

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Joshua I. Campista for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in Speech Communication, Speech Communication, and Political Science presented on June 4, 2021.

Title: The Effect of Affect: A Close Reading of LeBron James' Athlete Activism

Abstract approved:

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Trischa Goodnow

The purpose of this thesis is to argue that LeBron James' expressions of activism are, in many ways, perceived as insincere, hypocritical or disingenuous to his followers on the social media platform Twitter. Using the theoretical framework of Affect Theory and Plutchik's wheel of emotions, a close reading was conducted in order to find an interpretive answer to the argument presented. The results of this research found that, through the affect category of contempt and the notion of whataboutism, the perception of hypocrisy is confirmed by followers through the responses of LeBron James' online activism campaigns. The rhetorical implications of these findings suggest there may be a bandwagon effect regarding how LeBron James' expressions of activism are received by followers on social media platforms such as Twitter.

Keywords: LeBron James, Athlete Activism, Affect Theory, Twitter Responses, Whataboutism, Bandwagon Effect

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The Effect of Affect: A Close Reading of LeBron James' Athlete Activism

by  
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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Joshua I. Campista, Author

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

LeBron James has a long-standing history of incorporating activism in the realm of sport. After the murder of Trayvon Martin, LeBron James and his teammates of the Miami Heat posed in hoodies for a social media post with the hashtag #WeAreTrayvonMartin #Hoodies #Stereotyped #WeWantJustice (James, 2016). Additionally, in a sign of solidarity after Eric Garner was killed by police in 2015, LeBron James and teammate Kyrie Irving wore shirts during warmups with the phrase “I Can’t Breathe” (SI Wire, 2014). These examples show that LeBron James is not afraid to use his platform as an athlete to express messages of activism toward issues of social justice.

More recently, in January of 2018 LeBron James provided critical commentary of Donald Trump with Kevin Durant and Cari Champion on a segment of ‘Rolling with the Champion’. In this video, he criticized the Trump administration for both not understanding nor caring about the people he is to lead as president (Bryant, 2018). It is here that conservative news host, Laura Ingraham fired back at those comments with what is now known as the ‘shut up and dribble’ argument. Laura Ingraham made clear in this segment that LeBron’s argument was “barely intelligible,” “ungrammatical” and “ignorant” (Johnson, 2018). Laura Ingraham’s argument is essentially that LeBron James should stick to sports, even questioning LeBron’s high school education as a reason for the public to ignore his criticisms of the Trump administration. LeBron response came from an Instagram post with the message, ‘I am more than an athlete’ with the hashtag #wewillnotshutupanddribble (BarDown, 2018).

It is clear that LeBron James markets himself as an athlete activist, even making clear his presence on the social media platform Twitter, echoing the words of Martin Luther King Jr. saying “-Injustice Anywhere Is A Threat To Justice Everywhere- Our Lives Begin To End The Day We Become Silent About Things That Matter-” (James, 2018). However, one major criticism of LeBron James is how and when he chooses to express activism. One major example came on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019, when general manager of the Houston Rockets, Daryl Morey tweeted an image reading, “Fight for Freedom, Stand with Hong Kong” (Smith, 2019). The protests in Hong Kong are a result of an extradition bill introduced by the Chinese Communist Party, CCP. Even though Hong Kong is considered a democracy, this bill would in effect allow for the Chinese government to extradite the citizens of Hong Kong labeled as “criminal suspects”. Critics of this bill label it a threat to the democratic system of Hong Kong, and thus a threat to civil rights of its free citizens (BBC News, 2019).

Morey’s tweet ignited a firestorm within the league as China is a major partner of the NBA. After Morey tweeted his support against the CCP, suddenly the Rockets faced a slew of withdrawn sponsorships from China and Chinese state television pulling Rockets games from their schedule (Smith, 2019). It is clear that conformity to Morey’s tweet would escalate any and all financial ties to the CCP. Naturally, LeBron James was asked for comments on Morey’s tweet. Here, LeBron James expresses somewhat of a contradiction to his original sentiment by Martin Luther King Jr. regarding injustices everywhere. LeBron’s response was that Morey’s tweet was “misinformed or not really educated on the situation” (Cohen, 2019). LeBron’s response in this situation has fans

and critics pointing out a drastic contradiction to his previous expressions of activism (Anderson, 2020).

LeBron James has also faced criticisms for a lack of activism here in the U.S. In 2014, Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old African American boy, was shot and killed in Cleveland, Ohio, by a 26-year-old white police officer Timothy Loehmann. Making matters worse, the two officers tried for this crime were not indicted by a grand jury. As a Cleveland native, LeBron James faced pressure to speak out and protest the injustice of this outcome. A common hashtag that floated on social media was #NoJusticeNoLeBron, where fans urged LeBron James to sit out two games as a message to the two officers escaping accountability (Young, 2019). LeBron James did not participate in the movement and received criticisms from Samaria Rice, Tamir Rice's mother, as a result. Samaria says, "I think it's quite sad that LeBron hasn't spoken out about my son...I'm not asking him to sit out a game. I know his kids got to eat too, but you can at least put on a shirt or something" (Young, 2019). Samaria's words here point out one singular fact, the platforms of professional athlete's matter to their fans. What athletes choose to support and not support speaks volumes to their followers. For Samaria Rice, having some form of support from LeBron James would have gone a long way for her, while saying nothing spoke volumes.

While examining LeBron James' expressions of activism, along with the major criticism of said activism, a personal criticism points to the idea that LeBron James is disingenuous as an athlete activist. The purpose of this body of research is to argue that LeBron James' expressions of activism are, in many ways, perceived as insincere, hypocritical or disingenuous to his followers. In search of an interpretive answer to this

argument, this research aims to examine how fans receive LeBron James' expressions of athlete activism on the social media platform Twitter.

This research will be further organized in four major sections: a literature review, methodological approach, an analysis section, and an overall conclusion. The literature review section will examine the current conversation regarding racism in American politics and society, an overview of racism, equity, diversity, and justice in American sports, an overview of athlete activism by waves and types of expressions, and the impacts and consequences of athlete activism. The methodology section will provide an understanding of the qualitative criticism known as a close reading, an examination of affect theory as a lens for study, a taxonomy for emotions called Plutchik's wheel of emotions, and finally a proposition for research design. The analysis section will provide five artifacts for examination. For this body of research, the artifacts will be that of popular tweets by LeBron James containing the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and will examine the comment section of these five tweets. Each artifact will contain a contextual summary of each tweet, a summary of the data collected, and an overall analysis of those comments based on their affectual response. After reading this body of research, the reader should understand that fans often react to LeBron James expressions of activism with heavy criticism and charges of disingenuous intent.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This section will present a discussion surrounding the current literature of athlete activism and race in American society. There are four sections to this literature review. First, this discussion will contain elements of racism in American politics and society. Second, elements of racism, equity, diversity and justice in American sports will be discussed. Third, an explanation of waves and expressions of athlete activism. Fourth, the impacts and consequences of athlete activism. It is important to acknowledge that activism has many issues that it fights for, however for the purposes of this thesis there will only be a focus on race and activism.

### **Racism in American Politics and Society**

In order to understand athlete activism surrounding issues of racial injustice, first there needs to be a discussion of racism in American politics and society. Therefore, the following is an in-depth timeline highlighting racism and politics in this country. Tischauser (2012) provides a timeline of key legal events involving race in U.S. history. On April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1865, confederate general Robert E. Lee surrenders to the Northern territories, effectively ending the Civil War (Tischauser, 2012). On December 15<sup>th</sup>, the Thirteenth amendment was ratified by the United States congress which outlaws the practice of slavery “except as a punishment for crime” (p. 18). On July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1868, the fourteenth amendment was ratified by the United States congress which grants citizenship to all persons born within the US (Tischauser, 2012). On March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1870, the fifteenth amendment was ratified by the United States congress which declared that race could not be a factor preventing a US citizen from voting (Tischauser, 2012). On April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1873, the Supreme Court reduced voting protections granted by the fourteenth

amendment in what is commonly known as the *Slaughterhouse Cases*. This decision allowed states to deny voting rights to citizens based on race because the amendment can only be applied toward federal government actions, not state actions (Tischauser, 2012). On March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1875, congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which guaranteed equal rights to all US citizens irrespective of race (Tischauser, 2012). In March of 1881, the first Jim Crow law was passed in Tennessee, which allowed for the segregation of race on railroad cars (Tischauser, 2012). On October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1883, the Supreme Court ruled the Civil Rights Act of 1875 as unconstitutional (Tischauser, 2012). On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1890, the state constitutional convention of Mississippi approved the “Mississippi Plan,” which created literacy tests designed to restrict African Americans from voting (Tischauser, 2012). On May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1896, the Supreme Court ruled on the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case declaring that students in public schools can be separated based on race, in effect deeming Jim Crow laws constitutional (Tischauser, 2012). Ancillary to this timeline of racism and American politics, is a discussion on Jim Crow laws.

Jim Crow laws were originally structured in a way to segregate Americans by race in 26 states. Operating as a legal apparatus for separation, Jim Crow laws extended to virtually all forms of life. Where you can go to school, which neighborhoods you were allowed to live, what bathrooms you were allowed to use, restricted places of commerce, and even made illegal the choice of interracial marriage. Similar to the ideals premised around the secession of the American confederate south, which was the preservation of white supremacy and the enforcement of slavery, Jim Crow laws of segregation were designed to deny freedoms of equality based on race. In the book, *Jim Crow Laws* author Leslie Vincent Tischauser highlights what the primary goal was in exacting such laws for

racial segregation. To be specific “The goal of Jim Crow laws was to create a legal system that offered the same protections against Black ‘beastliness,’ that had been established by slave codes” (p. xii). Through this rationale of white deference and supremacy, and further embedding it in American policy, fundamentally positions racism as a primary function of American society.

### **Racism, Equity, Diversity, and Justice in American Sports**

It is important to discuss the relationship between Jim Crow laws and athletics, as state and local laws that enforced racial segregation played a large role in shaping the minds of the more prominent athlete activists of the Civil Rights era. In a study examining this relationship between integration and universities of the south, author Charles H. Martin (1993) seeks to address several important questions: (1) What were the dynamics of potential inter-racial competition between southern and northern colleges prior to the Brown decision? (2) What external and internal pressures were mobilized to prevent sports integration? (3) What social and political forces encouraged the abandonment of segregation? (4) What types of schools were willing to take the lead in breaking the color line? How important were university presidents in these decisions? (5) What were the characteristics of those athletes who served as 'racial pioneers'? (6) Were college athletic programs in the vanguard of social change in the South, or did sports serve the conservative function of reinforcing racial values which were under attack? (p. 69).

In response to the first question, Martin articulates that prior to the Brown v. Board of Education decision, the idea of integrated sports teams was one not easily accepted in the south. In fact, many of the Universities in the Southeastern Conference,



(SEC), were more willing to insist that opposing teams refrain from including Black players, in a so-called gentlemen's agreement. To be specific to this point with historical context "In December 1945...basketball coach Clair Bee withheld the two Black players on his Long Island University team from a game against the University of Tennessee, in deference to the visitors' racial sensitivities" (p. 70). This unwillingness to participate in integrated sports is one of the important themes of inter-racial competition between northern and southern universities.

Before the Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, wherein the fundamental principle that racial discrimination in public education is unconstitutional (*Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka et al.*, 1955), there existed internal and external pressures which prevent interracial collegiate participation. In the South, many Universities simply did not observe this notion of integrated teams by not recruiting Black players or allowing them to participate in collegiate sports (Martin, 1993). As mentioned before, even as Northern Universities allowed for the integration of Black athletes, when playing against Southern Universities often times Black players were asked to abstain from participation. To be specific to the reading "The first of many recurring incidents took place in December 1946, when the visiting University of Tennessee squad refused to take the floor for a scheduled basketball game against Duquesne University in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. The Volunteers demanded assurances that Charles Cooper, an African American and the top scorer for the home team, would not play" (p. 71).

With this ostensive refusal to integrate collegiate athletics, there were many social and political forces which served to encourage the abandonment of segregation. For

starters, the NCAA did not allow Southern white schools to select opponents in the post-season championship tournament. Meaning, if a nationally recognized team refused to participate on the grounds of interracial participation, they were essentially forfeiting the chance to compete for a national championship (Martin, 1993). Additionally, the student councils at the University of Nebraska and University of Kansas launched campaigns against the so called 'gentlemen's agreement' which discriminates against Black athletes. In May of 1946 "...conference representatives replaced the unwritten policy with a written guideline which now explicitly authorized a member institution playing at home to bar the use of Black athletes by opponents... Finally, in 1950, the conference relented and dropped the policy" (pp. 72-73). This ending of the rule allowed for Black athletes to make known their impact in sports like football, basketball and baseball. This era brought forth the talented players of Bill Russell, K.C. Jones, Walter Dukes, Si Green and Wilt Chamberlain, all of whom won considerable acclamation (Martin, 1993). Following the political ramifications of *Brown v. Board of Education*, a significant amount of pressure on southern universities was emphasized to change their discriminatory policies on integration (Martin, 1993). As an example, "Loyola University of New Orleans, a Jesuit institute, had dropped its opposition to playing against Black athletes after the *Brown* decision and had hosted the first integrated collegiate basketball game in the state in December 1954" (p. 74).

There were universities at this time more accepting of interracial participation in collegiate athletics, however those schools were programs that tended to be relatively smaller, independent colleges with ambitious goals in bettering their current athletic programs. Due to a lack of status, it is believed that their intentions were not for the

progress of race relations, but rather selfish endeavors for athletic success (Martin, 1993). To speak to this notion from the reading “During the late 1950s and early 1960s... small colleges saw the recruitment of Black prep stars as one means of upgrading their programs and winning championships, since they would not have to recruit against the 'big name' universities for such athletes” (p. 79).

College athletic programs in the South were ostensibly opposed toward social change. These institutions used collegiate sports to serve the conservative function of reinforcing racial values which were under duress through social reformation. In 1956, the University of Alabama basketball team found considerable success in their regular season achievements in the SEC. However, this team chose not to participate in the NCAA tournament. Similarly, in 1959 Mississippi State University found equal success by winning the SEC conference and also refusing to participate in the NCAA tournament. Auburn followed suit in 1960, and then Mississippi State again in 1961 and 1962 (Martin, 1993). To take this notion a step further, these decisions were supported by university officials despite seven of the Southwest Conference student body presidents issuing a resolution “...urging that 'capable athletes of all races' be admitted to members' athletic programs” (p. 78). Overall, a conglomeration of factors, over a significant period of time is what lead to the reformation of segregated collegiate sports. These changes are attributed to “...the changing student and faculty attitudes, complaints from the small but growing numbers of African-American students on campus, pressure from non-southern colleges, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and especially the desire to win more games ultimately combined to convince university administrators to abandon the color line in college sports” (pp. 83-84).

In discussion of the Jim Crow era of racial exclusion and sports, author Hasan Kwame Jeffries (2001) examines the African American alternative fields of play in order to qualify its impact. Using Georgia as a model for examination, mainly for its historical significance to early alternative leagues for Black athletes, Jeffries notes that some scholars believe this time to be the “nadir” of Black sports in terms of participatory status (Jeffries, 2001). This is where Jeffries disagrees with this notion, making clear that Black athletes in Georgia sought out ‘alternative fields of play’ in order to sustain viable outlets of athletic expression. Georgia represented the epicenter of this form of alternative play with the formation of the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SIAC) (Jeffries, 2001). This conference brought both quality of play and caliber of player to the front stage of collegiate sport. Shortly following, professional leagues of alternative play came to fruition, establishing the first professional leagues of sport for Black athletes in baseball, basketball and football. Jeffries emphasizes that the formation of these leagues created a discussion of meritocracy and integration of sport in the years to follow. Overall, Jeffries (2001) point of discussion with this research is to highlight how these alternative fields of play are “...indicative and reflective of the broader African American struggle against American racism” (p. 273).

In discussion of diversity, equity and inclusion in the realm of sport, it is hard to overlook the hallmark of gender equity legislation known as Title IX. Author Iram Valentin (1997) wrote a brief history of this legislation and its impact toward gender equity in sports. Enacted by Executive Order 11246, signed by President Lyndon Johnson, this act states that “[n]o person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination

under any educational programs or activity receiving federal financial assistance” (p. 123). This act extends to all institutions of learning, both public and private, from kindergarten to graduate school. The basis of discrimination considers the following “...admissions, recruitment, educational programs and activities, course offerings and access, counseling, financial aid, employment assistance, facilities and housing, health and insurance benefits and services, scholarships, and athletics” (p. 123). This act was a byproduct of the Civil Rights and feminist movements of the late 1950’s, 1960’s, and 1970’s (Valentin, 1997).

In 1988, congress passed the Civil Rights Restoration Act, which restored sanction liability for schools that receive federal education funding and discriminate on the basis of gender. With athletics being a major purview of said discriminatory behavior, institutions of higher learning are required to provide equal funding for sports programs, equitable across genders. Meaning simply, a school or university cannot spend more money on male athletics than it does on female athletics (Valentin, 1997). The U.S. Department of Education released a report in the 25 years following the enactment of Title IX in 1971, noting that participation of women in intercollegiate sports had increased fourfold (Valentin, 1997). Other notable findings of the report found that “In 1995, women made up 37 percent of athletes in college, compared to 15 percent in 1972. In 1996, girls constituted 39 percent of high school athletes, compared to 7.5 percent in 1971. Women won 19 Olympic medals in the 1996 summer Olympic Games—more than in any previous year’s Games” (p. 127). To summarize, the Title IX act of 1971 provided noticeable change in the way of tearing down institutional barriers on the basis of gender discrimination in the realm of sport.

## **Athlete Activism: Waves and Expressions**

Next, this literature review will include a section dedicated to athlete activism and its many forms and functions. Author George B. Cunningham (2019) highlights the work of Dr. Harry Edwards, who examines the evolution of activism and sports while typifying eras of activism through four distinct waves. The first wave existed from 1900-1945, and is defined as the era of legitimacy, which established the notion of a sports meritocracy (Cunningham, 2019). The second wave spanned from the first era into the 1960s wherein the dismantling of the Jim Crow era of sports segregation, gaining political access and the positioning of sports diversity was the primary focus (Cunningham, 2019). The third wave of sports activism extends into the 1970's where athletes focused on garnering more dignity and respect (Cunningham, 2019). Dr. Harry Edwards defines the fourth wave of athlete activism as the current era that we are living in today. Beginning in 2005, this era of athletes seeks to gain power through economic and technological capital (Cunningham, 2019). This evolution of activism defines its progress on these very issues, resulting in measurable change through an entire century.

The historical context of athlete activism can be understood through each of these distinct waves, however there are different types of activism expressed by athletes that also needs to be discussed. Researcher Joseph Cooper (2017) presents a typology of expressions that "...delineates different types of activist actions connected to sport

exhibited *by, through, and for* African American athletes, sport scholar activists, sport institutions, and/or entrepreneurs” (p. 2). This typology encompasses five categories of actions based on the intent of the action, while also highlighting relevant dimensions such as “...agency/consciousness, context (within or beyond sport or both), a radical view of race/racism as a motivating factor, presence of specific demands, time frame, and connections to broader social movements” (p. 2). Below is a table describing these five categories in more detail:

Type of activism (by, for, or through sport/athletes)	Intent of activist action	Level of agency/consciousness	Issue within sport or beyond sport	Radical view of race/racism as a motivating factor	Specific concrete demands	Four waves of Black athlete activism	Connections to broader social movements
Symbolic	Social awareness and structural change	Mid to high	Both	Radical	Varies	All four	Yes
Scholarly	Critical awareness, systems analysis, and policy reform	Mid to high	Both	Varies	Varies	All four	Yes
Grassroots	Broader social uplift via proximal impact	High	Beyond sport	Radical	Yes	All four	Yes
Sport-based	Specific rule or culture modification	Mid to high	Within sport	Varies	Yes	Second, third, and fourth	Varied
Economic	Fiscal empowerment	Mid to high	Both	Varies	Yes	All four	Varied

*Figure 1 African American Sport Activism Typology*

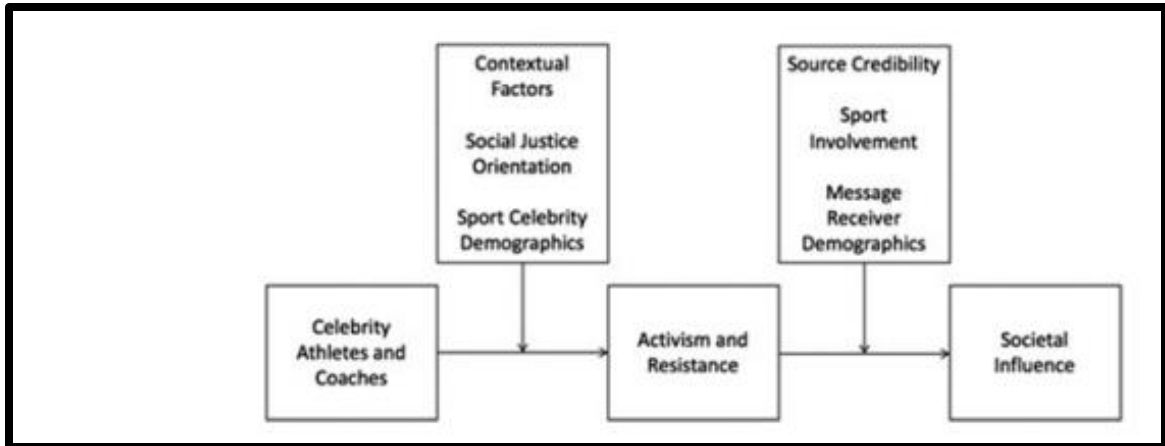
Symbolic activism is most often viewed as demonstrations of political protest. This type of activism demonstrates actions by athletes that are designed to create attention to a specific subject matter, often related to change in political, educational, economic, and social reform (Cooper, 2017). Scholarly activism is considered the transmission of ideas from one individual to another individual or group, with the aim of educating and enhancing understanding of oppressive hegemonic systems surrounding issues of social justice (Cooper, 2017). Scholarly activism is often seen through writings of experiences, i.e. memoirs, autobiographies, etc. These reflections of personal experience serve the function of connecting broader social movements and have persisted

through all four waves of athlete's activism (Cooper, 2017). Grassroots activism serves to counter-hegemonic systems through promoting lower-level activism, engaging individual relationships and within communities, pertaining to issues on a regional basis (Cooper, 2017). Next is sports based activism which "...refers to specific actions taken by athletes to alter and mitigate the hegemonic nature of structural arrangements, rules/policies/bylaws, and practices through sport organizations that serve to reinforce subordination, marginalization, and exploitation of certain groups" (p. 22). Finally, economic activism are actions premised around creating business in historically disadvantaged communities which stimulates empowerment through economic stability and financial mobility (Cooper, 2017). In conclusion, this body of research serves to provide context to the intent of athlete activism and its many forms.

Athlete activism can reach unique audiences and that is why it is important to understand the unique platform of the sports medium. Researcher George B. Cunningham (2019) claims that due to the celebrity status of coaches and athletes, these actors are often afforded a unique platform and opportunity to disrupt hegemonic structures and systems by challenging the status quo. To be specific "...because of sport's unique space in society, affecting all people irrespective of their fandom, it is different from other industries and serves as a unique site in which key individuals can resist cultural arrangements that serve to subjugate people from under-represented groups" (p. 3). Additionally, Cunningham furthers this claim by suggesting that "...the sport context, the social justice orientation and credibility of the coach or athlete, and the sport involvement of the message receiver all likely influence this process" (p. 3). The consumption of sport



thus leads to the inherent observance of activism, providing a degree of inimitable inclusion and diversity. Below is a model to the following claims posited by the authors:



*Figure 2 Activism and Resistance among Celebrity Athletes and Coaches*

Of course, contextual factors of diversity matter in the implementation of activism and resistance campaigns. Contained within the model are contextual factors that serve to moderate the relationship between celebrity status and the engagements of activism and resistance (Cunningham, 2019). In this model, Cunningham proposes that these activities are more likely to occur in a diversity and social justice supportive environment. Such a distinction is made clear between the organizations of the NFL and NBA, wherein protests by Colin Kaepernick are met with severe penalty, and protests by entire NBA teams are often celebrated. Another mediating factor for athletes and coaches engaging in activism are the demographics of these actors. To be specific to this relationship “...women and racial minorities are more likely than their male and White counterparts, respectively, to favor policies and procedures geared toward addressing previous injustices... instructors who were overweight or obese—characteristics that placed them in the social minority within the fitness industry—were strong champions of body

inclusiveness” (p. 8). What this pattern demonstrates is that these actors are more likely to participate in activism if they are from the specific under-represented groups of the activism campaign (Cunningham, 2019). In summary, Cunningham’s research seeks to understand the relationship between diversity, social justice and activism campaigns of athletes and coaches. This relationship is examined because the world of sports is considered a unique platform for message propagation because these actors can integrate their messages using their celebrity status as athletes. To be specific “...athlete demographics, their social justice orientation, and the context in which they operate are all likely to influence the relationship between celebrity status and activism and resistance” (pp. 12-13).

### **The Impacts and Consequences of Athlete Activism**

Furthering the discussion of contemporary forms of athlete activism is the realm of professional sports. In the book, *We Matter: Athletes and Activism*, author and former NBA player, Etan Thomas (2018), addresses critical issues of social justice across sporting arenas. The overall theme of this book is to articulate the collision of sports and politics, known as athlete activism, and why it is this pervasiveness of activism is important. In the first chapter titled, *The Children of the Movement*, Etan Thomas sits down with and interviews the brother of Trayvon Martin, daughter of Eric Garner, sister of Terence Crutcher and sister of Philando Castile. One theme that cuts across these interviews is the witnessing power granted to professional athletes and their platform. From the perspective of the family members of these victims of police brutality, it becomes clear that the recognition garnered by these athletes allows for them to force conversations on tough subjects. Even if the expressions of activism are more attention building rather than

action driving, the support provided to the families from this afforded attention makes a measurable difference toward the processing of grief. In this way, athlete activism matters because expressions provide support to the families of these victims.

It is important to note that athlete activism is not without consequence. The notion of consequence is quite prevalent in the conversation of athlete activism. In the Article titled, *Boos, Bans, and other Backlash: The Consequences of Being an Activist Athlete*, Peter Kaufman (2008) examines the negative consequences that athlete activists incur through their expressions of activism. What becomes clear from the conclusions presented in this writing, is that the realm of sport holds an unbridled sense of national identity and patriotism (Kaufman, 2008). When athletes engage in activism that challenges hegemonic systems, they are often met with significant criticisms from fans, coaches, and the institutions or organizations they play for. Notable athlete activists include Muhammed Ali, Toni Smith, Deidra Chatman, Marco Lokar, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, Carlos Delgado, Jim Keady, Kevin McMahon, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Ramogi Huma and Craig Hodges. All of these athletes above, whether on issues of race, war, or labor exploitation have all faced significant consequences. The severity of consequences ranged from being asked to leave the sport or country, being admonished by coaches and fans for impeding politics in the realm of sport, having accolades stripped from their legacy and even death threats from fans (Kaufman, 2008). Overall, Kaufman's analysis demonstrates just how common consequences arise when athletes perform activism. It is rare that some kind of backlash is absent from the general public due to these types of expressions persisting in the otherwise entertaining environment of sports.

One example of this notion of consequence and athlete activism occurred in 2015 when the University of Missouri football team, players and coaches, responded with outrage to incidents of racial injustice made on campus toward Black students. These incidents included "...the student body president being called the 'n-word,' a Black students' play rehearsal being interrupted with racial slurs, and a swastika being drawn in feces on a residence hall wall" (Izadi, 2015). The outrage was coupled with protests by these athletes and coaches due to the lack of response by university administrators. These athletes demanded the university president step down or they would not participate in intercollegiate play, to which he did in fact step down. Evan Frederick (2017) and researchers examined how individuals responded to these player's protest on the University of Missouri Athletic Department Facebook page. Facebook data pertaining to 7 posts and 792 comments found four major themes arising in how these protest were viewed: (a) trivializing racism; (b) encouraging advocacy; (c) systemic critiques; and (d) incompatibility of advocacy (Frederick, 2017).

The important takeaway from this research rests on the first theme of trivializing racism, especially in the context of athlete activism. When athletes of color express views of activism, they are met with harsh repercussion from their largely white audience, often times dismissed as irrelevant to the positions they hold as student-athletes. The emphasis is placed on the privilege of participation, and not the concerns presented by the players themselves against the universities they represent. They are likely to be misrepresented, mocked, criticized and downplayed. As a result, researchers have identified within this notion of trivializing racism four sub-themes: (a) mis-attributed racism; (b) mocking; (c) criticism; and (d) downplaying (p. 24). To speak directly to the first and last sub-theme

“With respect to mis-attributed racism, comments deflected attention from the players’ protest and instead, focused on topics such as reverse racism, which minimized the significance of the players’ activism...With regards to downplaying, comments suggested that the players’ activism efforts either lacked meaning or were an inappropriate course of action” (p. 24). Here it is clear that responses to athlete activism, more specifically amateur athletes of color expressing concerns over issues of race, are largely dismissed or lacked the agency to exact a message considered of social conscience.

So far, the discussion of consequence and athlete activism has largely examined the repercussions of actions taken, but there are also consequences of inaction. This is especially true for players of notable prestige. One such case is that of Michael Jordan, who has been harshly criticized for remaining silent on issues of social justice during his reign in the NBA. It is with this lack of activist expression that author Kwame Agyemang (2011) sought to qualify the impact. Using principles of transformational leadership and social cognitive theory, Agyemang illuminates the influence of Michael Jordan on Black male athletes and their lack of activism, (Agyemang, 2011).

It is important to first identify Michael Jordan’s activism legacy. Some of the major criticisms of Jordan were that he declined to provide support to Harvey Gantt of the North Carolina’s Senate race in 1990. A lack of support was more so amplified by the media because the opponent of Harvey Gantt was Jesse Helms, a candidate known for racially insensitive rhetoric charged by a segregationist mentality (Agyemang, 2011). The famous line following this lack of an endorsement was “republicans buy shoes, too.” Agyemang considers this to be a trend of Jordan, stating that “...Jordan did not want to offend any possible buyer of his shoes and decrease the demand of his products, thus

embodying capitalist ideals” (p. 437). Additionally, during the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles of 1992, Jordan was asked for a comment on the matter during the NBA Finals. His response was that he was not informed on the matter and did not care to comment further (Agyemang, 2011). Finally, another major criticism of Jordan is his lack of commentary on the brand Nike for their alleged treatment of factory workers in Southeast Asia. Some have considered this silence to be deafening, claiming that his notoriety, and obvious relationship to the Jordan brand, would make him the perfect candidate to speak out on such issues of social justice (Agyemang, 2011).

Using the major tenets of transformational leadership, Agyemang identifies the influence this silence has had on Black male athlete activism of today. To be specific to this process “...highlight an expressed vision (i.e. silence pertaining to social issues); commitment of followers (i.e. current Black male athletes commitment to the model set forth by Jordan); change in outlook (i.e. a transformed Black male athlete compared to athletes of yesteryear)” (p. 439). In summary, the concept of transformational leaders presented in Agyemang’s research highlight concepts such as charisma, vision, and transcending followers’ self-interest as all corresponding with Jordan’s impact on Black male athletes. In the role of a hero to many, Agyemang has illustrated a link between Michael Jordan’s silence on issues of social justice off the court and a lack of current Black male athletes’ expressions of activism (Agyemang, 2011).

Lastly, when discussing the impact of athlete activism, it becomes important to provide historical perspective that acknowledges the great athletes of the past. There is perhaps no greater example of an athlete activist than that of Muhammad Ali. The impact of Muhammad Ali’s activism cannot be understated as he was known for incurring

significant repercussions for his beliefs. He was willing to sacrifice all that he had accomplished as the world heavyweight boxing champion in protest of the Vietnam war. In 1967, Ali refused to be drafted into the United States Army, citing his religious beliefs as a Muslim. This decision ended with significant consequence for the Champ, as it inevitably resulted in his championship title being stripped while being banned from the sport of professional boxing with no opportunity to generate income (Gonyea, 2016). Ali's decision to publicly express this political stance, all while knowing the consequences of such a decision, is what separates him from African American athletes before him. In the years to follow, Ali's action would inspire other athletes to stand up in the face of adversity to be heard, not just seen (Gonyea, 2016).

Bill Russell is another icon in the world of athlete activism. In 1961, Bill Russell led the first ever NBA boycott in Lexington, Kentucky. At the time, the Celtics and the St. Louis Hawks, (now a defunct team), were scheduled to play a match wherein before the game, Celtics players Sam Jones, Thomas Sanders, and Bill Russell were refused service in a coffee shop in downtown Lexington. In protest, Bill Russell united black players on both teams to boycott the game. Bill Russell makes clear at the time that "I am coming to the realization that we are accepted as entertainers, but that we are not accepted as people in some places" (Bieler, 2020). Bill Russell made clear that athletes hold a position of power with their platform. Their ability to either play or not play is power in and of itself. This notion would make clear the power that athletes have to utilize their platforms in ways that make a positive change in the world.

Colin Kaepernick can be considered a contemporary athlete activist of critical importance and impact. In 2016, Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during the national

anthem before each NFL game to protest issues of racial injustice in the United States (Jude, 2020). Similar to Muhammad Ali, Kaepernick's actions led to significant consequence and in 2017 he was no longer a quarterback in the NFL. However, several years later, the impact of Colin Kaepernick's message is still widely discussed as a mobilizing force for political change (Jude, 2020). The impact of Colin Kaepernick's political stance provides other contemporary athlete activists a clear message. That discomfort was essential to liberation and true leadership means not shying away from that responsibility.

### **Twitter as a Medium for Research**

To conclude the literature review section of this body of research, it is important to understand what is known about the communication medium of Twitter. According to findings presented at the *Conference on Social Networks* in 2015, researchers Sho Tsugawa and Hiroyuki Ohsaki found a relationship between negative messages and their virality on the social media platform, Twitter. To be specific to these findings, "...negative messages are likely to be reposted more rapidly and frequently than positive and neutral messages" (p. 151). The research presented at this conference concluded that a negativity bias exists on social media. This conclusion is supported through the retweet speeds of both negative and positive tweets, with negative tweets spreading significantly faster than that of their positive counterparts (Tsugawa, 2015).

With respect to discussions about race in online spaces, research has found that the platform Twitter serves as a microcosm of hateful, racist rhetoric in society. Researcher, Irfan Chaudhry, examined three separate projects that track racist rhetoric on Twitter and found an interesting relationship between the platform and how racist



language is used online. Chaudhry concluded that all three projects revealed that individuals convey hateful messages about race online that they would not normally express off-line (Chaudhry, 2015). The degree of racial impoliteness on twitter suggests that a racial bias exists on Twitter that sways in the direction of hateful, racist rhetoric.

### **Summary**

It is clear from this literature review that athlete activism has a nuanced relationship with the world of sports. To summarize, this section presented an overview of the literature surrounding athlete activism and race in American society. The four sections covered included a discussion on racism in American politics and society, an overview of racism, equity, diversity and justice in American sports, an explanation of waves and expressions of athlete activism, and examples of impacts and consequences of athlete activism.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

Recently, LeBron James has established the *More Than a Vote* organization which works with Black athletes and artists to combat systemic and racist voter suppression by educating, energizing, and protecting the interests of communities of color, (More Than a Vote, 2020). Additionally, the outreach of The LeBron James Family Foundation serves more than 1,400 Akron-area students by providing them with the programs, support and mentors they need for success in school and beyond, (The LeBron James Family Foundation, 2019). It is because of this level of outreach that LeBron was awarded the 2020 Sports Illustrated Muhammad Ali Legacy Award for his continuous, demonstrated leadership in creating a measured positive impact on communities through sport (Abdul-Jabbar, 2020). In recognition of this feat, this body of research seeks to typify the affectional response to expressions of athlete activism by LeBron James' followers on Twitter. The purpose of this chapter is to detail the methodology of this research regarding its theoretical framework and timeframe of analysis.

### **Close Reading and Interactive Media**

For this study, a close reading will be used to qualify certain words, themes and concepts, i.e. the effect, of expressions of athlete activism by LeBron James. According to Brummett (2010), a close reading requires a mindful, disciplined reading of an object in order to provide understanding and meaning (Brummett, 2010). The discipline in this context is provided by the principles of Affect Theory and Social Identity and Affect Theory and Emotion. This methodology will require a deductive approach, which will begin with this theory and its coherent rationale for assigning meaning and then work

toward a typology of emotions in order to understand the effect of athlete activism expressed by LeBron James.

According to Paul Sakalski (2017) what differentiates interactive media as a text for analysis, compared to more traditional forms, is that users act as more than just receivers of messages. To be specific “They have an active role in adapting, altering, and even producing content” (p. 202). Traditional forms, such as books and films, are positioned in fixed states with end products. Interactive media is constantly evolving, expanding and compounding on the messages formed therein. The specific type of interactivity defined in this context is user-to-user interactivity which involves the interactions of users on social media sites (Sakalski, 2017). It is also important to distinguish the content being analyzed as user-generated content (UGC), which refers to content posted by the user on an interactive medium, i.e. Twitter (Sakalski, 2017). This distinction of content type is important, as it reflects an individual’s curated message platform (Sakalski, 2017). Additionally, user-selected content (USC) will also be under analysis, which is content that is selected by the user which reflects individual message choices (Sakalski, 2017). In the context of LeBron James’ Twitter platform, the particular type of USC will be user-curated content which is carefully selected with the purpose of meeting the needs of an audience (Sakalski, 2017). To be specific to this point, expressions of athlete activism that evoke awareness on Twitter can be considered user-curated content.

### **Affect Theory**

Next, it is important to recognize the major principles of Affect Theory as a lens for this close reading. To begin, affect plays a large role in social identity construction,

specifically the relationship that affect, cognition and categorization have with the formation of social identity. According to Patrick Colm Hogan (2017), emotion is integral to the function of cognition. To be specific "...cognition is a matter of information processing. Emotion is a matter of motivation. The two are neither opposed to one another nor parts of one another's function—though the two certainly interact, both sequentially and cyclically" (p. 184). With emotion being a matter of motivation, Hogan also claims that motivation affects cognition in several ways. Motivation may initiate information processing or act as an input for information processing. Additionally, emotions themselves can influence bias for information processing as well (Hogan, 2017).

Information processing is a function that allows one to form personal, practical, and categorial identities. Personal identity has two significant criteria "...extent of shared properties, with properties weighted for importance, and continuity in time, with any change in properties being gradual" (p. 185). Personal identity is closely related to two features of one's psyche: cognition, (i.e. informational), and motivation, (i.e. emotional) (Hogan, 2017).

Practical identity is a form of personal identity (Hogan, 2017). Gradual changes to oneself, acting peripherally to our capacities, practices, and inclinations is what Hogan refers to as practical identity (Hogan, 2017). Thus, personal identity is positioned between practical identity, and 'ego-identity', which is "...one's cognitive and emotional self-understanding, one's idea about who one "really" is, and one's feelings about the importance of specific properties" (p. 186). This intersection of self-understanding through both cognition and emotion is the key in understanding 'ego-identity'. Using this

principle of affect theory, the term ‘athlete-activist’ can be better understood as LeBron James’ ego-identity. Of course, this could be a carefully crafted persona that may or may not be managed by LeBron himself. Therefore, it would be impossible to determine the authenticity of ego-identity from the perspective of LeBron James’ rhetoric. What can be analyzed however, is the way an audience is responding to this online persona. Thus, the goal of this research will be to identify and categorize the responses of the audience as being either supportive or unsupportive of LeBron James’ expressions of athlete activism. That is where the principles of Affect Theory and Emotion are considered to see how users on Twitter interpret these messages.

### **Plutchik’s Wheel of Emotions**

At its core, Affect Theory seeks to organize affect, often synonymous with the concept of emotions or subjectively experienced feelings, into distinct categories and typify their physiological, social, interpersonal and internalized manifestations (Gregg, 2010). For this body of research, it is important to identify a taxonomical structure of emotion in order to perform this task. Stanley (2017) wrote that according to Silvan Tomkins, a psychologist and leading scholar on affect theory, there are nine major taxonomical affects: interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, startle-surprise, distress-grief, shame-humiliation, contempt-disgust, anger-rage, and fear-terror, (Stanley, 2017). This taxonomy is a great starting point, however for this body of research, Robert Plutchik’s wheel of emotions will be the basis for emotional classification.

Robert Plutchik (1980) designed a model that would provide a broad foundation for understanding human emotions that also describes the interrelations of those emotions (Plutchik, 1980). This can be easily understood through the diagram below:

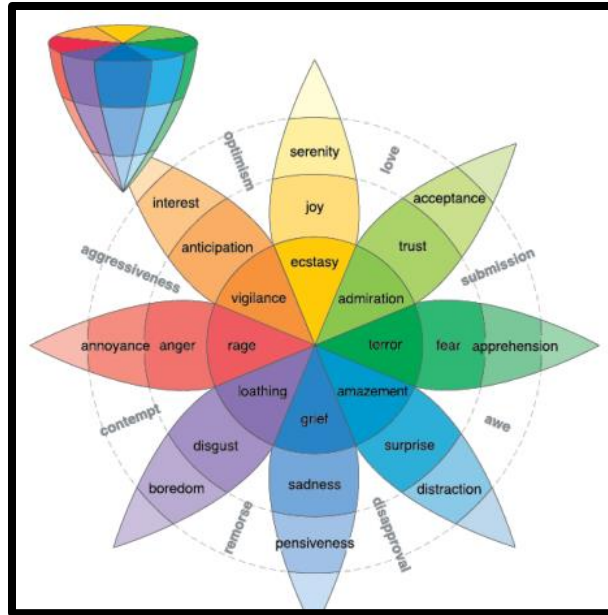


Figure 3 Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions

This model illustrates that eight primary sectors make up the full weight of emotional dimensions. To be specific, anger, anticipation, joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness and disgust. Additionally, this model illustrates the degree of intensity by each of these emotional sectors, adding depth and understanding to this primary set of emotions. As an example, within the emotional sector of joy, comes different degrees of intensity, the lesser form of serenity and the more intense form of ecstasy. Lastly, this model provides a visual representation of the relationships between emotional sectors. This suggests that the opposite to the sector of joy is sadness, and the opposite to the emotion of acceptance is boredom. The designations between each sector are emotions that are fixed between two sectors. This suggests that the combination of anger and disgust is contempt, the combination of joy and trust is love etc. (Donaldson, 2017).

To better justify this model as a basis for emotional taxonomy in this body of research, it becomes important to highlight other forms of research that have also utilized Plutchik's wheel of emotion. In fact, there has been a great deal of research that utilizes

Plutchik's wheel for the specific purpose of deducing emotions from human written messages. As an example, researchers Erik Tromp and Mykola Pechenizkiy (2014) form a rule-based emotion detection algorithm using Plutchik's wheel in order to study the emotions behind human messages on the social media platform Twitter (i.e. tweets). These researchers state that Plutchik's wheel of emotion is effective because the eight sectors of human emotions allow for accurate classifications (Tromp, 2014).

### **Data Collection Research Design**

Overall, this research will analyze user-generated and user-selected content related to athlete activism of LeBron James' Twitter profile. Using Affect Theory as a lens for close reading, specifically principles pertaining to ego-identity and the taxonomical structure of Plutchik's wheel of emotions, a close reading will be performed which seeks out an interpretive answer toward the effect of affect in this context. In order to collect data, first a distant reading of LeBron James' entire Twitter post history was analyzed based on a specific hashtag related to activism. For this research, all tweets containing the specific hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was collected, and the top five highest favorite count were considered for a close reading. For this close reading, a randomized sampling of responses, spanning every fifth tweet and ending at fifty total for a grand total of 250, was collected for examination. All tweets under this randomized sampling, including all multimedia presentations such as pictures and videos, were interpreted for their affectual bearing to LeBron James' expressions of activism.

A distant reading using Twitters API tool on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, found that a total of 23 tweets contained the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter from the profile @KingJames. The timeframe of the top five tweets containing the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter spanned from

Jun 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020, to April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. The tweet with the highest favorite count came to 192,277, and the lowest at 52,248. Out of the five total tweets, a total of 236 comment responses was collected for analysis. The following section will be an analysis which interprets the emotions of the comment section of these five tweets. The numbering of these five tweets will be considered in chronological order.



## Chapter 4: Analysis

This analysis section will be organized first by providing context of each of the five tweets under examination. Following a contextual summary of each tweet will be an overview of the data collected from each tweet. Finally, using the contextual understanding of each tweet and the data collected from the responses of those tweets, an interpretation can be formed of the affectual effect to LeBron James's expressions of athlete activism on the social media platform Twitter.

### Context of Tweet from June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020

On June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020, LeBron James shared a tweet with a video produced by his company, UNINTERRUPTED. This company, which according to the UNINTERRUPTED LinkedIn page, is an athlete empowerment brand founded by LeBron James and Maverick Carter. The central idea of this brand is instituted upon the idea that all athletes should have a platform to express themselves without intermediaries (UNINTERRUPTED, 2021). Through this company's mission statement of giving athletes a platform of self-expression, LeBron James provides cognitive and emotional self-understanding of what it means to be an athlete activist. In retweeting this video, this message thus serves to justify LeBron James' ego-identity as an athlete activist.

This video is simple in execution, which are just words on a screen that run in consecutive order. The collection of phrases in sequence are as follows: "shut up and dribble," "shut up and tackle," "shut up and stand," "shut up and get paid," "shut up and just do your job," "shut up and take off that hood," "shut up and stop running," "shut up and put your fist down," "shut up and do you live around here," "shut up and you fit the description," "shut up and put your hands up," "shut up and get out the car," "shut up and

don't move," "shut up and get on the ground," "shut up and lay still". This tweet is the third most liked tweet containing the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and appears to be in response to Fox News's Laura Ingraham telling LeBron to "shut up and dribble" for his criticisms of former president Donald Trump. Additionally, this video appears to address a series of social justice issues related to race. To be specific, this video addresses some of the issues of black athletes protesting, i.e. shut up and put your fist down (Tommie Smith and John Carlos), shut up and stand (Colin Kaepernick), shut up and dribble (LeBron James). This video also addresses some of the issues with policing in black communities, i.e. shut up and take off that hood, shut up and stop running, shut up and you fit the description, shut up and do you live around here, etc. The video then ends by saying "This is why we can't just stick to sports".

In order, these phrases serve to add depth to the phrase, "shut up and dribble". This video attempts to provide a connection to issues of social justice related to race and the platforms of professional athletes speaking out on such issues. It also makes clear that no matter the approach toward activism, i.e. kneeling, raised fists etc., there are always criticisms about the method. The tweet in question is below:



*Figure 4 Tweet from June 5th, 2020*

### **Collected Data of Tweet from June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

The responses to this tweet ranged from acceptance, admiration, aggressiveness, anger, annoyance, contempt, disapproval, disgust and interest. The most prevalent emotions represented in the sample size of responses were contempt, admiration and annoyance. The emotional category of contempt was by far the most common of the sample size collected, and the theme of whataboutism through contempt was easily recognizable in the responses of users. Here, the trend of charging LeBron with hypocrisy via the lack of commentary regarding China was what made this theme easily recognizable. The emotional category of admiration was the second most common response of the sample size collected by users. The emotion of admiration were generally expressions of gratitude toward LeBron James. The emotional category of annoyance was the third most common response of the sample size collected by users and took shape in

two ways. First, users expressed annoyance that LeBron James is speaking from a position of power and that he should simply stick to sports and get paid. Second, users were annoyed with LeBron James for simply speaking out with little action, i.e. talk is cheap and actions speak louder than words.

In terms of popularity, under the sample size collected it would appear that the emotional category of acceptance was most liked<sup>1</sup> by users. Acceptance refers to the recognition of a message without attempts to change or protest its meaning. The most liked comment from this tweet drastically skews this representation of acceptance by popularity. A single tweet containing a fist emoji with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, followed by a picture describing the mission of the Black Lives Matter movement garnered 553 likes. This picture is of Huey Freeman, a cartoon character from the television show *The Boondocks*, holding a sign with the words:

WE said: BLACK LIVES MATTER

NEVER said: ONLY BLACK LIVES MATTER

WE know: ALL LIVES MATTER

WE just need YOUR HELP with #blacklivesmatter for Black Lives are in  
danger...

Outside of acceptance, contempt and admiration were also fairly popular by the number of likes they gathered. The data under analysis is represented below:

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<sup>1</sup> The favorite count designation under Twitter is colloquially referred to as 'liked'. When discussing the comments under analysis that are most popular or most liked, this simply implies the most favorited on Twitter.

Affect category	Count of Affect category
acceptance	1
admiration	13
aggressiveness	1
ambiguous	1
anger	1
annoyance	7
contempt	20
disapproval	1
disgust	1
interest	3

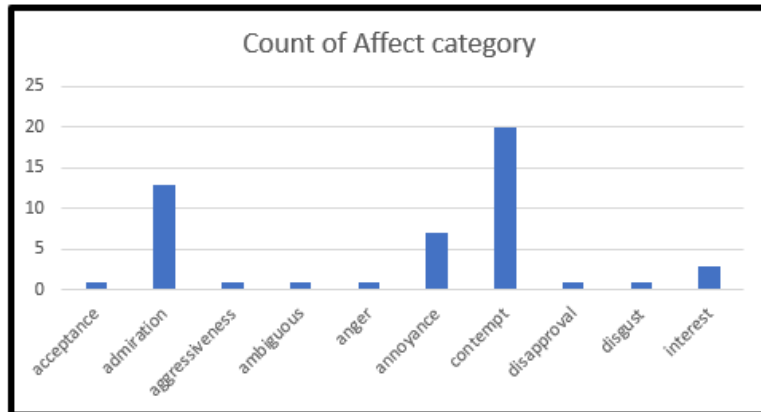


Table 1.1 Count of Affect Category from June 5th, 2020 Tweet

Affect category	Sum of Likes
acceptance	552
admiration	82
aggressiveness	0
ambiguous	53
anger	0
annoyance	2
contempt	185
disapproval	0
disgust	0
interest	51

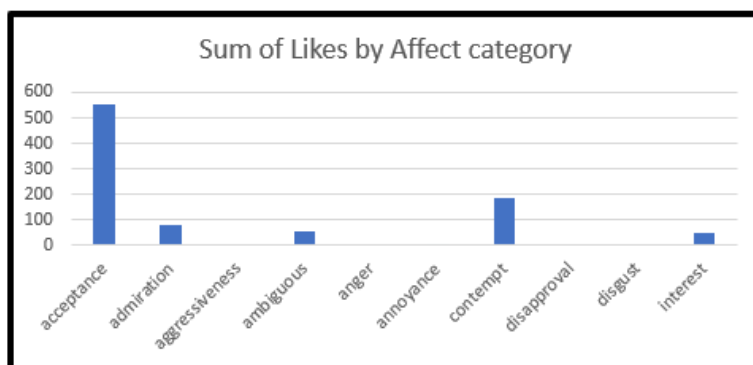


Table 1.2 Sum of Likes by Affect Category from June 5th, 2020 Tweet

## Analysis of Tweet from June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Although the emotion of acceptance is represented as the most popular, is also only represents a total of one comment out of fifty. What becomes clear when analyzing the sample size of the comments thread of this tweet is that contempt through whataboutism, specifically through charges of hypocrisy related to China, were the most easily identifiable and likely reflect the comment section as a whole. Whataboutism is a type of logical fallacy in which the opponent to a position will attempt to discredit the proponent's position through a charge of hypocrisy or even simply raising a different issue. When considering this theme, it is also clear that LeBron's stated position claiming ignorance toward Chinese politics runs fairly close to the posting of this tweet. The timeline of those comments toward China and this tweet running fairly close together, 8

months to be exact, and may have something to do with this type of response. With that position, coupled with his stance on standing up for issues of social justice here in the U.S., comes these repeated charges of hypocrisy. A series of examples toward this theme are listed below<sup>2</sup>:

User @ItsJustHashim2:

"LeBron but China" "picture"

User @ MississaugaLiam

Cool. Any thoughts on China? ""GIF"

User @newbury\_eric

You only do that if Xi tells you to do it.

User @robert\_bambrick

No thoughts on China?

User @ss1687

Quick do china you hypocrite

User @Chret33

Oh the chinese let you talk.

User @The\_Dank\_Lion

You got all this courage until China humbles you. Sit down

User @Joshua04396956

The get that China money... hypocrite @KingJames

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<sup>2</sup> The responses under analysis are presented as they are written online and reflect improper grammar or syntax from the original user

User @Bruski4six4

This message was not Intended for the people of Hong Kong and definitely not for almighty China. Maybe it's a misunderstanding

User @JhnnnyTheo

Appreciate this post! As the most popular athlete in the world, When will you address the China situation?

User @Dromo86

@KingJames I thought u wouldn't be educated enough on this subject, just like on the Hong Kong/ China issue! "mouth zipped emoji" Only when "money emoji" is involved huh?

These comments may not have been the most popular, however the repeated charges of hypocrisy were the most common from the sample size of data collected. It appears that LeBron's tweet is not only rejected by the majority of users but thrown back as somewhat hypocritical. As an athlete activist who stands for issues related to social justice, it can be hard to deny the criticisms presented by not standing up for the rights of those in China. Furthermore, some users of this opinion even point out that money is the difference maker for LeBron in his expressions of activism. What may not be well understood by simply observing this tweet and the accompanying video, is that UNDISPUTED is first and foremost a company which promotes a brand selling merchandise. This video can be considered a form of advertisement for this brand, which LeBron James stands to gain monetarily as one of the founders. With so many users addressing the lack of commentary regarding China, it appears there is a disparity between speaking out when money is involved. Overall, the argument presented in this

tweet suggests that the followers of LeBron James find his campaign as an athlete activist to be disingenuous. In terms of the repeated charges of hypocrisy regarding this tweet and LeBron's previously stated position concerning China, that position of duplicity is supported in the responses of contempt through whataboutism.

### **Context of Tweet from June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

During the 2020 Democratic Senate primary election, Kentucky's Republican secretary of state, Michael Adams, made the decision to significantly reduce the number of polling locations from 3,700 to 200. A decision that is considered by voting rights activists as an attempt to create long lines in predominately black communities (Lee, 2020). To be specific, Jefferson County – a population of up to 767,000 citizens and where 1 in 5 residents are African American, will be forced to cast their ballot in a single location of the convention and expo center (Lee, 2020). A combination of limited voting areas, long lines, and frustrated voters could be a factor of suppressed voter turnout in the Kentucky Senate race. In Fayette County, the second largest county in Kentucky, clerk Don Blevins Jr. commented on the repercussions of such a decision by saying "If we get a massive turnout at Kroger Field, that's just going to be an angry mob," (Lee, 2020).

LeBron James took to Twitter and made comments about this type of action calling it "SYSTEMIC RACISM" and a form of "OPPRESSION". The context of this message shows that LeBron James has cognitive awareness to the issue of systemic racism related to voter suppression. The expression of anger in this tweet shows emotional motivation for change on the issues. Through the cognitive awareness of the issue and the emotional expression of anger toward change, LeBron James demonstrates an intersection of cognition and emotion via the ego-identity of an athlete activist. This



tweet is the fifth most liked tweet containing the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter by LeBron James. The tweet in question is below:

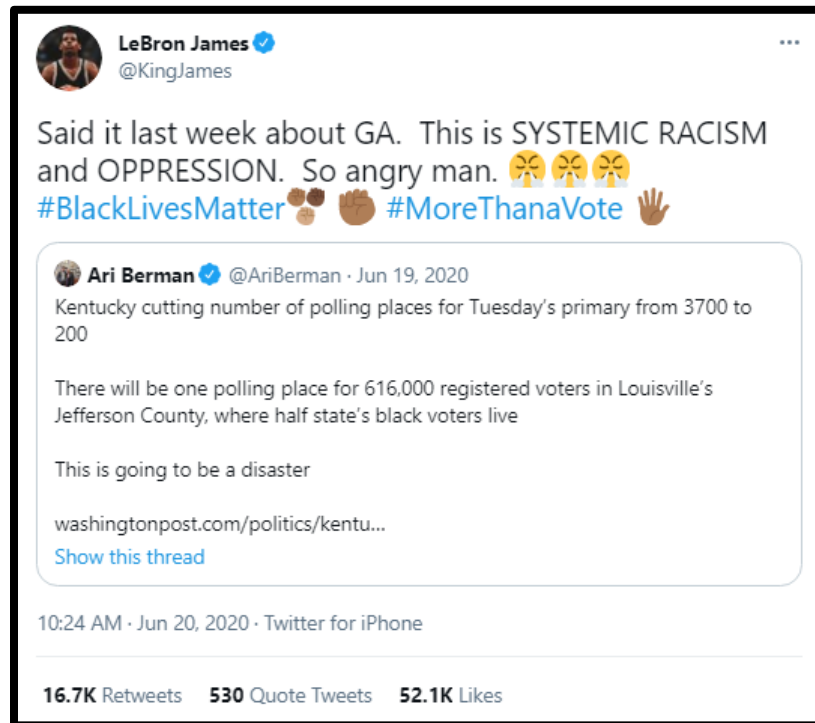


Figure 5 Tweet from June 20th, 2020

### Collected Data of Tweet from June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020

The responses to this tweet ranged from acceptance, admiration, anger, annoyance, apprehension, contempt, disapproval, interest, optimism and vigilance. The most prevalent emotions represented in the sample size of responses were contempt, vigilance and annoyance. The emotional category of annoyance and vigilance were most common within the sample size, while contempt through whataboutism was the most popular. This tweet was received with a more diverse set of emotions, some that agreed with the overall message, some urging vigilance and even anger about the closing of polling places. What becomes clear is that most users expressed either annoyance that

this type of policy change requires outrage, or a vigilance toward action in response to this policy. The data collected is represented below:

Affect category	Count of Affect category
acceptance	1
admiration	2
ambiguous	4
anger	5
annoyance	11
apprehension	1
contempt	6
disapproval	3
interest	3
optimism	1
vigilance	11

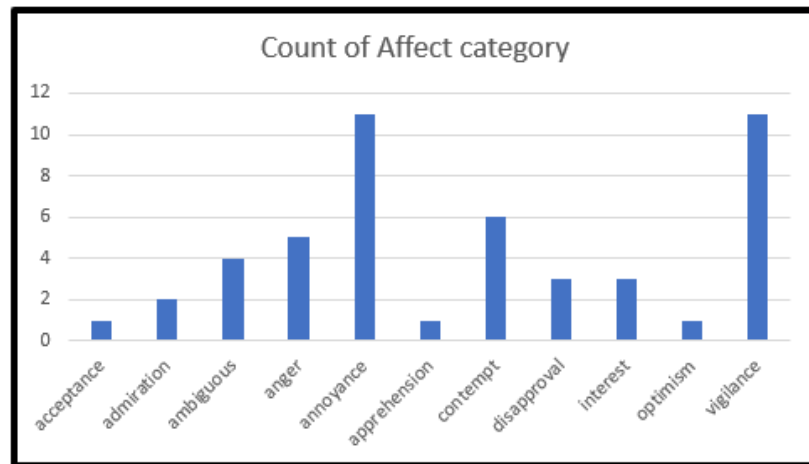


Table 2.1 Count of Affect Category from June 20th, 2020 Tweet

Affect category	Sum of Likes
acceptance	2
admiration	112
ambiguous	2
anger	0
annoyance	66
apprehension	0
contempt	188
disapproval	0
interest	0
optimism	1
vigilance	5

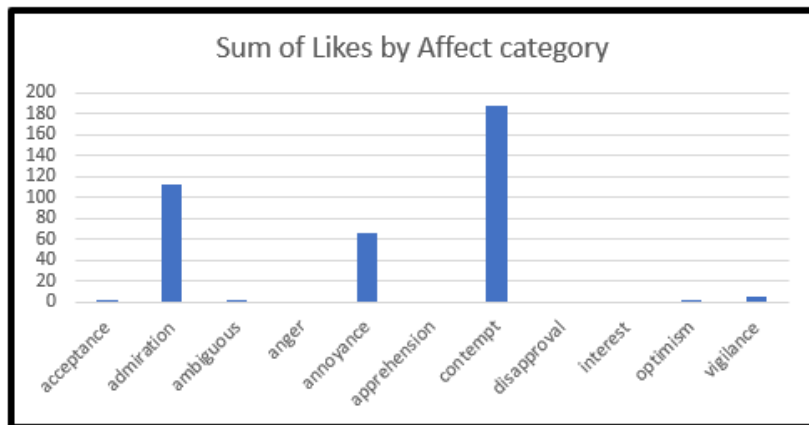


Table 2.2 Sum of Likes by Affect Category from June 20th, 2020 Tweet

### Analysis of Tweet from June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Contempt through whataboutism was not necessarily the overwhelming theme of this tweet, however it was the most liked category of emotional response. Much like the other tweets under analysis, the charge of hypocrisy regarding China was easily recognized and follows a trend of asserting this hypocrisy regardless of the message by LeBron James. Examples of these responses can be observed below:

User @KingMoethe8th:

What about the oppression in China?

User @BoudinBill:

Now do China you hack

User @Pgh4122:

At least ppl can vote in America! Ever learn what happens in China??

Annoyance was also a common trend of the responses in this tweet. Annoyance fell into two categories, annoyance to policy ignorance and ad hominem attacks surrounding LeBron James' qualifications as an athlete or his high school education<sup>3</sup>. The expression of annoyance through policy ignorance was displayed through attempts to rationalize the closing of polling places. Some users argued this initiative was a bipartisan effort or that this action was established by the Democratic party, even though the Kentucky Secretary of State, a Republican, was the catalyst behind the decision. Regardless, examples of this trend can be observed below:

User @Wade\_Gerritt

You realize it's for a Democratic primary, right?

User @Granneypuckett

Yea the Dems are running this one. You are so correct, Dems are suppressing the vote.

---

<sup>3</sup> LeBron James was drafted into the NBA straight out of high school.

User @KimSandlin6

In a bipartisan effort, Kentucky has created opportunities for early voting, mail-in voting, and safe in-person voting. There will be a record turnout for this election. The one voting location in Louisville is huge and is within 30 minutes of any home in Jefferson.

Annoyance was also displayed through attacking LeBron James' qualifications as a professional athlete or high school education. Similar to how the "shut up and dribble" conversation was started by Fox News's Laura Ingram; users parroted this notion through attacking LeBron for being a basketball player. Additionally, some users went as far as challenging the intellect of LeBron James for only having a high school education. These attacks are tantamount to the ad hominem fallacy which only attack the character of the individual rather than attacking the argument itself. Examples of these responses can be observed below:

User @813Lou

Oppression says a man, who's a multi-millionaire because he can put a ball in a hoop.

User @jiashidu

Wow, some high school grad trying to teach others the meaning of systemic....

Finally, the emotional response of vigilance was also common in affect category. LeBron James seems to have a trend of both negatively received and positively received responses with his audience in this tweet. In the sense of vigilance, the tweet itself contains all caps in dialogue to represent shouting which dictates significant frustration

and anger toward the closing of polling locations in Kentucky. The interpretation of the emotional response of vigilance can be considered in response to the tone of the original tweet itself. By expressing a message of frustration and anger in this way, most users expressed the same sense of urgency through a vigilant response of action. Most users wanted to know what can be done, how LeBron would provide measurable action and implored upon other users to act as well. Examples of this emotional response can be observed below:

User @kendajet32

Sooooooooo what are WE going to do about it!?!? Everyone tweets and talks. Even senators... what are we going to do to stop the BS?

User @Jakomo87152713

Help people go to vote. Help with transportations, food and water. Help. Cause if you won't, who will?

User @CherylScuadroni

Please share everyone! We have to showcase this voter suppression. We CAN NOT IGNORE THIS. "link"

It appears this tweet was received the most positively by the user base compared to the other tweets under analysis. Although, hate tweets of LeBron James still permeate and are prevalent in popularity, the overall sample size of the comment section seemed to support the message and agree with the tone that was displayed by LeBron James. As the argument presented in this body of research suggests that the followers of LeBron James finds his campaign as an athlete activist to be disingenuous, a conclusion to that notion cannot be drawn from the data collected from this tweet. Overall, the comment section of

this tweet doesn't necessarily suggest that fans are rejecting LeBron James' symbolic form of activism. However, this tweet is not absent of such a viewpoint as there does exist an audience which considers this tweet as disingenuous through charges of hypocrisy regarding China, and ad hominem attacks of character displayed through annoyance.

### **Context of Tweet from August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

On August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020 an unarmed black man, Jacob Blake, was shot seven times in front of his three children in Kenosha, Wisconsin by police officer Rusten Sheskey (Morales, 2021). A video of the shooting, which left Blake paralyzed from the waist down, was captured on video by neighbors and went viral on social media (Morales, 2021). Following the deaths of George Floyd, Elijah McClain and Breonna Taylor, Jacob Blake's shooting reignited nationwide protests calling for police reform. NBA superstar, Giannes Antetokounmpo of the Milwaukee Bucks joined in with teammates to protest the shooting, including the refusal to play in three NBA Playoff appearances, forcing the NBA to postpone said games (Morales, 2021).

On August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020, in response to the shooting of Jacob Blake, LeBron James took to Twitter to express his feelings on the matter. LeBron James' message is driven by the motivation of action. Which, according to affect theory, motivation is a function of emotional self-awareness. Furthermore, the message contains cognitive understanding of how a solution should be considered through mentioning the @MoreThanAVote campaign (i.e., voting as a solution). When considering the motivation of action and proposed solution together, LeBron James' ego-identity as an athlete activist can be understood in this message. LeBron's tweet is the most liked of any tweet containing the

hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Although this tweet does not directly mention the incident or Jacob Blake himself, it is a follow up to two separate tweets just two days prior. The tweet in question is below:



*Figure 6 Tweet from August 27th, 2020*

### **Collected Data of Tweet from August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

The responses to this tweet ranged from admiration, anger, annoyance, contempt, disapproval, disgust, interest, loathing and optimism. The most prevalent emotions represented in the sample size of responses were disapproval and admiration. Disapproval was displayed most commonly by attempting to change the conversation or narrative to something else or discrediting the message as not effective, i.e. talk is cheap. Additionally, disapproval also took the form of victim blaming, and calls to support the police. The hashtag, #AllLivesMatter was a common retort to this message. Admiration was easily identified through expressions of gratitude and support toward the messenger, LeBron James. Similar to emotions that were most common, the tweets containing these

emotions were also the most liked by users on Twitter as well. The results to the data collection of this tweet can be found below:

Affect category	Sum of Affect Category
account suspended	1
admiration	8
ambiguous	4
anger	3
annoyance	3
contempt	5
disapproval	21
disgust	2
Interest	1
loathing	1
optimism	1

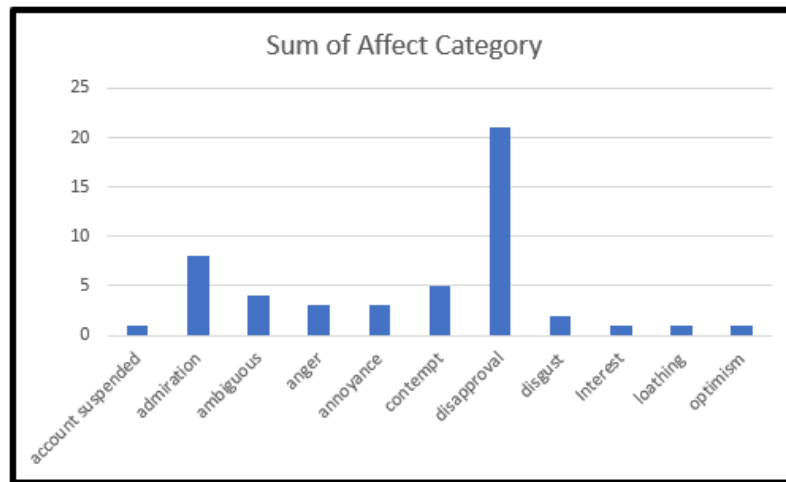


Table 3.1 Count of Affect Category from August 27th, 2020 Tweet

Affect category	Sum of Likes
account suspended	1
admiration	315
ambiguous	43
anger	15
annoyance	0
contempt	81
disapproval	1541
disgust	3
Interest	0
loathing	1
optimism	0

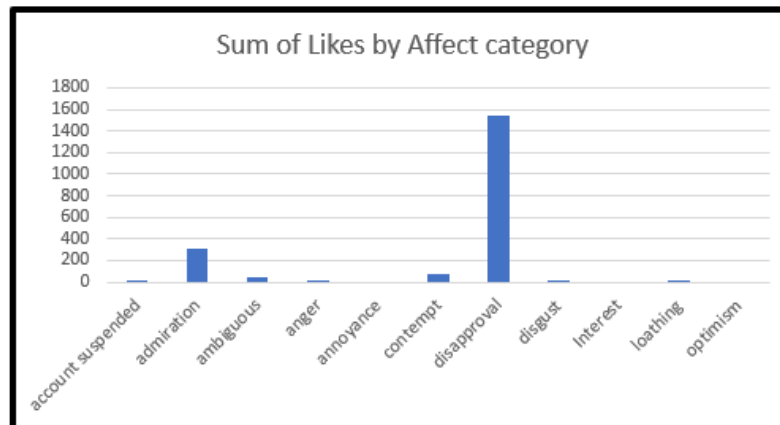


Table 3.2 Sum of Likes by Affect Category from August 27th, 2020 Tweet

### Analysis of Tweet from August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020

The affectual responses to this tweet were overwhelmingly negative. Although admiration represented the third most common affectual response based on the sample size, the majority of the other represented emotions were disapproval, contempt, annoyance, anger, loathing and disgust. Responses containing the tone of disapproval took shape in two different ways. First, users expressed disapproval toward LeBron's



messages in the sense that using Twitter is the easiest possible form of activism, i.e. talk is cheap and that actions speak louder than words. As an example, the most popular of these responses attempts to paint LeBron James as an ineffectual activist over Twitter, even poking fun at how he is perceived as a modern-day Muhammad Ali and Jackie Robinson. Additionally, some users express that the message contained in this tweet, that voting is the solution to this type of injustice, is not the correct action of recourse.

Examples of this trend can be observed below:

User @GSWKinta:

Lebron - Tweets in caps, doesn't say a word in the meeting, walks out to play madden

Everyone - Lebron is the modern-day Muhammad Ali and Jackie Robinson

User @David51993964:

As you post this on Twitter....

User @Chase\_Of\_Spades:

@KingJames be the change you preach.. you on them streets? You dying with these boys in the streets? You leaving that privileged life that is only reserved for supposedly "white" Americans. You're included in that privileges dawg

User @LadyCie

Vote...really? "GIF"

This pattern of disapproval does suggest that users are rejecting the symbolic activism expressed by LeBron James. The idea that talk is cheap and that actions speak

louder than words, supports the notion that LeBron's message here is considered to be ineffectual and insincere. When compared to the types of activism performed by NBA peer Giannis Antetokounmpo, wherein Giannis and team actually protested NBA playoff games and marched in Kenosha, Wisconsin, a tweet in this context pales in comparison. This type of theme supports the argument of this body of research which suggests that fans of LeBron James perceive his activism campaigns as disingenuous.

The second form of disapproval arising from the comments of this tweet are attempts to change the narrative to support the police. As this specific tweet is in relation to the police shooting of an unarmed black man, Jacob Blake, the issue of police reform is mentioned and combatted in the comment section. One user even suggests the solution to police brutality is actually not bashing the officers in question, but rather that black men and women suit up to join the police. Other users go as far as victim blaming to express disapproval of LeBron's message and to instead support police. Examples to this theme can be observed below.

User @Devon\_wright35:

How can we make change if we constantly demoralizing police officers  
how about instead of demoralizing them, we promote them and say to our  
young black man and women we can become a police officer and better  
protect and serving your neighborhood and community?!?

User @sweetonenc13:

“I support you and the BLM movement. I also support the men and women police that give of their lives every day and protect us. I do pray for change and peace. Please everyone also needs to stop when the police ask you to stop. Why run and ignore them?”

User @cap2569

I bet it is okay for the police to get shot though huh. #All lives matter.  
#Stop the Violence!!!! Let's make the world better but keeping peace

This theme of supporting police and not the victim was fairly consistent throughout the comments. Instead of placing blame on the officer for using deadly force, most comments focused on Jacob Blake's actions in the situation, specifically how he did not comply with the officer which led to the escalation. This form of disapproval does not necessarily suggest that users reject LeBron's message of activism, however they do disagree with the notion that police reform is necessary.

Another major theme that arose from the comments of this tweet was the affect category of contempt through whataboutism. To reiterate, whataboutism is an attempt to discredit an opponent's position by charging them with hypocrisy without directly refuting or disproving their argument. Many of the other tweets under analysis displayed this theme of whataboutism, however in the context of gun violence and police reform, the affect of contempt through whataboutism took a different shape. Whereas other tweets mention the hypocrisy of LeBron's comments regarding China, this tweet provides hypocrisy in the form of NBA players protesting one form of gun violence over another. Many users retweeted photos of gun violence statistics which attempt to paint this type of

outrage as hypocritical. Other users suggested the NBA isn't up in arms of black on white gun violence. Examples to this theme can be observed below:

User @LSownsyou:

Is the NBA protesting the murders of Nick Wall, 45, and his stepdaughter Laura Ashley Anderson, 21, who were shot dead by black man last night?

User @Blonde193 retweets:



Figure 7 Comment to Tweet from August 27th, 2020

User @jsabotts retweets:



*Figure 8 Comment to Tweet from August 27th, 2020*

Based on the sample size of data collected, the comment thread of this tweet suggests that most users agree that LeBron's contribution of commentary fails to rise to the level of meaningful change or is tantamount to the bare minimum of concern. Overall, based on the overwhelming response to this tweet of disapproval through ineffectual symbolic activism and contempt through whataboutism, it would appear that most users reject LeBron's message as being hypocritical or insincere. These two themes arising in the sample size of data collected supports the overall argument of this body of research which points to the notion that fans of LeBron James view his activism campaigns as disingenuous.

### **Context of Tweet from September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

On June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, LeBron James launched his More Than A Vote website, which is a nonprofit organization working to fight systemic racism through ending voter

suppression in Black communities (Rohlin, 2020). The More Than A Vote organization was initiated following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor with the singular goal of energizing, educating and protecting black voters (Medina, 2020). In September of 2020, the More Than A Vote organization was able to recruit upwards of 10,000 volunteers to help at the polls in predominately Black electoral districts for the November presidential election (Deese, 2020). On September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, former president Barack Obama tweeted out a video wherein he expresses gratitude toward LeBron James for his efforts in founding the More Than A Vote organization, his ability to recruit so many volunteers, and commended him for being a leader in the black community as an athlete activist.

In terms of ego-identity, motivation and cognition self-awareness exist through acknowledging former President Barack Obama's words. The former president essentially labels LeBron James as an activist toward voting rights, supporting his athlete activist ego-identity. By LeBron James retweeting this video, he is validating the ego-identity of the athlete activist being presented by President Obama. This tweet is LeBron's second most liked tweet containing the hashtag BlackLivesMatter. The tweet in question is below:



Figure 9 Tweet from September 30th, 2020

### Collected Data of Tweet from September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020

The responses to this tweet ranged from admiration, anger, annoyance, contempt, disapproval, disgust, interest, joy and optimism. The most prevalent emotions represented in sample size of data collected were the responses of admiration, disapproval and contempt. Admiration was displayed most commonly through expressions recognizing competence, talent, or skill toward either Barack Obama or LeBron James. Disapproval was displayed mostly toward former president Obama, criticizing him for his tenure as president. Contempt was displayed through whataboutism, a common theme through all the tweets under analysis. Additionally, although admiration was the most common affect category<sup>4</sup>, the most popular of these categories was disapproval and disgust. It would appear that comments that were overly critical of former president Barack Obama were

<sup>4</sup> Common is designated as the category of affect which is the most prevalent in the sample set

largely favored by the Twitter audience observing this specific tweet of LeBron James.

The data collected is represented below:

Affect category	Count of Affect category
admiration	10
ambiguous	4
anger	1
annoyance	1
contempt	6
disapproval	7
disgust	1
interest	4
joy	1
optimism	3

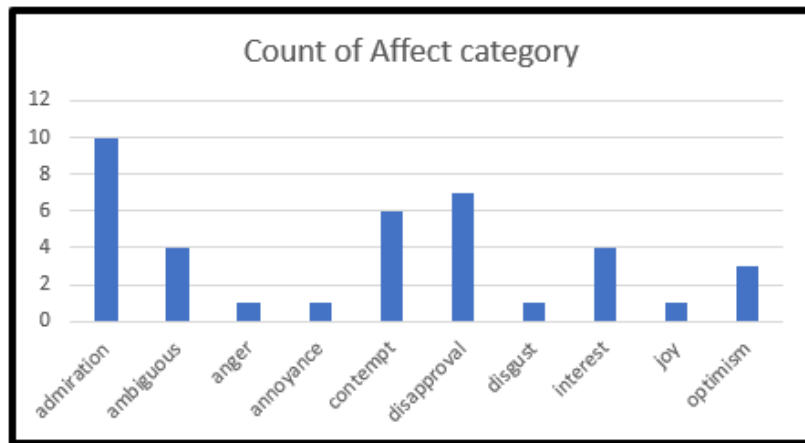


Table 4.1 Count of Affect Category from September 30th, 2020 Tweet

Affect category	Sum of Likes
admiration	5
ambiguous	3
anger	4
annoyance	0
contempt	9
disapproval	515
disgust	272
interest	23
joy	0
optimism	18

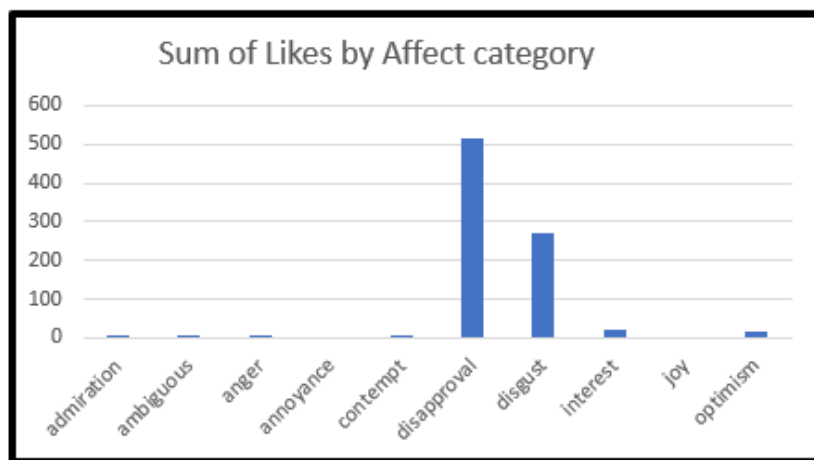


Table 4.2 Sum of Likes by Affect Category from September 30th, 2020 Tweet

### Analysis of Tweet from September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020

When analyzing the sample size of data collected from responses to this tweet, it becomes important to consider how this message was received in two ways: which category was most common, and which categories were most popular. Admiration toward the message was in fact most common and fairly similar in nature. One form of



admiration was expressions of acknowledged competence or skill extended toward former president Barack Obama. As an example:

User @GregS198:

Its a shame Presidents are limited to 2 terms. We would've benefited from Obama's leadership during this pandemic. There would be a lot less Americans dead because of Covid 19.

User @Ace1ner:

He still is my president too lol "Cry Laughing emoji"

User @DWestEsq:

We miss you Mr. President.

User @WARRIORSKINGG3:

Real President, President for all races!

User @Mona\_Wangoi:

Great President Barack Obama.

The second form of admiration were expressions of congratulations toward LeBron for his success in the NBA finals. Examples to this theme can be seen below:

User @iamericapacilan:

Congrats king james "clap emoji, heart emoji's" biggest fan here in Philippines "Philippines flag emoji, smiling heart emoji's"

User @greenhellcat:

good win today king

However, it's also important to consider that although admiration was most common, it is relatively low in popularity in terms of the most likes. Similar to the

responses of the other tweets under analysis, this tweet has an overwhelmingly negative tone. The tweets with the most likes fell into the category of disapproval or disgust. Nearly all the messages of admiration were coupled with similar messages of disapproval in the same context. Some of the responses of disapproval were aimed at LeBron in an attempt to discredit his basketball legacy. Examples of disapproval toward LeBron's legacy are below:

User @CenturyOG

Take in all 4 of Lebrons rings have a ding on them, like I can't make this up "cry laugh emoji" 2012 - lockout season plus beat super young guys 2013 - ray allen saved him 2016 - Kyrie saved him 2020 - doesn't count because bubble

User @giannis34antent

Either a rigged mickey mouse chip or 3-7. Dont know which is worse Although LeBron James had responses falling into the disapproval category of affect, the most liked responses of disapproval were aimed at Barack Obama and his tenure as president. In fact, some messages of disapproval rise to the level of disgust. Common examples of disapproval and disgust toward Barack Obama are below:

User @Cabowabo24:

Worst President ever. 8 years in office and what did he accomplish?  
Responsible for dividing this country more than ANY other president!

User @GetRammed69:

If Obama is so great why didn't he get re-elected for a third term?

User @klloyd67:

Oh yeah, you were the arsonist that started the fire in 2009 and also the Cpt.of the Fire Dept that put it out in 2016, you should be so proud....moron!

User @tmoncada2:

Saw him do nothing for 8 years. Where's the money black lives matter got from people cause its not where it should be. Pieces of shit that's all they are.

User @Tjmntz:

Funk off with ur one eyed BLM bulldust. Obama owns slaves still

There were also responses of disapproval and anger that were not aimed at LeBron James or Barack Obama, but rather the Black Lives Matter movement itself. These responses took shape with the counter hashtag #AllLivesMatter or simply criticisms in general of the movement. Examples can be observed below:

User @MrMoonshine10:

#alllivesmatter

User @Alolivers:

Blacklivesmatters es mierda!!! es español pa que te sea mejor<sup>5</sup>

What becomes clear when looking over these trends of affectual responses, based on the sample size of data collected, is that not many are qualifying LeBron's activism here as insincere, duplicitous or disingenuous. Overall, the comment section of this tweet doesn't necessarily suggest that fans are rejecting LeBron James' grassroots form of

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<sup>5</sup> Translation: "Blacklivesmatters is shit!!! It's Spanish to make it better for you"

activism. Instead, most of the affectual responses are simply disapproving indictments on LeBron James' basketball legacy, Barack Obama's tenure as president, or the Black Lives Matter movement. One reason that this could be the case is that the context of this tweet points to actionable change toward the voting process. It's difficult to claim that LeBron's recruitment of over 10,000 poll volunteers is not some degree of measurable change through activism. However, this tweet is not absent of a viewpoint which disapprove of and rejects the message simply for the sake of argument. In fact, some users highlight a trend in which Trump followers simply seek to disagree with or hate on LeBron James. Examples of this awareness in responses can be observed below:

User @Sdenimopson:

This tweet is not about basketball and yet the haters flock to it anyway.  
The people trying to discredit LeBron's accomplishments every chance they get are unknown and irrelevant so their opinions only matter to them.

User @ WORLDORDER43:

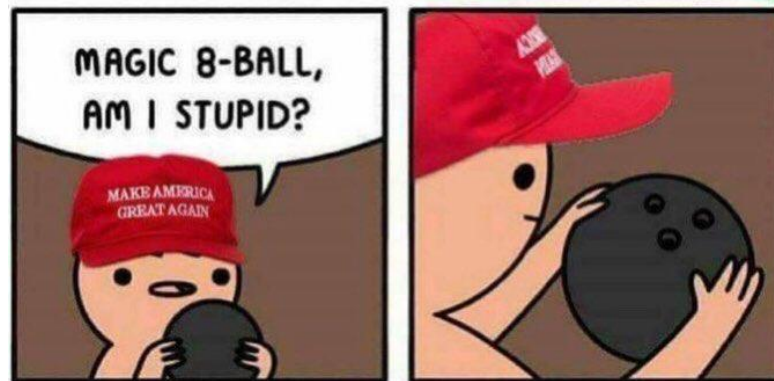
Dam bron all your followers are your hater smdh that's crazy

User @MyHerroAcademia:

Trump twitter fuming

User @bballnews826:

Incoming dumbasses



*Figure 10 Comment to Tweet from September 30th, 2020*

Therefore, there is still an overwhelming response by users that reject this message of activism, just not qualified as insincere, hypocritical, or disingenuous. This result does support the overall argument of this body of research which suggests that, to some degree, fans of LeBron James are rejecting his expressions of athlete activism.

### **Context of Tweet from Tweet on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021**

On March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021, Georgia's Governor, Brian Kemp, signed into law a new voting rights bill that Democrats and many civil rights groups have labeled akin to voter suppression (Cox, 2021). This law will shorten the time period for early in-person voting in an attempt to limit voting after church services known as "souls to the polls" (Cox, 2021). Also, this law will ban citizens to a range of 150 feet from poll lines, with the added provision that bans the offering of food or drinks for those standing in line (Cox, 2021). Georgia Senate Minority Leader Gloria Butler says such a move is designed to prevent people from eating or drinking while waiting in long lines to cast a ballot (Cox, 2021). Additionally, the new law will allow for a Republican-controlled board to temporarily take over local election offices, a move which some critics have suggested is

in retaliation to last year's presidential election where Secretary of State, Brad Raffensperger, refused to overturn election results (Cox, 2021).

The passing of this law has been met with heavy criticism. The Major League Baseball association has responded to this new law by changing venues of their All-Star weekend from Atlanta, Georgia to Denver, Colorado. Commissioner of Baseball, Robert Manfred issued a statement saying that the MLB “fundamentally supports voting rights for all Americans and opposes restrictions to the ballot box” (Godwin, 2021). In response to the venue change by the MLB, LeBron James took to Twitter and tweeted that he is “proud to call myself a part of the MLB family today.” LeBron James demonstrates cognitive self-awareness by mentioning his @MoreThanAVote campaign regarding the issue of voting rights. He demonstrates emotional self-awareness by stating his pride in the decision of the MLB to change locations. Together, LeBron James' athlete activist ego-identity is justified in this message. This tweet is the fourth most favorited tweet containing the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. The tweet in question is below:



Figure 11 Tweet from April 2nd, 2021

## Collected Data of Tweet from April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021

The responses to this tweet ranged from admiration, anger, annoyance, contempt, disapproval, and interest. The most prevalent emotions represented in the responses were contempt and annoyance. The emotional category of contempt was by far the most common from the sample size of data collected and most popular by the sum of likes. Additionally, the theme of whataboutism through contempt was easily recognizable in the responses of users via the circulation of a single picture. Here, the trend of charging LeBron with hypocrisy via the lack of commentary regarding China was what made this theme easily recognizable. The data collected is represented below:

Affect category	Count of Affect category
admiration	2
ambiguous	1
anger	2
annoyance	12
contempt	30
disapproval	1
interest	3

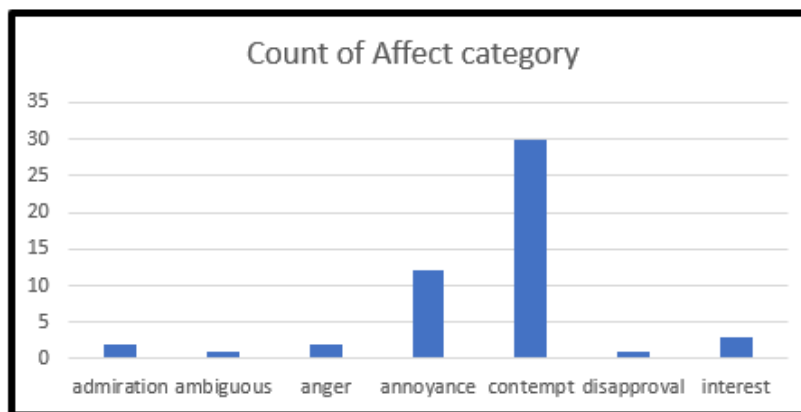


Table 5.1 Count of Affect Category from April 2nd, 2021 Tweet

Affect category	Sum of Likes
admiration	56
ambiguous	1
anger	0
annoyance	2198
contempt	10821
disapproval	0
interest	137

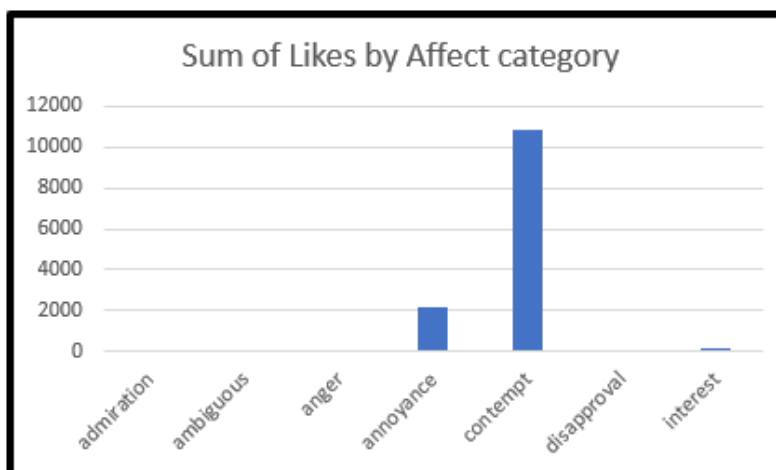


Table 5.2 Sum of Likes by Affect Category from April 2nd, 2021 Tweet

### **Analysis of Tweet from April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021**

Much like the previous tweets, contempt through whataboutism was not only the most common, but also the most popular. What separates this tweet from the last is that most users expressed this emotion not through dialogue but through the repeated posting of a photograph. The picture is one depicting the Uyghur Muslim concentration camp in China. It is important to provide context to this photo and to the Uyghur Muslims that are being held in China. In March of this year the Biden administration formally accused the Chinese government in having engaged in “genocide and crimes against humanity” regarding evidence of concentration camps of Uyghur Muslims (Shesgreen, 2021). The type of abuses taking place in these camps are forced sterilization, rape, torture and forced labor, per an annual State Department human rights report (Shesgreen, 2021). These demonstrable mass detention centers are yet another indictment of the Chinese government.

It has already been established that LeBron James has faced criticisms for his lack of commentary on China and the civil rights abuses taking place in Hong Kong, however when this tweet was published online, the Biden administration had made these formal announcements just days Prior. As a result, the comment section of this tweet was filled with a new form of whataboutism, a single photo of the Uyghur Muslim concentration camps. The photo in question can be observed below:





*Figure 12 Picture of Xinjiang Concentration Camps of Uighur Muslims*

Regencia T 2018, From Escape from Xinjiang: Muslim Uighurs speak of China persecution, Aljazeera, accessed 30 April 2021, < <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/9/10/escape-from-xinjiang-muslim-uighurs-speak-of-china-persecution>>

This photo is a different way to communicate the feelings of contempt through whataboutism. It appears that once this photo was circulated, it was simply reposted over and over again, often with no written dialogue to accompany the photo. Out of the 50 comments collected for data analysis, over half were of this photo. This photo has nothing to do with the new Georgia voting laws, the MLB or LeBron James himself. However, it does call into question some of the criticisms about LeBron James' lack of commentary regarding the civil rights abuses in China, in this case the known human rights violations of this Uyghur Muslim concentration camps. What this picture

symbolizes is essentially, “That’s great about the MLB, what about these concentration camps?”. As the purpose of this body of research is to argue that LeBron James’ expressions of activism are, in many ways, perceived as insincere, hypocritical or disingenuous to his followers, the notion of whataboutism is a clear indicator that fans do in fact view this tweet in this manner.

## **Summary**

To summarize the overall analysis of these five tweets, it is clear that three major trends are presented. First, most of the tweets under analysis contained some form of contempt through the concept of whataboutism. Most of these charges of hypocrisy took shape in the form of bringing up China in some degree or another. Any message that LeBron shares online that has the overall tone of activism toward issues of social justice are consistently met with criticisms of his lack of commentary on the human rights violations of the Communist Chinese Party. These charges of hypocrisy were reflected in dialogue and pictures and support the overall argument of this body of research which suggests that LeBron James’ expressions of activism are, in many ways, perceived as insincere, hypocritical or disingenuous to his followers.

The second trend that is observed in the affectual responses is that most users expressed annoyance toward LeBron and provided ad hominem attacks regarding his expressions of athlete activism. These ad hominem attacks sought to discredit the message of activism by attacking LeBron’s qualifications as an athlete or his high school education. This was not a surprising trend as this notion of “shut up and dribble,” is a well understood commentary regarding athletes encroaching on spaces of entertainment such as sports. With Fox News’s Laura Ingram quite famously echoing these words on

conservative news outlets, it has become a common response by the users observing LeBron's messaging.

Finally, the third trend that was observed in this analysis is how the most popular of tweets by favorite count were overwhelmingly negative. It would appear that the conglomeration of inflammatory emotions online is not only the most liked by the users but are also the most retweeted and engaged the most commentary. What becomes clear overall, is that regardless of the message, regardless of the context of each tweet under analysis, the overwhelming response by the user base is negative.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Overall, the purpose of this thesis was to argue that LeBron James' expressions of activism are perceived as insincere, hypocritical or disingenuous to his followers. In search of an interpretive answer to this argument, this body of research examined how fans receive LeBron James' expressions of athlete activism on the social media platform Twitter. Through a close reading, an interpretive answer found that some followers of LeBron James do in fact view his expressions of activism as hypocritical. The following section will present an overall conclusion to this body of research. There are three sections to this conclusion, implications, limitations and ideas for future research.

### **Implications**

The results of this body of research suggests there is a large audience on Twitter that views LeBron James' expressions of activism as insincere, hypocritical or disingenuous. Using the methodology of a close reading with the theoretical lens of Affect Theory and Plutchik's wheel of emotions, these results were most commonly understood through the affect category of contempt through whataboutism. This consistent trend of whataboutism, which are attempts to discredit a proponent's position through a charge of hypocrisy, suggests that a larger rhetorical phenomenon may be at play which warrant further consideration for research.

By choosing the BlackLivesMatter hashtag, this research identified the connection of what race and activism means for LeBron James as an athlete. Additionally, through examining this connection of race and activism, it would appear as though LeBron James' ego-identity as an athlete activist also encompasses any racial implications toward his activism. To this points, the racial implications of this research suggest that the use of

the BlackLivesMatter hashtag serves as a focal point for negative emotional responses by followers on Twitter. This racial implication is supported by the research identifying both a negative (Tsugawa, 2015) and racial (Chaudhry, 2015) bias in online spaces such as Twitter.

The rhetorical implications of these findings suggest there may be a bandwagon effect regarding how LeBron James' expressions of activism are received by followers. According to Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck, a bandwagon effect is a phenomenon where "...people join what they perceive to be existing or expected majorities or dominant positions in society. It implies that success breeds further success, and alternatives that appear to enjoy a broad popular backing are likely to gain even stronger support" (Schmitt-Beck, 2015).

In the context of the artifacts under analysis, it would appear that when charges of hypocrisy are present in the comment section, more are soon to follow. More research needs to be conducted which considers these findings and the broader rhetorical implications presented in this research. The findings of this thesis are important because the way in which fans perceive expressions of activism, specifically symbolic activism, is what qualifies its effectiveness. Through all of this research, it is important to make clear why it matters how LeBron James' fans perceive his expressions of activism.

As written previously, there are significant consequences for a lack of activism from athletes of considerable prestige. As in the example of Michael Jordan's inaction of activism, when athletes do not use their platform in ways that identify and combat issues of social justice, their leadership acts as a catalyst for other athletes to act in the same manner (Agyemang, 2011). In this way, it matters how these messages are perceived as

they have lasting effects in the ways that other athletes perform activism. The same can be true for athletes and the fans that look up to them.

It matters how fans perceive expressions of activism by athletes because professional athletes hold powerful positions with their platforms. When athletes speak out on issues of social justice, they garner significant awareness to their cause. In the book, *We Matter*, author Etan Thomas sits down and interviews the family members of police shooting victims in the United States. When asked about the impact that athletes have had in using their platforms to speak out, all four interviewees Jahvaris Fulton (brother of Trayvon Martin), Emerald Snipes (daughter of Eric Garner), Tiffany Crutcher (sister of Terence Crutcher), and Allysza Castille (sister of Philando Castile) made clear that support from both fans and athletes helped aid in the process of grieving for their loss (Thomas, 2018). In this way, how fans perceive athlete activism matters.

Finally, in discussion of the responsibility of the athlete activists, NBA superstar Dwayne Wade discusses the responsibility of using his platform as a professional athlete to bring awareness and attention to issues of social justice. After the tragic shooting of Trayvon Martin, the nation was reeling and communities of color felt discouraged, outraged and betrayed by a failed justice system. In response, Dwayne Wade and the rest of the Miami Heat wore hoodies on national television to bring awareness to what it means to be a black man in America. In this display of symbolic activism, Dwayne Wade offers his perspective on the situation “We wanted to really broadcast this to the entire country and the world, because we know in the NBA and being who we are that we have this massive global platform at our disposal, so we utilized it to broadcast this message” (Thomas, 2018). Here, the conversation of responsibility is disclosed as superseding the

responsibility of basketball. When fans perceive these gesture as disingenuous, the activism itself lacks validity and renders it meaningless. In this way, it matters how expressions of activism are perceived by fans.

### **Limitations**

One limitation from research that analyzes messages on social media platforms is that messages in online spaces are subject to incorrect interpretations from automated response programs, also known as bots. These bots are complex and capable of imitating genuine human behavior while also communicating with genuine users in online spaces. According to research from 2017 in the International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining, an estimated 8.5% of accounts on Twitter are bots (p. 467). Additionally, the primary difficulty with identifying fraudulent accounts is that social media sites contain hundreds of millions of users, making it difficult and costly to verify all accounts online (p. 467). Lastly, it is difficult to detect bots because their behavior is constantly evolving as to avoid account suspension, (p. 467). As this body of research merely sought out an interpretive answer to how affect is characterized from the comment section of LeBron James' Twitter profile, it is likely that not all of the 236 comments under analysis were from genuine Twitter users.

It is also important to note that this body of research concluded that LeBron James' expressions of athlete activism on Twitter were met with a significant number of negatively charged emotional responses. These responses were not only the most common, but also the most popular by favorite count. With respect to bots in online spaces, researchers Ema Kusen and Mark Strembeck found that "...bots emotionally polarize during controversial events and even inject polarizing emotions into the Twitter

discourse” (p. 13). Kusen and Strembeck’s findings further validate the likelihood that Twitter bots played a role in the findings of this body of research.

Other limitations of this body of research include the sampling size, methods for interpreting results and scope of the overall research. Time became a significant factor in data collection and therefore only a snapshot of comments could be collected.

Generalizability of this research is limited due to the relatively small sample size. As an example, a total of 50 comments was collected for each tweet under analysis whereas in some cases over 10,000 comments existed.

The interpretation of results is also limited as these interpretations are subject to the worldview of the researcher. Such is the case for all rhetorical analyses which require the interpretation of a critic. Using Plutchik’s wheel of emotion as a taxonomy for classifying emotions, I may interpret one comment as falling into the category of contempt, whereas another researcher may interpret the same comment as anger.

Finally, the scope of this research can be considered to be a fairly narrow overview of LeBron James’ expressions of athlete activism. Only tweets containing the hashtag BlackLivesMatter were collected for analyzing messages of athlete activism. Additionally, of those 23 cases, only the top 5 were considered for data collection. The hashtag BlackLivesMatter is only one case of activism expression and is not fully representable of all the forms of activism that LeBron James expresses on Twitter.

### **Future Research**

This body of research took a criticism approach for interpreting data, while other qualitative methods exist. As an example, researchers that would like to further this study can rely on intercoder reliability, which allows independent coders to evaluate a



characteristic of a message in order to reach the same conclusion, as a method for interpreting data. Additionally, future research could approach this data with a more quantitative methodology. To be specific, a quantitative approach could use computational software that would more consistently detect emotions in human-written messages. As an example, researchers Erik Tromp and Mykola Pechenizkiy developed a Rule-Based Emission Model algorithm (RBEM-Emo) using Plutchik's wheel of emotions that is capable of large-scale interpretation of human-written messages (Erik Tromp, p. 1). Using this type of methodology for analyzing data, not only would more data be able to be collected but a more consistent and generalizable result can be deduced.

Additionally, future research using quantitative methods could also account for fraudulent Twitter accounts using a bot detection algorithm. As stated earlier in the implications section, Twitter bots often amplify polarizing emotions in online spaces. In 2018, researchers Philip Efthimion, Scott Payne and Nick Proferes created a novel, complex machine learning algorithm capable of simple bot detection. Their computational algorithm accounts for "length of usernames, reposting rate, temporal patterns, sentiment expression, followers-to-friends ratio, and message variability for bot detection" (Phillip Efthimion, p. 1). Future research should consider some type of qualifier for data collected which accounts for Twitter bots.

Furthermore, the purpose of this thesis was to examine the responses of followers of LeBron James to qualify what affect category was most prevalent. It was never the purpose of this body of research to examine the 'why' factor which motivates the need for expression. For example, future research could examine the profit motives of LeBron

James in order to understand whether or not a correlation to monetary benefit and activism expression exists.

Lastly, this research only examined one specific type of activism through written messages in the online medium Twitter. However, there are many forms of activism that can be considered for future research, specifically through emotional classification. As an example, there are verbal, symbolic, and visual expressions of athlete activism that can be examined for future research.

In conclusion, throughout this thesis the concept of athlete activism has been met with both celebration and criticism. Thus, it becomes important to circle back to the original claim by conservative news host, Laura Ingraham regarding the notion that athletes should ‘shut up and dribble’. Laura Ingraham’s argument was essentially that LeBron James should stick to sports, and refrain from talking politics because that is not his role as an athlete. However, based on the findings of this body of research, it would appear that followers of LeBron James who do criticize his expressions of activism are more commonly criticizing his lack of expression, not that he should say less. It is what he is choosing not to say that has warranted the most condemnation.

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