

Centering Race in Sport Fan Research

A Call to Action

Anne C. Osborne and Danielle Sarver Coombs

In this book we have tried to highlight the breadth of research on sport fans and fandom, but the reality is that existent research has been dominated by Western scholars and rooted in masculinity and whiteness. In the last several years, numerous researchers, ourselves included, have called out the lack of research on women's fandom, and as a result we have seen considerable advances in the understanding and appreciation of female fans (see e.g. Pfister & Pope, 2018; Toffoletti, 2017; Osborne & Coombs, 2015). Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for research on sport fandom related to BIPOC fans or sport fandom in the global south and Asia. The gap in literature at the intersection of sport, fandom, and race needs to be addressed, particularly as racialized issues continue to feature prominently in sports discourses. In this chapter we outline some of the major areas where race might be centered in future research.

Racist Fans

From the moment sports leagues racially integrated, Black athletes have been subjected to racist abuse. Sometimes these attacks come from other athletes but more often fans are to blame, particularly now that social platforms allow fans to quickly and anonymously fling hatred around.

The 2021 men's European Championship football (soccer) final came down to a penalty shootout. In the end Italy defeated England after three English players, all of whom are Black, missed their shots on goal. Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho, and Bukayo Saka were then targeted with racist attacks on social media and a mural of Rashford was defaced with racist graffiti. League officials, the British prime minister, and citizens condemned the attacks, and PM Boris Johnson vowed that those responsible would be banned from future matches (Kirka, 2020).

Unfortunately, instances like this are neither new nor isolated. With only 25 percent of English Premier League players being Black or ethnic minorities while the coaching, ownership, and fanbases remain almost entirely white (Pearn Kandola, 2021), the league has long struggled with a toxic dynamic. At the opening of its 2020 season, the English Premier League sought to directly address racism on and off the pitch. Players' jerseys featured Black Lives Matter arm patches, at times the names on kits were replaced with "Black Lives Matters," and entire teams took a knee

at the opening of some matches. The league also launched a system for players and staff to report online abuse. Not all fans supported the league's efforts. As the *Washington Post* reported:

Within a week of the mid-June restart, the fuzzy feelings were punctured by a plane, flying over Manchester City's stadium during a match against Burnley, trailing a banner reading "WHITE LIVES MATTER BURNLEY!" The move was quickly decried, but the reminder had been served: Racism has always been—and continues to be—a problem in English football.

Barshad, 2020

The market research firm YouGov conducted a survey of 4,500 football fans across nine European countries to assess attitudes and beliefs about racism in football, finding that 90 percent of British fans think racism remains a problem in football and over half (57 percent) think it is a serious issue. Among "ethnically diverse" fans, 79 percent view racism as a serious issue in football. Spain and the Netherlands reported the least concern about racism in football; France reported the greatest level of concern. Fans believe that the league and the clubs should do more to combat racism but they also think that fans themselves need to shoulder some of the responsibility. In England, for example, only 20 percent of respondents thought fans were doing enough to end racism; only 10 percent of BIPOC fans agree. More than two-thirds of English fans (68 percent) thought they could do more to stop racism (Sky Sports News, 2021).

Anecdotal evidence also tells us that racist fan behavior takes a very real toll on the players. In recent years, tennis star Naomi Osaka has spoken out about the added pressure and resulting mental health concerns she has faced as a biracial woman competing in front of majority-white fans. She is certainly not alone.

There is no greater example than Serena Williams, one of the greatest tennis players of all time and also a leading target of racism from the media, fans and social media. In 2001, Serena and her sister Venus Williams were booed and called the N-word during the final of Indian Wells in California. Then in 2015, moments after she won the French Open, hateful comments on Twitter comparing her to a gorilla went viral.... [A former ESPN creative strategist explained], "I think at a certain point, that hate and that anger fuels a player to kind of prove people wrong, but then ultimately it gets to them. We've seen Serena break down on the court, and if you compare her to other white tennis players, they're viewed as passionate and secure about themselves, and that's why they were defending their game. But when it comes to Serena, she's just the angry Black woman."

Holt, 2021

Not only does racism affect athletes' mental health, it negatively affects their performance. Researchers in Italy used the fact that fans were barred from attending football matches due to COVID-19 as a natural experiment to examine the relationship between racism and on-the-pitch success. They found, "that players from Africa, who are most heavily targeted by racial harassment during matches, experience a significant improvement in performance when supporters are no longer at the stadium, while the performance of players from other regions does not change" (Caselli & Falco, 2021).

We need more of this kind of research that clearly details the relationship between racism, fandom, and athlete performance. We also need more academic research that investigates how racism targeted toward players affects BIPOC fans. Does animus toward athletes spill over into racial tensions in the stands? To what extent does this racism create barriers to fandom?

Athlete Activists

The previous section explores how white fans treat athletes simply for being Black. What about when those athletes respond to the racism the experience and witness? In 2016, Colin Kaepernick, quarterback for the National Football League's San Francisco 49'ers, took a knee as the national anthem played before a game. Kaepernick was not the first or last athlete to use their platform to address racial oppression, but his actions sparked a heated national conversation about athletes as activists. Kaepernick was protesting longstanding racial injustice in the United States and police brutality targeted toward Black people. Fans were quick to respond with vitriol. Videos showing white fans burning Kaepernick jerseys spread across social media along with posts calling him arrogant, disrespectful of the American military, and unpatriotic. A *Rolling Stone* article explained,

Kaepernick's protest, just as [Muhammed] Ali's refusal to participate in the Vietnam War, tapped into an entrenched, historical fear of race in this country, that blackness is by default anti-American. This is why when gymnast Gabby Douglas did not place a hand over her heart for the pledge of allegiance during the 2016 Rio Olympics, she was heavily criticized to the point where she released a public apology. Meanwhile, white shot-putters Ryan Crouser and Joe Kovacs kept their hands down at their side and no one questioned them. Whiteness is considered to be intrinsically American; therefore, a white athlete's allegiance to the flag is assumed whereas with black athletes, it is more heavily enforced.

Jerkins, 2016

Who does the enforcing? The media play a significant role but largely it's the fans. "When Kaepernick takes a knee during the Star-Spangled Banner, when [Lebron] James wears an 'I Can't Breathe' sweatshirt during warm-ups, when the then-St Louis Rams wide receivers emerge from the stadium tunnel in the 'hands up, don't shoot' pose, they are violating the terms of the white fan's contract" (Freedman, 2016).

It's important to note the power structures at work within most American sports leagues. The US's most popular league, the NFL, has a blindingly white fanbase, 83 percent, while the players are predominantly Black (Jerkins, 2016). Sports such as baseball, hockey, NASCAR, and soccer have similarly white-dominant fans. The National Basketball Association is the only major American sports league that comes close to having a fanbase that resembles the racial make-up of the teams. This may account for the tensions that arise when Black players call out racism. "The white fan begrudgingly tolerates the political engagement of the black athlete. More commonly, though, the white fan treats it as ingratitude, arrogance, defiance, all those variations on the theme of uppity" (Freedman, 2016).

Research bears this out. Content analysis of fan reactions, largely on social media, confirm that fans prefer when players "stick to sports" (see e.g. Chapter 34 in this volume). American sport fans with a strong sense of national identity are more likely to react negatively to player protests (Smith & Tryce, 2019; Smith, 2019). Negative perceptions of player activism is also likely to result in fans purchasing less of that player's merchandise, though team merchandise sales are not affected (Mudrick, Sauder, & Davies, 2019). News media sometimes play a role in fans' perceptions of player activism. News frames (either positive or negative) have little effect on audiences' perceptions of well-known players. However, for unknown athletes, news frames can moderate how fans perceive athlete activism (Park, Park, & Billings, 2020). Fans also respond more positively when white allies support Black player protests (Coombs et al., 2020).

These studies shed light on how fans perceive athletes who engage in social justice causes. They do not, however, tell us much about differences in fans' reactions based on their race, largely because the research has been conducted with predominantly white participants. Research should consider the strong possibility that there are racial and ethnic differences in how fans respond to activism, particularly when it relates to racial justice. It is also worth more deeply exploring the racial attitudes of white fans. As Columbia University journalism professor Samuel Freedman (2016) wrote, "The national conversation about activism by African-American athletes, which itself is part of the larger Black Lives Matter movement, has focused primarily on the participants, on their experiences and motivations. That is only half the discussion that should be taking place. The other part of the sporting equation involves the fan, particularly the white fan."

Motives and Behaviors

Freedman's call for greater consideration of white fandom in relation to activism belies the fact that, generally speaking, we already know a great deal about white fans: their motivations, consumption behaviors, media usage, stadium dining preferences, and sport betting habits. We know far less about the motives and behaviors of BIPOC fans.

In a preliminary study, Wann et al. (1999) compared the motivations of Black and white sport fans on eight factors: eustress (i.e., positive stress), self-esteem, escape, entertainment, economic (i.e., gambling), aesthetics, group affiliation, and family needs. They found that white fans reported significantly higher levels of eustress, self-esteem, escape, and family motivation. Black fans did not score higher than white fans on any of the eight factors, suggesting they are less motivated sport enthusiasts. In subsequent research, Bilyeu and Wann (2002) revised the Sport Fan Motivation Scale to include three additional factors: representation (e.g., people of the same background), similarity (e.g., people they have things in common with), and support/perceived greater equality (e.g., people they want to succeed). They concluded that Black fans indeed have different reasons for their sport fandom than had been identified through research conducted with predominantly white research participants. Other research has found racial differences in sport fan behaviors such as game attendance (Armstrong & Stratta, 2004).

The little bit of research there is that centers race in examining fan motives and behaviors clearly demonstrates the shortcomings of research conducted with only hegemonic white, male participants as well as the problem with measures of fandom that are grounded in the experiences of these same hegemonic sports fans. In order to understand the full diversity of sport fandom the participants in sports fan research need to be diverse.

Global Sport

In addition to research relying heavily on white, male participants, the majority of sport fan research has been conducted by scholars in and from white-dominant countries and has focused on the sports that are most popular there, specifically European and American football. Football/soccer is by far the most popular sport in the world with roughly 4 billion fans so the wealth of research on its fans makes sense. The focus on European football fans does not. According to Nielsen, 80 percent of the United Arab Emirates' population is "interested" or "very interested" in football. Thailand (78 percent), Chile (75 percent), Portugal (75 percent), and Turkey (75 percent) follow in their populations' interest in the beautiful game. The U.K. ranks number 17 with only 51 percent of Brits saying they are interested in football (Nielsen, 2018). The top three countries on Nielsen's list are located in the global south or Asia yet we have very little research on fan cultures from these regions.

There are also sports that enjoy large fanbases in non-Western countries. We should know more about them. Cricket, for example, is the second most popular sport in the world with 2.5 billion fans, largely due to its popularity in India and throughout South Asia. Basketball and table tennis are the most popular sports in China, the world's most populous country. As Western sports such as basketball and American football grow in popularity across the globe it is likely that we will see more research on fans in the global South and East. The concern is that like the early research on female fans and Black fans in predominantly white countries, research is likely to reinforce Western standards and understandings of fandom in non-Western parts of the world.

Conclusion

Whether you like it or not, race permeates all aspects of society and affects the way that people are allowed (or not) to move through the world. Sport is certainly no different. In fact, the influence of race may be even more important given the social nature of sport and sport fandom. It is time for the study of sport fandom to take race seriously, not just as another demographic indicator asked of research participants but as a central construct. This chapter has laid out just a few of the ways that race and sport fandom often intersect or even collide. There are certainly others but we hope with this chapter to provide a jumping off point for more diverse and inclusive research.

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