

Elite Athlete Activism: Perceptions, Authenticity, and Sacrifice

Submitted by
Francis O'Neill

Bachelor of Arts and Social Sciences (Honours), 2016,
The University of New South Wales
Master of Management (Sport Management), 2021,
La Trobe University

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La Trobe University
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Faculty of Law, Business & Economics
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Vorgelegt

von

Francis O'Neill

Aus

Sydney, Australia

Dekan: Prof. Dr. Claas Christian Germelmann

Erstberichterstatter: Prof. Dr. Tim Ströbel

Zweitberichterstatter: Prof. Dr. Geoff Dickson

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	viii
Acknowledgement of Financial Support.....	x
Abstract.....	xi
List of Tables	xiii
List of Figures.....	xiv
List of Abbreviations	xv
Chapter 1: Introduction	16
1.1 Chapter Overview	16
1.2 Background of the Study	16
1.3 Rationale	22
1.4 Cumulative Thesis within the Joint PhD Program.....	24
1.5 Objectives and Research Questions	26
1.6 Research Philosophy	27
1.7 Research Gaps and Study Links	28
1.8 Thesis Structure	32
1.9 Statement of Authorship	33
Chapter 2: Elite athlete activism, advocacy, and protest: a scoping review	34
2.1 Introduction.....	36
2.2 Activism, Advocacy and Protest – A Brief Overview	38
2.2.1 Activism.....	38
2.2.2 Advocacy	39
2.2.3 Protest	40
2.3 Method	41
2.3.1 Identification of the Research Questions	41
2.3.2 Identifying Relevant Studies.....	41
2.3.2.1 Phase 1.	41
2.3.2.2 Phase 2.	42
2.3.2.3 Phase 3.	43
2.3.3 Inclusionary and Exclusionary Criteria	43
2.3.4 Citation Management.....	44

2.3.5 Selection of Studies.....	45
2.3.6 Charting the Data	46
2.3.7 Collating, Summarising, and Reporting the Findings.....	48
2.4 Results.....	48
2.4.1 Frequency Analysis.....	48
2.4.1.1 Year of Publication.	48
2.4.1.2 Journals.	48
2.4.1.3 National Context.	49
2.4.1.4 Country of First Author’s University Affiliation.....	50
2.4.1.5 Research Design.....	50
2.4.1.6 Theoretical Frameworks.	52
2.4.1.7 Terminology.....	53
2.4.1.8 Definitions.....	55
2.4.1.9 League/Event Contexts.	55
2.4.1.10 Eliteness.	57
2.4.2 Thematic Analysis	58
2.4.2.1 Public Perceptions.....	58
2.4.2.2 Athlete Perspectives.....	59
2.4.2.3 Media Coverage.	60
2.4.2.5 Methods.....	62
2.4.2.6 Stakeholder Responses.....	62
2.5 Research Agenda	63
2.6 Conclusion	66
2.7 References.....	67
Chapter 3: Discursive Delegitimisation of Athlete Activism: A Study of the Australian Football Team.....	92
3.1 Introduction.....	93
3.2 Literature Review.....	96
3.2.1 Elite Athlete Activism.....	96
3.2.2 Discursive Delegitimisation.....	98
3.3 Methods.....	102

3.3.1 Case Context	102
3.3.2 Content Analysis	103
3.3.3 Data Collection	103
3.3.4 Data Analysis	105
3.3.4.1 Analytical Frameworks	105
3.3.4.2 Testing the Frameworks	106
3.3.4.3 Coding	107
3.4 Results	107
3.4.1 Disingenuous	111
3.4.2 Distraction	112
3.4.3 Authorisation	113
3.4.4 Disputing the Tactic's Meaning	114
3.4.5 Moral Evaluation	115
3.4.6 Mythopoesis	116
3.4.7 Negative Consequences	117
3.4.8 Rationalisation	118
3.4.9 Stigmatising the Athletes	120
3.5 Discussion	120
3.6 Practical Implications	126
3.7 Limitations and Future Research	128
3.8 Conclusion	130
3.9 References	131
Chapter 4: Standing at a Cost: Consumer Perceptions of Athlete Activism Sacrifice, Support and Authenticity	145
4.1 Introduction	146
4.2 Literature Review	146
4.2.1 Public Perceptions of Athlete Activism	147
4.2.2 Costly Signaling Theory and Sacrifice	148
4.2.3 Authenticity	149
4.3 Method	152
4.3.1 Experimental design	155

4.3.2 Pretests	159
4.3.3 Participants.....	159
4.3.4 Measures	160
4.4 Results.....	165
4.4.1 Pre-Tests, Manipulation Check and Sacrifice Measurement.....	165
4.4.2 Hypothesis Testing.....	165
4.4.2.1 ANOVA	166
4.4.2.2 MANCOVA.....	167
4.5 Discussion	171
4.5.1 Theoretical Contributions	172
4.5.2 Managerial Implications	173
4.6 Limitations and Future Research	174
4.7 References.....	178
Chapter 5: General Discussion	178
5.1 Key Contributions	189
5.1.1 The Four Elements of Perceptions of Athlete Activism.	191
5.1.2 Authenticity as a Central Concept	194
5.1.3 The Social Media Wave.....	196
5.1.4 Cultural Contexts Matter.....	197
5.2 Theoretical Implications	198
5.3 Managerial Implications	200
5.4 Methodological Implications	203
5.5 Limitations	203
5.6 Future Research Directions	204
5.7 Conclusion	207
References	208
Appendix A: International Conference Presentations	246
Appendix B: Study 1 Supplemental File.....	247
Appendix C: Study 3 Ethics Approval – La Trobe University.....	250
Appendix D: Study 3 Ethics Approval – University of Bayreuth.....	252
Appendix E: Study 3 Online Survey	253

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Abstract

Elite athlete activism is an increasingly visible and contested feature of contemporary sport. When elite athletes engage in activism on social or political issues, observers are often divided in their perceptions, with strong support and opposition taking place. This thesis explores the dynamics of how activism by elite athletes is perceived, resisted and evaluated by the public and sports stakeholders. The thesis addresses these topics through three interconnected studies, employing a systematic review, qualitative and quantitative methods, underpinned by a pragmatist research philosophy.

Study 1 presents a scoping review of 151 empirical articles on elite athlete activism, advocacy and protest. Utilising a five-stage scoping review methodology, the study aimed to synthesise the existing empirical literature on athlete activism to identify key patterns, gaps, and trends. Results revealed inconsistent use of the terms activism, advocacy, and protest; an over-focus on the American context and Colin Kaepernick; a lack of attention to opposition to athlete activism; and no clear identification of best-practice strategies for athletes. This study established a comprehensive research agenda and highlighted the need for theory-driven, cross-cultural, and outcome-focused research on athlete activism.

Study 2 presents a qualitative analysis examining how online observers attempt to discursively delegitimise activist athletes. The study aimed to identify the delegitimation strategies being employed by critics of athlete activism. A content analysis was conducted of 5,844 social media comments responding to a case of activism by the Australian men's football team. Using abductive coding the study identifies nine discursive delegitimation strategies used by critics to undermine activist athletes, including two newly identified forms. The study

demonstrates that social media is used as a platform to counteract athlete activism and conceptualises an integrative framework of discursive delegitimisation strategies in elite sport.

Study 3 presents a quantitative experiment examining how an athlete activist's personal sacrifice impacts support for the athlete and perceptions of their authenticity. Drawing on Costly Signalling Theory, the study makes use of an online survey of German sports fans. Participants ($N = 481$) are exposed to an AI-generated athlete engaging in activism under one of three conditions: No Sacrifice, Sacrifice A (Refusing prize money) or Sacrifice B (Boycotting). Findings reveal that personal sacrifice significantly enhanced participant perceptions of the athlete's authenticity and support for both the athlete and their activism. Pre-existing attitudes to activism and alignment with the social issue are highlighted as strong predictors of support. The study provides valuable insight for athletes and managers navigating activism and stress the importance of ideological alignment.

Together, these three studies offer new insights into how elite athlete activism is perceived, resisted, and evaluated. It makes several key contributions to the field of sport management by providing greater understanding of the major elements shaping perceptions of athlete activism; highlighting the role of authenticity; exploring the influence of social media; and centralising the importance of cultural context. The thesis discusses its practical, theoretical and methodological implications, and provides recommendations for future research into this important issue.

List of Tables

Table 1.1 Selected Journals and their Rankings.....	26
Table 1.2 Author Contributions	34
Table 2.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria	45
Table 2.2 Number of Articles by Scopus Subject Area.....	50
Table 2.3 Number of Articles by National Context and Country of First Author’s University Affiliation.....	51
Table 2.4 Frequency of Author-Stated Methodologies	52
Table 2.5 Frequency of Theoretical Frameworks	53
Table 2.6 Frequency of Terms Activism, Advocacy, and Protest – Abstract or Title or Keywords.....	54
Table 2.7 Athletes Who Were the Focus of at Least Two Studies.....	56
Table 2.8 League/ Event Contexts	57
Table 3.1 Framework of Delegitimisation Strategies.....	101
Table 3.2 Social Media Threads of Soccerroos’ Video Included in Study	105
Table 3.3 Prompt Questions for Coding.....	108
Table 3.4 Delegitimisation Strategy, Sub Strategies, Proportion of Use, and Example Quotes	109
Table 4.1 Composite Reliability, Average Variance Extracted, and Interconstruct Correlations.....	167
Table 4.2 ANOVA Results	167
Table 4.3 MANCOVA Results	170

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Overview of Thesis.....	31
Figure 2.1 Study Selection Process: PRISMA Flow Chart.....	47
Figure 2.2 Frequency of Studies Examining Elite Athlete Activism, Advocacy and Protest.	49
Figure 4.1 Player Profile of Fictional Elite German Tennis Player	157
Figure 4.2 Experimental Stimulus. No Sacrifice, Sacrifice A and Sacrifice B.....	158

List of Abbreviations

AAP	Athlete Activism, Advocacy, and Protest
ABDC	Australian Business Deans Council
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
ASJC	All Science Journal Classification
CST	Costly Signaling Theory
DD	Discursive Delegitimisation
FIA	Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
GATAA	General Attitude to Athlete Activism
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and others
MANCOVA	Multivariate Analysis of Covariance
NBA	National Basketball Association
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
NFL	National Football League
NRL	National Rugby League
NWSL	National Women's Soccer League
PFA	Professional Footballers Association
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
SMOA	Support for the Method of Activism
USWNT	United States Women's National Team
WNBA	Women's National Basketball Association
WTA	Women's Tennis Association

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis investigates elite athlete activism. This research comprises three interconnected studies: a scoping review of the athlete activism literature, an analysis of the discursive strategies used to delegitimise activist athletes, and an investigation of how an athlete activist's personal sacrifice impacts support for the athlete and perceptions of their authenticity. In doing so, the thesis highlights the complex and contested nature of athlete activism.

1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter outlines the thesis, beginning with the background to the research and the growing relevance of athlete activism within the field of sports management. The chapter frames the investigation within the current research domain, focusing on the theoretical, managerial and social implications of athlete-led activism, advocacy and protest. The thesis establishes its rationale by positioning athlete activism as a historically significant, timely, and contested issue. The chapter then explains how this research is situated within the Joint PhD Program between La Trobe University and the University of Bayreuth, and as such is structured as a cumulative thesis. The chapter then identifies the overarching research objectives, research questions and research gaps that underpin the thesis and provides an overview of the links between the various studies. The structure of the cumulative thesis is then explained, accompanied by a visual overview of the three empirical studies (Figure 1.1), highlighting the interconnections between the research and their contribution to the thesis objectives. The chapter concludes with a statement of authorship and acknowledgement of contributions by co-authors.

1.2 Background of the Study

Athlete activism is not a recent development, but rather a long-standing feature of elite sports that has evolved across generations, countries, and social contexts. As Cunningham et al. (2021, p. 1) explains, sport has long served as a platform to “resist and persist”. Hence, sport offers

a platform for athletes to challenge social and political issues, and in doing so, change how people think, behave, and feel.

In recent years, athlete activism has emerged as an increasingly prominent yet persistently polarising aspect of contemporary sport (Magrath, 2021). Athletes around the world use their platforms to advocate for change on a range of social and political issues, including racial justice and human rights (Kluch, 2020; Y. Kluch et al., 2023a), climate change (Bingaman & Mike, 2024), and mental health (Cassilo, 2022). However, public reactions to elite athletes speaking out are often divided. While some athletes are celebrated for their public stances, others face a backlash, incurring damage to their careers and reputations (Kaufman, 2008). Elite athlete activism is therefore both influential and highly divisive, raising important questions about the role that athletes play as social actors.

While public debate often frames athlete activism negatively, athlete activism in sport is not universally perceived unfavourably. Instead, it is framed through audience expectations about the role of athletes and social norms, yielding both negative and positive evaluations. In contrast to corporate activism where consumers expect brands to engage with social and political issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020), athletes are often judged against the “stick to sport” expectation. A consequence of this is that even when perceived positively by sections of the society, the vocal opponents force the framing around athlete activism into a negative discussion. Accordingly, this thesis acknowledges both resonance and resistance, examining conditions that can shift perceptions both negatively (Study 2) and more positively (Study 3).

Athlete activism has gone through several ‘waves’ (Edwards, 2017). The early twentieth century saw numerous athletic figures use their status to combat racial discrimination setting a precedent for future generations. At the 1906 ‘intercalary’ Olympic Games, Irish athlete Peter

O'Connor became the first recorded activist Olympian when he scaled a flagpole during the medal ceremony to replace the Union Jack with an Irish flag (Boykoff, 2019). Activism continued into the civil rights era, with American athletes such as Jackie Robinson and Althea Gibson symbolising a broader movement for racial integration and representation in sport. By the 1960s and 70s, athlete protest became front page news, with Muhammad Ali's opposition to the Vietnam War and Tommie Smith and John Carlos' raising fists at the 1968 Olympics, becoming iconic symbols of athlete activism (Agyemang et al., 2020).

Athletes who engage in activism often face sanctions, professional repercussions, and public criticism (Kaufman, 2008). As noted by Agyemang et al. (2020), athlete activism has long been divisive, with debates often raging over whether sport is an appropriate venue for political expression. Despite instances of public resistance, athlete activism is recognised as a meaningful contributor to institutional change, often serving as a catalyst for increased dialogue on critical issues (Cooper et al., 2019; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). Nevertheless, the backlash faced by activist athletes underscores a longstanding societal discomfort with the intersection of sports and politics—a tension that continues to influence public perceptions of athlete activism.

Perceptions also depend on the form of sport. In team sports, a lone athlete's activism can be judged as imposing costs on teammates like distraction and competitive disadvantage (Sappington et al., 2019). This criticism was often utilised as in the case of Colin Kaepernick (Hawkins et al., 2022). This is of course unless the action is undertaken collectively by the team, such as in the case of the Socceroos 2022 World Cup activism against Qatar (Chapter 3). By contrast, individual-sport athletes such as Naomi Osaka and the fictional tennis player in Chapter 4, primarily bear the consequences themselves, reducing the perceived spillover costs to others.

Today, athlete activism has expanded significantly in both reach and accessibility, driven by the global influence of social media and increasing public expectations for athletes to engage with social and political issues. Social media has shifted the power dynamics between athletes, traditional media, and organisations, allowing athletes to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and speak directly to the public (Brown-Devlin, 2022; Frederick et al., 2017). Modern activism is personified by Colin Kaepernick's 2016 kneeling protest during the U.S. national anthems in the NFL. This marked not only a turning point in the global visibility of athlete activism but also underpinned increased academic interest in athlete activism (O'Neill et al., 2023). Kaepernick's case prompted both intense praise and condemnation while creating widespread discussion of issues like race, patriotism, and protest in sport (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020; Doehler, 2023; Magrath, 2021). Kaepernick's activism, largely amplified through platforms like Twitter and Instagram, became symbolic of broader struggles for racial justice and spurred similar actions by other athletes worldwide. At the same time, star athletes like LeBron James and Naomi Osaka, often depicted as leading voices of contemporary activism, used social media to position themselves as both athletes and social leaders (Chen & Kwak, 2022; Frederick et al., 2019).

Athlete activism has become a global phenomenon, with each instance shaped by local cultures, identities, and, most importantly, the specific social and political issues at stake. Australian cricket captain Pat Cummins used his platform to advocate for climate action, signalling a shift there toward environmental activism (Bingaman & Mike, 2024). In Europe, the German national football team silently protested FIFA's "OneLove" armband ban at the 2022 World Cup, an indication that athletes are willing to directly challenge sporting institutions (Kokholm et al., 2024). Athletes with disabilities have consistently engaged in advocacy — a concept closely aligned with activism—to promote inclusion and reform. This is evident in

research on Irish and Brazilian Paralympic athletes, who have voiced concerns about underrepresentation and structural inequalities within sport (Haslett et al., 2020; Kirakosyan, 2021). In Asia, athlete activism is evident in non-traditional sport spaces, such as esports, where gamer Blitzchung's public support for Hong Kong's independence sparked international debate (Klíma, 2022). These cases demonstrate that athlete activism transcends national boundaries, encompassing a wide range of causes and increasingly sophisticated modes of resistance. Despite contextual and expressive differences, they collectively reaffirm the evolving role of athletes as influential agents of change within a globalised society.

Although contemporary athlete activism is more visible and digitally interconnected through social media, it continues to carry many of the same fundamental risks, including career jeopardy, public backlash, and damage to personal reputation. Due to its divisive nature, considerable academic research has examined perceptions of athlete activism (O'Neill et al., 2023). Public responses to athlete activism are sharply divided and often shaped by personal factors of the public such as political views (Smith, 2019), race and culture (Click et al., 2022; Knoester et al., 2022) and education (Allison et al., 2021). Similarly, both the form of activism and the specific social issue being addressed can significantly influence public perceptions of athlete activism. (Cunningham & Regan, 2012). For some people, activism enhances their perception of athletes as role models; however, for others, it challenges the expectation that sport should remain apolitical, resulting in frustration or disengagement with the athlete or the sport itself. These reactions can further affect an athlete's image and commercial partnerships. For example, Mudrick et al. (2019) noted that activism can enhance athlete brand equity among socially conscious audiences, while simultaneously risking alienation of more traditional or conservative consumers.

For athletes, the consequences of their activism extend far beyond public perception. Activists like Kaepernick have famously experienced exclusion from their profession as a direct result of their activism (Hoffmann et al., 2020). Other NFL players involved in the national anthem protests similarly faced reduced contract opportunities, demonstrating the material consequences of political expression (Niven, 2020). Activist athletes have also been attacked in digital spaces, where they have been the targets of abuse, harsh accusations, and misinformation (Boatwright, 2022; Sappington et al., 2019). Even when activism aligns with the values of the public, activists can still be criticised for being ineffective or insincere (Thomas & Fowler, 2023). Thus, while the platforms and methods of engaging in activism have evolved, the risks facing these athletes remain deeply entrenched.

Sports organisations are also not immune to the risks and consequences of athlete activism. For these organisations, the financial implications of athlete activism are indeed real. The 2016 NFL kneeling protests underpinned short-term drops in viewership and fan engagement (Watanabe & Cunningham, 2020), along with public dissatisfaction at the league's handling of the activism (Anderson, 2020). Sports organisations therefore face a difficult choice: support athlete activism and face backlash from conservatives or oppose activism and face backlash from athletes and social progressives. While certain professional sports leagues and clubs—such as the NBA in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement—have chosen to align themselves with athlete protests, these organisations often exercise caution by portraying support in a non-confrontational manner to avoid controversy (Kwak et al., 2023). In the same way, activism suppression by organisations creates the risk of reputational backlash and accusations of unfairness (Cooper et al., 2019; Klíma, 2022). At the same time, sponsors expect sport organisations to manage activist athletes in ways that protect their brand. Those same sponsors may face pressure to support or

sever ties with sports and athletes based on how activism is handled (Bingaman & Mike, 2024). This places sport organisations in a precarious position where they are caught between stakeholder groups with diverging values on the politicisation of sports (Kim et al., 2020). In this evolving landscape, sport organisations are active participants and stakeholders in the effects of athlete activism, whether they choose to engage or not.

In summary, athlete activism is a globally visible and socially influential part of contemporary sport. Activism provokes a range of public emotions from admiration and support to resistance and intense public debate. While cases of athlete activism differ greatly across cultural and political contexts, one thing is certain: the public is divided in how it receives and interprets these acts.

1.3 Rationale

The resurgence of athlete activism within global sports has generated widespread attention, discourse, and research around the role of athletes. While high-profile cases (e.g., Kaepernick) have dominated media coverage and academic discourse, there remains a limited systematic understanding of how sports consumers respond to athlete activism. Research on athlete activism has tended to focus on media framing of cases or how demographic and personal factors influence support or opposition to activism. This thesis aims to address that gap by examining how activism is perceived, resisted, and authenticated by audiences across in somewhat novel cultural contexts.

Research on athlete activism is fragmented, with limited theoretical integration or synthesis across disciplines such as sport management, sociology, communication, and marketing. Despite growing calls to examine the factors surrounding the impacts and effects of athlete activism, the literature lacked empirically grounded research that engages with public resistance or research systematically exploring how specific activism strategies can reduce negative public perceptions.

By examining these elements, this thesis contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of athlete activism as a deeply contested social phenomenon.

Given the fragmentated nature of the research, a crucial first element of this research is a systematic scoping review of the empirical athlete activism literature (Study 1). This review offers a comprehensive and systematic overview of existing empirical studies. The review was necessary in order to capture not only the existing knowledge but to highlight where crucial gaps remained, and therefore identifies key research patterns, dominant themes, critical gaps and importantly an agenda for future research.

This research agenda formed the development of Study 2 and Study 3, beginning with an identified need for theory-based studies of athlete activism. Advancing a field of study requires grounding research within a strong theoretical framework (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Theoretically, Study 2 and Study 3 are based on discursive delegitimisation (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018; Van Leeuwen, 2007) and Costly Signaling Theory (CST) (Kane & Zollman, 2015) respectively. These studies extend our knowledge of how activism may be neutralised through public discourse and how activists can signal credibility via sacrifice. Additionally, the inclusion of both qualitative and experimental methods provides comprehensive insight, offering both breadth and depth of understanding into how audience perceptions are formed and influenced. In this way, the thesis responds directly to gaps identified in previous research and introduces new empirical data to inform academic and industry decisions.

In accordance with calls to prioritise culture within sports research (McGannon & Smith, 2015), and given the overrepresentation of the American context in this field (O'Neill et al., 2023), non-American cultural contexts were considered an imperative. To that end, the Australian and German contexts offer important perspectives rarely addressed in the existing literature. Both

countries share histories of complex relationships between sport and politics, making them fertile ground for understanding how activism is perceived within a sports context. Germany represents a context with a nuanced history where sport has been central to both the national identity and political agenda of the country (Yannick Kluch et al., 2023b). Australia's own nuanced history of sports and politics is one of evolving debates around history and Indigenous recognition through sport (Cleland et al., 2022). While sharing similar traits, these countries provide rich contextual contrasts. Furthermore, elite athlete activism is increasingly visible in both nations. The many high-profile instances of athlete activism in Germany and Australia are exemplified by the independent protests staged by their national football teams against the Qatar World Cup (Meier et al., 2023; Rayson, 2022).

In summary, reasoning behind this research is to address deficiencies in the athlete activism literature. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, this provides a theoretically informed and empirically grounded examination of the athlete activism literature, an analysis of the discursive strategies used to delegitimise activist athletes, and an investigation of how an athlete's personal sacrifice impacts support for the athlete and perceptions of their authenticity.

1.4 Cumulative Thesis within the Joint PhD Program

This thesis is submitted as part of the Joint PhD program between La Trobe University, Australia, and the University of Bayreuth, Germany. The project was supervised by staff from both universities. The same thesis was submitted for examination at both universities. Each university conducted their own examination process.

The Joint PhD Program provides an international framework for investigating athlete activism through interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives. The program supports strategic objectives at both institutions, fostering research that is globally relevant and practically impactful. For addressing culturally significant phenomena within sports, like athlete activism, international

collaboration is vital for bringing together alternative perspectives and varied expertise (Wang et al., 2015). This collaboration enables the integration of diverse methodologies and theoretical insights, enhancing the academic quality and relevance of the research.

The program also supports both universities' commitments to delivering high-impact research through international partnerships and interdisciplinary engagement. Similarly, the program reflects their internationalisation and transfer strategies, which focus on strengthening global research networks, and promoting interdisciplinary projects to bridge the gap between academia and practice. Based on these shared goals, the Joint PhD Program provides a strong framework for addressing the complex research questions posed by athlete activism research in an international context, combining diverse methodological approaches and generating academically rigorous and practically relevant contributions.

The thesis adopts a cumulative format, consisting of three interconnected empirical research studies that collectively address the complex and contested phenomenon of athlete activism. This format enables an in-depth exploration of athlete activism through a progression of three uniquely distinct but interrelated studies. Each study builds upon the last, contributing to a richer understanding of how athlete activism is perceived, evaluated, and resisted by the public.

The articles included in this thesis are either published or currently under review. Journal selection was guided by recognised academic quality benchmarks, including the ABDC Journal Quality List, and the VHB-JOURQUAL ranking, which evaluate journals based on scholarly reputation and impact. An overview of the selected journals and their corresponding rankings is presented in Table 1.1:

Table 1.1*Selected Journals and their Rankings*

Study	Journal	Status	ABDC*	VHB**
1	European Sport Management Quarterly	Published	A	C
2	Sport Management Review	Published	A	N/A
3	Journal of Sport Management	In Press	A	C

Note. * ABDC Journal Quality List 2024; **VHB Publication Media Rating 2024

1.5 Objectives and Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the complex and contested nature of elite athlete activism. Through a nuanced examination of athlete activism across cultural contexts, I seek to strengthen the theoretical foundations of activism scholarship in sport. This research offers practical implications for athletes, sport managers, and sponsors navigating the reputational dynamics of athlete activism.

The objectives of the thesis are as follows:

- Study 1: To explore the empirical literature on elite athlete activism to identify key themes, conceptual inconsistencies, and gaps in research, and to propose a future research agenda.
- Study 2: To examine how athlete activism is resisted and delegitimised by the public through discursive strategies in online fan discourse.
- Study 3: To investigate how varying levels of personal sacrifice influence public perceptions of activist athletes, including perceived authenticity, support, and brand evaluation.

The thesis has been guided by the following research questions:

Study 1: RQ 1) How has athlete activism, advocacy and protest been covered in the literature?

RQ 2) What themes and topics are covered in the athlete activism/ advocacy/ protest literature?

RQ 3) What are the research gaps in the athlete activism/advocacy/protest literature that could be organised in a future research agenda?

Study 2: RQ 1) What discursive delegitimisation strategies were used by critics of the Australian men's football team's activism?

Study 3: RQ 1) What impact does an athlete's personal sacrifice have on sports consumer perceptions of the athlete and their activism?

1.6 Research Philosophy

Although no single study in this thesis follows a specific research paradigm, it is important that the overall thesis is guided by a clear research philosophy. Grounding empirical research in a philosophical perspective is essential, as it informs the research design, guides methodological choices, and ensures coherence between the study's aims, methods, and interpretations (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). The use of a philosophy also makes a researcher's positionality and assumptions explicit, increasing the transparency and rigor of the research (Žukauskas et al., 2018). Accordingly, and reflecting the integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods, this study adopts a pragmatist research philosophy.

Pragmatism prioritises practicality and real-world applications over abstract conceptualisation (Morgan, 2007). In research, a pragmatic view embraces both interpretivist and positivist approaches, focusing on what methods work best to address the purpose and research questions. Pragmatism therefore does not commit exclusively to utilising either quantitative or qualitative methods but rather, it encourages the integration of both, recognising that they offer

complementary insights into complex issues (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Rather than being guided by strict philosophical allegiances, this view aligns with the use of multi methods, allowing for flexible ‘what works’ approach to research, tailored to the complexities of real world issues, such as the sociocultural phenomenon of athlete activism (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

This thesis has therefore adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods in line with the pragmatic paradigm. Pragmatism is especially suitable for this thesis as the research explores the multidimensional and sociocultural phenomenon of athlete activism across multiple cultural contexts. In this way, the researcher has been free to choose methods, frameworks and procedures that best meet the needs of addressing the issue of how athlete activism is perceived in various situations. A pragmatic philosophy has accommodated the use of multiple data sources, tools and forms of analysis to generate both depth and generalisability. This aligns with the thesis’s goal of producing meaningful implications for both sports management and sports practitioners. The philosophy also acknowledges the researcher’s positionality of addressing the issue of athlete activism from a neutral perspective, rather than one with an agenda (Biesta, 2021). This position is taken with a desire to inform practice and improve social conditions, rather than to drive a specific agenda (Biesta, 2010). In summary, pragmatism provides an apt philosophical foundation for this thesis's interdisciplinary aims and research questions, enabling a more holistic understanding of how athlete activism is received and interpreted across multiple contexts.

1.7 Research Gaps and Study Links

A review of the athlete activism literature within sport management revealed that, although the volume of research was greater than initially anticipated, it remained fragmented and lacked a coherent synthesis. Despite the growing body of work, no comprehensive review had been conducted, underscoring the need for a systematic assessment of the field.

To address this research gap, the initial phase of this thesis consisted of a scoping review (Study 1) of the empirical literature on athlete activism, advocacy and protest. This review discerned four key research gaps. First, it identified a lack of conceptual consistency, with the terms activism, advocacy, and protest being frequently used interchangeably and without definitions. Existing studies incorrectly identified cases of activism as advocacy and vice-versa. Thus, Study 2 and Study 3 adopted a singular method of clearly defining and referring to athletes' actions as activism. Second, the review revealed a strong over-reliance on U.S. case studies, particularly involving Colin Kaepernick, limiting the field's ability to account for how athlete activism manifests across different cultural and sporting contexts. Therefore, in line with the joint PhD program, Studies 2 and 3 explored perceptions of athlete activism in the unique cultural contexts of Australia and Germany respectively.

Third, the scoping review identified that a clear gap existed in understanding how athlete activism is challenged and resisted by opponents. Previous research had focused on how athlete activism was negatively framed via media (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018), yet no research had considered how members of the public push back against activism. This prompted Study 2 which aimed at identifying how activist athletes are delegitimised activist athletes through public discourse via social media. The study demonstrated through qualitative analysis that opponents use a variety of strategies to delegitimise athletes to neutralise their activism. A unique gap was identified in Study 2 where athletes were criticised as being disingenuous due to a lack of personal sacrifice.

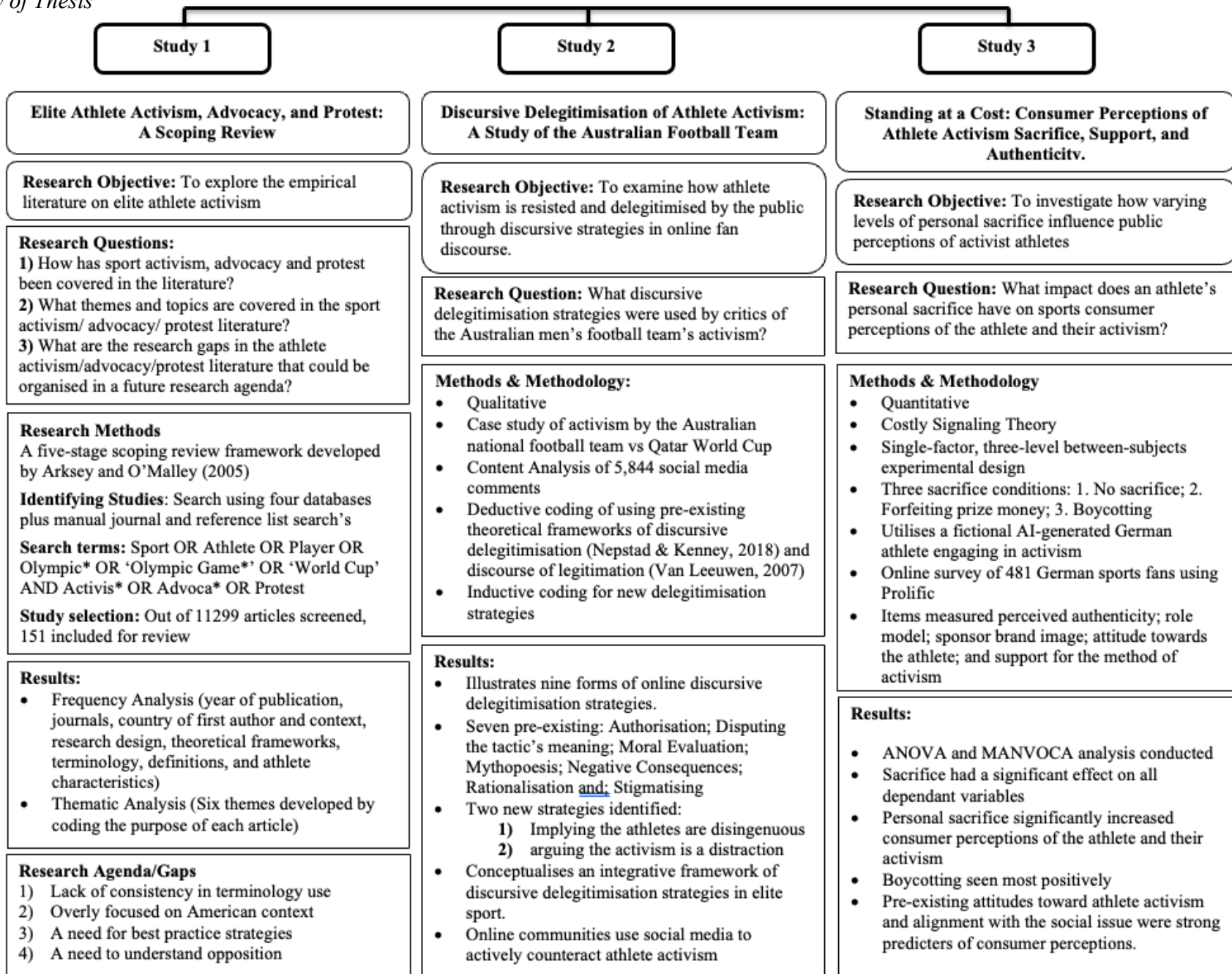
Finally, Study 3 draws upon research gaps identified in both Study 1 and Study 2. The scoping review highlighted a shortage of practical or strategic guidance for athletes and seeking to engage in activism effectively. Similarly, it remained unknown if personal sacrifice would indeed

improve public perceptions of activist athletes or if this was simply a counterfactual claim used to attack the athletes. Acknowledging these two gaps, Study 3 focused on quantitatively testing the hypothesis that making a personal sacrifice when engaging in activism would increase public perceptions of the athlete and their activism.

In summary, this approach, beginning with a scoping review, informed the design of the subsequent studies, which further informed upon each other. Each study uniquely identified and filled research gaps through an integrated framework, advancing our understanding of perceptions of athlete activism. Taken together, the three studies presented in this thesis offer a significant and original contribution to the athlete activism literature by advancing both conceptual and empirical understanding of how activist athletes are perceived by the public. This research represents one of the first multi-method studies to explore public and consumer responses to athlete activism across multiple cultural contexts often overlooked in existing scholarship. Figure 1.1 below provides a visual overview of the three studies of the thesis.

Figure 1.1

Overview of Thesis



1.8 Thesis Structure

The remaining thesis is organised as follows. Chapter 2 presents Study 1, a scoping review that systematically maps the existing literature on athlete activism, advocacy, and protest. This chapter identifies four key gaps in the literature: a lack of conceptual clarity; an over-emphasis on the American context; limited exploration of opposition to athlete activism; and an absence of practical guidance for activist athletes and managers. It also presents a comprehensive future research agenda to guide the development of more methodologically diverse, theoretically grounded and globally relevant studies.

Chapter 3 details Study 2, a qualitative study investigating how athlete activism is discursively naturalised by members of the public on social media. Drawing on frameworks of discursive delegitimisation, the study analyses fan discourse in reaction to activism by the Australian men's national football team. Study 2 identifies nine distinct discursive strategies used to challenge the legitimacy of activist athletes. The study offers new theoretical insights into publicly led resistance to athlete activism while expanding the application of legitimisation theory to sport contexts.

Chapter 4 presents Study 3, a quantitative survey experiment that explores how personal sacrifice influences by athletes engaging in activism can influence sports consumer perceptions. Guided by CST, Study 3 examines how varying levels of personal sacrifice by an activist athlete affect consumer perceptions of their authenticity, role model status, attitude to the athlete, support for method of activism, and brand-related outcomes. The findings support CST and find that sacrifice does improve consumer perceptions of athlete activism. The study makes valuable theoretical and practical contributions by highlighting the importance of credible and authentic signals in shaping audience support and trust.

Chapter 5 serves as the general discussion and conclusion of the thesis. This chapter synthesises the findings across all three studies to provide an integrated understanding of public responses to athlete activism. It discusses the theoretical contributions of the thesis, including the development and application of theoretical frameworks and novel methodological approaches. Chapter 5 also outlines managerial implications and recommendations for athletes, sport organisations, and sponsors seeking to engage with activism. Limitations of the thesis are then discussed. Finally, a detailed agenda for future research inquiries is presented, reinforcing the agenda proposed from the scoping review and pointing to new directions for cross-cultural, organisation-centred, and solution-focused research in athlete activism.

Note. Studies 1, 2 and 3 each contain their own reference lists, as reflecting the specific studies. A final integrated reference list is also presented at the end of the thesis containing references from all five chapters.

1.9 Statement of Authorship

Except where specifically referenced in the text of this thesis (cf. authors and journal), this thesis contains no material that has been published elsewhere or extracted, in whole or in part, from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma. All work included is original, and any external contributions have been appropriately acknowledged. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma at any other tertiary institution. All co-authors have been informed and have agreed to the submission or publication of the following articles. As referenced in the text, material that has been published, accepted or submitted for publication, in which I am a co-author, includes the following three papers:

Study 1: O'Neill, F., Dickson, G., Ströbel, T., & Thompson, A. J. (2025). Elite Athlete Activism, Advocacy, and Protest: A Scoping Review. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 25(1), 145-173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2023.2287471>

Study 2: O'Neill, F., Thompson, A.J., Dickson, G., & Ströbel, T. (In Press) Discursive Delegitimisation of Athlete Activism: A Study of the Australian Football Team. *Sport Management Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2025.2514864>

Study 3: O'Neill, F., Ströbel, T., Thompson, A. J., & Dickson, G. (202x). Standing at a Cost: Consumer Perceptions of Athlete Activism Sacrifice, Support, and Authenticity. (Under Review at *Journal of Sport Management*)

The contributions of each author to the three studies have been outline below in Table 1.2:

Table 1.2

Author Contributions

Study	Co-Author Name	Contribution	Contribution Percentage
1	O'Neill, F.	Concept, design, data collection, screening, data analysis, writing, revision	70%
	Dickson, G.	Concept, design, data collection, screening, editing	10%
	Ströbel, T.	Concept, study screening, editing, revision	10%
	Thompson, A.J.	Concept, editing	10%
2	O'Neill, F.	Concept, design, data collection, analysis, writing, revision	70%
	Thompson, A.J.	Concept, design, data collection, analysis, writing	15%
	Dickson, G.	Concept, design, editing, revision	10%
	Ströbel, T.	Concept, editing	5%
3	O'Neill, F.	Concept, design, ethics, data collection, data analysis, data presentation, writing	80%
	Ströbel, T.	Concept, design, ethics, data presentation, editing	10%
	Thompson, A.J.	Concept, design, editing	5%
	Dickson, G.	Concept, design, editing	5%

Francis O'Neill, 2/5/2025

Chapter 2: Elite athlete activism, advocacy, and protest: a scoping review

Authors: Francis O'Neill, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia and
University of Bayreuth, Germany
Geoff Dickson, La Trobe University, Melbourne
Tim Ströbel, University of Bayreuth, Germany
Ashleigh-Jane Thompson, La Trobe University, Melbourne

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Abstract

Research question: The purpose of this scoping review is to explore the extant literature devoted to elite athlete activism, advocacy, and protest. Three research questions guided the study: (1) How has sports activism, advocacy and protest been covered in the literature? (2) What themes and topics are covered in the elite sport activism/advocacy/protest literature? (3) What are the research gaps in the athlete activism/advocacy/protest literature that could be organised in a future research agenda?

Research methods: We conducted a scoping review of 151 studies, primarily sourced from four databases.

Results and Findings: Attempts by elite athletes to bring about social and political change are increasingly visible and relevant in sport management. There has also been a commensurate proliferation of academic studies on this topic within research. However, there is no systematic review and integration of this scholarship to structure this topic. Results show that most research

is American and focuses on a small number of highly publicised events. Results also highlight the interdisciplinary nature of the topic. More problematically, the terms activism, advocacy and protest are used inconsistently.

Implications: This study helps researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to better understand the range of issues associated with elite athlete activism, advocacy, and protest.

Key words: Athlete activism; athlete advocacy; athlete protest; elite athletes; research agenda.

2.1 Introduction

Athlete activism, advocacy, and protests are an increasingly visible and influential feature of contemporary sport, as more elite athletes use their platform to speak out on social and political issues (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Leppard, 2022; Magrath, 2021). Athlete activism is not a new phenomenon. In his seminal work, sport scholar activist and sociologist, Dr Harry Edwards (2017), delineates four waves of activism since 1900. Most recently, athletes such as Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James, Naomi Osaka, and Megan Rapinoe have all challenged race, equality, and gender orthodoxies (Brown, et al., 2022; Leppard, 2022; Mitchell., 2018).

Rather than focus solely on activism, the study positions advocacy and protest as highly complementary concepts to activism. Activism refers to direct action to bring about change to a social or political issue (Lee & Cunningham, 2019). Advocacy refers to communicating and working on behalf of those affected by issues in society (Toledano, 2016; Van den Bulck, 2018). Protest is a non-violent form of activism which uses public displays and demonstrations to express disapproval or support for an issue (Atouba & Wilson, 2020; Sharp, 2005). Despite their nuanced differences, and the myriad of definitions, these actions are united by their desire to bring about

social or political change (Garber, 2022), as well as their interchangeable and sometimes incorrect use (Lee & Cunningham, 2019; Parsons, 2016).

Despite the current relevance, there is no systematic review and integration of this scholarship. Therefore, we conducted a scoping review of elite-athlete activism, advocacy, and protest in this study. Literature reviews are an important part of the scientific process. Webster and Watson (2002, p. 13) claim that:

A review of prior, relevant literature is an essential feature of any academic project. An effective review creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge. It facilitates theory development, closes areas where a plethora of research exists, and uncovers areas where research is needed.

Scoping reviews are well suited to the synthesis of emergent and heterogenous topics (Pham et al., 2014; Stegmann et al., 2023). In their monograph, Magrath (2021) noted that the research on athlete activism, advocacy and protest is growing and varied. A scoping review determines the extent, range, and nature of research activity in a particular topic (Pham et al., 2014). Unlike systematic reviews, scoping reviews are broad rather than in-depth (Dowling, et al., 2020). Amongst other differences to a systematic review, a scoping review does not attempt to critically evaluate individual studies, nor synthesise evidence from different studies (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

Understanding what is known (and not yet known) about elite athlete activism, advocacy, and protest is important for several reasons. First, understanding what has already been covered about elite athlete activism, advocacy and protest can identify future areas of research (Hussain & Cunningham, 2022). Second, as a heterogenous topic, it is useful to consolidate the existing

research from the various fields on elite athlete activism, advocacy, and protest to provide insight into the nature and impact of the topic (Peters et al., 2020).

The remainder of this study is structured as follows. In the next section, we provide a brief overview of the theoretical underpinnings of the main concepts of the study. Then, we present the methods and analysis used in the scoping review. A discussion of the study results follows this section before concluding with suggestions for a future research agenda.

2.2 Activism, Advocacy and Protest – A Brief Overview

Activism, advocacy, and protest are all strategies for promoting social or political change (Atouba & Wilson, 2020; Garber, 2022; Toledano, 2016). Despite their nuanced differences, activism, advocacy, and protests can be conducted either individually or collectively (Presley et al., 2016), and used to bring about changes in wider society and/or the sport (or sport organisation) (Bundon & Clarke, 2015).

2.2.1 Activism

Activism has many definitions (Mueller, 2022; Parsons, 2016). Searle-Chatterjee (1999) refers to activism in the context of new social movements. Some theorists define activism as working to support social and political causes (Curtin & McGarty, 2016) while others have even argued that activism is advocating for a political cause (Klar & Kasser, 2009). Lee and Cunningham (2019) refer to an activist as ‘a person who makes an intentional action to bring about social or political change’ (p. 247).

Cooper, Macaulay, and Rodriguez (2019) consider that activism must meet four criteria: Clear opposition; challenging of structures, norms and processes; goals and objectives to measure progress; and a link to wider social movements. Activism involves several strategies, ranging from peaceful actions like creating a petition (Klar & Kasser, 2009) to much more confrontational

methods like public demonstrations, protests and boycotts (Toledano, 2016). Fisher's (2018) five categories of activist strategies highlight the clear overlap between activism and other concepts such as protests, lobbying, and civil disobedience. The five categories are informational activities like interviews and news conferences; boycotts and other protests; organising activities such as formal meetings and community outreach; legal activities like lawsuits or lobbying; and civil disobedience such as blocking traffic.

Activism is often viewed negatively. Images of violent demonstrations, mass protest and destruction of property have led to activists often being associated with words like 'tree-huggers', 'self-righteous' and even 'militant' (Bashir et al., 2013; Toledano, 2016).

Athlete Activism. Athlete activism includes 'starting advocacy organisations, engaging in symbolic protests during competitions, and resigning from a team as a form of protest' (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010, p. 158). Presley et al. (2016) defined athlete activism as individual, collective, and informal or institutional actions by amateur or professional athletes, which aim to promote social change. Kluch (2020) states that studies have mostly defined athlete activism as an athletes' use of their sporting platform to promote social justice (p. 571). Cooper et al. (2019) provided a typology of athlete activism based on athletes' efforts: grassroots activism, symbolic activism, economic activism, sport-based activism, and scholarly activism.

2.2.2 Advocacy

Some consider advocacy as a form of activism (Toledano, 2016). Whereas activism focuses on direct action to bring about social or political change, advocacy focuses on communication and seeking support for the issue (Toledano, 2016; Van den Bulck, 2018). Similarly, authors suggest that where activists try to draw public attention to an issue, advocates speak on behalf of individuals and groups affected by the issue (Lee & Cunningham, 2019; Parsons, 2016). Advocacy

and activism both exhibit high levels engagement and commitment, to a cause (Ryan & Cole, 2009; Scully, 2019). Advocacy uses methods focused on communication such as lobbying policy makers and legislators, public education, scholarship, meeting with stakeholders and writing articles (Brockington, 2014; Garber, 2022; Toledano, 2016). Typical negative associations with activism are less likely to be associated with advocacy.

Athlete Advocacy. Only Ogiso, et al., (2022b, 2022a) have conceptualised ‘athlete advocacy’ simply defining it as promoting public involvement in social and political issues through persuasive communication. Similarly, they define an athlete advocate as athletes who choose to advocate for social or political issues.

2.2.3 Protest

The distinction between activism and protest is unclear. Some consider protest as a non-violent method for engaging in activism (Agyemang, et al., 2010; Wang & Sant, 2023). Protest is also a strategy of activism (Fisher, 2018). Protesting is considered one of the three main non-violent methods for engaging in activism (Sharp, 2005). McLeod and Loya (2011 as cited in Atouba & Wilson, 2020) consider protests a form of political expression which include public displays and demonstrations to create change by influencing beliefs and attitudes about a social or political issue. Protests are often highly visible and disruptive which makes them the most utilised form of public demonstrative activist action. Sperling and Vandegrift (2022) differentiate between unambiguous protests which have clear meaning as well as visibility and attention, and ambiguous protests which can be subject to different interpretations.

Athlete Protest. Despite the common practice of referring to athletes’ actions only as ‘protests’, no studies have conceptualised or defined ‘athlete protests’ or defined it differently from conventional definitions of protests.

2.3 Method

The scoping review framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) is widely utilised in many fields, including sport management (e.g. Dowling et al., 2018; Stegmann et al., 2023). The five essential stages of the framework are: (1) identification of research questions; (2) identification of relevant studies; (3) selection of studies; (4) charting of data; (5) summarising, collating, and reporting the findings. To ensure rigour we utilised the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews checklist to report the review (Tricco et al., 2018). See supplemental file for the checklist.

2.3.1 Identification of the Research Questions

This scoping review is guided by three research questions: (1) How has sport activism, advocacy and protest been covered in the literature? (2) What themes and topics are covered in the sport activism/advocacy/protest literature? (3) What are the research gaps in the athlete activism/advocacy/protest literature that could be organised in a future research agenda?

2.3.2 Identifying Relevant Studies

The study used a three-phase search process entailing a systematic database search supplemented by a systematic manual journal search and a manual reference list search (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Teare & Taks, 2020). For this study, only peer-reviewed empirical journal articles in English were considered.

2.3.2.1 Phase 1. Our search utilised four databases: Scopus, SportDiscus, Web of Science and Business Source Ultimate. These four databases have been used in previous sport-focussed scoping reviews (Hussain & Cunningham, 2022; Stegmann et al., 2023). The following search terms were entered into two separate search fields and connected using the Boolean connector AND:

Sport OR Athlete OR Player OR Olympic* OR ‘Olympic Game*’ OR ‘World Cup’ OR
‘List of Sports’ (SCOPUS Only) AND Activis* OR Advoca* OR Protest

Due to database search capabilities, a list of popular and Olympic sports was also included in Field 1 for the SCOPUS search only. See supplemental file for full search strategy applied.

The initial search was conducted on 3 August 2022, and yielded 7963 articles across the four databases: Scopus ($n = 3573$), SportDiscus ($n = 1272$), Web of Science ($n = 2701$) and Business Source Ultimate ($n = 417$). Three follow up searches were conducted to identify any relevant articles published after the initial search. Search Two was conducted on 16 September 2022, yielding 91 additional articles. Search Three was conducted on 27 January 2023, identifying an additional 429 studies. Search Four was conducted on 18 April 2023, and yielded 110 new potential studies.

After a review of terminology, a supplemental fifth database search was conducted, including the terms Paralympic* in the *sport-focused criteria* and Voice, Commission*, Boycott* and Representat* in the *action-focused criteria*. This search identified 2706 potential studies. In total, the five searches yielded 11,299 articles.

2.3.2.2 Phase 2. Articles may be missed in the database search because electronic databases may be incomplete, may not have access to specific journals or the search criteria may not apply (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005). We then conducted a systematic manual search for additional articles in the field’s leading journals (Teare & Taks, 2020). These were the four A-ranked sport journals in the Australian Business Dean’s Council (ABDC) rankings – European Sport Management Quarterly (ESMQ), Sport Management Review (SMR), Journal of Sport Management (JSM) and Sociology of Sport Journal (SSJ) – and the B-ranked International Journal of Sport Communication (IJSC), the highest- rated sport communication journal. Due to time constraints, we only searched

these journals for articles published from 2016, the year in which Kaepernick's protest sparked a rapid increase in academic studies. As a result, 15 additional studies were identified.

2.3.2.3 Phase 3. We then reviewed the reference lists of all retained articles published 2021–2023 ($n = 66$). As a result, 70 additional studies were identified.

2.3.3 Inclusionary and Exclusionary Criteria

Along with the core terms of activism, advocacy and protest, the search criteria also included the concepts of voice, boycotts, athlete commissions and athlete representation. These concepts describe elements of athlete activism, advocacy and protest and were included to prevent the exclusion of potentially relevant articles, which may have omitted the core terms in their title, abstract or key words.

Several similar terms were excluded from our search including endorsement, lobbying, ambassadorship, whistleblowing, unionisation, and philanthropy. While elements of union involvement can be considered activism, advocacy, or protest (Hinkel & McHugh, 2022), we would expect articles making this connection to utilise these terms. Some authors do consider philanthropy and donations as part of activism (e.g. Klar & Kasser, 2009). However, philanthropy operates within existing social structures and typically involves mainstream or less controversial causes (Van den Bulck, 2018). Hence, philanthropy is therefore different from activism, advocacy and protest, and their challenges to existing order.

For it to be considered 'athlete' activism, advocacy or protest, the athlete must use sport or their role as an athlete in their actions (Cooper et al., 2019; Kaufman, 2008; Schmidt et al., 2018; Smith, 2019). We therefore excluded studies which focus on actions by retired athletes where they are no longer involved in sport, such as the recent advocacy work of Olympic gold medallist Caitlin Jenner (Williams, 2022).

We only retained studies on elite-level athletes (Magrath, 2021). Within our analysis, we applied the eliteness classification proposed by Swann et al., (2015) – semi-elite (i.e. university level, semi-professional leagues), competitive elite (i.e. talent development programmes, third-tier professional leagues), successful elite (i.e. national level, second-tier professional leagues) through to world-class elite (i.e. international level, top tier professional leagues).

We included only empirical studies because we consider that empiricism (i.e. deriving knowledge from data and experience) is key to knowledge construction (Loadenthal, 2019). Within a scoping review, the inclusion of only empirical studies also has the capacity to ‘unveil the epistemological biases in the extant scholarship’ (Hussain & Cunningham, 2022, p. 6). The inclusion of only empirical studies is a feature of other scoping reviews in the field of sport management (Baxter et al., 2023; Hussain & Cunningham, 2022; Inoue et al., 2015). We therefore excluded non-empirical studies (i.e. editorials, commentaries, essays) and those without a replicable description of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods (e.g. Chappelet, 2020; Hartmann, 2022; Henderson, 2009).

2.3.4 Citation Management

The three-phase search strategy identified 11,384 articles. All citations from each phase were first imported into the bibliographic manager EndNote and saved into phase-based groups. These citations were then uploaded into Covidence. Covidence is a web-based screening and data extraction platform which streamlines the process for systematic reviews (Veritas Health Innovation, 2022). Covidence removed duplicates ($n = 3608$), all of which were double-checked by the lead author, leaving 7776 citations.

2.3.5 Selection of Studies

In this third step of the scoping review process, articles are included or excluded based on a set of evolving post-hoc criteria (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Articles were screened for relevance, first based on their title and abstract and then full text.

Title and Abstract Review. The lead author individually screened the title and abstract of all 7776 articles in Covidence against the following exclusion criteria: (a) Article not sufficiently focused on sport; (b) Article not sufficiently focused on activism, advocacy, or protest (as defined earlier), (c) Casual (or informal) use of the words: activism, advocacy, or protest. If the relevance was unclear, the article was retained. To promote trustworthiness, all excluded articles were then screened by a second reviewer who checked for possible errors in omissions (Levac, Colquhoun, & O'Brien, 2010). The reviewers excluded 6161 irrelevant studies, retaining 1615 articles.

Having discarded the clearly irrelevant articles, the title and abstracts of the remaining 1615 articles were independently screened in Covidence by two reviewers using the criteria in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Peer reviewed article	Textbooks, dissertations, book chapters, media reports
Substantive focus on activism/advocacy; and/or protest	Insufficient focus on activism or advocacy of protest.
Elite athletes	Non-elite athletes
Athlete used sport or their role as athletes in the activism, advocacy or protest.	Sport or role as athlete not utilised for the activism/advocacy or protest
Empirical study – explicit description of methods	Non-empirical – methods not described or at least not replicable

If an article's relevance could not be determined with certainty, it was retained for full-text review. For this reason, many non-empirical articles were retained. Covidence automatically flagged disagreements between the authors who later met to resolve disagreements. If unresolved, a third reviewer independently made the final decision (Levac et al., 2010). This second screening of title and abstracts excluded 1227 irrelevant articles. In total, the title and abstract of 7776 articles were screened, with 7388 irrelevant articles removed and 388 retained for the full-text review.

Full-text Review. The full texts of the remaining 388 articles were retrieved and independently screened by two reviewers. When an article could not be retrieved from the available university databases, we sought a copy from the article's authors. The reviewers again met to resolve disagreements with a third reviewer resolving deadlocks. The full-text review excluded 237 articles with 151 articles retained for analysis. Only three studies from the supplemental fifth database search were included for analysis. See Figure 2.1 for an overview of screening process and reasons for full-text exclusions.

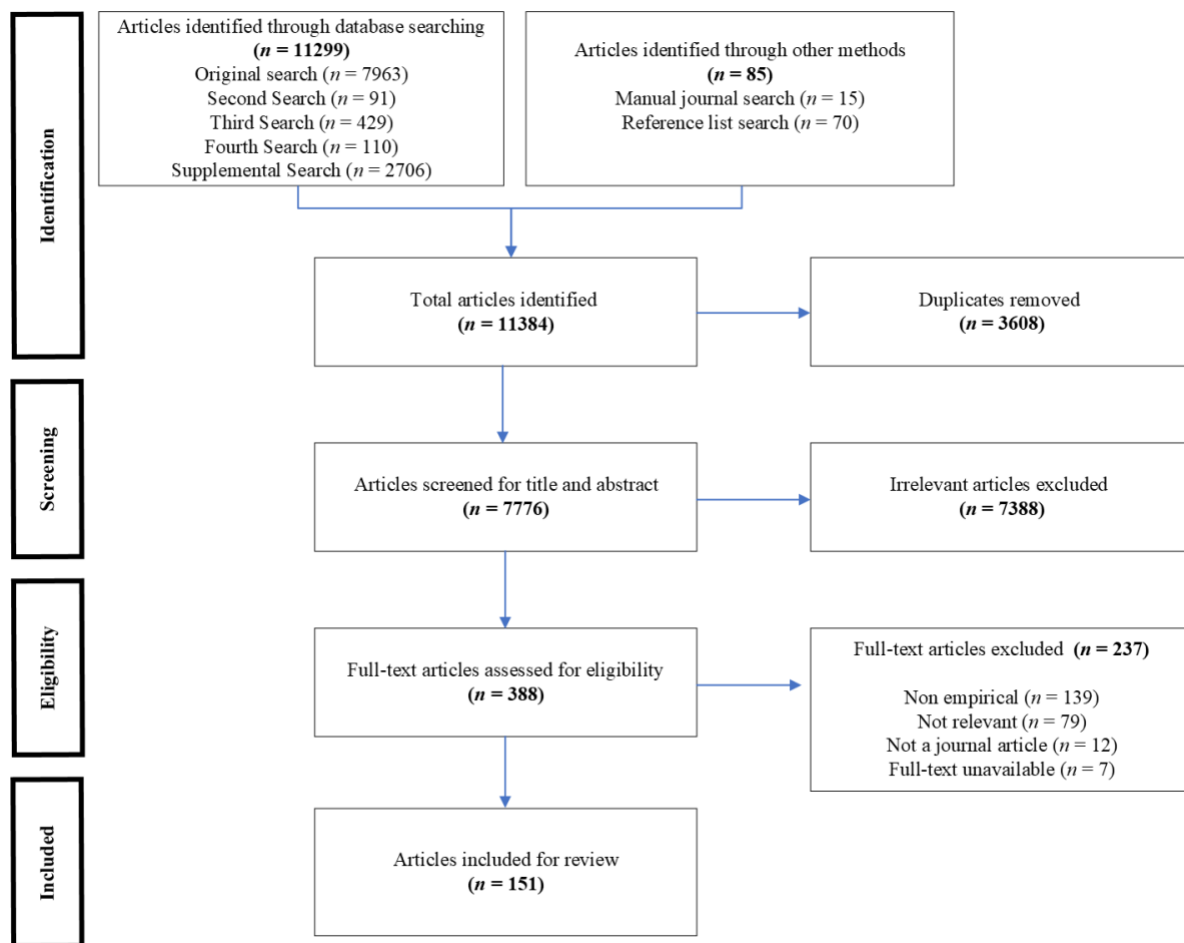
2.3.6 Charting the Data

Charting the data is necessary to synthesise and interpret the data by sorting it into key issues and themes (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). We used a data extraction form within Covidence before exporting the extracted data into Microsoft Excel file for analysis. Following other scoping reviews (Hussain & Cunningham, 2022; Pham et al., 2014; Shaw & Cunningham, 2021; Stegmann et al., 2023), we collected the following: article title, year of publication, author names, abstract, country of first author, country of study context, study aims, empirical design (quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods), methodology, methods (e.g. survey, interviews, etc.), type of data (primary or secondary), theoretical frameworks used, study participants/population, key findings, limitations. In addition, we also extracted: terminology used in abstract and in full text (i.e.

activism, advocacy, or protest), definitions of activism, advocacy or protest used, social issues discussed (author defined), form of activism, advocacy or protest undertaken (author defined), individual or group action, as well as any focus-athlete characteristics (i.e. name, gender, eliteness, and league/event). The extraction was conducted by the lead author with the support of co-authors.

Figure 2.1

Study Selection Process: PRISMA Flow Chart



2.3.7 Collating, Summarising, and Reporting the Findings

The fifth and final stage reports the findings through descriptive frequency analyses and thematic analyses (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The frequency analysis provides a descriptive numerical summary of the key characteristics and overall distribution of retained studies (Levac et al., 2010). Our frequency analysis includes the year of publication, journals, country of first author and context, research design, theoretical frameworks, terminology, definitions, and athlete characteristics.

A thematic analysis was then applied. Thematic analysis provides a useful tool for understanding the main areas of interest for a specific topic and consequently understanding where the gaps in the literature are (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

2.4 Results

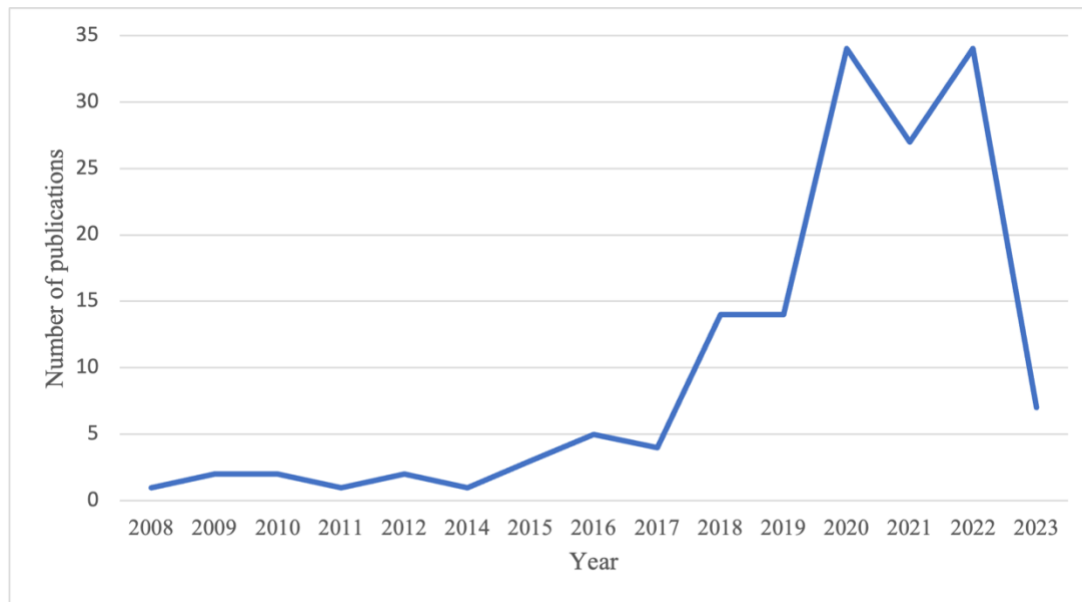
2.4.1 Frequency Analysis

2.4.1.1 Year of Publication. The year of publication analysis highlighted the recent growth of empirical research on athlete activism, advocacy, and protest. Figure 2.2 illustrates that the first empirical study of athlete activism, advocacy and protest was published in 2008. Between 2008 to 2017, there were no more than five articles published each year. However, a marked increase was evident since 2018. We note here that studies of Colin Kaepernick and the 2016-17 NFL protests accounted for 44% ($n = 57$) of the studies published between 2018-23, and that 86% ($n = 130$) of the studies were published since the beginning of 2018.

2.4.1.2 Journals. The 151 articles were published in 93 different journals. The journals with the most articles were *Communication and Sport* ($n = 12$), *International Journal of Sport Communication* ($n = 7$), and *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* ($n = 7$).

Figure 2.2

Frequency of Studies Examining Elite Athlete Activism, Advocacy and Protest.



Note: Only studies published before 18 April, 2023 were included

Scopus, Elsevier's abstract and citation database, assigns each journal to a subject area using the All Science Journal Classification (ASJC) scheme. Table 2.2 shows the subject areas with the greatest number of articles were Communication ($n = 41$), and Sociology and Political Science ($n = 32$). Ten articles appeared in sport management journals, including three in *Sport Management Review*. These results highlight the interdisciplinary nature of athlete activism, advocacy, and protest.

2.4.1.3 National Context. The context of the study refers to the country of the study's participants. Research was contextualised in 20 countries, with some articles having multiple contexts. Most articles were contextualised in the United States ($n = 127$). Other contexts with multiple studies were Japan ($n = 5$) and the UK ($n = 5$).

Table 2.2*Number of Articles by Scopus Subject Area*

Subject Area	Frequency	Percent
Communication	41	27.15%
Sociology and Political Science	32	21.19%
Psychology	12	7.95%
Cultural Studies	11	7.28%
Sport Management	10	6.62%
General Social Sciences	8	5.30%
Education	5	3.31%
Law	4	2.65%
Medicine	3	1.99%
Intercollegiate sport	3	1.99%
Other	22	14.57%
Total	151	100.00%

2.4.1.4 Country of First Author's University Affiliation. Studies originated in 13 countries, but most studies were carried out in the United States ($n = 122$; 80%). Other countries with multiple studies were the UK ($n = 13$; 8%), Canada ($n = 5$; 3%) and Japan ($n = 2$; 1%). Table 2.3 summarises the frequency of studies by national context and country of first author's university affiliation.

2.4.1.5 Research Design. The studies utilised a range of research designs. A qualitative approach was used in 82 (54.3%) studies with the most common methods being interviews, and either a thematic or textual analysis of both traditional and social media. A quantitative design was used in 51 (34.5%) articles with the most common methods being surveys. Eleven studies used an experimental research design. Only 18 studies (11.9%) used a mixed methods design. Most studies ($n = 83$, 55%) used secondary data, with 57 (38%) using primary data and 11 (7%) studies using both.

Table 2.3*Number of Articles by National Context and Country of First Author's University Affiliation*

Study – National Context	Frequency	%	First Author - Country of University Affiliation	Frequency	%
United States	127	77.9%	United States	122	80.8%
Japan	5	3.1%	UK	13	8.6%
UK	5	3.1%	Canada	5	3.3%
Australia	2	1.2%	Japan	2	1.3%
Canada	2	1.2%	Australia	1	0.7%
Hong Kong	2	1.2%	Czech Republic	1	0.7%
Ireland	2	1.2%	Denmark	1	0.7%
South Korea	2	1.2%	Ireland	1	0.7%
Brazil	1	0.6%	New Zealand	1	0.7%
Bolivia	1	0.6%	Philippines	1	0.7%
China	1	0.6%	Saudi Arabia	1	0.7%
Colombia	1	0.6%	Spain	1	0.7%
Ecuador	1	0.6%	Sweden	1	0.7%
Egypt	1	0.6%			
Iran	1	0.6%			
Kuwait	1	0.6%			
New Zealand	1	0.6%			
Pakistan	1	0.6%			
Peru	1	0.6%			
Philippines	1	0.6%			
Saudi Arabia	1	0.6%			
Spain	1	0.6%			
Sweden	1	0.6%			
UAE	1	0.6%			
Total	163	100.0%	Total	151	100.0%

Note: Several studies discussed multiple contexts

Table 2.4*Frequency of Author-Stated Methodologies*

Methodology	Frequency
None	110
Case Study	17
Phenomenology	5
Epistemological Constructivism	5
Grounded Theory	4
Narrative Enquiry	4
Ontological Realism	2
Ontological Relativism	2
Ethnography	2
Q methodology	1
Hermeneutic Social Constructivism	1
Philosophical Hermeneutics	1
Symbolic Interactionism	1
Constant Comparative methodology	1
Ontological Constructivism	1
Total	157

Note: Some studies utilised multiple methodologies

In terms of methodology, the analysis revealed that 60% ($n = 60$) of qualitative and mixed methods studies did not explicitly state a methodology. The most used author-stated methodologies were Case Study ($n = 17$), Phenomenology ($n = 5$), Epistemological Constructivism ($n = 5$), Narrative Enquiry ($n = 4$) and Grounded Theory ($n = 4$). See Table 2.4 for the full list of methodologies used.

2.4.1.6 Theoretical Frameworks. The analysis of theoretical frameworks showed that 53 studies (35%) did not explicitly state the use of any theory. In total, 74 different theoretical frameworks were identified, with 21 studies using two or more theories. The most utilised theoretical frameworks - as stated by the authors - were Framing Theory ($n = 14$), Critical Race

Theory ($n = 12$), Social Identity Theory ($n = 6$), Boundary Work ($n = 3$), Protest Paradigm ($n = 3$), Intersectionality ($n = 3$) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour ($n = 3$). All other theories were used only one or two times. See Table 2.5 for list of theories used two or more times.

Table 2.5

Frequency of Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical Framework	Frequency
None	53
Framing Theory	14
Critical Race Theory	12
Social Identity Theory	7
Boundary Work	3
Protest Paradigm Theory	3
Theory of Planned Behavior	3
Intersectionality	3
Resource Mobilisation Theory	2
Moral Foundations Theory	2
Social Movement Theory	2
Attribution Theory	2
Network Theory	2
Cultivation Theory	2
Situational Crisis Communication Theory	2
Gatekeeping	2
Symbolic Interactionism	2
Balance Theory	2

2.4.1.7 Terminology. We collected data about how the number of articles, which featured the terms activism, advocacy and protest in either the abstract, title, or keywords, as well as in the full text. See Table 2.6 for a summary of this analysis.

In terms of the full-text analysis, activism ($n = 117$) and protest ($n = 111$) appeared in significantly more articles than advocacy ($n = 49$). Inconsistencies were evident in the use of these

terms in the abstract-title-keywords, and the full text. In their abstracts, 44 studies referred to only activism, 39 studies used only protest and 16 used only advocacy. The remaining 49 studies used a combination of the three terms with three studies using none of the terms in either their abstract or title. In terms of their full texts, most studies used a combination of terms, with the activism-protest combination being used in 67 studies. Surprisingly, 20 studies only referred to protest in either their abstract or their full text, with only 10 studies referring only to advocacy in their abstract or full text. Twelve studies referred only to activism in both their abstract and full text.

Somewhat problematically, 56 studies referred exclusively to activism or advocacy or protest in the abstract, while later using a combination of terms in the full text. Three studies referred to one of the terms in their abstract but never used the term in the full text.

Table 2.6

Frequency of Terms Activism, Advocacy, and Protest – Abstract or Title or Keywords

Terminology	Abstract, Title, Keywords	Full text
Activism	44	13
Activism; Protest	42	67
Protest	39	22
Advocacy	16	11
Activism; Advocacy; Protest	3	21
Activism; Advocacy	2	16
Advocacy; Protest	2	1
None	3	
Total	151	151

Terminology often changed depending on the athlete or issue discussed. For example, 36 of the Kaepernick studies referred to his actions as both protest and activism, yet 16 studies only

described Kaepernick's actions as protest. Six studies referred to his actions using all three terms. Elsewhere, only two of the six Naomi Osaka studies referred exclusively to activism and protest when describing her actions. Four used combinations which included advocacy, whereas two described her actions as advocacy.

2.4.1.8 Definitions. Most studies (70%, $n = 105$) did not define activism, advocacy, or protest. One third of the 117 studies (33%, $n = 38$) which referred to activism, provided at least one definition of activism or a closely related term (i.e., activist, athlete activism, para-athlete activism, hashtag activism, symbolic activism, or slacktivism). Eight of the 49 advocacy studies (16%) provided a definition(s) of advocacy or closely related term (i.e., advocacy, athlete advocacy, advocate, and corporate political advocacy). Only 6 of the 111 protest studies (5%) provided at least one definition of protest. These findings highlight the need for further cohesion in the use of these terms and the necessity for future studies to include all three terms in any searches to avoid excluding key studies.

2.4.1.9 League/Event Contexts. By some considerable margin, the athlete with the most presence in the literature was Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick was the focus of 57 (38%) studies. Interestingly, Kaepernick was mentioned in another 44 studies, meaning Kaepernick has appeared in 67% ($n = 101$) of the 151 included studies. Kaepernick was not the only elite athlete involved in the 2016-2017 NFL protests, but in studies there was tendency to refer to Kaepernick by name with another 32 studies referring to unnamed NFL athletes who took part. Only 11 studies discussed Eric Reid, the NFL player who first joined Kaepernick's protest.

Other notable athletes who were the focus of multiple articles include Eric Reid, the first NFL player to join Kaepernick's protest during the US national anthem ($n = 11$), LeBron James ($n = 9$), Megan Rapinoe ($n = 8$), Naomi Osaka ($n = 6$), Tommie Smith ($n = 5$) and John Carlos ($n =$

5). James, Rapinoe, and Osaka are all contemporary examples of activism, whereas the joint activism-advocacy-protest by Smith and Carlos was in 1968. Six studies used fictional elite athletes in their experiments or surveys. Of the athletes that were the focus of three or more articles, all are American or live in America. See Table 2.7 for the list of athletes who were the focus of two or more studies.

Table 2.7

Athletes Who Were the Focus of at Least Two Studies

Athlete/team name(s)	Frequency	Athlete/team name(s)	Frequency
Colin Kaepernick	57	Toni Smith	3
Unnamed NFL players	30	United States Women's National Soccer Team	3
Eric Reid	10	Brandon Marshall	2
LeBron James	9	Carmelo Anthony	2
Megan Rapinoe	8	Damian Lillard	2
Hypothetical athlete	6	Deidra Chatman	2
Naomi Osaka	6	Hudson Taylor	2
No specific athlete utilised	6	Irish Paralympic Team	2
Anonymous athletes	5	Jim Keady	2
John Carlos	5	Joey Cheek	2
Tommie Smith	5	Kenny Britt	2
St. Louis Rams players - Stedman Bailey, Tavon Austin, Jared Cook, Chris Givens, Kenny Britt	4	Kevin McMahon	2
Malcolm Jenkins	4	Martina Navratilova	2
University of Missouri football players	4	Michael Thomas	2
Jackie Robinson	3	Ng Wai Chung (aka Blitzchung)	2
Jeremy Lane	3	Ramogi Huma	2
Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf	3	Roddy White	2
Muhammad Ali	3		
Robert Quinn	3		

2.4.1.10 Eliteness. We categorised each athlete's eliteness using the classification developed by Swann et al. (2015). Many of the studies ($n = 118$) were focused on world-class elite athletes, with 31 studies focused on semi-elite athletes (i.e., NCAA) and only 15 studies looking at competitive or successful elite athletes.

Given the Kaepernick effect, the NFL ($n = 67$) was unsurprisingly the organisational context to most of the athletes studied, followed by NCAA Divisions 1-3 ($n = 30$), NBA ($n = 16$), Olympic Games ($n = 15$) and the Paralympic Games ($n = 14$). See Table 2.8 for a full list of league and event contexts and article frequency.

Table 2.8

League/ Event Contexts

League/ event context	Frequency
NFL	67
NCAA	30
NBA	16
Olympic Games	15
Paralympic Games	14
None	8
WTA Tour	7
MLB	6
FIFA Women's World Cup	4
National Women's Soccer League (NWSL)	4
WNBA	3
World Para Championships	3
World Boxing	2
Women's U.S Open	2
Hearthstone Grandmasters tournament	2
Asian Para Games	2

Note: Table capped at minimum of two studies

2.4.2 Thematic Analysis

The analysis generated six themes – public perceptions, athlete perspectives, media coverage, impact, method of activism, advocacy and protest, and stakeholders. Consistent with other scoping reviews (e.g. Shaw & Cunningham, 2021), themes were developed by coding the purpose of each article. While some studies examined multiple factors, we coded only the primary purpose of the research.

2.4.2.1 Public Perceptions. The most common theme was public perceptions of activism, advocacy, and protest by elite athletes ($n = 46$, 30%). Many studies measured the general public's perceptions to the actions of college athletes (Frederick et al., 2017; Knoester et al., 2022), the 2016–2017 NFL protests (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2019; Yoo et al., 2018) or Naomi Osaka's withdrawal from the French Open (Chen & Kwak, 2023). Authors also looked at reactions from more specific groups. For example, Chaplin and de Oca (2019) studied responses from white fans. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2023) explored how people perceive athlete activists through the case of LeBron James, whilst Serazio and Thorson (2020) looked more broadly at how fans perceive the politicisation of sport.

Several studies used social media as a tool for the public to discuss and react to athlete activism, advocacy, and protest (e.g. Boatwright, 2022; Eschmann et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2019). A growing number of studies examined perceptions of stakeholder responses to athlete activism, advocacy and protest such as how sporting leagues have handled these acts (Anderson, 2020; Asada et al., 2021), corporations using activist athletes for marketing (Intravia et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020) and public criticism from politicians (Kinsey et al., 2020). Meanwhile, one study developed scales to measure people's attitudes to athlete activism (Sappington et al., 2019), there

is little research concerning the validity of public opinion surveys with only Mueller (2022) studying whether social pressure impacts on the honesty of respondents.

Research also focused on how people's perceptions of athlete activism, advocacy and protest are influenced by factors such as racial views (Click et al., 2022; Niven, 2021), moral values (Monroe et al., 2021), nationalistic attitudes (Ponce de Leon, 2023; Smith, 2019; Smith, Tryce, & Ferrara, 2023; Smith & Tryce, 2019b), the activist/advocates message (Dunn & Nisbett, 2017; Mudrick et al., 2019) and news media framing (Park et al., 2020). Other studies examined whether different forms of activism, advocacy or protest are perceived differently (Atouba & Wilson, 2020; Cunningham & Regan Jr, 2012; Dixon et al., 2023; Intravia et al., 2018). A significant lack of literature exists in terms of understanding best practice for athlete activism, advocacy or protest with only Deflem (2023) studying what conditions elicit a positive reception. Most studies focus on exploring people's reactions to single controversial cases and have omitted research on groups such as para sport athletes or if perceptions differ across cases or athlete groups.

2.4.2.2 Athlete Perspectives. The next most common theme was athletes' perspective ($n = 32$, 21%). Researchers considered black student athletes (e.g. Agyemang et al., 2010; Jolly & Rose Chepyator-Thomson, 2022; Kluch, 2020), athletes with disabilities (Braye, 2016; Carty et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2021; Kirk et al., 2021) and teammates of activist athletes (Agyemang et al., 2018). Studies sought to understand athletes' reasoning for becoming activist or advocates (e.g. Intosh et al., 2020a; Lee & Cunningham, 2019) and athletes' perceived barriers to these actions (e.g. Kluch, 2023; Martin et al., 2022). Research has also looked at the role of activism or advocacy as part of an athlete's identity (Beachy et al., 2018; Kirakosyan, 2021; Scheadler et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2016).

Research in this theme also looked at rates of athlete activism such as if rates are higher in disabled vs non-disabled athletes (Choi et al., 2021), student athletes vs non athlete students (Gayles et al., 2012; Hoffman et al., 2015) and the number of protesting vs non-protesting NFL players (Houghteling & Dantzler, 2020; Weffer et al., 2018). In addition, a small number of studies have provided second-hand descriptive case studies of athletes' experiences of activism, advocacy, or protest to illustrate what they went through, what their message was and how much success the athletes had in bringing about change (Calow, 2022; Gill, 2016; Gill et al., 2020; Muhammed & Mathew, 2022; Skelton, 2022). Research tended to focus on the actions of disadvantaged or minority athletes. Whilst some studies have assessed wider student athletes (e.g. Toomey et al., 2016), gaps exist in understanding the perspectives of non-minority elite athletes.

2.4.2.3 Media Coverage. The third most common theme was media coverage (n = 21, 14%). The largest subgroup in this theme examined how online and print media outlets framed activism, advocacy and protest by elite athletes such as Colin Kaepernick (e.g. Boykoff & Carrington, 2020; Doehler, 2023; Graber et al., 2020), LeBron James (Coombs et al., 2020), D. J. Carton (Cassilo & Kluch, 2021) and Royce White and DeMar DeRozan (Cassilo, 2022). Through the Kaepernick case, Nepstad and Kenney (2018) uniquely examined the use of discursive delegitimisation to neutralise athlete activism, advocacy, and protest. Research has mostly considered this concept through the tool of media framing and has yet to consider if these strategies have been employed by actors such as fans or sporting organisations. Alkhamash (2021) analysed the social media framing of US Women's National Football Team's protest over the gender pay gap. Peña (2021) also examined how media framing of a specific event changed over time and the media's adherence to the protest paradigm (Peña, 2021). Additionally, there is some research on the overall extent of media coverage such as how much sport media incidentally

exposes people to political content (Broussard et al., 2021) and how much sport media cover athlete activism, advocacy, and protest in a particular year (Schmidt, 2018). Further, some research focused on in-house sport media coverage of athlete activism, advocacy, and protest (Mirer, 2018; Mirer, 2019; Mirer & Grubic, 2020) whilst others specifically addressed how sport journalists cover these events (e.g. Broussard, 2020; Peterson, 2009). Two studies additionally used cases of athlete activism-advocacy-protest to discuss media control such as the controlling of feminist perspectives (Knott-Fayle et al., 2021) and gatekeeping behaviour by the Chinese media (Xu & Billings, 2018).

2.4.2.4 Impact. Several studies focused on the impact of elite athlete activism, advocacy, and protest (n = 21, 14%). Studies evaluated the effectiveness of activism, advocacy, and protest efforts to promote social change such as athletes becoming movement leaders (English, 2021), influencing media narratives (Finlay, 2018), serving as representatives in athlete commissions (Naidoo & Grevemberg, 2022) and motivating the public to become involved in social issues (Ogiso et al., 2022b, 2022a; Towler et al., 2020). Mikkilineni et al., (2023) similarly measured whether student-athlete advocacy could decrease binge drinking intentions in college students. Other studies looked at the impact of athlete activism, advocacy, and protest on game attendance (Watanabe et al., 2019, 2023; Watanabe & Cunningham, 2020) and television viewership (Brown & Sheridan, 2020; Sperling & Vandegrift, 2022). Every study in this category focused on American Football, either in the NFL or NCAA.

A few studies identified the personal consequences of engaging in activism, advocacy, and protest (Kaufman, 2008; Niven, 2020) and if economically vulnerable athletes are less likely to participate as a result (Niven, 2019). No research has addressed the potential benefits of these actions. Only one article considered an athlete's union activism, analysing its impact on their chances of making the baseball Hall of Fame (Hinkel & McHugh, 2022). Despite some non-

empirical papers considering players rights to unionise and collectively bargain (Horn, 2021; Staurowsky, 2014; Tompkins, 2017), there is a lack of empirical literature examining athlete's activism, advocacy or protests linked to union activities. Some research examined the effect of athlete activism, advocacy and protest on brand image, specifically on an athlete's own brand (Brown-Devlin, 2022; Murry et al., 2020), on the sponsor's brand image (Schmidt et al., 2018), and national image (Dubinsky, 2021).

2.4.2.5 Methods. Researchers also studied the methods employed by athletes in their activism, advocacy or protest (n = 18, 12%). Studies in this theme have looked at topics such as how para-athletes have advocated for disability rights (Bundon & Clarke, 2015; Haslett, et al., 2020a), the use of objects to start discussions (Brice, 2023) and the use of symbolism (O'Hallarn et al., 2021). McCaffrey (2020) for example, explored how Jack Robinson used his newspaper column to fight for civil rights in sport. Several studies have specifically looked at how athletes have used social media in their activism, advocacy, or protest efforts (Abuín-Penas et al., 2022; Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020; Hull, 2014; Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015; Yan et al., 2018). Theorists have also applied and evaluated theoretical concepts of activism such as organisation-as-platform activism (Rheinhardt et al., 2023) or representation activism (Wallace & Andrews, 2021). Further, a number of studies have addressed the use of sport as the site for athlete activism, advocacy or protest, discussing factors such as whether this method is appropriate (Agyemang et al., 2020; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010), the impact of this method on sport performance (Hawkins et al., 2022), and the conflict that arises when athletes use sport as their platform (Myrdahl, 2011; Trithara, 2022).

2.4.2.6 Stakeholder Responses. Comparatively fewer studies focused on the final theme of stakeholder involvement (n = 13, 9%). Most of these studies examined at how NFL stakeholders

responded to various protests (Brown-Devlin, 2022; Donahue, 2020; McGannon & Butryn, 2020; Read & Lock, 2022) as well as efforts to regulate or prevent athlete activism, advocacy, or protest by sporting organisations (Ekberg & Strange, 2017; Klíma, 2022; Park, 2022). Studies have also looked at other stakeholder groups such as Druckman et al., (2019) which assessed attitudes of coaches to protests by student athletes and Yan (2021) who studied gatekeeping efforts by internet trolls to influence public opinion. Hoffman (2020) looked at the use of athlete activism in corporate political advocacy campaigns by Nike, while a small number of studies focused on stakeholder support for athlete activists and advocates, from organisations such as the International Paralympic Committee (Haslett et al., 2020b) and advocacy groups such as Athlete Ally (Schmidt et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2023).

2.5 Research Agenda

Research on elite athlete activism, advocacy and protest covers a wide range of topics and methods. However, numerous opportunities exist for future research. Consistent with advice from Brutus et al., (2013) this research agenda will focus on the most immediate and incremental opportunities for future research.

Ideally, future research will bring clarity on what constitutes (and differentiates) activism, advocacy, and protest. This is important because a better conceptualisation of these concepts, for example extending the work of Cooper et al. (2019), will likely inform the development of a typology of athlete activism, advocacy, and protest. Most importantly, future researchers should always define their concept and avoid the temptation to use words with similar meanings that may not actually be synonyms.

Results also indicated a lack of cultural and contextual diversity, with most research conducted by American scholars on American athletes. America represents a unique cultural

context and as such numerous authors recognise the need for research to test the generalisability of American studies (e.g. Asada et al., 2021; Beachy et al., 2018). Because culture shapes how we think, feel, and behave, the culture within which activism unfolds, and is subsequently interpreted, matters deeply (McGannon & Smith, 2015). Cleland et al., (2022) for example, stated that Australian National Rugby League (NRL) players did not receive the same level of negative backlash for their national anthem protest that Colin Kaepernick experienced. Similarly, Doepler (2023) speculated that reactions to a Kaepernick-style protest would be different outside America. Future research should look beyond the American context. Comparative or multiple case studies would also be insightful (Ogiso et al., 2022b). The published literature does not reflect fully the variety of athlete activism, advocacy and protest. Future research should consider more contemporary examples of activism, advocacy and protest, rather than conduct repeated studies on the same cases.

Another opportunity for future research is to consider how athlete characteristics impact perceptions of activism, advocacy, and protest. For example, there is the need to consider race beyond the distinction between just white and black athletes (Utych, 2022). Research on elite disabled athlete activism, advocacy or protest is significantly under researched (Haslett et al., 2020a) with no studies comparing the perceptions or media portrayal of elite disabled athletes to elite non-disabled athletes. Other athlete characteristics – ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, career status, to name just a few – all have the potential to contribute much needed insight into what shapes attitudes and perceptions of activism, advocacy, and protest.

Studies of athlete activism, advocacy, and protest are likely to be single case studies and examine mainly dyadic effects of activism, advocacy, and protest on a single stakeholder group (e.g. Finlay, 2018). Future research should utilise multiple perspectives, integrating the perceptions

of fans, coaches, and athletes to compare different relationship patterns (Stegmann et al., 2023), as well as the actors within the wider sport ecosystem wider (i.e. sponsors, event owners, media) (Buser et al., 2022).

In terms of methodology, we found that 35% ($n = 53$) did not employ an explicit theoretical framework. To better understand athlete activism, advocacy and protest, more theory-based approaches are therefore needed. Centralising theory in research can ‘allow the researcher to reveal existing predispositions about a study and assist in data coding and interpretation’ (Collins & Stockton, 2018, p. 1). Moreover, most studies utilised communication or sociological theories to explain the human behaviour and social interactions which occur because of activism, advocacy and protest by athletes. Following Brown-Devlin’s (2022) work with stakeholder theory, it would be beneficial to continue to apply organisation theories to this issue.

Significant literature has demonstrated the divisive nature of this issue. Studies should aim at identifying best practice strategies for athletes when engaging in activism, advocacy or protest to reduce negative reactions and to maximise positive impact. Such work could be linked to the concept of personal brand bravery (Jain et al., 2021), to develop the novel concept of personal brand bravery.

Another promising topic is the effort to regulate or combat elite athlete, activism, advocacy, and protest. Recent organisational examples include the Rule 50 at the Olympics (Agyemang et al., 2018; Brice, 2023), FIFA prohibiting team captains from wearing rainbow armbands at the Qatar World Cup (Ramsay & Nabbi, 2022) and the policy that requires Formula 1 drivers to acquire Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile (FIA) approval to make political statements. It should be noted that many articles related to athlete activism, advocacy and protest at the Olympics and Rule 50 were identified in the early stages of the review but were subsequently excluded given

their non-empirical nature. Studies could consider the legality and enforceability of such regulations, the ethicality of regulating free speech, and their effectiveness in curbing undesired behaviours. One voice that remains relatively silent so far has been of sports managers representing the organisational perspective. For this, we encourage researchers to explore the circumstances and boundary conditions under which the sport organisation will encourage, tolerate, or prohibit athlete activism, advocacy, and protest.

Currently, we know very little about how opponents attempt to criticise, neutralise, discredit, or undermine athlete activism, advocacy, and protests (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018). Future research should address this, taking into consideration athlete characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, career status), issue characteristics (e.g. sensitivity/ polarisation, sport or non-sport issue) and the specific mechanism of activism, advocacy, and protest.

2.6 Conclusion

This scoping review explored the empirical literature on activism, advocacy, and protest by elite athletes. Results highlight the interdisciplinary nature of this topic, and hence its relevance to various aspects of society. Research is overwhelmingly focused on the American context and a small number of highly publicised events. If athletes have the courage to place their head above the parapet and engage in some form of activism, advocacy, and protest, then researchers should be similarly courageous and explore alternative contexts and methods to advance the field.

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References marked with an asterisk indicate studies included in the systematic scoping review.

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Chapter 3: Discursive Delegitimisation of Athlete Activism: A Study of the Australian Football Team

Authors: Francis O'Neill, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia and
University of Bayreuth, Germany
Ashleigh-Jane Thompson, La Trobe University, Melbourne
Geoff Dickson, La Trobe University, Melbourne
Tim Ströbel, University of Bayreuth, Germany

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Abstract

Athlete activism is increasingly visible and polarising. However, little is known in sport management research about the strategies which opponents use to neutralise athlete activists. Discursive delegitimisation refers to the public discourse, which seeks to undermine activist legitimacy and challenge the meaning of activist actions. Prior to 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, 16 members of the Australian football team released a video via social media criticising Qatar's human rights record with migrant workers and the LGBTQIA+ community. A content analysis was conducted of 5,844 social media comments on this video to examine the delegitimisation strategies employed by critics of this athlete activism. Findings illustrate nine forms of online discursive delegitimisation strategies. Those consistent with previous research were: 1) Stigmatising the athletes; 2) Authorisation; 3) Emphasising negative consequences; 4) Attributing new meaning to the activism; 5) Moral Evaluation; 6) Rationalisation; and 7) Mythopoesis. Two

new strategies were identified: 8) Implying the athletes are disingenuous; and 9) arguing the activism is a distraction. This research demonstrates that online communities use social media to not only discuss and react to athlete activism, but to actively counteract and neutralise it. This study contributes to athlete activism research by conceptualising an integrative framework of discursive delegitimisation strategies in elite sport. As public perceptions closely align with sports marketing and branding efforts, this research has managerial implications to help athletes to avoid and overcome negative public perceptions and encourage their activism. Athletes and managers may be able to adjust their activist efforts to reduce delegitimisation.

Key words: Athlete activism; discursive delegitimisation; neutralisation

3.1 Introduction

Sport is an important context for studying activism. In the past decade, scholars have increasingly studied how elite athletes use sport to bring about social and political change (Cooper et al., 2019; Kluch, 2020; Watanabe et al., 2019, 2023). Sport has highly visible and influential figures (Anderski et al., 2023) who use their platform to influence debates on many social issues (e.g. diversity and social justice) (Agyemang et al., 2020; Edwards, 2017). Given their status and ability to reach a significant number of people via social media, their statements and actions can significantly shape public discourse (Hoeber et al., 2023; Noh et al., 2023). Athlete activism is increasingly relevant to the field of sport management (Leppard, 2022; Magrath, 2021).

It is well documented that athletes face criticism and backlash as a direct result of their activism (Kaufman, 2008) and that criticism is a concern to athlete activists (Agyemang et al., 2010; Haslett et al., 2020). People engaging in discursive delegitimisation use verbal or written discourse to undermine the authority, credibility, or moral standing of a person, organisation, group

or idea. Discursive delegitimisation typically portrays the target (e.g. the athlete activist) as unworthy of support, respect, or legitimacy (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018; Ross & Rivers, 2017). The discursive delegitimisation of athlete activism is important for at least three reasons. First, discursive delegitimisation can influence societal attitudes toward the social issue (Knott-Fayle et al., 2021) and therefore compromise the athlete activists' intended outcome. Second, the delegitimisation narratives can also negatively impact the athlete's brand (Anderski et al., 2023). Third, given the inevitable criticism their activism will generate (Doidge et al., 2024; Kaufman, 2008), the athlete's mental health may be jeopardised (Kluch, 2023). Sport organisations seek to combat online hate and safeguard athletes from abuse and harassment (Hayday et al., 2024).

Research is therefore crucial to understand why and how critics oppose athlete activism. Currently, very little is understood about the strategies that critics use to negate elite athlete activism. While research has identified several neutralisation strategies employed in the media towards elite athletes (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018), it remains unclear if and how members of the public attempt to neutralise activist athletes. Discursive delegitimisation, or the use of public discourse to undermine activist legitimacy and challenge the meaning of activist actions is one such strategy.

Whilst research related to perceptions of athlete activism is expanding, studies have overwhelmingly focused on the American context and American elite athletes (Kluch et al., 2023; O'Neill et al., 2023). This narrow focus limits our understanding of how elite athlete activism is perceived in different countries (Kluch et al., 2023; Meier et al., 2023; Ogiso et al., 2022). There is research suggesting that athlete activism is perceived differently in countries like Australia and Germany when compared to the USA (Cleland et al., 2022; Meier et al., 2023). In Australia for example, protests during the national anthem generated a degree of mixed public responses but not

the widespread backlash evident in the USA (Cleland et al., 2022). While the reasons for these differences remain unclear, there is enough to suggest that athlete activism is viewed differently throughout the world.

Thus, to advance scholarship in this domain, this study uses a content analysis approach to observe and examine online social media comments related to a single case study of athlete activism by Australian athletes. Content analysis is well suited to studying the ideas and messages that exist in social media commentary on athlete activism (Gill Jr., 2016; Leppard, 2022). The study uses a deductive coding process based on pre-existing frameworks of discursive delegitimisation (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018) and discourse of legitimation (Van Leeuwen, 2007), supplemented with inductive coding to uncover new strategies. Using these, social media comments are analysed to conceptualise an integrative framework of discursive delegitimisation of athlete activism. As a result of this process, we conceptualised two novel delegitimisation strategies: Disingenuousness and Distraction.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the discursive efforts of online critics to delegitimise athlete activists. The study is guided by a single research question: What discursive delegitimisation strategies were used by critics of the Australian men's football team's activism? Building on the work of O'Neill et al. (2023) this article makes four main contributions to the field of athlete activism. The article: 1) illustrates the various online discursive delegitimisation strategies deployed by critics of athlete activism; 2) examines elite athlete activism beyond the American context; 3) conceptualises an integrative framework of discursive delegitimisation strategies in elite sport; and 4) explores how online communities counteract elite athlete activism.

3.2 Literature Review

3.2.1 *Elite Athlete Activism*

There is no agreed-upon definition for what constitutes activism and by extension ‘elite athlete activism’ (Kluch, 2020; Lee & Cunningham, 2019; Parsons, 2016). In Kaufman & Wolff (2010) athletes defined their activism as being advocates for causes or “engaging in symbolic protests” (p.158). Cooper et al., (2019) delineated five types of activist athletes based on the efforts the athlete undertakes: 1) symbolic; 2) scholarly; 3) grassroots; 4) sport-based; and 5) economic activism. As a method of bringing about social change, athlete activism can be done by individual athletes or as a collective, such as with a team (Presley et al., 2016). Activism encapsulates several strategies, ranging from peaceful actions like being part of a petition or public statement (Klar & Kasser, 2009) to much more confrontational methods like public protests and even boycotts (Toledano, 2016). Similarly, Fisher (2018) suggests there are five categories of activist strategies including concepts such as protests and giving public press releases. Kluch (2020) combines many definitions to argue that athlete activism has mostly been defined as an athlete’s “use of their involvement in sport as a platform to promote social justice” (p. 571), we utilise this summarised definition of athlete activism for the purpose of this study and will therefore refer to it consistently as activism.

Public perception is a frequently studied element of athlete activism (O’Neill et al., 2023). Previous research has highlighted that athlete activism is a highly divisive topic (Frederick et al., 2017; Frederick et al., 2022; Knoester et al., 2022). Athletes challenge existing political and social values, whilst also reframing traditionally held beliefs about the role of athletes in society, neither of which can be done without sparking dissent (Schmidt et al., 2019). American studies have shown that the public rejects athlete activism more than it supports it (Kaufman, 2008; Serazio &

Thorson, 2020). Allison et al. (2022) for example found that over two thirds of adults disapproved of the 2016 NFL protests, yet younger Americans and Black Americans were more likely to support the protests. Meanwhile, disapproval for the activism stemmed from perceptions of disrespect for national symbols, denial of racial inequality and desires to keep sports an apolitical arena. Political ideology has also been seen to be a major contributing factor to how athlete activism is perceived in both the US (Mueller, 2022; Niven, 2021) and Germany (Meier et al., 2023; Müller et al., 2023) with those who are politically conservative being more likely to disapprove of athlete activism.

How activism is undertaken and for what social issue appear to affect public perceptions. Some forms of protest, such as coming into conflict with police, are perceived as less appropriate than others (Atouba & Wilson, 2020). Likewise, speaking on social injustice is seen to decrease an athlete's attractiveness as a brand more than speaking on gender equality (Brown & Brison, 2017). Meanwhile, participants in Cunningham & Regan's (2012) study valued authenticity and perceived athletes as more trustworthy when engaging in non-controversial activism, which they viewed as activism for a topic, which people generally support. Indeed, significant research has noted the importance of authenticity and trustworthiness when engaging in activism (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Increasingly, research has looked at how the public use online media to discuss this phenomenon (Boatwright, 2022; Johnson et al., 2019; Wang & Sant, 2022). Dickerson & Hodler (2021) found that people used online memes to label and mock Kaepernick's protest as well as to frame the protest negatively. Similarly, research has shown that the public can use social media to craft narratives around athlete activism (Frederick et al., 2022) and that fans will use social media as a forum to debate perceived threats to their identity caused by athlete activism (Sanderson et al.,

2016). Yet, a lack of research still exists in understanding the backlash and opposition, which athlete activism generates online among sporting organisations, news agencies and amongst the public (Hawkins et al., 2022). While still in its infancy for research, social media is a fertile ground for the discussion and debate of elite athlete activism.

3.2.2 Discursive Delegitimisation

Discursive delegitimisation refers to the use of public discourse to discredit actors and their concerns (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018). Where legitimacy can be defined as accepting a claim based on it being just or right, delegitimisation occurs when we reject that claim for being unjust or wrong (Kelman, 2001). Where legitimisation creates a sense of positive or socially acceptable action, delegitimisation creates a negative image by making the argument and underlying premise appear misaligned with social values (Ross & Rivers, 2017, 2018; Suchman, 1995). Ultimately, legitimacy adds reasoning for why we should listen to someone or something, while delegitimisation counters by suggesting why we should not listen (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Discursive delegitimisation can be seen as a form of tactical neutralisation. In this context, tactical neutralisation refers to those actions which attempt to stop a tactic such as activism by undercutting its power. Other tactical neutralisation methods used against athlete activism include co-opting the activists and imposing costs on them (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018). Discursive delegitimisation attempts to neutralise the activism by stripping activist and activism campaigns of their legitimacy. The core aims of delegitimisation are to discredit the activist and redefine their message (Naples, 2013).

The concept of delegitimising discourse has largely been applied to the fields of politics, public relations, and communications, and usually in relation to institutions such as governments (Ross, 2020). Similarly, it has historically been studied using more traditional texts (see Van

Leeuwen, 2007). However, more recently it has been shown that delegitimisation takes place across a range of online platforms including social media (Davis et al., 2016; Ross, 2020) and can be equally applied to individuals (Ross & Rivers, 2017).

Delegitimisation is a relatively new concept to study athlete activism and has largely been applied to how the mainstream media can frame narratives to delegitimise and marginalise athlete protestors (Doehler, 2023; Park et al., 2020). In the same way, Park (2022) stated that media delegitimises athlete activists by overemphasising conflict rather than the issues being addressed. As the tactic has the potential to change public perceptions of institutions and people (Ross & Rivers, 2018), potentially stripping athletes of their power to influence, studying delegitimisation surrounding athlete activism is necessary. In their media framing study of Colin Kaepernick, Nepstad and Kenney (2018) identified several tactical neutralisation strategies used against Kaepernick. From their study, they developed the first framework of discursive delegitimisation centred on athlete activism. The framework is premised upon four strategies: 1) Stigmatising the athlete-protesters; 2) Questioning the athletes' right to represent the aggrieved group; 3) Emphasising the negative consequences of the tactic; and 4) Attributing new meaning to the activism. See Table 3.1 for characteristics of the delegitimisation strategies. Our study represents the first application of this framework to public/social media discourse.

In their work on public communication, Van Leeuwen (2007) distinguishes four strategies of legitimisation: 1) Authorisation; 2) Moral Evaluation; 3) Rationalisation; and 4) Mythopoesis. The delegitimisation strategies of Authorisation, Moral Evaluation and Rationalisation can be subdivided into sub strategies (See Table 3.1). Though rarely applied to sport, Van Leeuwen's strategies have proven suitable for analysing legitimisation and delegitimisation by sports fans. Utilising Van Leeuwen's work, Kearns et al. (2024) found that Manchester City fans used online

discourse to legitimise their club management by subsequently delegitimising critics as envious, hypocritical or uninformed. This framework's focus on understanding why social practices exist makes it suitable for studying the divisive social practices in sports (Qvarfordt et al, 2019) such as athlete activism. We therefore apply this framework to our study. Consistent with previous studies, we considered Van Leeuwen's framework from an inverse perspective, as delegitimation (Ross & Rivers, 2017, 2019; Sadeghi et al., 2014).

Legitimacy of activism efforts has also been considered from a public perspective. A public survey regarding the 2016 NFL protests found the success of athletes is used against them and that they are delegitimised if they critique the system that granted them their wealth and fame (Serazio & Thorson, 2020). Meier et al. (2023) meanwhile found that the German public were most likely to perceive political activism by elite athletes as legitimate if it aligned with their own political values. Building on such literature, Hawkins et al., (2022) propose their 'Distraction Hypothesis' that suggests that athlete activists are delegitimised because their activism distracts them from the competition, interferes with their athletic performance, and therefore does not "belong".

In summary, previous research has studied delegitimation from a range of perspectives yet it has not been applied in sport management research. Due to the divisive nature of athlete activism, the relevance of analysing discursive delegitimation strategies in relation to this topic is clear because of the potential for these strategies to deter or prevent athlete activism.

Table 3.11*Framework of Delegitimisation Strategies*

Delegitimisation Strategy	Strategy Characteristics	Author
Authorisation	Referring to the authority (or lack of) vested in a person's status (Personal Authority), perceived expertise (Expert Authority), collective behaviour (Authority of Conformity) and leading by example (Role Model Authority) OR, in customs, laws or regulations (Impersonal Authority and Authority of Tradition).	Van Leeuwen (2007); Nepstad & Kenney (2008)
Disingenuous	Implying a lack of sincerity or authenticity	
Disputing the Tactics Meaning	Changing the meaning and purpose of why the tactic was undertaken	Nepstad & Kenney (2018)
Distraction	Suggesting that an action is distracting from one's core purpose.	
Moral Evaluation	Discrediting by highlighting perceived moral transgressions or ethical violations. Done by making moral judgements (Evaluation), comparisons (Analogies), deeming something unnatural (Naturalisation) or by reframing the action (Abstraction).	Van Leeuwen (2007)
Mythopoesis	Creating narratives, stories and cautionary tales.	Van Leeuwen (2007)
Negative Consequences	Discrediting the athletes for the immediate negative or harmful consequences the activism will cause.	Nepstad & Kenney (2018)
Rationalisation	Implying that an action is irrational either due the goals of the action (Instrumental Rationalisation) or a lack of truth behind the action (Theoretical Rationalisation).	Van Leeuwen (2007)
Stigmatising	Attacking one's character.	Nepstad & Kenney (2018)

3.3 Methods

This research sought to understand how online communities combat and neutralise activist athletes. For this purpose, we conducted a systematic content analysis of social media comments and applied it to a single case study of elite athlete activism. Case studies are particularly useful for studying complex and bounded phenomena to bring meaning to them (Yin, 2018). The applicability of the case study method for the study of athlete activism is well documented (O'Neill et al., 2023).

3.3.1 Case Context

This study focuses on a single case of the Australian men's football team, popularly known in Australia as the Socceroos. On October 27, 2022, 16 players from the Socceroos released a collective statement video via social media whereby the team challenged Qatar's human rights record with migrant workers and the LGBTQIA+ community (Rayson, 2022). Qatar would soon host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, a point of significant controversy among western human rights groups (Adair, 2022). The video was posted on multiple social media accounts by the Socceroos and the Professional Footballers Association and recirculated on social media by numerous Australian news agencies. The goal of the video, as stated by the athletes, was to support international agencies in:

...seeking to embed reforms and establish a lasting legacy in Qatar. This must include establishing a Migrant Resource Centre, effective remedy for those who have been denied their rights, and the decriminalization of all same-sex relationships (Subway Socceroos, 2020).

The video meets the four criteria for activism set by Cooper et al. (2019):

(1) A clear opposition; concrete disruption and challenging (as opposed to reinforcing) of hegemonic structures, norms, and mental processes; (3) specific goals and objectives (often in the form of demands) to assess progress; and (4) a connection to broader social justice movements.

The Socceroos' video was divisive, generating considerable mainstream and social media coverage. Whilst the activism was supported by Football Australia, Australia's governing body, it received mixed responses by media both within and outside Australia and was heavily criticised by both Qatari and FIFA officials (Alkhaldi & Nasser, 2022; Reid, 2022). For these reasons, the video provides a useful case study for analysing discursive delegitimisation of athlete activism.

3.3.2 Content Analysis

This study uses a well-established qualitative content analysis method (Filo et al., 2015). Qualitative content analysis aims to identify consistencies by systematically categorising and identifying themes or patterns through coding (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis is especially useful for observing and investigating interactions by actors on digital platforms (Dubinsky, 2021; Leppard, 2022; Nepstad & Kenney, 2018). This includes analyses of social media comments related to athlete activism (Johnson et al., 2019; Wang & Sant, 2022). For this study, members of the online public who oppose athlete activism were selected as the target group, with their social media comments providing the codable text.

3.3.3 Data Collection

Data for this study was collected from several social media sources using retrospective data collection of 25 social media threads which discussed the Socceroos' video. Threads were gathered from five social media sites: Facebook; X (formerly Twitter); Instagram; YouTube; and TikTok. Only threads made by Australian organisations (or Australian focused) were included within the

study. Researchers manually searched Australian social media pages on the five platforms for the threads with the highest comment counts. The 25 threads with the most comments were selected. Seven of the included threads were posted by football organisations including the Socceroos, Professional Footballers Australia (i.e., the Australian football players association), Football Australia and the A-League's football competition. The remaining 18 threads were posted by popular Australia mainstream media outlets.

Due to changing social media platform regulations and data accessibility, different data collection tools were required. Hence, original comments and replies were collected using three open-source online data analytic tools: Communalystic, Apify and Export Comments (Apify, 2023; ExportComments, 2023; Gruzd & Mai, 2021). Initially, 6,793 comments were collected. Comments from each platform were exported into separate comma-separated value (CSV) files for cleaning within Microsoft Excel (Chen & Kwak, 2022). Only comments with multiple words in English were included for analysis. Comments solely containing emojis, images, links to external content, tagged comments, and comments not in English were excluded from the analysis. For data privacy reasons, no personal information was collected such as poster locations or names. For this reason, we lack an understanding of the demographics of our sample which is a limitation of the study. Following cleaning, 5,844 comments were then uploaded to NVivo for coding and analysis (Lumivero, 2023). See Table 3.2 for full list of threads of the video included in the study and the number of comments collected from each.

Table 3.2*Social Media Threads of Socceroos' Video Included in Study*

Organisation	Source	Number of comments collected
10 News (The Project)	Facebook	248
9 News	Facebook	329
9 Wide World of Sport	Facebook	76
A League	Facebook	248
ABC News	Facebook	155
ABC Sport	Facebook	115
Fox Sports Football	Facebook	73
News.com.au	Facebook	118
SBS News	Facebook	205
Sky News Australia	Facebook	198
Socceroos	Facebook	392
SportBible Australia	Facebook	83
Sydney Morning Herald	Facebook	248
The Age	Facebook	153
ABC News	X	83
Professional Footballers Australia (PFA)	X	541
Socceroos	X	1554
ABC Sport	Instagram	63
SBS News Australia	Instagram	54
Socceroos	Instagram	219
News.com.au	TikTok	199
Socceroos	TikTok	46
The Guardian	TikTok	90
Football Australia	YouTube	183
Sky News Australia	YouTube	171
Total		5844

3.3.4 Data Analysis

3.3.4.1 Analytical Frameworks. Our analytical framework reflects Nepstad & Kenney's (2018) framework of discursive delegitimation and Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework of legitimation. Nepstad and Kenney's framework consists of four strategies: 1) Stigmatising the

athletes; 2) Questioning the athletes' right to represent the aggrieved group; 3) Emphasising the negative consequences; and 4) Attributing new meaning to the activism. Van Leeuwen (2007) distinguishes four strategies of legitimation: 1) Authorisation; 2) Moral Evaluation; 3) Rationalisation; and 4) Mythopoesis along with their subcategories. We considered that Nepstad and Kenney's strategy of 'Questioning the athletes' right to represent the aggrieved group' was sufficiently similar to a subcategory of 'Authorisation' titled 'Personal Authorisation' (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Therefore, for this study, these strategies were merged under the title of Authorisation. Only comments which directly related to the Socceroos and their video were considered.

3.3.4.2 Testing the Frameworks. To test the validity of the framework, a pilot study was conducted using comments about the Socceroos' activism video which were not included in the main study (Kwon & Sung, 2011). This pilot study used an abductive coding approach combining deductive and inductive coding to test the effectiveness of the pre-existing strategies and reveal any unidentified strategies (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). In this pilot study, two coders, one experienced sport management researcher and one sport management PhD student, worked collectively to deductively code comments using the framework. For each comment identified as 'delegitimising' the athletes, the researchers discussed the purpose of the comment and coded based on mutual agreement (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). During this pilot study, researchers identified several comments, which shared a common theme and fitted the overall definition of 'delegitimising' yet did not fit within the existing strategies. Consequently, the researchers created two additional strategies – *Disingenuous* and *Distraction* – to the integrative framework. Distraction reflects the distraction hypothesis of Hawkins et al., (2022).

3.3.4.3 Coding. To ensure the viability of the integrative framework and to determine intercoder reliability, a subsample of the 5,844 comments ($n = 611$; 10.4%) was independently coded by two authors (Antunovic et al., 2023; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The subsample included comment threads from each of the five social media sites included in the study. Per Ross and Rivers (2017), it was apparent that certain individual comments reflected more than one delegitimisation strategy. Consequently, due to the latent nature of many comments, some level of interpretation was necessary (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Consistent with Ross and Rivers (2017), the authors developed a series of prompt questions to assist with the coding process. Refer to Table 3.3.

Coding inconsistencies were discussed between the coders to clarify conflicting interpretations and refine the framework (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, researchers determined the overall intercoder reliability to be ($r = 0.83$) indicating a high level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Following the subsample coding, the remainder of the comments were coded by a single researcher and then reviewed by a second researcher, again with a discussion of any inconsistencies (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

3.4 Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies which opponents use to delegitimise athlete activism. From 5,844 comments, the analysis revealed nine delegitimisation strategies. Seven of these strategies were consistent with prior literature: Authorisation; Disputing the tactic's meaning; Moral Evaluation; Mythopoesis; Negative Consequences; Rationalisation and Stigmatising (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018; Van Leeuwen, 2007). Two new strategies were identified: Disingenuous and Distraction. Table 3.4 provides both the usage proportions and exemplar quotes for each strategy and corresponding sub-strategies.

The following sections will outline each of these in more detail.

Table 3.3

Prompt Questions for Coding

Delegitimisation strategy	Prompt questions
Authorisation	Does the comment imply a lack of authority/right/knowledge to speak on the issue?
Disingenuous	Does the comment suggest some lack of sincerity in the protest? Does it imply the athletes weren't genuine in their efforts or attempts to bring about change?
Disputing the Tactic's Meaning	Does the comment challenge the reasoning behind making the video? Does the comment imply there were other factors behind the video?
Distraction	Does the comment suggest that by engaging in activism the athletes are being distracted from their on-field performance?
Moral Evaluation	Does the comment discredit the protest by using morals and ethics? Does the comment make a moral comparison to something outside of the video?
Mythopoesis	Does the comment offer alternative (fictional) future predictions due to the goals or ideals of the protest? Does the comment reflect a moral or cautionary story?
Negative Consequences	Does the comment mention potential real-world consequences due to the action of protesting?
Rationalisation	Does the comment imply the protest's motives are irrational? <u>Instrumental Rationalisation</u> – Does it comment imply irrationality due to the outcomes, goals or effectiveness of the protest? <u>Theoretical Rationalisation</u> - Does it imply inaccuracies/ lies/ untrue facts surrounding the protest?
Stigmatising	Are the athletes' characters portrayed negatively in the comment? Does the comment describe their personalities as unreliable?

Table 3.4*Delegitimisation Strategy, Sub Strategies, Proportion of Use, and Example Quotes*

Delegitimisation Strategy	Proportion of use (%)	Sample Comments
Disingenuous	18.94	“Will still play there, will still collect their national player cash, will still collect their personal sponsor money and nothing will change. Stunning and brave.” (Facebook 1) “If you're genuine about your views you would boycott the event instead of reading from an autocue that somebody else scripted. (Facebook 2)
Distraction	3.25	“This is exactly why Australia will never win anything on the world stage! While other countries focus on the sport and actually getting good at it, Australia is on some woke garbage.” (YouTube 1) “Athletes should focus on being the best at their sport otherwise they risk losing the support of fans in their droves.” (Instagram User 1)
Authorisation - Conformity	0.19	“You are the ONLY team that used the biggest sport event in the world to promote your sick ideology!” (Facebook User 3)
Authorisation - Expert	8.74	“How about you play sport and leave the other stuff to real activists and to the United Nations.” (Facebook 4) “I am a massive Socceroos fan, but I am not convinced people who play sport for a living are the right people to highlight and make comment on another country's internal issues.” (YouTube 2)
Authorisation - Impersonal & Tradition	7.97	“How hard is it to respect another countries religion and culture?” (X 1) “Talking about respect when blatantly not respecting a country’s culture or Laws. As much as I don’t agree with their Laws it’s there [sic] country.” (TikTok 1)
Authorisation - Personal	3.84	“What gives you the right to determine which values should be established in a society that is not yours!” (X 2) “Your views are personal, not representative of every Australian.” (Facebook 5)
Authorisation - Role model	0.39	“If they want change they might first want to start asking why our best ever Socceroo Tim Cahill has been over in Qatar opening academies (Instagram 2) “Before lecturing other countries, at least be the right example.” (X 3)
Authorisation - TOTAL	21.13	
Disputing the Tactics Meaning	7.29	“Purely a marketing and PR exercise using human rights abuses as leverage to lift the Socceroos brand. Look at the timing. Virtue signalling at its worst” (Facebook 6) “Players should NOT be put on the spot and press ganged into being political pawns” (X 4)

Delegitimisation Strategy	Proportion of use (%)	Sample Comments
Moral Evaluation - Abstraction	2.09	“More idiots biting the hand that feeds them” (Facebook 7) “Go woke go broke” (Facebook 8)
Moral Evaluation - Analogy	15.15	“Australia doesn't have the best track record with human rights abuses including refugees locked in indefinite detention for no reason and indigenous deaths in custody. The Socceroos own sponsors include Nike (poor human rights record), QANTAS (fired workers during the pandemic while still making massive profits and executive bonuses)” (Facebook 9)
Moral Evaluation - Evaluation	3.3	“Australia is becoming a Woke Joke!” (Facebook 10)
Moral Evaluation - Naturalisation	3.93	“Welcome to New Australia - the moral superiority capital of the world.” (Facebook 11) “Keep the world's separate, no-one wants to hear it. Sport and politics aren't meant to be together.” (Facebook 12)
Moral Evaluation - TOTAL	24.48	“What's soccer have anything to do with sexual orientation? Two different topics.” (TikTok 2)
Mythopoesis	2.43	“The left won't be happy until they have everyone violent rioting in the street and burning the world down, they are so dumb that it will be too late once they realise that their toxic mind and agenda is what's wrong with the world.” (Facebook 13)
Negative Consequences	5.44	“Didn't the Australian netball team just do that? Didn't work out well for them” (TikTok 3) “Waiting for a sponsor to pull funding” (Instagram 3)
Rationalisation - Instrumental	5.59	“Fat chance Australia will host a Mens WC anytime soon, now” (Facebook 14) “Throw in a demand for World Peace while you're at it.” (Facebook 15) “I think there are a few thousand workers no longer with us that would probably consider that stand a bit late.” (Facebook 16)
Rationalisation - Theoretical	6.61	“You really should do some fact checking” (Facebook 17) “They didn't say a peep when Qatar hosted the Socceroos when they couldn't play in oz.” (Facebook 18)
Rationalisation TOTAL	12.19	
Stigmatising	4.86	“Get off your high horse people (Facebook 19)” “Privileged and over pampered snowflakes.” (TikTok 4)
TOTAL	100	

Note: The Authorisation subcategories of Impersonal Authority and Authority of Tradition were combined because many comments cited Qatar's authority in terms of cultural tradition and religious law.

3.4.1 Disingenuous

One of the most identified strategies in this study, Disingenuous delegitimisation was evident when critics of the Soccerroos implied that the athletes lacked genuineness, sincerity, or authenticity in their activism. Employing the Disingenuous strategy involves creating an impression that the athletes lack sincere concern for the issues they address in their video. Commentary employing this approach predominantly centred on the argument that the athletes were still attending the World Cup. These commentators delegitimised the Soccerroos for being disingenuous, emphasising the absence of sacrifice on their part (Table 3.4, Facebook 1). Comments implied that making the video was not a “genuine” or “authentic” form of activism and implying that if the athletes were genuinely sincere, they would not attend the World Cup. Complementing the lack of sincerity or authenticity, some commentators underscored perceived hypocrisy in the Soccerroos’ activism:

If you are committed to the cause then don’t play at stadiums that were constructed by the migrant workers you are highlighting the plight of (Facebook 20)

The collective statement’s message was here used against the athletes, suggesting that their actions did not align with their advocated principles. These comments suggest that if an athlete fails to make sacrifices when undertaking activism, the effectiveness of their efforts diminishes in the eyes of the public.

Lastly, comments delegitimised the athletes through the disingenuous strategy by suggesting a lack of effort in producing the video and the collective statement overall. Evident in comments such as “My man filmed in his car” (Facebook 21) is the suggestion that the athletes exhibited insufficient effort in producing the video, thus further reinforcing a lack of genuine concern. Some comments for example implied that the athletes dedicated minimal time and effort

to the video, or even suggesting they did not write the message themselves (Table 3.4, Facebook 2). Commentors using this strategy, implying the athletes were disingenuous, essentially argued that the Socceroos were not genuine or authentic, as their activism was simply not enough to achieve their goals. Ultimately, comments of this nature delegitimise the activism efforts by implying that a mere collective statement video falls short in demonstrating a sincere care for the issues discussed.

3.4.2 *Distraction*

Newly identified, this Distraction category follows the ‘Distraction Hypothesis’ proposed by Hawkins et al. (2022). Here, efforts are made to delegitimise the athlete activist by asserting that activism distracts them from their athletic performance. Opponents of the Socceroos suggest that by making the video, and dealing with the subsequent attention from it, would compromise the athletes’ ability to play football at the level required. Though not as widely utilised as some strategies, comments here followed one of two approaches. Opponents regularly weaponised the word ‘focus’ to imply that the Socceroos’ attention was not where it *should* be, insinuating that the athletes are distracted:

Seriously. Why don’t you focus on the football instead of distracting yourselves with this stuff (Instagram 4)

Other opponents asserted the consequences of elite athletes failing to prioritise their sporting pursuits. Comments implied that engaging in athlete activism is a primary factor contributing to the team’s perceived prior lack of success and will similarly impede future performance. Other critics attacked the athletes’ attractiveness by suggesting that fans will withdraw support from the team due to a perceived lack of focus on winning (Table 3.4, Instagram 1). Results from this strategy show that opponents of athlete activism were prepared to attribute

poor on-field performance to the athletes' engagement in activism. By using this strategy, opponents appear to urge the athletes to cease their activism by insinuating that the team's performance would improve if they did so.

3.4.3 Authorisation

The Authorisation delegitimisation strategy focuses on the concept of authority as held by a person, custom, law or tradition. If someone is perceived as lacking or misusing authority, they are delegitimised. Commentors employ this strategy by implying that the Socceroos lacked the authority to speak on this issue:

I am a massive Socceroos fan, but I am not convinced people who play sport for a living are the right people to highlight and make comment on another country's internal issues (YouTube 3)

A primary aim of this strategy was to undermine the athletes based on their profession, arguing that it does not confer them expert authority to engage in such discourse. These three statements employ the "stick to sports" argument to discredit the athletes, suggesting their authority is limited to sports and not to matters of human rights or politics. Use of the term 'real activists' takes this delegitimisation further by implying the athletes are somehow false activists (Table 3.4, Facebook 4). Comments undermine the athletes' credibility by emphasising their (perceived) lack of expertise, thus casting doubt on authorisation to speak on the issue.

Another common approach employed by commentors was to question the athletes' requisite personal authority to be standing against this issue. Specifically, commentors assert that the Socceroos lack the personal right or status to be proponents of change. Comments delegitimised the athletes by contending that their Australian nationality precludes them from possessing personal authority to address matters in a foreign context (Table 3.4, X 1). These

comments argue that it is beyond the ambit of foreigners to challenge another country's societal norms. Additionally, commentators undermined the athletes' legitimacy by questioning their capacity to represent all Australians (Table 3.4, Facebook 5).

Similarly, comments also delegitimised the Socceroos through reference to impersonal authority or the authority of tradition. Rather than focusing solely on the athletes' lack of authority, critics delegitimised through reference to the supreme authority of Qatar's religion, laws or customs. Comments within this subset such as "It is an independent country with their own rules, just respect it" (Instagram 5) collectively implied that Qatar, as a sovereign Islamic nation, has the inherent authority and right to govern itself. Consequently, these comments delegitimise the athletes by suggesting their authority is subordinate to that of Qatar. Though far less utilised, the Authorisation sub-strategies of Conformity and Role Model were also identified. Conformity was employed mostly by insinuating that the Socceroos should 'fall in line' and behave like other countries who were not protesting against Qatar (Table 3.4, Facebook 4). Similarly, comments in the Role Model sub-strategy delegitimised by suggesting the athletes are setting a bad example. A tactic employed here was to compare the team to 'real' role models such as former star Socceroo Tim Cahill who was actively promoting the Qatar World Cup (Table 3.4, Instagram 2). Through employing the delegitimation strategy of authorisation, all such comments ultimately insinuated, using various rationales that the Socceroos arguments ought to be dismissed.

3.4.4 Disputing the Tactic's Meaning

This form of delegitimation occurred when commentators attempted to change the meaning of the video tactic. While the Socceroos' stated motivation was to promote change in Qatar's treatment of migrant workers and the LGBTQIA+ community, opponents asserted alternative motives. Much like the strategy of disingenuous, these comments delegitimised by insinuating

insincerity on the part of the athletes. However, unlike disingenuous, which aims to suggest the athletes' lack of seriousness, this strategy primarily insinuates the presence of ulterior motives. One of the core uses of this strategy, was to contend that the athletes made the video simply to make themselves look like good and conscionable people. Some commentators even went as far as to suggest that the team made the video to enhance their brand image and garner publicity (Table 3.4, Facebook 7).

A related effort to delegitimise the athletes was to suggest that the athletes were forced to make the video. Comments implied that this video was not athlete-led activism, but an organisation-led action. This delegitimises the athletes by suggesting they are without agency in this matter, and more significantly, that the athletes may not truly support the message they are sending. Other opponents went as far as to suggest that the video was made for even more nefarious purposes such as being a form of western propaganda to destabilise Qatar and other Arab nations:

You go to a country to compete in a tournament. Then you go on spreading propaganda and aiming to cause unrest (YouTube 4).

Delegitimation occurs here by suggesting that the athletes made the video in the hope that it would cause conflict and disagreement.

3.4.5 Moral Evaluation

This most identified form of discursive delegitimation occurred when opponents attempted to discredit the Socceroos by invoking values and ethics. This strategy manifested in several ways throughout the comments, all with the apparent goal of suggesting that the Socceroos should not be listened to on these issues due to perceived moral shortcomings. Comments routinely evaluated the athletes and their video using moral adjectives such as wrong, hypocritical, racist, Islamophobic, and contemptible. Such terminology suggests that the athletes' actions are morally

objectionable and therefore unworthy of consideration. Similarly, commentators sarcastically used the term ‘Woke’, a slang word for social awareness, to suggest that the athletes are being too progressive and hence not to be taken seriously. Furthermore, comments also delegitimised the athletes by ironically implying that portions of Australia, including these athletes, perceive themselves as morally superior to others (Table 3.4, Facebook 11).

Opponents also used the sub-strategy of Moral Evaluation - Naturalisation to delegitimise the athletes by implying that their actions disrupt the natural order. Commentors contended that sport should remain separate from societal issues with the comment “sports and politics don’t mix” (X User 5) frequently appearing. This implies that by using their platform to address human rights concerns, the Socceroos are acting unnaturally and therefore immorally.

Results showed that discursive delegitimation in this strategy mostly occurred through use of moral analogies. Opponents employed this sub-strategy by drawing parallels between the Socceroos’ activism and external actions they deemed unethical. For instance, opponents attacked the credibility of the Socceroos by referencing Australia’s human rights record and the team’s partnerships (Table 3.4, Facebook 9). Common analogies such as ‘those in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones’ and ‘look in your own backyard’ were also used to suggest that the athletes’ own nationality makes them morally unsuitable to pass judgement on the issues in Qatar. Additionally, opponents accused the team of selective activism by highlighting their lack of activism in other areas, including previous World Cups and other global human rights issues.

3.4.6 Mythopoesis

Another form of discursive delegitimation identified was the use of narratives and cautionary tales. Opponents used this storytelling strategy to suggest potential negative outcomes if acceptable social practices are not adhered to. Much of the commentary using this strategy aimed

to delegitimise either the goals of the protest or the concept of athlete activism itself. Comments here provide warnings about potential future scenarios if the behaviour advocated by the Socceroos is allowed to continue. For example:

We could bring in gulag camps for people who don't obey athletes statements and virtue signalling. We could call them 'Woke Sports Deniers Gulags' (Facebook 22).

Similar comments warned that “the left”, implying left wing or social progressives, will incite conflict, division and social unrest if their agenda continues unchallenged (Table 3.4, Facebook 13). Conversely, critics delegitimised the concept of athlete activism by warning that society would suffer if athletes were allowed to continue making public statements. Results also showed comments used this strategy by referencing past examples of elite athletes as cautionary tales. Comments referenced athletes like Britney Griner, who was arrested and detained in Russia, and the Australian women's netball team who protested the inclusion of a sponsor on their uniform, resulting in loss of the sponsorship (Table 3.4, TikTok 3). These examples serve to delegitimise by warning of the consequences faced by athletes who deviate from accepted norms, implying similar repercussions could befall the Socceroos.

3.4.7 Negative Consequences

This form of delegitimation entails discrediting the athletes by emphasising the real-world negative consequences of their activism. Some similarities can be seen with the strategy of Mythopoesis. However, Negative Consequences lacks the storytelling element and where Mythopoesis is directed at the message of the activism, Negative Consequences is directed at the specific act of activism. Users of this strategy followed one of two main approaches. In one approach, opponents cautioned against calling out Qatar, citing potential repercussions for the athletes. Repercussions commonly mentioned included team bans from competing at the World

Cup, athlete punishment and even arrest, loss of sponsorships, and the team being harassed by opponents:

All you gained here guys is the enmity of the locals and fans from the region who are going to boo you every game you play (X User 6)

Alternatively, opponents used this strategy to underscore the negative consequences this activism would have for the nations and peoples involved. Comments implied that the video would negatively harm political and economic relations between Australia and Qatar. Some commentary suggested that the Socceroos' activism was unwanted as it may affect operations between Australian and Qatari businesses. Other comments discredited the video by suggesting it will have consequences for Australian fans, particularly those attending the World Cup. Additionally, comments implied that the athletes had inadvertently jeopardised Australia's role in world football such as arguing the video would prevent Australia from hosting the men's FIFA World Cup (Table 3.4, Facebook 14).

Comments such as these seek to cast blame on the athletes and suggest their activism is causing more harm than good. Results from this section insinuate that any form of athlete activism, which causes negative consequences, are inappropriate and therefore illegitimate. This implies that the only legitimate form of activism is one in which all parties remain unaffected.

3.4.8 Rationalisation

The Rationalisation strategy occurred when opponents implied that the Socceroos' activism was irrational. Employing this strategy involved insinuating a lack of relevance or logic behind the decision to produce the video. This strategy was undertaken in one of two ways. Firstly, comments insinuated that the desired outcomes and effectiveness of the video were irrational, a process that Van Leeuwen (2007) refers to as "Instrumental Rationalisation". Comments like that

below imply the irrationality of the Socceroos' video, suggesting that its ability to cause meaningful change in Qatar is negligible. Comments facetiously implied that catalysing change in Qatar is as unrealistic as achieving world peace:

You think some stupid black and white video will change the way a country thinks....honestly (Facebook 23)

Other comments suggested that the activism was irrational because it originated from the Socceroos. These comments question the relevance of the Socceroos' involvement, implying that as a football team from Australia, they held little influence and will therefore not be taken seriously. This implies that the activism might have been deemed rational had it come from a more prolific football nation. Some comments also suggested that the timing of the video was illogical as it came too late to be effective. Critics suggested that raising the issue of migrant workers in Qatar would have been logical had it been done before the building of the stadiums and the subsequent deaths of workers.

Comments also utilised what Van Leeuwen (2007) calls "Theoretical Rationalisation". Statements such as "You really should do some fact checking" (Facebook 24) argued that there were factual inaccuracies in the video, particularly in relation to the deaths and conditions of migrant workers. Other comments weaponised the team's past to question the authenticity of the athletes' activism. Commentors cited the Socceroos' previous matches in Qatar to undermine their current stance. Some comments noted that Qatar hosted the Socceroos for several games during the Covid-19 pandemic when the team was unable to play in Australia (Table 3.4, Facebook 18). These suggested that the team's activism was insincere and irrational as they were previously willing to play 'silently' in Qatar without protest. Other critics made similar arguments, questioning the sincerity of the athletes' activism because members of the team played in countries

with equally contentious human rights practices. Once more, the contention was that the athletes' current stance lacked coherence with their past silence on similar issues.

3.4.9 Stigmatising the Athletes

Critics resorted to attacking the character of the athletes as a final delegitimisation strategy. This typically involved attributing them with negative personality traits like arrogance, sanctimony, and egotism, portraying the athletes as wielding inflated self-views and believing themselves to be ethically superior. Comments like “white saviour complex” (TikTok 5) discredit their stance by suggesting they were trying to impose their personal and cultural views on others. Commentors also depicted the athletes as overpaid and entitled, insinuating the athletes lacked the appropriate character to address issues such as migrant labour. Other opponents attacked their masculinity through the use of terms such as “snowflake” and “sissie”, insinuating they were overly emotional and were lacking the ‘appropriate’ masculine traits required to be a suitable role model and representative. These comments delegitimise the athletes cause by suggesting their activism is being wrongly fuelled by their negative personalities.

A unique result from this strategy revealed critics attacked the character of the athletes by invoking football related terminology. Opponents labelled the athletes as ‘divers’ and ‘injury actors’, terms commonly applied to football players who feign injuries to be awarded penalties. Employing these terms undermines the credibility of the athletes by implying they are dishonest and untrustworthy. The accusations question that if the athletes would be willing to deceive on the football pitch, their credibility off the field should also be questioned.

3.5 Discussion

This study sought to extend the literature on elite athlete activism by making several contributions.

Firstly, this study highlights various discursive delegitimisation strategies employed by opponents of athlete activism. Our findings are consistent with existing delegitimisation frameworks (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018; Van Leeuwen, 2007), yet we identify additional strategies specific to athlete activism. Whilst Van Leeuwen's framework has been applied previously to social media commentary studies (e.g., Ross, 2020), this study demonstrates its relevance in the context of sporting discourse and athlete activism. While this is among the first studies applying this framework, primarily used in political discourse analysis, to sport management research, we suggest that it is well suited to the study of elite athlete activism, which is often political in nature (Meier et al., 2023). Specifically, in activism endeavours such as the Socceroots' which feature political underpinnings.

Further, we extended Nepstad & Kenney's (2018) strategy of 'Emphasising the negative consequences of the tactic'. In their study, Nepstad & Kenney (2018) limited their analysis to discourse, which emphasised consequences for the economy and the nation. In contrast, our study expanded upon this by including discourse on the negative consequences for the athletes and the team. It is well documented that elite athletes encounter numerous personal negative consequences for engaging in activism (Kaufman, 2008; Niven, 2020). Athlete activists are at risk of provoking waves of backlash from the media, political elites and from the public. These athletes face being undermined via online discourse as well as personal and even racialised attacks, demonstrating the heightened costs of activism (Doidge et al., 2024). Thus, our analysis aligns with and extends this previous research by demonstrating that the threat or implication of these consequences can be used to delegitimise athletes. Additionally, this research shows that discursive delegitimisation is itself a negative consequence of engaging in athlete activism.

Notably, our study identified two new discursive delegitimisation strategies pertinent to the sport context. Our identification of the Disingenuous strategy adds to the literature, highlighting that the public tends to more positively favour actions perceived as being genuine or authentic (Cunningham & Regan Jr, 2012; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Opponents in this study perceived the Socceroos' activism as insincere or inauthentic due to their continued participation in the tournament despite advocating otherwise. The implication here that athletes may be discounted for their activism unless they are willing to make personal sacrifices is significant and warrants further investigation. This aligns with the central tenets of Costly Signaling Theory (CST) which posits that those who are willing to bear costs (i.e., make sacrifices) can demonstrate that they are truly committed to the cause (Kane & Zollman, 2015). CST has been applied to a range of human social fields including cultural practices, social behaviour and even finance yet never to athlete activism (Connelly et al., 2010).

Results from this theme contribute to the growing literature suggesting that engaging in activism has significant influence on how the brand image of athletes is perceived (Brown et al, 2022; Hu et al, 2023). Specifically, this finding aligns with branding research emphasising the importance of financial sacrifice and practicing what you preach for engaging in authentic activism (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Indeed, an alignment between activist message and activist practice appears to be crucial in shaping how activism will be perceived by the public (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Without sacrifice, it is possible that athletes increase their risk of being labelled as “woke washing”, insinuating they are only engaging with social issues to help their image (Sobande, 2019). Athletes who engage in perceived ‘disingenuous’ activism risk having their brand tarnished, potentially limiting their attractiveness to teams, sponsors or fans.

Our inclusion of the Distraction strategy aligns with Hawkins et al.'s (2022) proposition that athletes face delegitimisation for engaging in activism efforts seen as a distraction from competition. Commentors in our study argued that the Socceroos' activism had negatively affected their past and would impact their future on-field performances. This argument has historically been used against athlete activism (Hawkins et al., 2022; Kaufman, 2008) and has been a common excuse for why athletes have not engaged in activism (Brown et al., 2022; Gill Jr., 2016; Kluch, 2023). While the concept of discrediting athletes for being distracted by engaging in activism has been discussed in previous research (e.g., Kaufman, 2008; Kluch, 2023), it has not been integrated into the broader discourse on delegitimisation of athlete activism until now. Despite a dearth of research examining the extent to which athletes are in fact distracted by activism (Hawkins et al., 2022) the potential remains for this strategy to pressure athletes into avoiding activism.

This study extends the literature by validating the conceptualisation of an integrative framework of discursive delegitimisation of elite athlete activism. This framework posits that nine distinct delegitimisation strategies exist which critics employ to neutralise athlete activism. While these strategies may be identified in other cases of athlete activism, it is also probable that the application of these strategies will differ. It is also expected that unique strategies will be identified in other cases of athlete activism. These statements are particularly likely when considering the varied social and cultural contexts within which athlete activism takes place, not to mention the numerous methods of engaging in athlete activism. Every case of athlete activism is unique in some way, be it the athlete involved, the issue at hand or the method of activism. Therefore, delegitimising responses from critics are likely to be equally as unique. We believe that opponents in this study used these strategies independently; however, there is the potential for them to be used as part of a coordinated effort to delegitimise athletes. Social media has already been used

for coordinated dis/misinformation “attacks”, particularly in relation to politics (Yan et al., 2021). It is therefore possible that depending on the visibility of the issue and profile of the actors involved, coordinated attempts may also be made to delegitimise athlete activism efforts. Of course, opponents of athlete activism do not merely exist in the comment section of social media, rather these delegitimation strategies can be utilised in all forms of communication such as traditional media and be employed by a range of actors (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018). While we know that these delegitimation strategies are being employed, the effectiveness of these strategies in neutralising athlete activism remains unknown.

Second, contrasting with previous research which predominantly centred on American contexts (Kluch et al., 2023) and delegitimation of North American athletes’ activism (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018), this study examined the public response to activism by elite Australian athletes, highlighting that activism occurs beyond the American contexts and thus warrants a broader contextual understanding of the concept. Although some scholars have explored activism in non-American contexts (Choi et al., 2021; Haslett et al., 2020; Meier et al., 2023) research on athlete activism in Australia remains scarce. More significantly, the findings indicate that the cultural context within which the activism takes place may influence the strategies opponents employ for delegitimation. The Australian athletes were clearly delegitimised via their nationality. For example, comments reflecting the Moral Evaluation strategy weaponised Australia’s human rights history. Similarly, Australian athletes were contrasted with international teams and athletes considered to hold greater legitimacy. Our assertion is that, had the athletes involved come from a different cultural background, the forms and extent of delegitimation would likely have differed. The finding lends further support to McGannon and Smith’s (2015) claim that prioritising culture in sports research is essential for identifying key contextual distinctions. The findings from this

study may also challenge previous research regarding how athlete activism is perceived in Australia (e.g. Cleland et al., 2022). The presence of high levels of public delegitimisation in the comments may suggest that at least in this issue, Australia is not as pro-activist as suggested. What the findings do highlight however is that cultural context greatly affects how the public respond to activism on different issues. It remains to be seen if athletes from a different culture, speaking on the same social issue, would be delegitimised to the same extent.

Further, this study reveals notable distinctions compared to Nepstad & Kenney's (2018) examination of NFL protests in the USA initiated by Colin Kaepernick. While both studies identified similar delegitimisation strategies, nuanced differences emerged in their execution. For example, Nepstad and Kenney (2018) observed that NFL athletes were mostly stigmatised as "spoiled, ungrateful brats" whereas in this study, athletes were largely stigmatised as self-righteous and weak. These differences may reflect not only national cultural contexts, but also that sports are subject to different stigmatisations and stereotypes based on the sports' social and cultural positioning (Wang et al., 2025). Similarly, Kaepernick's opponents challenged his authority to represent the issue based on his race, whereas opponents challenged the authority of the Socceroos based on their nationality and perceived lack of knowledge on the issue. These differences may be explained by the specific targets of activism in these two cases: Kaepernick sought internal change within the USA, while the Socceroos were attempting to effect change in another country. This is supported by Müller et al. (2023) who found that the German public were more likely to support activist athletes who speak on issues abroad as opposed to domestic topics. Notably, research on differences between athlete activism targeted within one's culture or country versus externally focused activism is lacking. That said, the 'stick to sports' narrative which has been well documented in American cases (Broussard, 2020; Mudrick et al., 2019; Park, 2022) was also

prevalent in this study. These findings highlight the importance of investigating activism in diverse contexts (Kluch et al., 2023).

This study has also shown that online communities play a role in neutralising athlete activism. The use of online spaces for critics of athletes' activism to share discourse is well documented (Boatwright, 2022; Sanderson et al., 2016; Wang & Sant, 2022). Online spaces such as social media appear to be a fertile ground for the public to engage with athlete activism. This study adds to this growing literature by suggesting that opponents use these online spaces to not only discuss, share or react to athlete activism, but to actively combat it. What remains unclear though, is to what influence, if any, these communities have on athletes or sporting organisations in terms of athlete activism.

3.6 Practical Implications

Since delegitimisation strategies have the potential to neutralise athlete activism, this research has implications for elite athletes wishing to engage in activism. Athletes should consider these delegitimisation strategies before engaging in activism efforts and prepare to counteract them. We argue that whilst some strategies may be unavoidable, others may be reduced based on the form of activism undertaken and potentially by taking proactive counter measures. Strategies like Authorisation, Distraction, Moral Evaluation, Mythopoesis and Stigmatising the Athletes appear to be broadly focused and therefore likely to be experienced by all activist athletes. Athletes should therefore expect to experience these inevitable discursive attacks by members of the public. For example, athletes should be aware that any sport specific stereotypes as well as their own athletic performances will likely be utilised against them in their activism. Managers and sporting organisations might consider educating to-be athlete activists on the sorts of commentary they will likely experience, such as those in this study. Practices such as this may help to increase awareness

among athletes and help to reduce negative mental health when experiencing delegitimisation firsthand.

Other strategies, however, like Disingenuous, Disputing the Tactics Meaning, Rationalisation and even Negative Consequences appear specific to the form of activism undertaken and therefore have the potential to be reduced. For example, it is possible that by making some form of sacrifice when engaging in activism, athletes may be able to reduce perceptions that they are disingenuous or inauthentic. By aligning activist messaging with physical action, athletes may be able to reduce perceptions of virtue signalling which would again assist in maintaining a positive brand (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Athletes should also consider the timing of their activism. If athletes want their actions, and themselves, to be perceived more favourably, then considering *when* to make a stand is seemingly just as important as the action or message. As with many of these strategies, increasing communication from athletes, as well as from sporting organisations, regarding the facts, purpose and intended consequences of any activism efforts may also be effective in challenging any misinformation. One strategy for athletes is to consider their activism situation, along with their chosen social issue and activism method, and identify which delegitimisation strategies are likely to be used and how. Doing this may allow athletes to preemptively address these issues, either through action or communication, and reduce the effectiveness of their use by opponents. Ultimately, through increased awareness this research may assist in limiting the impact of delegitimisation strategies on athlete activism.

Lastly, this research has implications for sports managers. Currently it is unclear if this discursive delegitimisation has any impact on the tolerance of sporting organisations towards their activist athletes. If sporting organisations and managers are susceptible to public opinion, it is possible that high levels of delegitimisation by the public may reduce their willingness to support

their athletes in their activism. Delegitimisation has the potential to dissuade or even harm athletes and should therefore be understood by sporting organisations. Ultimately, this research can assist both athletes and sporting organisations in understanding the divide between those who support and oppose athlete activism.

3.7 Limitations and Future Research

This study had several limitations. Firstly, this research focused on a single instance of activism by Australian athletes and therefore the findings of the study should not be generalised to all cases of elite athlete activism. Future studies should continue to study athlete activism in alternative non-American contexts. Undoubtedly, future studies will identify new delegitimisation strategies. Therefore, we encourage researchers to apply this framework to culturally and topically unique cases of athlete activism. In terms of methodology, research should utilise multiple case study methods to identify similar and conflicting uses of these delegitimisation strategies in different contexts. Similarly, future research into delegitimisation of athlete activism should utilise critical discourse analysis (CDA) to delve deeper into the power dynamics and ideological underpinnings shaping public responses to athlete activism. Unlike content analysis, CDA emphasises societal and structural forces which influence discursive delegitimisation. Theoretically, incorporating a Foucauldian perspective on discourse and power could assist in highlighting how these delegitimisation strategies both reflect and reinforce broader societal hierarchies. Such approaches would help to extend the literature on public perceptions of athlete activism by generating more comprehensive understandings of the relationship between public discourse, activism, and power in elite sports contexts.

Second, future research should use quantitative methods to identify the effectiveness of these strategies in neutralising athlete activism. Studies should determine if certain

delegitimisation strategies are more prominent or effective than others. One avenue may be to study how delegitimisation influences public perceptions towards athlete activists and their causes. Examining how individuals interpret and respond to delegitimisation strategies could shed light on the effectiveness of such strategies in shaping public opinion. Future research may also consider the impact of discursive delegitimisation messaging from different sources and actors. For example, studies may consider if athletes feel different levels of pressure to disengage from activism if the delegitimisation comes from different sources (e.g. traditional or social media) and actors (e.g. athletes, politicians, and the public). Whilst this paper has presumed that delegitimisation is not in the best interests of the athlete and the athletes' message, future research should consider if high levels of delegitimisation may in fact be an indicator of successful activism in so far as the message is reaching a wider audience.

Work should also be conducted to identify methods of engaging in activism, which could result in less delegitimisation of the athlete. Given the unique findings of the Disingenuous strategy specifically, future research should determine if perceived 'authentic' activism results in less delegitimising behaviour from the public, possibly drawing on Costly Signaling Theory. Future research could explore how sporting organisations respond to discursive delegitimisation of activist athletes. Investigating organisational policies, communication strategies, and support mechanisms for athletes facing delegitimisation could inform best practices for fostering athlete advocacy within sports institutions. Alternatively, research might consider strategies that athletes or sporting organisations can use to combat discursive delegitimisation, such as by developing methods for athletes and sporting organisations in 're-legitimising' (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018).

3.8 Conclusion

This research investigated discursive delegitimisation strategies employed against athlete activism, focusing on the case of the Australian national soccer team, the Socceroos. Through discourse analysis, several strategies emerge, including Disingenuous, Distraction, Moral Evaluation, and Mythopoesis. These findings expand existing literature, showcasing how opponents leverage various strategies to undermine athlete activism. Notably, the study highlights the importance of authenticity and consistency in activist messaging and practice, as well as the role of online communities in combatting athlete activism. The research underscores the need for elite athletes to anticipate and counteract delegitimisation strategies, while also emphasising the potential impact on sporting organisations' tolerance towards activist athletes. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by athletes engaging in activism and offers insights for both athletes and sports managers navigating this area.

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Chapter 4: Standing at a Cost: Consumer Perceptions of Athlete Activism Sacrifice, Support and Authenticity

Authors: Francis O'Neill, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia and
University of Bayreuth, Germany
Tim Ströbel, University of Bayreuth, Germany
Ashleigh-Jane Thompson, La Trobe University, Melbourne
Geoff Dickson, La Trobe University, Melbourne

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Abstract

This study investigates how varying levels of personal sacrifice influence public perceptions of athlete activists among German sports fans. Drawing on Costly Signaling Theory, this study makes use of a single-factor, three-level between-subjects experimental design. Participants (N = 481) were randomly assigned to view a fictional AI-generated athlete engaging in activism under one of three sacrifice conditions: no sacrifice or Sacrifice A or Sacrifice B. Results showed that personal sacrifice significantly increased perceptions of the athlete's authenticity, role model status, attitudes toward the athlete, support for method of activism, and perceptions of sponsor brands. Both pre-existing attitudes toward athlete activism and alignment with the social issue were strong predictors of consumer perceptions. These findings suggest that public support may hinge more on ideological alignment than activist behavior. The study provides valuable insights for athletes, brands, and sports organizations seeking to navigate the complexities of activism in sport.

Key Words: Costly signaling; advocacy; marketing

4.1 Introduction

Athlete activism is increasingly visible, particularly with social media use offering athletes more opportunities to instantly communicate to a wider audience (Yan et al., 2018). Yet, public responses to athlete activism are often polarized with some activist athletes celebrated and others criticized (Knoester et al., 2022). The effects of athlete activism on public perceptions have been widely studied with existing research focusing largely on how people react to various cases of elite athlete activism and which demographic groups show higher levels of support and opposition (Allison et al., 2021; Mudrick et al., 2019).

Elite athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Colin Kaepernick, and Naomi Osaka have all engaged in activism and experienced significant public criticism, often at great personal and professional sacrifice (Chen & Kwak, 2022; Coombs et al., 2020; Kaufman, 2008). Sacrifice here can be seen as the extent to which someone is willing to incur costs to appear genuine and sincere in their desire to help society (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Despite these costs, existing research has largely overlooked how the public perceives the sacrifices made by athletes engaging in activism. To address this limitation, we draw upon Costly Signaling Theory (CST), which posits that actors are perceived as more authentic and credible when they make costly signals such as financial or personal sacrifices (Kane & Zollman, 2015). We use CST to propose that athletes who make visible personal sacrifices when engaging in activism are likely to be viewed more positively by the public. By making sacrifices, athletes may increase their perceived authenticity and may, in turn, enhance public support for their activism.

Despite the growing prevalence of athlete activism, there remains a limited understanding of which specific characteristics are most effective in generating positive public responses, a gap

that hampers both scholarly inquiry and practical application. Germany is an appropriate country context for examining athlete activism, given the country's longstanding engagement with both broader social movements (Kluch et al., 2023) and activism within the athletic community (Müller et al, 2024). Elite German athletes, including basketballer Satou Sabally and members of the national football team, received mixed reactions from the public and media for their activism (Kluch et al., 2023; Kokholm et al., 2024). By examining German sports consumers, this study helps to address the US-centric bias within the athlete activism literature (O'Neill et al, 2023).

The purpose of this study is therefore to empirically test whether personal sacrifice impacts the perception of activist athletes. The study is guided by the research question: *What impact does an athlete's personal sacrifice have on sports consumer perceptions of the athlete and their activism?* The study investigates the relationship between personal sacrifice from a hypothetical activist athlete with sports consumer perceptions of the athlete. Using a single-factor, three-level between-subjects experimental design, the study tests how German sports consumers react to different forms of personal sacrifice. Specifically, the study analyzes how different levels of sacrifice impact public attitudes towards the athlete, their perceived authenticity, and their status as a role model. Further, the study examines whether these perceptions affect broader aspects such as the method of activism chosen by the athlete as well as perceptions of the sponsor brands. The study extends literature on athlete activism by providing two main contributions: 1) exploring the role which sacrifice plays in gaining public support for activist athletes; 2) identifying potential strategies for activist athletes to increase authenticity and support.

4.2 Literature Review

4.2.1 Public Perceptions of Athlete Activism

Although athlete activism is often viewed as a powerful vehicle for social change, it remains polarizing, with many fans advocating for sport to remain apolitical (Kluch, 2020). Public reactions to athlete activism vary greatly and are shaped by many factors, including the type of activism, the athlete's identity, demographics of the public, and media framing (Cooper et al., 2019; Park & Kwak, 2024b).

Reflecting its polarizing nature, research has focused on analyzing public reactions to athlete activism. For example, Sappington et al. (2019) developed their Attitudes Towards Athlete Activism Questionnaire to help researchers identify negative public attitudes to athlete activism. Public reactions appear influenced by factors such as race, political ideology, and nationalism. Studies have found that racial attitudes play a significant role. White American sports fans often showing less support when the activist athlete is black (Click et al., 2022). Black Americans are generally more supportive of athlete protests (Allison et al., 2021). Similarly, patriotic attitudes can lead to public backlash when athlete activism is seen as unpatriotic (Ponce de Leon, 2022; Smith, 2019) whilst high levels of national attachment. Demographics such as age and education also appear to play a factor in how athlete activism is perceived, with younger and more highly educated individuals being more likely to support athlete protests (Allison et al., 2021; Meier et al., 2024).

Several experiments have examined how the public reacts to athlete activism and the factors that influence these reactions. Brown et al. (2022) found that athletes attractiveness decreased when athletes engaged in 'riskier' activism issues like social injustice, versus 'safer' issues like gender inequality. Similarly, Cunningham and Regan (2012) found that athletes were viewed more favorably and trustworthy when they were involved in non-controversial activism. Other studies investigated how fandom and psychological reactance affect public perceptions to athlete activism,

finding people respond more positively to less controlling language and when the athlete is perceived as being similar to them (Dunn & Nisbett, 2017). This is supported by Johnson et al. (2020) who found that personal favorability with an athlete positively influences whether we see them as a credible advocate. Meanwhile, Park et al. (2020) showed that media narratives surrounding cases of athlete activism significantly influence public attitudes toward the athlete.

While most research in this field focuses on American perceptions of American athlete activists, a few studies have explored this phenomenon in other contexts, including Germany. Meier et al. (2024) countered American findings, showing that the German public are less likely to strongly reject athlete activism and more likely to view it as legitimate. Socially progressive issues (e.g., anti-discrimination) received greater public support when compared to controversial issues (e.g., anti-vaccination). Similarly, Müller et al., (2024) showed that Germans are more likely to accept athlete activism when it addresses international issues rather than domestic issues and prefer non-disruptive activism as opposed to actions like boycotts. Research also found numerous similarities and differences between how United States (U.S.) and German media frame athlete activism (Kluch et al., 2023).

Despite this abundance of research, little has focused on attempting to identify ‘best practice’ strategies for athletes. Research has focused mostly on a what-not-to-do strategy, rather than identifying specific strategies they can use to reduce criticism and improve public perception.

4.2.2 Costly Signaling Theory and Sacrifice

An offshoot of Signaling Theory, CST explains how costly behaviors can be used to signal trustworthiness, authenticity, commitment or quality. The central idea of CST is that only those who are willing to bear the costs are truly committed to the cause, therefore making it difficult for uncommitted or dishonest actors to imitate (Kane & Zollman, 2015). CST originates in

evolutionary biology through Zahavi's (1975) handicap principle, which argues that animals utilize traits which handicap their survival (e.g., extravagant courtship displays) to signal their quality. Bliege Bird and Smith (2005) extended this by demonstrating how humans can communicate credible personal qualities through costly behavioral signals such as public generosity or time commitments. CST has been applied to a range of human social fields including religion, cultural practices, social behavior and even finance where costly signaling helps attract investors (Connelly et al., 2010; Di Pietro et al., 2023). Studies within branding research indicate that costly advertising campaigns, premium pricing, and strategic brand alliances serve as expensive signals, signaling a company's confidence in the quality and value of its products (Erdem et al., 2008; Rao et al., 1999).

The concept of sacrifice is pivotal to CST, especially in the context of activism and advocacy. Sacrifice refers to a willingness to give up something of value to obtain a benefit of even greater value (Gomes et al., 2021). Sacrifices contain a reciprocal element in which willingly losing something valuable is met with expected returns, be they physical, social or relational (Garcia - Rada et al., 2025; Mauss, 2024). CST illuminates how individuals or organizations may incur costs or make significant efforts to signal genuine commitment to a cause, enhancing their credibility and influence. When it comes to engaging in corporate activism and advocacy, CST suggests that brands should make tangible financial sacrifices to enhance their perceived authenticity. Mirzaei et al. (2022) defined brand sacrifice as the extent to which a brand is willing to forgo profit to support society. Aligning with CST, this suggests that brands who are willing to endure financial costs such as losing customers or market share can appear more trustworthy and demonstrate true commitment to social issues. For example, companies like Patagonia, which donates a portion of their profits to environmental causes, align their activist messaging with the

practice of financial sacrifice to enhance perceived authenticity (Bulmer et al., 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

In the context of a sponsor leveraging the athlete's activism, the credibility of both the athlete and their sponsor is linked with a willingness to bear costly signals. Nike's 2018 "Just Do It" campaign utilizing Colin Kaepernick, featured the tagline, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything". This example reflects CST principles by highlighting Kaepernick's personal sacrifice of his career to protest racial injustice, while also demonstrating Nike's willingness to alienate Kaepernick's critics, risking both public and financial backlash (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, this framing may be misleading as it is debatable if Kaepernick's case exemplifies sacrifice or externally imposed punishment. Within the context of CST, sacrifice may be better understood as a deliberate and voluntary willingness to incur costs (Van Lange et al., 1997). Examples more in line with CST could include Muhammad Ali who voluntarily accepted being banned from boxing rather than serve in Vietnam (Harrison, 2001) or more recently, Maya Moore's decision to step away from the WNBA at her athletic peak to fight criminal justice reform (Cardoso Brown et al., 2025). In these cases, the application of CST may highlight how personal sacrifice can demonstrate an athlete's commitment to a social cause and consequently enhance their authenticity and impact.

4.2.3 Authenticity

Authenticity refers to the perceptions that a person or organization is genuine or true to itself (Stanyer, 2022). In branding research, authenticity is a central concept as it is a primary purchasing criteria for building trust and engagement with clients (Morhart et al., 2013). Authentic brands are judged based on values like credibility, integrity and continuity (Sobande, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). In sports marketing, authenticity is a leading factor in influencing fan

loyalty and brand perception of both athletes and sports organizations (Rees, 2022). In developing their Sport Brand Personality scale, Mitsis and Leckie (2016) suggest that athletes are more likely to be seen as role models if they are perceived as authentic, subsequently creating stronger connections to fans.

Significant literature has highlighted the importance of authenticity in activism. Within their Woke Activism Authenticity Framework (WAAF), Mirzaei et al. (2022) identify several key dimensions of authentic brand activism, including practice, fit, motivation and sacrifice. Meanwhile, the Typology of Authentic Brand Activism by Vredenburg et al. (2020) posits that activist brands need to constantly align their activist messaging with action in order to maintain authenticity and avoid perceptions of ‘woke-washing’. Woke-washing is evident when people or organizations position themselves as socially conscious despite having unclear or inconsistent records of social cause engagement (Sobande, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2018). For athlete activists, public perception is greatly affected by perceived authenticity, with insincere activism damaging an athlete’s reputation (Schmidt et al., 2021). Indeed, activist athletes themselves see authenticity as a crucial element of their identity (Kluch, 2020). Despite the clear link between authenticity, activism and athlete brands, a dearth of research has examined how activist athletes can increase their authenticity. Following from CST, an athlete who is willing to make costly signals for their activism should be able to demonstrate that their involvement in a social issue is authentic.

Hypothesis 1: Personal sacrifice by an activist athlete will significantly influence sports consumer perceptions of the athlete’s authenticity.

4.2.4 Athlete Activism Support

While being perceived as authentic by the public is important for athletes and their brands, there is no guarantee that an athlete activist will be supported by the public. Scholars have

increasingly recognized that public perceptions towards athlete activism cannot be fully understood through a single attitudinal lens. Instead, support is often measured using multiple variables. Orr and Sailofsky (2025) for example, conceptualized support as comprising related variables such as trust, credibility, acceptance of the message, and perceived role model status. Consistent with this perspective, we use ‘support’ as a proxy underpinned by multiple independent variables. These include attitudes towards the athlete, perceptions of the athlete’s role model status, the perception of sponsor brands and support for the method/type of activism utilized. This approach acknowledges the complexity and multidimensional nature of responses to athlete activism.

4.2.4.1 Attitude Towards the Athlete. Several studies have focused on overall public attitudes towards athletes as a means of determining support for athlete activism. Mudrick et al. (2019), for example, found that different types of activist messaging had varying effects on consumer attitudes towards the athlete. Sauder et al. (2024) meanwhile used attitudes towards the athlete to explore fan reactions to vaccine related activism by professional basketball players.

4.2.4.2 Role Model Status. Researchers have similarly used an athlete’s role model status as a measure of support. Whether they want to be or not, elite athletes are often perceived as role models (Knowles et al., 2023), a perception which can strongly shape public responses to their activism. Kluch (2021) highlights the symbolic power of athletes to influence public opinion and promote social causes. Coincidentally, Mitsis and Leckie (2016) argue that authenticity is strongly related to the influence of athletes as a role model. As such, when an athlete is perceived as a credible role model, their fans are more likely to support the athlete’s engagement in social causes.

4.2.4.3 Sponsor Brand Perception. Other research has focused on how consumers can support athletes by supporting their brands. Consumers can feel strong attachments to athlete

brands and support that athlete by purchasing or engaging with products which are sponsored by or associated with the athlete (Su et al., 2020; Thomson, 2006). Brown et al. (2022) found that fan attitudes towards general athlete activism significantly influenced their opinion on the athlete's brand image, despite the activism type having no effect on brand image perceptions.

4.2.4.4 Support the Method of Activism. Numerous studies have likewise studied levels of public support for varying methods of activism (Sanderson et al., 2016; Schmidt et al., 2018).

We argue that only by considering these various elements of public perception together can we arrive at a truly confident measure of public support for cases of athlete activism. This study will therefore consider overall support for a particular case of athlete activism to include the elements of attitude towards the athlete as well as towards the method of activism, support for the athlete's role model status and perception of sponsor brands. As we hypothesized that sacrifice would have a direct influence on perceptions of an athlete's authenticity, we similarly suggest that sacrifice may have more direct impact on whether members of the public support the athlete.

Hypothesis 2: Personal sacrifice will result in significantly greater public support for the athlete and their activism.

In summary, research is yet to explore how factors like sacrifice or authenticity shape public support for an athlete and their activism. Moreover, a comprehensive framework for measuring the public's support for activist athletes remains elusive.

4.3 Method

To test the hypotheses, the study utilized a single-factor, three-level between-subjects experimental design administered through an online survey experiment. The survey was developed using the Qualtrics survey software. The survey was made available in both English and German. A review of social media pages of elite German tennis players found that they overwhelmingly

posted in English. Therefore, for the sake of authenticity, the experimental treatment was only in English. The survey was developed in English by the lead author who is a native English speaker and then professionally translated into German to ensure clarity and avoid language barriers. The second author, a native German speaker, also re-checked all translations. During the survey, participants were able to alternate between the English and German version. Most participants completed the survey in German (76.9%). The power analysis was conducted using G-Power 3.1; the results suggested that based on a survey with three groups and seven covariates (full covariate descriptions on page 17), the sample size should be $N = 432$ ($f = 0.15$, $\alpha = 0.05$, $\beta = 0.8$). Prior to data collection, the study received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of all associated universities.

4.3.1 Experimental design

The single factor being manipulated is the level of personal sacrifice being exhibited by an elite athlete. For the experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions involving a fictional elite athlete engaging in activism. Condition groups were based around levels of personal sacrifice to examine the effects of sacrifice on public perceptions of athlete activism. The survey began with an introduction outlining the purpose of the study and information regarding risks, confidentiality and consent. After responding to questions regarding two covariates, general attitude towards athlete activism and sports identification (see “Measure” section for details of items), participants were then exposed to the experimental stimulus. All participants were shown the profile of a fictional elite German women’s tennis player (see Figure 1) followed by one of three simulated social media posts in which the athlete engages in activism (see Figure 2). Participants were shown the treatment twice during the survey whilst a back button was included so that they could return to the scenario if they wanted to. This was followed by

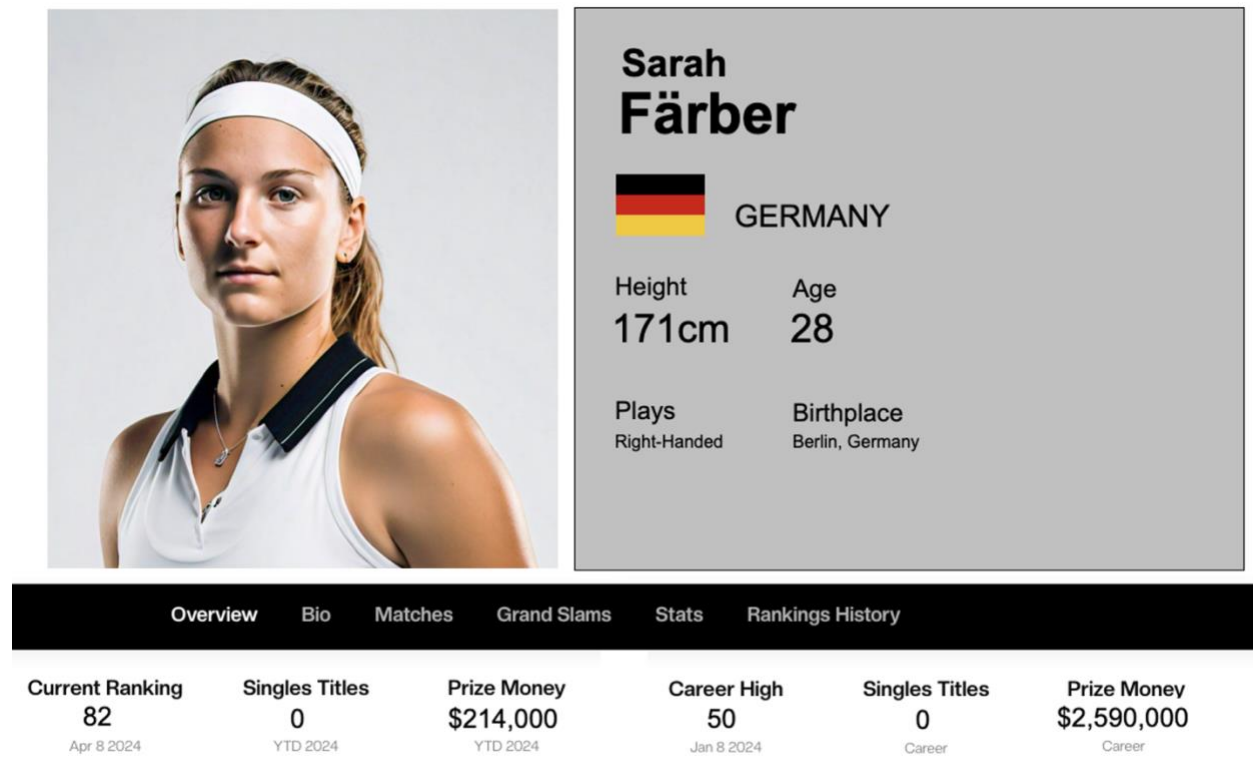
manipulation and attention check questions, a covariate question relating to the participants' personal stance on the social issue in the scenario, as well as questions measuring the dependent variables: perceived authenticity; role model; brand image; attitude towards the athlete; and support for the method of activism. The survey concluded with an item asking participants to rate the level of personal sacrifice shown by the athlete and demographic questions including age, ethnicity, gender, household income and education. Data was transferred to IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 30) software for statistical analysis.

4.3.1.1 Experimental Stimulus. The study's experimental stimulus consisted of a player profile and three different social media posts. The profile and posts all pertain to a fictional athlete and scenario. The image of the elite athlete used in the profile was created using Meta's generative AI software (Meta, 2024). Image creation followed a process of trial and error, using iterative prompts such as German, female, tennis player, and professional player profile. To increase authenticity, the profile layout was modelled on the online profiles on the WTA Tour website (WTA, 2024) while the content of the profile including prize money and ranking were based on the profiles of the top four German professional tennis players at the time, also sourced from the WTA Tour website (See Figure 4.1 for the AI athletes profile). The name was selected to be a stereotypical female German name. The use of fictional athletes and fictional activism scenarios are common practice for studying perceptions of athlete activism in order to reduce confounding factors associated with previous perceptions of an athlete (Cunningham & Regan, 2012; Park et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2018). While this approach maximizes the internal validity for the study, we recognise that it reduces ecological validity. A female elite athlete was chosen to help address the lack of empirical research on athlete activism in elite women's sport (O'Neill et al., 2023). A singles tennis player, representing a non-team sport athlete, was selected to minimize confounding

effects related to the perception that an activist in a team sport might negatively impact team performance (Sappington et al., 2019).

Figure 4.1

Player Profile of Fictional Elite German Tennis Player



Sarah Färber					
 GERMANY					
Height		Age			
171cm		28			
Plays		Birthplace			
Right-Handed		Berlin, Germany			

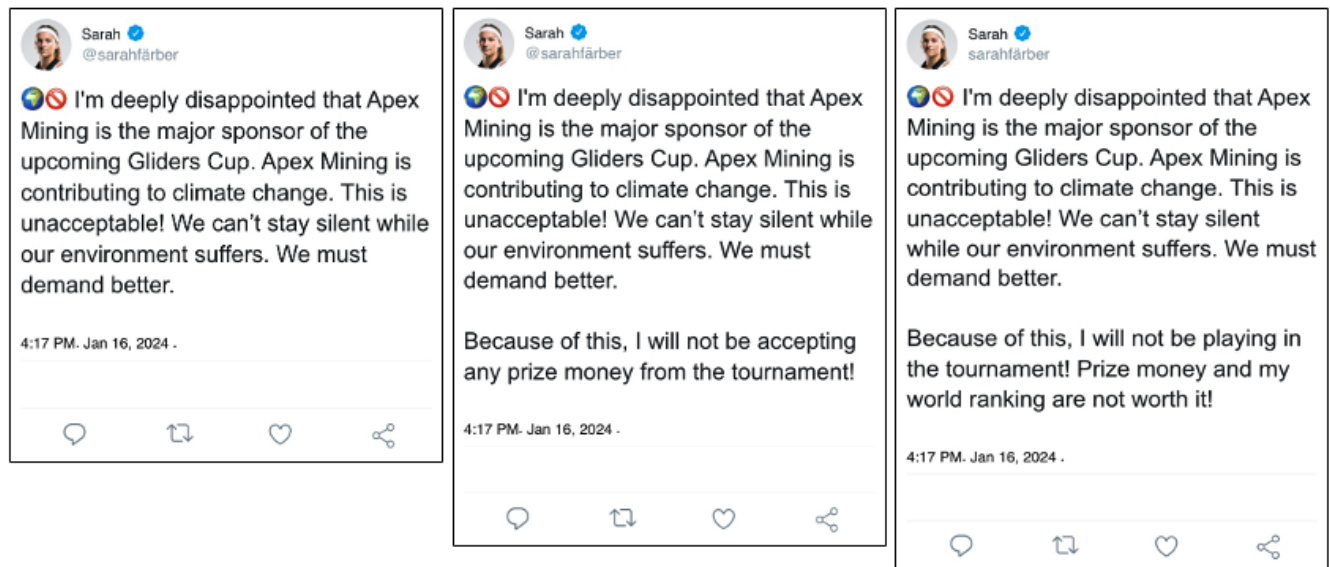
Overview	Bio	Matches	Grand Slams	Stats	Rankings History
Current Ranking 82 Apr 8 2024	Singles Titles 0 YTD 2024	Prize Money \$214,000 YTD 2024	Career High 50 Jan 8 2024	Singles Titles 0 Career	Prize Money \$2,590,000 Career

After viewing the profile of the athlete, participants were shown one of three social media posts in which the athlete criticizes the organizers and sponsor of an upcoming tournament for an insufficient climate change action (See Figure 4.2). The content of the posts and scenarios were developed through internal team discussions and tested using three rounds of focus groups. The choice of climate change as the focal social issue aligns with recent research showing that

environmental action is an emerging focus of elite activist athletes (Wågan & Wilson, 2025). The athlete's name "Sarah Färber" was selected as a stereotypical German female name to enhance realism, while the other stakeholders were crafted to sound plausible and contextually appropriate. Personal sacrifice by the athlete was manipulated across three condition groups: 1. No Sacrifice (Control group) – the athlete makes no personal sacrifice and only makes a statement; 2. Sacrifice A (No money) – along with the statement the athlete refuses to accept any prize money; 3. Sacrifice B (Boycott) - along with the statement the athlete boycotts the tournament, forfeiting prize money and ranking points.

Figure 4.2

Experimental Stimulus. No Sacrifice, Sacrifice A and Sacrifice B



All stakeholders in the posts are fictional to again reduce confounding factors. Climate change was chosen as it is considered one of the most important social issues for Germans and while it still creates debate in Germany, it does not create the same level of public division as other more controversial topics (Müller et al., 2024), reducing the likeliness that the issue will confound the experiment's results. The case also mirrors several real-world examples where elite athletes have publicly criticized sponsors for their role in climate change (Bingaman & Mike, 2024).

4.3.2 Pretests

Focus groups. Three focus groups were conducted in June and July of 2024 using students in an undergraduate sport management class in Germany. The focus groups' primary purpose was to test the credibility of the experimental stimulus, the manipulation, and the fictional athlete. The groups were also used to identify any issues with the translations of items or concepts (e.g., 'Sacrifice') from English to German. Once all issues were addressed, we proceeded to a pilot study.

Pilot survey. To test the validity of the experiment, a comprehensive pilot of the survey was conducted utilizing a convenience sample of German adult sports fans. A link to the survey was distributed to several German sports forums and sports social media pages. Approval was provided by site administrators before posting the survey link. To assist with recruitment, participants were offered the chance to enter a prize draw for one of three €100 gift vouchers. Out of an initial 227 responses, we obtained 137 usable responses, after removing: non-German adults ($n = 10$); incomplete responses ($n = 61$); those who failed the manipulation check ($n = 16$) and attention checks ($n = 2$); and selected identical responses across all items ($n = 1$). The sample was mostly male (66.4%), with average age between 18-34 (86.1%), with most having at least a bachelor's degree (51.9%). Using SPSS, analysis was conducted to test the viability of the experiment. All scales showed good to excellent scale reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of

between 0.86 to 0.93. A Chi-Square test of the manipulation check showed statistically significant changes across the three conditions ($p < 0.001$). An analysis of variance (Goranova & Ryan) showed significant differences across condition groups for three variables, which was supported by results from a multiple analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). The MANCOVA also identified some significant effects on covariates. Despite the promising results, a lack of power from the small sample size rendered these results inconclusive.

4.3.3 Participants

The participants in this experiment were German adult sports fans who were recruited from Prolific, a cost-effective survey platform known for delivering high-quality data (Larkin, 2025; Park & Kwak, 2024b). Prolific allows users to limit participants based on selection criteria. We limited participation to Germans aged 18 years or older who had listed ‘Watching Sports’ in their hobbies and possessed a 99% approval rating based on previous Prolific surveys. The survey was completed by 501 people, with 481 usable responses obtained. Responses were removed for failing the manipulation check ($n = 18$) or attention checks ($n = 1$), as well as completing the survey too quickly ($n = 1$). Participants were evenly distributed across the three conditions (Condition 1 = 159; Condition 2 = 162; Condition 3 = 160).

The sample consisted of 67.2% male and 32.2% female with 0.6% identifying as other. Participants were predominantly white (88.9%). Ages ranged from 18 to 68, with a mean age of 32.3 ($SD = 10.10$) and most participants being between 18 and 34 (66.5%). In addition, most held at least a bachelor’s degree or higher (51.9%), with the next biggest group holding a high school certificate or equivalent (25.6%). Only 20.6% stated a total household income of €75,000 or higher.

4.3.4 Measurements

Dependent variables. The experiment asked participants to respond to various measures to see how they were affected by the changes in sacrifice. The study focused on five dependent variables: the athlete's authenticity, the athlete's role model status, general attitude towards the athlete, support of the athlete's method of activism and perception of the sponsor brands. Perceptions of the athlete's authenticity was measured using nine items adopted from Liu and Lee (2024). The athlete's role model status was measured using five items adapted from Mitsis and Leckie (2016). Support for the method of activism utilized by the athlete in the social media posts was measured using a single item derived from Müller et al. (2024) with the prompt "I would support the form of activism described in the scenario". Perception of sponsor brands was measured using five items adapted from Schartel Dunn and Nisbett (2023) with the prompt "The athlete Sarah Färber has an endorsement deal with several well-known companies. If those companies maintain their relationship with this athlete how likely are you to:". The items for these variables were all measured on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Attitude towards the athlete was measured using a three-item 7-point semantic differential scale (unfavorable-favorable, bad-good, negative-positive) adapted from Park et al. (2020). All scales were deemed reliable (Cronbach's α range = 0.90–0.96; M range = 3.21–5.36; SD range = 0.03–0.24).

Covariates. In experimental research, various covariates should be considered when examining public perceptions of athlete activism to increase statistical accuracy (Ogiso et al., 2024). Public support for athlete activism is likely influenced by a range of personal and socio demographic factors (Müller et al., 2024). Based on previous research, the study accounted for seven covariates: general attitude towards athlete activism, sports identification, social issue

position, age, gender, income and education. Race was not included as a covariate due to the lack of racial diversity within both our sample and the wider German population.

General attitude towards athlete activism. Given the division caused by athlete activism, as evident in the literature, it is essential to determine an individual's pre-existing attitudes towards athlete activism as a concept (Brown et al., 2022; Pradhan & Yacobian, 2022). General attitude to athlete activism was measured using eleven items from the Attitudes Towards Athlete Activism Questionnaire developed by Sappington et al. (2019). The initial questionnaire contained a negatively worded 19-item scale, with high scores indicating negative attitudes towards athlete activism. We retained the items pertaining to participants' affections, the athlete's role in society and political credibility. Items related to team conflict were removed as we are focusing on a single sport athlete, while items related to consequences of activism were removed due to a close link with the experiment's subject matter. The scale was reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$; $M = 2.98$; $SD = 0.84$).

Sports identification. Identification has been identified in numerous studies as a key influencer in the behavior and perceptions of sports consumers (Park & Kwak, 2024a; Trail & James, 2001). A person's interest and identification with sport can affect how they perceive athletes and this identification may in turn affect how they perceive the actions of athletes (Brown et al., 2022). Sports identification was measured in the study using three items from Trail and James (2001). The scale was reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$; $M = 3.95$; $SD = 0.03$).

Social issue position. Naturally people have different opinions on contentious social issues. It is well documented that public perceptions of athlete activism differ greatly depending on the social issue which athletes engage with (Cunningham & Regan, 2012; Schmidt et al., 2018). It was therefore important to measure participants' agreement with the athlete's stance on the issue of

climate change. Social issue position was measured post-manipulation using a one item scaled adapted from Ketron et al. (2022) with the prompt “The athlete Sarah Färber took a position on climate change that agreed with my own”.

All items for attitude towards athlete activism, sports identification and social issue position were measured on a 7-point Likert scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). See supplementary file for a full list of scales and items used in the survey.

Measurement Model Validity. To evaluate the construct validity of the six multi-item scales, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using maximum likelihood estimation. The CFA was restricted to multi-item constructs, with any single-item measures treated separately in the structural analysis. The six latent constructs included general attitude toward athlete activism (11 items), sport identification (3 items), authenticity (9 items), role model perception (5 items), attitude toward the athlete (3 items), sponsor brand perception (5 items). Based on guidelines by Hu and Bentler (1999), results demonstrated excellent fit for the model: $\chi^2/df = 2.01$, CFI = .96, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .04. Each item loaded significantly on its intended factor, with all standardized loadings above .59. Composite reliability (CR) values exceeded .89 for all constructs. Average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from .61 to .78, supporting convergent validity. Discriminant validity was further assessed using the **Fornell-Larcker Criterion** (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), which showed that the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeded its correlations with other constructs. See Table 1 for composite reliability (CR), inter-construct correlations, and the square root of average variance extracted (AVE).

Attention check, manipulation check and sacrifice measurement. To ensure the validity of the experiment, several checks were conducted. An attention check was incorporated into the survey to ensure that all respondents were reading each section properly. Participants were

instructed to select “Strongly Disagree” as the correct option. In addition, a manipulation check was administered through a single item question asked directly after participants were shown the experimental stimulus. The item read “In the social media post you just read, did the tennis player Sarah Färber say they would give something up or make a financial sacrifice?”. The item was responded to using either Yes or No. Respondents from Condition 1 (No Sacrifice) were removed if they answered Yes, respondents from Condition 2 (Refuses money) and 3 (Boycott) were removed if they answered No. An additional measurement was included at the end of the survey to both validate the manipulation check and to compare the perceived level of sacrifice in Conditions 2 and 3. The single item read: “Based on the scenario, to what extent did Sarah Färber sacrifice something as part of her protest against Apex Mining?” and was measured on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*No sacrifice*) to 7 (*High sacrifice*).

Table 4.1

Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Interconstruct Correlations

Construct	Authenticity	Role Model	Attitude to Athlete	Sponsor Brand Perception	ATAA	Sports Identification
Authenticity	.79					
Role Model	.45	.82				
Attitude to Athlete	.38	.54	.87			
Sponsor Brand Perception	.48	.52	.49	.79		
ATAA	.61	.50	.47	.57	.78	
Sports Identification	.52	.55	.49	.51	.44	.88

Note: ATAA = General attitude towards athlete activism. Diagonal values represent the square root of average variance extracted (AVE). Off-diagonal values are interconstruct correlations.

4.4 Results

4.4.1 Pre-Tests, Manipulation Check and Sacrifice Measurement

Prior to seeing the manipulation, participants responded to questions regarding their general attitude towards athlete activism, and their sports identification. With the negatively framed questionnaire, participants held relatively positive attitudes towards athlete activism ($M = 2.98$; $SD = 1.30$). Participants also held moderate sports identification levels ($M = 3.95$; $SD = 1.73$). Results of the manipulation check confirmed that the manipulations were effective in the main study. Analysis was conducted prior to removing any responses that failed the manipulation check. A Chi-Square Test between experimental conditions and participants responses to the manipulation check item was significant with $\chi^2(2, N = 499) = 421.67, p < .001$. Specifically, most participants in Condition 1 (94.6%) identified that the athlete made no sacrifice while nearly all participants in Condition 2 (97.6%) and 3 (97.6%) identified that the athlete did make a sacrifice.

Additionally, a one-way ANOVA examined participants' perceptions of sacrifice across the three condition groups. The ANOVA revealed that the experimental manipulation had a highly significant effect on perceived sacrifice $F(2, 478) = 367.31, p < .001$ with a large effect size ($\eta^2 = .61$). Descriptive statistics show that Condition 1 ($M = 2.27, SD = 1.56$) was rated substantially lower than Condition 2 ($M = 5.65, SD = 1.16$) and Condition 3 ($M = 5.76, SD = 1.18$). Post hoc Tukey tests confirmed that Condition 1 responses differed significantly from Condition 2 ($p < .001$) and Condition 3 ($p < .001$), however, no significant difference was identified between Conditions 2 and 3. This reconfirmed the success of the experimental manipulation as the 'No Sacrifice' scenario scored significantly lower in perceived sacrifice than the 'Refuses money' or 'Boycott' scenarios, with the Condition 3 Boycott scoring marginally higher.

4.4.2 Hypothesis Testing

To test the two hypotheses, separate one-way ANOVAs were first conducted for each dependent variable to determine the raw effect of the sacrifice manipulation. This was followed by conducting a MANCOVA with all dependent variables, while controlling for all covariates to test if their presence changed the result.

4.4.2.1 ANOVA. As summarized in Table 2, the one-way ANOVAs revealed significant main effects of the sacrifice manipulation on all five dependent variables, with varying effect sizes. Participants' perceptions of the athlete's authenticity were significantly influenced, $F(2, 478) = 12.30, p < .001$, with a moderate effect size ($\eta^2 = .05$). Both Condition 2 (Refuses money) ($M = 5.14, SD = 1.00, p = .014$) and Condition 3 (Boycott) ($M = 5.39, SD = 1.03, p < .001$) rated significantly higher than the No sacrifice condition ($M = 4.81, SD = 1.13$), with Condition 3 also scoring significantly higher than Condition 2 ($p = .01$). These results suggest that sports consumers are more likely to perceive an athlete as authentic if the athlete makes a personal sacrifice in their activism. On this basis, we conclude that Hypothesis 1 is supported.

In terms of Hypothesis 2, significant effects were observed for role model perception, support for the method of activism, attitude toward the athlete and perception of sponsor brands. A significant main effect was found for role model perception, $F(2, 478) = 11.33, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$. Participants in Condition 1 ($M = 4.45, SD = 1.54$) rated the athlete significantly lower than those in Condition 2 ($M = 5.03, SD = 1.53, p < .001$) and Condition 3 ($M = 5.23, SD = 1.49, p < .001$). No significant difference was found between Conditions 2 and 3. Attitude towards the athlete showed a significant effect $F(2, 478) = 7.07, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$. Attitudes were significantly lower in Condition 1 ($M = 5.02, SD = 1.52$) compared to Condition 3 ($M = 5.58, SD = 1.32, p = .001$). Condition 2 ($M = 5.47, SD = 1.33$) did not significantly differ from other condition groups. Similarly, a significant effect was found for support for the method of activism $F(2, 478) = 5.89,$

$p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .02$, with Condition 3 ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.66$) showing significantly greater ratings than Condition 1 ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.99$, $p = .002$) but no significant differences between Condition 2 ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.74$) and other conditions. Finally, an overall significant effect was observed for sponsor brand perception $F(2, 478) = 3.85$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .02$, but no significant effects were identified between any of the conditions. Boycotting was rated highest across every variable. However, while the no-sacrifice condition consistently resulted in lower evaluations, differences were not always significant between the refuses-money condition and the boycott condition, particularly for support for the method ($p = .21$), role model perception ($p = .38$), and attitude toward the athlete ($p = .75$). On this basis, we conclude that Hypothesis 2 is also supported.

Table 4.2

ANOVA Results

Dependent Variable	Condition 1 M(SD)	Condition 2 M(SD)	Condition 3 M(SD)	F	p	η^2
Authenticity	4.81 (1.13)	5.14 (1.0)	5.39 (1.49)	12.3	0.001	0.049
Role Model	4.45 (1.54)	5.03 (1.53)	5.23 (1.49)	11.334	0.001	0.045
Attitude to Athlete	5.02 (1.52)	5.47 (1.33)	5.57 (1.32)	7.073	0.001	0.029
Support for Method	4.67 (1.99)	5.1 (1.74)	5.35 (1.66)	5.889	0.003	0.024
Sponsor Brand Perception	2.94 (1.55)	3.28 (1.55)	3.39 (1.49)	3.849	0.022	0.016

4.4.2.2 MANCOVA. To reduce the risk of Type I and Type II errors from conducting multiple separate ANOVA tests, a MANCOVA assessed the multivariate effects of sacrifice condition across the dependent variables. The MANCOVA was conducted to examine if the effects of the sacrifice condition were still significant on the dependent variables while controlling for the

covariates: sports identification, general attitude to athlete activism (GATAA), social issue position regarding climate change, age, gender, household income and education.

Using Wilks' Lambda, results showed that the overall multivariate effect of sacrifice was significant across the model $.908$, $F(10, 936) = 4.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$. This indicated that even with covariates, changes in the sacrifice condition significantly influenced the combination of dependent variables. As shown in Table 3, univariate tests within the MANCOVA also revealed significant main effects of the condition group on all five dependent variables, reinforcing the findings of the ANOVA.

Perceptions of authenticity were significantly influenced, $F(2, 478) = 13.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$, again with participants in both Conditions 2 and 3 rating the athlete as significantly more authentic than Condition 1 ($p < .001$). No significant difference was identified between conditions 2 and 3 ($p = .07$). These findings again support H1 that engaging in personal sacrifice will influence consumer perceptions of an athlete's authenticity.

Effects for role model $F(2, 478) = 16.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$, attitude towards the athlete $F(2, 478) = 10.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$ and support for the method of activism $F(2, 478) = 7.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$ were all significant with Condition 2 and Condition 3 having significantly higher ratings than Condition 1 across each variable. Condition 3 again maintained the higher rating across all variables however no statistically significant differences were identified between Conditions 2 and 3. Analysis showed that sponsor brand perception had a smaller but still significant effect $F(2, 478) = 3.13$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$, however the effect was only significant between Condition 1 and Condition 3, indicating an overall weaker effect for the variable. These findings further support H2 that the athletes' personal sacrifice will result in significantly greater public support for both the athlete and their activism.

Several significant effects were identified from the covariates, some with the strongest effects of the study. Primarily, social issue position showed by far the strongest effect across all dependent variables ($p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03 - .52$). Participants who agreed with the athlete's position towards climate change were significantly more likely to perceive the fictional athlete as authentic, a role model or to support their brand or their activism. Those who disagreed with the athlete's stance were far less supportive. Participants GATAA also showed significant effects for authenticity, role model, attitude toward the athlete and support for the method of activism ($p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08 - .11$). Participants with negative attitudes rated the athlete lower in each of these variables compared to those who hold positive opinions towards activist athletes. Sponsor brand perception was not significantly predicted by GATAA. Sports identification also showed significant effects on attitude towards the athlete and sponsor brand perception ($p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$). Those who identify strongly as sports fans were more likely to perceive the athlete as authentic and a role model. Finally, age, gender, income, and education showed no significant effects.

In summary, both H1 and H2 were supported with perceptions of the athlete's authenticity and support for the athlete being significantly affected by the sacrifice manipulation in the scenarios. Participants stance position on climate change and attitude to athlete activism had the strongest covariate effects on how participants perceived the athlete. Main effects were still significant for the dependent variables after accounting for covariates.

Table 4.3*MANCOVA Results*

Source of Variance	Dependent Variable	SS ₃	df	Mean Square	F	p	ηp^2
Condition Group	Authenticity	18.016	2	9.008	13.392	<.001	0.054
	Role Model	34.34	2	17.17	16.772	<.001	0.066
	Attitude to Athlete	15.99	2	7.995	10.303	<.001	0.042
	SMOA	17.821	2	8.91	7.718	<.001	0.032
	Sponsor Brand Perception	13.339	2	6.669	3.131	0.045	0.013
Sports Identification	Authenticity	7.636	1	7.636	11.352	0.001	0.024
	Role Model	7.943	1	7.943	7.758	0.006	0.016
	Attitude to Athlete	2.161	1	2.161	2.785	0.096	0.006
	SMOA	1.276	1	1.276	1.105	0.294	0.002
	Sponsor Brand Perception	16.833	1	16.833	7.902	0.005	0.016
GATAA	Authenticity	38.636	1	38.636	57.443	<.001	0.109
	Role Model	43.812	1	43.812	42.795	<.001	0.083
	Attitude to Athlete	41.573	1	41.573	53.576	<.001	0.102
	SMOA	52.113	1	52.113	45.138	<.001	0.087
	Sponsor Brand Perception	4.755	1	4.755	2.232	0.136	0.005
Social Issue Position	Authenticity	77.527	1	77.527	115.262	<.001	0.197
	Role Model	336.875	1	336.875	329.058	<.001	0.411
	Attitude to Athlete	306.162	1	306.162	394.551	<.001	0.456
	SMOA	590.968	1	590.968	511.869	<.001	0.521
	Sponsor Brand Perception	25.453	1	25.453	11.948	0.025	0.025
Age	Authenticity	0.313	1	0.313	0.466	0.495	0.001
	Role Model	0.755	1	0.755	0.737	0.391	0.002
	Attitude to Athlete	1.535	1	1.535	1.978	0.16	0.004
	SMOA	0.284	1	0.284	0.246	0.62	0.001
	Sponsor Brand Perception	0.063	1	0.063	0.03	0.863	0
Error	Authenticity	316.799	471	0.673			
	Role Model	482.189	471	1.024			
	Attitude to Athlete	365.484	471	0.776			
	SMOA	543.784	471	1.155			
	Sponsor Brand Perception	1003.35	471	2.13			

Note: SMOA = Support for the method of activism; ATAA = General attitude towards athlete activism

4.5 Discussion

This study analyzed how consumer perceptions of athlete activism are influenced by the personal sacrifice of athletes. The findings supported both hypotheses: 1) Personal sacrifice by an activist athlete will significantly influence sports consumer perceptions of the athlete's authenticity; and 2) Personal sacrifice will result in significantly greater public support for the athlete and their activism.

The results offer several insights when placed alongside prior research on athlete activism and costly signaling. Results were consistent with the logic of CST (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Kane & Zollman, 2015; Zahavi, 1975), as participants viewed the athlete more positively when their activism involved personal sacrifice. Both refusing prize money and boycotting a tournament significantly enhanced consumer perceptions of the athlete's authenticity, with the boycott condition producing the strongest effect. This finding reflects earlier works emphasising that authenticity is strengthened when activist actions carry visible costs (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Here, sacrifice serves as a marker of sincerity allowing fans to distinguish genuine conviction from insincere gestures.

This effect on authenticity carried through to other outcomes. First, the athlete activist was viewed as having stronger role model perceptions when the activism involved sacrifice, supporting previous arguments that authenticity underpins athlete's inherent social influence (Kluch, 2021; Knowles et al., 2023; Mitsis & Leckie, 2016). Similarly, attitudes toward the athlete and support for the method of activism both followed the same pattern, suggesting that fans may use sacrifice as a guide when evaluating both the activist and the act. Results do however challenge earlier claims that disruptive forms of activism potentially diminish support (Brown et al., 2022). In this study, the disruptive and high-cost act of boycotting was not penalised but instead seen as the most

credible option, highlighting that disruption can be tolerated when the athlete highlights the personal losses inflicted as a result of boycotting.

The findings regarding sponsor brand perception were more modest. While authenticity did increase for the athlete, brand evaluations were less consistent and significant. This aligns with research suggesting that authenticity of an activist does not automatically transfer to their partner brands (Sobande, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2018). It is therefore likely that sponsors need to demonstrate their own forms of sacrifice to benefit from these branding associations.

The covariate results provide additional discussion as attitudes toward activism and consumer alignment with the social issue were the strongest predictors across all outcomes. This reinforces evidence that ideology and identity strongly shape our responses to activism (Smith & Tryce, 2019; Meier et al., 2024). However, unlike previous research, variables such as gender, income, education, and general sport interest, did not exert significant influence. This finding suggests that perceptions of activist athletes may be driven more by pre-existing beliefs than by standard socio-demographic characteristics.

These results also contribute to the growing body of research on athlete activism in Germany (Meier et al., 2024; Müller et al., 2024). The results underline that these effects are filtered through audience predispositions with the participants being overall mostly supportive of the activist athlete. This pattern is consistent with recent evidence that German publics are, on balance, more tolerant of athlete activism than U.S. counterparts (Meier et al., 2024). Together, the findings demonstrate that sacrifice plays a role in shaping our perceptions of athlete activism, yet consumer predispositions remain the dominant lens used to interpret activism.

4.5.1 Theoretical Contributions

From the findings, the study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends work on CST, confirming that costly signals (visible sacrifices) are an effective way of showing commitment, credibility and authenticity (Cronk, 2005). While prior research has emphasized the risks faced by athlete activists (Kaufman, 2008), our study highlights the possibility of reputational benefits. This is likely the case when athletes make personal sacrifices. The findings support the WAAF (Mirzaei et al. (2022), offering an avenue for activist athletes to avoid perceptions of virtue signaling (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Similarly, the results support research suggesting that authentic athletes are perceived as better role models (Mitsis & Leckie, 2016), reinforcing the viability of CST as a theoretical lens for athlete activism and broader sports marketing research.

However, while the results showed strong evidence that costly signals positively influence support for athlete activists in some forms, we found little evidence that sacrifice enhances sponsor brand perceptions. Theoretically, the results help refine the application of CST in sponsorship contexts, suggesting that while costly signals can strengthen authenticity perceptions of the athlete, the effects may not extend to sponsoring brands. This finding suggests a boundary condition of costly signaling where its benefits accrue to the activist athlete and not their partners.

While sacrifice was shown to have a significant effect on participants' perceptions of athlete activism, the study underscores the theoretical primacy of audience predispositions and the need to further research into this topic. Consumers' general attitude towards athlete activism and position towards climate change were consistently seen to have even stronger effects than the experimental manipulations. This finding suggests that the impacts of costly signals are largely governed by individuals' preconceived beliefs which supports research suggesting that athlete-cause alignment is one of the most critical factors influencing perceptions of athlete activism

(Meier et al., 2024). This extends work on signaling by reinforcing that the power of activist signals depends on both the nature of the signal and the ideological alignment between the cause and the audiences preconceived beliefs.

Second, this study extends research on athlete activism beyond the North American context. Our findings support research showing that the German public holds overall more positive views towards athlete activism when compared to the U.S. (Meier et al., 2024). Theoretically, this highlights the need to consider cultural and geographical contexts when evaluating audience responses to athlete activism, as baseline attitudes can amplify the reception of activist signals. The study extends CST suggesting that costly signals may not operate uniformly across national settings, reaffirming the need for cross-cultural perspectives in researching athlete activism.

4.5.2 Managerial Implications

This research highlights several important considerations for athletes, managers and sponsors surrounding athlete activism. While athlete activists will likely face inevitable criticism (Kaufman, 2008; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010), it is possible for public backlash to be reduced or mitigated by making personal sacrifices. Athletes, who wish to engage in activism but want to avoid heightened criticism, should consider if they are prepared to give something up to appear more genuine. Indeed our findings support the view that public perception is influenced by the level of effort an athlete puts into their activism (Brown et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2018). Athletes who are willing to ‘put their money where their mouth is’ may be able to avoid perceptions of woke-washing. Further, sponsors and brands looking to engage with activist athletes should consider whether the athletes are perceived as authentic and credible by consumers. Though the effect was limited, results showed that consumers do respond more favorably to sponsor brands which appear genuinely committed to a social cause.

However, the results of this study also suggest that while personal sacrifice may help play a mitigating role with public criticism, public responses are still primarily shaped by pre-existing attitudes towards athlete activism and specific social issues. That is, how the public perceive activist athletes appears to have more to do with how aligned the athlete's stance is with the public's values, rather than the activism itself. Athletes, managers and sponsors should be aware that attempts to shift public opinion purely through alternative methods of activism have limited effectiveness against unreceptive audiences.

Importantly, while we found evidence of the reputational benefits of costly signaling for activist athletes, it is essential that sacrifice is not framed as an expectation or a requirement. Athletes already face significant emotional risks when engaging in activism (Kluch, 2023). Expecting these athletes to bear financial or professional costs to validate their activism would put undue burden on the athlete. Instead, athletes and their managers should weigh up the risks and rewards of this form of activism, recognizing that bringing about social change can take many forms and that personal loss should not be required to be deemed authentic.

4.6 Limitations and Future Research

As with all research, this study had limitations which provide avenues for future research. First, our sample was not representative of the German public, particularly in relation to age or gender, which potentially resulted in no significant results from these covariates. Due to the lack of racial diversity in Germany, we also could not address whether racial attitudes were a factor in how sacrifice is perceived. Similarly, our study focused on German sports consumers, limiting the generalizability of the results to other cultural contexts. Future research should utilize multiple cultural contexts to compare whether the role of personal sacrifice is consistent or culturally dependent. The study highlights the need to continue researching this phenomenon in unique

cultural contexts, particularly those such as Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Asia, with vastly different cultures to the west.

Second, the study utilized an AI-generated athlete and fictional scenario. While this allowed for greater control, it raises concerns about ecological validity and whether real world cases of an athlete making a personal sacrifice would produce the same results. Future studies should consider how sacrifice by real-life elite athletes with pre-existing public images would influence public perception. Additionally, while this study examined financial and career sacrifices, other forms of sacrifice (such as personal safety or long-term career impacts) may be perceived differently. Future research should consider if certain forms of costly signaling generate stronger public support. Additionally, given that media framing has been shown to significantly shape public perceptions to athlete activism (Park et al., 2020), future research might consider how different media narratives of an athletes sacrifice (e.g. the athlete framed as an “entitled activist” vs. a “martyr”) would affect results.

Finally, our findings showed that pre-held beliefs towards athlete activism and alignment with the social issue had greater effects than the sacrifice. Rather than assessing which methods of activism may be more accepted, future research should consider strategies for shifting public opinion towards athlete activism in general.

4.7 Conclusion

Using a three-level experimental design, this research examined how personal sacrifice can shape German sport consumer perceptions of athlete activism. Results show that personal sacrifice strengthened perceptions of authenticity as well as improved attitudes towards the athlete, their role model status, and their method of activism. To a lesser degree, these effects also extend to sponsor brand perceptions. Beyond the influence of sacrifice, the strongest predictors of athlete

support were general attitudes toward athlete activism and agreement with the social cause. These findings extend CST by illustrating that voluntary sacrifice can influence perceptions of activists and activism yet does not automatically transfer to commercial partners.

4.7 References

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Chapter 5: General Discussion

This final chapter provides the general discussion and conclusion of the thesis. This thesis investigated elite athlete activism. This thesis comprised three interconnected studies: a scoping review of the athlete activism literature, an analysis of the discursive strategies used to delegitimise activist athletes, and an investigation of how an athlete activist's personal sacrifice impacts support for the athlete and perceptions of their authenticity. In doing so, the thesis highlighted the complex and contested nature of athlete activism. The thesis contributes to the field of sport management in numerous ways, including theoretical advancement, conceptual clarity, and novel methods.

This chapter opens with a synthesis of the key findings and contributions from the three studies. The chapter then explores the main theoretical advancements offered by the thesis to the field of sport management, including the development and application of conceptual frameworks and innovations in research methodology. Following this, the chapter outlines key managerial implications and provides actionable recommendations for athletes, managers, sport organisations, and sponsors seeking to engage with activism. The limitations of the integrated thesis are subsequently examined, acknowledging the research constraints and areas for future refinement. A comprehensive research agenda provides suggestions to guide continued exploration in the evolving field of athlete activism. The chapter concludes with a summary of the overall contributions of the thesis and final reflections.

5.1 Key Contributions

Considered collectively, the findings of this research suggest a unifying theme: the divisive nature of athlete activism is shaped not solely by the characteristics and actions of the athletes, but also by the observer's perspectives, interpretations and evaluative frameworks. Prior to this thesis, we knew that a large part of society did not like athlete activism. What remained insufficiently

understood was the nature of the opposition to athlete activism, as well as the extent to which athletes themselves can influence or reshape these critical perceptions.

Each study in this thesis addresses specific research gaps that are conceptually connected. At the conceptual level, the thesis moves the athlete activism discussion beyond media framing and public demographics toward a better understanding of consumer-centred mentality surrounding activism.

The scoping review established the foundations of the research, revealing it to be a divisive, topical, yet under-theorised. The findings from this study pushed for academic expansion into non-US contexts; definitional clarity and greater emphasis on understanding the motivating factors around sports consumers perceptions of athlete activism. These gaps laid the foundations for investigating public responses to activism in two unique contexts through discourse and experimental conditions.

The qualitative analysis of social media discourse in Study 2 exposed the strategies used by the public to challenge athlete activism, simultaneously providing a better understanding of the elements of athlete activism that are most disliked by the public. The identified targeting of athlete's sincerity specifically highlighted a research hypothesis surrounding one factor influencing why people perceive athlete activism negatively. This insight, previously untouched in athlete activism research, was crucial in suggesting that an athlete's authenticity is not a stable trait but rather a contested concept that is vulnerable to public scrutiny.

Study 3 further demonstrated this link by quantitatively demonstrating that perceptions of an athlete and their authenticity can be altered based on the actions of the athlete. Yet these studies have also highlighted that while the athlete and their choices influence public perception, so too

do the individual values of the public. Together, the research contributes to a coherent, conceptual understanding of the divisive nature of athlete activism.

5.1.1 The Four Elements of Perceptions of Athlete Activism.

A key insight from this thesis is that perceptions of athlete activism are shaped by a complex and context-specific interplay of factors. When considered alongside previous research, the findings indicate that perceptions of athlete activism are shaped not by a single factor, but through the interplay of four key elements: a) athlete characteristics; b) the form or type of activism; c) the social issue being addressed, and d) observer characteristics. The following paragraphs discuss each of these in more detail.

Many characteristics of an athlete can influence how their activism is perceived. Research has shown that observer responses differ depending on factors such as whether the athlete is male or female (Allison et al., 2021), black or white (Click et al., 2022), a star or a fringe player (Kaufman, 2008). As seen in Study 2, athlete characteristics shaped public perceptions of legitimacy, expertise, and even the "right" to speak on social issues. The attacks targeting Australia's human rights record, for example, highlighted that culturally different athletes would have experienced differing levels or aspects of delegitimisation. To avoid compounding factors, the characteristics of the athlete was kept constant in Study 3, yet it should be acknowledged that a different athlete would likely have resulted in different outcomes. This highlights the importance of recognising athlete characteristics as a crucial variable that interacts with activist methods and messaging.

The method used by the athlete to engage in activism is another central influence on perceptions. Several key contributions have been made towards an understanding of how specific methods will be perceived. The thesis first acknowledged, through Study 1, that no guidance has

been provided in the research on what constitutes best practice when engaging in activism, despite a clear need for this knowledge. Study 2 then showed that minimal methods like messaging (e.g. posting on social media) without any visible follow-up action can damage an athlete's credibility. Finally, Study 3 advanced this line of inquiry by quantitatively confirming that personal sacrifice is an effective strategy for enhancing perceptions of authenticity and generating support for athlete activism. This finding aligns with broader research suggesting that methods of activism are often evaluated based on factors such as the level of personal effort involved and the perceived degree of confrontation or disruption. (Cooper et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2018). This research ultimately reveals that public criticisms of certain activist methods are not merely excuses to dissuade athletes from speaking out. Rather, these opposing views underscore a fundamental tension in athlete activism: if athletes do too much, they risk being seen as distracted or inappropriate; if they do too little, they are often dismissed as inauthentic. At the same time, our findings challenged previous research suggesting that disruptive forms of activism are the least preferred (Müller et al., 2023), highlighting that there is no universally correct method of engaging in athlete activism.

The specific issue addressed by the athlete activist is clearly a significant factor. Some issues may be safer than others, for example hunger or child protection. Others like abortion or climate change will stimulate polarising argument. The choice of which issues to engage with greatly influence the perceptions of the public, based on elements like if it is a controversial, safe, or a domestic or global issue (Brown et al., 2022; Cunningham & Regan, 2012). This thesis contributes to the study of perceptions by demonstrating that athletes are delegitimised when they speak out on issues outside their perceived expertise or cultural domain. Perhaps most importantly, the research reveals that the nature of the social issue itself can have a greater impact on public perceptions than other factors. In Study 3 the issue of climate change was kept consistent to focus

on analysing the method of activism, yet participants personal stance on climate was a stronger predictor of the perceptions than the activism method. Again, had the issue been different, the results would likely have shifted significantly. This underscores the fundamental reality that public perception is heavily influenced by the specific cause being represented.

Finally, there are the characteristics of those observing the activism. It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate this element from the other three because the observer's personal traits shape how they respond to the athlete, the method, and the issue. Study 1 identified observer characteristics are one of the dominant topics in the athlete activism literature, highlighting the need to better understand how and why observers respond to and interpret activist behaviour. Previous research affirmed that public interpretations of activism is influenced by personal demographics, values, cultural norms, and social identity (Calow, 2021; Knoester et al., 2022; Müller et al., 2023; Niven, 2021). Study 2 and Study 3 both identified interesting points about how personal characteristics influence the response to the activism. Study 2 revealed how grassroots resistance to athlete activism reflects broader ideological divides which are often culturally based, for example one's religion or legal system. Study 3 further confirmed that consumer support is strongly influenced by alignment with the social issue and personal attitudes toward athlete activism in general — factors that outweigh even the impact of the activism method itself. Importantly, by focusing specifically on sports consumers, this research provides fresh insights into how fans and followers, rather than just the media or broader public, actively construct meaning around activism. It underscores the deeply subjective nature of how activist efforts are received. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the newly identified strategy of delegitimising athletes for being “distracted,” a critique uniquely relevant to sports fans who prioritise athletic performance over activism.

The combined insights of the thesis show that any attempt to assess or predict public responses to athlete activism must consider these four interdependent elements. To study one only presents part of a wider picture. Each variable, be it athlete, method, issue or observer, acts as a filter through which the activist message is processed. A change in one element inevitably alters the outcome. As such, this research offers a clearer understanding of why every athlete activism case is different and why pursuing a one-size-fits-all approach to managing athlete activism is likely to fail. To advance this field, a greater understanding of the role that each of these four elements play in shaping perceptions is necessary, as well as how each element affects the others.

5.1.2 Authenticity as a Central Concept

Another important contribution of this thesis is highlighting the key but often overlooked role of authenticity in how athlete activism is perceived. While authenticity has widely been acknowledged as a key contributing factor within marketing and branding (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Morhart et al., 2013; Vredenburg et al., 2020), it has rarely been a focus in studies of athlete activism. The scoping review identified authenticity in earlier research, though it has typically been treated as a background assumption or self-identified personality trait by athletes, rather than a subject of direct analysis or measurement (Kluch, 2020). This thesis, however, demonstrates that authenticity is a fundamental element in how activist athletes are understood, supported, rejected, or opposed by the public and sports consumers.

The findings reaffirm that authenticity is not likely a fixed trait that an athlete either possesses or lacks. Responses to activism across both Study 2 and Study 3 were not simply about the act of protest, but also about how genuinely that athletes appeared to care about the issue. Rather than treating authenticity as a fixed trait, this research demonstrates it is a socially constructed and observer-dependent perception, shaped by contextual cues, rhetorical framing, and

the perceived personal cost of action. While athletes may view themselves as authentic, being perceived as an authentic activist is entirely subjective and is continuously assessed by observers based on factors such as where, how, and why the activism is conducted. Commenters in Study 2 questioned the sincerity and seriousness of the activism, characterising it as opportunistic and a superficial attempt at virtue signalling, primarily because they perceived a lack of effort and commitment. However, as with any criticism of athlete activism, it is difficult to discern whether these concerns reflect genuine public sentiment or merely serve as excuses to oppose a practice they dislike. It is only when considered alongside the findings of Study 3 that this thesis confirms athletes can garner greater support and be perceived as more authentic by demonstrating a higher level of personal investment in their activism.

However, while the findings of this section are important, they should not be overstated. This thesis also demonstrates that authenticity alone does not guarantee consumer support. Instead, the research reveals that individuals' values and political orientations often exert a stronger influence on how activism is evaluated. This suggests that even the most authentic athlete activist may face rejection if their message or actions conflict with the personal beliefs of the observer. This aligns with the previous finding that personality elements, such as political opinions, are among the strongest indicators of perceptions towards athlete activism (Niven, 2021; Park & Kwak, 2024). This opens the floor for empirical testing of other factors, long held as excuses to criticise activist athletes. These include the criticism that athletes are not qualified or sufficiently knowledgeable to speak on an issue, or that activism distracts from performance. While research has challenged the distraction hypothesis (Hawkins et al., 2022) recent research still suggests that a lack of "on-field" success will increase delegitimisation of activist athletes (Doidge et al., 2024). Other strategies, such as highlighting the positive outcomes of activism or reaffirming the athlete's

authority, remain empirically untested in terms of whether they offer legitimising effects comparable to those of perceived authenticity.

5.1.3 The Social Media Wave

The thesis further underscores that contemporary elite athlete activism is predominantly manifested within the digital era through the use of social media. All three studies engaged with and relied on social media to help answer their research questions. Study 1 identified social media as one of the dominant themes in the athlete activism literature, noting that research has highlighted its dual role as both a platform for athlete expression and a site of contestation and division. This thesis confirms the growing importance of social media in sport and contributes to existing research examining how athletes use social media to engage fans with their activist messaging (Abeza & Sanderson, 2024; Sanderson et al., 2016; Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015). Until now, little research has considered the interplay of how these activist messages are sent, interpreted, and criticised. This gap is addressed here by examining both sides of the communication process: how athletes can present their activism online and how their social media posts are reacted to. In the real world, social media is the format through which many people would be exposed to athlete activism. This is reflected in both studies 2 and 3, where social media is the platform through which the athlete activism occurs.

Undeniably, social media enables today's athletes to bypass traditional media filters and reach global audiences. This has allowed these athletes to frame their activism on their own terms, something unachievable by early activist athletes. However, evidenced by Study 2, this does not guarantee that the observer will interpret it using the same frames. This is closely tied to another key insight: increased visibility also subjects athletes to greater scrutiny and opposition. As Study 2 reinforced, social media creates fertile ground for discursive and at times harmful resistance

(Doidge et al., 2024). Modern athlete activists face globalised opposition, all at the touch of a phone, something previous waves of activist athletes did not face (Edwards, 2017). The very accessibility that makes social media such a powerful tool for addressing social and political issues also makes it highly volatile and potentially harmful (Hayday et al., 2024).

Despite the central role of social media in both athlete activism and scholarly discourse on the topic, many critical questions remain unanswered. It is still unclear whether social media activism translates into meaningful social or political change. Additionally, the psychological impact of public delegitimisation, criticism, and abuse directed at activist athletes remains underexplored, as do effective strategies for addressing such behaviour in digital spaces. While social media clearly defines the current wave of athlete activism, the form and challenges of future waves remain uncertain. As athlete activism continues to evolve, ongoing research will be essential to understand how emerging platforms and broader societal shifts will shape the nature, reach, and impact of activism

5.1.4 Cultural Contexts Matter

The final contribution of this thesis emphasises the role of cultural context in shaping public perceptions of athlete activism. Put simply, culture matters in athlete activism. Study 1 highlighted the US bias in athlete activism research. The increase in recent studies looking at athlete activism outside of America including Australia is a welcome addition (Bingaman & Mike, 2024), Japan (Ogiso et al., 2024), Germany (Kluch et al., 2023; Müller et al., 2023; J. Müller et al., 2023) and the UK (Doidge et al., 2024; Kearns et al., 2024). Study 2 and Study 3 have further contributed by examining perceptions of activism in two increasingly relevant national contexts, Australia and Germany. Whilst neither of the empirical studies are cross-cultural comparisons, the

use of multiple national contexts provides insights into the role of culture, broadly defined, in shaping perceptions of athlete activism.

In Study 2, athletes were clearly delegitimised not only because of their message and the way they expressed it, but also because they are Australian. Their very national identity was weaponised against them, illustrating how an athlete's culture can influence public perceptions of the athlete's right or credibility to speak out on specific issues. In Study 3, the nationality of both the athlete (German) and the observers (German sports fans) likely influenced the results, as evidenced by the alignment of our findings with previous research indicating that the German public generally view athlete activism as a legitimate form of expression (Meier et al., 2023). It is indeed likely that conducting the same studies in different cultural contexts would have yielded different results. For example, while many delegitimation strategies—such as claims that athletes are distracted—are likely to appear across different contexts, it is also probable that new strategies, or at least context-specific variations in how these strategies are employed, would emerge.

The findings confirm that perceptions of athlete activism do not emerge in a vacuum. There is evidence elsewhere that perceptions of athlete activism are filtered through our national identity, political history, religion, and social expectations (Choi et al., 2021; Serazio & Thorson, 2020). However, despite the increasingly global nature of athlete activism, research remains predominately Western in focus, with a lack of genuine cross-cultural research. This thesis underscores the ongoing need to place culture at the forefront of athlete activism research.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

Two key theoretical implications are evident in this thesis. First, it advances theoretical understanding of Costly Signaling Theory (Kane & Zollman, 2015) and discursive delegitimation (Nepstad & Kenney, 2018; Van Leeuwen, 2007). By doing so this thesis

demonstrates the value of applying these theoretical concepts to athlete activism. Second, it positions authenticity as a central theoretical construct in athlete activism research, framing it as a measurable yet observer-dependent factor that plays a critical role in shaping perceptions of legitimacy and support. The following paragraphs expand on each of these contributions.

The first theoretical implication of this thesis lies in its application of novel theoretical frameworks to examine athlete activism. The scoping review highlighted a significant lack of theory being applied to the study of elite athlete activism. Studies 2 and 3 sought to address that shortfall by employing and extending theories not previously used in this context. Study 2 drew on two distinct theories of legitimation and delegitimation. Van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework, previously used in political and communication research, was applied to athlete activism for the first time. Second, the study successfully repurposed Nepstad and Kenney's (2018) delegitimation strategies previously applied to media framing of athlete activism, to show how individual members of the public neutralise athlete activists online. This dual theory approach enabled the conceptualisation of an integrative framework for future research into opposition of athlete activism. Meanwhile, the application of Costly Signaling Theory in Study 3—originally rooted in evolutionary biology and later explored in marketing and economics—proved instrumental in theorising how personal sacrifice can enhance perceptions of authenticity and increase public support for activist athletes. Together, this thesis demonstrates the value of drawing from interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks to deepen our understanding of athlete activism and advance sport management research.

Second, the findings of this thesis have significant implications for how authenticity is conceptualised and studied within athlete activism research. Studies 2 and 3 focused on authenticity due to its limited prominence in the existing literature. These studies demonstrated

that authenticity is a perceived quality shaped by factors such as personal sacrifice, alignment with public values, and issue relevance. Crucially, the thesis provides empirical evidence that authenticity is directly influenced by the method of activism, with more sacrificial or costly forms enhancing perceptions of sincerity. This finding is important for researchers because it establishes authenticity not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic, relational construct that can be empirically examined through experimental designs.

For sport management scholars, this means authenticity must be theorised not merely as a marketing asset but as a complex, contested concept that significantly influences public support, credibility, and athlete image. By doing so, the thesis positions authenticity as a core variable for advancing theoretical understanding of athlete activism and public perception in sport. Furthermore, the successful operationalisation of authenticity as a measurable construct in Study 3 encourages sport scholars to explore its impact across other domains of athlete activism, including sponsorship, organisational responses, leadership, and media engagement.

5.3 Managerial Implications

This thesis offers several actionable implications for sports managers, athletes, sponsors, and sports organisations. Central to the research is the understanding that public perceptions fundamentally influence the effectiveness of athlete activism. Drawing on findings from the scoping review and empirical studies, this thesis develops evidence-based guidance to support athletes in their activist endeavours.

By highlighting the risks of delegitimisation, the thesis informs athletes about the challenges they may face when engaging in activism. Recognising that a one-size-fits-all approach is unfeasible, the research proposes the foundations of a best-practice framework designed to help

activist athletes make informed decisions based on the four key elements discussed earlier and their specific activism goals.

First, athletes and sports managers must be aware of the inherent risks associated with activism. Study 2 identified a range of often aggressive public strategies used to delegitimise athlete activists, including framing them as attention-seeking, lacking authority, hypocritical, or inauthentic. Importantly, the study also demonstrated that such delegitimation strategies are essentially inevitable. Regardless of how athletes engage, who they are, or the issues they support, it is likely that some members of the public will seek to undermine their credibility. Therefore, activist athletes should anticipate backlash, and managers should ensure that athletes willing to make activist statements are fully informed about these risks.

However, this research also suggests that criticism can be mitigated, and in some cases avoided, through specific methods and messaging. By understanding recurring patterns of public opposition, athletes and managers can craft activist messages that enhance credibility. Best-practice recommendations include clarifying motivations, demonstrating alignment between personal values and activism, and publicly linking actions to authentic personal experiences.

Crucially, this thesis finds that athletes aiming to maximise the impact of their activism while minimising negative perceptions should consider the potential benefits of making a personal sacrifice. Such sacrifice not only increases perceived authenticity but also fosters more positive attitudes toward the athlete, their brand, and their activism. Nonetheless, these benefits should not be overstated—significant sacrifices, such as boycotting a tournament, do not guarantee immunity from delegitimation. Moreover, not all athletes are positioned to afford such sacrifices, so managers and athletes must carefully weigh the financial, career, and wellbeing costs involved.

Practically, where feasible, athletes are encouraged to incorporate acts of personal investment into their activism strategies to strengthen their credibility.

Third, the findings emphasise the importance of alignment between athletes, the issues they address, and the values of sponsoring organisations or brands. Study 3 demonstrated that observer support is strongly influenced by their personal beliefs about athlete activism and the specific social issues at stake. Consequently, brands and organisations should evaluate not only an athlete's performance and popularity when selecting partners for corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns but also the alignment of values. If athletes are publicly perceived as inauthentic or engaging in "virtue signaling", this could negatively impact the associated organisations. This reinforces the earlier discussion on the critical role of observer perception in determining how activism is received.

Best-practice strategies in this regard include conducting alignment assessments and mapping consumer values to minimise the risk of conflicts. Organisations must also recognise that, despite proactive measures, association with activist athletes is likely to attract some degree of backlash, and they should prepare accordingly.

Finally, education and training programs for athletes should be developed, informed by the findings of this thesis. Athletes want to engage in activism (Lee & Cunningham, 2019). Many athletes however, especially those in early-career stages, may lack awareness of the broader implications of their activism. This thesis provides a basis for incorporating topics such as strategic communication, social issue alignment, authenticity and observer opposition into athlete development programs. By doing so, organisations can better equip athletes to navigate the socially complex yet rewarding realm of athlete activism.

5.4 Methodological Implications

Study 3 is perhaps the first to use generative-AI image construction within research on athlete activism. This approach enabled a more neutral and natural examination of public responses to activism firstly by removing confounding biases tied to real elite athletes (e.g. gender, race, fame) (Cunningham & Regan, 2012). At the same time, the use of the AI athlete enabled the creation of more realistic scenario compared to previous experiment methods like the use of stock images (Utych, 2022). This method offers a valuable model not only for research on athlete activism, but also for future athlete-focused studies where precise stimulus control is essential. AI-generated images have the potential to become standard practice in sport consumer behaviour research.

5.5 Limitations

As with all research, the studies in this thesis and the thesis as a whole, have several limitations. Since Study 1 was published, more than 20 relevant empirical studies on athlete activism have been published (e.g. Boykoff, 2025; Brown et al., 2025; Cartee et al., 2025; Kluch et al., 2024; Kokholm et al., 2024), with many filling research gaps identified in the scoping review. Study 2 has several potential limitations, including limited generalisability due to the specificity of the case study and the absence of demographic data on the commenters. Study 3 was limited by a non-representative sample characterised by limited demographic diversity—reflective primarily of the German population—and by its focus on a specific target group (sports consumers), all of which impact the generalisability of the findings. At the same time, the AI generate athlete and their chosen profile (i.e., female, white, tennis player, pro-climate), as well as the fictional activism scenario could also potentially influence results. Finally, as acknowledged earlier, the use of a bilingual survey may contain interpretation limitations.

In terms of the whole thesis, while each of the three studies contributed to the understanding of athlete activism, their integration as a coherent framework was again limited by their different research designs and objectives. The combination of a systematic review, a qualitative social media content analysis, and an experimental survey was certainly useful in addressing the research questions. However, these designs also present challenges when drawing direct comparisons or causal inferences between studies. Therefore, the many differences between the cases, methods, theories and analysis make it unable to provide a true comparison of how activism is perceived in the contexts of Australia and Germany. Furthermore, this work focused on the perspectives of opponents of athlete activism (Study 2) and sports consumers (Study 3), meaning again that they are not directly comparable. At the same time, the thesis shows limited engagement with alternative perspectives, including those of activist athletes, sponsors, and, importantly, sporting organisations. Further insights are needed, for example, into how sporting organisations respond to delegitimisation and whether such public discourse influences their tolerance of athlete activism.

Finally, the attempt to identify best practice strategies for athletes are only very preliminary. Any best practice solutions are highly dependent on cultural, political and temporal factors, meaning that further research is required to confirm their generalisability and practical relevance. Given that this research challenges some findings of previous studies, the reception of any best-practice solutions across different sport settings and audiences remains inconclusive. A systematic approach to identifying best practices is therefore necessary, with the four key elements of athlete activism perception—the athlete, method, issue, and observer—placed at its core.

5.6 Future Research Directions

Given the findings and limitations of this thesis, there are ample opportunities for future research. While each individual study, most notably the scoping review, has identified numerous

areas for future scholarly work, this section focuses on the most prominent and immediate research opportunities stemming from the integrated thesis as a whole. As such, this should not be considered an exhaustive list.

First, future research should be conducted into mapping the four elements that influence public perceptions of athlete activism: the athlete, the method, the issue, and the observer. A synthesised theoretical mapping of each element is required to develop a framework of perceptions of athlete activism. This should then be followed with empirical analysis. While each element has been explored individually, and occasionally two in combination through 2x2 experimental designs (Cunningham & Regan, 2012; Schmidt et al., 2018), research has yet to comprehensively examine how all four interact with one another or assess their relative influence. Future research should therefore employ experimental and comparative designs to investigate these interaction effects and determine which element has the greatest influence on perceptions of athlete activism. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for advancing theoretical frameworks but also for guiding athletes in making strategic decisions regarding their activism. In regard to the method of activism, future research should specifically consider whether activism expressed collectively is received differently than when voiced individually. Regarding the athlete and the issue, research should explicitly test athlete–cause fit—be it personal, cultural, or professional—as a driver of how observers judge an athlete's perceived authenticity and the credibility of their stance.

Another immediate research opportunity in athlete activism lies in exploring the role of culture. Despite notable progress in expanding the study of athlete activism beyond the American context, research in this field remains predominantly Western-centric. There is currently a significant lack of empirical research on elite athlete activism in regions such as Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia. Future studies should investigate the motivations behind activism—or its

absence—in these regions, examining how regional histories, cultural values, and political climates influence both activist expression and public reception. Such research is urgently needed to enhance the global understanding of the risks and potentials of activism, while also validating or challenging existing findings derived primarily from Western settings.

Following this, there is a pressing need for cross-cultural research employing comparative methodologies to rigorously explore how cultural factors—such as nationalism, social norms, and identity—shape perceptions of athlete activism. One potential approach involves media framing analysis, comparing how a high-profile activism case is reported domestically versus internationally across different national contexts. Alternatively, large-scale experimental studies could present identical hypothetical activism scenarios to respondents from diverse cultures, utilising AI-generated athlete profiles that correspond to the respondent’s nationality (e.g., a Chinese respondent viewing a Chinese athlete).

Finally, a crucial yet underexplored perspective in the discourse on athlete activism is that of sports organisations themselves. While substantial research has focused on athletes, fans, and the public, far less is known about how sports organisations respond to athlete activism. Future research should examine how organisational leadership, stakeholder pressures, brand risk, and institutional values influence decision-making processes related to activist engagement. Key questions include: How do organisations and their management assess athlete activism? What factors shape their tolerance or resistance toward activist expressions? How can organisational policies promote fairness, maintain stakeholder trust, and foster a supportive culture for athlete activism? As activism becomes increasingly prominent, the risks associated with mismanaging athlete activism rise, making the study of these organisational dynamics an essential focus for future research.

5.7 Conclusion

This thesis provides a comprehensive examination of elite athlete activism. This thesis comprised three interconnected studies: a scoping review of the athlete activism literature, an analysis of the discursive strategies used to delegitimise activist athletes, and an investigation of how an athlete activist's personal sacrifice impacts support for the athlete and perceptions of their authenticity. The studies were underpinned by a pragmatic lens, utilising different questions, methods and cultural contexts. The thesis offers conceptual and theoretical advancement by placing authenticity at the heart of athlete activism research and applying both novel theoretical frameworks and innovative research methods. This research finds that athlete activism is a socially contested, culturally embedded phenomenon, with every case likely a novel context. In doing so, the research has developed a clearer framework for understanding and addressing the complex dynamics surrounding the divisiveness of athlete activism. While there currently exist no universal best practices, this work provides guidance, suggestions and warnings for activist athletes. The groundwork has been laid for more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches in how scholars and practitioners address this issue. Athletes will continue to speak out. People will continue to hate it. In a world where silence speaks volumes, this work reminds us that the athlete's voice, and how they are heard, matters more than ever.

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Appendix A: International Conference Presentations

- O'Neill, F., Ströbel, T., Dickson, G., & Thompson, A. J. (2024). "How Much Do I Have To Give?" Consumer Perceptions Of Athlete Activism Sacrifice, Support and Authenticity. 32nd Conference of the European Association for Sport Management (EASM), Paris, France.
- O'Neill, F., Thompson, A. J., Dickson, G., & Ströbel, T., (2024) Delegitimisation of athlete activism: A Study of the Australian Football Team. 27th annual conference of the Arbeitskreis Sportökonomie e.V. in cooperation with the International Association of Sports Economists (IASE), Bayreuth. Germany.
- O'Neill, F., Thompson, A. J., Dickson, G., & Ströbel, T., (2023). Tactical Neutralisation of Athlete Activism: A Study of Discursive Delegitimisation of the Australian Football Team. 29th Conference of the Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand, Canberra Australia
- O'Neill, F., Dickson, G., Ströbel, T., & Thompson, A. J. (2023). Elite Athlete Activism, Advocacy And Protest: A Scoping Review. 31st Conference of the European Association for Sport Management (EASM), Belfast, Northern Ireland.
- O'Neill, F., (2023). Finalist: SMAANZ 3-Minute Thesis Competition. 29th Conference of the Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand, Canberra Australia
- Anderski, M., O'Neill, F., Dickson, G., Fuller, R., Ströbel, T., & Thompson, A. J. (2023). Human Brand Activism: Developing An Athlete Brand Activism Continuum Based On A Multi-actor Perspective. 31st Conference of the European Association for Sport Management (EASM), Belfast, Northern Ireland.
- Anderski, M., O'Neill, F., Dickson, G., Fuller, R., Ströbel, T., & Thompson, A. J. (2023). A Multi-actor Perspective On Athlete Brand Activism. The Australian And New Zealand Marketing Academy (ANZMAC) 2023, Dunedin, Otago, New Zealand.

Appendix B: Study 1 Supplemental File

Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) Checklist

SECTION	ITEM	PRISMA-ScR CHECKLIST ITEM	PAGE #
TITLE			
Title	1	Identify the report as a scoping review.	1
ABSTRACT			
Structured summary	2	Provide a structured summary that includes (as applicable): background, objectives, eligibility criteria, sources of evidence, charting methods, results, and conclusions that relate to the review questions and objectives.	2
INTRODUCTION			
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of what is already known. Explain why the review questions/objectives lend themselves to a scoping review approach.	3-4
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of the questions and objectives being addressed with reference to their key elements (e.g., population or participants, concepts, and context) or other relevant key elements used to conceptualize the review questions and/or objectives.	4
METHODS			
Protocol and registration	5	Indicate whether a review protocol exists; state if and where it can be accessed and if available, provide registration information, including the registration number.	Not applicable
Eligibility criteria	6	Specify characteristics of the sources of evidence used as eligibility criteria (e.g., years considered, language, and publication status), and provide a rationale.	8
Information sources	7	Describe all information sources in the search (e.g., databases with dates of coverage and contact with authors to identify additional sources), as well as the date the most recent search was executed.	8-9
Search	8	Present the full electronic search strategy for at least one database, including any limits used, such that it could be repeated.	8
Selection of sources of evidence	9	State the process for selecting sources of evidence (i.e., screening and eligibility) included in the scoping review.	10-11

Data charting process	10	Describe the methods of charting data from the included sources of evidence (e.g., calibrated forms or forms that have been tested by the team before their use, and whether data charting was done independently or in duplicate) and any processes for obtaining and confirming data from investigators.	12
Data items	11	List and define all variables for which data were sought and any assumptions and simplifications made.	12
Critical appraisal of individual sources of evidence	12	If done, provide a rationale for conducting a critical appraisal of included sources of evidence; describe the methods used and how this information was used in any data synthesis (if appropriate).	Not applicable
Synthesis of results	13	Describe the methods of handling and summarizing the data that were charted.	12-13
RESULTS			
Selection of sources of evidence	14	Give numbers of sources of evidence screened, assessed for eligibility, and included in the review, with reasons for exclusions at each stage, ideally using a flow diagram.	11-12
Characteristics of sources of evidence	15	For each source of evidence, present characteristics for which data were charted and provide the citations.	12-13
Critical appraisal within sources of evidence	16	If done, present data on critical appraisal of included sources of evidence (see item 12).	Not applicable
Results of individual sources of evidence	17	For each included source of evidence, present the relevant data that were charted that relate to the review questions and objectives.	13-23
Synthesis of results	18	Summarize and/or present the charting results as they relate to the review questions and objectives.	12-23
DISCUSSION			
Summary of evidence	19	Summarize the main results (including an overview of concepts, themes, and types of evidence available), link to the review questions and objectives, and consider the relevance to key groups.	23-26
Limitations	20	Discuss the limitations of the scoping review process.	8
Conclusions	21	Provide a general interpretation of the results with respect to the review questions and objectives, as well as potential implications and/or next steps.	26-27
FUNDING			

Funding	22	Describe sources of funding for the included sources of evidence, as well as sources of funding for the scoping review. Describe the role of the funders of the scoping review.	27
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Tricco, A. C., Lillie, E., Zarin, W., O'Brien, K. K., Colquhoun, H., Levac, D., Moher, D., Peters, M. D. J., Horsley, T., Weeks, L., Hempel, S., Akl, E. A., Chang, C., McGowan, J., Stewart, L., Hartling, L., Aldcroft, A., Wilson, M. G., Garritty, C., ... Straus, S. E. (2018). PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR): Checklist and Explanation. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 169(7), 467–473. <https://doi.org/10.7326/M18-0850>

Full Search Strategy.

Sport-focused criteria:

Sport OR Athlete OR Player OR Olympic* OR “Olympic Game*” OR Paralympic* OR “World Cup” OR “American Football” OR Basketball OR archery OR athletics OR badminton OR baseball OR biathlon OR BMX OR bobsleigh OR bobsled* OR boxing OR “break danc*” OR canoe OR chess OR cricket OR curling OR cycling OR decathlon OR “e-sports” OR esports OR equestrian OR fencing OR football OR soccer OR futsal OR golf OR gymnastic OR handball OR heptathlon OR hockey OR “horse racing” OR judo OR karate OR kayak* OR luge OR “martial arts” OR "motor sport" OR "mountain bike" OR netball OR pentathlon OR racing OR rowing OR rugby OR sailing OR skiing OR ski OR skating OR skateboard* OR snowboard OR softball OR surfing OR swimming OR tennis OR taekwondo OR trampolin* OR triathlon OR volleyball OR “water polo” OR weightlifting OR wrestling

AND

Action-focused criteria:

Activis* OR Advoca* OR Protest OR Voice, Commission*, Boycott* & Representat*

The following sports were removed due to the frequent and unrelated use of the word:

Climbing; Breaking; Diving; Shooting

Appendix C: Study 3 Ethics Approval – La Trobe University



LA TROBE RESEARCH

To: Geoff Dickson

From: Low Risk Committee

Date: 19/06/2024

Subject: Notification of Ethics Review Outcome - Approved

Ethics Application Number: [NO.24-026](#)

Ethics Application Title: "How much do I have to give?" Consumer perceptions of athlete activist sacrifice, support and authenticity

Approval Period: 3/06/2024 to 3/06/2025

Approved Documents:
UBT ethics application template-English translation
LTU Externally-Approved-Project-Application-Form
UBT ethics application and survey outline
UBT Ethics Approval

I am pleased to advise you that Research Governance Authorisation has been granted for the project listed above, subject to the following conditions being met:

Conditions of Approval specific to this project

N/A

Conditions of Approval – All projects

- **Multicentre Projects:** If this project is a multicentre project you must forward a copy of this letter to all Investigators at other sites for their records.

- **Approving Ethics Committee Conditions:** Please note that all requirements and conditions of the original ethical approval for this project still apply.
- **Research Governance Approval is limited** to the research project and associated documents as outlined in the approving ethics committee letter.
- **The La Trobe Principal Investigator** will immediately report anything that might warrant review of ethical approval of the project.
- **Modifications to an Approved Project:** Any changes to the project application, project description/protocol and/or other project documents must be submitted to the approving ethics committee review and approval in accordance with the instructions outlined on the Approving Ethics Committee website. Once the Approval Ethics Committee has granted approval for modifications, the approval letter and associated documents should be submitted to La Trobe for Research Governance Authorisation.
- **Annual Report:** Please submit a copy of your annual report, using the Approving Ethics Committee template to La Trobe for Governance Authorisation.
- **Final Report or Withdrawal of Project:** At the conclusion of your project you must submit a final report within 3 months using the Approving Ethics Committee template.
- **Safety Reporting:** If a significant safety issue arises from the conduct of the project, it must be reported via the process outlined on the La Trobe Ethics, Integrity and Biosafety website.
- **Monitoring:** All projects are subject to monitoring at any time and will be monitored in accordance with the University's Research Monitoring Policy alongside the monitoring and research integrity policies and/or agreements with the Approval Ethics Committee.

Should you require any further information, please contact the Human Research Ethics Team on:

T: +61 3 9479 1443 | E: humanethics@latrobe.edu.au.

Kind regards,

Ethics, Integrity & Biosafety on behalf of
Chair, Low Risk Committee

Appendix D: Study 3 Ethics Approval – University of Bayreuth



University of Bayreuth, 95440 Bayreuth

Professor Tim Ströbel
Chair of Marketing & Sport Management

internal mail

Ref. Nr O 1305/1 - GB
Please include in future correspondence
Bayreuth, 03 June 2024

— Your request to the University of Bayreuth's Research Ethics Committee dated 13 May 2024, received on 13 May 2024, concerning the research "How much do I have to give?" Consumer perceptions of athlete activist sacrifice, support and authenticity

No. 24-026

Dear Professor Ströbel,

— You have requested an ethical assessment from us on the research project "How much do I have to give?" Consumer perceptions of athlete activist sacrifice, support and authenticity" which we gladly provide. The study's purpose is to provide quantitative evidence to support the theory that sacrifice is an impacting factor into how activist athletes are perceived.

The Research Ethics Committee's assessment considers the following aspects:

- the content and topics on which the research project is based,
- the planned execution of the investigations involving appropriate test persons, the processing and evaluation of the findings from the investigations from an ethical point of view, and
- ▪ a brief examination of compliance with valid data protection regulations.

After assessing the project on the basis of your request from 13 May 2024 and the documents attached to that submission considering the aspects outlined before, the Research Ethics Committee expresses the following:

There are no ethical concerns with regard to the implementation of the project.

Katrin Winkler | Committee Support, Universitätsstr. 30, 95447 Bayreuth,
Phone: 0921 55-5364, gremienbuero@uni-bayreuth.de

Appendix E: Study 3 Online Survey

29/05/2025, 20:42

Qualtrics Survey Software



English ▾

Introduction

Dear participant,

Thank you for dedicating your time to participate in our research study. Your insights are crucial as we aim to understand and comprehend the reactions of sports fans to elite athlete activism in Germany.

The survey will take approximately 7 minutes.

Your voluntary participation is highly appreciated, and all responses will be handled confidentially. Your answers will be utilised solely for research purposes, and your identity will remain anonymous. You can withdraw your consent to participate at any time - if you no longer want to complete the questionnaire, simply close the web browser. If you change your mind after clicking on the 'Submit' button, we can withdraw your responses.

The survey questions and answers are designed in English and German. Some elements of the survey will be in English only.

Should you have any inquiries or concerns regarding the study, please do not hesitate to contact Francis O'Neill M.Mgt at Francis.ONeill@uni-bayreuth.de

Once again, thank you for your valuable participation!

Sincerely, The research team

Please enter your Prolific ID

--

Please think about your favourite sports team or athlete. If you do not have a favorite team/athlete, please think about the team/athlete you most closely follow. Please indicate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to what extent you agree with the following statements:

[illegible][illegible]

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I don't think athletes have a duty to speak out publicly on political or social issues.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I don't think that athletes have the necessary expertise to speak out on political or social issues.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I think that it's not part of an athlete's job to speak out publicly on political or social issues.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When athletes speak out on political or social issues, it makes me angry.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I don't think that athletes are intelligent enough to speak out on political or social issues.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I don't think it is important for athletes to speak out publicly on political or social issues.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It disgusts me when athletes speak out on political or social issues.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Experimental Conditions

In this section of the survey, you will see the profile of a professional German tennis player, followed by a social media post made by the athlete.

Please carefully analyse the athlete's profile and the social media post and consider the information presented.

After reviewing the post, you will be asked a series of questions based on the athlete. All the following questions are related to the social media post.



Sarah Färber

 GERMANY

Height

171cm

Age

28

Plays

Right-Handed

Birthplace

Berlin, Germany

Overview

Bio

Matches

Grand Slams

Stats

Rankings History

Current Ranking

82

Apr 8 2024

Singles Titles

0

YTD 2024

Prize Money

\$214,000

YTD 2024

Career High

50

Jan 8 2024

Singles Titles

0

Career

Prize Money

\$2,590,000

Career



🌍🚫 I'm deeply disappointed that Apex Mining is the major sponsor of the upcoming Gliders Cup. Apex Mining is contributing to climate change. This is unacceptable! We can't stay silent while our environment suffers. We must demand better.

4:17 PM. Jan 16, 2024 .





Sarah ✓
@sarahfärber

🌍🚫 I'm deeply disappointed that Apex Mining is the major sponsor of the upcoming Gliders Cup. Apex Mining is contributing to climate change. This is unacceptable! We can't stay silent while our environment suffers. We must demand better.

Because of this, I will not be accepting any prize money from the tournament!

4:17 PM. Jan 16, 2024 .



Sarah ✓
@sarahfärber

🌍🚫 I'm deeply disappointed that Apex Mining is the major sponsor of the upcoming Gliders Cup. Apex Mining is contributing to climate change. This is unacceptable! We can't stay silent while our environment suffers. We must demand better.

Because of this, I will not be accepting any prize money from the tournament!

4:17 PM. Jan 16, 2024 .



Manipulation Check

In the social media post you just read, did the tennis player Sarah Färber say they would give something up or make a financial sacrifice?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Moderators

Please indicate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to what extent you agree with the following statement:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sarah Färber took a position on climate change that agreed with my own.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please indicate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to what extent you agree with the following statement:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I would support the form of activism described in the scenario	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please select 'Strongly Disagree' to indicate that you are paying attention:

- ☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree

Dependant variables

Overall, my attitude to Sarah Färber is:

Bad	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Good
Unfavourable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Favourable
Negative	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Positive

Please indicate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to what extent you agree with the following statements about Sarah Färber:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
This athlete leads by example.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This athlete exhibits the kind of work ethic and behaviour I try to imitate.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This athlete sets a positive example for others to follow.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This athlete provides a good model for me to follow.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This athlete acts as a role model for me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please indicate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to what extent you agree with the following statements about Sarah Färber:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The athlete cares more about being themselves, than being popular.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The athlete lives in accordance with their values and beliefs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The athlete is authentic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Others (e.g., sponsors) influence the athletes' behaviours greatly.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The athlete usually says what others (e.g., sponsors) tell them to say.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The athlete is pretending to be what they are not.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The athlete expresses their true feelings and emotions in posts.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The athletes' words and behaviours reflect their true self.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The athlete always stands by what they believe in.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

The athlete Sarah Färber has an endorsement deal with several well-known companies. If those companies maintain their relationship with this athlete how likely are you to:

(1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Tell others to support these brands.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Follow these companies on social media.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Support these companies.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Learn more about these companies and their product offerings.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Buy more from these companies.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Sacrifice Measurement

Based on the scenario, to what extent did Sarah Färber sacrifice something as part of her protest against Apex Mining?

	1 - No Sacrifice	2	3	4	5	6	7 - High Sacrifice
Evaluate the sacrifice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Demographics

What is your age?

Which gender do you belong to?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other

What is your total household income?

- ☐ 25,000 or less
- ☐ 25,000 – 50,000
- ☐ 50,000 – 75, 000
- ☐ 75, 000 – 100,000
- ☐ 100,000 +

What is your highest level of education?

- ☐ Secondary school / Hauptschulabschluss
- ☐ Secondary school / Realschule (Mittlere Reife)
- ☐ Highschool / Gymnasium (Abitur)
- ☐ Vocational training / Abgeschlossene Berufsausbildung
- ☐ Academic degree / Hochschulabschluss (Bachelor, Master, Diploma)
- ☐ PhD / Promotion

What is your Nationality?

- ☐ German
- ☐ Other

Appendix F: Study 3 Online Supplementary File

Survey Scales and Items

1. Sport Identification – 3 items. Adapted from Trail and James (2001)

Prompt: Please think about your favourite sports team or athlete. If you do not have a favorite team/athlete, please think about the team/athlete you most closely follow. Please indicate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to what extent you agree with the following statements:

- 1) I consider myself to be a “real” fan of the team/athlete
- 2) I would experience a loss if I had to stop being a fan of the team/ athlete
- 3) Being a fan of the team/athlete is very important to me

2. General attitude towards athlete activism – 11 items. Adapted from Sappington et al. (2019)

Prompt: People have different beliefs and feelings about athletes who speak out publicly on political or social issues. Below is a list of items reflecting your own beliefs and feelings. Please answer each item as honestly as possible. There are no right or wrong answers. (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree)

- 1) When athletes speak out on political or social issues, it makes me upset.
- 2) When athletes speak out on political or social issues, it makes me angry.
- 3) It bothers me when athletes speak out on political or social issues.
- 4) It disgusts me when athletes speak out on political or social issues.
- 5) I get annoyed when athletes speak out on political or social issues.
- 6) I don't think athletes have a duty to speak out publicly on political or social issues.
- 7) I think that it's not part of an athlete's job to speak out publicly on political or social issues.
- 8) I don't think it is important for athletes to speak out publicly on political or social issues.
- 9) I don't think that athletes have the necessary expertise to speak out on political or social issues.
- 10) I don't think that athletes are informed enough to speak out publicly on political or social issues.
- 11) I don't think that athletes are intelligent enough to speak out on political or social issues.

3. Manipulation check - 1 Item

- 1) In the social media post you just read, did the tennis player Sarah Färber say they would give something up or make a financial sacrifice? (Yes/No)

4. Social issue position - 1 Item. Adapted from Ketron et al., (2022)

 Prompt: Please indicate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to what extent you agree with the following statement:

 1) The athlete Sarah Färber took a position on climate change that agreed with my own

5. Attention Check

 1) Please select 'Strongly Disagree' to indicate that you are paying attention

6. Support for the Method of Activism - 1 item. Adapted from Müller et al., (2023)

 Please indicate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to what extent you agree with the following statement:

 1) "I would support the form of activism described in the scenario"

7. Attitude Towards the Athlete - 3 items. Adapted from Park et al., (2020)

 Prompt: Overall, my attitude to the athlete Sarah Färber is: (7-point semantic scale)

 1) Unfavorable-favorable
 2) Bad-good
 3) Positive-negative (Reversed)

8. Role model – 5 items. Adapted from Mitsis & Leckie (2016)

 Please indicate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to what extent you agree with the following statements about Sarah Färber:

 1) This athlete provides a good model for me to follow.
 2) This athlete leads by example.
 3) This athlete sets a positive example for others to follow.
 4) This athlete exhibits the kind of work ethic and behaviour I try to imitate.
 5) This athlete acts as a role model for me.

9. Athlete Authenticity – 9 items. Adapted from Liu & Lee (2024)

Please indicate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to what extent you agree with the following statements about Sarah Färber:

- 1) The athlete is authentic.
- 2) The athletes' words and behaviours reflect their true self.
- 3) The athlete always stands by what they believe in.
- 4) The athlete lives in accordance with their values and beliefs.
- 5) The athlete cares more about being themselves, than being popular.
- 6) The athlete expresses their true feelings and emotions in posts.
- 7) The athlete is pretending to be what they are not. (Reversed)
- 8) The athlete usually says what others (e.g., sponsors) tell them to say. (Reversed)
- 9) Others (e.g., sponsors) influence the athletes' behaviours greatly. (Reversed)

10. Brand perception – 5 items. Adapted from Scharrel Dunn & Nisbett (2023)

Prompt: The athlete Sarah Färber has an endorsement deal with several well-known companies. If those companies maintain their relationship with this athlete how likely are you to: (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree)

- 1) Buy more from these companies.
- 2) Follow these companies on social media.
- 3) Tell others to support these brands.
- 4) Learn more about these companies and their product offerings.
- 5) Support these companies.

11. Sacrifice measurement - 1 Item

- 1) Based on the scenario, to what extent did Sarah Färber sacrifice something as part of her protest against Apex Mining? (1 = no sacrifice, 7 = high sacrifice)