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Shut Up and Dribble: How Twitter Users Attempt to Mute Athlete Opinion

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ABSTRACT

Professional athletes have engaged in several methods of activism to show their discontent with President Donald Trump, including forgoing the traditional White House visit for teams who win national championships. This form of protest has headlined the national media, especially since President Trump has personally uninvited players and teams through Twitter. NBA superstars, such as LeBron James, also took to Twitter to attack and criticize the president, resulting in a cascade of tweets from NBA players with disparaging remarks about the president. This research will analyze and categorize Twitter users' replies to these tweets. Results show that most of the tweet replies were negative towards the NBA players and there were six emergent themes: President Trump, stick to sports and athletic ability, agreement, respect/honor, and President Obama. Overall, the analysis of the tweet replies revealed that though athletes are expected to use their platform and influence, they are not always welcome to express their political opinions and if they do, their voices will be minimized, and their characters attacked as a form of discouragement. Through distraction and detraction, athlete opinion is often spun into conversations that are irrelevant and purposeless. It also identifies a need for more intersectionality between race, sports, and politics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The excitement of the 2017-2018 National Basketball Association (NBA) season was not limited to only on-court activity such as “poster” dunks, mesmerizing cross-overs, unforgettable highlights, broken records, and team and player rivals. Instead, much of the discord was enacted off the court, where players, coaches, and other members of the NBA family spoke openly, and often negatively, about President Donald Trump. Since his inauguration, leading NBA figures such as LeBron James, Gregg Popovich, Stephen Curry, Kevin Durant, and Steve Kerr have taken to the media and their personal social media accounts to denounce the president.

On February 7, 2017, three-time NBA champion and two-time NBA Most Valuable Player (MVP), Stephen Curry, told a columnist that President Trump could be considered an asset, “if you remove the ‘et’ from asset” (Ostler, 2017). Curry’s comments came after Under Armour CEO Kevin Plank described President Trump as an “asset.” Curry, one of the more prominent and highly paid athletes of Under Armour’s brand, sharply dispelled the

description and suggested that he could disassociate with Under Armour if their “leadership is not in line with [his] core values” (Bieler, 2017). In May 2017, coach Gregg Popovich, a five-time NBA champion who is well-regarded as one of the greatest coaches of all time, described President Trump’s conduct as “embarrassing” (Ostler, 2017). This was not the first nor the last time the future Hall of Fame coach expressed his disapproving opinion of the president. When President Trump was first elected in November 2016, Popovich said he was “sick to [his] stomach;” in September 2017, he described the United States as an “embarrassment” and mentioned that President Trump’s thinking was “delusional” (Cato, 2017). Jemele Hill, a former ESPN sports journalist tweeted that President Trump is a “white supremacist” in September and was later suspended in October for more “anti-Trump” tweets (Ostler, 2017). Her tweets prompted a large outcry for her firing and caused the president to demand an apology from ESPN.

In other sports leagues, more specifically the National Football League (NFL), the players, owners, and President Trump were involved in a

fierce and controversial conflict concerning the National Anthem protests, where players knelt or stayed in the locker room during the Anthem, throughout the season. The owners and President Trump walked a fine line between demanding players respect the anthem and infringing upon their First Amendment rights and plain racism. On the other hand, players consistently dealt with fans misconstruing their purpose and being accused of disrespect to the country or the military personnel who sacrificed on their behalf.

President Trump, news journalists, political figures, and enraged fans continuously asserted that players who participated in the anthem protest should be fined, suspended, or even dismissed from the sport. On October 8, 2017, Vice President Mike Pence walked out of an Indiana Colts game after players knelt for the anthem. Before kickoff, Pence tweeted that he could not “dignify any event that disrespects our soldiers, our Flag, or our National Anthem” (Press, 2017). Many felt, though, that Pence’s walk-out was a political ploy since he knew prior to the game that players would kneel for the anthem (they had been kneeling since the beginning of the season). President Trump later tweeted that the Vice President’s trip to the Colts game was “long planned” (Ostler, 2017). A week later, on October 17, 2017, Houston Texans owner Bob McNair referred to NFL players as “inmates” in reference to controlling the anthem protests: “We can’t have the inmates running the prison.” The peak of the NFL’s chaotic season of politics and sport was perhaps the moment when President Trump labeled anthem protesters as “[sons] of [bitches].” At a political rally in Huntsville, Alabama on September 22, 2017, President Trump detailed a scenario where NFL owners removed players who protested the anthem: “Wouldn’t you love to see one of the NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out! He’s fired!’” This quote rang throughout social media and infuriated many players and fans. The following Sunday, protests rose from four on the previous Sunday to 300, and owners even took the field to show support for their players.

Coincidentally, the climax of the NBA’s debacle with politics and sport also transpired within the same weekend. On September 22, Stephen Curry told the media he would not attend the White House visit slated for the Golden State Warriors to celebrate their 2017 NBA Championship. A day later, President Trump tweeted out that Curry’s invitation had been withdrawn, initiating a spiral of tweets, discussions, and reactions that altered the relationship between the NBA and President Trump. This research will analyze what Twitter users are saying in response to NBA players who tweet negatively about President Donald Trump.

METHOD

Data Collection

The first step of data collection determined which NBA players tweeted negatively in response to President Trump’s tweet that disinvited NBA player Stephen Curry to the White House. Tweets from retired or inactive NBA players were not considered. Multiple tweets from one player were not considered; only the first tweet from each eligible player was used. From the NBA players who tweeted negatively about President Trump, only direct replies to the NBA players’ tweet were used for the content analysis (no quoted tweets, retweets etc.). The first 100 available replies to each NBA players’ tweets were collected and coded to determine whether the content was in support of or critical of the athlete or his tweet, and also to identify any themes present. In total, 400 tweets from four NBA players (Bradley Beal, Chris Paul, Draymond Green, and LeBron James) met these criteria and were collected and analyzed.

Data Analysis

To determine whether a reply was in support of or critical of the original tweet and what themes were present in responses to NBA players who tweeted negatively about President Donald Trump, a content analysis was conducted, with each tweet serving as the unit of analysis. First, the replies were reviewed to examine whether the tweet maintained a positive or negative connotation. Also, any immediately identifiable themes were created into inductively derived categories. After the initial review of

tweets, the tweets were once again reviewed and placed into categories that accurately described the overall theme of the tweet. Any newly identified categories were also established.

RESULTS & INTERPRETATION

Analysis revealed that six emergent themes were discussed in the replies to NBA players who tweeted negatively about President Donald Trump: (a) President Trump, (b) stick to sports and athletic ability, (c) agreement, (d) respect/honor, and (f) President Obama. Each emergent theme will now be discussed with examples drawn from the data. All examples are taken verbatim as they appeared in the data; spelling and grammatical errors were left intact.

President Trump

Within both negative and positive replies, President Trump was often referred to in discussion about the conflict about NBA players visiting the White House. Positive replies primarily stood in agreement with President Trump or reiterated his authority or position as president. For example, in response to NBA player Chris Paul telling President Trump to “#StayInYoLane,” one tweeter said “He’s the president of the United States. Pretty sure he’s in his lane when he’s telling people to respect this country. #StayInYourLane.” This stance concedes with the President because of his position. Other comments that mentioned President Trump were derogatory and in support of the NBA player’s original tweet, often making jokes or otherwise criticizing President Trump. In reply to the same Chris Paul tweet, one user said, “Trumpy Dumpty has no lane...he is a chaos maker, devoid of policy, devoid of common sense and human decency.” This user employs a negative twist on Trump’s name and further attacks his character and ability as a president. These two themes are common throughout the replies and illustrate how users use President Trump to support or criticize the players’ attitude expressed in their tweets.

Stick to Sports and Athletic Ability

Of the content that was tweeted with a negative connotation, “stick to sports” or some variation of this theme was used most to derail players from voicing their opinion on political matters. In essence, tweeters implied that

because NBA players are merely athletes, they don’t have the range or right to speak on subjects other than sports. A response to NBA player LeBron James read, “You are the BUM James. Trump has already done more good for the black man than their so called brother (OBUMA) did in eight years. Play ball and leave the politics to people who know what they are doing.” This was especially mentioned if players had shortcomings within their respective careers. In response to NBA player Draymond Green, a tweet said, “Heard that. I’m still wondering how y’all blew that 3-1 lead with a unanimous MVP smh,” in reference to the Golden State Warriors’ loss in the 2016 NBA Finals, after a historic 73-9 regular season, led by the first ever unanimous league MVP Stephen Curry. Again, the idea that athletes are strictly athletes and do not have the intellectual capability to understand or comment on politics is persistent throughout all replies to the players.

Agreement

Many variations of agreement with the players’ comment were present throughout the replies. Examples include simple statements like “Amen” and “Exactly” or more in depth support like “You are a great person! No need to defend yourself.. we all love you” in reply to LeBron James or “We all are Draymond, we all are! #idiotPOTUS.” By simply agreeing with the players’ comments, Twitter users showed their support and solidarity with the players against the President.

Respect/Honor

Respect and/or honor was a popular subject when tweeters attempted to minimize the value of the NBA players’ thoughts. By insinuating that players were being disrespectful to the president, the country, the troops, the anthem, etc., the main idea transitions from President Trump’s antics to athletes’ lack of respect for America. “Because it’s his job to defend this while athletes disrespect it” is an example of this theme. This ploy has been consistent throughout athletes of all sports methods of protest. Whether by kneeling during the anthem or making political statements, a common response is to accuse the player of being disrespectful. This breeds an underlying tone of ungratefulness on the players’ part;

instead of disrespecting the institutions that have granted them this opportunity, they should remain silent and appreciative of their circumstances. It's as if criticism of the government has always been uncommon and abominable.

President Obama

Mention of President Obama was almost exclusively limited to discussing his faults during his term and disapproval of his presidency in comparison to President Trump. In attempt to detract from the topic at hand, tweeters would name drop President Obama in a "but what about Obama" or "what if this was Obama" fashion. In response to LeBron James, a tweeter wrote, "Lost so much respect for you. Had I called Obama a "bum" I would be called a racist. Didn't like Obama, but respected him as POTUS. #MAGA." President Obama has nothing to do with this situation, yet tweeters used his name to create a comparison between him and President Trump. It served no real purpose, since it didn't change the circumstances of the original topic nor provide any further relevant insight.

DISCUSSION

This research analyzed what themes were present in response to NBA players who tweeted negatively about President Donald Trump and whether the responses were more critical or supportive in nature. The results of the data provide several implications for athletes and social activism. First, it's increasingly clear that social activism and political opinion are not always welcome from athletes. Even before the saga with President Trump and the NBA, players from other leagues, namely the NFL, struggled to find their place in the world of activism as an athlete. They were criticized for their method of protest and minimized for their lack of formal political backgrounds. After the analysis of this data, these limitations still exist (stick to sports). Athletes are not granted access to be politically expressive because of their role as athletes. Secondly, even if they choose to work past these limitations, their voices will be distracted and detracted from. By any means necessary, attempts will always be made to change the nature of the conversation (President Obama,

respect/honor). By continually bringing other topics to the forefront, the initial issues are disparaged and nearly lost in translation. However, aside from all the discord and confusion that surrounds athletes' opinions, it's still clear that they are expected to use their platform to advocate for causes. *Which* causes continues to be a fiery debate, but nonetheless, athletes are held to some degree of social responsibility. Whether it's to show respect and cordiality with government and political authority, or to make statements by kneeling and passing up White House visits, athletes are expected to use their influence. The last implication of this research makes room for further research. The intersectionality of race, politics, and sports remains a prominent yet delicate subject. There is no true safe space for athletes to express their opinions on certain subjects that affect them and the communities they represent. However, this is critical to the progression of society and the integral changes for more equity and equality.

LIMITATIONS

There were some limitations in this research regarding the use of the Twitter app. For one, the search filters were limited, so not all tweeted replies were available for analysis. Secondly, in collecting the first 100 tweets available, the Twitter algorithm had effects on what tweets were available at certain times (most recent or most popular tweets versus initial reaction tweets).

CONCLUSION

This research provided preliminary insight on attitudes and opinions towards athletes who use their platform to advocate for social activism. In general, tweets were more critical than supportive and attempted to distract from the issue at hand. It hints at the prevailing stigma around sports and politics. In the future, research could focus on why certain themes are prevalent and why tweeters feel it is appropriate to give certain responses.

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