

## **Black Lives Matter on the Ground and in Sports: Varied Influences of Delegitimizing News Coverage on Self-Perceived Knowledge and Support for Protests**

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This study investigates how pre-existing attitudes, self-perceived knowledge, and variances in news media consumption, including news from mainstream, liberal, conservative, sports, and social media, are correlated with support for recent Black civil rights protests (e.g., Black Lives Matter) and demonstrations led by celebrity sports figures. Using a U.S. survey (n = 1030), we find that the extremities of narratives in partisan networks, especially conservative media, are more likely to contribute to the stagnation of supportive public opinion. Generally, more news consumption is positively correlated with more knowledge and more support for Black Lives Matter protests, including those held during sporting events.

*Keywords: Black Lives Matter, sports activism, news media, social movements, public opinion, media effects, protests*

Favorable public opinion has long been positioned as a currency for social movements. Those who can win the hearts and minds of the public can advance their causes more productively in social and political realms than movements that cannot. Protests can arise for various reasons, but each demonstration has the shared goal of disrupting “business as usual” and signaling to both the public and those in power their grievances and demands for change. Though protest activity has incrementally increased globally over the past two decades (Ortiz, Burke, Berrada, & Saenz Cortés, 2022), protests remain unobtrusive events. That is, the vast majority of what the public knows about a protest comes from mediated depictions, not direct experience. As such, media consumption has long been considered a critical factor in understanding public knowledge about and attitudes toward a protest movement.

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In communications research, the intersections between protests, media, and public opinion have been widely explored through the framework of the protest paradigm. The protest paradigm builds on the idea of media dependency for social movements (McLeod & Hertog, 1999) and explores how news coverage differs based on different kinds of protests (Brown & Harlow, 2019) and how that coverage influences public support for a movement (Arpan et al., 2006). For some protests, coverage is consistently delegitimizing, which is consequential for public support (e.g., Arpan et al., 2006; Mourão & Brown, 2022). Notably, much of the protest paradigm's theoretical foundations were established during the pre-Internet era (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Since then, information spaces have increased in amount and shifted in terms of the quality of information available to news audiences (e.g., Literat, Boxman-Shabtai, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). In line with this research, the present study investigates how varied media consumption might influence how much people think they know about a protest, measured as self-perceived knowledge, and the valence of attitudes toward protest efforts. Aligned with the protest paradigm's predictions, we center media consumption as a critical space for understanding attitudes toward protests, while also accounting for niche areas in the media landscape.

Our work situates the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, which broadly began as an attempt to address police brutality and racism in the United States, as a space for exploring these relationships. In previous work, BLM protests consistently aligned with the protest paradigm's predictions that the movement would be delegitimized in coverage and that delegitimization would reduce public support (e.g., Brown & Mourão, 2019). Little research has focused on the varied protest iterations within this modern civil rights movement, however. As such, we account for differences in two such manifestations of BLM-related demonstrations: grassroots efforts and celebrity-led initiatives within professional sports.

Our results show that greater media consumption increases perceived knowledge about an issue and shapes attitudes toward different kinds of Black civil rights protests. Theoretically, we advance our understanding of the protest paradigm, challenging assumptions that negative coverage patterns anticipated in the mainstream media explain negative public opinion and point instead to partisan attitudes and partisan media consumption preferences, which play the most influential role in this study.

### **Protest, Media, and Public Opinion**

Protest paradigm theory suggests that mainstream media coverage of protests challenging the status quo typically follows a well-documented pattern that undercuts the legitimacy of those protests and movements (e.g., McLeod & Hertog, 1999). While there have recently been many discussions about defining the parameters of the status quo (e.g., Harlow & Brown, 2023), most empirical studies have shown that mainstream news coverage of BLM aligns with this pattern. For example, Brown and Harlow's (2019) comparative work finds that BLM and related protests were conceived as more status quo challenging than other protests, evidenced by news coverage that framed BLM protesters in delegitimizing ways. Theory further suggests that such coverage ultimately reduces public support (e.g., McLeod & Hertog, 1999). While direct experience plays a role in how people understand events, such as earthquakes or environmental crises, most people learn about events like political happenings and protests from the news media. This amplifies the potential effect of media narratives on public opinion.

Here, we explore new ways of understanding the potential influence of these news media on audiences by considering the concept of self-perceived knowledge. Some scholars have found that media exposure is linked with the perception that news audiences know information about an issue, even if they do not (Holland, 1995; Mondak, 1995; Park, 2001; Salwen & Driscoll, 1995). We conceptualize this as self-perceived knowledge—knowledge or expertise that individuals believe they have without necessarily verifying its depth. Park (2001) argues that increased media exposure can contribute to higher self-perceived knowledge,

As exposure increases, media audiences may increasingly recognize frequently portrayed events as familiar, without necessarily gaining knowledge. In this way, those who more frequently use the news can develop an illusion of knowing more about the issues covered in the media, as compared to those who use the media less frequently. (p. 419)

Importantly, while actual knowledge requires accuracy and evidence, this self-perceived knowledge has less to do with accuracy and more to do with personal reflection about individual knowledge. In other words, one can think they know something about an issue (self-perceived knowledge) with or without being up-to-date with accurate evidence and information. Dependency on actual knowledge is not required for individuals to feel like they know something. For situations like Black Lives Matter protests, which have repeatedly appeared in headlines since 2014, there is more opportunity for exposure and thus more opportunity to develop the *illusion of knowing*, as Park (2001) describes.

In this study, we assess the relationship between media consumption and self-perceived knowledge. We also explore how this factor might help explain attitudes about protest.

*RQ1: What is the relationship between self-perceived knowledge and support for Black civil rights protests?*

*H1: Increased news consumption will be positively associated with increased self-perceived knowledge about Black civil rights protests.*

### **Protest Paradigm Beyond the Mainstream**

While the paradigm predicts that predominantly negative mainstream news narratives help explain low public support, little research has considered how a broader range of news narratives may impact audiences' understanding and opinions. In the United States, research shows that modern Black civil rights protests—including those led by citizens and celebrities—are singled out as the least legitimate and most marginalized in mainstream coverage (Brown & Harlow, 2019). Studies show that this pattern has remained consistent in news coverage of BLM-related protests over time. For example, the demonstrations that followed the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin were perceived as threats to public peace (Brown, Mourão, & Sylvie, 2019). In regards to the protests that followed the killing of Michael Brown in 2014, media coverage delegitimized protesters and minimized their grievances (Mourão, Brown, & Sylvie, 2021). Anti-Black racism protests, like those following the acquittal of the police officer who killed Anthony Lamar Smith, received little coverage that discussed the grievances or demands of the movement (Brown & Harlow, 2019). Coverage of the 2018 protests following the killing of Stephon Clark often highlighted their potential for

disruption while failing to contextualize his death alongside similar cases and broader systemic issues (Brown, 2021). Further, recent work suggests that this pattern of delegitimization in news coverage continued after the so-called “racial reckoning” of 2020 that followed the murder of George Floyd (Dilliplane, Smith, & Lincoln, 2022).

Sports celebrity activism occupies a unique space in Black civil rights movements. However, research on modern BLM-related activism draws similar conclusions about the quality of mainstream news coverage and its effects on audiences. Most recently, mainstream news coverage has paid excessive attention to demonstrators’ actions, such as striking before a basketball game or kneeling during the national anthem, while inadequately and sometimes inaccurately describing the reason for the demonstration (e.g., Boykoff & Carrington, 2019; Coombs, Lambert, Cassilo, & Humphries, 2020). For example, media coverage of the Kaepernick-led protests against racial injustice in the NFL paid more attention to protester actions (i.e., kneeling during the national anthem) than to Kaepernick’s motivation and the substance of his message (Coombs et al., 2020). In addition, the sports figures who led NFL and NBA protests are celebrities, a factor considered delegitimizing because of the tendency to emphasize the spectacle of celebrity involvement.

News audiences have more options than the mainstream, however. Cable news programs that are often considered partisan can be highly influential sites of information for news audiences. In addition, genre-specific news sites offer tailored narratives. Social media platforms—key sources for protest news and movement mobilization—also serve as spaces where individuals can learn about protests or events. Coupled with different norms, routines, and boundaries, these news organizations and media platforms provide alternative or supplemental information to the mainstream. The narrative diversity in this media landscape offers an opportunity to reconsider how news exposure might explain variance in public knowledge and opinion about protests. This research considers variations in media consumption as playing a critical role in further understanding the media’s role in public opinion, considering three types of media genres: partisan, sports, and social media.

### ***Partisan Media***

In the United States, partisan media offer content that aligns with a liberal-conservative political spectrum. BLM and race-related protests are more widely supported by liberals than by conservatives; thus, one might expect partisan media to provide protest narratives that vary along political lines. Such is the case with some conservative cable outlets, such as Fox News. Mills (2017) analyzed Fox News’s coverage of Black Lives Matter in 2014 and 2015 and found that discourse about the politicization of racism was used to minimize the grievances of racism and police brutality. Coverage also pushed forward stigmatized stereotypical representations of Black people, criminalizing Black people. Unlike other genres of media, empirical evidence suggests that increased exposure to Fox News is strongly correlated with more negative attitudes toward the protests and toward addressing the issue of racism more broadly (Brown & Mourão, 2019). While Republican political officials and candidates have long labeled mainstream media as liberal (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999), less is known about the quality of coverage found within liberal media in the context of protest. However, some work has shown that liberal cable networks like MSNBC are more willing to discuss racism in U.S. politics in certain scenarios, though specific discussions about systemic racism remain rare (Bell, 2019).

### ***Sports Media***

Significant demonstrations connected with the general BLM movement were led during sports games and by sports celebrities. While mainstream news often covers sports and activist events, so too do niche outlets that center on sports coverage. Sports media devotes more time to coverage of social or political activism in sports than non-sports news media (Schmidt, 2018). Sports coverage and dedicated sports network depictions have been criticized for their coverage narratives, just as other news organizations have. Hirschfelder (2020) noted that sports networks “still operate on the very same problematic social and political structures that activist networks, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, with which Kaepernick is affiliated, seek to eradicate” (p. 101). Sports media is critiqued for its historically imbalanced coverage of Black athletes. As coverage increased, so did the negative and stereotypical representations (Davis & Harris, 1998; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; McCarthy & Jones, 1997). Though there are no extensive studies on protest coverage by sports networks, existing research suggests that the protest paradigm’s predicted patterns will continue in protest coverage by sports media channels. For example, Coombs and colleagues’ (2020) analysis of coverage, which included ESPN and Bleacher Report, found that kneeling was emphasized more often than the message behind it.

### ***Social Media***

The emergence and adoption of social media offered a new source for news and information retrieval and revolutionized discursive spaces for news media, news audiences, and social movements. In its infancy, social media changed the framing of Black Lives Matter and offered a “broad audience to manipulate the movement’s construction of meaning” (Ince, Rojas, & Davis, 2017, p. 1827). Social media also offered variations in witnessing—observed and distant—and allowed citizens and activists to break news predominantly through social media by uploading cellphone footage of police violence incidents that resulted in harm to or the death of Black people (Richardson, 2020). Furthermore, social media shifted how journalists report news. Following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, journalists’ narratives often privileged the police in line with mainstream narrative perspectives, but were also sympathetic to protesters in the face of police repression (Barnard, 2018). In addition, evidence suggests that when journalists covered protest demands on social media, they mostly focused on police violence rather than the more systemic issue of racism (Harlow, 2019). Social media users also have increased exposure to hashtag conversations that express opposition and counter-perspectives to Black Lives Matter.

Considering the diversity of channels from which audiences consume news and information, we explore the relationship between the consumption of specific media genres and attitudes toward Black civil rights protests. We ask the following question and hypothesis:

*RQ2: What is the relationship between media consumption of news from (a) mainstream media, (b) liberal media, (c) sports media, and (d) social media and attitudes about Black civil rights protests?*

*H2: Increased conservative news consumption will be significantly associated with less support for civil rights protests.*

### **Considerations for Political Ideology**

Brown and Mourão (2019) found that political ideology and politically right-leaning media consumption, specifically Fox News, were the most influential predictors of low support for Black Lives Matter's core demands. The authors identified a feedback loop where watching *Fox News* made respondents more conservative, and people with more conservative ideologies watched more *Fox News*. Given that research has repeatedly revealed that political ideology and attitudes are strong predictors of support for protests and Black civil rights generally, we test political ideology as a potential moderating variable that influences the relationship between news consumption and support for Black civil rights protests.

*H3: Political ideology moderates the relationship between media consumption and support for protests, with more conservative individuals, who watch more conservative news, having less support for protests than more liberal individuals.*

### **Methods**

The results of this study come from an online representative survey administered by Qualtrics from January 13–26, 2021 ( $n = 1,030$ ). Table 1 shows the socio-demographic information of the survey participants.

### **Survey Variables**

#### *Support for Protests*

Protests advocating for Black civil rights, such as BLM, have employed diverse tactics, unified many communities, and made headlines across the news media spectrum. Since 2014, Black civil rights advocacy efforts, including on-the-street protests, marches, demonstrations, and vigils, have intensified. These efforts have tended to be framed more for their immediate actions or the threat they posed than for the substance and girth behind the movement.

**Table 1. Participant Demographics.**

<i>Demographics</i>		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Age</i>	18-24	132	12.8
	25-34	174	16.9
	35-44	207	20.1
	45-54	155	15.0
	55-64	154	15.0
	65-74	152	14.8
	75+	56	5.1
<i>Gender</i>	Male	492	47.8
	Female	529	51.4
	Non-Binary/Other	9	0.9
<i>Race</i>	White	738	71.7
	Black or African American	134	13
	Other Race	158	15.4
<i>Ethnicity</i>	Latino/Hispanic	122	11.8
<i>Education</i>	Less than high school	121	11.7
	High school diploma	310	30.1
	Some college	305	29.6
	Four-year college degree	165	16.0
	Some postgraduate schooling, no postgraduate degree	24	2.3
	Postgraduate degree	105	10.2
<i>Income</i>	Less than \$25,000	284	27.6
	\$25,000 to \$50,000	276	26.8
	\$50,001 to \$75,000	192	18.6
	\$75,001 to \$100,000	115	11.2
	\$100,001 to \$125,000	73	7.1
	\$125,001 to \$150,000	43	4.2
	\$150,001 or more	47	4.6

However, the BLM movement is marked by more than citizen action and on-the-street protest by the masses.

Sports celebrities and teams—particularly from leagues with predominantly Black players—protested and struck in support of Black people’s human rights, often wearing apparel honoring victims of racist violence or speaking about them during interviews (Ganguli, 2020). Media and popular discourse, however, often focus on the tactics rather than on the message when discussing athletes’ activism. Evidence suggests that these protests were framed differently from other BLM demonstrations (Brown & Harlow, 2019). As such, we consider both protest types: BLM (generally) and sports-related demonstrations.

Two outcome variables were created to measure support, centering demonstration type: general BLM and sports protests (which included separate questions for NBA and NFL protests).

Participants were asked three core questions for each demonstration type. The first two questions assessed how much participants agreed or disagreed with the following statements: (1) These protests were annoying; (2) These protests were a waste of time (range: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). An additional item asked about support: "We want to know how much you support the following protests or movements (Range: 1—not supportive at all, 5—extremely supportive): Black Lives Matter Protests, NFL activism and protests, and NBA activism, protests, and boycotts." The items were combined for each protest type: BLM ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ,  $\alpha = .81$ ) and sports protests ( $M = 2.907$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ,  $\alpha = .975$ ).

#### *Self-Perceived Recall*

Participants were asked how much they remembered about Black Lives Matter and sports protests (NFL and NBA), adapting the approach of Park (2001) to measure self-perceived knowledge. For each protest type, two core questions were asked: (1) How much do you remember about the events, actions, and tactics of the following protests? and (2) How much do you remember about the goals, demands, policy suggestions, or agendas of the following protests? (Range: 1 = very little, 10 = a great deal). The items were combined into one measure to assess recall ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ).

#### *Political Ideology*

Political ideology was measured with the following question: On a scale from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative), where would you place yourself? ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ).

#### *Media Consumption*

Participants were asked how often they got news from a list of sources (range: 1 = never, 6 = very frequently), and items were combined to create the following composites. *Mainstream media* included consumption of (a) national television news on CBS, ABC, or NBC; (b) national newspapers; and (c) local news about your area, including local newspapers and TV stations ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .65$ ). *Conservative media* included consumption of (a) *Fox News* breaking news, (b) *Fox News* opinion hosts and commentators, and (c) Conservative news online, radio, or podcasts ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ). *Liberal media* included consumption of (a) MSNBC breaking news, (b) MSNBC opinion hosts & commentators, and (c) Liberal news online, radio, or podcasts ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ). *Sports media* included consumption of (a) sports broadcast news or television and (b) sports news websites ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ). *Social media* considered news consumption on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, TikTok, Snapchat, or other ( $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ).

#### *Control Variables*

Sociodemographic variables, including race, age, income, and education, were used as controls (Table 1).

### Data Analysis

RQ1 was answered using correlations between the single self-perceived knowledge question and news consumption. All other hypotheses and research questions were answered using a series of hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. For each regression, the first, second, and third blocks were as follows: sociodemographic information (Block 1), political ideology (Block 2), self-perceived knowledge (Block 3), and media consumption (Block 4). To test the interaction effects involving political ideology (H3), political ideology and news consumption variables were first centered (Aiken, West, & Reno, 1991). Centered variables were then multiplied and placed in Block 5 for analysis. To interpret significant effects, political partisanship was indexed into subgroups, and standardized betas were used to determine and compare the strength of relationships. Subgroups were plotted, and fit lines were utilized to compare differences between effects.

### Results

RQ1 inquired about the relationship between self-perceived knowledge and news consumption. Correlations reveal that for all, self-perceived knowledge and media consumption had a significant and positive relationship: Mainstream [ $r(130) = .342, p < .001$ ]; conservative [ $r(130) = .187, p < .001$ ]; liberal [ $r(130) = .337, p < .001$ ]; sports media [ $r(130) = .383, p < .001$ ]; and social media [ $r(130) = .260, p < .001$ ]. The more people consume news of all kinds, the more likely they are to consider themselves knowledgeable about BLM in its various forms.

**H1** predicted that increased news consumption would be positively associated with increased self-perceived knowledge about Black civil rights protests. After controlling for demographics and ideology, those with higher self-perceived knowledge were significantly and positively more likely to support BLM protests: general [ $B = .031, p < .001$ ;  $f(15, 1029) = 48.480, p < .001, r^2 = .418$ ] and sports [ $B = .067, p < .001$ ;  $f(15, 1029) = 56.699, p < .001, r^2 = .456$ ]. The overall influence of Self-perceived knowledge was stronger in the model predicting support for sports protests than for BLM generally. **H1** was supported.

**H2** predicted that increased conservative news consumption would lead to less support for protest efforts, while **RQ2** questioned the relationship between mainstream, liberal, sports, and social media news consumption (see Table 2, Block 4). As predicted, increased consumption of conservative media led to more negative assessments of both BLM ( $B = -.285, p < .001$ ) and sports protests ( $B = -.276, p < .001$ ). **H2** was supported. Conversely, increased liberal media consumption (BLM:  $B = .161, p < .001$ , Sports:  $B = .164, p < .001$ ) was strongly associated with increased support for both protest types, and, to a lesser degree, mainstream (BLM:  $B = .079, p < .05$ , Sports:  $B = .085, p < .01$ ) and social media consumption (BLM:  $B = .078, p < .05$ , Sports:  $B = .78, p < .05$ ) were also significantly and positively correlated with increased support. One of the key differences between the models was the impact of sports media consumption: While increased consumption of sports media was positively associated with support for sports-related protests ( $B = .074, p < .05$ ), there was no significant relationship with BLM.

**Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Support for BLM Protests.**

		BLM protests	Sports protests
		<i>B</i> (SE)	<i>B</i> (SE)
<i>Block 1</i>	Hispanic (1 = yes)	.053 (.103) *	.070 (.097)**
	White (ref)		
	Black	.157(.10)***	.161 (.094)***
	Other	.025 (.093)	.035 (0.087)
	Men (ref)		
	Women	.113 (.07)***	.076 (.066)**
	Non-Binary	.038 (.358)	.019 (.338)
	Age	-.121 (.022)***	-.111 (.020)***
	Income	.024 (.021)	.021 (.020)
	Education	.005 (.027)	.000 (.025)
	$\Delta r^2$	.123***	.144***
<i>Block 2</i>	Political Ideology (1 = liberal)	-.308 (.021)***	-.281***
	$\Delta r^2$	.204***	.179***
<i>Block 3</i>	Self-perceived Knowledge	0.031 (.015)***	0.224 (0.013)***
	$\Delta r^2$	.031***	.067***
<i>Block 4</i>	Mainstream	.079 (.032)*	.085 (.029)**
	Liberal	.161 (.026)***	.164 (.028)***
	Conservative	-.285(.030)***	-.276 (.025)***
	Sports	.028 (.026)	.074 (.024)*
	Social Media	.078 (.036)*	.078 (.034)*
	$\Delta r^2$	.059***	.066***
	Total $r^2$	.418	.456

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Supporting previous empirical findings related to public opinion of Black Lives Matter (Brown & Mourão, 2019), our results show that political ideology continued to be the strongest predictor of support (Table 2). **H3** suggested that political ideology would moderate the relationship between media consumption and support for protests (see Table 3). Results showed varied relationships depending on the protest. For BLM, only the interactive relationship between conservative media consumption and political ideology ( $B = .049$ ,  $p < .05$ ) was significant. Table 4 and Figure 1 show that the negative effect of conservative media consumption on support for Black Lives Matter is stronger for liberals than for moderates or conservatives. However, for sports-related protests, conservative media was not a relevant factor. Instead, the interactions between ideology and mainstream ( $B = -.063$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and liberal ( $B = -.103$ ,  $p < .01$ ) media consumption were significant. Figure 2 and Table 5 show that the positive effect of liberal media consumption on attitudes is stronger among conservatives and moderates who consume more liberal media. Figure 3 and Table 5 show that the positive effect of increased mainstream media consumption on attitudes is most influential for conservatives, followed by liberals, then moderates.

**Table 3. Moderating Relationship of Political Ideology and News Consumption.**

	BLM	Sports
	<i>B (SE)</i>	<i>B (SE)</i>
Initial $\Delta r^2$	.431	.456
Mainstream * Political Ideology	-0.006 (.017)	-.063 (.015)*
Liberal * Political Ideology	0.081 (.017)	0.103 (.015)**
Conservative * Political Ideology	0.049 (.014)*	0.030 (.012)
Sports Media * Political Ideology	-0.022 (.015)	-0.015 (.013)
Social Media * Political Ideology	0.037 (.018)	0.052 (.016)
	$\Delta r^2$ .013***	.014***
	Total $r^2$ .431	.470

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 4. Conditional Effect of Conservative News Consumption on Support for BLM for Political Partisans.**

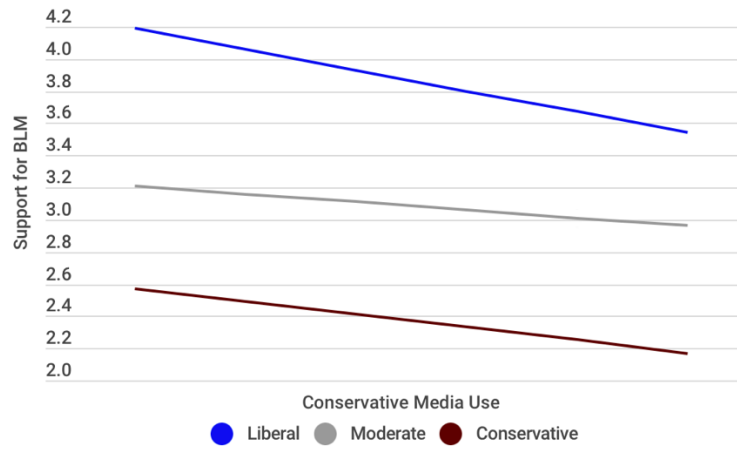
	Political Affiliation	Support for BLM <i>B (SE)</i>
Conservative Media	Conservative	-.193(.041)
	Moderate	-.056 (.044)
	Liberal	-.197(.036)***

Note. \*\*\*  $p < .001$

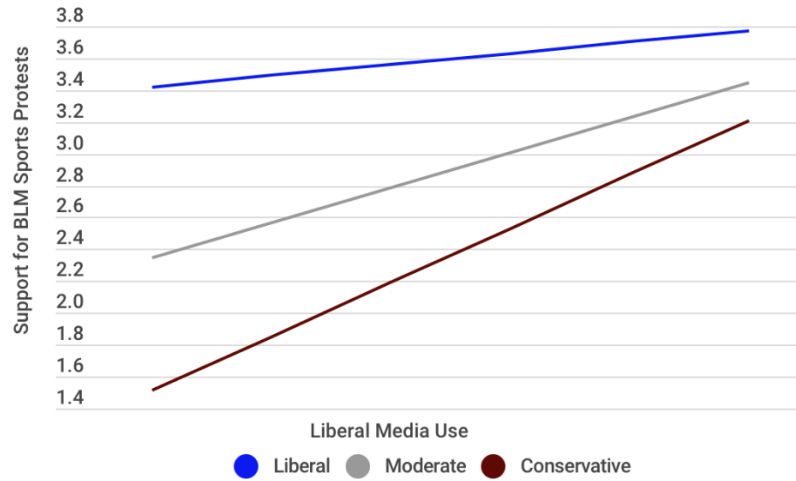
**Table 5. Conditional Effect of Liberal and News Consumption on Support for Sports Protests for Political Partisans.**

	Political Affiliation	Support for sports <i>B (SE)</i>
Liberal Media	Conservative	.464(.036)***
	Moderate	.226 (.043)***
	Liberal	.109 (.034)*
Mainstream Media	Conservative	.326 (.041)***
	Moderate	.147 (.048) **
	Liberal	.219 (.044)***

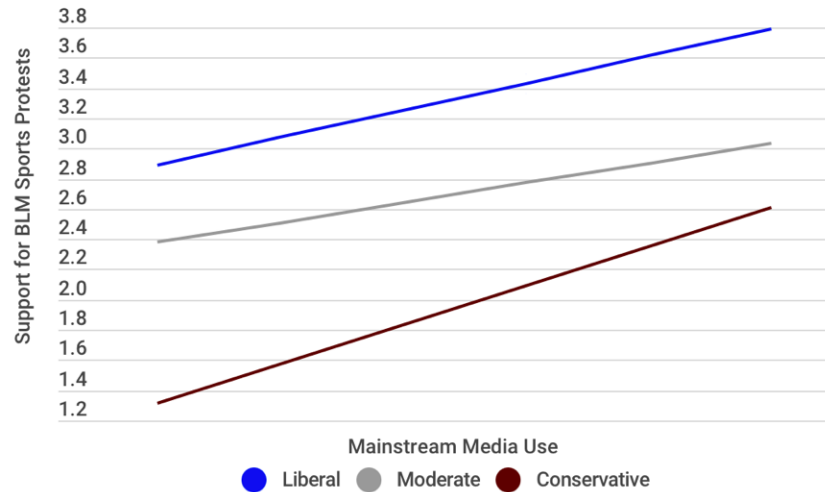
Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$



**Figure 1. Interaction effect of political ideology on the relationship between support for Black Lives Matter protests and conservative media use.**



**Figure 2. Interaction effect of political ideology on the relationship between support for sports protests and liberal media use.**



**Figure 3. Interaction effect of political ideology on the relationship between support for Black Lives Matter and mainstream media use.**

### Discussion

Our work explores the limitations and relevance of what we know about the protest paradigm in the context of U.S.-originated BLM protests.

The present study not only considers different protest tactics within the BLM movement, but also accounts for diverse aspects of media consumption and introduces new considerations for confounding factors such as self-perceived knowledge and political ideology.

As we acknowledge in our literature review, the protest paradigm theory is based extensively on the negative coverage produced by mainstream media. In the context of Black Lives Matter, numerous studies suggest that mainstream media coverage is negative and, therefore, negatively affects public opinion. Contrary to the protest paradigm's core predictions, however, our results indicate that mainstream media has no such negative effect on audiences. Instead, increased mainstream, liberal, and social media news consumptions are correlated with increased support for these protests. Our findings support our later observations that factors like pre-existing beliefs, knowledge, and identities are critical components for understanding the indirect ways media coverage may affect public opinion formation.

We find that only the increased news consumption of conservative media leads to the negative effects predicted by the protest paradigm. This expected finding aligns with studies that have shown that conservative media pushed racist narratives (Mills, 2017) and produced exponentially more negative coverage than other kinds of news media (Brown & Mourão, 2021). It is of little surprise that conservative ideologies are also strong predictors of decreased support for protests. Overall, we find that the more

conservative respondents were, or the more conservative news they watched, the less likely they were to support BLM, whether sports-related or otherwise.

Importantly, our work finds critical caveats to this trend that affect groups across party lines. We find that exposure to media that does not align with the political ideology of the news consumer could moderate how we understand support outcomes. For conservatives, exposure to media that does not align with their ideology—in this case, increased consumption of liberal or, in some cases, mainstream news media—might shift them toward being more supportive of these movements' efforts. For liberals, we also find that more consumption of news that does not align with their ideology, such as conservative news consumption, might temper their support for BLM movements. We acknowledge the complexities and inadequacies of the liberal-conservative continuum, particularly when discussing the politics of race in the United States, as the hierarchies built by white supremacist cultures permeate American politics across the aisles. Given that liberals are more deterred from supporting Black Lives Matter when they consume likely-negative content from conservative outlets, we find that the veil of liberalism is not enough to predict support. Future studies should consider how racialized ideologies interact with the tendencies of liberals to understand more about why diversified news consumption might be shifting support. Overall, though the hostile media effect predicts that partisans find media contrary to their perspectives (Perloff, 1989; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), *continued exposure may be helpful for moving individuals toward shifting temperaments about protest movements*. Our conclusions support the idea that diversified media consumption will not necessarily help a social movement win over the hearts and minds of individuals, but it might temper the public's support (or lack thereof) for a movement.

Our study explores the role that self-perceived knowledge plays in understanding protests. We find that self-perceived knowledge and news consumption are positively correlated. Because media frames play an important role in constructing schemas about events, it follows that media exposure might make people feel more knowledgeable, no matter who delivers that information. We note that the reasons individuals seek information through the media and how they encounter it also matter (e.g., Prior, 2007; Shah, Rojas, & Cho, 2009), and ultimately these factors may affect what knowledge is available and the epistemological position from which that knowledge derives. As Park (2001) warns, this self-perceived knowledge may ultimately be an illusion. Future studies might consider expanding and testing the impact of knowledge on outcomes. For example, how does perceived knowledge versus actual knowledge explain support for protests? How does knowledge of all kinds affect how people consume and retain information from the news?

An important innovation in our study includes considerations for BLM protests generally and sports-protest efforts, which are often celebrity-led initiatives with distinctly different framings. Given the informational inaccuracies of sports protests—such as the political notions that delegitimized players and the reconfiguration of sports protest tactics by elites who claimed protests were about anti-patriotism (Coombs et al., 2020)—news audiences are less informed or misinformed about the genuine intentions of players' activist efforts. In other words, audiences may not evaluate these protests as having fundamentally connected grievances with BLM. This might elucidate future hurdles the movement will face with splintered discourse and audience knowledge. Those who consumed sports media were more likely to support these protests. Given that our study found no interaction between political partisanship and the positive effect of

sports news consumption, future studies might explore the psychological processes that interact with sports media watching, such as fandom for sports, teams, or players. We also note the limitations of our study, which exclusively explores support for BLM and NFL protests. These demonstrations, however, appeared in other professional sports and leagues, including amateur and professional sports. Expanding considerations to include these teams could provide further variance in our understanding of the divisions of support for these modern civil rights efforts.

In addition to the limitations of our study already listed, the measurement of news consumption in this study could and should be advanced by other measures and methods. Our study based consumption on well-utilized measures of time and amount that are, by nature, self-perceived. More detailed examinations of news exposure—including specifics about timing, program preference, and attentiveness—would bring more nuance to our understanding of the media's role in knowledge production and support. The same is true for social media news consumption, which offers diverse spaces with opportunities for homogenous content.

Importantly, researchers should continue to consider the role of news beyond the mainstream by exploring the spectrum of news sources within and beyond the mainstream. Social media's impact, which continues to be a prime space for retrieving news and information, is critical for further assessment within the paradigm's framework. While our study explores social media news consumption generally, we acknowledge that news appears on these platforms in individualized and culturally specific ways. Future work might explore the nuance within social media consumption, in terms of platform and content preferences, to further explore the effect of news consumption on perceptions of knowledge and support for protests.

### **Conclusions**

The protest paradigm suggests that the negative coverage patterns expected to appear in mainstream media have negative effects on public opinion, and scholars and critics alike have heavily critiqued mainstream journalism for predominantly presenting Black Lives Matter within a marginalizing narrative (e.g., Brown & Harlow, 2019). However, the present study empirically complicates the theory's rather elementary predictions about the effects of these media narrative imbalances on news audiences. More consumption of mainstream news, even with its predominantly marginalizing coverage trends, predicts more support for Black Lives Matter, not less. Only increased consumption of conservative media was linked with a decline in public opinion. Such conclusions affirm recent calls to problematize the binary effects that the paradigm assigns to coverage (Brown, 2021) and acknowledge that the distinct variance in the audience effects of media misrepresentation and delegitimizing narratives should be considered on a spectrum. Ultimately, since its inception in the early 2010s, the Black Lives Matter movement and the various factions associated with it have been fiercely politicized as they have grown and evolved. This study suggests that news coverage's effects on news audiences must be understood with political allegiances—traditional or otherwise—in mind. The protest paradigm's future utility for predicting the effects of media coverage on audiences must account for the litany of individual social and psychological factors that change how audiences encode, decode, accept, or reject news media narratives.

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