

More Than a Game: A Public Relations Guide to Managing Athlete Activism

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Abstract

This study examines best practices for managing athlete activism within sports organizations, focusing on the development of proactive strategies that support advocacy while maintaining stakeholder relationships and ensuring long-term sustainability. Through comprehensive analysis, the research identifies essential practices in policy development, corporate social responsibility (CSR), stakeholder engagement, crisis communication, and digital strategy management. A key outcome of this study is the creation of a Public Relations (PR) handbook designed to guide sports organizations in effectively navigating the complexities of athlete activism. This handbook serves as a practical tool, translating theoretical insights into actionable guidelines for practitioners. By integrating this artifact, the research bridges the gap between theory and practice, offering valuable resources for organizations aiming to align athlete advocacy with their broader mission and operational integrity.

Keywords: Athlete activism, sports organizations, public relations strategies, corporate social responsibility (CSR), crisis communication

Literature Review

Introduction: The Evolution and Impact of Athlete Activism

Athlete activism refers to the use of an athlete's platform to advocate for social, political, or economic change, often challenging dominant ideologies and influencing public discourse (Hartmann, 2024). While commonly associated with contemporary movements, athlete activism has a long and significant history, shaping cultural and institutional responses to social justice issues. The intersection of sports and advocacy has been evident for over a century, with athletes leveraging their visibility to push for systemic change (O'Neill et al., 2023). The tradition of athlete activism has evolved over time, shifting from direct protests and legal battles to digital advocacy campaigns, yet the fundamental goal remains the same: to use the power of sports to drive societal transformation (McDonald & Marshall, 2023).

The history of athlete activism is marked by defining moments that have shaped its trajectory. One of the earliest cases of organized athlete advocacy dates back to the early 20th century, when boxer Jack Johnson became a symbol of resistance against racial segregation, despite facing severe backlash and legal persecution (Steele, 2022). In the decades that followed, athletes like Jackie Robinson used their visibility to challenge systemic racism—Robinson not only broke Major League Baseball's color barrier in 1947, but also later advocated against segregation and voter suppression (Rampersad, 1997). Muhammad Ali became a global icon of resistance in the 1960s when he refused to be drafted into the Vietnam War, citing his religious beliefs and opposition to racial injustice—a move that cost him his boxing titles but made him a symbol of principled defiance (Hauser, 2012). Similarly, Bill Russell, while leading the Boston Celtics to championships, was a vocal civil rights advocate who marched with Dr. King, spoke against discrimination, and even boycotted games in protest of racism (Araton, 2011). In 1968,

Tommie Smith and John Carlos' Black Power salute during the Olympic medal ceremony became an enduring image of political resistance in sports (Hartmann, 2019). Around the same time, Billie Jean King emerged as a leader in the fight for gender equality, challenging pay disparities and advocating for women's rights in professional sports (Bass, 2023). In more recent decades, activism has expanded beyond racial and gender equality to include issues such as mental health awareness, LGBTQ+ rights, and labor rights for athletes (Chen & Kwak, 2023; Razack & Joseph, 2021).

The digital era has transformed athlete activism, allowing athletes to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and communicate directly with the public. Social media platforms have enabled figures like Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles to advocate for mental health, while others, such as Megan Rapinoe, have pushed for LGBTQ+ rights and equal pay (Razack & Joseph, 2021). At the same time, these platforms have exposed athletes to increased scrutiny, backlash, and potential career consequences for speaking out (Intravia et al., 2020). The rise of digital activism has forced sports organizations to reconsider their roles, prompting varied institutional responses—some leagues embracing advocacy while others impose restrictions to maintain a politically neutral stance (McDonald & Marshall, 2023).

Despite the growing presence of athlete activism, institutional resistance remains a key barrier as many sports organizations attempt to regulate or suppress advocacy. Some leagues have taken progressive approaches by integrating social justice into their operations, while others have faced backlash for limiting player expression. The tension between advocacy and institutional control remains central to understanding how sports organizations navigate activism today.

Given the increasing role of athlete activism in shaping public and institutional discourse, sports organizations must navigate this evolving landscape carefully. The purpose of this literature review is to examine the historical and contemporary dimensions of athlete activism, identify key challenges faced by activist athletes, analyze media and organizational responses, and explore the broader implications of athlete-led advocacy. This analysis will inform the development of a Public Relations (PR) handbook for sports organizations, providing a framework for supporting athlete activism while balancing stakeholder interests. By understanding the complexities of athlete advocacy, sports organizations can adopt strategies that align with both ethical considerations and long-term brand sustainability.

This research is also informed by Framing Theory, which explores how language, symbols, and structure shape the way information is interpreted by audiences (Entman, 1993). In the context of athlete activism, framing helps explain why similar actions—such as a protest or a celebratory gesture—can be received very differently depending on who performs them, how they are portrayed by the media, or whether they align with dominant cultural narratives. Understanding how media frames activism provides insight into public and institutional responses, and helps sports organizations anticipate or navigate reputational challenges related to athlete expression.

The WNBA's Commitment to Athlete Activism

The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) has established itself as a leader in athlete activism, integrating social justice initiatives into its organizational framework while providing unwavering support for player advocacy. Unlike other professional sports leagues that have historically discouraged political engagement, the WNBA has consistently taken an active role in addressing systemic inequalities, particularly those related to racial justice, LGBTQ+

rights, and gender equity (Antunovic et al., 2023; Leolita, 2024). One of the league's most defining moments came in July 2020, when the WNBA, in collaboration with the Women's National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA), launched the Social Justice Council. This initiative was designed to create a structured platform for advocacy, ensuring that player activism was not only encouraged but embedded into the league's operations (WNBA, 2020). The Council, spearheaded by players like Layshia Clarendon and A'ja Wilson, prioritized key issues such as voting rights, racial justice, and mental health awareness while working alongside social justice leaders like Alicia Garza, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement (Wilson, 2025).

The league's commitment to activism was further demonstrated during the 2020 season, which was explicitly dedicated to social justice. Players collectively supported the Say Her Name campaign, an initiative aimed at raising awareness of violence against Black women, particularly in response to the police killing of Breonna Taylor (Leolita, 2024). Throughout the season, players wore jerseys displaying "Say Her Name" and Taylor's name, while the phrase "Black Lives Matter" was prominently displayed on the courts (WNBA, 2020). Additionally, the WNBA Social Justice Council facilitated virtual roundtables and media discussions, providing players with a platform to engage in conversations on racial injustice, economic disparities, and political participation (Antunovic et al., 2023).

Beyond symbolic gestures, the WNBA's activism also extended into political engagement. A pivotal moment occurred when players took a public stand against then-Atlanta Dream co-owner and U.S. Senator Kelly Loeffler. After Loeffler openly criticized the league's support for the Black Lives Matter movement, players from multiple teams responded by wearing "Vote Warnock" T-shirts, endorsing her political opponent, Raphael Warnock, in the

Georgia Senate race (Greg.B, 2020). Their unified stance played a role in bringing national attention to the election, ultimately contributing to Warnock's victory. The WNBPA later issued a statement asserting that players "refuse to let our advocacy be silenced," demonstrating their collective power in influencing social and political change (Bluestein & Felicien, 2020).

The league has continued to prioritize social justice by embedding activism into its operational and branding strategies. The WNBA's website now includes a dedicated section for social justice initiatives, highlighting ongoing efforts such as educational programming, community outreach, and collaborations with grassroots organizations (WNBA, 2020). Moreover, the Commissioner's Cup, an annual in-season competition, has been utilized as a vehicle for advocacy, with portions of its proceeds directed toward organizations committed to racial justice and gender equity (Antunovic et al., 2023).

Through its unwavering commitment to advocacy, the WNBA has solidified its reputation as the most progressive sports league in terms of athlete activism. Unlike leagues that attempt to suppress or neutralize political expression, the WNBA has fostered an environment where players are empowered to use their voices for change. Media outlets such as *Harper's Bazaar* have described the league's activism as "unrelenting, strategic, and impactful," reinforcing the broader influence of its model on the sports industry and society at large (Wilson, 2025). By fully integrating activism into its culture, the WNBA has redefined the role of athletes as both competitors and changemakers, setting a precedent for other sports organizations to follow.

Colin Kaepernick, the NFL, and the Impact of Athlete Activism

Colin Kaepernick's protest against police brutality and racial injustice remains one of the most high-profile instances of athlete activism in modern sports history. In 2016, the then-San

San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick chose to kneel during the national anthem before games to draw attention to systemic racism and police violence against Black Americans. His actions sparked nationwide controversy, igniting debates over free speech, patriotism, and the role of politics in sports (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020). While Kaepernick initially explained his protest in interviews, stating, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color" (Peña, 2021, p. 194), the response from the National Football League (NFL), team owners, and the public was deeply divided.

Despite initially stating that players had the right to express themselves, the NFL's response to Kaepernick's protest shifted over time. The league and individual team owners distanced themselves from Kaepernick's activism, emphasizing a desire to keep politics separate from the game. By the following season, Kaepernick was not signed by any NFL team, leading to widespread allegations that he had been blackballed due to his activism rather than his performance on the field (Donahue, 2020). In 2017, he filed a grievance against the NFL, accusing team owners of collusion to keep him out of the league, a case that was later settled under undisclosed terms in 2019 (Scott, 2022). The league's handling of Kaepernick's protest became a defining moment in the intersection of sports, activism, and corporate politics, as the backlash against his advocacy—amplified by political figures such as then-President Donald Trump—framed his protest as unpatriotic and divisive (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020).

In a sharp contrast to the backlash against Colin Kaepernick's protest, several NFL players in 2024 and 2025 have adopted a celebratory gesture known as the "Trump dance," mimicking the former president's signature rally moves after making plays. For example, San Francisco 49ers player Nick Bosa, a known supporter of Trump, performed the dance during a nationally televised game, drawing attention and sparking widespread media coverage

(Widdicombe, 2024). Unlike its reaction to Kaepernick's kneeling, the NFL publicly stated it had "no issue" with players using the Trump dance as a form of celebration (Seifert, 2025). Trump himself responded positively, saying he was surprised but "honored" by the trend, offering no criticism of the athletes involved (Hollis, 2025). This drastically different response—both from the league and from Trump—highlights an inconsistency in how athlete expressions are treated depending on the political alignment of the message. While peaceful protests for racial justice were labeled divisive and met with professional consequences, celebrations that implicitly signal support for a political figure are embraced. This contrast reveals how power dynamics, media framing, and stakeholder interests continue to shape the boundaries of acceptable activism in professional sports.

The NFL's inconsistent messaging regarding player activism is further evident when we examine the racial justice protests of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd. Amid nationwide demonstrations, the league publicly altered its stance on activism. Commissioner Roger Goodell released a video statement in which he admitted that the NFL had been wrong in how it handled past protests, acknowledging the importance of addressing racial injustice (Scott, 2022). The NFL also launched the *Inspire Change* initiative, pledging \$250 million toward social justice causes, including education, criminal justice reform, and economic development for Black communities (Donahue, 2020). However, critics argued that these efforts were largely performative, as Kaepernick remained unsigned despite his continued interest in returning to professional football (Peña, 2021).

Media responses to Kaepernick's activism and the NFL's handling of the situation varied widely. Conservative outlets largely framed his protest as unpatriotic and disrespectful to the military, while progressive media sources emphasized the legitimacy of his cause and criticized

the NFL's suppression of his advocacy (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020). Social media also played a crucial role in amplifying Kaepernick's activism, with hashtags such as *#TakeAKnee* and *#IStandWithKap* generating global discussions on race and sports (Peña, 2021). At the same time, Kaepernick's protest inspired similar acts of resistance across other professional leagues, including the NBA and WNBA, further cementing his influence on the broader athlete activism movement.

While Kaepernick remains unsigned by an NFL team, his activism has had a lasting impact on sports and advocacy. His actions helped normalize athlete activism, encouraging more players to speak out on social issues without facing the same level of professional risk. The *Inspire Change* initiative and the NFL's evolving stance on activism reflect a shift in how major sports organizations engage with social justice causes, even if critics argue that these changes are more symbolic than substantive (Donahue, 2020). Kaepernick has continued his advocacy outside of football, launching the *Know Your Rights Camp*, an organization dedicated to educating marginalized communities on their rights and empowering young people to challenge racial injustice (Scott, 2022).

Ultimately, Colin Kaepernick's protest and the NFL's responses to him versus other players illustrate the complexities of athlete activism within professional sports. While Kaepernick's career suffered as a result of his advocacy, his influence on the discourse surrounding social justice in sports has been profound. The NFL's eventual acknowledgment of racial injustice, though arguably insufficient, marks a shift in how leagues engage with activism. This case study highlights the ongoing tension between corporate interests, athlete autonomy, and the evolving role of sports as a platform for social change.

LeBron James and the NBA's Support for Athlete Activism

LeBron James has been one of the most vocal and influential athlete activists of the modern era, using his platform to address racial injustice, voting rights, and social equity. Throughout his career, James has engaged in activism through philanthropy, public statements, and grassroots initiatives, influencing both public discourse and institutional responses from the National Basketball Association (NBA). Unlike other leagues that have attempted to distance themselves from athlete advocacy, the NBA has taken a proactive stance in supporting social justice efforts, collaborating with players to amplify their voices and integrate activism into league operations (Blackistone, 2023).

One of James' most significant initiatives is *More Than a Vote*, a nonprofit organization he launched in 2020 in response to voter suppression efforts disproportionately affecting Black communities. The initiative focused on mobilizing poll workers, increasing voter registration, and combating misinformation about voting rights. Through partnerships with community organizations and fellow athletes, *More Than a Vote* recruited more than 10,000 poll workers and helped open NBA arenas as polling places during the 2020 U.S. presidential election (Boren, 2020). The NBA played an instrumental role in supporting this initiative, working with players and the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) to facilitate voter engagement campaigns. Unlike leagues such as the NFL, which initially distanced itself from activism, the NBA aligned itself with players' advocacy efforts, reinforcing a collaborative approach rather than a restrictive one (Thornton, 2020).

James has also been outspoken on issues of racial injustice and police violence, often using his media presence to demand accountability. Following the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, James led efforts within the NBA to keep the focus on social justice. During the 2020 NBA season restart in the COVID-19 bubble, he and other players pushed for the league to

allow social justice messages on jerseys and to dedicate resources to racial justice initiatives (Wilson, 2025). The NBA responded by working with players to implement programs such as the *NBA Foundation*, a league-wide initiative launched with a \$300 million commitment to support economic empowerment in Black communities (Golliver, 2020a). This marked a significant departure from traditional corporate sponsorships, demonstrating how the NBA integrated athlete activism into its broader corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy.

James has frequently used press conferences, social media, and high-profile interviews to challenge political leaders and advocate for systemic change. His public criticism of former President Donald Trump and other political figures who dismissed athlete activism further solidified his role as a leading voice in sports advocacy (Golliver, 2020a). The NBA, in contrast to leagues that penalized players for political statements, has largely supported player expression. Commissioner Adam Silver acknowledged the importance of activism within the league, stating, "The NBA has a long history of being a league that fosters not just competition, but conversation, and we support our players in their efforts to address social change" (Wilson, 2025).

However, the NBA's approach to activism has not been without controversy. While the league has openly supported domestic activism efforts, it has faced criticism for its selective approach to global human rights issues. The NBA encountered significant backlash in 2019 when then-Houston Rockets general manager Daryl Morey tweeted in support of Hong Kong protestors, leading to strained relations with China. The league's initial response was widely seen as an attempt to distance itself from the controversy in order to preserve business interests in the Chinese market. Critics argued that while the NBA was supportive of activism in the U.S., financial incentives influenced its hesitance to address international human rights concerns

(Golliver, 2020b). This illustrates the complexities of athlete activism within corporate sports structures, where financial and political considerations shape the boundaries of advocacy.

Ultimately, James' activism and the NBA's response highlight how leagues can effectively support athlete-led advocacy without alienating stakeholders. By actively working with players to implement social justice initiatives, the NBA has positioned itself as a model for leagues seeking to navigate the intersection of sports and activism. The case of LeBron James underscores the power of athlete advocacy when paired with institutional support, demonstrating how sports organizations can play a meaningful role in advancing social change.

International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Athlete Activism

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has historically maintained a stance of political neutrality, primarily enforced through Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, which prohibits athletes from engaging in political, religious, or racial demonstrations during the Olympic Games. The IOC asserts that this rule is meant to preserve the apolitical nature of the Games, but it has increasingly come under scrutiny for restricting athletes' rights to free expression, particularly regarding human rights and racial justice issues (Modi, 2023). Scholars argue that Rule 50 functions as a systemic barrier to racial justice, disproportionately affecting athletes from marginalized backgrounds who seek to use their platform for advocacy (Kluch et al., 2024). This ongoing debate raises questions about whether the IOC's policies genuinely uphold neutrality or serve to suppress activism under the guise of maintaining order in global sports.

One of the most well-known instances of athlete activism at the Olympics occurred during the 1968 Mexico City Games when American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in a Black Power salute during their medal ceremony. Their silent protest against racial injustice led to immediate backlash, including their expulsion from the Olympic Village

and long-term professional consequences (Hartmann, 2003). The IOC framed the protest as a violation of the Games' political neutrality, a stance that set the precedent for future restrictions on athlete demonstrations (Blutstein, 2021). However, many scholars contend that the IOC's harsh response exposed inconsistencies in its enforcement of neutrality, as other forms of political expression—such as nationalistic symbolism—were allowed to persist without punishment (James & Osborn, 2024).

More recently, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics reignited debates over athlete activism, particularly regarding the IOC's selective enforcement of Rule 50. Leading up to the Games, the IOC banned Black Lives Matter (BLM) apparel, stating that such expressions violated its neutrality policies (Anyanwu, 2021). However, in response to mounting global pressure, the IOC later revised its stance, permitting athletes to make gestures of solidarity before competitions but not during medal ceremonies (James et al., 2024). This shift demonstrated an evolving, albeit still restrictive, approach to athlete advocacy, revealing tensions between the IOC's governance model and modern expectations of social responsibility in sports.

The controversy surrounding Rule 50 has sparked legal and ethical debates regarding freedom of expression in international sporting events. Legal scholars have increasingly questioned whether the rule violates fundamental human rights principles, particularly regarding athletes' freedom of speech (Boillet et al., 2024). Critics argue that Rule 50 disproportionately silences marginalized athletes while allowing Olympic sponsors and host nations to engage in overt political messaging through branding and national representation (Modi, 2023). The contradiction between restricting athlete activism while permitting corporate and governmental political influence has led to growing calls for reform. Some have suggested that Rule 50 should

be restructured to allow for non-disruptive forms of protest, particularly on issues of human rights and racial justice (James & Osborn, 2024).

Unlike the NBA and WNBA, which have actively supported athlete activism, the IOC has largely maintained a conservative approach, prioritizing uniformity and neutrality over individual expression (Leolita, 2024). While the NFL initially resisted athlete activism, it has since adapted its policies following public and athlete pressure, demonstrating a capacity for institutional change (Donahue, 2020). In contrast, the IOC continues to enforce strict limitations, positioning itself as one of the more rigid sports organizations regarding political and social advocacy.

The controversy surrounding Rule 50 illustrates the evolving role of sports as a platform for social change. While the IOC has made slight adjustments to its policies, its overall stance remains largely resistant to athlete activism. Moving forward, continued advocacy from athletes, human rights organizations, and legal scholars may push the IOC toward more inclusive policies. The broader question remains: Can a global sporting event that prides itself on unity and diversity truly remain apolitical, or must it evolve to accommodate the changing landscape of athlete advocacy? By examining the history of Olympic athlete activism, the enforcement of Rule 50, and the legal critiques of the IOC's policies, this case study provides a comprehensive look at how global sports governance interacts with social movements. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing best practices that balance the interests of athletes, organizations, and the broader sporting community.

Best Practices for Managing Athlete Activism in Sports Organizations

Effectively managing athlete activism requires sports organizations to implement proactive strategies that support advocacy while maintaining stakeholder relationships and

long-term sustainability. Organizations that fail to develop structured approaches risk inconsistent messaging, reputational damage, and internal discord. This section outlines essential best practices for handling athlete activism through strategic policy development, corporate social responsibility (CSR), stakeholder engagement, crisis communication, and digital strategy management.

A key element of managing athlete activism is establishing clear policies and internal guidelines that ensure consistency in decision-making. Without formalized policies, organizations risk reactive approaches that lead to backlash or perceived hypocrisy. These policies should define permissible forms of activism in official team settings, clarify the organization's stance on social issues, and outline protocols for addressing activism-related conflicts (Rentner & Burns, 2023). The NBA and WNBA have demonstrated progressive approaches by integrating social justice initiatives into league operations, while organizations like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) have imposed stricter regulations, such as Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, to limit political demonstrations (Kluch et al., 2024). Establishing transparent policies enables organizations to balance activism with operational integrity while ensuring athletes and stakeholders understand expectations.

Aligning CSR initiatives with athlete advocacy is another best practice that allows organizations to shift activism from controversy to opportunity. When integrated effectively, CSR strategies provide a structured way for organizations to support social causes and avoid reactive crisis management. This can include partnerships with athlete-led advocacy groups, sponsorships for social justice initiatives, and investments in community programs that reflect the organization's values (Paramio-Salcines et al., 2013). The WNBA's Social Justice Council exemplifies a strong CSR-driven approach, as it provides a formal mechanism for player

activism while ensuring alignment with the league's brand identity (Leolita, 2024). Transparency and accountability within CSR efforts are essential to prevent accusations of performative activism and ensure long-term credibility in social justice commitments.

Proactive stakeholder engagement is crucial when managing athlete activism, as advocacy efforts can affect relationships with sponsors, media, fans, and governing bodies. Organizations should engage in ongoing discussions with key stakeholders to prevent conflicts and align values. This includes collaborating with sponsors to establish shared positions on social issues, segmenting audiences to tailor messaging, and educating league officials and investors on the role of activism in brand sustainability (Cleland et al., 2024; Schartel Dunn & Nisbett, 2023). Open communication between athletes and executives also plays a vital role in ensuring alignment between player advocacy and organizational goals, fostering a culture of inclusion rather than division (Guenzi & Ruta, 2013). By actively managing these relationships, organizations can create a more stable and supportive environment for athlete activism.

Crisis communication preparedness is another critical component of managing athlete advocacy, as controversies can escalate quickly in the public sphere. Organizations should develop a rapid-response team to handle activism-related media inquiries and ensure messaging remains consistent and authentic (Austin & Jin, 2018). Pre-approved messaging frameworks allow organizations to address issues quickly without appearing reactionary or insincere (Harker & Saffer, 2018). Training athletes in media engagement further helps align their advocacy efforts with organizational messaging, reducing risks of misinterpretation (Frederick & Pegoraro, 2023). Monitoring public sentiment through social media analytics enables organizations to assess the impact of activism-related discussions and adjust communication strategies accordingly (He, 2024). Examples such as Nike's support for Colin Kaepernick highlight how organizations can

use strategic messaging to reinforce their brand identity, while cases like the NFL's initial response to Kaepernick's protest illustrate the consequences of poor crisis management (Kitchin et al., 2020). Organizations must be prepared to respond with transparency and authenticity to maintain credibility and public trust.

Leveraging social media effectively is another essential strategy for managing athlete activism. Digital platforms provide athletes with direct access to audiences but also increase exposure to scrutiny, misinformation, and backlash. To mitigate risks, organizations should offer digital literacy training to help athletes navigate online discourse and maintain professionalism (Abeza & Sanderson, 2023). Official league and team social media accounts should be strategically used to amplify activism messages in a controlled manner that aligns with organizational values (Frederick & Pegoraro, 2023). Implementing rapid-response protocols for misinformation ensures that organizations can correct false narratives before they spread (Lee & Oh, 2023). By proactively shaping online discussions, organizations can enhance their reputation and foster more positive engagement with activist efforts (Knight et al., 2020).

Rather than viewing athlete activism as a challenge, sports organizations should recognize it as an opportunity to strengthen brand loyalty, enhance corporate responsibility, and contribute to meaningful social change. By implementing structured policies, aligning CSR initiatives with advocacy, engaging stakeholders proactively, preparing for crisis situations, and leveraging social media strategically, organizations can support athlete activism while ensuring long-term sustainability. These best practices ensure that athlete activism is integrated into the organization's broader mission, reinforcing the role of sports as a platform for social progress rather than a space constrained by outdated norms and reactionary PR strategies.

Conclusion and Research Gaps: Toward a Strategic PR Framework for Athlete Activism

Athlete activism has played a pivotal role in shaping both sports institutions and broader social justice movements. As examined throughout this literature review, sports organizations have struggled to navigate the balance between supporting athlete advocacy and maintaining business interests. The case studies of the WNBA, NFL, NBA, and IOC highlight different institutional approaches—ranging from the WNBA’s proactive support of activism to the IOC’s restrictive enforcement of Rule 50. While leagues such as the NBA have collaborated with athletes to implement social justice initiatives, others, like the NFL, have faced backlash for inconsistencies in their responses to activism, as seen in the handling of Colin Kaepernick’s protest. These case studies illustrate the complexities of athlete advocacy, underscoring the need for structured public relations (PR) strategies that allow organizations to manage activism effectively while fostering positive relationships with key stakeholders.

Despite the growing body of research on athlete activism, significant gaps remain in understanding how sports organizations can develop long-term strategies to integrate advocacy into their operations. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on historical examples of activism, media framing, and public reception, yet there is limited research on how organizational policies affect both brand reputation and athlete engagement over time. Furthermore, while corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are often leveraged in response to athlete advocacy, there is little empirical analysis on their effectiveness in mitigating backlash or fostering meaningful change. Additionally, many sports organizations lack standardized PR frameworks for handling activism, leading to inconsistent messaging and heightened reputational risks.

To address these research gaps and inform the development of a PR handbook for managing athlete activism, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How

can sports organizations develop proactive communication strategies that support athlete activism while maintaining brand integrity and stakeholder confidence? (2) What crisis communication frameworks are most effective in mitigating backlash while aligning with organizational values and athlete advocacy efforts? (3) How do corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives influence public and stakeholder perceptions of athlete activism, and what best practices can be applied across different sports organizations? By exploring these questions, this research will contribute to the development of a comprehensive PR handbook that provides structured, actionable strategies for sports organizations. The goal is to equip organizations with a proactive framework for crisis communication, stakeholder engagement, and CSR alignment, ensuring that athlete activism is not merely managed reactively but integrated into long-term organizational strategies.

Methodology

This study employs a thematic analysis approach to examine how sports organizations manage athlete activism through public relations (PR) strategies, corporate social responsibility (CSR), crisis communication, and stakeholder engagement. The research process begins with a comprehensive review of scholarly sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports that discuss athlete activism, organizational crisis communication, CSR initiatives, and the intersection of sports and social justice. This literature informs the historical and contemporary context of athlete advocacy, offering insights into how different organizations have approached activism-related challenges. The case studies of the WNBA, NFL, NBA, and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) serve as focal points for analysis, as these organizations have taken varying stances on athlete activism, from proactive support to restrictive policies. By

comparing these responses, this study identifies key factors that influence an organization's approach to managing athlete advocacy.

By analyzing existing case studies, organizational statements, press releases, media coverage, and scholarly literature, this research identifies patterns in institutional responses to athlete activism and assesses the effectiveness of different management strategies. This analysis was guided by both Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Framing Theory, which helped examine how organizations and media constructed narratives around athlete activism and influenced public perception.

Organizational websites were reviewed to gather supporting materials such as press releases, campaign descriptions, and official statements. Each sports organization examined in the case studies—the WNBA, NFL, NBA, and IOC—maintains public-facing platforms that offer direct insight into their advocacy, crisis responses, and stakeholder engagement strategies. These sites were accessed to identify materials that aligned with the key themes of the study, including corporate social responsibility (CSR), stakeholder communication, and crisis response.

Sources were selected based on their relevance to the research questions and their connection to athlete activism-related events or policies, ensuring that the data reflected how each organization publicly positions itself in relation to advocacy efforts. The goal is to synthesize best practices that can be applied to the development of a PR handbook for sports organizations, providing structured guidance on supporting athlete advocacy while maintaining brand integrity.

By integrating insights from academic literature, case studies, and institutional responses, this research provides a practical foundation for the development of a PR handbook. This handbook will offer structured recommendations for sports organizations, including proactive

communication strategies, CSR alignment, crisis response planning, and digital engagement best practices. The ultimate objective is to equip sports organizations with the tools necessary to navigate athlete activism effectively while fostering a culture of inclusivity, advocacy, and brand sustainability.

Findings

In the evolving landscape of sports, athlete activism has become increasingly prominent, prompting sports organizations to reassess their roles and responsibilities. This study investigates strategies that sports organizations can employ to effectively manage athlete activism while preserving brand integrity and maintaining stakeholder confidence. The research focuses on three primary questions:

1. How can sports organizations develop proactive communication strategies that support athlete activism while maintaining brand integrity and stakeholder confidence?
2. What crisis communication frameworks are most effective in mitigating backlash while aligning with organizational values and athlete advocacy efforts?
3. How do corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives influence public and stakeholder perceptions of athlete activism, and what best practices can be applied across different sports organizations?

The study's findings reveal that integrating athlete activism into an organization's core identity enhances brand authenticity and stakeholder trust. Effective crisis communication frameworks, particularly those emphasizing ethical communication and organizational learning, are crucial in mitigating backlash. Moreover, authentic CSR initiatives that align with societal issues positively influence public and stakeholder perceptions of athlete activism.

Sports organizations employ proactive communication strategies to support athlete activism while maintaining brand integrity and stakeholder confidence. Research indicates that integrating athlete advocacy into corporate messaging fosters alignment between organizational values and public engagement (Antunovic et al., 2023). Social media plays a crucial role in shaping narratives, as evidenced by WNBA teams' strategic social media advocacy efforts (Abeza & Sanderson, 2023). Organizations that establish clear messaging frameworks and engage in early dialogue with athletes about activism-related policies mitigate risks of reputational damage while reinforcing their commitment to social responsibility (Austin & Jin, 2018). Moreover, findings highlight that internal education on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within sports organizations enhances preparedness in addressing athlete-led social justice initiatives (Cleland et al., 2024).

Sports organizations employ proactive communication strategies to support athlete activism while maintaining brand integrity and stakeholder confidence. Research indicates that integrating athlete advocacy into corporate messaging fosters alignment between organizational values and public engagement (Antunovic et al., 2023). Social media plays a crucial role in shaping narratives, as evidenced by WNBA teams' strategic social media advocacy efforts (Abeza & Sanderson, 2023). Organizations that establish clear messaging frameworks and engage in early dialogue with athletes about activism-related policies mitigate risks of reputational damage while reinforcing their commitment to social responsibility (Austin & Jin, 2018). Moreover, findings highlight that internal education on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within sports organizations enhances preparedness in addressing athlete-led social justice initiatives (Cleland et al., 2024).

Effective crisis communication frameworks mitigate backlash while maintaining alignment with athlete advocacy efforts and organizational values. Studies suggest that transparency, authenticity, and timely response strategies are critical elements in crisis mitigation (Seeger & Sellnow, 2019). The NFL's shifting response to Colin Kaepernick's protests underscores the importance of evolving crisis communication strategies that acknowledge social movements rather than dismiss them (Donahue, 2020). Research supports the use of situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) to guide responses, recommending that organizations adopt accommodative stances—expressing support for athletes rather than attempting to suppress activism (Harker & Saffer, 2018). SCCT suggests that organizations should align their response strategies with the nature of the crisis and the level of responsibility attributed to them. SCCT helped inform how the responses of leagues like the NFL, NBA, and IOC were interpreted in terms of effectiveness, authenticity, and alignment with stakeholder expectations. Additionally, strategic partnerships with advocacy groups and athlete influencers contribute to public trust and reinforce positive brand perception during crises (Frederick & Pegoraro, 2023).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives significantly impact public and stakeholder perceptions of athlete activism. Findings reveal that sports organizations with robust CSR programs experience greater public support when athletes engage in advocacy (Paramio-Salcines et al., 2013). The NBA and WNBA's proactive CSR strategies, including the formation of social justice councils, have enhanced fan engagement and brand loyalty (WNBA, 2020; Leolita, 2024). However, conflicting perspectives arise when CSR efforts appear performative rather than actionable, leading to skepticism among stakeholders (Cleland et al., 2024). Research highlights that consistency between CSR messaging and actual corporate

actions strengthens credibility, emphasizing that organizations must implement long-term commitments to social causes rather than reactive, one-time campaigns (Orlando, 2022).

While many organizations support athlete activism, some studies indicate resistance from key stakeholders, including sponsors and league officials, when activism is perceived as politically divisive (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020). The International Olympic Committee's (IOC) continued enforcement of Rule 50, which restricts athlete protests during the Olympics, demonstrates ongoing tensions between institutional control and individual advocacy rights (Boillet et al., 2024). Furthermore, fan perceptions vary based on sociopolitical factors, with research suggesting that demographic differences influence audience reception to athlete activism (Intravia et al., 2020). These findings indicate the need for sports organizations to tailor their strategies based on audience segmentation and cultural considerations.

Overall, the findings underscore the necessity for sports organizations to implement proactive, research-backed communication strategies that align with athlete advocacy efforts. The integration of CSR initiatives, transparency in crisis communication, and continuous stakeholder engagement are key to maintaining brand integrity while fostering social impact through athlete activism.

Discussion

These results indicate that sports organizations can no longer afford to treat activism as a peripheral issue. Instead, they must embed advocacy into their broader communication and CSR strategies. Organizations that fail to do so risk alienating key stakeholders, including athletes, fans, and sponsors. The WNBA's success in integrating activism into its identity serves as a model, demonstrating that sports leagues can take a firm stance on social justice while maintaining brand integrity and financial stability.

The study also underscores the necessity of crisis preparedness. Findings highlight that leagues adopting accommodative crisis communication strategies—those that acknowledge and support athlete advocacy—fare better than organizations that take a defensive or dismissive stance. The NFL’s eventual reversal on activism-related policies during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests suggests that leagues will inevitably have to address social issues, and those that proactively develop ethical and transparent crisis communication frameworks will be better positioned to do so.

Additionally, the role of CSR initiatives is particularly significant. CSR is not just a way to enhance an organization’s image but a crucial tool for aligning sports brands with societal values. However, performative CSR—statements or donations without sustained action—can backfire, leading to public skepticism. The NBA’s establishment of the NBA Foundation and the WNBA’s Social Justice Council illustrate how long-term investment in social causes strengthens public trust and organizational credibility.

Based on these findings, sports organizations should implement the following strategies:

1. Develop Clear and Consistent Policies – Establish formal guidelines for athlete activism that align with organizational values, ensuring consistency and transparency in decision-making.
2. Invest in Authentic CSR Initiatives – Move beyond performative activism by embedding long-term social justice commitments into corporate strategies, fostering credibility among stakeholders.
3. Enhance Crisis Preparedness – Create proactive crisis communication plans that prioritize ethical messaging, transparency, and rapid response mechanisms to mitigate backlash.

4. Leverage Social Media Strategically – Support athlete-led advocacy through controlled, organization-driven messaging that aligns with both brand identity and audience expectations.
5. Engage Stakeholders in Ongoing Dialogue – Establish open lines of communication with athletes, sponsors, and fans to ensure advocacy efforts are collaborative rather than reactive.

By doing so, they can transform athlete activism from a potential crisis into an opportunity for positive engagement and lasting impact.

Next Direction

Future research should delve into the long-term effects of institutional policies on athlete careers, brand loyalty, and league profitability. Understanding how leagues that integrate activism into their structures compare to those that suppress it is crucial for assessing impacts on financial stability, sponsorship retention, and fan engagement. Additionally, exploring the role of global sports organizations like FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in shaping activism policies internationally is essential. Investigating how activism policies differ between international and U.S.-based leagues, and identifying the cultural and political factors influencing these differences, can provide valuable insights. Furthermore, examining the evolution of social media's impact on activism discourse is vital. Researching how the rise of digital platforms has transformed interactions among athletes, leagues, and fans in activism debates will contribute to a comprehensive public relations framework for effectively managing athlete activism in a rapidly evolving media and political environment.

Another promising direction for future exploration involves the role of athlete-founded nonprofit organizations and foundations. While these efforts may not always be framed as

activism, they perform critical work in areas like youth education, social justice, and community development. These foundations often allow athletes to invest in deeply personal causes while still participating in broader league-approved campaigns. This dual-track model—combining personal foundations with public advocacy—offers a more comprehensive view of athlete engagement. Exploring how these private philanthropic efforts complement or contrast with organizational messaging could expand our understanding of how activism operates across multiple levels in sports communication.

Limitations

Reflecting on the limitations of this study on sports organizations' management of athlete activism, several key considerations emerge. Firstly, the research predominantly focuses on high-profile cases within major U.S. sports leagues, such as the NFL, NBA, and WNBA. While these examples provide valuable insights, they may not fully represent the diverse approaches to athlete activism management across different sports, levels of competition, or international contexts. Secondly, the study relies heavily on publicly available information, including media reports, press releases, and organizational statements. This reliance may limit the depth of understanding regarding internal decision-making processes within sports organizations, as internal communications and confidential deliberations were not accessible.

Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of athlete activism means that organizational responses can change over time. This study captures a specific timeframe, which may not account for recent developments or shifts in organizational strategies related to activism. Moreover, given the focus on U.S.-based sports organizations, the findings may not be directly applicable to organizations operating in different cultural or political environments. Attitudes toward activism and the appropriate organizational responses can vary significantly across

cultures, potentially limiting the generalizability of the conclusions. Lastly, while the study examines organizational policies and public responses, it does not extensively explore the perspectives of the athletes themselves. Understanding athletes' motivations, experiences, and perceptions of organizational support or suppression would provide a more comprehensive view of the dynamics at play. Acknowledging these limitations is crucial for contextualizing the findings and identifying areas for future research to develop a more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding athlete activism and organizational responses.

Conclusion

This study delved into the multifaceted realm of athlete activism, focusing on how sports organizations can effectively manage and support advocacy efforts while balancing stakeholder interests and ensuring long-term sustainability. By examining proactive strategies such as policy development, alignment with corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, stakeholder engagement, crisis communication, and digital strategy management, the research highlighted the necessity for organizations to establish clear guidelines that define permissible forms of activism within official settings. This clarity not only ensures consistent decision-making but also prevents reactive measures that could lead to reputational harm or internal discord.

The integration of athlete advocacy into CSR initiatives emerged as a pivotal approach, transforming potential controversies into opportunities for positive social impact. Organizations that align their missions with the causes championed by their athletes can foster a unified brand identity, as evidenced by leagues like the WNBA, which have effectively incorporated social justice initiatives into their operations. Furthermore, the study underscored the importance of proactive stakeholder engagement, emphasizing that open dialogues with sponsors, fans, and

governing bodies can preempt conflicts and cultivate authentic, long-term commitments to social issues.

In the digital age, the role of social media in shaping narratives around athlete activism cannot be overstated. The research highlighted that while digital platforms offer athletes direct channels to express their views, they also present challenges for organizations in managing public perception. Implementing structured social media strategies, providing digital literacy training for athletes, and maintaining consistent messaging across platforms are essential practices for organizations aiming to navigate the complexities of modern activism discourse effectively.

Building upon the insights from this study, a comprehensive Public Relations (PR) handbook is proposed to guide sports organizations in effectively managing athlete activism. This handbook will serve as a strategic resource, offering detailed frameworks and actionable guidelines to navigate the complexities of supporting athlete advocacy while maintaining organizational integrity and stakeholder trust.

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