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# Guest editorial: Diversity, equity and inclusivity in sport marketing research

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On May 25th, 2020, the day George Floyd was murdered, the world experienced a racial awakening and the sports world responded in an unprecedented fashion with athletes and organizations standing together in solidarity to show support for humanity under the banner of social justice. In a similar fashion, we as sport academicians have an opportunity to highlight voices that has been historically left out of sport marketing research. The voices of underrepresented groups such as women, LGBTQ+, individuals with disabilities and people from racial and ethnic minority groups are mostly absent in sport management literature and are often silent or silenced in the academy.

When we specifically examined the body of research in sport marketing, there is a dearth of research investigating diversity and inclusion, and sport marketing research by and large has failed to include the perspective of underrepresented minority groups in the extant literature. It is certainly not due to the lack of significant contributions of these groups to the sport industry. As suggested by [Brown \(2020\)](#), black Americans are the most highly identified, engaged and passionate fan base, and much more research is needed to gain an understanding of their motivations and consumption behaviors. Women, LGBTQ+ and individuals with disabilities also are often absent from study populations and limited research to date has focused on intersectional identities within sport marketing. Our research must continue to advance the body of knowledge as well as serve the communities and industry from which our research is derived. To this end, the objective of this *International Journal of Sport Marketing and Sponsorship* special issue was to bring together scholarship that seeks to advance our collective knowledge on diversity and inclusion in sport marketing. We acknowledge that diversity may include a myriad of characteristics that distinguish individuals and groups of people.

## Ongoing deficiencies in sport marketing research

Before we provide insight into the articles and areas covered in this special issue, there are several topics we wanted to cover that highlight where there are still significant issues related to sport marketing research and inclusivity.

### *(Lack of) diverse research subject groups, diverse research teams and diverse research contexts*

With technology advancements over time, sport has become increasingly international and multinational, incorporating active (athletes) and passive (spectators) individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures ([Szymanski et al., 2020](#)). Through this expanding internationalization, sport brands and properties have incorporated cultural marketing and branding practices in marketing plans and activities. Cultural marketing utilizes an ethnic group's distinct cultural references, such as culture, language, religion, etc. to communicate to a targeted demographic ([Jamal, 2003](#)). Yet, sport corporations' marketing campaigns have often failed in their marketing efforts, receiving scrutiny for superficial incorporation of cultural factors ([Horne, 2017](#)). The failure of such campaigns reflects the hegemonic Americanized culture, perpetuating a lack of cultural awareness and competency, among



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many North American sport marketers (Andrews, 2018). As Delia *et al.* (2022) note, when researchers focus on

any one gender, race, social class, sport setting, or culture to the exclusion of others, they develop a partial knowledge of human behavior. Or, as Rad *et al.* (2018) commented, scientists' reliance on homogeneous samples and use of data in unreflective ways creates barriers in understanding human psychology, in knowing how context and culture influence outcomes, and in developing good theory.

Most scholarly work in sport marketing remains grounded in theories proposed, developed and validated using samples that come predominately from the North American market and consumers and are produced by research teams dominated by White North American scholars (Yoshida *et al.*, 2015). As noted previously by scholars (Henrich *et al.*, 2010), the body of research in sport marketing has predominantly utilized western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic samples, which omit important contexts and cultures. In addition, theoretical development has often been developed on samples from college campuses across the USA with little attention to gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation of these samples. Widely used sport marketing constructs such as team identification, self-brand connection and fan loyalty, are not inclusive of non-Western sport and cultural traditions (Armstrong, 2008) and have largely been built on Western sample populations. The constraints posed by homogeneous samples, lack of diverse contexts and the potential impact of cultural differences on sport consumer behavior, are frequently only discussed in the limitations section of journal articles and not incorporated into research design.

To ensure that sport marketing research is more inclusive, scholars must acknowledge, respect and embrace intersectionality, cultural differences and nuances that are present across different groups (Wang and Ya-Yun Tang, 2018). While sport management scholars have incorporated intersectional, cross cultural and non-Western approaches in other areas of scholarship such as governance (Henne and Pape, 2018), leadership (Chen and Mason, 2018) and sport for development (Darnell and Hayhurst, 2013), sport marketing researchers has devoted limited attention to research focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. Therefore, the purpose of this special issue was to solicit research that would incorporate cross/multi-cultural, multi context and intersectional research and serve to move sport marketing research to a more inclusive mode.

### **Moving DEI research forward in sport marketing**

In this special issue we feature articles by authors whose contributions help to fill gaps in sport marketing scholarship. Additionally, these articles identify important future areas for scholars to focus on to continue to build the body of research on diversity, equity and inclusion in sport marketing. We will provide some highlights of each of the articles in this issue and how they contribute to specific areas of DEI research, specifically in the areas of LGBTQ+, individuals with disability and historically marginalized groups.

### **LGBTQ + voices in sport marketing research**

As societies around the world have gradually become more accepting of LGBTQ + individuals, sport organizations have started to acknowledge this marginalized group and have begun to create ways to connect with, and market to, this fan base. In fact, the LGBTQ + market is a lucrative one that sport organizations cannot afford to ignore anymore. As noted by Melton and MacCharles (2021) "the size, spending power, and loyalty of the LGBTQ market should appeal to savvy sport managers . . . the buying power of this growing market is projected to be over 1 USD trillion in 2020" (p. 422). Despite the size and buying power of this market, little sport marketing research has been dedicated to understanding LGBTQ + consumers. In this edition, Melton *et al.*

(2023) adds to the nascent literature through their article *LGBTQ Inclusive Fan Codes of Conduct in US Athletic Department: A Multilevel Analysis*. In this work the authors investigate the prevalence and antecedents of inclusive fan codes of conduct in 350 US athletic departments. The results of this work illustrate that institutions that are research intensive and have strong gender equity are more likely to possess a code of conduct. As the authors note, institutions where research is valued and gender equity is the norm, it is possible that fans and spectators have expectations that inclusive codes of conduct include LGBTQ + populations. The authors also provide practical insights for sport marketers from their research and provide researchers with future areas of investigation to help fill the gaps in sport marketing scholarship.

It is not only fan bases that are diversifying in sport, but the athletes themselves are steadily coming out and self-identifying as part of the LGBTQ + community. As society has become more accepting, athletes are increasingly sharing their LGBTQ + identities – and for the most part sport organizations have become more welcoming for such individuals (Melton and MacCharles, 2021). In their article *Inclusivity in Sports: Fan Attitudes and Behaviors towards Nonbinary Athletes* Elmadag *et al.* (2023) explore the differences in fan attitudes and behavioral intentions towards nonbinary athletes in both women's and men's sports. The authors conducted a literature search determining that their work is the first empirical study to employ experimental design to examine the differences in fans' attitudes towards nonbinary athletes in both women's and men's sports at the same time. Utilizing the context of basketball, the study findings revealed that among sports fans, there was no perceived performance difference linked to athletes' nonbinary status (as measured by athletic ability, future performance, sportsmanship, talent and quickness). Sport fans did exhibit lower support, (as measured by sport engagement, intention to buy team merchandise and team fanship) when the athlete was perceived as nonbinary, particularly in the context of women's basketball.

### Disability inclusion

In their look at the state of sport consumer behavior research, Delia *et al.* (2022), after applying search terms such as “fan” and “spectator” in three mainstream sport management journals from 1989 to 2020, found 535 articles for inclusion in their review. When further examining these articles, the authors found only one article that focused on parasport. The study by

Cottingham *et al.* (2014) was conducted around the collegiate wheelchair basketball national championship and aimed to assess motives for consuming disability sport. Through their work, the authors developed the Motivation Scale for Disability Sport Consumption, which included traditional sport motives as well as some unique to the setting (e.g. inspiration, supercrip image). Delia *et al.* (2022) noted that the authors in this article did not disclose information about research participants' ability status. In fact, in their sample, Delia *et al.* found only two articles that disclosed information about participant ability status in their samples. One article (García *et al.*, 2017) was focused on disabled supporters of a football clubs, while the other article (Ramchandani *et al.*, 2015) noted that the majority of their participants did not have a disability in their study on the impact of sport event attendance on sport participation.

In their article, *Promote the “Wow”: (Mis)representation, Perception and Reception of Media Promotion on Wheelchair Rugby*, Hu *et al.* also discuss the dearth of research on marketing and parasport. The authors note, that while the marketing and promotion of parasport has received increasing attention in the literature, there has been little attention paid to athletes' perspectives in these processes. In their work, the authors seek to add to this nascent literature on athletes' perspectives on marketing of parasport, by exploring the views of wheelchair rugby athletes on how media currently promotes their sport and how media should promote their sport. Not surprisingly, the athletes noted the gap in coverage for their sport and besides asking for increased coverage, the athletes requested that this coverage

also switch to a focus on their athleticism. As reflected in the article title, the athletes suggested marketing the “wow” factor of wheelchair rugby as the aggressive nature of the sport and its athletes can be its bestselling feature. In their conclusions and suggestions for future research, the authors identify research that is still needed to move the body of literature forward to provide a well-rounded understanding in parasport marketing.

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### Marginalized groups

In their recent article, [Singer et al. \(2022\)](#) reviewed the limited existing research in sport management that dealt with race, ethnicity and diversity and the results illustrated that very few studies focused on matters related to the lived experiences of black people; and in the articles that tangentially included black people, the authors found that black people are often represented as simply a demographic in research studies. Therefore, while scholars have recently turned their attention to studying racialized groups in sport, the body of research is nascent at best. In terms of sport marketing research, it is even more limited.

In their work entitled *Diversity Matters: Highlighting the Differences in Sport Consumption Motives of Marginalized College Students*, [Fridley et al. \(2023\)](#) address the missing demographics of fans with underrepresented identities by exploring the differences in motivation for sport consumption within a diverse sample of college students. The research designed compared a dominant group (White and non-LGBTQ+) to an underrepresented group (non-White race and/or LGBTQ+) in terms of motives for sport consumption. The results indicated that the dominant group scored significantly higher in four of the eight sport consumption motives however, the comparison of individual underrepresented groups (Asian, black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, LGBTQ+, intersectional marginalized identities) revealed significant differences for all eight consumption motives between at least two underrepresented groups. Of importance, the LGBTQ+ group showed significantly lower mean scores on all eight subscales than all three marginalized groups examined. The authors examine the nuances of the results, emphasizing the ability of sport to enhance social connection, community and connectedness to address the stated motivations of underrepresented groups.

Beyond the external focus of marketing activities in a sport organization, there are also the internal issues surrounding who is responsible for these marketing activities. Most entry level jobs in sport organizations revolve around revenue generation, predominantly ticket sales. In their article, *A “toxic culture”: the experiences of underrepresented ticket sales employees across professional sport* [Sattler et al. \(2023\)](#) examined the experiences of current and former ticket sales employees from underrepresented groups. Sport organizations proprot to want to improve on their hiring practices and expand the diversity of their employees ([Wells et al., 2019](#)) and the authors note this is particularly a concern in the high turnover positions like ticket sales where women and non-white men are underrepresented. The results of the study showed significant negative experiences for ticket salespeople from underrepresented groups. These experiences differed by groups with women experiencing misogyny and gender sidelining and non-White respondents experiencing higher rates of racism, inaccurate assumptions about their skills and abilities and feelings of exclusion. The authors provide detailed findings and suggestions for improving the workplace experience for underrepresented groups, noting that a clear understanding of organizational vision regarding diversity and inclusion is needed for managers to embrace any diversity initiatives.

In some contexts, a more homogenous sample can be appropriate to investigate specific phenomena. In their paper, *Which Sway? Athlete Activism, Teammate Allyship and Fan Patriotism*, [Smith et al. \(2023\)](#) investigated sport fan support of athlete allyship utilizing a predominately White identifying sample from the USA. The authors situate the contribution of their work at “the intersection of social identity theory and nationalistic attitudes (not implicit or

explicit racial cues), adopting Smith's (2019) finding and intimating that patriotism, not necessarily race, can provide sound, adequately generalizable explanations of fans' responses to athlete activism" (p. 8–9). The results provided clear evidence that feelings of patriotism are significant for sport fans and identified a new pathway—teammate allies—for advancing the social justice conversation in the sport world. This finding demonstrates the potential impact that white teammate allies can have on not only supporting their teammates but also the impact they can have on propelling the social justice conversation forward.

In the last paper in this special issue, [Beek et al. \(2023\)](#) explored sponsor activations at UEFA EURO 2020 for social justice content in the context of a mega event. In their paper entitled, *Sponsorship and social justice: Brand positioning on diversity and inclusion in sport marketing during the 2020 UEFA European Football Championship*, the authors contest that the global reach of a mega event such as the EURO 2020 Championships has the potential to impact social justice movements if sponsors activate related content during the event. Indeed, the findings indicate that only five of the 12 sponsors changed their sponsorship activations to position their brands related to diversity and inclusion. The authors discuss the difficulty of authenticity for brands who engage in social justice content as part of their event sponsorship activation. There is a fine line between authenticity and sports washing for the social good, a practice whereby a company, country diverts the public's attention from less favorable perceptions through an investment program in sports. Sports washing is becoming increasingly prevalent in recent times with events such as the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and the establishment of the LIV Golf Tour backed by the Public Investment Fund, the sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia.

## Conclusion

The papers in this special issue provide new contributions that advance our collective knowledge on diversity and inclusion in sport marketing. Equity, diversity and inclusion are framed as a valuable goal by sport organizations; however, most organizations fall short of achieving any meaningful progress on this goal and as evidenced by the papers in this special issue, there is much work to be done in sport marketing. As noted by [Knoppers et al. \(2021, p. 619\)](#), “unless scholars, managers, and policymakers recognize, address, and radically change how prevailing discursive practices in sport produce organizational cultures that are supported by gendered, racialized, and heteronormative subtexts”, EDI goals will remain empty promises and diversity focused marketing initiatives will continue to fail. As researchers, we all play a critical role in developing theoretical knowledge in our discipline and as such we leave sport marketing scholars with this call to action: to diversify their research, to be more inclusive in their samples, their research teams and their research contexts, and to acknowledge that differences exist and are vitally important to truly moving our discipline forward equitably.

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