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**The Societal Influence of the NBA**

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ENGL 128: Writing & Research - Literature & Culture

Dr. Jackie Hendricks

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## Introduction

With the restart of the NBA season in Orlando, there are messages of social justice everywhere that you look on the court, like on the players' warm up shirts, on the jumbotron screens behind the players' benches, and even on the floor itself, where "Black Lives Matter" is displayed in huge letters across midcourt. The players also have the opportunity to have a message displayed on the back of their jerseys that have some significance to each individual player. Some of these messages include "Black Lives Matter," "Equality," "How Many More," "Vote," and "Say Their Names."

Given that other major sports are also playing again now, it is interesting to see how much effort the NBA is putting into spreading these messages compared to the other sports leagues. The MLB and NHL players have been kneeling during the national anthem before games and have displayed some social justice messages on warm up shirts and in their respective arenas, but the NBA still seems to be more active in the fight for social justice.

Along with doing the things that the MLB and NHL have been doing, the NBA has been especially active in the media by talking about social injustice whenever they can. Oftentimes, the players and coaches will address the issues in this country during midgame and postgame interviews amidst the basketball related questions from the reporters. It is evident that the players and coaches want to keep the conversation going regarding social injustice while they are in the NBA Bubble in Orlando. They do not want their basketball games to distract from the issues at hand, but rather, they want to use the attention that they are getting to help bring some necessary change to this country. With the effort that they are putting in, I wondered how effective the NBA could be at spreading their messages about social injustice.

I argue that the increased popularity of the NBA, due to the distribution of their product, online engagement, global outreach, and their choice to allow players to use their platforms, has allowed them to be at the head of many conversations about issues in this country, specifically regarding social injustice. I am making this argument because the NBA has often been a topic of discussion in the news about things other than basketball. Based on recent events, the NBA has made greater efforts compared to other major sports leagues to spread awareness about social injustice issues and push for change in this country. I believe that their efforts have been more effective as well because of the platform that the organization has and the impact that the players have on society.

Several factors have impacted the influence that the NBA has on society, which I will discuss in this paper. The NBA has been able to increase its viewership around the world by creating more avenues for people to watch games with online streaming. The NBA has also taken advantage of social media, helping increase the number of people who follow the league and improving player relationships and engagement with fans. The global outreach of the NBA, like with NBA Cares, has helped improve the public image of the league. Giving back to the community allows the players to set an example for their fans and become role models for the younger generation. Allowing players to use their platforms also improves fan relations since they get to see more of the players' personalities. Fans are able to learn more about the players, which allows them to feel more connected to them. The players are also able to voice their opinions about issues they see in the world and can help spread awareness to those who look up to them. Being connected to their fans allows the players to spread their messages more easily since they have that support from their fanbase and messages are more likely to be reciprocated.

Others might say that addressing social issues will decrease the ratings and viewership of the NBA because some people have responded negatively to athlete activism. For example, when athletes kneel during the national anthem, people have misinterpreted that as a sign of disrespect to the flag, military, and country as a whole (Smith, 2019), but people do not realize that the purpose of kneeling is to make a stand against police brutality and racial injustice. Nonetheless, because of the things the league has done to grow its fanbase, I think that addressing these issues will only help inspire others to raise awareness and help fight for what is right in this country.

### **Background of my Approach**

Looking at the background behind the NBA's activism, many of the players embody the theories and messages of authors like Michelle Alexander and Ibram X. Kendi into their own messages, which is a theoretical approach I am taking in my paper. In Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, she talks about how racism is systemic in our country by explaining the different systems of racist control that have changed throughout history, from slavery, to the Jim Crow laws, and to the War on Drugs. Many people are unaware that racism has adapted over time and has never really ended in America. A lot of people also do not know that the War on Drugs was a political tactic created by the Nixon administration that led to the mass incarceration of many African Americans, further suppressing them as a people in this country.

This book by Alexander helps to raise awareness about the issue of systemic racism in this country, which is something that many NBA players want to be able to do. Almost all of the NBA players have taken a part in spreading awareness with their messages in one way or another, but some have specifically focused on this issue by portraying “Education Reform” on their jerseys. Changing the way schools teach will allow our children to have a better understanding of what really happened in our country’s history. Having more informed citizens will help America see the change that it so desperately needs.

Ibram X. Kendi also addresses the issue of systemic racism, specifically with academia. He talks about how racism has been bred into many academic disciplines early in America’s history, which has prevented people from seeing antiracist ideas (Kendi, 2018). We’ve grown accustomed to racism in this country to the point where it has almost become normalized. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi encourages us to reflect on ourselves to see how we might be supporting racist ideas without consciously doing so. He teaches us how we can change our thinking to be more antiracist and shows us why education reform is necessary.

Understanding the importance of education, LeBron James and the LeBron James Family Foundation founded the I Promise School in 2018 to support at-risk children in James’s hometown of Akron, Ohio. He wanted to be able to provide struggling families with the opportunity to get an education. This includes both children and their parents. Along with providing the children with a curriculum that allows them to “succeed inside the classroom, at home, and in their community” (White, 2020), resources for parents are also available that include GED programs, child care, and a food pantry. James envisioned “a more holistic and equitable form of education” (White 2020) for his school since he also experienced struggles

with education and homelessness. He and his foundation understand that “when a child’s basic needs are met at home, they can remain entirely focused on their education” (White, 2020).

In Ibram X. Kendi’s book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, he discusses that it is racist to think that there are significant biological differences between races, like thinking that black people are better at physical activity. This ideology has fueled the thinking that black people are only good at sports. Many NBA players and black athletes in general have been categorized as athletes and nothing else. When they try to talk about or do something unrelated to the sport they play, they are often criticized.

One incident of this is when Laura Ingraham, a Fox News host, said that “it’s unwise to seek political advice from someone who gets paid \$100 million a year to bounce a ball” (Sullivan, 2018) and told LeBron James and Kevin Durant to “shut up and dribble” (Sullivan, 2018) when they were discussing politics in a podcast. If two white NBA players made these comments instead of James and Durant, I do not think that we would have seen the same response from Ingraham. But because black athletes made these comments, they receive these types of responses since people think that they can only play sports.

This is a reason why some players, like Mike Conley, have chosen to wear “I Am A Man” on the back of their jerseys. Black people not only want to be seen as equals to their white counterparts, but they just want to be seen as people. Regardless of socioeconomic status and education level, Americans have the right to their political opinions and the right to express them. It does not matter if they get paid to “bounce a ball” (Sullivan, 2018), athletes should not be told to not express their rights as Americans.

The NBA's increase in popularity is a reason why the messages of these theorists can be spread through society. It is important though to understand the factors that have allowed the NBA to increase its popularity over the past several years, which I will define now, but explain in greater detail in the next section of my article. One of the factors is the distribution of their product, which is basically allowing more ways for people to be able to watch games all over the world, most notably with streaming platforms. Another factor is online engagement, which is the use of social media to be able to connect to fans. The NBA has official accounts on every major social media platform, like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and they have used it to their advantage to increase popularity through fan interactions.

Another factor is the promotion of a culture of free speech with the platforms that NBA players have. In the past, NBA players who spoke out and expressed their political opinions and beliefs were often fined, or even suspended from playing. The NBA had a clear stance that it was not a place for possible controversial political statements since it so heavily relied on corporate sponsorships and television ratings for revenue. But now, all players are welcome to stand up for what they believe in and express that on and off the court. As LeBron James said in an interview with Bruce Schoenfeld (2017), "Times have changed" and "athletes feel like there's more than just sports." Many athletes feel like they now have an obligation to stand up for what is right. With this, especially with the NBA restart in Orlando, we have seen almost every player and coach express their support for the Black Lives Matter Movement, with social justice messages on their jerseys and kneeling during the national anthem.



### **How the NBA has Increased its Popularity**

Looking at the factors that have helped increase the popularity of the NBA helps us understand the magnitude of the NBA in addressing these social injustice issues. Analyzing one of these factors here, the NBA has been successful in its distribution of games domestically and internationally, which has allowed them to increase the number of ways that people can watch games. In addition to cable television, people can now watch games through online streaming platforms, like NBA League Pass and YouTube TV. While many games are only broadcasted to certain regions on cable television, NBA League Pass allows people to watch every NBA game regardless of their location. This has allowed NBA games to reach more people not only throughout the United States, but internationally as well. According to Michael Singer's (2017) article in USA Today, the NBA's viewership has gone up 32% between ESPN, TNT, and NBA TV during the 2017-2018 season.

Along with online streaming, the NBA has been able to increase its international viewership in other ways. As of 2012, 20% of the NBA's players were from countries other than the United States, according to a Forbes article by Alicia Jessop (2012). Because of this, more international countries have taken part in media coverage of the NBA, especially during the Finals. In 2012, ninety international television, radio, and online outlets aired the NBA Finals and 12.6% of all official media coverage was from international sources, which included 227 journalists from 34 different countries (Jessop, 2012).

In addition, the league has reached out to several countries by hosting games overseas in different cities, like London, Mexico City, and Tokyo. The NBA also celebrates many cultural events like Black History Month and Chinese New Year. This allows the league to have a

stronger connection with its international viewers, which is especially important with China since the NBA is the most popular sports league in the country.

It also helps the NBA that basketball has such a deep history in the country of China, so many Chinese people are already familiar with the game, according to an article in China Business Review by Rui Zhong (2018). Other sports like football, hockey, and baseball do not have that same history in the country, which is one of the reasons why the NFL, NHL, and MLB are not as popular in China (Zhong, 2018). Also, within Chinese culture and entertainment, fandom develops organically around athletes not just because of their talent but because of the characteristics of their style and the stories behind their careers, which the Chinese fans can connect to (Zhong, 2018). Being able to connect with the athletes is a very important aspect in increasing the popularity of the athletes and the sport as a whole, and social media is a very easy and effective way for fans to be able to interact with their favorite athletes.

A majority of the NBA's success on social media can actually be attributed to fans outside of the United States. According to Jessop's Forbes article (2012), of the 226 million followers that the official NBA, team, and player pages have gained on Twitter and Facebook, approximately 50% of them are international. In addition, the NBA is the most popular sports league across all social media platforms in China. Being able to reach out to the international fans through social media has given the NBA an avenue to more effectively engage with these people.

There was a study published in the Journal of Relationship Marketing in 2016 that examined the relationship between fans' engagement with their favorite NBA teams' Facebook pages and the relationship quality with their favorite team. The results showed that fans who

engaged more with their favorite team's Facebook page had greater relationship quality with their team (Achen, 2016). Although it has not been tested, it is likely that similar results would be seen with other social media platforms, like Instagram and Twitter. Since social media engagement helps fans feel closer to their favorite athletes, it makes sense why the NBA and its players have so many followers across all of the main social media platforms.

From a business perspective, utilizing social media and technology is one of the best ways to brand something in the world today (Smith, 2009). This is because people are constantly looking at their phones throughout the day, so using technology to brand is an effective way to keep people looking at a product. The use of social media also has an influence on broadening the audience of sports because social media makes it easier to follow sports. Based on a study published in the *Web Journal of Mass Communication Research*, social media has an increasingly important role in sports consumption and has helped increase the sports consumption of women and older people (Schultz & Sheffer, 2011).

Looking solely at the numbers, NBA players are some of the most popular athletes on Twitter and Instagram. In comparison to the NFL, which is the most viewed sports league in America, the number of social media followers that NBA stars have greatly exceeds the number of followers that NFL stars have. The most followed NBA player, LeBron James, has 70.2 million followers on Instagram and 46.9 million on Twitter. The most followed NFL player on Instagram, Odell Beckham Jr., has 14.1 million followers and the most followed on Twitter, Russell Wilson, has 5.5 million followers. In addition, the official Instagram account for the NBA has 49.6 million followers while the official Instagram account for the NFL only has 18.2 million followers.

The discrepancy in social media popularity largely has to do with the difference in restrictions that the NFL has on video sharing compared to the NBA. According to Adam Kilgore's article (2017) in *The Washington Post*, the NBA's policies are unrestrictive on sharing video online which allows the fans to see the players' personalities more. However, the NFL does not allow the use of video highlights and they focus more on marketing the teams and the league than the players (Kilgore, 2017). Because of this, the fans do not know as much about NFL players as they do about NBA players, which gives them less of a connection to the players. This connection is especially important for the younger fans because it keeps them more invested in the sport and the players.

To cater to the younger fans, the NBA has put more of an emphasis on social media. Allowing their players to express themselves more on social media has led them to gain a much younger fan base. The NBA has been the only sports league to take advantage of where the young fans are, on social media. According to Kilgore's article (2017), the NBA measured that their social media followers have the youngest average age of any U.S. sports league. Marketing to younger fans on social media allows the NBA to gain popularity because the average age of their fans stays constant, while the average age of fans for other major sports leagues increases (Lombardo & Broughton, 2017). As one generation of fans ages, there is a new, younger generation of fans who comes along.

Since there are many young fans of the NBA, it is important for the NBA to have a good public image so that the organization and its players can set an example for these fans. One of the ways that the NBA has been able to create a more positive image of themselves is with their global outreach. One example of the league's outreach is with NBA Cares, which is the league's

social responsibility group that builds on the NBA's mission of addressing important social issues in the United States and around the world. According to nba.com, NBA Cares has provided more than 4.1 million hours of hands-on service and created more than 1,000 places where families can live, learn, and play in communities around the world. They also work with other community service programs like Boys & Girls Clubs of America, UNICEF, and the Make-a-Wish Foundation. Taking part in these selfless acts not only allows the players to be seen as role models for younger fans, but also leaves a lasting impression on the people that they help.

Promoting a culture of free speech in the NBA has also improved the public image of the league. In the NBA, players are encouraged to stand up for what they believe in. For example, many players, including LeBron James and Kyrie Irving, wore "I Can't Breathe" pregame t-shirts after the Eric Garner tragedy in 2014. Also, before the 2016 ESPYS awards show, LeBron James, Chris Paul, Carmelo Anthony, and Dwayne Wade gave a speech to talk about the social injustices in our country and to tell all athletes to use their resources to bring the change they want to see in America.

In addition to the players, the NBA organization itself has promoted social activism when it moved the 2017 All-Star events from Charlotte to New Orleans because of an anti-LGBT law in North Carolina. Other sports leagues like the NFL have not been as tolerant of their players expressing their opinions of social issues, like when Colin Kaepernick kneeled during the national anthem, which resulted in some backlash. Because the NBA promotes this type of environment, the players in the league become different kinds of role models for the fans. They

are not just sports heroes. They also set examples for the youth to stand up for what they believe in.

### **Analyzing the NBA's Activism**

NBA players, coaches, and owners have been participating in acts of social activism that have made waves in our society thanks to the platform that the association has. There have been several instances where NBA players have stood up against social injustice before any of their other athlete counterparts have, and were praised by their peers for doing so. One of these instances, which I mentioned earlier in the article, was when LeBron James, Chris Paul, Carmelo Anthony, and Dwayne Wade spoke at the 2016 ESPYS. Carmelo Anthony, in particular, talked about how these social injustice issues have persisted in our country by saying, "The system is broken. The problems are not new. The violence is not new and the racial divide is definitely not new" (McCarthy, 2016).

From a theoretical viewpoint, the words by Anthony echo the ideas of Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Anthony alludes to the fact that systemic racism is present in America and something needs to be done to change that. In her book, Alexander discusses this very issue. She explains how "the U.S. criminal justice system acts as a contemporary system of racial control" (Alexander, 2010) because black men were targeted in the War on Drugs. And once these men were labeled as felons, all of the old forms of discrimination were legal again, affecting them for the rest of their lives. Racial caste has not ended in America, it has only been redesigned (Alexander, 2010).

The messages given by Anthony and his fellow NBA players on the night of the ESPYS were received very well. Their speech received a lot of attention from the media and they were applauded for speaking up by many people, including Bill Clinton, who said he was inspired by their words, and by former Attorney General, Eric Holder, who called them “Athletes who care and who are unafraid” (McCarthy, 2016). That is what it takes to bring change: to be unafraid. Because these players are not afraid and the NBA has helped them feel unafraid, they are able to stand up for what is right and be the leaders that others can follow.

Another example of NBA social activism is when players across the country attended protests in their communities in response to the killing of George Floyd in May of 2020. Some of the biggest names in the game, like Stephen Curry, Damian Lillard, and Giannis Antetokounmpo, were all out in the streets protesting against police brutality and racial injustice and leading their communities. Again, this act of activism was received well and gained a lot of traction both in the news and on social media.

Another act of activism by the NBA is when they boycotted their games in light of the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin in August 2020. The boycott started with the Milwaukee Bucks and Orlando Magic game on August 26, 2020 and continued with the rest of the NBA games scheduled for the next couple of days. Other professional sports leagues, like the MLB, MLS, and WNBA, followed in the NBA’s footsteps and boycotted some of their games as well. In addition, tennis player Naomi Osaka joined the boycott by not playing in her scheduled semifinals match in the Western & Southern Open. This was a historic moment in sports. Not only was it the first time two NBA teams refused to play, but it was the first time

multiple sports leagues boycotted or postponed their games and matches in one day. And it was all led by the NBA.

The reactions of the public to the NBA boycott were generally very positive. Many celebrities commended the players on social media for standing up for what is right, including Barack Obama. Sports analysts also expressed their support for the NBA players, like when Shannon Sharpe talked about how proud he was of them on *Skip and Shannon: UNDISPUTED*. The general public also had many positive reactions to the NBA boycott. Milwaukee Bucks fans who were prepared to watch the boycotted game outside of the Bucks arena, Fiserv Forum, expressed their support and how proud they were. One fan said, “They made a statement that obviously I wouldn’t have made, because I’m here ready to watch the game. And so for them to make that statement shows the power of it” (Hampl, 2020).

With the attendance of the protests and the boycott of the NBA, the players are demanding change in America. This idea of change is alluded to in both Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* and Kendi’s *How to Be an Antiracist*. Through the explanation of the history of the racist infrastructure of America by Alexander, we can see that systemic racism is a present issue and it needs to be fixed. The theme of change is central throughout Kendi’s book as he is talking about how to be an antiracist. He discusses racial issues related to biology, behavior, and the connection between capitalism and race, to name a few, that need to be changed in order to become closer to eliminating systemic racism (Kendi, 2019).



## **Moving Forward**

Although sports are primarily seen as a source of entertainment, they can teach us a lot about racial issues pertaining to our society. Because sports are so popular, they have a significant impact on what is talked about in this country. In thinking about how we can end systemic racism, it is important to consider the role sports could have in education reform. Integrating sports as examples in schools' curriculum could help make it easier to discuss social issues in the classroom (Tannebaum & Cridland-Hughes, 2017). For example in football, the quarterback, a predominantly white position, is typically seen as the leader of the team and through popular media, "has become synonymous with 'getting the girl' and living a privileged lifestyle" (Journell, 2017). The lack of African American quarterbacks in the NFL could be attributed to racist stereotypes and systemic discrimination (Journell, 2017).

Another example could be when former Los Angeles Clippers owner, Donald Sterling, made racist comments about the Clippers' players in 2014 when he said, "I support [the Clippers' players] and give them food, and clothes, and cars, and houses... Who gives it to them? Does someone else give it to them?... Do I make the game, or do they make the game?" (Journell, 2017). Based on his comments, Sterling seems to belittle the NBA players as he is basically saying that he is responsible for the success and wealth of the players. These are only a couple of examples that show how sports portray the systemic issues in our society. Educators can use these examples and many others to teach people about social issues, so that we may have a more informed community to bring about change in America.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the goal of my paper is to argue that the increased popularity of the NBA, due to the distribution of their product, their global outreach, online engagement, and their choice to allow players to use their platforms, has allowed them to be at the head of many conversations about issues in this country, especially regarding social injustice. I think the topic of social injustice that I am addressing in my paper is very important to discuss, especially because of what has happened in recent events. We thought racial disparities would have gone away when the 13th Amendment was passed in 1865. We thought these issues would have gone away after the Civil Rights Movement. And I think almost all of us would have expected these issues to be gone in 2020. But sadly, they are not. Time and time again, we are reminded that we have made no progress with racial discrimination as a country with the many deaths of innocent African Americans we see on the news. It is finally time that we see change in this country and I think a major step towards that is spreading awareness about the issue. With the platforms that the NBA and its players have, they have the ability to spread awareness unlike any organization in the world. And with the passion that they have regarding these issues, it is easy to be impacted by the messages they are spreading, which is why I think we might finally see the change we need to see in this country.

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