it enough to *comment*."

- *There are some cynicism and fatigue* about false narratives and performance activism.

3. Respondents Analysis

Ninety-three respondents answered the open-ended and closed-ended questions. The respondents included sports fans who were not loyal to any sport, students, professionals, and a few other respondents who were directly connected to the sports ecosystem. The survey encompassed a diverse age range (18 – 50 +), thus offering a good range of generational perspectives.

3.1. Impact of Athlete Activism on Viewers' Awareness

Question:

Can you recall a recent moment where an athlete's activism impacted your view on a social issue?

- *Yes:* 43% (40+ respondents)
- *No or Not Sure:* 57%

Common examples recalled:

- *Mental Health Awareness:* Naomi Osaka and Serena Williams' openness about anxiety and depression.
- *Gender Rights & Equality:* Megan Rapinoe's LGBTQ+ advocacy and pay parity movements.
- *Sexual Harassment in Indian Wrestling:* Sakshi Malik, Vinesh Phogat, and Bajrang Punia protests against WFI.
- *Black Lives Matter / Racism in Sports:* Colin Kaepernick, Lewis Hamilton.
- *Trans Inclusion in Sports:* Mixed responses highlighting increased awareness and concerns.

Insight:

The impact of athlete activism was evident. Influence on respondents displayed the recall of a few case studies and names that were associated to activism. This indicated that stories spread quickly and widely through digital journalism.

3.2. Perceptions on Digital Journalism's Role

Question:

What improvements would you like to see in how digital sports journalism manages social justice narratives?

Key themes from 90+ qualitative responses:

Theme	Frequency	Example Responses
Authenticity & Fact-Checking	High	“Truth without bias,” “No embellishment for TRP”
Transparency & Balanced Coverage	High	“Both sides of the story,” “Avoid influencer-driven takes.”
Greater Depth and Context	Medium	“Focus on systemic issues, not just headlines.”
Consistent Follow-Up	Medium	“Stick with stories till justice is served”
Representation & Inclusion	Medium	“More women’s sports,” “Regional and underrepresented voices”
Credibility & Source Trust	High	“Auditing body,” “Mainstream journalists needed”
Mental Health & Athlete Privacy	Low	“Respect privacy,” “Do not sensationalize mental health.”

Insight:

Respondents are calling for journalism that informs rather than sensationalizes. The desire for nuanced, sensitive storytelling is strong.

3.3. Trust and Emotional Impact

Although not directly asked, several respondents expressed:

- *Scepticism of “clickbait” journalism.*
- *Confusion around what is true due to an overload of opinions.*
- *A sense of emotional resonance when stories were told authentically (e.g., wrestling protest).*

4. Summary Paragraph for Dissertation Integration

Survey responses revealed a widespread desire for greater authenticity, transparency, and fairness in how digital sports journalism manages social justice narratives. Participants emphasized the need for truthful and unbiased reporting, urging journalists to avoid sensationalism and ensure stories are thoroughly fact-checked. There is a clear demand for expanded coverage, particularly of underrepresented sports, regions, and athlete voices, alongside sustained follow-up on issues beyond fleeting headlines. Additionally, many called for greater compassion, sensitivity, and respect for privacy, particularly when

dealing with vulnerable individuals or communities. Suggestions also included the establishment of fact-checking mechanisms, auditing bodies, and educational, contextual reporting that provides depth and historical understanding. This data underscores the public's expectation that digital sports journalism should not only inform but also empower audiences and promote accountability in the realm of athlete activism and social justice.

XI. CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that digital sports journalism has significant potential to amplify athlete activism and social justice narratives, but its influence is not uniformly felt across audiences.

While digital platforms have elevated powerful voices—especially around mental health, gender equality, and sexual harassment—there exists a disconnect between message and memory. Over half of respondents could not recall recent activism stories, signalling challenges in visibility, storytelling quality, or digital engagement.

The cases that did resonate—such as the Indian wrestlers’ protests—highlight the importance of cultural proximity, emotional relatability, and consistent coverage in shaping public perception. Stories involving mental health and gender justice, when authentically presented, also foster empathetic responses and greater awareness.

However, polarized issues like transgender participation in sport reveal that digital journalism must evolve beyond sensationalism, embracing more nuanced, inclusive, and educational approaches.

In conclusion, the journey from field to feed is incomplete without addressing the gaps in audience reach, media framing, and representational justice. For digital sports journalism to become a true catalyst of athlete activism and social change, it must combine strategic storytelling, grassroots amplification, and inclusive narratives that resonate widely and ethically.

REFERENCES

- [1] CNN, “NFL preseason: 49ers vs Chargers, Colin Kaepernick national anthem protest,” 2016. [Online]. Available: <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/01/sport/nfl->

- preseason-49ers-chargers-colin-kaepernick-national-anthem
- [2] *Sportstar*, “Colin Kaepernick-Eric Reed settlement: Timeline of events,” 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://sportstar.thehindu.com/other-sports/colin-kaepernick-eric-reed-settlement-issue-timeline-of-events-nfl-san-francisco-49ers-player-protests/article26290406.ece>
- [3] CBS News, “Colin Kaepernick: A cultural star fast turning into a global icon,” [Online]. Available: <https://www.cbsnews.com/baltimore/news/colin-kaepernick-a-cultural-star-fast-turning-into-a-global-icon>
- [4] Wikipedia, “U.S. national anthem kneeling protests,” [Online]. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._national_anthem_kneeling_protests
- [5] AS USA, “Colin Kaepernick protest coverage,” 2016. [Online]. Available: https://as.com/us/us/2016/09/28/masdeporte/1475080924_062745.html
- [6] *Teen Vogue*, “Seattle high school football team kneels during national anthem,” [Online]. Available: <http://teenvogue.com/story/entire-seattle-high-school-football-team-kneels-during-national-anthem>
- [7] *The Guardian*, “Ruth Bader Ginsburg on Colin Kaepernick protest,” 2016. [Online]. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/oct/10/ruth-bader-ginsburg-colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest>
- [8] *Vanity Fair*, “Trump, Kaepernick and the NFL culture war,” 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/09/trump-kaepernick-and-the-nfl-culture-war>
- [9] Rise to Win, “Women athletes and sports moments that changed society,” 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://risetowin.org/stories/2021/3-24/these-thirty-women-athletes-and-sports-moments-changed-society/index.html>
- [10] HowStuffWorks, “How 24-hour sports stations changed society,” [Online]. Available: <https://people.howstuffworks.com/culture-traditions/tv-and-culture/24-hour-sports-stations-changed-society.htm>
- [11] Surprise Sports, “Transformation of sports journalism,” [Online]. Available: <https://surprisesports.com/others/beyond-the-game-the-transformation-of-sports-journalism/>
- [12] SPORTFIVE, “Importance of social media for athletes,” [Online]. Available: <https://sportfive.com/beyond-the-match/insights/importance-social-media-for-athletes>
- [13] *The Atlantic*, “Why the NFL is protesting,” 2017. [Online]. Available: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/09/why-the-nfl-is-protesting/540927/>
- [14] Wikipedia, “Athlete activism in the United States,” [Online]. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athlete_activism_in_the_United_States
- [15] Bloomsbury, *Social Justice and the Modern Athlete*, [Online]. Available: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/social-justice-and-the-modern-athlete-9781978756939/>
- [16] ResearchGate, “Changing the paradigm of traditional journalism to digital journalism,” 2023. [Online]. Available: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371579789>
- [17] University of Nebraska, “Digital journalism thesis,” [Online]. Available: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1105&context=honorsthesis>
- [18] OpenLearn, “A brief history of athlete activism,” [Online]. Available: <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/health-sports-psychology/shut-and-play-brief-history-athlete-activism>
- [19] *Glamour*, “Naomi Osaka takes a break from tennis,” [Online]. Available: <https://www.glamour.com/story/naomi-osaka-just-announced-that-shes-taking-a-break-from-tennis-for-a-while>
- [20] PPIHMS, “Simone Biles and mental health advocacy,” [Online]. Available: <https://ppihms.org/newspost/simone-biles-an-unexpected-advocate-for-mental-health/>
- [21] Oxford Academic, “Athlete activism research chapter,” [Online]. Available: <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/59763/chapter-abstract/508602631>
- [22] Taylor & Francis, “Sports activism research article,” 2025. [Online]. Available:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14413523.2025.2514864>

- [23] *The Hindu*, “Why We Kneel, How We Rise review,” [Online]. Available: <https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-reviews/why-we-kneel-how-we-rise-review-voice-against-discrimination/article37823164.ece>
- [24] Harvard Business Review, “Athletes and mental health at work,” 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://hbr.org/2021/09/athletes-are-shifting-the-narrative-around-mental-health-at-work>
- [25] SAGE Journals, “Athlete activism study,” 2023. [Online]. Available: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/15226379231222732>
- [26] Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Colin Kaepernick biography,” [Online]. Available: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Colin-Kaepernick>
- [27] Taylor & Francis, “Sports activism research,” 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17430437.2021.1970138>
- [28] History.com, “Kaepernick kneels during national anthem,” [Online]. Available: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/august-26/colin-kaepernick-kneels-during-national-anthem>
- [29] ESPN, “Kaepernick social media growth,” [Online]. Available: https://www.espn.in/nfl/story/_/id/17505052
- [30] World Economic Forum, “Athlete activism and equality,” 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2022/08/sports-athletes-activism-equality-diversity/>
- [31] OAPEN Library, “Sports and society publication,” [Online]. Available: <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/58744/9781780935577.pdf>
- [32] Olympics, “Dutee Chand profile,” [Online]. Available: <https://www.olympics.com/en/athletes/dutee-chand>