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## An Analysis of Sports Talk Radio's Effect On Social Issues

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# An Analysis of Sports Talk Radio's Effect On Social Issues

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*Professional athletes are becoming more vocal about their stances on different social issues like Black Lives Matter, MeToo and more. The researchers chose to investigate the effects that sports talk radio has on listeners perceptions of different social issues. Participants of the study hailed from a Lutheran, faith-based institution of higher education in an urban area of the Midwestern United States. The study thoroughly addressed the relationship between consumers of sports talk radio and their opinions on professional athletes addressing social issues.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In today's society there are many social and civil issues still being fought for, with a number of movements bringing attention to them in the hopes of creating real change. Black Lives Matter, MeToo, athletes kneeling during the national anthem, and gun control are only a few of the many crucial and influential movements occurring today in America. These movements are spreading across the country rapidly and are found in all facets of news and media. Because there are so many different outlets for people to retrieve their news today, it is common for citizens to get false or highly biased information. If someone has a strong opinion about a subject or event, it is easy to find a news or social media source that will provide them with "news" that only backs up their way of thinking rather than provide an abstract amount of accurate information. There are many directions that this type of communication can lead, and how someone gets their news and information can affect their opinions and views.

Over the past few years athletes have become more open to the public with their opinions and views on the many social and civil issues going on in America. Colin Kaepernick started the movement throughout the NFL of kneeling during the national anthem to bring social injustice and systematic oppression to viewers' attention. Colin Kaepernick, Eric Reid and

many NFL players as well as athletes in other sports have spoken publicly about both the act of kneeling during the national anthem as well as why they do or do not participate. LeBron James of the L.A. Lakers has also spoken out regarding social injustice in the United States and has called out many political figures on social media (Witz, 2014). Athletes discussing these social and political issues has led to many Sports talk radio and podcast shows making it a point to touch on these hot topics occurring today not only as it relates to athletes but even expanding on the conversations for their listeners. These discussions cause an increase in the non-sports related news being discussed on these stations. When listeners tune in to their local or national sports talk radio station, there is an assumption that they are expecting mostly sports talk to occur; when these outside topics come up, the listeners moods and opinions regarding the station or the issues can potentially be affected.

This study looked into how these social and civil issues being discussed on different sports talk radio shows affect the views of these topics with the listeners. It focused on frequent listeners to sports talk radio programs, their views on recent social and civil issues and their opinions as those stations discuss these topics. Do listeners opinions about the station or program change? Do their views on those issues change at all? This study is designed to examine this topic and help answer the question, How does sports radio coverage of current social issues impact consumers' perception of social and civil issues?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Athletes from around the world are, more than ever, willing to take a stand for a political or social movement (Thomas, 2018). Sports talk radio allows show hosts, the general public, and even athletes themselves to comment on the social and political issues of the day. The open format of sports talk radio allows for many diverse opinions regarding athletes and their desire

to speak on social issues impacting their community. Sports talk radio and athletes have influence over their audiences; their increase of open dialogue of activism allows for their audience to make assumptions about these same athletes (Witz, 2014). “He (Lebron James) learned what it means to be a leader and he takes his leadership position seriously, I think that’s what leads him to do the things he’s done, which I think is great” (Witz, 2014). Sports talk radio has a large voice in the community of sports, and the way in which they cover current social issues impacts the way sports fans view athletes as well as the way athletes view media (Witz, 2014).

### **Sports Talk Radio**

Sports talk radio shows give fans the opportunities to share their own creative interpretation of sporting events (Zagacki & Grano, 2005). In Baton Rouge, Louisiana there is a sports talk radio show that discusses the Louisiana State University (LSU) “Fighting Tigers”. The show allows its listeners to share their thoughts on events as well as to cope with moments of perceived crisis when these teams lose. The listeners solidified their identity with the Fighting Tigers as tied to pride and the values of work, race and masculinity (Zagacki & Grano, 2005). The International Communication Association looked into how sports fans both identify with their teams but also how they communicate that through their sports talk radio stations (Tillery & Agne, 2011). Tillery & Agne previously had indicated that most sports fans had either a ‘low connection’ or were ‘highly connected’ to their sports teams. The International Communication Association (2011) found however that there was more to sports fans behavior than a high or low connection status. Sports fans reacted emotionally and differently to every win and loss. These fans refer to their teams as ‘us’ and ‘we’ when referencing how the team was performing and what the team should do to improve.

The increase of sports radio shows in the United States has allowed for dynamic conversations to transcend sports through an open public space where the ideas and attitudes of ordinary people matter. "Sports talk radio plays a central role in producing the uniformity in style of expression, of opinion, of team support" (Goldberg, 1998, p. 14). Goldberg suggests that the popularity of sports talk radio aligns with the social climate of the world, and a space for conversations that move beyond the sports arena. Entercom, which owns KFXX, says that 11 million people listen to its 40 sports radio stations every week, 71 percent of which is male. ESPN radio says that between 80 and 90 percent of the audience is male. This data shows us that mostly all men listen to sports radio which could be the reason there are more men in the industry than women (Tillery & Agne, 2011).

### **Sex and Gender**

Sports talk radio shows allow for listeners to engage in conversations with peers about different teams that they feel connected to like "guys in a locker room". A study concluded that sports talk radio shows are a potential platform to invoke change to gender relationships and identities, while also reinforcing some forms of traditional masculinity (Nylund, 2004). Masculinity is perceived as toughness, aggressiveness, assertiveness and competitiveness. Sports talk radio shows enable male participants to support these gender stereotypes. As male fans called into LSU radio, they were prone to criticize the player's lack of aggressive characteristics while female callers were more nurturing and supportive in nature (Zagacki & Grano, 2005). The Jim Rome Show, a popular sports talk radio show, is known for its sexist and misogynistic references to women as "skanks" and "tramps" as well as prejudicial treatment of homosexuals. The study of the Jim Rome Show explained that men crave affiliation with other men. In their need for approval from other men in their peer groups, men will insult and

disrespect others outside of their group (Nylund, 2004). Men connect through sport talk radio as a form of bonding whereby they confront their loss of dominance in society to homosexuals and women. The central premise was whether Rome's radio program reinforced social inequality, homophobia and sexism thereby promoting male superiority and dominance (Nylund, 2004).

### **Social Issues**

Social issues span across many avenues when it comes to sports talk radio shows. The LSU Tigers sports talk radio show emphasized the over inspection and negative assumptions of African American student athletes. There were instances where professors at LSU unfairly assumed that these student athletes had nothing to contribute to classroom discussions (Zagacki & Grano, 2005). "Race, Class, and Crime" studied the disparity between African Americans in offending, victimization and sentencing (Hassett-Walker, 2012). This treatment of African Americans doesn't shy away from the sports arena. A direct controversy throughout the NBA was when former owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, Donald Sterling made racist remarks regarding the black athletes in the NBA (Witz, 2014). The Donald Sterling comments ignited the leadership quality of LeBron James in regard to be a voice for issues facing the Black community. Witz (2014) discussed the rise of social media and the impact that it has on star athletes like LeBron James to use their platforms to speak on issues facing their community.

Witz (2014) emphasized how moments like Donald Sterling's comments on black athletes in a majority black sport influence the way that big named athletes discuss social issues that affect them directly (Witz, 2014). Social media allows for this activism to continue through Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram where posts about Black Lives Matter are posted with clarity and the intention of spreading awareness of what the movement is really about (Clark, 2016). "Social movements like the Black Lives Matter movement develop because of

the role that social media eventually takes place in them” (Clark, 2016 p. 240). The increase of social media activism allowed the sports talks radio shows themselves to be involved in sports media activism. Sports media activism allows for social issues to be the forefront of the sports news world. (Forde & Wilson, 2017). This study emphasizes the lack of social issues researched in sports and the different ways that activism can be included in reporting of sports by the journalists as well as the athletes themselves. Forde and Wilson (2017) conclude that sports journalism has a large influence with the activism that athletes participate in, and there needs to be more of an emphasis on activism in media in order to normalize it.

## **Conclusion**

Sports Talk Radio has a large presence in media today; however, it has expanded from discussing not only sports but also relevant topics happening in the world today. Studies have shown that listeners feel these shows are a place they can not only listen but also call in and engage in conversation regarding any topics that are being discussed (Zagacki & Grano, 2005). With today's athletes taking a political and social stand and being a voice for others without one within their community, these topics are becoming more common on these sports talk radio shows. (Forde & Wilson, 2017). Social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Hands Up Don't Shoot, are expanding in today's society and bring forth the discussion that racism continues to be prominent and in dire need of being eliminated. Large numbers of athletes in the United States are African-Americans and are celebrated and loved by their fans. However, when these same athletes take a stand on social issues that affect their communities, the discussions on the radio shows begin to focus on those rather than the sports themselves. Thus, the researchers determined how does sports radio coverage of current social issues impact



consumers perception. The researchers hypothesize that sports radio coverage of current social issues does impact consumers' perceptions

## **RESEARCH QUESTION & HYPOTHESIS**

With the social and civil current events going on in the United States athletes are using their platform to express their opinions on these issues. Sports radio gives athletes the freedom to speak on and give their opinions and personal thought about important situation that are going on in our country today. Goldberg (1998) suggested that although there is an increase in young voices and diverse backgrounds in sports radio, the consumers are still white males that hold their beliefs higher than others.

*RQ1: How does sports radio coverage of current social issues impact consumers' perception of current social issues?*

H1: Researchers hypothesized that sports radio covering current social and civil issues does have an impact on consumers' perception.

This hypothesis suggests that hearing of athletes and sports talk radio hosts discussing social and civil issues can very easily influence the consumer to change their thoughts and opinions on the subject.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Participants*

Undergraduate students and faculty at a private faith-based university in the Midwest were asked to complete a survey via Survey Monkey. 2,734 students and faculty received the survey.

Participants were sent a link to a survey in their email. This was a cross sectional study, no further follow up occurred after the survey. The email gave a brief summary of what the participants could expect from the survey.

### *Procedures*

The researchers constructed the survey through the website Survey Monkey, the survey went live on October 12, 2018, and the link was emailed to faculty and students. The survey stayed open for 12 days and closed on October 24, 2018. The survey was self-administered, the questions were clear and specific, without any biased or negative language to influence the participants answers. The survey consisted of 15 questions, the first five questions inquired about the participant's gender, if they listen to any sports talk radio, which social media platform they follow athletes on, and the remaining 10 questions were formed using the Likert scale with the following options: strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, strongly disagree. The participants were asked questions regarding the types of sports radio broadcasts and podcasts they listen to, specific social issues and movements that they are aware of and if content regarding those social issues were discussed on the sports talk radio programs they consume and whether or not it has an effect on their personal perceptions on those issues. The coders used the data to form a chi-square analysis. The data from the surveys was used, and proved the null, suggesting there is no difference in consumer perception on these issues.

## **RESULTS**

The entire undergraduate student body and faculty of the University was surveyed, asking 15 questions to determine if there was any association between people listening to sports talk radio and their opinions being affected about current social issues. The researchers also

looked at the correlation between individuals who follow professional athletes on social media platforms and their opinions being affected about current social issues as well. Of the 2,734 number of undergraduate and faculty members that were sent the survey, 112 of those individuals participated, (a response rate of 4%). Of those, only one participant didn't complete the survey, giving the researchers 111 surveys to analyze.

To test the hypothesis the researchers looked at the results of what types of sports radio participants listened to, if any, and compared those results, using cross tabulation, with two other surveyed questions. 58 of the 111 participants surveyed (52%) said they do not listen to any of the listed types of sports radio out of the options listed, which were local sports talk radio, ESPN (national or local), sports podcasts, other or none. The first question the researchers compared with those results was whether participants thought professional athletes should speak out about politics, with 89% of those surveyed who don't listen to any sports radio agreeing that they should and 79% of those surveyed who do listen to sports radio also agreeing with the question. (See Figure 1). In a chi-square test of association ( $p=.746338$ ) there is not a significant relationship between attitudes of athletes expressing their ideas on social issues and the type of sports radio people engage in. These findings failed to reject the null hypothesis.

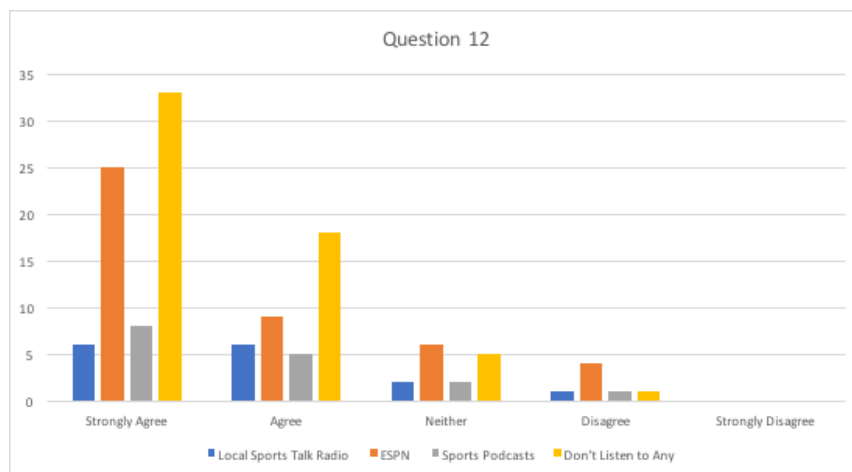


Figure 1

The second question that was analyzed was whether or not an athlete's opinion, on the social issues mentioned in the survey, affect the participants opinion of that athlete. This was again compared with the question about what types of sports radio the participants listened to. 51% of those surveyed who do listen to sports radio were found to agree with this question while 21% disagreed. Comparatively, 62% of those surveyed who do not listen to any sports radio agreed with the question, while 19% disagreed. (See Figure 2). In a chi-square test of association ( $p=.852839$ ) there is not a significant relationship between the type of sports radio people engage in and whether sports athletes speaking out about social issues affects people's opinions on those issues. These findings failed to reject the null hypothesis.

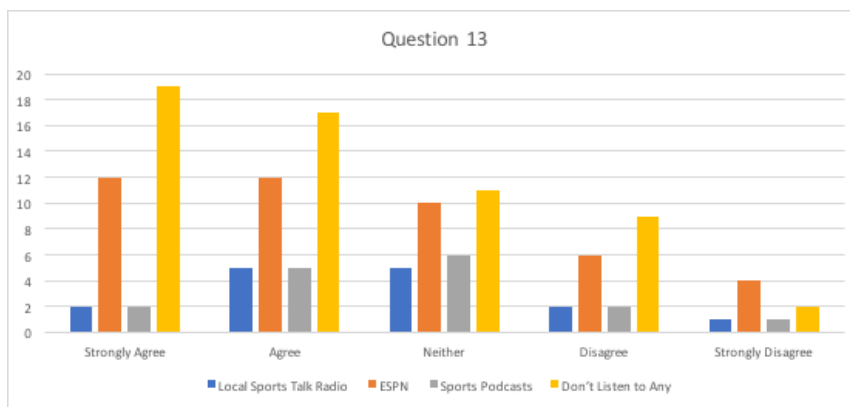


Figure 2

The researchers also found that the participants opinion on athletes was not affected by sports talk radio. The majority of those that participated in the survey were female at 75%, and of those female participants, 63% indicated they do not listen to any type of sports radio. Even though such a high percentage doesn't listen to sports radio or podcasts, 53% of the females surveyed do follow athletes on social media platforms, primarily on Instagram and Twitter. While only 25% of those that participated were males and 100% of those participants listen to some type of sports radio (primarily ESPN at 75%), the researchers found that 85% of the men also follow athletes on social media, again primarily on Twitter and Instagram. The number of

participants that agreed that athletes should voice their opinion on social issues was very similar between males and females, at 93% and 94% respectively.

The participants were asked about three specific social issues going on today, the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), NFL players kneeling during the National Anthem and the Me-Too/Times Up movements. The female participants were found to agree significantly more with these movements than males. Females agreed at a rate of 90% with both the Me-Too/Times Up movements as well as with the NFL players kneeling, and 93% with BLM. When it came to the NFL players kneeling, 60% of the male participants agreed with the movement, and 68% also agreed with BLM. However, when it came to the Me Too/Times Up movements, male participants agreed at 46.4% while 42% also said they remained neutral on the movement.

One question all participants were asked was if the sports radio station they are listening to discusses these issues, would they listen in to the discussion? 93% of male participants said they would listen to these discussions take place. While 78% of female participants also said they would, it is noted that 62.7% of those females also stated they do not listen to any type of sports radio. The last notable question was regarding whether those participants surveyed were as likely to listen to a female broadcaster as they are a male broadcaster. 79% of participants surveyed said that they would listen to a female broadcaster as much as a male broadcaster.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Cultural Studies Theory**

Cultural Studies Theory was initially developed gradually over the 1960's-1970's. Although there were contributions to cultural studies theory by many scholars, it is most associated with

Stuart Hall and his lifelong studies and research. Cultural studies theory was developed, understanding the processes through which societies and the diverse groups within them come to terms with history, community life, and the challenges of the future. Cultural studies examines the whole range of a culture with being prejudice towards a practice or institution. (Kellner, 1995)

Based on the data found in this study, cultural studies can show us how media culture manipulates and indoctrinates us. Cultural studies examine how sensitive people can be to power and domination in mediums such as television, film and radio. Cultural studies theory examines culture within the social relations and system through which culture is produced and consumed and that this study of culture is intimately bound up with the study of society, politics, and economics. Cultural studies examine how media culture changes the dominant values, political ideologies, and social developments and novelties of the era (Kellner, 2007, p. 6). The media contribute through educating consumers on how to behave, what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire as well as what not to. This theory suggests that although sports talk radio may not contribute as much as initially thought, media and social media does overall contribute to social issues, politics, and different trends in our world today.

In 1981 Gilbert Rodman wrote that it was time to begin rethinking the relationships structured between popular culture, politics and cultural studies. (Sender, Decherney 2016). This is evident in the research for this study as the participants were being asked not only about their media following, primarily sports talk radio, but also their views on political and social issues going on today. Sender and Decherney (2016) indicated that it was time to begin investing time into research between politics and pop culture which is exactly what this study has done. With politics becoming such a hot topic over the last few years, social and civil

movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), Me Too/Times Up, and NFL players kneeling during the national anthem have become so well-known and followed. A large part of the following of these movements has to do with media and the way that they discuss and represent the movements, the individuals taking part in them, and the politics behind them. The relationship between the media and their viewers or listeners can potentially create a bias regarding the politics going on, and this study was meant to dive into whether that bias occurs either positively or negatively through the medium of sports talk radio.

The data suggests that sports talk radio does not have a significant role in the participants opinions on athletes. This is suggested when looking at mass media communication and technology. “The different cultural practices created and transferred through the different media systems confront the countries in the world with several fundamental points for reflection and action” (Siljanovska, 2014, p.115). This is suggested in our research where the majority of those participated in the survey were female (75%) and of those participants 62.7% of those participants don’t listen to any type of sports radio, however, more than half of those participants follow professional athletes on social media platforms and strongly agreed that athletes should voice their political opinion. Sports talk radio may not have an absolute influence over the perception of athletes and their political opinion, but the culture of social media allows for our participants to acknowledge the social movements (BLM) as something relevant and necessary. “Media has a great influence in the formation of cultural memory and global transformation” (Siljanovska, 2014, p. 120). Siljanovska suggested that media has influence over the culture of the individuals that engage with it. Our participants engage with athletes through social media platforms, and that suggests the cultural shift from mainstream

sports media to the more personal social media Instagram and Twitter accounts which is due to the global shift in media.

Social media users are present on social media as a way to get information and become more aware of certain social issues going on in the world today; social media has become the new source for world news. "These dramatic changes require new theoretical and political responses to interpret our current social situation and to illuminate our contemporary problems, conflicts, challenges, and possibilities" (Kellner, 2007, p. 14). Today social media gives people the platform to make people laugh, to inform, and to make people aware of a situation. Kellner (2007) discussed how media junkies or techno freaks in today's world can be viewed as a type of hunter/gatherer when it comes to entertainment and information. This however can overload these individuals with such an overwhelming number of constant images and ideas, causing a challenge of excess "infotainment" to be processed. Through the survey, the researchers asked peers if they think professional athletes should voice their opinions on the social issues, 94% of women agreed and 93% of men agreed that professional athletes should voice their opinions on social issues. Although the research did not support the hypothesis that sports talk radio does have an impact on consumers perceptions, as the majority of the participants do not listen to any sports talk radio; it does appear to support the idea that social media has an impact as whole.

## **LIMITATIONS**

A limitation of this study is the sample size was too small, making it difficult to find significant relationships from the data. In addition to the small sample size, the researchers had limited participants and an uneven participant ratio by gender with only 24 male participants and 83 female participants along with a limited amount of time to retrieve data. Another limitation is that the research is based in the Midwest so it could be biased as it's not a scope of



the country as a whole. Research studies form the basis of our literature review and help lay a foundation for understanding the research problem that was investigated, however, there is a lack of research on the topic of sports talk radio which has limited the researcher's findings.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The results from this survey provide many avenues for future research to be done. To begin, the researchers suggest widening the participant range demographically, across different regions in the U.S. as well as in number to have more data overall to utilize. The researchers acknowledge that the popularity of some specific sports talk radio shows and podcasts in different regions of the country could potentially have a different impact on this study.

As the study was not able to conclude that there is an association between sports talk radio and consumers opinions about social issues, the researchers suggest a different avenue of research. Social media was found to be a more common tool used by consumers to follow social issues and athletes; future research could explore that through a qualitative study to determine in depth how consumers feel about different social issues and whether that determines their social media usage and following of celebrities and athletes.

Another area that future research could examine is the prevalence of sexism within sports broadcasting, both in radio and television. It has been found in some regions of the U.S. in previous research that discussions between male broadcasters and listeners of sports radio shows have been found to use sexist, derogatory language to describe and discuss women (Nylund, 2004). It could be researched to find the differences in consumer interaction to male and female broadcasters.

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