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Fan Perception of Professional Sports as a Social Justice Platform

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## ABSTRACT

Through in-depth interviews with Gen Z (age 18-23) sports fans, this study aims to identify sentiments toward the involvement of professional sports leagues in social justice initiatives. Insights from the diverse participant pool identify how fans view the incorporation of social justice causes into athletic organizations' social responsibility efforts. This study argues that Gen Z fans expect to see professional sports organizations exercise activism that goes beyond social media, to player-driven initiatives and transparency regarding organizations' work, if those groups are to effectively utilize their platform for social justice. The identified key themes, pulled from interviews using content analysis, serve to inform professional sports organizations how their utilization, or lack thereof, of their platform for social justice impacts Gen Z's intent to continue interacting as fans. They also prove relevant for social justice organizers advocating for professional sports leagues to support and amplify their cause. The research contextualizes and updates the long-term discussion of sports as a social justice platform for contemporary times.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sports have long played an integral role in social, economic and cultural change. Now, in 2021, the athletic arena has once again entered the spotlight as a potential stage for society's most pressing issues. Amid a global pandemic and human rights movement, communities all over the world have turned to sports organizations with both hope and frustration. More than ever before, leagues, teams and athletes are under a microscope when it comes to their advocacy for and investment in social issues. As it pertains to social justice initiatives, specifically, the industry is constantly being scrutinized by stakeholders at all levels to evaluate such programs' worth and sincerity.

Sentiments toward utilizing the platform of professional sports for social justice issues are complex for many reasons. This study set out to uncover how students aged 18-23 (Gen Z) in particular feel about the issue. Through qualitative in-depth interviews, this research is a broad inquiry into the expectations of Gen Z sports fans as it pertains to professional sports organizations' commitment to social justice and the tactics they utilize to demonstrate that responsibility.

This study's focus on Gen Z perception is relevant for multiple reasons. Given that Gen Z is a target audience within athletics, professional leagues should be interested in learning how the generation's viewership and purchasing decisions are, or are not, dependent on league involvement in social justice. Unlike previous studies that have largely focused on the history of sports and social justice, this study is essential to understanding modern sentiment towards this

issue, as it evolves in real time. This study also provides insight into what future involvement would be beneficial for sports organizations and attractive to Gen Z fans. This thesis goes beyond historical relevance to declare the modern significance of the relationship between social justice and sports.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

To fully comprehend the modern relationship between social justice and sports, and its relevance to Gen Z fans, it is necessary to first explore each facet of the topic at hand independently. Weaving these three elements together through a study of existing literature on their history, both culturally and academically, provides the context required to understand findings pertaining to the current state of Gen Z perception of professional sports as a social justice platform.

#### Defining Social Justice

Before the relationship between athletics and social justice can truly be understood, we first must identify what is communicated through the term “social justice” and the various contexts in which it can be interpreted. The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) defines social justice as, “justice at the level of a society or state as regards the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities, and privileges.” Through a more people-centered lens, Toporek and Williams (2006) argue that social justice is achieved when, regardless of race, gender, ability status, sexual orientation, physical makeup, or religious creed, all individuals receive a fair distribution of resources.

Due to the fact that certain identity groups experience marginalization in more ways than others, recognizing particularly vulnerable communities is another important element to understanding what constitutes social justice. The following seven categories of underrepresented groups help to outline which identities may cause experiences of



powerlessness, marginalization or mistreatment that constitute a need for social justice. They are race and ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and physical and mental ability (Tatum, 1997). Recognizing these identities, which can also intersect to create a more complex need for equity in the distribution of advantages, provides a clear context to understand when an issue at hand may be identified as a social justice issue.

With these definitions in mind, social justice can be extended to almost all aspects of society, and consequently life, in pursuit of the equitable spread of privilege across individuals belonging to every identity group (Toporek & Williams, 2006). Sports certainly qualify as a relevant context for society that is worthy of exploration in relation to this observation. Gauging perception of social justice in a sports environment is most successful when analyzed in relation to one group's perspective, hence the relevance of Gen Z to this study.

### **Gen Z and Advocacy**

At the forefront of modern social justice is an advocacy-focused age group. Generation Z, more commonly known as Gen Z, is recognized demographically as those born after 1996 (Dimock, 2021). Making up 40% of consumers in the United States and boasting a purchasing power of \$143 billion, they play an undeniably important role in the national economic, social and political landscape (Fromm, 2021). For professional sports organizations, and for purposes of this study, understanding this generation will give insight into how their market potential can be harnessed and their continued support ensured.

It is widely understood that Gen Z, also recognized as digital natives, have not experienced a world without the internet and the immediate gratification provided by

smartphones. They also have little to no first-hand memory of the attacks on September 11, 2001 and consequent war on terror, which was a defining moment of political and cultural focus for older generations (Gomez, Mawhinney, & Betts). Unlike Millennials, who entered adulthood in the midst of the Great Recession, Gen Zers face the economic uncertainty from the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic as they come of age. These general insights into the generation do hold importance, but the most relevant characteristics of Gen Zers to this study are their ethnic and racial diversity, and stance on modern societal issues.

Compared to 61% of Millennials, just 52% of Gen Zers are non-Hispanic white while 25% are Hispanic, 14% are Black, 6% are Asian and 5% identify as other or at least two races (Parker & Igielnik, 2021). Beyond their own racial identities, Gen Zers place value on advocacy for inequities faced by different communities. In 2020, only 22% of Gen Z did not take action related to Black Lives Matter protests, while 12% attended a protest, 41% utilized social media for action and 46% stated that they took steps to learn how they could actively support racial justice (Laughlin, 2020). These figures highlight the need for even non-cause-related organizations to vocalize support for social causes that directly affect this diverse generation and the causes that matter to them. To Gen Z, these issues are personal, but they do not expect to solve them alone. According to research conducted by Deloitte and the Network of Executive Women, “Gen Z no longer forms opinions of a company solely based on the quality of their products/services but now on their ethics, practices and social impact” (Gomez, Mawhinney, & Betts, p. 11). In the same study, 77% of respondents said it was important that their values align with a potential employer. This emphasizes the importance of corporate activism in the future as not just a way to hold on to Gen Z consumers, but also as a key component to recruiting the

future workforce. This demographic has a desire to not only witness social change, but to be included in the decision-making process that creates it.

### **Beyond the Game: Social Justice in the Athletic Arena**

After taking into account Gen Z's inclination for advocacy and inclusion and the aforementioned definitions of social justice, there remains a need to identify a vehicle to exercise young people's desire for social change. This is where sports enter the conversation. One might wonder why or how social justice and sports have become so closely intertwined. According to Lee and Cunningham (2019), "sports have reflected and reinforced various hegemonies of oppression and inequality in our society such as racial, gender, sexual orientation, and social class prejudices." It is because the culture of athletics often mirrors the environment that surrounds it, that sports have become a stage where injustices have been both exposed and consequently destroyed. This platform is far from perfect though, and public opinion on the topic is not uniform.

Research regarding social justice initiatives within sports provides a wide range of perspectives surrounding the impact of such programs. It all comes back to the conflict between intent versus impact, which begs us to analyze whether the inclusion of professional sports organizations in social justice rhetoric and programming amplifies or constricts the causes themselves. Some view sports and special events as a natural fit for advocacy, with an inherent ability to remove divisions across groups, change attitudes and behavior and activate people by encouraging celebration and communication within communities (Brown et al., 2003). From this perspective, athletic organizations can be viewed as a voice to back social justice issues in highly

invested communities. Beyond just sports organizations, the cultural capital and fame of professional athletes make them commanding thought leaders in their own right. Athletes can use this popularity to commit to and vocalize their support for social justice movements, knowing that their words hold weight for fans (Lee & Cunningham, 2019). Given the commercial nature of the sports industry, however; it would be nearly impossible to separate the restrictions and censorship that come with meticulously curated brand images in professional sports from the freedom of speech and opposition often needed to successfully facilitate change in a social justice context. Hayhurst and Szto (2016) argue that no matter how hard they may try, privatized social justice campaigns cannot ever resolve systemic social issues, because the dismantling of those systems is a threat to their very existence. This context is an important element in providing a critical and constructive lens to the advancement of social justice through sport.

In practice, the actual execution of these initiatives varies depending on the broader cultural moment. Given Gen Z's make-up of the market, we can expect to see a shift in the demand for which issues are highlighted by sports organizations as a result of the experiences shaping Gen Z's adulthood. The surge of military appreciation and patriotism in sporting events following the September 11 attacks serves as a prime historical example of this kind of change. Butterworth and Moskal (2009) argue that despite the long history relating athletics and militarism, the war on terror sparked an "an unprecedented overlap between military and sporting discourses." Just as Gen Z fans view this relationship between the armed forces and athletic organizations as second nature, they have also only known a sports world in which social justice protests and initiatives are normal.

It is impossible to separate the preferences and expectations of Gen Z fans without recognizing that the sports they grew up watching have been influenced by Colin Kaepernick

taking a knee, LeBron James founding his *I Promise School* and now, following 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement and killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and Elijah McClain. Together, the expectation for sports organizations to engage with society beyond athletics and the demographic research revealing Gen Z's avidity for activism paint a clear picture of their hopes for professional sports as a platform for social good explored in this study.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **2020: A YEAR FOR ACTION IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS**

There are few backgrounds in history upon which to study the collision of social justice and sports that are more significant than the year 2020. Even beyond athletics, all corporations and institutions have been forced to evaluate their stance on societal issues and how they are communicated to the public. The cultural reset inspired by a summer of activism for human rights, specifically the Black Lives Matter movement, and the public responses from sports organizations have created the perfect environment and awareness to study how Gen Z feels about this relationship as it develops. In order to properly interpret findings from the qualitative data collected as primary research in the study, it is necessary to identify which current events and moments in sports history helped shape the image of social justice and sports at the time this thesis was written.

The year 2020 was certainly not the advent of social justice in sports. Athletics have long held their relevance in politically and culturally significant moments (Cooper et al., 2017). Some of which include Tommie Smith and John Carlos raising their gloved fists for justice on the podium at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, the dedication of LeBron James' *I Promise*

School in Akron, Ohio, and, of course, Colin Kaepernick's choice to kneel during the national anthem (Boren, 2020; Green, 2019; Intravia et al., 2017). Since Kaepernick's gesture in 2016, protesting police brutality and the oppression of Black people in the United States, has become one of the most widely recognized protests in sports (Boren, 2020). His activism has also recently regained popularity with the revitalization of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The human rights initiative commanded national spotlight following the killing of George Floyd, an African American in Minneapolis, Minnesota, who died in police custody on May 25, 2020 ("What to Know," 2021). The episode of police brutality, captured on video and shared widely on social media, sparked outrage and protests across the nation. The fury continued later into the summer, following the killings of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and Elijah McClain, all at the hands of the police and white supremacists ("Breonna Taylor," 2020; Griffith, 2020; Schmelzer, 2021). Despite the coronavirus pandemic, these injustices provoked marches, rallies and protests nationwide. People also took to social media to become involved with the cause via posting informational graphics and resharing thought leaders. Not all tactics were universally well-received, however. One controversial moment that stands out was "#BlackoutTuesday" on Instagram. On June 2, 2020 users posted black squares on their feed all day, with the intention of disrupting the news cycle and bringing attention to racial oppression in the United States. Reviews were mixed, with some supportive of the show of solidarity, while others thought it undermined the power of Black Lives Matter by burying the voices of organizers and activists on one of their largest platforms (Coscarelli, 2020). Regardless of the medium, it was nearly impossible to avoid the cries for equity and justice throughout the rest of the year, and even still today.

While social justice is not limited to racial justice, the Black Lives Matter movement is particularly important to the research in this study. These injustices, protests and organizational responses form the landscape in which Gen Z, and most modern Americans, contextualize the meaning and impact of social justice. Due to the prominence of Black Lives Matter in the media, popular culture and politics, it is understandable that the movement has become almost synonymous with social justice at this point in time. The injustices and institutional inequities identified by the movement have inspired sports leagues, teams and athletes to take action.

Perhaps one of the most drastic steps taken by an athletic organization occurred during the NBA Playoffs. Following the shooting of Jacob Blake in Wisconsin, the Orlando Magic and Milwaukee Bucks opted not to play in their playoff game on August 26, 2020 (Spears, 2020). This caused a chain reaction among other teams, resulting in three days without game play in the league. The WNBA, Major League Baseball, Major League Soccer and individual athletes, including tennis star Naomi Osaka, all followed suit and boycotted games to redirect attention to social justice (Stein, 2020). Basketball resumed only when an agreement was reached for the NBA to shine light on voting and utilize league infrastructure for polling during the presidential election (Spears, 2020). This was not the NBA's only involvement with social justice in their COVID-safe "bubble" this season. Messaging has played a significant role in their approach, including "Black Lives Matter" plastered on the side of the Toronto Raptors' bus to the "bubble" and league-sponsored jerseys that read "Say Her Name," "I Can't Breathe," "Education Reform," and "Vote" (Andrews & Spears, 2020). These minimally disruptive approaches offered avenues for advocacy without interrupting game play or competition. Teams did also kneel for the anthem alongside some coaches and staff, despite an official NBA rule that requires standing for the song. Commissioner Adam Silver made it clear, however, that the rule would not be

enforced under the circumstances (Quinn, 2020). The “bubble” became more than just a safe zone from COVID-19, but also a stage for social justice activism, which other leagues could not easily emulate.

Eyes were on the NFL as athletes in different sports began to silently protest in the same way as Kaepernick. The league was called in to the Black Lives Matter movement most directly when 18 players released a video asking the NFL to publicly condemn racism. Commissioner Roger Goodell did respond with a video admitting the league’s fault in not listening to previous protests regarding Black lives but did not specifically mention Kaepernick (National Football League, 2020). Beyond response to outside calls to action, the league did take actions of their own, including a \$20 million commitment to supporting initiatives and programs that combat systemic racism (Kasabian, 2020). The financial promise came even before the season began, but further commitment could be seen once the season started. Similar to the NBA’s jerseys, NFL players were permitted to honor victims of police brutality or social justice heroes on their helmets using decals, if they wanted to. Additionally, the end zones read “It Takes All of Us” and “End Racism,” the former being the slogan for the season. A non-partisan voting initiative was also launched (Kim, 2020). Beyond these season-long efforts, the NFL continued to support and fund their Inspire Change campaign dedicated to education, economic advancement, community-police relations and criminal justice reform to dismantle systemic racism (“Inspire Change”). The initiative launched in 2018 and most recently awarded 13 grants to social justice organizations in January 2021 (AP, 2021). The league has come a long way from its treatment of Kaepernick in 2016 and 2017, but general sentiment seems to be that the NBA still outshined the NFL in social justice activism this season (Khabbaz, 2021). These two leagues are most



important for the interpretation of the primary findings of the study, though it should be noted that social justice action did occur across sports outside of football and basketball.

Keeping in mind these actions and initiatives in the sports for social justice realm, the timing for a study on Gen Z perception of athletics as a platform for social good was opportune. The primary research completed takes into account the context above as the foundation for opinions uncovered in the qualitative study.

## Chapter 4

### METHODOLOGY

The primary research for this study utilized in-depth interviews to identify key themes among Gen Z-aged participants regarding the modern relationship between professional sports and social justice. To recruit participants, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was utilized. Eligibility criteria required that participants were Penn State undergraduate students between age 18 and 23 with a self-identified interest in professional sports. Recruitment materials were distributed to athletic-focused student organizations and groups at Penn State, including but not limited to, club sports teams and young professional organizations for students pursuing careers in sports. After participants were identified from organizational listservs, snowball sampling was used to recruit the necessary remaining participants to reach the point of saturation in interviews.

Once participants began being identified, one-time, hour-long interviews were conducted with each of the 10 participants via password-secured Zoom or phone calls, depending on the participant's preference. This qualitative approach allowed for a more continuous study of the issue than a survey or any quantitative study could have. Participants were invited to contribute personal experiences and opinions on professional sports leagues and social justice, rather than indicate their agreement or disagreement with a predetermined set of themes. This flexible approach ensured that the research was participant-centered, uncovering personal perspectives that were unknown prior to conducting interviews. In this way, the study highlights the themes of interest for a more representative group of Gen Z, and not just the principal investigator.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed as they were conducted. Content analysis was then employed to interpret the data set of 10 interviews and uncover the findings below.

## Chapter 5

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Below is the general question guide utilized to structure interviews with each participant. The research protocol also allowed for spontaneous follow-ups throughout the interview in appropriate areas introduced by the subject. These follow-up questions have not been included below, given their conversational nature.

#### Question Guide

##### Screening Questions

- Q1: What is your birth month and year?
- Q2: With what gender do you identify?
- Q3: Are you a Penn State undergraduate student?
- Q4: With what generation do you identify?
- Q5: How would you describe your race and/or ethnicity?

##### Section 1 – Qualifying Fan Status

- Q6: Describe your relationship with professional sports.
- Q7: What inspires your interest in professional sports?
- Q8: Do you follow any leagues, teams or athletes more seriously than others?

##### Section 2 – Defining Social Justice

- Q9: How do you define social justice?

Q10: What, generally, makes a social justice initiative successful?

Q11: What, generally, makes a social justice initiative genuine?

### **Section 3 – Connecting Social Justice and Professional Sports**

Q12: Do you believe sports have a role to play in social justice movements? Why or why not?

Q13: Which social justice initiatives put forth by the National Football League, Major League Baseball, National Basketball Association or National Hockey League, if any, are you familiar with?

- a. If you are familiar, how did you learn about this/these initiative(s)?
- b. If not, what might have prevented you from learning about these initiatives?

Q14: What makes a professional sports league's involvement in social justice issues successful?

Q15: What makes a professional sports league's involvement in social justice issues genuine?

### **Section 4 – Understanding Personal Experiences**

Q16: How does your favorite sports league, team or athlete's involvement in social justice make you feel?

Q17: Can you tell me about a time you **stopped** following a team, league or athlete because of their involvement in social justice initiatives?

Q18: Can you tell me about a time you **started** following a team, league or athlete because of their involvement in social justice initiatives?

Q19: Can you tell me about a time a family member or friend **stopped** following a team, league or athlete because of their involvement in social justice initiatives?

Q20: Can you tell me about a time a family member or friend **started** following a team, league or athlete because of their involvement in social justice initiatives?

Q21: What personal experiences have you had that contribute to your opinion on the role of professional sports leagues in social justice movements?

### **Section 5 – Highlighting Sentiments of Gen Z**

Q22: As a young fan, what level of involvement in social justice initiatives from a sports **league** would influence your future status as a fan?

Q22: As a young fan, what level of involvement in social justice initiatives from a sports **team** would influence your future status as a fan?

Q23: As a young fan, what level of involvement in social justice initiatives from a **specific athlete** would influence your future status as a fan?

### **Section 6 – Drawing Conclusions and Identifying Future Hopes**

Q24: In what environments should professional sports leagues contribute to social justice movements? (ex: the internet, social media, in-game events, specific campaigns, donations, etc.)

Q25: Compared to 2020, do you think professional sports leagues will contribute more, less or the same amount to social justice initiatives going forward?

Q26: How would you like to see professional sports leagues contribute to social justice?

Q27: What are professional sports leagues doing right in the fight for social justice?

Q28: What are professional sports leagues doing wrong in the fight for social justice?

Q29: What are the potential benefits of professional sports leagues being involved in social justice movements?

Q30: What are the potential drawbacks of professional sports leagues being involved in social justice movements?

Q31: Do you have anything else to add?

Q32: Do you know anyone else who would be interested/qualified to participate in this study?

## **Chapter 6**

### **FINDINGS**

Three main factors came to the surface as key to the subjects' vision for professional sports as a social justice platform. Three main factors came to the surface as key to the subjects' vision for professional sports as a social justice platform. They are as follows: actions that go beyond statements on social platforms; player-driven initiatives; and, structural changes to make leagues more transparent about the extent and efficacy of their social activism efforts. Interviews with 10 subjects brought these themes to life, supported by examples and personal experiences.

All participants did agree, although to varying extents, that professional sports do have some form of a role to play in social justice initiatives. In the words of one participant regarding social justice initiatives from professional leagues, "The more the better. If I see them speaking out, I will be more inclined to respect them and follow them and support them." While at least a neutral stance was expected by all participants, opinions varied on whether activism in sports was a right or a duty. One participant said, "I don't think people should be required or feel like they should speak out on these things, just because they have the platform," he argued that what mattered instead is that they are given the chance. To another participant, it is "almost a civic duty to speak out and improve the world because [athletes] are put on this pedestal because of their athletic ability, and I think it's like their job to also better society in a bigger way." Despite variation in the degree of involvement expected of sports leagues, teams and athletes, the study was able to identify consistent characteristics and approaches to social justice. Gen Z fans are not

just looking for anything, though. The data outlines their targeted vision for initiatives that they would consider both successful and genuine.

### **Action Beyond Social Media Statements**

The demand for a holistic approach to social justice initiatives was apparent throughout the research process. All participants mentioned social media as an element of their own awareness of initiatives and expectation for future league involvement. None, however, advocated for social media to be the sole vehicle for social justice in sports. As members of the digital native Gen Z, it is not surprising that social media was viewed as more of a given element to a larger campaign, and not an ambitious or ground-breaking approach to social justice activism. Participants suggested monetary donations, community events, in-game programming, advertising and promotions to build a more complete campaign that incorporated action steps in a variety of capacities.

It is also important to note the desire for consistency from subjects. They are a fad and trend averse group, looking for campaigns that will outlast a moment and, instead, sustain a movement. For this reason, it was challenging for subjects to evaluate the modern success of professional leagues in this realm, given that they could not yet tell if efforts were sustained beyond larger moments in popular culture and history, especially the Black Lives Matter movement and coronavirus pandemic, or simply only celebrated for their relevance in the news cycle. Overall, participants outlined multi-faceted approaches to social justice initiatives sustained over long periods of time, across a diverse range of contexts and platforms.



**Table 1. Action Beyond Social Media Statements**

<i>PARTICIPANT</i>	<i>QUOTE</i>
<b>Participant #1</b>	<p>“You're reposting it because it resonated with you, or you want others to become knowledgeable on the issue. I don't think people should just be reposting something because other people are.”</p> <p>“I think even just even like the smallest thing, like just acknowledging it before a game would be a good thing, a good look for them.”</p>
<b>Participant #2</b>	<p>“Overall, the organizations coming out and donating in a philanthropic way, or at least supporting something, I think that would be good too.”</p>
<b>Participant #3</b>	<p>“I would say that's probably the best thing I can kind of articulate in terms of what makes me think, you know, these things are genuine or successful; I think it's just making it more than just a marketing scheme.”</p> <p>“Something that's big for me would be seeing money spent on things, whether it's community programs or things that benefit the community.”</p> <p>“So one thing is if money is going into it and resources are going into it. Another thing is consistency. So that's kind of another thing that ties into seeing it as more than a marketing scheme, is seeing them consistently going after this thing, not just when it's trending.”</p> <p>“Whenever I see players putting money or effort or community involvement into some of these causes, that always, you know, warms my heart a little bit and makes me want to support them even more as well.”</p> <p>“I think launching initiatives beyond even just social media, it could be things where you can funnel money in for support, or, you know, programs that help certain groups. I think that's another huge one.”</p> <p>“Diversifying the Social Justice Initiative on the internet, in the local communities, even you know, in broader communities through monetary help and then displaying that even on game day, those things come to mind. I think all of those are pretty important.”</p> <p>“If any team is just kind of trying to bandwagon a cause and not really do much more than throw it on the internet, and just try to, you know, use it as a only a marketing tactic, I think that's also wrong.”</p>

<b>Participant #4</b>	<p>“I think the overall big message is A, this is not a one and done, and you need to keep being involved here going forward. And then two, yes, money is always good, but it's more than just that. Money doesn't solve problems.”</p> <p>“It needs to be holistic, it needs to be well-rounded. It can't just be, ‘hey we donated a million dollars now we're done.’”</p> <p>“It can't be just be because it's in the news cycle right now, it can't be a one and done. This needs to keep going; 2021, 2022, 2025, 2030, and so on and so forth.”</p> <p>“It needs to be collective and it can't just be that one aspect of it... but going forward, I think that's that big thing that's going to separate and make a bigger difference than just the social media -- the talk. Now, let's walk the talk, let's actually act and do it.”</p>
<b>Participant #5</b>	<p>“From the league’s purpose that I see is just the advertising and stuff like that, and kind of their dedication to, you know, finding ways to fund different resources that can help with social justice issues.”</p>
<b>Participant #6</b>	<p>“I think there needs to be more action than just saying words. I think any step is the right step in the right direction.”</p>
<b>Participant #7</b>	<p>“I guess just taking a very hands-off approach, no matter what sports league it is, would definitely negatively impact my viewership and involvement with a sport.”</p> <p>“I think with social media you tend to reach a lot of the younger generation who tends to support athletes using their platform more, while using on-field events you also get a lot of, I guess more of the traditionalists.”</p>
<b>Participant #8</b>	<p>“I think there's a difference between promote and propel, so promoting it would just be like, you know, the patches, the signage, you know. Propelling it would be like working with social justice initiatives, and donating time or donating resources and stuff like that to help propel change.”</p>

<p><b>Participant #9</b></p>	<p>“It's great to post the black photo for the Black Lives Matter Tuesday or Blackout Tuesday or whatever, but actually then carry that forward and do something that can work to make a difference.”</p> <p>“If they're going to be involved, then like I said before, actually doing something about it...what I mean is something like actual proof of them doing something, as opposed to just following along with the trend and being like ‘oh yeah we stand by this too.’”</p> <p>“If a league made actual steps and action towards bettering a cause, donating money, starting a fund, even just, you know, trying to boost their presence in inner city schools, that sort of thing, not, not just money but you know, these leagues have a lot of money so, that can be very helpful.”</p> <p>“Social media, in my personal opinion, has become so overused and diluted it really doesn't mean anything... you go on Instagram and there's 800,000 stories to look at and so if one of them is the NFL saying, ‘Oh, we support whatever,’ like, okay, that doesn't really make a difference to me.”</p>
<p><b>Participant #10</b></p>	<p>“Someone who posts on their Instagram story, reposting something about Black Lives Matter, means something but it means less than someone who comes up to me and asks me a question or inquires and is genuinely interested in the topic and not just doing it because it's like trendy or what you're supposed to do.”</p> <p>“I want to see consistent and often pursuits at trying to change a problem and not just like this one thing, this isolated incident happened and I'm really behind it.”</p> <p>“I think that social media is like the easiest way to get like a lot of information out quickly, but I think hosting events is probably more important to me. I feel like sometimes donating a bunch of money somewhere is just kind of like sticking a Band-Aid on it.”</p> <p>“So I think that having a consistent message over social media, and then hosting your own event would probably be the easiest ways to do it, the most effective ways.”</p> <p>“I think it's good that we've started the accountability where people put out statements, but I think they're sometimes doing it wrong and that it doesn't really kind of address the issues at hand.”</p>

## **Genuine, Player-Driven Initiatives**

Beyond just the delivery of social justice initiatives, interviews revealed the importance of how they were developed and who was involved in that process. For Gen Z, it was apparent that there was a stronger attachment to programs or campaigns that were initiated by players, rather than by the leagues or teams themselves. When asked to identify specific social justice initiatives set forth by a professional league that they were familiar with, participants gave examples of player action. Colin Kaepernick kneeling for the National Anthem, LeBron James' I Promise School, Naomi Osaka's face masks at the 2020 U.S. Open all came to mind first. Though some mentioned that leagues had added patches to their jerseys or messages on the field and court recognizing racial injustice, no participants were able to formally name social justice initiatives (i.e., NFL's Inspire Change) specifically set forth by a league or a team. This indicates that fans are more interested in the actions of their favorite athletes and role models rather than the opinions of the leagues and teams themselves.

A player empowerment approach was relevant to fans for multiple reasons. Participants expressed that players feel more relatable than franchises do, in turn making the causes they care about seem more compelling and genuine. Additionally, initiatives sparked by players and subsequent support from their respective organizations prove that these groups are putting their players interests first and not just following a trend blindly. This approach is also appealing to fans who prefer that organizations allow for freedom of expression without taking a clear stance of their own. When leagues and teams choose to champion the causes that their players have self-identified as important, their efforts will be better received and remembered by their fanbase.

**Table 2. Genuine, Player-Driven Initiatives**

<i>PARTICIPANT</i>	<i>QUOTE</i>
<b>Participant #1</b>	<p>“[Leagues] should listen to the players that are being affected. How do they feel? How do they think? What do they think should be changed? And it should be very thoughtful and meaningful, not just because everyone else is doing it.”</p>
<b>Participant #2</b>	<p>“I feel like that's like an NFL movement, if you will, and I feel like I follow like the players individually. So I guess that's why I don't like doesn't come to mind right away if that makes sense.</p> <p>“I feel like it's more genuine seeing it come from a person rather than a franchise, but I am glad to see it coming from a franchise and seeing the support from the franchise and from the NFL as a whole. I think that should definitely continue, I just think it is more personable if it comes from a player, because it's like them speaking out as an individual.”</p> <p>“Find a way to make it more personable in terms of like, reaching out to families who have been affected by social injustice, or having players lead the movement as opposed to the franchise itself.”</p>
<b>Participant #3</b>	<p>“I would like to see those organizations have something to say about it and kind of stand up for, not only the fact that their athletes may be a part of this group that is having the issue with the social justice cause, but also just seeing them as people, you know, not just seeing them as football robots that play football and then that's all.”</p>
<b>Participant #5</b>	<p>“I think how we see [leagues] as genuine is when they take the players input, and they take that input, and they kind of use that in their decision making on certain initiatives.”</p> <p>“When you hear the support from the players and what the players want, and the league matches up, I think that's when you can see that it was genuine.”</p> <p>“The more that [players] put themselves out there and create a platform for these initiatives, I think I feel closer to them, more connected with them, past me watching them play a basketball game or a football game or a soccer game or whatever it may be. So, I think it makes me root for them more and more and more, I tend to root for players that their values align with mine.”</p> <p>“I think what [leagues are] doing now is a great springboard for every single player to have that opportunity to go as far as they want with it. So, I would probably say that the leagues would continue to do just about the same, and kind of, you know, leave it up to their players, to their specific teams, to kind of take that next step and continue to do those types of things.”</p>

<b>Participant #6</b>	<p>“[Players] have a platform just as much as their owner has a platform, just as much as their team has a platform, their league has a platform, and just because they're athletes doesn't mean that they shouldn't be allowed to use that platform.”</p> <p>“I would say, having a hands-on role is very critical. You know, it's one thing to simply say athletes can use their platform, their name, their image their likeness to promote equality and social justice, but it's another thing for leagues to basically be like, supporting them right behind them and using or working with players to create missions within the sport and within teams.”</p>
<b>Participant #7</b>	<p>“[I want to see leagues] showing support for players as they use their causes and promote their causes, not just leaving them out to dry on their own.</p> <p>“At the end of the day, if you lose your players, you lose your team, you lose your league, and I think players, you know, they have more say and they have more impact in the league now than ever before.”</p>
<b>Participant #9</b>	<p>“I would say right now the main thing would just be like letting athletes individually express their opinions without the fear of retaliation.”</p>
<b>Participant #10</b>	<p>“If athletes can say confidently, ‘I'm standing with my organization,’ then that would probably make me actually get behind the organization as a whole.”</p> <p>“[Leagues should be] making sure that you're speaking for the vast majority of your athletes, and that you can have prominent people who are involved in social justice movements be behind you, because nothing is worse than contradicting someone who is very known for their stances on things and then as a whole organization you're contradicting them.”</p>

### League Transparency and Structural Change

In addition to social justice initiatives themselves, participants in the study emphasized the importance of transparency and accountability within the leagues and teams behind the campaigns and programs. For fans, this was an aspect of what made an initiative genuine – knowing that the sports organization was practicing what they preached in their messaging and did not just use social justice initiatives as a marketing tactic, but rather a guiding principle.

Subjects expected leagues to embody the values of equal opportunity and justice that they promote externally within their own internal culture.

Upon discussing the topic, participants expressed that they were unaware of how they could be informed on whether or not sports organizations were putting into practice these values, due to the opaque nature of the administrative side of sports. Unlike athletes, coaches and owners, the coordinators and facilitators of sports organizations are largely hidden from the public. This creates a barrier between employees of said organizations and the communities they are attempting to serve, often preventing initiatives from seeming genuine when fans are unaware of the origin of a project or the qualification and motivation of the person running it. As a result, multiple subjects expressed a desire to gain a more behind-the-scenes look at sports organizations for a variety of reasons. An understanding of hiring practices and diversity, an increased accountability for practicing social justice within the institution and a clarification of the purpose, planning and people behind social justice initiatives stood out as practices for leagues to adopt in pursuit of improved fan reception of such initiatives. Fans also wanted to see leagues and teams holding themselves accountable by promptly and openly addressing necessary personnel changes and disciplinary actions pertaining to discriminatory practices or language from members of the organization at all levels. With professional sports organizations addressing each of these concerns, participants felt they would see the initiatives put forth by the organization as more relatable and respectable.

**Table 3. League Transparency and Structural Change**

<i>PARTICIPANT</i>	<i>QUOTE</i>
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<b>Participant #1</b>	<p>“I feel like giving equal opportunity to any group, either as race or gender, equal opportunities for them [in hiring], I guess that could show to the fans that they are taking initiative to make things better.”</p> <p>“As a sports fan, if [leagues] acknowledge the issue and make a change in their operations of their organization I would have respect for them, for that team.”</p> <p>“If they didn't acknowledge these issues, didn't make a change in their organization, like as a whole, even just staffing, not just the team, like the organization, if they didn't make that change or acknowledge that there was an issue, then I'd probably have to question that, like a 'who am I supporting?' kind of thing.”</p>
<b>Participant #4</b>	<p>“It also comes into hiring within the front office, the greater organization, on making sure that we're having a more diverse background within there, being able to talk with them and hear their voices as well, and just get new and different viewpoints within the organization.”</p> <p>“The biggest thing at the league level is you need to make sure that you're preaching and doing what the teams are doing, but also you're going to need to hold people accountable. That's going to be the biggest factor in keeping my fandom. If you say one thing, but then the people in your league are totally disregarding it and you're not holding them accountable and allowing them to do these things, then yeah my fandom for that league is going to slip.”</p>
<b>Participant #5</b>	<p>“I think it's hard to listen to them just because there's a lot of people working for a league like the NBA or the NFL. And there's just like, so many, employees or board members or whoever, but the only person that we hear from is the face of the organization. So, Adam Silver for the NB or Roger Goodell for the NFL. So, I think it's hard to see them as genuine actions because they kind of seem like puppets.”</p> <p>“[Leagues] can control what they can control, who works on their executive board and who works with their marketing team and that kind of stuff. Any way they can help internally.”</p>
<b>Participant #9</b>	<p>“If athletic organizations and leagues and everything didn't have such harsh penalties then, you know, more change could definitely be made.”</p>



<b>Participant #10</b>	<p>“Is it just the marketing team that's in charge of deciding what you do for [social justice] or is there an actual sector for it? I don't know any of that and so I think that's why it's more meaningful when it comes from an athlete, because it goes back to the genuine part.”</p> <p>“Putting a face to the name of the person who is, or the group of people, who are kind of pioneering the movement for these organizations would be important to me because it would make an organization more relatable.”</p> <p>“So, if there was a way to kind of get them out there and then make the relationship between the consumer in terms of entertainment and the provider, not the athletes but like above that, a little closer I think would be beneficial.”</p> <p>“I think that there's an accountability of people, and then in these large organizations, that has grown recently and so I think we're in the beginning stages of kind of getting that accountability up and having people say things about what is going on in the world.”</p> <p>“Then again, I think that there just isn't a relationship between the people that are actually behind those statements, and the people who are receiving them.”</p>
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Together, supplements to social media activism, player empowerment and organizational accountability and transparency will provide a clear framework for professional sports organizations searching for continued support from Gen Z fans. Though the sample for the study was small, these three themes were consistently communicated by participants, regardless of their personal backgrounds. These keys should be at the forefront of decision-making processes for organizations interested in creating initiatives that garner respect from their Gen Z fanbase and are perceived as genuine.

## Chapter 7

### DISCUSSION

Beyond just the three key themes that surfaced in interviews, there are additional considerations for professional sports organizations to take into account when analyzing the research and developing future plans for social justice participation.

#### **Post-COVID Importance of Community Programming**

Most participants noted the importance of personal interactions in local communities as a key to how genuine they perceived a sports organization's involvement in social justice. It is important to note that interviews were conducted in March 2021, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the absence of in-person programming at the time of the research, it is not surprising that there is a desire for more presence in local communities. Professional leagues, teams and athletes should keep this in mind as programming and events of all kinds phase back to in-person opportunities. It will be critical for organizations to not only prioritize the implementation of in-person athletic events, but also the development of community programs and social initiatives that bring teams and athletes directly into local communities. This expectation for intimate interaction with key players in professional sports following the pandemic should be considered when determining which strategies will be employed in a social justice initiative. Following more than a year of virtual programming, fans will see in-person events and local programs as a concerted effort to be involved in a more meaningful way with the community beyond social media and in-game campaigns which have been implemented even throughout the pandemic. When it is safe to do so for the health and safety of all stakeholders,

organizations should place high priority on creating a strong in-person presence with fans and locals in their respective market.

### **The Potential Drawbacks of Social Justice Advocacy**

This research focuses primarily on the potential benefits of professional sports organizations' involvement in social justice because the data collected pointed almost entirely in that direction. While participants were generous in sharing the numerous ways in which they felt this type of advocacy could benefit the athletic organizations, the cause at hand and society as a whole, they struggled to identify more ways than one in which an organization would have a negative experience when participating in social justice initiatives. This sole concern was losing fans who thought differently than the participants themselves.

When asked the question, "What are the potential drawbacks of professional sports leagues being involved in social justice movements?" all ten participants responded with the potential loss of angered fans, specifically those of older demographics. This should be no secret to professional sports organizations, given that those opposed to this kind of involvement have been outspoken about their desire to keep athletics strictly about the game. Participants were not surprised or disturbed by this potential loss of viewership either. A common theme when answering this question centered around the idea that it is impossible to make everyone happy. In the words of one participant, "I think there's always going to be people that disagree with you, but I think the franchise needs to decide for themselves what they want to stand for." Another added, "It's kind of hard to avoid some sort of backlash regardless of what you do." Overall, the message from young fans was that it is almost guaranteed that any involvement or lack of

involvement in social justice will leave people on either side of the debate unhappy. With that in mind, the priority should not be trying to please everyone, but rather, choosing to stand with the side that aligns more with respect.

The lack of in-depth analysis of this particular question in the findings section is not an attempted erasure of the consequences of involvement in social justice, but instead a direct reflection of the data collected in interviews. Given that the potential loss of viewership was the only true noted drawback by participants, it was not identified as a key concern for professional sports organizations, especially keeping in mind that they will likely upset some population of fans regardless of what their stance is.

### **Understanding the Research Sample**

Due to the nature of snowball sampling, it should be noted that some of the participants were of a similar profile. Three out of ten subjects were marketing majors. There was still diversity of thought and background, though not as much as the researcher would have hoped. Seven of them identified as white, one was Hispanic and two described themselves half African American, half white. Subjects did include five Penn State Athletics interns, two varsity athletes, two members of the Association of Women in Sports Media, two members of the Sports Business Club and a practice player for the Women's Basketball Team. Half of them identified as female and half of them identified as male. Participants ranged from their first, second and third to fourth year at Penn State. All were over 18. It should be recognized that the participants in the study are likely to have a higher level of understanding of the sports industry given their personal investment in different aspects of the field as athletes and aspiring professionals.

Additionally, the voluntary nature of the study should be considered when interpreting findings. Due to the fact that participation in the study was not mandatory and students had to self-identify their interest and qualifications to be a part of the study, the findings may be overly representative of Gen Z fans who care more strongly about the issue. Those who were indifferent on the matter were unlikely to participate. It is worth noting, however, that while no subjects interviewed were indifferent to the topic, there were also no participants strongly opposed to professional sports organizations' involvement in social justice. Everyone who volunteered to participate was interviewed. This leads the researcher to believe that there was not a significant amount of bias due to the voluntary nature of the study, since those heavily opposed had the same opportunity to participate but did not. Still, this should be considered when attempting to generalize the results of the study, which is already difficult due to the small sample size of participants. Though the results may not be fully generalizable, the study still speaks strongly to the feelings and ideas of ten members of Gen Z.

### **The Relevance of Research Timing**

Data collection for the study occurred within a three-week period. Though a quick turnaround, it is a significant asset to the research, given that the events discussed in the interview were developing in real time as interviews were conducted. A condensed and delayed time for data collection allowed for more recent and relevant research. This ensured a more current evaluation of social justice movements and the responses from professional organizations and athletes.

Even after interviews were completed, the enduring impacts of social justice have solidified the validity of this approach. On April 2, 2021, just days before the publication of this thesis, Major League Baseball announced that it would move its 2021 All-Star Game out of Atlanta (Gonzalez, 2021). The call was made in solidarity with civil rights groups concerned about a new Georgia law that could potentially intensify voter suppression, especially among people of color. Commissioner Rob Manfred stated that the decision was the “best way to demonstrate our values as a sport” (Lacques, 2021). This is just one example of many that illustrates the already-persisting influence of social justice on the sports environment, making a current events approach the most effective way to conduct this research.

## Chapter 8

### CONCLUSION

This study took an in-depth look at ten members of Gen Z's perception of professional sports as a vehicle for social justice. Through content analysis, the key factors by which Gen Z fans will allow involvement in social justice to influence their fandom for professional sports organizations were determined. The data gathered demonstrated that to keep the loyalty of young fans and remain relevant in society beyond the field and court, professional sports organizations must advocate beyond social media, empower player-driven initiatives and increase transparency. These actions capitalize on the incredible potential that young fans see in sport as more than just entertainment, but a critical aspect of modern culture and society. Following the year 2020 and its heavy focus on social justice, especially the Black Lives Matter movement, this type of activism is becoming an element of sports that Gen Z views as a natural extension of the game.

As politician, activist and philanthropist Nelson Mandela said, "Sports can create hope, where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination" (LauerusTV, 2012). Gen Z fans believe this, and they expect their favorite leagues, teams and athletes to believe it too. As both professional sports organizations and social justice organizers look to develop, they should use this research as a guiding tool for fostering a culture in professional sports that creates hope, because that, in fact, is what young fans are hoping for.

## Appendix A

### IMPLIED CONSENT DOCUMENT

#### CONSENT FOR RESEARCH

The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Fan Perception of Professional Sports as a Social Justice Platform  
Principal Investigator: Nina Trach

Address: 325 S Garner St, Apt. 201, State College, PA 16801

Telephone Number: 732-853-5049

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Colleen Connolly-Ahern

Faculty Advisor Telephone Number: 814-865-3073

Subject's Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**We are asking you to be in a research study. This form gives you information about the research.**

**Whether or not you take part is up to you. You can choose not to take part. You can agree to take part and later change your mind. Your decision will not be held against you and there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.**

**Please ask questions about anything that is unclear to you and take your time to make your choice.**

#### DETAILED INFORMATION

**The following is more detailed information about this study in addition to the information provided above.**

##### **1. Why is this research study being done?**

This research is being done to find out how members of Gen Z view the relationship between professional sports and social justice. The research also fulfills requirements for a senior thesis in the Schreyer Honors college. Approximately 12 Penn State students will take part in this research study.

##### **2. What will happen in this research study?**

- If you consent, you will participate in an hour-long interview. You will be asked to answer a series of questions regarding your experience with and feelings about professional sports and social justice. You will be asked about your general awareness of these topics and your personal feelings toward different initiatives put forth by professional sports teams and leagues.
- All interviews will take place using your Penn State Zoom account or a phone call. You will make this decision based on your personal preference.



- You will be permitted to skip any questions which you do not feel comfortable answering.
- You will interact with the principal investigator, Nina Trach, throughout the recruitment and interview process.
- You may be contacted for further research.

**3. What are the risks and possible discomforts from being in this research study?**

There is a risk of loss of confidentiality if your information or your identity is obtained by someone other than the investigators, but precautions will be taken to prevent this from happening. The confidentiality of your electronic data created by you or by the researchers will be maintained as required by applicable law and to the degree permitted by the technology used. Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Other rare risks may include feeling vulnerable as a result of sharing personal feelings, opinions and experiences. This risk is not expected.

**4. What are the possible benefits from being in this research study?**

**4a. What are the possible benefits to you?**

You will not directly benefit from this research study.

**4b. What are the possible benefits to others?**

The study may benefit society as an indicator for how the professional sports industry should continue or modify their contributions to social justice movements. It will also provide social justice organizers and organizations with data to justify and solicit support from professional sports leagues, teams and athletes. This study will support continued improvement of social justice causes across the country by explaining the relationship between Gen Z fans and professional sports.

**5. What other options are available instead of being in this research study?**

You may decide not to participate in this research study.

**6. How long will you take part in this research study?**

If you agree to take part, it will take you about one hour to complete this research study. You will be asked to visit the virtual research site only once.

**7. How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you decide to take part in this research study?**

**7a. What happens to the information collected for the research?**

Efforts will be made to limit the use and sharing of your personal research information to people who have a need to review this information. Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private. However, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

- Your research records will be labeled with a number assigned to the order of your interview, the date of your interview and your birth month/year. They will be kept safe in a dual-factor protected Penn State Microsoft OneDrive folder. Only the principal investigator will have access to your data.

In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

We will do our best to keep your participation in this research study confidential to the extent permitted by law. However, it is possible that other people may find out about your participation in this research study. For example, the following people/groups may check and copy records about this research.

- The Office for Human Research Protections in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services
- The Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) and Penn State's Office for Research Protections.

**7b. What will happen to my research information and/or samples after the study is completed?**

Your information or samples that are collected as part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research studies, even if all of your identifiers are removed.

**8. Will you be paid or receive credit to take part in this research study?**

Upon completion of the study, all participants will be entered into a drawing for one \$25 Visa gift card as compensation for your participation in the study. The winner will be contacted via email.

**9. What are your rights if you take part in this research study?**

Taking part in this research study is voluntary.

- You do not have to be in this research.
- If you choose to be in this research, you have the right to stop at any time.
- If you decide not to be in this research or if you decide to stop at a later date, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.

**10. If you have questions or concerns about this research study, whom should you call?**

Please call the head of the research study (principal investigator), Nina Trach at 732-853-5049 if you:

- Have questions, complaints or concerns about the research, including questions about compensation.
- Believe you may have been harmed by being in the research study.

You may also contact the Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775, IRB-ORP@psu.edu if you:

- Have questions regarding your rights as a person in a research study.
- Have concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to offer input or to talk to someone else about any concerns related to the research.

You may visit the Office for Research Protections' website at

<https://www.research.psu.edu/irb/participants> for:

- Information about your rights when you are in a research study;
- Information about the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a group of people who review the research to protect your rights; and
- Links to the federal regulations and information about the protection of people who are in research studies. If you do not have access to the internet, copies of these federal regulations are available by calling the ORP at (814) 865-1775.

## **INFORMED CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH**

### **Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent**

Your signature below means that you have explained the research to the subject or subject representative, provided the subject or subject representative an opportunity to discuss and consider whether or not to participate in the research, and have answered any questions the subject or subject representative has about the research.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person who explained this research

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

(Only approved investigators for this research may explain the research and obtain informed consent.)

### **Signature of Person Giving Informed Consent**

Before making the decision about being in this research you should have:

- Discussed this research study with an investigator,
- Read the information in this form, and
- Had the opportunity to ask any questions you may have.

Your signature below means that you have received this information, have asked the questions you currently have about the research and those questions have been answered. You will receive a copy of the signed and dated form to keep for future reference.

### **Signature of Subject**

By signing this consent form, you indicate that you voluntarily choose to be in this research and agree to allow your information to be used and shared as described above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

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## ACADEMIC VITA OF NINA G. TRACH

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### EDUCATION

#### **The Pennsylvania State University // Schreyer Honors College**

*Bellisario College of Communications // Bachelor of Arts in Public Relations*

*College of the Liberal Arts // Bachelor of Science in Spanish*

*Thesis Title: Fan Perception of Professional Sports as a Social Justice Platform*

**University Park, PA**

*Graduation: May 2021*

#### **IES Abroad Granada**

**Granada, Spain**

*Jan. – May 2019*

### COMMUNICATIONS EXPERIENCE

#### **ABC New Year's Rockin' Eve**

Production Assistant

**Dec. 2018, 2019 & 2020**

*New York, NY*

- Served as talent liaison, coordinating schedules and hit times for Dick Clark Productions talent under COVID-19 protocols
- Aided producers with logistical tasks & organization during rehearsals & live show
- Acted as talent stand-in for rehearsals, reading teleprompter & taking cues

#### **National Football League**

Summer Intern

**July 2019**

*New York, NY - Remote*

- Identified stories and created content for community relations social channels
- Involved with Social Responsibility & Communications Team meetings pertaining to social justice, non-profit partners, COVID & League initiatives
- Developed distribution plan for 'I am NFL Media' videos, leveraging research to determine proper owned & operated channels & social platforms
- Conducted fan panel to prototype distribution program, understand target audiences & test perception of intended messaging

#### **Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications**

Strategic Communications Intern

**Aug. 2018 – June 2020**

*University Park, PA*

- Wrote feature articles for *PSU News & The Communicator* magazine to promote the Bellisario College & connect alumni with current students
- Analyzed competitive social media strategies to improve digital presence
- Facilitated & recorded events to foster student, alumni & faculty engagement

#### **Axalta Coating Systems**

Corporate Communications Intern

**May – Aug. 2019**

*Philadelphia, PA*

- Developed improvement strategy for internal social media platform of more than 10,000 global employees, presenting weekly data analytics to International Corporate Affairs Team
- Promoted employee engagement initiatives through event coordination & execution
- Developed internal resource to maximize use of communications channels
- Organized Women's Event with female senior leadership & female interns

#### **Anera Travel**

Translation and Communication Intern

**Feb. – May 2019**

*Granada, Spain*

- Translated print & online content, stylized English materials & developed communications plan geared towards English-speaking clients
- Partnered with an app for Chinese tourists to secure, translate & input marketing material for authentic tourist experiences in Andalucía

#### **NSF International Health Sciences**

Marketing Intern for Medical Devices

**June – Aug. 2018**

*Washington, D.C.*

- Improved website content for clear and concise information on various consulting services
- Developed a list of 20 top clients based on analysis of revenue, contracts, and client relations to determine which relationships could be utilized for marketing

## **LEADERSHIP & INVOLVEMENT**

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Penn State Lion Ambassadors Student Alumni Corps, *Administrative Vice President*  
Penn State Dance MaraTHON, *Special Events & Rules and Regulations Committee Member*  
Morgan Academic Center, *Spanish & Communications Tutor*  
Schreyer Honors College Special Living Option, *Resident Assistant*  
Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, *Student COMMunity Leader*  
Leadership Jump Start, *Teaching Assistant*  
Schreyer Honors Orientation (SHO Time), *Mentor*

## **HONORS & AWARDS**

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Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications Ad/PR Student Marshal, *Spring 2021*  
Homecoming Student Court, *Fall 2020*  
Donald P. Bellisario Fellow, *Fall 2019*  
John W. White Spanish Scholarship, *Spring 2019*  
The President's Freshman Award, *Spring 2018*  
New York Women in Communications (NYWICI) Scholar, *Spring 2018*  
Paterno Fellow, *2017-2021*  
Schreyer Academic Excellence Award, *2017-2021*  
Provost Award, *2017-2021*