

**Osaka Outside the Lines: Creating Change in Tennis, Media and Activism**

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## Introduction

Sport and media have been synonymous with each other since they both originated. The ability for people to create commentary surrounding a match, tournament, or athlete has always—and will always—be around in a society that thrives off creating a buzz of the sporting world and its characters. This project looks at the current landscape of what it means to be a tennis player and what it means to represent yourself in the media. More specifically, we are concerned with the relationship between activism in the sports media and athletes, centering around Naomi Osaka. Osaka, the 23-year-old tennis player and superstar, was born in Japan and thrown into the limelight after her win at the 2018 U.S. Open, where she defeated arguably the most famous tennis player in the world, Serena Williams. Osaka, who remains in the infant years of her career, is still learning and grappling with her identity as a tennis player and who she represents within the tennis community. This will be shown through her recent actions, and how she conducts herself to the media, which is a reflection upon who she is as an advocate for change. Osaka has called for change within the way the tennis community functions, specifically the media, while also being an activist for social justice issues outside the lines of the tennis courts she plays on.

Based on her activism, Osaka has been at the forefront of sports media for the past twelve months, and her relationship with journalists and major media outlets has been far from simple. The aim of this study is to dissect the narratives painted around Osaka, and explain how activism and media within tennis intertwine. Doing this requires not simply distinguishing her role as a tennis player, but also understanding Osaka as a leader of a new generation of athletes, in a society that is pushing both athletes (and the media that covers them), to be more progressive.

In this research, I complete a content analysis as well as a discourse analysis to go through Osaka's social media platforms, as well as other modes of media, to look at activism and

the media's relationship with Osaka, and create a conversation surrounding how digital media is changing how athletes interact with their fans, governing bodies, and the ability to create change within the sport they play. My argument is that digital media has the affordances to allow athletes to engage in activism outside of sports, but also creates dialogue that spurs activism within the sport itself, as evidenced by how Osaka is using her own platforms to create change. My study is integral to understanding how activism is changing in a digital space, especially in sports, and exploring Osaka's case reveals key issues that will define the intersection of athletes, their digital identities, and their role in activist causes in the coming years.

### **Media Coverage of Activism in Sport**

Activism in sports is not a new topic. From protesting gender equality in pay, fighting for racial equity and highlighting discrimination, supporting trans rights and much more, the sports world and its athletes continues to have the spotlight and platform to raise awareness of social justice issues, and the discrepancies within our society.

Sports media has changed drastically over the last couple of decades, and even years, when it comes to how it confronts these activist causes within sports. Activism is now experienced differently, not just in real time events, but on digital platforms. Media approaches are changing, because of changing attitudes towards these activist causes, and because now athletes have their own platforms. Media outlets have now developed into being more vocal about racial inequality amongst other subjects that are considered 'political topics'. It is important to note the pivotal figures that led us to this point - "The resurgence of athletes engaging in activism was heightened by the 2016 death of boxer Muhammad Ali, considered one of sport's greatest ever political activists, which led to calls to action for current athletes to have a similar impact (Shoals, 2016)." Ali was among several Black athletes in the 1960s who used

their platform to advocate for civil rights, including Bill Russell (basketball), Jim Brown (American football), Arthur Ashe (tennis), and Tommie Smith and John Carlos (Olympic medalists in the 200m race). “These men were considered instrumental to the movement, and their names continued to be noted for their achievements as both athletes and activists (Coombs, D. S., & Cassilo, D, p. 426, 2017).” Each of these athletes were scrutinized for their actions of activism—for example Smith and Carlos were shunned by the public upon their arrival back in the U.S. The traditional media (like newspapers and television shows), wrote scathing reports and the reaction on TV was overwhelmingly negative. The difference now, is the change in the way in which athletes who partake in activism are portrayed. Now, athletes engaging in activism have to deal with social media critiques, and a constant conversation between themselves and their fans. This change is significant as this conversation between athlete and fan was never present before without the traditional media holding the narrative on how much was released, what was released, and how they portrayed the athlete to the general public.

An athlete that is essential to mention in this dialogue is basketball phenomenon and global superstar LeBron James. As one of the world’s most recognizable athletes, James is emblematic of the modern athlete-activist just like Osaka, and it is interesting to explore how the media frame him in the context of a controversial issue not unlike the ones I am addressing in this project. In recent years, he has come under scrutiny from reporters such as Fox News reporter Laura Ingraham who infamously told him to “Shut up and dribble”, wanting him to stop talking about topics she deemed political, in which James then switched into a personal slogan, and used to make his “More Than an Athlete” brand. Recently, James has shown support for the Black Lives Matter movement on his social media platforms. However, this is in contrast to James’s past history with being a loud advocate for change on social media. “In 2014,

12-year-old Tamir Rice was killed by police on a Cleveland playground, just miles from where the Cavaliers play and just north of James's hometown of Akron. James declined to comment on the case, and a Twitter campaign—#NoJusticeNoLeBron—attempted to force his hand. We found James is cautious and deliberate in his activism, moderating a message of consideration rather than revolution, contextualized by his brand and ambitions (Coombs, D. S., Cassilo, D., p. 1 (2017).” This has clearly changed, as LeBron's brand has grown into being a huge advocate for change, and leading the Black Lives Matter total branding that the National Basketball Association (NBA) went under in the NBA Finals in 2020. As the research shows James used to be more hesitant in his activism, but now is a true leader in change and an example in the way athletes feel more comfortable speaking up about topics such as racial inequality. The traditional media coverage of James will remain critical of him, but as James, like Osaka, has a huge platform online to interact with his fans, he can voice his opinion clearly. Osaka is emblematic of the current stance of athletes in terms of activism and media, because she did not shy away from activism, even in the early stages of her career, unlike James, who started his glittering career in an earlier era of media.

In modern day, it is athletes like LeBron and Osaka that are leading the way in using their platforms (which have drastically changed since the days of someone like Muhammad Ali), to help create positive change, and make their sports more progressive, inclusive, and to reflect the society we live in. It can not be denied that sport today is big business, and sport media are omnipresent. Schmidt's research looks how sports is accessible and recognized worldwide, not from just the day to day fans that support the sport and know the stories behind the athletes, but also the average casual viewer, who might not know any context of the match or tournament being shown: “Clearly, sports are not just the domain of a niche group of devoted fans; they are a

central part of mainstream culture and occupy a prominent role in the lives of many people today (Schmidt, H. C, p. 2, 2018)". Mainstream media coverage is likely to draw a broad "general" audience, who may not be connected to the nuances of either a particular sport or a particular athlete. This makes this audience particularly resistant to activist efforts by athletes, but this audience is not the primary one for today's athletes. The accessibility of social media means that the broader audience who may be resistant, can have access to these athletes' platforms, which allows them to send negative comments or even abuse.

For fans today to expect sports to still be this utopian discourse in which they cannot address systemic issues, such as white supremacy, they will be thoroughly disappointed. More athletes than ever are using their voice, both in person and online, in raising attention about what is important to them. There are even claims that the society we operate in is "post-racial", and sport is and should be apolitical. Love et al states that "issues of racial injustice continue to permeate sport and recreational institutions. Drawing insight from critical race theory, we articulate a vision of social justice oriented toward illuminating and addressing issues of racial injustice in sport and recreation (Love, A., Deeb, A., & Waller, S. N, , p. 1, 2019.) The claim that we live in a 'post-racial' society, not only is clearly way out of touch but is the the narrative that some 'fans' want to push, so they can escape the heavier topics when trying to enjoy a game. In reality, changes in how athletes are able to express themselves as individuals and connect with communities mean their race and other parts of their identity are more important than ever, and they have both the right and the responsibility to advocate and use their platforms to help better educate people on why these issues are vitally important.

## Activism in (Social) Media

Activism is continually evolving, with the introduction of online activism on social media platforms online. The function of traditional media is being challenged by social media, and gives athletes like James and Osaka their own voices. Firstly, we will focus on traditional media sources, such as newspapers and TV, and then move into the focal point of social media platforms and more modern forms of media.

It seems that today in some cases sports media and general news media collide, with the general media reporting on athletes kneeling during national anthems and gender inequalities. A case study led by Schmidt in 2018, shows the similarities and differences with sports media and news media, and how they chose to report on political and social issues. “Sport media, including newspapers, magazines, and television, devoted a notable amount of space or time to addressing topics related to athletes’ stands on political and social issues. Specifically, the intersection of social and political issues and sports was the topic of 9.82% (n = 43) of newspaper sport articles, 8.95% (n = 17) of sport-magazine articles, and 26.13% (n = 2.12 hr) of television broadcasts. In print sources, articles pertaining to social or political issues were most common in the *New York Post*, where 13.54% (n = 13) of sports articles were about these topics, followed by *U.S.A Today* with 11.69% (n = 9), *Sports Illustrated* with 8.95% (n = 17), *The New York Times* with 8.07% (n = 13), and the *Los Angeles Times* with 7.69% (n = 8) (p. 8, Schmidt, H. C, 2018)”. This is striking as in the same research news media (including newspapers, magazines, and television) is shown devoting relatively little space and time to topics involving political and social activism. Specifically, social and political activism were the only topics of 4.00% (n = 101) of newspaper news articles, 1.65% (n = 3) of news-magazine articles, and 4.78% (n = 2.59 hr) of television news broadcasts.

The sports media have such a huge role in the way athletes are viewed. This importance of media storytelling is highlighted in Razack and Josephs' research into Osaka's biracial identity in coverage of her 2018 U.S. Open win (2020), where they state "Every media text is produced or constructed by an individual or a group for a particular purpose, to inform, entertain, or satirize. More than merely giving information, texts work through language and image to generate social identities, activities, and hierarchies and are, therefore, political because they direct us to understand the social world through promoting certain types of knowledge and ways of thinking. A disproportionate amount of power in how we understand our social world comes from Western mainstream and corporate-global media sources (p. 296)." The Western mainstream media chose to create an image and identity for Osaka that was distinctly different to her Black female counterparts, notably most of the Williams sisters, due to her half Asian racial identity. In mainstream media and online, Osaka was further associated with Asia and Japan through descriptions of her as apologetic, meek, quiet, and emphasizing her Japanese heritage, skin color, and visible behaviors such as crying, that followed an ideology of respectable femininity, modesty, and obedience, perpetrating that she wasn't the "angry Black woman" stereotype that is placed on many female athletes of color, like Serena Williams, as mentioned earlier in this study.

Contrary to traditional sports media, we now have platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and even Snapchat that can help athletes interact with fans, and help create their brand online. These modern day media platforms allow a place for more freedom for athletes and the public to put their opinions out there, and gain traction online. Social media gives athletes two tools. The first is the ability to combat misconceptions about their identity by presenting a more complex and intimate version of themselves. The second is to engage in outright activism to clarify their



positions on these issues. Interacting and building a brand can be done without any kind of activism (Serena Williams for example). This interaction of passive and active engagement with how social media can combat the type of mistreatment.

Evidence of this can be found in a study that explores how National Football League (NFL) players used Twitter to discuss the verdict in the George Zimmerman murder trial in the immediate aftermath of its announcement. The study was a textual analysis, using constant comparative procedures of 465 tweets from 125 NFL players, was conducted. The results of the study showed that “players discussed the case in the following ways: (a) anticipation, (b) disbelief, (c) critiques of the American Justice System, (d) social commentary, (e) condolences and support, (f) responding to fans, and (g) freedom of speech arguments. The results suggest that Twitter is a viable mechanism for African American and other minority athletes to engage in activism and initiate important conversations about social justice issues. Although empowering, this also may create conflict for team personnel and fans who may be uncomfortable with athletes using Twitter to question structures that favor Whiteness (Schmittel, A., & Sanderson, J, p. 1, 2015).” Their research explains how if Twitter is a viable mechanism for Black athletes to voice their discomfort and challenge Whiteness, then that could be considered a step forward compared to a traditional media platform, where they might not be comfortable coming forward as speaking as openly (in an interview for example).

The ongoing awareness of Whiteness and the related privilege is pivotal to this activist sentiment, and has come to the forefront of recent academic research. According to Bebout, “recent scholarship has deployed the word “whiteness” to draw attention to previously under-recognized attributes. Some have identified the ways in which whiteness shapes everyday discourse and understandings of race (p. 1, 2019).” This research explores the buffers that White

people may be protected from confronting the system of white supremacy that benefits them and is foundational to the identity of whiteness. The rise of social media shows its effectiveness in changing discourses such as Whiteness, and pointing out perspectives that may not have a big platform, challenging the norm in media, which is in comparison to traditional media, where challenging Whiteness as a concept would be less common.

We have demonstrated in this section that social media is changing activism, and by exploring the history of athletes within activism, we can show how media is continuing to evolve how athletes are portrayed online with their advocacy. We explored how concepts such as Whiteness are being challenged due to a more diverse and progressive audience within digital platforms. Now, we will move into focusing on activism within tennis, dissecting the governing bodies that run the sport, and consider how Osaka is challenging that environment.

### **Advantage, Bureaucracy: Activism in Tennis**

In order to look at the media's relationship with activism and the players themselves, it is essential to understand the WTA (Women's Tennis Association), and how it functions as a governing body for the tennis world. The WTA's organization echoes larger issues of leadership and bureaucracy that impact both amateur and professional athletes. The Women's Tennis Association (WTA) is the principal organizing body of women's professional tennis. It governs the WTA Tour which is the worldwide professional tennis tour for women and states that its aim, when it was founded, was to create a better future for women's tennis. The WTA tour runs the events that players like Osaka play week in week out during the tennis calendar year, and amongst this calendar year is the four Grand Slams - Australian Open, French Open, Wimbledon and U.S. Open (in that order). These four major tournaments all function, and are governed by the ITF (International Tennis Federation) and are not run by the WTA. The ITF is run by its

member unions. The main policy-making body is the Congress which meets every four years, in which they elect The President and five Vice-Presidents (four from different world regions and one Women's Vice-President).

It is vital to understand these are governing bodies as they constantly create the systems that tennis as a sport operates in, including its media and their response to activism, social justice issues, and of course, the way in which they look after (or don't hold responsibility in looking after) their athletes. In talking about sporting governing bodies and their response to activism by their athletes, we can look at the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association). Due to the absence of a players' union, the WTA functions more like the NCAA than other professional sports governing bodies, such as the National Basketball Association (NBA), or Major League Baseball (MLB).

The NCAA has undergone a lot of scrutiny in the past, with critics pointing out their inability to look after college athletes fairly and adequately, and their reluctance to speak up on social justice issues. Grow and Haugh argue that the NCAA is less of a representative structure but is more of a compliance organization, summarizing “the sustained and withering critiques of the NCAA centered on the association's inability to adequately and fairly police the integrity of college athletics (Grow, N., & Haugh, T, p. 1, 2021).” It is important to note the NCAA in the context of media and athletes, as the way it runs almost mimics the professional governing bodies of tennis, in both a negative and positive light.

As a tennis player myself, who has just turned professional, undergoing this study and looking at the way tennis as a sport functions through media in an analytical lens changed my perspective on a lot of topics surrounding media and its relationship with its athletes, especially around activism. Tennis as a sport is no stranger to athletes coming forward and being actively

vocal about equality. Most notable are the efforts by nine female tennis players (Billie Jean King, Rosie Casals, Julie Heldman, Peaches Bartkowicz, Judy Dalton, Kerry Melville Reid, Kristy Pigeon, Nancy Richey, and Valerie Ziegenfuss), coined ‘Original 9’, who advocated for equal pay between men and women at major tournaments. This pivotal point in time allowed more female tennis players to come forward about issues important to them, whether regarding LBGTQ+ issues or racial equity. In 2016, Tredway summarizes this historical moment in tennis as “46 years since the women known as the Original 9 began protesting against the pay inequality between men’s and women’s tennis, subsequent cohorts of women have brought different issues and concerns to women’s tennis, expanding its scope and efforts (Tredway. K, p. 1, 2016).” Tredway’s research is important because acknowledging the ‘Original 9’ shows how tennis has a long standing history in advocacy, and sets the stage for other female athletes to speak up about inequalities in the game. It’s important because the game needs athletes such as the ‘Original 9’, and now athletes like Osaka, to keep developing the game, so it can stay current and with the times. Referring back to previously speaking on LeBron James, movements like this have allowed James himself, and now Naomi to readily—if not always easily—advocate what they want to speak on.

It is necessary to understand previous movements and moments in sport and activism as players are now, more than ever, advocating for issues that they believe in. This includes Osaka’s advocacy related to Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate, alongside greater visibility for LGTBQ+ players in the WTA, as well as the male number one player in the world, Novak Djokovic co-founding the PTPA (The Professional Tennis Players Association), which is an association that of male tennis players represents singles players in the top 500 and doubles players in the top 200 of the rankings advocating for more equal prize money distribution to

lower ranked players. The PTPA is an example of activism within a sport, as the players are activists for themselves as individuals within distinct organizations. This type of activism is distinct from those of athletes like LeBron James or this project's case study, Naomi Osaka, whose activism primarily uses their position on an athlete to speak to issues outside of their sports. However, the two are often linked, and the labor struggles within tennis hearken back to the earlier activism of the 'Original 9.'

However, while the 'Original 9' and the PTPA share some of the same goals, the latter's choice to not involve the WTA and its female players during their initial formation reinforces the gender discrepancies in the game of tennis, and they remain primarily concerned with financial considerations compared to the broader equity sought by King and her colleagues.. This was particularly frustrating given that WTA players suffer from the same issues facing ATP players when it comes to the tennis bureaucracy. Although WTA is a professional tennis' organization that runs tournaments focused on player compliance, it offers little opportunity for player representation due to a lack of any type of union. Players such as the ones in the PTPA are working to change this, but failing to involve both male and female tennis players undercut their core message and the path to real change.

There are many similarities between the WTA as a governing body, and the NCAA on a collegiate level. Including the NCAA in this conversation, we can delve into the internal pressure that athletes both college and professional can feel when they avoid embracing activism on their social media platforms. Kluch's research speaks on how activism amongst athletes can still be a taboo topic, and it is not seen as the usual to be an activist whilst also being an athlete. His research states that "despite the recent re-emergence of the athlete activist into public consciousness, activism among athletes continues to be viewed as non-normative behavior (p.1,

2020).” As a previous college athlete myself, NCAA athletes still can be apprehensive when talking about social justice issues if they feel like their position on the team is compromised. They can feel like their coaches could view them differently after speaking out, or that it could cause drama amongst the team who might have different political beliefs (even though human rights shouldn’t be considered political). The NCAA is where many professional athletes start out, and although a smaller percentage of professional tennis players begin as college athletes, the NCAA still has a hand in setting the scene for professional sports, such as the attitudes athletes take into the next level. These attitudes could be about media and activism and how they can then build their own personal brand. Whilst athletes that go from college sports into professional sport should have more freedom, the reality is in a sport like tennis, the sport lacks frameworks for the players to generate organizational change, leaving athletes in those sports equally trapped in the system.

The backlash that athletes face is definitely considered before speaking out. According to McCoy, “social justice activism from college athletes is considered a rare occurrence often due to the intensity of negative public response and the possibility of athletic repercussions. Athletics and this type of representation can be used as a service opportunity for social workers employed as faculty on campus (p. 166, 2020)”. However, athletic departments that work underneath the NCAA have to be open to this new advocacy, just like governing bodies like the WTA must be prepared to meet resistance from the general public within the closed nature of athletics. Advocating for and creating real change will take time; however, the motivations of college athletes show the NCAA, and the general public can and should consider their voices beyond the playing field, just like the professionals that spoke out before them.

### **Race and Tennis, Then and Now: Media, Blackness, and the Williams Sisters**

As previously discussed, social media has created a platform for athletes to speak out about social justice issues, or create more of a relationship with their fans and the general public on a personal level than traditional media. They can connect with like-minded people, and be more familiar with their intended audience. This speaks not only to issues of lifespan, and how our society is progressively digitally in different generations, but brings us to the topic of Osaka, and her similarities and differences to Serena and Venus Williams, who confronted similar challenges as black women navigating stardom and bureaucracy early in their careers.

The Williams sisters are vital in the analysis of Osaka, not just because of the match Serena played in Osaka's rise to the limelight, but their history as two of the sport's most decorated champions. The impact that the two sisters from Compton have had on the game of tennis is monumental - but has not come without backlash from a sport that was not used to Black female athletes dominating the major titles. The siblings dominated the WTA Tour, but were met with plenty of criticism, especially early in their career. "By 2002 Venus and Serena Williams were the top two women players on the women's professional tennis tour. Nevertheless, despite their spectacular success, there has been a decidedly ambivalent tenor toward their accomplishments (Douglas, p. 1, 2005)." Two of the most noticeable events of this discrimination was the atmosphere of the crowds produced at two tournaments (Indian Wells, CA in 2001 and the French Open in 2003), where overwhelmingly white crowds took it upon themselves to heckle and 'boo' Serena on her successes. Again, these moments are essential to recognize in understanding the history of tennis and its activism, in order to understand how white racial subjectivities are conceived and communicated in daily life, and how those two sisters have allowed Osaka a platform to speak more freely about racial injustice, that they might

have not been able to do as candidly and openly, as they themselves would be met with significantly more backlash from not just the tennis community, but the media in general, and the ‘fans’ that come with it.

In looking into the differences in eras between Osaka and the younger sibling, and how their exposure to the media is different, Serena came into tennis when social media was not at all what it is now. Social justice issues, like racism, were not used in a dialogue so openly and advocated online in the way it is today in the tennis world (which still has a long way to go). Her career lands in the start of social media’s rise to power, and if these platforms had been available to her earlier in her career, she may have spoken out more regarding the inequalities she faced. She paved the way for someone like Osaka to have the opportunity to educate a newer audience on issues such as police brutality, but it was not by any means easy. In their research looking into occurring themes in sports media, specifically representation of athletes, Razack and Joseph (2020) touched on themes that they noticed in their research into athletes and the way they were represented in the media. Three key themes were noted; ongoing misogynoir (misogyny directed towards Black women), colorism of sport media and athlete sponsors and diaspora media misrepresentations and resistance to gendered racism through self-representation. Both Williams and Osaka, amongst countless other Black athletes, have had to deal with all of these three themes throughout their career - even Osaka who has only just begun hers. In terms of activism, the way that these athletes are represented is so important, because if they are represented in an accurate way, the general public will digest what they have to say, rather than having poorly conceived negative stereotypes or ideals surrounding the athlete speaking out about social justice issues.



The intersection of sexism and racism is something Black women grapple with on a daily basis, and even though both Serena and Naomi faced similar challenges as Black women in tennis, Serena had had more commentary in terms of her body, and the way she looks on court. Williams was criticized heavily from the minute her career began. In an article written for *The Huffington Post*, Zeba Blay ties criticism of Williams to her blackness, arguing “this goes beyond Williams' body. Not only is her womanhood consistently denied, her character is deemed as dominant, aggressive and arrogant. Everything from her hairstyles to her celebratory dances have been regarded as "ghetto" or uncouth. No matter her success, her intelligence or her graciousness, her humanity is consistently denied (2015).” This portrayal of Williams was ongoing in the media, who almost wanted to paint her as a villain within tennis, whilst she was arguably becoming the greatest tennis player and athlete of all time. Her outfits and body were constantly surveyed and analyzed in the press, none probably more infamous than the catsuit. Schultz writes that “during the 2002 U.S. Open, Serena Williams received a great deal of attention for wearing an outfit described as ”a body-clinging, faux leather, black cat-suit.” It was not necessarily the catsuit itself that the popular media found especially controversial but rather the visibility of her physique the outfit provided. The ways in which Serena Williams, the outfit, and her body were discussed offers a particular site at which to interrogate the production of blackness in 21st-century U.S. society (p. 1, 2005).” The volume in which the media had scrutinized her body and outfits was unlike anyone else, and this criticism may explain why Williams has been less vocal than one might expect on social justice issues like Black Lives Matter, because of her relationship with scrutiny in the press, and the sheer vast amount of critics she has been dealing with the majority of her life. The amount of negativity that she was exposed

to early on from her career, it is not shocking that she has been less vocal on racial inequality within the game given the era she emerged in, and the limited tools available to her at the time.

This section identifies Osaka's link to her opponent in the U.S. Open final in 2018, Serena Williams, and the way in which the media has treated them both speaks to generational divides in navigating issues of race and activism within the sport of tennis and sports in general. After Osaka's first major title win, some information and communication technologies (ICT's), including social media, presented counter-narratives and a recognition of the mainstream media vilification and erasure of Black women. "At times, ICT channels disrupted racist dominant narratives, and counter-narratives of Osaka's Blackness and position as part of the Haitian *jaspóra* (diaspora) prevailed (Razack, S., & Joseph, p. 291, 2020)." These ICT's, especially sports media, social media platforms in particular, is what we will be looking at next, and how much of an effect they can have on the general public's views on stances that athletes take in regard to social justice. We now need to explore Osaka's identity and her own relationship with social media to consider how she hopes to build on the foundation the Williams sisters have provided her.

### **Case Study: Naomi Osaka**

Although she has established herself as one of the sport's top athletes, Osaka's position as a superstar is far from a stable role within the tennis community based on how these issues surrounding her race inflect her identity as an athlete. Osaka, being both Asian and Black, born in her namesake Osaka, Japan, moved to America when she was young, and was somewhat disregarded from the United States Tennis Association (USTA) when it came to funding and the availability of training facilities. She chose to play under Japan as the country she represents when she competes, due to the sheer amount of young prospects that come through the American

tennis system, and the realization she was bound to receive more support from the Japanese tennis federation compared to the U.S. She made the choice that benefited her opportunities (such as entry into bigger tournaments, sponsorships, exposure) with the game more. This is important as it is not just the country you play for in the Olympics, but also the federation that provides for you as far as funding and travel expenses etc. Razack and Joseph have highlighted Osaka's complicated stardom within the tennis community as it relates to her race, focusing on the immediate aftermath of her 2018 U.S. Open victory: they note that after her maiden Grand Slam title, “questions around her culture, national identity, and race will likely persist. Newer media, along with her own social media channels, resist racial binary or fixed Japanese identity classifications. While mainstream sources often disavow her Blackness in favor of simple, colonial, storylines, Osaka contests or disidentifies with simple binaries and positions herself as a complicated, ‘interesting’ person, claiming her humanity and Haitian heritage (Razack & Joseph, p. 302, 2020).” As Osaka does not fit into one mold - a Black athlete, or an Asian athlete, the media seem desperate to put her into a box where she can fit the narrative they want for her. However, social media gives Osaka the ability to frame her own narrative, making it necessary to explore her own efforts to build her identity in the aftermath of her 2018 victory.

In Osaka's duality as being both a part of the Asian and Black community, the media were quick to jump to conclusions about her character, and what they wanted to focus on when she burst onto the scene. The erasure of her Blackness, especially when it was against Serena Williams in the U.S. Open Final, Osaka was painted as submissive and less aggressive than Williams, with the media painting her into stereotypical Asian character traits. As Razack and Joseph note, this is unsurprising, as “overt and subtle misogynoir (anti-Black misogyny) pervade sport and sport media, as women in the Black diaspora are rarely in control of sporting

regulations or their media representations (p. 291, 2020). In Osaka's new *Netflix* series, which launched in July 2021, the trailer claims that Osaka, in her own words, "is not afraid of what people think (of her) anymore," meaning that she is ready to shed this submissive character that the media originally were painting how out to be.

Due to her active career and the current controversy, this is such an ongoing conversation and study, and after the *Netflix* series is released, more media will be entering the dialogue created by this project. The work in this study will provide the foundation for research into how Osaka's case speaks to not only the specifics of tennis stardom, but also how the media interacts with athletes on digital platforms, and how Osaka's emerging activism is reshaping the sports landscape.

### **The Next Generation: Naomi Osaka, the Activist Tennis Star**

In terms of a predominantly white sport like tennis, it is easy to think of white as the 'norm', but it is athletes like Osaka that are challenging this norm, and pushing the look of a 'standard' tennis player to be constantly re-thought. The research cited above concerning whiteness has noted that "white fragility" erupts when these norms are challenged, and Osaka has consistently demonstrated her willingness to play the role of challenger using her social media accounts.

Osaka is no stranger to using her platforms online to voice her opinions. She repeatedly has vocalized, (some in screenshots of statements she has personally written on her 'Notes' app on an iPhone), her support for Black Lives Matter (*Appendix A*), Stop Asian Hate (*Appendix B*), and recently her statements on her relationship with the media and mental health (*Appendix C*), on both her Instagram and Twitter. This ability to easily put out statements in a matter of minutes allows Osaka to write her thoughts and stance in a personal way, where her audience can see straight away where she stands. However, it also opens a conversation where people that

disagree can have access to a response with her, and allows the media more content that they can pick a part, and may scrutinize more, than if she didn't put out a statement at all. We have spoken previously on the media's role in Osaka's representation, but in this section, we can move our attention to her role within social media and her leadership as a younger generation superstar.

At only twenty three years old, Osaka is associated with the generation that has been coined 'Gen-Z'. People that are born in this generation are not only more racially and ethnically diverse than any previous generation: they are on track, admirably, "to be the most well-educated generation yet. People who grew up in this generation are also very familiar with digital media, and social media platforms are almost seen as essential and part of everyday life (Parker, 2021)".

This difference is evident when comparing Osaka's navigation of the day-to-day pressures of being a mediated figure to that of her predecessors, the Williams sisters. In a press conference following Osaka's withdrawal from the French Open due to mental health concerns, Williams was asked how she handles the pressure, and stated "For me personally, how I deal with it was that I know every single person asking me a question can't play as well as I can and never will, so no matter what you say or write, you'll never light a candle to me. So that's how I deal with it, but each person deals with it differently." This blunt reply was interesting as Venus herself has had to deal with the press from a young age, but showed the generational divide between the two players.

Venus grew up, just like Serena, in a sport that was without social media. She went under an undeniable amount of pressure as a Black female tennis player, but never had the interaction level with fans, and social media spotlight that Osaka has had. This comment was a great display of how different generations of athletes have had to navigate the world of media differently. Social media creates immediacy, and with Osaka using her platforms weekly, she cleverly shifts

the burden of responsibility of having to rely on traditional sports media. However, this puts greater pressure on her disclosures, and makes her more vulnerable to the discussion of her career. So, whilst Venus is also a tennis superstar, she hasn't grown up with the same online exposure that Osaka has had to deal with. This additional pressure that Osaka has grown up with, Williams is almost oblivious too, and seemingly less able to compartmentalize.

Osaka, as a popular young athlete, has also grown up on social media, and has used her social media platforms to not just educate and inform her audience for her ideas and voice her opinion, but has allowed her to have a more approachable look from younger fans, making her a leader for this generation. Social media's broad impact on activism and athletes is clear, but for individual athletes the most important change is a greater degree of control and agency it offers them over their identities and the narrative surrounding them. With personal statements, photos and videos, she allows fans to interact with her and her content, without the 'middleman', or in this case, the journalists. Her call for change from governing bodies like the WTA, as she has amassed a wide audience (millions in fact) that will support her moves, as they feel closer to her as an athlete and perhaps person.

These personal interactions with fans, allows Osaka to make statements directly to her fans. A great example of how she blurs the line between "public statement to her sport" and "personal statement to her fans/followers", would be when she withdrew from the Cincinnati Open as a protest (a WTA tournament), putting out a statement on her Twitter (*Appendix A*) and Instagram account to her fans. The withdrawal was in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, following other Black athletes who had ceased play in their respective sports, to bring awareness to the Black police brutality victims in the United States. Much as the Cincinnati Open serves as a warmup for the U.S. Open later in the summer, Osaka's protest served as a

precursor to her biggest show of support for the Black Lives Matter movement two years after her 2018 breakthrough.

### **7 Matches, 7 Masks: Naomi Osaka at the 2020 U.S. Open**

To demonstrate how social media's introduction to sport has altered the possibilities for activism, Osaka's actions at the 2020 U.S. Open represent a culmination of her efforts and a flashpoint for how the traditional sports media engage with her identity as an activist. With COVID-19 being at the forefront of the media and allowing zero fans into New York City, the tennis community was not even sure if the 2020 U.S. Open would go ahead, with other major titles like Wimbledon being cancelled earlier that year. However, with the help of a model like the “NBA bubble”, where only participants and minimal people were allowed on the venue site with consistent testing, the event was to go on.

In addition to COVID-19, the 2020 U.S. Open was played against the backdrop of another major cultural event. Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests were at a height of exposure, with the murder of George Floyd being a catalyst for protestors. In such a restless climate, it was almost eerie to see a sporting event go on - how would the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) and USTA (United States Tennis Association) run an event on such sensitive grounds?

In setting the scene for this case study, the COVID-19 pandemic is roughly a year-and-a-half old at the time of writing, while BLM is around 6 years old. The latter is a movement driven initially by the murder of Trayvon Martin (26th February, 2012) and the acquittal of his killer in the U.S.A, but saw an accelerated increase in exposure and attention in May 2020 after the public killing of George Floyd by Minnesota police was caught on camera by bystanders and shared across the globe, instigating a surge in protests regarding both this specific crime and other similar ones both before and after. This rise in protests and exposure of the BLM

movement created a divide in the public. Evans et al (2020) look at how the rise in reactionary statements from opponents of the BLM movement has polarised public perspectives, with BLM simultaneously labelled a movement for social justice by its organisers, and a Marxist group by its opponents. According to the research, discourse around BLM “has given rise to vociferous discussions, debates, protests and even violence in relation to issues including economic and health inequalities in different ethnic communities, on policing, crime, human rights and social welfare (Evans et al, p. 289, 2020).” BLM as a whole organization could be an entirely different study on its own, but here we are looking at it and its position in which it was put forward by Osaka, something that had not been done before on such a big stage in the tennis community. Evans et al go on to state in their research that “We need to understand not only the goals and actions of protesters, activists, BLM supporters and their allies, but also to reflect upon the actions and beliefs of their opponents and those who would seek to maintain the status quo (p. 296).” In truly understanding BLM and what it stands for, more people will be in support of it and athletes like Osaka are going to help push the correct narrative forward, unlike the storylines that more traditional media outlets are still trying to push.

Although Grand Slam tennis tournaments had never actively taken a role in addressing activism to this point, the 2020 U.S. Open was an exception, demonstrating how sports leagues and organizations felt a growing burden of responsibility. Taking a stance on racial inequality and police brutality is not something that a grand slam had actively done yet, but the U.S. Open did. The USTA as an organization took a direct approach on their stance compared to the WTA by featuring art by Black artists in the stands of the empty Arthur Ashe stadium. In contrast, the WTA was slow to put out a statement, only eventually putting their support for Black Lives Matter in a video made by American male tennis player Frances Tiafoe. It was a small nod to the



movement, rather than a massive gesture from the organization, showing their unwavering support.

Based on Osaka's decision to extend her activism beyond this general statement and into the realm of her personal social media, these types of broad statements are not sufficient for all players. The U.S. Open's approach was a positive gesture, and a step in the right direction for the tennis community, but ultimately hardly qualifies as activism. It was the bare minimum in both social media presence in support of BLM and the art installation within the stadium. Osaka wanted to take her stance in a more direct approach, and chose to extend her activism beyond the previously discussed social media posts and onto the court directly. With players required to wear a mask onto the court due to COVID-19 protocols, she wore seven different face masks for each round of the annual tournament. Each mask, which she started wearing when the tournament began on August 31st 2020, named a Black person whose death has been repeatedly cited in nationwide protests about racial injustice. "The seven masks Osaka wore in recent weeks included the names of Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Ahmaud Arbury, Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, Philando Castile and Tamir Rice, all names that have come up repeatedly as victims of racial injustice (Mansoor, 2020)". The subtlety of Osaka's activism this week made the U.S. Open and tennis part of the BLM movement, and included tennis in the conversation of sports that were taking a stance against racism and social justice issues. Her personal choice of being an activist during the tournament, not just through the affordances of social media, but in what she was wearing, separated her from the other athletes who were also participating.

This meant that Osaka's activism was now unavoidably part of her interactions with the broader sports media, and the way they chose to address and cover her actions points to the limitations of this format. When interviewed about the masks in her post match interviews

(*Appendix D*), the interviewer Rennae Stubbs (former professional tennis player) asked Osaka what was the message that she wanted to send. Osaka's response was measured and direct. "Well, what was the message that you got was more the question. I feel like the point is to make people start talking." She continued to explain "I feel like I'm a vessel at this point, in order to spread awareness (*Appendix E*)." She went on to state that "it's not going to dull the pain, but hopefully I can help with anything that they (the victims' families) need." Sybrina Fulton, Martin's mother, and Marcus Arbery, Ahmaud's father, sent video messages that were shown to Osaka during an ESPN interview after her quarter-final victory, bringing her to tears and revealing how her actions had shaped ESPN's coverage of the event and the BLM movement. Although Stubbs forcing Osaka to explain herself reveals the limitations of traditional media framings of activist causes, her message opened up an important dialogue that spread from ESPN's coverage to social media. A dialogue on Twitter and Instagram began, and the tennis community was shown in a light it had not truly been before - a topic of police brutality within the Black community was taking centre stage, on centre court.

Osaka's actions during the U.S. Open, and the interview between her and Stubbs created a worldwide reaction and link between the tennis media, sports media, and general news. She showed the simplicity of seven masks could have such a huge impact and message. The Black community was going through an immeasurable amount of pain during 2020, and having access to a global voice was powerful, and a step in the direction of what tennis as a sport needs to take to be more progressive, diverse and inclusive. Not close to even being done, but a start, nonetheless.

### **Calling for Change, Waiting for Action: Tennis' Uncertain Activist Future**

The case study of Naomi Osaka clearly identifies multiple concerns that will define the future of tennis specifically, and of sport's relationship with activism and media more broadly. To progress tennis as a sport moving forwards, using the media to help create change in the larger community, athletes like Osaka are focused on building their own platforms and voices, to try and help educate their audience to issues that they want to raise awareness on.

Osaka herself is trying to change the way in which traditional media is run, making it a more accessible and inclusive area of the sport. In order to create a change in tennis, specifically, minority players have said the federations and larger organizations need to provide resources and programming. For example, American tennis player Taylor Townsend wrote a passionate article for *Players Tribune*, addressing her feelings towards the USTA and their lack of support towards her as a promising young Black tennis player. She writes, "There's also hundreds (thousands?!) of stories you'll probably never even hear about, of Black girls who just didn't get a shot. Whether that's because of money, or racism, or lack of support, or gatekeeping bullsh\*t, or because the system just kind of failed them, the way it fails so many Black women". For non-white inner-city kids and people who live in low-income areas so that they can have the exposure, experience, and support to succeed (i.e an ambition and goal for myself in my professional career). Media can be a way to appeal to the people who don't have access to these resources and facilities. In seeing themselves in stars like Osaka, in the way they look, and are represented in the sport, they might pick up a racket and have ambition to play professional tennis. In other words, it starts with reevaluating the system because the system is not made for minorities to thrive and succeed to the same ease as their white colleagues.

In terms of media use, with the new wave of tennis players such as Osaka leading the way for younger generations, seeing themselves represented on the big stage is good, but the WTA and USTA need to continue to highlight the voices and platforms of minorities in the game, to allow the game to continue to grow a new narrative of inclusiveness. Osaka is reshaping the trajectory of this industry/these issues, but she is also showing tennis governing bodies what else needs to happen. The WTA and USTA need to use the platforms they have, to try and give time and space in their sport to advocacy, allowing their athletes to speak on issues. Encouraging their players like Osaka to work with the organization, the message can be received as clearly as possible by the masses that watch the sport.

When asked why minorities have a bigger voice now than previously, Serena Williams' answer was clear - technology and social media. In a British Vogue article in the November 2020 issue she stated “We as Black people have a voice - and technology has been a huge part of that. We see things that have been hidden for years; the things that we as people have to go through. This has been happening for years. People just couldn't pull out their phones and video it before (Nast, 2020)”. This small changed of being able to ‘pull out a phone’ could be instrumental - not just to record discrimination, but to help these athletes like Naomi interact with their audience, and help see their personal perspective, and views on racial inequity.

Governing bodies also need to take more of a vocal stance, not just the athletes. The USTA continues to be a driving force in the tennis world, with the statement it released last summer stating “The USTA will not tolerate racism or discrimination of any kind – not in our offices, not in our boardroom, and not on the tennis courts. Even more, we will strive to be a model of inclusivity and equity as we bring competitive, social and fitness-oriented tennis programs to U.S. residents. We have and will continue to commit to make tennis accessible to

diverse and underserved communities so that they may experience and enjoy the life-long benefits of the sport. Further, we will invest in players and organizations that serve these communities more regularly so that we can exceed the reach of our own small staff. Finally, we will make it a priority to recognize and support young and talented players of color who have the potential to use tennis as a vehicle for obtaining a college or vocational education, or a professional career (USTA, 2020).” This statement may seem like common sense, in the world of tennis, the ATP and WTA are still yet to put out a statement that is clear and damning.

Wimbledon and the All England Club (based in London, England, and heavily linked with the Lawn Tennis Association), is still further behind, with still a huge lack of people of color on their Executive Board. The USTA is further ahead than other countries and organizations that run individual tournaments through the tennis calendar year, and needs to continue to lead in statements and actions that help promote diversity and inclusion within the sport, through media, and advocacy for equal human rights.

With Naomi continually dominating the women’s game, she will continue to lead in a way that keeps the WTA and other tennis governing bodies in check in how they portray tennis worldwide. Coombs and Cassilo touch on how the tension between sport as a site of community versus protest led to a number of articles debating the role of an athlete in terms of social movements and protest. “On one hand, athletes are asked to just be athletes and help by distracting the public for a few hours. On the other hand, athletes are asked to use their position to speak in forums that others cannot. Caught between these two ideas, athletes themselves are often the ones asked to decide their role (p. 437, 2017).” This tension is what every athlete has to deal with - do they speak out, and create a more hostile environment amongst their fans (maybe lose some of them), or do they put their neck on the line with the media, ready for ridicule and

negative press, and speak out. Many athletes have chosen the latter, as these issues are too large to be ignored in their day to day lives, and Osaka is no exception.

With the athletes, it must be noted the difference in female and male athletes.

Unfortunately, women are more susceptible to negative press when it comes to political stances and voicing their opinions, because they are not taken as seriously as athletes as male athletes.

An example of the lack of severity female athletes are shown is the WNBA. “The Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) have been at the forefront of the Black Lives Matter movement, yet their voices have not received the same level of media attention as those of their male counterparts. The intersections of gender and race are powerful moderators in this environment, and it is essential to understand the impact they have and the conditions under which their perspective is heard (Coombs, D. S. Cassilo, D, p. 440, 2017).”

With an organization such as the WTA, unlike Osaka’s cohorts in the WNBA, tennis remains predominantly white, even with its progress, and still markets heavily to a ‘well-heeled, country club-type’ of fan. McDonald’s research looks into the race and class dynamics of this particular atmosphere. “Osaka has fielded lots of questions about racism and protests from white interlocutors. She’s also decided how to engage with race and racism as a professional athlete on her own terms, in a way that indicates precisely who she expects to do more thinking.

McDonald, S, 2020).” Her choice to engage on her own terms has been helped by the facilitation of social media platforms. Now, as Naomi is dominating the sport and is the most successful athlete of color within the women’s game as of right now, places a lot of heavy responsibility on her shoulders. That is why other athletes, especially white athletes, need to feel comfortable within the tennis community to come forward and express being an ally, and also use their platforms to highlight topics such as police brutality, racism and white supremacy. Referring

back to previous statements made in this study, we have to acknowledge traditional media, and its role in catering to a white audience, just like governing bodies like the WTA have been. Osaka is using her own media (digital platforms such as Twitter and Instagram), to challenge these structures that are in place, to make sure the audience she reaches is educated on issues that may not reach them from traditional media sources. We now must look at where Osaka's relationship with the media is headed.

### **Naomi Osaka vs. the Media: A Reluctant Star's Activist Agenda**

While Naomi Osaka's primary activism surrounding the 2020 U.S. Open and the events that followed primarily started conversations in the tennis community related to issues of race affecting society at large, her actions since have extended her activist agenda into the role of the media within tennis itself. The media may have supported her choice to use her platform to protest the loss of innocent Black lives, but her identity as a social media-focused star created tension that would boil over in 2021.

In undergoing this study, I could not have predicted the sheer amount of content Osaka was going to unleash in the summer of 2021. On social media, Osaka announced that she would not be doing any press during the French Open, skipping post-match conferences that are mandatory for players during the event. Osaka could easily pay the fines for skipping the conferences, but her decision shocked and offended the tennis media, and general reaction from the sport was negative, with the French Tennis Federation openly criticizing her for so casually rejecting the norms of athlete access.

But what we were seeing was a whole different dialogue, again opened up by Naomi. In her explanation of her plans not to do press conferences, she created an oppositional position with the media. The media and athletes relationship is somewhat of a paradox, with the media

needing athletes to function and make money, and athletes using and benefiting off the media for exposure and coverage. Osaka was essentially stating that she didn't only not need the media, she didn't want to participate in her relationship with them because it was damaging her mental health further. Her choice as an athlete was to cut out the conversation with media that she felt was continually strenuous in her mind, protecting her mental health, and again, going against the norm in the tennis community.

This was only then complicated, when Osaka stated on her social media platforms that she wasn't going to participate in Wimbledon, due to her mental health. This prompted further outrage from the press, both tennis and sports media, as Wimbledon, arguably the most prestigious of the Grand Slams, is simply 'not missed' for athletes unless dire circumstances arise. But Osaka's core argument is that depression and anxiety represent dire circumstances. Changing the conversation amongst athletes and media and the negative stigma surrounding mental health, and the taboo of it not being a serious topic, is admirable, but tricky, as you are annoying the very people that also have the ability to change the narrative about you to masses of people.

At first, Osaka almost shot herself in the foot, coming across as nonchalant in her social media posts. That changed when a *TIME* magazine article was released. Eloquently written, Osaka touched on her time with the media, in terms of activism and mental health. She writes that, "In the past few weeks, my journey took an unexpected path but one that has taught me so much and helped me grow. I learned a couple of key lessons. Lesson one: you can never please everyone. The world is as divided now as I can remember in my short 23 years. Issues that are so obvious to me at face value, like wearing a mask in a pandemic or kneeling to show support for anti-racism, are ferociously contested. I mean, wow. So, when I said I needed to miss French



Open press conferences to take care of myself mentally, I should have been prepared for what unfolded (*TIME*, 2021)”. Another key takeaway from this article was her call for a different approach in the way that the media is run within the tennis community - more of a fifty-fifty dialogue, rather than a dominant and submissive relationship like it is now. She went on to write “This was never about the press, but rather the traditional format of the press conference. I’ll say it again for those at the back: I love the press; I do not love all press conferences. I have always enjoyed an amazing relationship with the media and have given numerous in-depth, one-on-one interviews. I always try to answer genuinely and from the heart. I’ve never been media-trained, so what you see is what you get. The way I see it, the reliance and respect from athlete to press is reciprocal. However, in my opinion (and I want to say that this is just my opinion and not that of every tennis player on tour), the press-conference format itself is out of date and in great need of a refresh. I believe that we can make it better, more interesting and more enjoyable for each side. Less subject vs. object; more peer to peer (*TIME*, 2021).”

To think that peer to peer relationship could happen eventually not just within tennis but also the sporting world is a bold assumption, but what Osaka is trying to advocate for. She continues to push these uncomfortable conversations amongst the media and the governing bodies of tennis alike, with her own media platforms. Voicing opinions on political events and social justice issues online makes the media and governing bodies check the way they are run, and be as much in parallel in their statements with one of their best players as possible. Maybe slowly and surely, it might help to continue to grow the game and make it more appealing, ultimately ending up being accessed by more of a younger generation that Osaka represents.

Continuing the pattern of Osaka owning the narrative of the media about her, she also released the aforementioned documentary series, in partnership with Netflix. *Naomi Osaka* is

narrated by Osaka herself, and looks back at her background and upbringing, whilst discussing her ‘overnight stardom’ with winning the 2018 U.S. Open. The series is directed by Oscar nominee Garrett Bradley, who explains that “more than anything, I'd hope people can feel the power of empathy and to feel encouraged to take chances in life, perhaps especially in moments where the stakes can feel impossibly high (Greze, 2021)”. In releasing this *Netflix* series, alongside the *TIME* magazine article, Osaka is building on her use of social media by controlling her content when and how much she wants to reveal, and it is certain there will be a lot of commentary on both the article and the documentary moving forward. In her own words regarding the series, Osaka stated that “I feel like the platform that I have right now is something that I used to take for granted, and for me I feel like I should be using it for something - I believe, instead of following, you have to make your own path.” This series feels like a turning point for Osaka, who originally painted as more submissive and meek by the press, has decided to take matters of her representation into her own hands.

Osaka complicated her situation with the media, as in using casually written social media posts to withdraw and state her current mental health status, and finally her view on how the media should be making change. She then used traditional media (*TIME* magazine article, the *Netflix* documentary and *VOGUE* magazine profiles) to shape the narrative in ways that seemed more focused, controlled. It shows there's no simple solution to navigating such a difficult situation, continuing the dialogue on how athletes should or can interact with the media, and that Osaka's balancing act between her own social media platforms, and what the general media says and portrays her, is now a requirement for all athletes.

Osaka has positioned herself as a true pioneer for change within the sporting world. She is a representative of the consequences of not choosing to participate in the media world, and

how moving forward will create dialogue in how the media world is run. Her relationship with the media will affect what tournaments she plays, and how much familiarity she is granted with the traditional media at the bigger tournaments. Will she now be under more scrutiny than ever before from the journalists she decided to not converse with? Sports media can be far from forgiving, and Osaka choosing to take on these challenges will be a defining moment in her career.

## **Conclusion**

On July 13th, *Barbie* released their own version of Naomi herself. With racket in hand, dark skin and an afro, the doll is a far cry from the blonde and white standard *Barbie* doll that became a household image for little girls growing up. Selling out in a matter of hours, the doll's success shows that the public support for Osaka has not wavered, and her fans remain wanting to purchase in who she is and what she represents. However, it also shows that brands like *Barbie* are buying into the change for inclusivity and changing the narrative of what the ideal 'look' is for girls growing up and also what a 'tennis player' looks like. Her importance is also emphasized by recently lighting the torch at the Tokyo 2021 Olympics Opening ceremony - the first tennis player ever to do so.

In this research I have highlighted Osaka's role within the tennis community, and how her use of social media to build an activist identity tied to her race reshapes how we think about the intersections of sports, media, and activism. In showing the case study of her U.S. Open 2020 championship win, she demonstrated how to best use her platform, and put the sport of tennis on the global map as far as speaking out against social justice issues consistent with her messaging on Twitter and Instagram. In her continuing to lead the charge, it is forcing organizations to keep up with the modern-day game and modern day society, with governing bodies such as the WTA

using their social media platforms to also speak out. In comparing this to how athletes in other organizations like the NCAA struggle to operate within restrictive organizations, this study shows how college athletes and professional athletes in other sports can look to Osaka's actions as a model, potentially spurring change in how the governing bodies involved address digital activism among their members.

It was vital to note the ever-changing relationship between Osaka in the media, with additions like the withdrawals from Grand Slams, the *TIME* magazine article (*Appendix F*), and her *Netflix* series. The way in which every professional athlete is represented in the media ebbs and flows through their career, and this study looked at Osaka's representation as a player and the way her activism was perceived by the media. Hall's research states how representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture: "It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events (Hall, p. 1, 2020)." His work means that people, objects and even events, can operate as mental representations of them, which the media has a role to play when painting an image of how people think of something, or in this case, a person or athlete. The representation that Osaka operates in within the media will constantly shift, and it is on social media platforms that she will be able to try and control how that narrative is conveyed to the general public.

This study has also highlighted how important it is for the sports media who covers this type of activism into its role in bringing those sports and society as a whole into a new era of activism. As Schmidt (2018) stated "after all, some who turn to sports for entertainment have little interest in other news media. Thus, sport-media coverage of social and political issues

associated with the world of sport can help a broader group of people in society gain knowledge about issues to which they would otherwise have had little exposure. Providing such information is vital in a democratic society and is an important function of journalism (p. 12).” Concepts such as race and racism, intertwining with social justice issues that athletes like Osaka continue to speak on, will continue until white supremacy systems within the sports they play change. Evans touches on how such prejudice and prejudice leading to discrimination operate at multiple levels, including the systemic (such as tennis governing bodies), cultural and individual (Osaka herself) levels. “In sum, race/ethnicity as a subject of study is a labyrinthine one, both in sport and society (Evans et al, p. 290, 2020).” Sport will continue to be a huge part of society, and lead the way in changing certain ideologies, or racist stereotypes and challenging traditional, dated notions.

Sports media will continue to intersect with the mainstream media, as it constantly shines a light on social justice issues and aims to lead us to a better place in society, off and on the court. Osaka is making massive strides in changing the way the power dynamic between the media and athletes is changing, and with social media and activism becoming more of a standard part of the way athletes and sport operate, it is going to be outside the lines of the tennis courts that Osaka continues to create change.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

Osaka's withdrawal from Cincinnati and thoughts of police brutality (regarding Black Lives Matter)

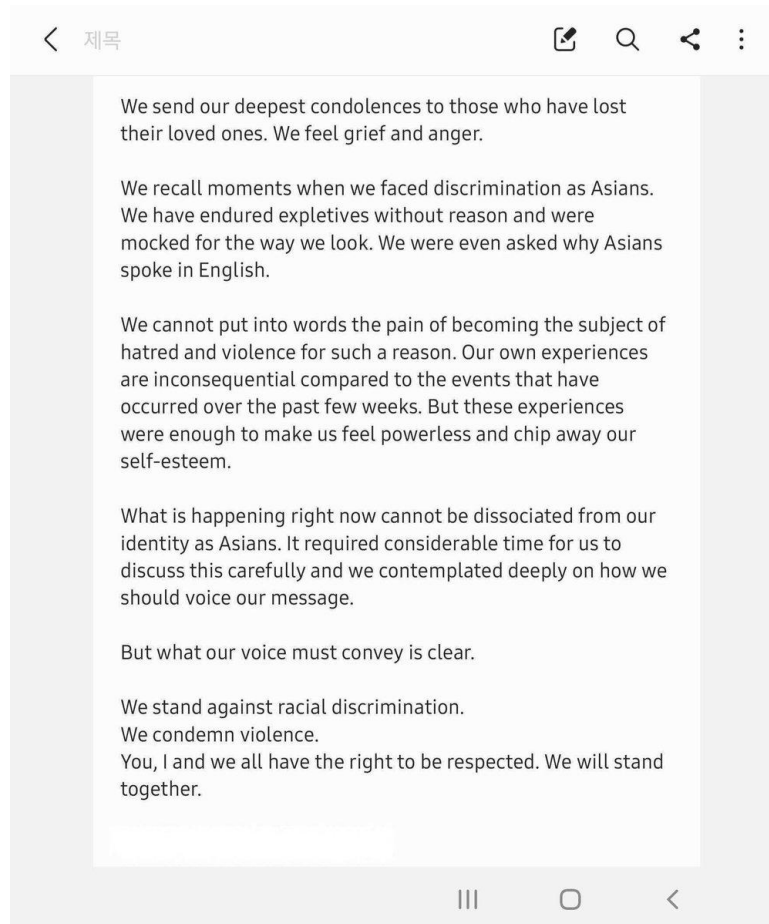
August 26, 2020 at 8:46 PM

Hello, as many of you are aware I was scheduled to play my semifinals match tomorrow. However, before I am an athlete, I am a black woman. And as a black woman I feel as though there are much more important matters at hand that need immediate attention, rather than watching me play tennis. I don't expect anything drastic to happen with me not playing, but if I can get a conversation started in a majority white sport I consider that a step in the right direction. Watching the continued genocide of Black people at the hand of the police is honestly making me sick to my stomach. I'm exhausted of having a new hashtag pop up every few days and I'm extremely tired of having this same conversation over and over again. When will it ever be enough?  
 #JacobBlake, #BreonnaTaylor, #ElijahMcclain, #GeorgeFloyd



## Appendix B

### Osaka's support for #StopAsianHate



## Appendix C

### Osaka's personal statements regarding her mental health

So here in Paris I was already feeling vulnerable and anxious so I thought it was better to exercise self-care and skip the press conferences. I announced it preemptively because I do feel like the rules are quite outdated in parts and I wanted to highlight that. I wrote privately to the tournament apologizing and saying that I would be more than happy to speak with them after the tournament as the Slams are intense. I'm gonna take some time away from the court now, but when the time is right I really want to work with the Tour to discuss ways we can make things better for the players, press and fans. Anyways hope you are all doing well and staying safe, love you guys I'll see you when I see you ❤️

Hey everyone, this isn't a situation I ever imagined or intended when I posted a few days ago. I think now the best thing for the tournament, the other players and my well-being is that I withdraw so that everyone can get back to focusing on the tennis going on in Paris. I never wanted to be a distraction and I accept that my timing was not ideal and my message could have been clearer. More importantly I would never trivialize mental health or use the term lightly. The truth is that I have suffered long bouts of depression since the US Open in 2018 and I have had a really hard time coping with that. Anyone that knows me knows I'm introverted, and anyone that has seen me at the tournaments will notice that I'm often wearing headphones as that helps dull my social anxiety. Though the tennis press has always been kind to me (and I wanna apologize especially to all the cool journalists who I may have hurt), I am not a natural public speaker and get huge waves of anxiety before I speak to the world's media. I get really nervous and find it stressful to always try to engage and give you the best answers I can.

## Appendix D

## Osaka's U.S. Open 2020 - 7 Masks and her interview with Stubbs



The Undeclared  
@TheUndeclared



"What was the message that you got was more the question. I feel like the point is to make people start talking."

Naomi Osaka on the message that she wanted to send by wearing her seven face masks honoring Black victims of racial injustice and police brutality.



6:31 PM · Sep 12, 2020



4.5K



See the latest COVID-19 information on Twitter

## Appendix E

**The Undefeated**

@TheUndefeated

"What was the message that you got was more the question. I feel like the point is to make people start talking." Naomi Osaka on the message that she wanted to send by wearing her seven face masks honoring Black victims of racial injustice and police brutality. <https://t.co/YQ4Ee46gyD>

## Appendix F

Osaka's TIME magazine cover

