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# Incidental exposure to political content in sports media: antecedents and effects on political discussion and participation

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## ABSTRACT

Incidental exposure, also called inadvertent exposure, has grown more important in recent years because it has the potential to engage news “dropouts” and expose partisans to the “other side” in political communication. Televised sports media are becoming an important venue for this type of unintentional exposure to political content, with the rise in the last decade of a new age of athlete activism not seen since the ‘60s and ‘70s, and the accompanying perception from some conservatives that sports media be a “politics-free zone.” Relying on a representative, online panel survey of adult internet users in the United States (N = 1,493), this study assesses the extent to which Americans are incidentally exposed to political content in televised sports media. It analyzed demographic, political, and communicative antecedents of such exposure. Results suggest low-but-substantial levels of incidental exposure in sports media, and highlight the demographic, psychographic, and behavioral profiles who report exposure. Results are discussed in light of important public conversations about the role of sports media in the political sphere.

## KEYWORDS

Sports media; incidental exposure; political participation; communication mediation; Colin Kaepernick

When Colin Kaepernick sat during the national anthem of a 2016 preseason game, he wanted to start a conversation about the oppression of black people and ongoing police brutality in the United States (Wyche, 2016). Sitting, and later kneeling, during the anthem led to a firestorm of criticism (Rorke & Copeland, 2017), which reached a climax a year later when President Donald Trump told supporters at a rally that NFL owners should fire players who knelt for disrespecting the flag and urged fans to leave if players knelt (Tatum, 2017), and flared again in 2020 when prominent Black athletes indicated they would kneel during the anthem to continue shining a light on racial injustices following George Floyd’s death by Minneapolis police.

Media coverage of and discourse about Kaepernick’s protest, with concurrent stories involving athlete activism, led numerous fans to boycott the NFL, citing “politicization of the game” (SI, 2017, para. 20). This complaint became

commonplace over the next several years among commentators and fans (Freddoso, 2017), contributing to a burgeoning normative assertion that sports and sports media should be an “apolitical” space (Clavio & Vooris, 2018), but overlooking sports media’s long-standing reinforcement of conservative social and political ideologies (Thorson & Serazio, 2018). The perceived politicization of sports media contributes to an understudied phenomenon: incidental exposure to political content in sports media, or exposure to political content where people did not intend to encounter it, specifically while watching televised sporting events and sports programming. Incidental exposure is important because it can engage people in political discussion and participation (Ardèvol-Abreu, Diehl, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; Kim, Chen, & De Zúñiga, 2013), however, research has not focused on incidental exposure in sports media, which has been an overlooked venue for such exposure.

This study aims fill that gap in the literature. Relying on an online panel survey (N = 1,493) conducted before the 2018 U.S. Midterm Elections, it provides descriptive inferences about the frequency by which people perceive they have been incidentally exposed to political content in televised sports media. It also assesses the antecedents and outcomes of exposure, including its relationships with political discussion and participation. We focus on televised sports media because much of the “stick to sports” narrative is a response to athletes protesting during the national anthem, as well as the coverage of those protests on popular televised sports-centric shows.

## **Sports and politics**

Sports and politics have a long history together (Bryant, 2018; Grix, 2013; Zirin, 2005, 2013), despite the fact some people believe they are and should remain separate. Strenk (1979, p. 129) noted, “sports are politics,” and there are numerous instances of the two intermingling: the Olympics (e.g., Grix, 2013), controversies over publicly funded sports stadiums (e.g., Delaney & Eckstein, 2008), and athlete protests (e.g., Kaufman, 2008; Zirin, 2005). While the public in the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the rise of activist athletes, including Muhammad Ali, Billie Jean King, and Arthur Ashe, fighting for civil rights (Cunningham & Regan, 2012), sports fans largely decried those activist athletes, and those in power tried to tamper that activism by signing “mild-mannered” Black athletes and blackballing outspoken players (Bryant, 2018; Vooris, 2010). Many sports reporters also railed against the activist athletes, arguing athletes made too much money to complain about societal issues (Khan, 2012).

Perhaps as a result of these efforts to quash athlete activism, apolitical athletes became the norm between the 1980s and 2000s. For example, O. J. Simpson, Michael Jordan, and Tiger Woods remained apolitical to avoid losing endorsements and alienating advertisers (Bryant, 2018; Cooky,

2017; Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). However, there is currently a growing trend of Black athletes speaking up about societal issues (Hartmann, 2016). Publicized instances of police killing unarmed black men (Cooky, 2017), beginning with Trayvon Martin in 2012 (Zirin, 2013), as well as the formation of Black Lives Matter in response to these killings, provided motivation for this generation of activist athletes (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017, p. 427). Some point to LeBron James and his actions in response to the Martin shooting – he and his Miami Heat teammates posed for a photograph wearing hooded sweatshirts – as the first instance an athlete became politically active in the contemporary era (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Zirin, 2013). James and fellow NBA superstars Dwayne Wade, Carmelo Anthony and Chris Paul opened the 2016 ESPYs by discussing issues of police brutality and racial profiling, as well as encouraging fellow athletes to become actively involved (Messer & Caplan, 2016).

### **“Apolitical” sports media**

American sports media have always been “political”; they have traditionally promoted dominant social narratives (Serazio & Thorson, 2017). These narratives favored a socially conservative worldview, reinforcing the social status quo (Thorson & Serazio, 2018) in terms of race, gender, and nationalism (e.g., Eastman & Billings, 2000). An example of a conservative reinforcing this ideology, while not a sports media member, is FOX News’ Laura Ingraham. She told LeBron James, a Black athlete, in 2018 to “shut up and dribble,” and said his criticisms of Trump were “ignorant,” but Ingraham defended NFL quarterback Drew Brees, a white athlete, following his comments in 2020 about players kneeling during the national anthem would be disrespecting the American flag (Rosenstein, 2020) – a popular refrain from conservatives during Kaepernick’s protests.

There is a growing perception among sports fans that sports media should be an “apolitical” space and avoid athlete activism coverage (Clavio & Vooris, 2018; Freddoso, 2017).

There is a tinge of truth behind claims that sports media have adopted a more political voice. Sports journalist Dave Zirin said in an interview with *Contexts* (Carrington, 2016) that sports media have become more political in an effort to reach underserved markets (see also, Brady, 2016), and some sports commentators point to coverage of the “kneeling controversy” and athlete activism as a primary reason for ESPN’s declining revenue (e.g., Strauss, 2017). And while these narratives overlook media’s long history of promoting politically conservative narratives in the context of sport, they also reflect a growing perception that sports media have become more political when they shouldn’t (Clavio & Vooris, 2018; Freddoso, 2017). These perceived changes in sports media highlight an interesting and under-studied phenomenon: People perceive they are incidentally exposed to political content in sports media.

### ***Incidental exposure***

Incidental exposure refers to unintentional encounters with news or public affairs content (Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001), and it has been an important concept in audience studies since the 1950s (Downs, 1957; see also Krugman & Hartley, 1970). But it has received renewed scholarly attention in recent years as the “purposeful” news audience has shrunk due to increased media choice (Prior, 2007), and as partisan selective exposure becomes more common (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Stroud, 2008). A Pew Research Center study found about 60% of Americans are incidentally exposed to news online while searching for other news content or performing other tasks (Mitchell, Gottfried, Shearer, & Lu, 2017). A different Pew survey found about one-third of Americans appreciated incidental exposure to news or public affairs content online, while about half said they somewhat appreciated the incidental exposure and the other third did not appreciate it (Purcell, Raine, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010). Of the one-third who appreciated the incidental exposure, they were avid news followers who used several news platforms daily, those with college degrees and respondents with high levels of income. Incidental exposure becoming more common means it has the potential to engage those who do not normally seek out the news, and to break people out of their “echo chambers,” exposing partisans to oppositional news viewpoints.

Research shows incidental exposure is an important source of learning and/or the development of political efficacy among people not interested in politics (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2013), particularly if they actively process the information they encounter (Matthes, Nanz, Stubenvoll, & Heiss, 2020). For example, Lee and Kim (2017) found incidental exposure increases audience recall and recognition of news stories. Meanwhile, Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2017) found incidental exposure is related to internal political efficacy, particularly if people discuss the news they encounter. Research also shows incidental exposure is positively correlated with civic and/or political participation (Kim et al., 2013; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016) and news engagement (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). Most of the research on incidental exposure has focused on (a) entertainment media other than televised sports media (e.g., Hollander, 2005; Kim & Vishak, 2008) and (b) media technologies such as social media (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). But little research has been conducted on incidental exposure in sports media, and we therefore pose the following research question:

RQ1: How often are people incidentally exposed to political content in sports media?

Evidence regarding the relationship between demographic factors and incidental exposure is limited. However, the research that does exist shows that age (Tewksbury et al., 2001) and income and/or education (Fletcher & Nielsen,

2018; Lee & Kim, 2017; Purcell et al., 2010) are positively related, leading some scholar to argue that incidental exposure takes on a “rich-get-richer” dynamic, whereby people who are likely to engage with news in other venues are also the most likely to encounter news incidentally on social media (Kümpel, 2020). Meanwhile, prior research also shows political orientations could be important variables to consider. One study (Weeks, Lane, Kim, Lee, & Kwak, 2017) found political partisanship and incidental exposure jointly affect political information sharing. Another study tested several political variables, but found no significant results (Lee & Kim, 2017). In sum, evidence regarding the role of demographics in shaping incidental exposure on social media are mixed, and it is unclear whether they translate to television sports media, where audiences may be quite different from social media audiences. Therefore, we ask the following questions:

RQ2: Which demographic variables are related to incidental exposure to political content in sports media?

RQ3: Which political orientations are related to incidental exposure to political content in sports media?

### ***Incidental exposure and political participation***

In the political science literature, political participation has been conceptualized as a four-dimensional construct: (1) voting, (2) campaign activity, (3) contacting politicians or public officials, and (4) collective action (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Theory suggests many of these behaviors are rooted in social or community-oriented realms (Verba et al., 1995). Thus, traditional engagement in political action grows from involvement with social and community ties (Brehm & Rahn, 1997). Communication plays a vital role in this process, because the value in social and community ties must be realized via communication to produce action (Rojas, Shah, & Friedland, 2011).

These community and communicative bases for political action took different forms with the advent of the internet, which resulted in new forms of political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010) that are personal and driven by ephemeral attachment to online communities or causes (Bennett, 1998) and may require low levels of long-term commitment (Norris, 2002). But they also expanded repertoires of political action to reach beyond political and social institutions, and led to the formation of new types of engagement-driven organizations (Bimber, Flanigan, & Stohl, 2005). These actions have not replaced older forms, but complemented them so the range of potential action is broader than in the past (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011).

Prior research found an empirical connection between incidental news exposure in non-sports media to political participation in both American (e.g., Kim et al., 2013) and non-American samples (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Theoretically, this connection occurs because incidental exposure promotes political learning (Tewksbury et al., 2001) and develops internal political efficacy (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2017). Therefore, incidental exposure provides a knowledge base for action, as well as the requisite self-belief. Drawing from these studies, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Incidental exposure to political content in sports media will be positively related to online political participation.

H2: Incidental exposure to political content in sports media will be positively related to offline political participation.

### ***Communication mediation***

The communication mediation model is a family of models that seeks to explain the process through which news use influences political behavior (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). One key point is the idea that political discussion mediates the relationship between news use and participation (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). This process occurs because discussion gives people the opportunity to reflect on and integrate information in to preexisting cognitive schema (Shah et al., 2007), allowing individuals to connect ideas of news coverage to existing informational and community-based resources critical for political action (Shah et al., 2017).

The model consistently finds a connection between news use and political talk frequency (e.g., Shah, 2016; Shah et al., 2005), and prior research on incidental exposure shows a positive relationship to political discussion (e.g., Ardèvol-Abreu, Diehl, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019). Based on prior research, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Incidental exposure to political content in sports media will be positively related to talk frequency.

The communication mediation model also implies talk frequency will mediate the relationships between incidental exposure in sports media and political participation.

H4: Talk frequency will mediate the relationship between incidental exposure in sports media and online political participation.

H5: Talk frequency will mediate the relationship between incidental exposure in sports media and offline political participation.

## **Methods**

### ***Sample and data***

This study is based on an online survey of adult internet users in the United States collected September 19–29, 2018. The survey was fielded by a private survey firm, Survey Sampling International (SSI). It has a sample size of  $N = 1,493$  and a cooperation rate of approximately 70% (AAPOR, 2016; CR3), an appropriate metric when traditional response rates cannot be reported because parameters of sample invitations are unknown. The sample is broadly reflective of the population of interest, with an average age of 48.39 ( $SD = 16.18$ ), 51% women, and 77.2% white. The average respondent has an associate's or bachelor's degree ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ , where 1 = Some high school and 7 = Post-graduate degree) and their household that makes between 45,000 USD and 75,000 USD per year ( $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 2.14$ , where 1 = Less than 15,000 USD and 8 = More than 150,000 USD).

### ***Measures***

#### ***Online political participation***

Measures for online and offline participation are based on prior research (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010), and it was operationalized by asking respondents whether they have recently participated in 14 common political activities. Specifically, respondents were asked whether, in the last 12 months, they participated in the following activities online (1 = Yes, 0 = No): donate to a politician or party, work for a politician or party, attend a rally or town hall, contact a politician or political party, organize or invite people to attend a protest, organize or invite people to attend a demonstration or a march, organize or invite people to attend a road block, contact your elected representative, write a letter to the editor or call a talk radio show, sign a petition, join a group related to a political cause, create a group related to a political cause, follow/friend/like a politician or political party on social media, and change your social media profile picture in support of a political cause. Each respondents' scores on these 14 items were summed to create an additive index (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 1.04$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ).

#### ***Offline political participation***

Similarly, offline political participation was operationalized by asking respondents whether they have recently participated in 18 common political activities

offline (1 = Yes, 0 = No). These items included offline engagement in the same 12 activities as listed above for online participation, plus an additional six activities that include the following: attend a protest, attend a demonstration or a march, participate in a road block, display a bumper sticker or yard sign supporting a politician or political party, boycott a company or product for political reasons, and purchase a product for political reasons. Each respondents' scores on these 18 items were summed to create an additive index (Cronbach's alpha = .88,  $M = 1.50$ ,  $SD = 2.89$ ).

### ***Political talk frequency***

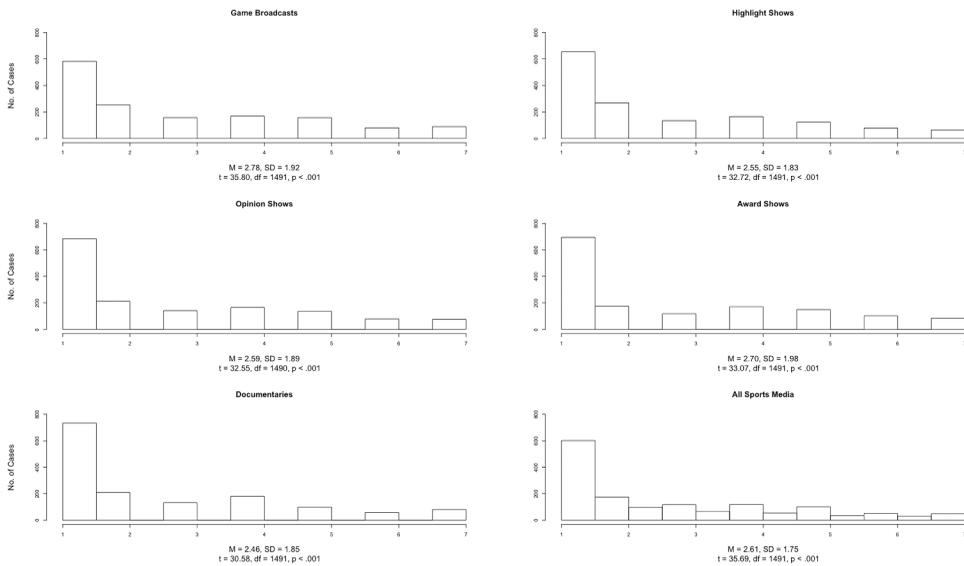
Based on prior literature (Barnidge, 2017), the measure used 16 items (1 = Never, 7 = Very often) asking respondents how often they talk about "government, elections, or politics" with family members, friends, other coworkers or classmates, and other acquaintances in four settings: face-to-face, mobile messaging apps, social media, and online (not including social media or mobile messaging apps). The 16 items were averaged (Cronbach's alpha = .97,  $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ).

### ***Sports media incidental exposure***

The dependent variable, incidental exposure to political content in televised sports media, comes from prior research on incidental exposure to news content (Barnidge, 2020; Kim et al., 2013) and was adapted to fit the above research questions. The variable is based on five survey items (1 = Never, 7 = Very often) asking respondents how often they "encounter or come across political content" in (a) sports game broadcasts (e.g., on ESPN, NBC Sports), (b) sports highlights or news (e.g., Sportscenter, FSN News), (c) sports opinion or commentary shows (e.g., Around the Horn, Speak for Yourself), (d) sports award shows (e.g., the ESPYs, the Heisman Ceremony), and (e) sports documentaries (e.g., ESPN 30 for 30, HBO Real Sports). These five items were averaged to create the final variable (Cronbach's alpha = .96,  $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ). Distributions for individual items and the averaged scale are shown in Figure 1.

### ***Political talk network size***

Based on prior literature (Barnidge, 2017), we included two dimensions of political talk: network size and talk frequency. Respondents were prompted, "From time to time, people talk with others about government, elections, politics, or the news," then asked how many people with whom they have "talked about these subjects" in the past 12 months (a) in face-to-face settings, (b) via mobile messaging apps, (c) on social media, and (d) online (not including social media or mobile messaging apps). These four items were summed to create the measure, which was capped at 200 to reduce skew (Cronbach's alpha = .63,  $M = 43.42$ ,  $SD = 156.38$ ).



**Figure 1.** Histograms for the items used to measure inadvertent exposure to political content in sports media, as well as the five-item composite scale (bottom left). All items are measured on seven-point scales where 1 = Never and 7 = All the time. Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) are reported below each histogram, along with results from one-sample t-tests that test for statistically significant difference from the lowest point on the scale (1 = Never).

### News use

Based on prior literature (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012), the variable was constructed using 13 items, asking respondents how often (1 = Never, 7 = Several times a day), they use national newspapers (e.g., the New York Times, Wall Street Journal), local or regional newspapers, national news magazines (e.g., Time, Newsweek), talk radio (e.g., Rush Limbaugh, Paul Finebaum), public radio (e.g., NPR), national news broadcasts (e.g., ABC, CBS), local news broadcasts, cable news (e.g., Fox news, CNN), online-only news sites or blogs (e.g., HuffPo, DrudgeReport), online sites for news organizations (e.g., nytimes.com, foxnews.com), podcasts (e.g., PodSaveAmerica, RadioLab), online message boards (e.g., Reddit, Digg), blogging websites (e.g., Wordpress, Medium), social networking websites or apps (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), microblogging websites or apps (e.g., Twitter, Tumblr), photo sharing websites or apps (e.g., Instagram, Pinterest), video sharing websites or apps (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo), and mobile messaging websites or apps (e.g., Snapchat, What's App). These items were averaged to create the final variable (Cronbach's alpha = .97, M = 2.87, SD = 1.16).

### ***Conservative ideology***

Based on prior literature (Garrett & Stroud, 2014), political ideology was measured with three survey items asking respondents to place themselves on an 11-point, L-R scale (1 = Liberal, 5 = Neutral, 11 = Conservative) for social issues, economic issues, and general ideology. These average of these items created the final variable (Cronbach's alpha = .95,  $M = 6.33$ ,  $SD = 2.70$ ).

### ***Republican party identity***

Three survey items, borrowed from the Annenberg National Election Study (ANES, 2017), created the party identity variable. The first question asked respondents, "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an independent, or what?" Those who identified as Democrat or Republican were directed to a second question asking them how strong their identity is (Strong or Not that strong). Strong party identifiers received a score of 3 (Republican) or -3 (Democrat), while weak party identifiers received a score of 2 or -2. Those who identified as independents or other were directed to a different follow-up question: "Even though you don't identify with either major party, do you typically think of yourself as closer to the Democratic Party or to the Republican Party?" Those who identified as party leaners received scores of 1 (Republican) or -1 (Democrat), while those who responded "Neither" received a score of 0 (nonpartisan). This resulted in a 7-point scale (-3 = Strong Democrat, 0 = Nonpartisan, 3 = Strong Republican). The variable has a mean close to zero ( $M = -.15$ ,  $SD = 2.20$ ).

### ***Political knowledge***

Political knowledge was measured with six fact-based survey items from prior research (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) asking respondents about political actors, parties, and processes. Correct answers were tallied, with a minimum score of 0 and a maximum score of 6 ( $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ).

### ***Political efficacy***

Political efficacy was measured with three items borrowed from prior research (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). Respondents were asked the extent they agree or disagree (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree): "People like me can influence what local government does," "I believe that the national government cares about what people like me think," and "City government responds to the initiatives of individuals." These three items were averaged to create the final variable (Cronbach's alpha = .70,  $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ).

### ***Political interest***

Based on prior literature (Verba et al., 1995), political interest was measured with three items asking respondents their interest in local or regional politics,

national politics, and international politics (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very). These three items were averaged (Cronbach's alpha = .89, M = 4.35, SD = 1.72).

### Demographics

Analyses controlled for age, gender, race, education, and income. See above for descriptive statistics.

### Analysis

The analysis unfolds in four stages. First, descriptive statistics are assessed for the sports media incidental exposure items, followed by tests for differences by demographic groups using t-tests and ANOVA. Second, logistic regression (logit) and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression assess the predictors of sports media incidental exposure. Third, logit and OLS are again used to assess the outcomes of sports media incidental exposure: talk frequency, online participation, and offline participation. Finally, the bootstrapped mediation tests are conducted in the SPSS PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) to determine whether talk frequency mediates the relationships between sports media incidental exposure and participation.

### Results

RQ1 asked how often people incidentally encounter political content in sports media. The sample distributions for the five individual televised sports media incidental exposure items are plotted in [Figure 1](#). The bottom right panel shows the composite scale. Results from one-sample t-tests testing for statistically significant difference from the lowest point on the scale are shown below each panel. The figure shows a high number of “never” responses for each item; however, beyond that, the sample distributions approach normality. Means for the individual items – all of which are statistically different from 1 – range between 2.46 and 2.78 (1 = Never, 7 = Very often). The composite scale has a mean of 2.61, which is significantly different from the scale's low point ( $t(1491) = 35.69, p < .001$ ). Although these means are statistically different from the “Never” response option, they are low given the scale's range. These means are lowered by the high number of “never” responses, indicating most people are not incidentally exposed to political content in sports media. However, among those who report minor exposure, it is not an uncommon occurrence.

[Table 1](#) shows the composite scale breakdown by demographic groups. For age, the highest mean (3.13) was in the 26–33 age group, while the lowest mean (2.21) is in the 41–49 age group ( $F(8, 1480) = 4.68, p < .001$ ). Men ( $M = 2.88$ ) are significantly more likely ( $t(1464.8) = 5.71, p < .001$ ) to report incidental exposure in sports media than women ( $M = 2.36$ ), and nonwhite individuals ( $M = 2.79$ ) are more likely ( $t(1490) = -2.40, p = .017$ )

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for sports media inadvertent exposure by age, gender identity, education, annual household income, and racial identity.

Group			Test Statistics and <i>p</i> -values
Age	M	SD	F (8, 1480) = 4.68 <i>p</i> <.001 <sup>a</sup>
18–25	2.49	1.81	
26–33	3.13	2.05	
34–41	2.78	1.83	
41–49	2.21	1.48	
50–57	2.36	1.64	
58–65	2.74	1.72	
65–73	2.61	1.62	
74–81	2.84	1.67	
82+	2.63	1.68	
Gender Identity			t (1464.8) = 5.71 <i>p</i> <.001
Man	2.88	1.79	
Woman	2.36	1.66	
Education			F (2, 1489) = 1.94 <i>p</i> =.144
No College Degree	2.50	1.74	
College Degree	2.67	1.76	
Graduate Degree	2.70	1.72	
Annual Household Income			F (2, 1481) = 7.88 <i>p</i> <.001 <sup>b</sup>
\$45 k or less	2.38	1.66	
\$45 k to \$75 k	2.58	1.72	
\$75 k or more	2.80	1.81	
Racial Identity			t (1490) = –2.40 <i>p</i> =.017
White	2.56	1.73	
Nonwhite	2.79	1.81	

Cell entries are means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for the sports media inadvertent exposure items. <sup>a</sup> For age, Tukey post-hoc tests show the 26–33 category is significantly higher than the others, and also the 41–49 category is significantly lower than the others. <sup>b</sup> For income, Tukey post-hoc tests show the lowest and highest categories are significantly different from one another.

to report exposure than whites ( $M = 2.56$ ). Finally, the lowest income group ( $M = 2.38$ ) and the highest income group ( $M = 2.80$ ) are statistically different from one another ( $F(2, 1481) = 7.88, p < .001$ ). In summary, these results suggest minority men are the most likely to report incidental exposure in sports media.

RQ2 and RQ3 asked which demographic and political orientations variables are related to incidental exposure to political content in sports media. Because of a high number of “Never” responses on the sports media incidental exposure variable, logistic regression is used to assess which antecedent variables are related to a binary measure for sports media incidental exposure: In this case, 0 = Never and 1 = More often than never. Then, OLS regression is used to assess the linear predictors of sports media incidental exposure among the subset of respondents who reported at least some incidental exposure ( $n = 964$ ).

As seen in Table 2, the logit model shows women are half as likely as men to report incidental exposure to political content in sports media (Odds Ratio (OR) = .58). Meanwhile, nonwhite individuals are about 1.5 times more likely

**Table 2.** Antecedents of incidental exposure to political content in sports media.

Variable	Sports Media Incidental Exposure				
	Binary (Logit)			Continuous (OLS)	
	OR	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	.06	-2.84***	.50	1.07**	.38
Age	1.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Gender Identity (1 = Woman)	.58	-.54***	.15	-.23*	.11
Education	1.02	.02	.04	-.01	.03
Income	1.07	.07*	.03	.02	.02
Race (1 = Nonwhite)	1.43	.36*	.16	.11	.11
Political Knowledge	1.00	.00	.04	-.13***	.04
Political Efficacy	1.01	.01	.06	-.04	.04
Political Interest	1.09	.08	.04	.14***	.03
Conservative Ideology	1.09	.08*	.03	.12***	.02
Republican Identification	1.10	.09*	.04	.02	.03
Intentional News Use	2.22	.80***	.08	.52***	.05
Political Talk Network Size	1.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
R <sup>2</sup> (Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> )	(.16)***			.29***	
N	1481			964	

In the first three columns, cell entries are odds ratios (OR), coefficients (B) and standard errors (SE) from a logistic regression (logit) model predicting the probability of exposure (1 = Exposed, 0 = Not Exposed). In the last two columns, cell entries are unstandardized coefficients (B) and standard errors (SE) from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models predicting sports media incidental exposure among those who report at least some exposure. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

to report exposure than white individuals (OR = 1.43). Conservatives (OR = 1.09), Republicans (OR = 1.10), and respondents with higher incomes (OR = 1.07) are slightly more likely to report exposure. Finally, people who intentionally use the news are more than twice as likely to report exposure (OR = 2.22).

The OLS model shows the predictors of sports media incidental exposure among those who reported at least some exposure. Results show men report more exposure than women (B = -.23, SE = .11,  $p < .05$ ). Those who are less knowledgeable (B = -.13, SE = .04,  $p < .001$ ), but more interested in politics (B = .14, SE = .03,  $p < .001$ ) also report more exposure. Finally, conservatives (B = .12, SE = .02,  $p < .001$ ) and people who intentionally use the news (B = .52, SE = .05,  $p < .001$ ) report more exposure, as well.

H1 – H3 posit sports media incidental exposure will be positively related to talk frequency, online participation, and offline participation, respectively. These hypotheses were again tested using the “zero-hurdle” approach: For each outcome, one model was fit with a binary variable for sports media incidental exposure, and a second model was fit using a continuous variable among the subset of respondents who report at least some exposure. Table 3 shows results for talk frequency. Both the binary and continuous measures of sports media incidental exposure are positively related. For the binary measure, B = .23 (SE = .06,  $p < .001$ ), and the continuous measure, B = .17 (SE = .02,  $p < .001$ ). These results support H1.

Table 4 shows results for online and offline participation. For both outcomes, the binary independent variable is not significantly related.

**Table 3.** The relationship between incidental exposure to political content in sports media and political talk frequency.

Variable	Political Talk Frequency			
	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	.45*	.21	.30	.28
Age	-.01***	.00	-.01***	.00
Gender (1 = Woman)	-.21**	.06	-.19*	.08
Education	.01	.02	.00	.02
Income	.03*	.01	.01	.02
Race (1 = Nonwhite)	.07	.06	.00	.08
Political Knowledge	-.07**	.02	-.04	.03
Political Efficacy	.03	.02	.06*	.03
Political Interest	.15***	.02	.15***	.03
Conservative Ideology	.04**	.01	.04**	.02
Republican Identification	-.03	.02	-.05*	.02
Intentional News Use	.64***	.03	.57***	.04
Political Talk Network Size	.01***	.00	.01***	.00
Sports Media Incidental Exposure (Binary)	.23***	.06		
Sports Media Incidental Exposure (Continuous)			.17***	.02
R <sup>2</sup>	.53***		.57***	
N		1481		964

Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients (B) and standard errors (SE) from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. The first model uses a binary predictor for sports media incidental exposure (1 = Yes, 0 = No) and is fit for the full sample (N = 1481). The second model for each outcome uses a continuous predictor and is fit only among those who report at least some exposure (N = 964). \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.** The outcomes of incidental exposure to political content in sports media.

Variable	Online Political Participation				Offline Political Participation			
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	-1.55***	.36	-2.14***	.54	-1.84***	.51	-2.89***	.75
Age	-.01*	.00	-.01*	.01	-.01**	.00	-.02*	.01
Gender (1 = Woman)	-.24*	.11	-.27	.15	-.42**	.16	-.39	.21
Education	.03	.03	.00	.04	.03	.04	-.01	.06
Income	.03	.02	.03	.03	.06	.03	.08	.05
Race (1 = Nonwhite)	-.39***	.12	-.37*	.16	-.58***	.17	-.60**	.22
Political Knowledge	-.09*	.04	-.09	.05	-.14**	.05	-.15*	.07
Political Efficacy	.18***	.04	.22***	.06	.23***	.06	.29***	.08
Political Interest	.18***	.03	.21***	.05	.26***	.05	.30***	.07
Conservative Ideology	.04	.02	.06	.03	.04	.03	.05	.04
Republican Identification	-.12***	.03	-.12**	.04	-.15***	.04	-.14**	.05
Intentional News Use	.55***	.05	.51***	.07	.82***	.07	.76***	.10
Political Talk Network Size	.01***	.00	.00	.00	.01***	.00	.00	.00
Sports Media Incidental Exposure (Binary)	-.07	.10			-.04	.15		
Sports Media Incidental Exposure (Continuous)			.17***	.05			.28***	.06
R <sup>2</sup>	.27***		.30***		.28***		.32***	
N		1481		964		1481		964

Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients (B) and standard errors (SE) from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. The first model for each outcome uses a binary predictor for sports media incidental exposure (1 = Yes, 0 = No) and is fit for the full sample (N = 1481). The second model for each outcome uses a continuous predictor and is fit only among those who report at least some exposure (N = 964). \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

However, the continuous independent variable is significantly related. For online participation,  $B = .17$  ( $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and for offline participation,  $B = .28$  ( $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results support H2 and H3 with a slight qualification: Incidental exposure to political content in televised sports media is related to political participation among those who report at least some exposure.

Finally, mediation tests were conducted in PROCESS to test H4 and H5, which predicted talk frequency would mediate the relationship between sports media incidental exposure and online/offline participation. PROCESS uses bootstrapping methods to estimate direct, indirect, and total effects (5,000 iterations). Results show talk frequency is a statistically significant mediator for both online and offline participation, where sports media incidental exposure has both a direct effect and an indirect effect through talk frequency. For online participation, the direct effect is  $B = .12$  ( $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the indirect effect is  $B = .05$  ( $SE = .01$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and the total effect is  $B = .17$  ( $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For offline participation, the direct effect is  $B = .21$  ( $SE = .07$ ,  $p < .01$ ), the indirect effect is  $B = .07$  ( $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and the total effect is  $B = .28$  ( $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Both Sobel tests are statistically significant (for online participation,  $z = 3.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ; for offline participation,  $z = 4.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results support H4 and H5.

## Discussion

This study has provided (1) descriptive inferences about the frequency with which people report incidental exposure to political content in televised sports media, (2) the demographic and political antecedents of such exposure, and (3) the outcomes of this exposure, including political discussion and participation. On the first point, results suggest low-but-substantial levels of incidental exposure in televised sports media. Second, the study identifies gender, race, ideology, partisanship, and intentional news use as antecedents. Third, the study shows positive relationships between sports media incidental exposure and (a) talk frequency, (b) online political participation, and (c) offline political participation. Finally, talk frequency partially mediates the relationships between sports media incidental exposure and political participation.

These findings are relevant for two important discussion points regarding sports media and the broader public sphere. The first is certain people may be more sensitive in recognizing “political” content, and therefore report higher levels of it. American sports media have a history of skewing conservative and have reinforced the social status quo in terms of race, gender, and nationalism (Eastman & Billings, 2000; Thorson & Serazio, 2018). But there is a growing perception among conservatives and conservative media that sports media should be an “apolitical” space that avoids political coverage, including the “kneeling controversy.” We contend this normative assertion about sports media is one of the factors driving the growth of the perception that sports media have become “politicized.” That said, many respondents reported no incidental exposure to political content in sports media. That could be because of a recency bias from the respondents who took the survey in 2018. That year lacked major socio-political protests, outside of a few instances, than the preceding years and following years – which will invariably include protests

by major stars across the sports landscape over the deaths of George Floyd and others killed by law enforcement in the last decade. The respondents may not have recalled any political content in sports while completing the survey.

So, who is more likely to perceive content is “political?” Our findings bear identify two groups. The first group, politically conservative men, is not surprising. This is who one might expect would perceive incidental exposure given the argument about normative presumptions about sports media. The second group, nonwhite individuals, is more surprising. That said, the same psychological processes may be driving perception among both groups. While they may fall on opposing sides of issues such as “Black Lives Matter,” each has well-formed schemas for interpreting political discourse about race. Thus, both groups are more sensitive about these conversations, and are likely to notice when media engage in them. People who do not identify with either of these groups are less likely to describe these conversations as “political.”

Delving deeper into the demographic results, we find men ages 26–33 reported they are more likely to be incidentally exposed to political content in sports than other age groups. This could be because respondents outside the aforementioned groups may not be as sensitive to the conversations surrounding social and political issues. The fact women were half as likely as men to report encountering political content in sports media is not surprising because men are more likely to be sports fans than women, according to a 2020 survey that show 74% of male respondents saying they are sports fans compared to 54% of female respondents (Morning Consult, 2020); however, we have no way of knowing that was the case without asking how often the respondents consume sports media.

The second point is that incidental exposure is an important way to engage people who are involved in politics. Incidental exposure is positively related to political participation (e.g., Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2013) and political discussion (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2019). In line with the communication mediation model, political discussion gives people the opportunity to think about and integrate information incidentally encountered in sports media (Shah et al., 2007), allowing them to connect that information to existing informational and community resources (Shah et al., 2017). Some view sports as an “apolitical” media arena, but these findings challenge that narrative. Rather than being apolitical, sports media may promote political action by covering political topics. This study cannot comment on the *nature* of that participation. It is unclear whether individuals are persuaded by coverage of political topics in sports media, or whether they respond to it because they want to take “corrective action,” correcting perceived wrongs encountered via political participation (Rojas, Barnidge, & Abril, 2016). Future research could address this question.

This study is limited in several important ways. First, the design of the study is cross-sectional. Although the study’s goals revolve around descriptive rather

than causal inferences, we cannot be certain about the over-time dynamics of those inferences. Second, we did not measure attention to sports media and therefore have no way of knowing whether incidental exposure is more common among frequent sports consumers. However, we can infer from the demographic correlates that this is probably the case. Third, the measures rely on self-reported measures rather than observational data. Future research could compare these self-reports to observational data to understand whether people over-report or underreport incidental exposure in sports media. Fourth, our measures were not borrowed from prior research on sports media, but adapted from prior research on incidental exposure to general news media. Future research should assess the reliability and validity of these measures in different samples. Fifth, we studied incidental exposure to political content in televised sports media, so the results cannot be generalized to other forms of sports media, such as print media and sports talk radio. Finally, our analyses focused on descriptive, not causal inferences. Future research should theorize and outline a causal process of the effects of incidental exposure, and test them using time-ordered data. This research could focus on examining the outcomes, rather than the antecedents, of incidental exposure to political content in sports media. Promising possibilities could include political polarization, tolerance of the other side, outgroup prejudice, and whether the incidental exposure acted as a call to action.

Despite these limitations, this study provides evidence about the link between incidental exposure to political content in sports media and political action. Furthermore, the study provides valuable descriptive inferences about extent of such incidental exposure and its antecedents. These findings could lay the groundwork for future research in this area.

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