

# ESSAY

## Professional Athletes and Gen Z: A Commentary on Social Media Influence During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The proliferation of television in the mid-20th century expanded the exposure of professional athletes, and now in the early 21st century, social media has seen the impact of athletes explode. The intimacy of social media has enabled professional athletes to interact with their fan communities, changing the perception that they are untouchable elites and creating a dynamic where fans, particularly those in Generation Z (Gen Z), now relate to athletes more like peers than idols. The unique communicative opportunities afforded by social media, combined with declining trust in traditional institutional sources such as the media and government, have created potential for athletes

to have even greater behavioral influence on their followers. As a result, the influence of professional athletes on society has become undeniable. Drawing on media consumption and credibility trends, normative social influence theory, and parasocial relationships, this commentary considers how the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the potential influence of professional athletes on the behaviors of Gen Z. Given the stakes, this commentary raises the importance of examining the impact and implications of athlete influencers and concludes with recommendations for future research.

Keywords: influencer, trust, professional athletes, social media, Generation Z, COVID-19, Coronavirus.

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**I**n a time of declining trust in the media, Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019), spend more time on social media and are less engaged with traditional news sources than any other generation (Ahmed, 2019; Perrin & Kumar, 2019). So where is this group of Americans getting their information? Whose opinions do they value and trust? And in a critical situation like the COVID-19 pandemic, where swift behavioral change is required by an entire planet, whose lead do

they follow? One answer may be professional athletes. Many professional athletes (e.g., Serena Williams, LeBron James, Cristiano Ronaldo, Megan Rapinoe, and Steph Curry) have a robust social media presence with millions of followers worldwide, making their names and stories ubiquitous. For many “Gen Z” youth, these professional athletes are purveyors of news regarding COVID-19 and other socially relevant issues. Through social media, athletes are able to gain users’ trust and thus increase their potential for behavioral influence (Evans, 2019). In this commentary, we will explore the conditions facilitating this potential, question what impact it is having during the COVID-19 pandemic, and discuss the implications.

### **Media & News Consumption Habits of Young Americans**

The approximately 60 million members of Gen Z in the U.S. were the first to be raised in a fully digital world. As a result, their media habits differ greatly from older generations like Generation X and Baby Boomers. In a recent study, more than half of the young American participants report spending upwards of nine hours per day on their smartphones (Ahmed, 2019). Despite the majority seeing themselves as “addicted to the internet” and “spending too much time on social media,” usage is not slowing down and about half say they are online “almost constantly” (Ahmed, 2019, p. 120; Perrin & Kumar, 2019, para. 4). Further, Gen Z report that they use social media to follow celebrities and to “get inspired” more than any other generation (Adobe, 2019, p. 10). Since the outbreak of COVID-19, their already significant consumption of digital media has increased even more. This increase in consumption is exemplified by Instagram Live viewership, which reportedly increased 70% from February to March 2020 (Burch, 2020).

Despite their voracious appetite for media, or perhaps because of it, this generation is often overwhelmed by the amount of news and has difficulty determining what is credible and important (Head et al., 2018). Most of Gen Z’s media consumption is not through traditional outlets, and most say they only seek out news that they see as directly affecting them, like weather (Head et al., 2018). Many in this age group report that they typically get most of their information from peers, while only eight percent of Americans aged 18-29 (including those slightly older than Gen Z) note they often get news from national networks (Matsa, 2018). These concurrent trends--decrease in traditional news

consumption and increase in social media usage--raise the question of how Gen Z's media consumption habits are influencing their information sources, beliefs, and behaviors.

### **A Matter of (Dis)Trust & Behavioral Impact**

Distrust of the media is so widespread that worldwide almost one third of people actively avoid the news (Newman et al., 2019). When looking at the U.S. population, more Americans distrust the media than trust it, and the media remains the least trusted among all institutions including the government and businesses (Edelman, 2019). Beyond the distrust of media outlets, the individuals reporting the news, including journalists and politicians, rank among the least trusted professions in the U.S. Younger generations are not dissimilar to the general population with their general lack of trust in traditional media sources. Only 40% of Gen Z say they trust the news media "some" or "a lot" (Morning Consult, 2019; Skinner & Clemence, 2019). The degradation of trust in the media may be one reason that Gen Z and Millennials are looking for influencers that they can trust and will provide good advice (Cassandra, 2020). It also may contribute to the 50% of Gen Z who note that they would trust the recommendation of a social media influencer (Donovan, 2020).

Additionally, there is emerging evidence that social media content from peers and influencers does in fact impact behavior. For example, research has shown that young adults who were exposed to, and engaged with, alcohol-related social media altered their drinking behaviors (Boyle et al., 2016; Curtis et al., 2018). Further, a research study conducted by Nielsen (2015), found evidence suggesting that Gen Z trusts individuals more than brands and their advertising when making purchase decisions. In the same study, a third of young consumers reported purchasing a product recommended by a social influencer post. Martin and Bush (2000), also suggested that vicarious role models, like athletes, can influence the lifestyle and consumption patterns of teens, who would be categorized as Gen Z.

### **The Intimate Celebrity-Follower Relationship: Normative Social Influence**

Although the relationship between a celebrity influencer and their follower may not seem akin to one of personal trust, the intimacy that social media affords may make the

follower feel that the celebrity is, in fact, someone they know (Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013). In particular, when celebrities practice self-disclosure, or revealing personal or professional sentiments that are perceived as authentic, it increases the followers' sense of being connected to the celebrity (Kim & Song, 2016). This increase leads to a more satisfying parasocial relationship because the follower feels they have a sense of (imagined) intimacy, feel personally known by the celebrity, and consider themselves part of the celebrity's circle (Kim & Song, 2016; Stever & Lawson, 2013). In a study of how social media affects the effectiveness of endorsers, researchers found that "social media interactions led to stronger parasocial relationships" which in turn "led to higher levels of source trustworthiness" (Chung & Cho, 2017).

According to the theory of normative social influence (Bastiaensens et al., 2016), individuals will behave in a manner that conforms with the behavior of those they observe, particularly "in situations in which the person belongs to the group and cares about the evaluations of the other group members" (Schultz, Tabanico, & Rendon, 2008, p. 386). If the followers feel they are part of the athlete's "circle" and sense more of a trusted peer relationship, they will be encouraged to conform to the injunctive behavioral norms (what *should* be done) espoused by the athlete in their social media posts. Following this logic, by practicing self-disclosure and sharing personal content on their social media accounts, professional athletes have incredible potential to influence behavior of their followers.

### **The Powerful Platform of Professional Athletes**

Professional athletes are among the most-followed individuals on social media. Of the top ten most followed Instagram accounts in the world, four are professional athletes. In fact, Portuguese football (soccer) player Cristiano Ronaldo is the most followed individual Instagrammer with over 200 million followers. Every time he posts, over five million users engage with his content (HypeAuditor, 2020). With such expansive reach, athletes like Ronaldo have the potential for significant influence on the 18-24 year old demographic that make up 75% of Instagram users (Tran, 2020). Further, according to YP Pulse (2018), athletes are the celebrity group most admired by both Gen Z and Millennials. The uniqueness of the social media context further compounds the potential influence of the athlete, as athletes have the opportunity to showcase both their "sport"

persona and their “personal” persona. Social media has allowed these previously untouchable, yet idolized, athletes to directly connect with fans/followers all over the world, by responding to comments, liking posts, and direct messaging users. As a result, consumers see not only a “god-like” figure that they aspire to be, but also someone with whom they could relate and trust, building that parasocial relationship. The authenticity of this parasocial relationship is something that Gen Z continues to seek in those they follow.

With such reach and influence, it is no surprise that marketers and brands have sought to leverage relationships with professional athletes in order to drive purchase behavior from their followers. Bush et al. (2004) found that influencers are not only important in helping spread positive word-of-mouth about a product or brand, but also for enhancing brand loyalty. Further, many celebrity athletes leverage their platform to address social issues. Serena Williams (12.5 million followers on Instagram), for example, has used her digital presence to speak on issues of racial injustice and gender inequality. When asked about athletes and their role as influencers, Williams said, “I think having that opportunity and that platform that we have, to be able to say things that we feel and speak up for social issues or things that aren’t right, or things that are right, good things and bad things, I think is really important” (Harwitt, 2017, para. 5). She is not alone; LeBron James (67.7 million followers), Colin Kaepernick (3.8 million followers), and Megan Rapinoe (2.2 million followers) have all coupled their brand affiliations and large social media followings with their social beliefs in order to seek change within society.

### **Athletes Using Their Platform During COVID-19**

The role of athletes as influencers became particularly noteworthy during the COVID-19 pandemic. News that athletes such as Rudy Gobert and Kevin Durant were diagnosed with Coronavirus early on in the crisis made headlines across the globe. Rudy Gobert was considered patient zero in the NBA because he was the first player to test positive for the virus. After his recovery, Gobert expressed remorse, publicly through social media, for not taking the virus more seriously and urged his fans to follow guidelines set by governments and health-related organizations. On his Instagram page (500,000 followers) on March 12, 2020, he posted:

I have gone through so many emotions since learning of my diagnosis...mostly fear, anxiety, and embarrassment.... I was careless and make no excuse. I hope my story serves as a warning and causes everyone to take this seriously. I will do whatever I can to support using my experience as way [sic] to educate others and prevent the spread of this virus.

His post generated nearly 25,000 comments from his followers. Some of his followers responded by expressing words of support such as:

- “Thank you for providing this great statement early on to try to help others and take responsibility for yourself”
- “You are my new favorite player thanks for supporting me”
- “Get well so that the season can continue.”

In the weeks that followed, Gobert encouraged healthy habits and donations to help food-insecure youth, stating again on Instagram in early May 2020, “let’s all keep having a positive impact during these challenging times.”

On March 26, 2020, Golden State Warriors point guard Stephen Curry hosted an Instagram Live event with Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, to ask questions about COVID-19. After LeBron James, Curry is the NBA player with the most social media followers (over 30 million). Nearly 50,000 people watched the live event (Sprunt, 2020). During the live event, Curry said that he wanted to provide the public with accurate medical advice, adding that information is power and saying, “I think we all can take some of the information we’re going to hear and pass it to our inner circles” (Sprunt, 2020, para. 3). The following are quotes from social media users:

- “This is what using your platform for good looks like. Over 50k are tuned in, it’s happening right now. Curry giving Dr. Fauci a platform without politics is powerful.”
- “Steph Curry talking to Dr. Fauci on instagram live tomorrow is brilliant because it reaches a different audience and connects them with factual, scientific information from an actual expert. I feel overjoyed and amused and grateful this is happening!”
- “Great to see medical experts finding creative ways to engage audiences, especially young people!”

In a move somewhat unprecedented for an athlete, Curry also provides significant public health information, resources, and information about COVID-19 through his website [www.sc30.com/covid19](http://www.sc30.com/covid19).

Wrestler-turned-actor Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson focused on the importance of following health and hygiene guidelines during the pandemic on his Instagram account which has 191 million followers. He also addressed mental health aspects, salient because it was reported that Americans’ levels of emotional distress during COVID-19 could lead to a national mental health crisis (Kam, 2020). Similar to Curry, Johnson hosted an Instagram Live Q&A session with California Governor Gavin Newsom on April 10, 2020, during which Johnson addressed his struggles with mental health and how the worldwide lockdown made the struggles more challenging. Thousands of followers also joined this Live Q&A event with a lot of them reacting positively:

- “That’s my Governor, so happy to be living in a state where the leadership has stepped up, taken this virus seriously and took measure well ahead of other states.”
- “Appreciate your genuine concern for all people and keeping us informed..Wishing Safety and love to your family!!!”
- “I LOVE the Rock and Governor Newsom!!! Praying for California's quick recovery and for us to walk in God's love and ways always!!”

Cavaliers player Kevin Love also used his platform as an athlete-influencer, donating \$100,000 to Cavaliers staff that were left without jobs due to the suspension of the NBA season. And like Johnson, he brought light to mental health issues. Love’s own struggles were made public in 2017 when he suffered a panic attack during a game. On March 12, 2020, he addressed his social media followers on Twitter and Instagram (3.2 million on each platform) by saying:

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. And the fear and anxiety resulting from the recent outbreak of COVID-19 can be extremely overwhelming...Pandemics are not just a medical phenomenon...It’s important to know that those with a mental illness may be vulnerable to the effects of widespread panic and threat. Be kind to one another. Be understanding of their

fears, regardless if you don't feel the same. Be safe and make informed decisions during this time.

Several other athletes used social media to let the public know what they were doing to help during the pandemic. For example, Anthony Rizzo from the Cubs donated hundreds of meals to doctors and nurses. Drew Brees donated \$5 million to help the people affected in the state of Louisiana. Joel Embiid from the 76ers donated half a million dollars for COVID-19 medical relief. Karl-Anthony Towns announced on social media his \$100,000 donation to Mayo Clinic's COVID-19 medical response.

Some athletes also partnered with government entities in an effort to spread information. In New York, for example, Governor Andrew Cuomo and his team developed a social media campaign to promote the importance of social distancing, called #istayhome. Former New York Yankees player Alex Rodriguez and his celebrity fiancée Jennifer Lopez were the faces of the campaign. Together A-Rod and J-Lo posted several videos on social media using the hashtag #istayhome to remind people of the importance of social distancing, exposing their combined 124 million followers to the campaign.

The multiple examples cited above show how, through social media, athletes have broadened their content beyond sports into health, social, and political issues. Professional athletes have long been role models for the youth, for their drive and discipline, as well as their success and lifestyle, but now they may play a very different role in society. This quote from the director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) captures this shift: “Who would have thought 2020 would bring an #NIH social media collab w/3-time NBA champ @StephenCurry30?...Big thanks to Curry for helping amplify #coronavirus safety measures & more”.

### **Implications and Future Research**

The impact of athletes on society has been studied extensively (e.g., Delaney, 2009; Macri, 2012). But recognizing that Gen Z spends more time online and on social media than any generation before them, and that professional athletes are among the most-followed content creators, we must question how their impact has evolved. Having a large number of followers does not necessarily translate to influence or behavioral change effectiveness (Chung & Cho, 2017), but their vast platform can not be denied.



In this commentary, we primarily focused on examples of athletes supporting governmental efforts and spreading news about the pandemic that were aligned with medical guidelines. However, there were also athletes sharing their views on the pandemic that can be considered misinformed and controversial. For example, boxing champion Terence Crawford stated during a podcast that he believed that the pandemic was a media-driven conspiracy so he continued training as usual and told his family to ignore lockdown guidelines (Cancian, 2020). Ex-NFL quarterback Matt Leinart created a Twitter controversy when he compared COVID-19 to cancer (Lincoln, 2020). Statements like the ones made by Crawford and Leinart can contribute to misinformation and confusion among their social media followers.

The life-or-death consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the need for greater understanding of professional athletes as social media influencers, and encourage us to ask: What specific impact are athletes' posts having on Gen Z beliefs and behaviors? Since Gen Z trusts traditional news sources less than previous generations, are athletes among those filling the void? Some specific, suggested areas for future research include:

- What factors influence perceptions of trust in social media?
- How are Gen Z's beliefs and behaviors changed by consuming athletes' social media content?
- Are there significant differences in perceptions of athletes as influencers based on race, gender, or sport?

## **Conclusion**

At the time of the writing of this commentary in the summer of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic is by no means behind us. We are also in the throes of Black Lives Matter protests, and are about to experience a noteworthy presidential election. Looking to 2021 and beyond, we can surely anticipate other critical health and societal issues, with equally critically high stakes. Social media usage also shows no sign of slowing down, nor do the follower numbers of professional athletes. It is incumbent on us as researchers to question how the behaviors of social media users are impacted by content, particularly for emerging

adults like Gen Z. As this generation enters the workforce and becomes more active in society, it is imperative to better understand the influence of professional athletes on Gen Z.

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## Online Connections

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