



The Integration of Politics and Sports in Lebanon

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Abstract

In Lebanon, sports have been heavily linked to politics and religion. The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of politics on Lebanese sports in the two most prominent sports fields, football and basketball, using the Spiral of Silence and the Two-Step theories investigated through a mixed methods approach (survey: fan participants, and interviews: professional players). Results showed that politics and religion play a major role in sports, especially through funding, and fans are affected by this former integration. Results also indicated mostly negative attitudes towards this interference, and many have noted being affected by opinions related to teams and decisions that circulate on social media. The results pave the way to understanding how the sports-religion system intertwines in Lebanon, provides an assessment of fans' and players' behavior, and emphasizes the need for financial support for the teams' and fans' sustainability, as a recommendation to reduce this interference in a healthy manner.

Introduction

From the ancient times of the Roman Colosseum to the present times of Yankee Stadium, the Super Bowl, and the Olympics, sports have played a pivotal role in societies across the globe. Taking into consideration that there is a lot at stake including power, money, as well as pride, sports is heavily linked with politics (Dunning 2013). In Lebanon, the case is not different. In fact, both religion and politics influence sports (Nassif and Amara 2015). In Lebanon, the major political parties have distinct religious affiliations and are tied to their own sports teams (Nassif and Amara 2015). The Future Movement political party is predominantly associated with Sunni Muslims and the Al Riyadi team in basketball and Al Ansar team in football (Reiche 2011) Likewise, the Lebanese Forces, another Lebanese political party mainly associated with Christians is a supporter of Sagesse basketball team (Najjar 2017). Similarly, the Progressive Socialist Party is predominantly Druze and is associated with Al-Safa football team (Reiche

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2011). These are a few examples of teams and their political affiliations; however, the greater concern lies in attempting to answer the following questions: Why is there a dominance of politics and religion in sports in Lebanon, and where did these types of divisions originate? How do they influence the Lebanese sports field?

To help answer these questions, a historical overview is needed about the Lebanese political system. By the end of WWI, Lebanon was under French mandate upon the partition of the Ottoman Empire, and it was the sub-unit of the French authority for Syria and Lebanon and managed from Damascus (Traboulsi 2012). Even after independence was declared, French forces continued to exert their influence (Hakim 2019). In 1943, Lebanon formed a sectarian government that distributed the seats in parliament on a ratio of six to five in favor of Christians (Minorities at Risk 2004) and it was agreed that the president of the Lebanese Republic would be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister would be Sunni Muslim, and the president of the parliament would be a Shia Muslim (Minorities at Risk 2004). A civil war erupted in 1975, spanning almost 30 years. After the war ended, the Taif Accord was ratified by parliament in 1989 with the aim of “eradicating political sectarianism” as an essential national objective (The Taif Agreement 1989, p. 5). The Accord divided the seats of parliament equally between Christians and Muslims while also transferring much of the authority of the president to the cabinet (The Taif Agreement, 1989).

The succeeding foreign powers that occupied the nation and a large group of people with various religious communities that have coexisted inside Lebanon have not just contributed to the development of a modern state that revels in very rich cultural and religious diversities but also established a republic administered by a delicate balance of power (Salibi 1993). This delicate balance, based on religious division or distribution, has permeated itself into different forms and discourses in the country, including but not limited to geopolitics, education, media, and sports.

This study attempts to identify how this integration influences the sports industry, with a specific focus on basketball and football. This is necessary to determine the ways in which these different sports can grow and develop. Lebanon offers a thought-provoking perspective on the study of sport and politics. While previous literature has looked into politics and religion in sports in Lebanon, no study has tackled this integration in detail, particularly taking into consideration fan attitude and behavior. This study is valuable in that it bridges that gap as it describes this integration in relation to the fans of basketball and football teams in Lebanon.

While the influence of politics on sports is obvious, the objective of this study is to investigate the details of this influence on football and basketball and its effect on fans and their opinion making process. In doing so, the



Spiral of Silence theory was used to investigate whether political figures and/or religious leaders impose a direct or indirect Spiral of Silence effect on the team and fans, given that the political/religious leader is the owner of the team or has strong political affiliations with certain political parties who sponsor (give financial help) those teams. From this perspective, this study will try to understand whether the teams and fans avoid expressing their actual opinions in fear of losing the support of the religious/political figures who offer financial assistance to the team. In investigating these intertwined perspectives, the researchers will be able to also understand, through the Two-Step Flow model, whether the opinion leaders (e.g., politicians/sponsors/owners of the teams, or teams/players) transfer their thoughts to the followers (e.g., teams/players, fans) on how to behave concerning football and basketball and at which point one (owners, teams/players, fans) becomes the opinion leader or the follower. These types of connections are vital in aiming at offering solutions to combat political and religious power over sports. In doing so, a sample consisting of sports fans were recruited to participate in a survey assessing the aforementioned concepts. In addition, qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with football and basketball players to understand these relationships from a team player's perspective. The methods are triangulated to understand how politics and religion influence and integrate with sports in Lebanon, mainly in basketball and football, as well as how the fans of these sports are impacted by this politics/religion sports relationship.

Literature Review

The integration of politics in sports is not only exclusive to Lebanon but is a worldwide phenomenon and can be seen in Middle Eastern countries (e.g., Egypt) and European (e.g., Spain, UK...). In 2007, the football fans in Egypt started organizing demonstrations against the government under the global and official banner of the Ultra-actions, statements and actions taken by the Ultras (Ennarah 2017). They used their fandom as a means to vocalize about various political and social issues in the country, and the events of the 2011 Arab Spring further politicized the Ultras and transformed them into revolutionary figures (Ennarah 2017). However, there were consequences to their efforts, such as stigmatization and eventually the government banning fans from attending football matches in stadiums, leading the team to lose their main space for expression (Ennarah 2017).

In the European context, La Liga (Spanish League) is considered as one of the most popular football leagues around the world; this is clearly indicated in the annual revenue of 4.479 billion euros in 2017-2018 (Casinellie 2019). However, Spain is home to one of the biggest political rivalries in sports, and that is evident between Real Madrid and Barcelona with the political



tension between these two teams dating back to historical events (Wallace 2013). Real Madrid is known to be supported by the government and are therefore excused from paying taxes while Barcelona, being Catalanian, is required to pay high taxes to the government (Wallace, 2013). The latest political clash between the two teams occurred in November 2019 when the match was postponed due to protests in Catalonia (Vakulenko 2013). Fans were protesting the arrest of certain political figures that support the Catalanian doctrine. Moreover, during national games, there had been several clashes between the players from both teams, and this affected the overall tone of future games (Vakulenko 2013).

While the rivalry between Barcelona and Real Madrid has a different historical context, the interference of politics in the world of sports is clearly highlighted in the events, which makes the essence of this rivalry similar to Lebanon. This demonstrates that integration of sports and politics is phenomenon that occurs in different parts of the world.

Likewise, the Scottish experience of football is fierce, intense, and embedded in deep political and religious representations. Even after hundreds of years, the Catholic-Protestant rivalry is portrayed through football between the Celtics, founded in 1887 by a Catholic brother, and the Rangers, founded in 1972, which became a team of the Scottish Protestant working class (PA Team, 2018). While the teams were professional and peaceful in the beginning, they soon became fierce rivals as both clubs and their fans vocalized their identities in direct opposition, with “Celtics being associated with socialism and Irish Republicanism while Rangers with conservatism and Northern Irish unionism” (PA Team 2018, para. 10).

During the games, the intensity of the rivalry is portrayed through political chants (Celtics chanting the IRA anthem to vocalize their desire to separate from the UK; Rangers chanting sectarian rife in the Ibrox or Parkhead stands), raising of flags, and in some cases, violence (Farah 2017). As Farah (2017) bluntly states, “a Celtic win is a victory for Catholicism and nationalism, while a Rangers victory is another step forward for the unionists and the Protestants” (para. 12).

The heated rivalry and the events that often take place are not strange in Lebanon, and are embedded in political and religious undertones. With fans also chanting political slogans or raising party flags, with the occasional physical altercation between opposing teams. The situation in both European as well as Middle Eastern countries shows how embedded the concept of politics and sports is, and this study will examine these possible tensions in Lebanon.

Context of Lebanon and Lebanese Sports

Lebanon is a country that has more than 18 religious sects. Since the formation of Lebanon, many political parties have formed. In fact, many of



them who participated in the Civil War in 1975 still exist today, and they are active members of the current government or participating members within the Lebanese parliament. The political parties each represent a certain religious sect in Lebanon. These politico-religious divisions have also been portrayed in sports, as each sports team is somehow a representative of one of the aforementioned political parties/religions.

Since a specific religious group occupies each geographical area in Lebanon, it seems that the common situation is to have the sports teams of this geographical area that is occupied by a specific religion support the political party that represents the religion. For example, in basketball, Al Riyade is the team of Central Beirut. Central Beirut is mainly occupied by Sunni Muslims, who are represented by the Future Movement, and therefore fans of Al Riyade Club are mostly Sunni Muslims who support the Future Movement (Yee 2019). Football and basketball are considered to be the most followed sports in Lebanon. Both basketball and football leagues have teams from different areas and date back to the early 1930s and late 1940s. The year 1933 was historical in sports history as it signaled the birth of the Lebanese Football Association (Hawi 2009). This paved the way to official leagues. For basketball, although teams have been around since the 1920s, the governing body, the Lebanese Basketball Federation was founded in 1947 (LBF 2021), however it was not until the 1992-1993 season that teams competed once again after the Lebanese civil war.

In football, The Classico, the game between Ansar and Nejme attracts the most fans and is considered the highlight event of the season. This match is usually played in the Camille Chamoun Stadium (known as Madine Reyadiyah or literally Sports City). The stadium has 45,000 seats, and during such matches (prior to Covid-19), the stadium welcomes the audience in full capacity. Most of the fans prefer to physically attend the match because it is in the heart of Beirut and very close to the areas where the fans reside (Maugendre 2018). The rest would be watching from cafes or homes. Other matches that strike an interest to the fans are games between Nejme and Alahed due to hidden political tensions that spark a competitive status from the teams as they are represented by *Haraket Amal* (Hope Movement) and Hezbollah respectively, both from the Shia Muslim sect (Maugendre 2018).

Basketball leagues have recently climbed up the ranks as one of the most-watched sports in Lebanon, especially in the last decade (Sharif 2017). One of the most popular matches in the numerous seasons is those between Sagesse and Riyadi, which are considered to be the most successful teams in the history of Lebanese basketball. These matches take place in either Manara (home stadium of Riyadi) or Ghazir (home stadium of Sagesse). The stadiums for these matches are usually full with more than 7,500 fans present. All matches are publicized via different media channels and have high viewership ratings (Ipsos 2017).



Table (1): Football Teams in Lebanon and their Affiliations

| Football Team | Political Affiliation | Religious Affiliation | Owner | Number of fans |
|-----------------------|--|--------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| <u>AlAhed</u> | <u>Hezbollah</u> | <u>Shia Muslim</u> | <u>Tamim Solayman</u> | 8,400 |
| <u>Nejmeh</u> | <u>Tayyar Al Mostakbal (Future Movement – ownership); Fans: Muslim Shia Amal Movement, Hezbollah</u> | <u>Sunni/Shia Muslim</u> | <u>Asaad Sakal</u> | 129,000 |
| <u>Shabab Alsahel</u> | <u>X</u> | <u>Shia Muslim</u> | <u>Samir Dbouk</u> | 18,000 |
| <u>Tadamon Sour</u> | <u>Haraket Amal (Amal/Hope Movement)</u> | <u>Shia Muslim</u> | <u>Samir Baweb</u> | 13,000 |
| <u>Ansar</u> | <u>Tayyar Mostakbal (Future Movement)</u> | <u>Sunni Muslim</u> | <u>Nabil Bader</u> | 10,000 |
| <u>Tripoli</u> | <u>Najib Mikatti</u> | <u>Sunni Muslim</u> | <u>Ghassan Yakan</u> | 13,000 |

Table (2) Basketball Teams in Lebanon and their Affiliations

| Basketball Team) | Political Affiliation | Religious Affiliation | Owner | Number of fans |
|-------------------|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| <u>Riyadi</u> | <u>Tayyar Al Mostakbal (Future Movement)</u> | <u>Sunni Muslim</u> | <u>Mazen Tabarra</u> | 165,000 |
| <u>Champville</u> | <u>Tayyar Alwatani (Free Patriotic Movement)</u> | <u>Maronite Christian</u> | <u>Akram Safa</u> | 12,300 |
| <u>Sagesse</u> | <u>Ouwet Al Lebnaniye (Lebanese Forces)</u> | <u>Maronite Christian</u> | <u>Elie Yahouchi</u> | 61,000 |
| <u>Moutahed</u> | <u>Mohammad Al Safadi</u> | <u>Sunni Muslim</u> | <u>Ahmad AlSafadi</u> | 12,000 |
| <u>Hoops</u> | <u>Al Bath</u> | <u>Shia Muslim</u> | <u>Jasem Kansou</u> | 4,500 |
| <u>Byblos</u> | <u>X</u> | <u>Christian</u> | <u>John Khaled</u> | 7,700 |
| <u>Homentmen</u> | <u>Tachnak (Armenian Revolutionary Federation)</u> | <u>Armenian Orthodox Christian</u> | <u>Rafi Mometchilian</u> | 33,000 |
| <u>Beirut</u> | <u>NA</u> | <u>Christian</u> | <u>Nader Hakim</u> | 69,000 |

Sports Culture in Lebanon

In Lebanon, football and basketball are considered the two most popular sports in the country (Sharif 2017). Many of the teams, whether in football or basketball, have reached a degree of fame that has attracted many fans and some of the teams have also gained international recognition (Sharif 2017) As a result, fans (as seen in the tables above) have become invested in these sports and have followed them and attended many of their games.



Presence of Sports Federations

The Lebanese Basketball Federation and the Lebanese Football Association are presided over by Akram Halabi (Maronite Christian) and Hachem Haidar (Shia Muslim), respectively, and divided based on political and religious agendas (Lebanese Basketball Federation 2022; Lebanese Football Association 2022). The federations include members from all the religions, but the main decisions are usually taken by the presidents and general secretaries (Nassif personal communication, June 6, 2020).

Football and Basketball Funding

Football is considered the most popular sports in Lebanon, and for years, no other sport was able to outshine its popularity (Reiche 2011; Sharif 2017). However, in the past years, basketball has started gaining popularity in Lebanon, and today, the number of followers has increased and almost surpassed that of football (Sharif 2017). This is due to the investment and the enormous financial support from businesspersons, sponsors, and banks that it has been receiving compared to football (Sharif 2017). Still, in most cases, the financial support has come with underlying political agendas. However, the result of this support was the drastic increase in the number of spectators during games over the course of the last few years (Attieh personal communication, June 5, 2020).

Impact of Politics on Sports

Nassif and Amara (2015) conducted a research study on sports, policy, and politics in Lebanon. According to the authors, the over-representation of religious communities in the sports industry within the nation to the detriment of developing a clear and functional structure is strongly existent in the national sport movement. In other words, there is a clear political and religious representation, whether regarding ownership, management, and/or team members, in each sports club or academy, and in the political and religious affiliation of the fans that support it. However, the type of impact and the extent to which the members involved (e.g., team players, fans, owners) affect the other is not clear. The national sport movement encompasses the numerous fans and spectators in the country that are in support of the various sports played. Numerous individuals within the sports industry end up landing in positions within certain federations since they are supported by a political party (Nassif and Amara 2015). The study indicated that 90% of the individuals working in sports organizations are not qualified for their jobs and were recruited because of political considerations (Nassif and Amara 2015). This only further proves the manifestation of politics and religion in the sports industry as an indirect form of power struggle.

Nassif (2014) indicates that there is a great deal of corruption in the nation's sports industry as a result of the meddling and intrusion by the political



figures in the club administrations; thus, politicization of sports in Lebanon has been unavoidable. Political influence is predominantly linked to the administrators and fans and less so for the players (Nassif 2014). The Lebanese sports industry is becoming a sector where there is constant clashing between political parties, thereby going against the actual objectives of sports which are meant to unite people, bring them closer, and generate happiness and entertainment (Rieche 2011). The objectives are, instead, being replaced with hatred, division, and aggressive competition; especially in a country in where politics cannot be separated from religion due to the structure of the Lebanese system (in reference to the Taif Accord).

The lack of transparency in the funding system and nepotism were common in this sector and lack of transparency in allocation of money to associations and different federations were expected (Rice et al. 1952). Perhaps then, one of the main reasons Lebanon was not able to disentangle the involvement of politics in sports is the vital need for a financial sponsor or supporter, and when it comes to funding, a price is always paid.

Theoretical Framework

To further understand the influence of political and religious figures as club representatives and/or funders of the players and fans, the Spiral of Silence and the Two-Step Flow model are used. These theories are used to help determine the degree (e.g., Two-Step Flow) and independence of vocalization (e.g., Spiral of Silence) of opinions.

Spiral of Silence Theory

The Spiral of Silence theoretical framework was chosen for this study to account for the fact that sports fans might have herd mentality, moving with the crowd, or whose points of view, although dissimilar sometimes, might choose to conform to the overall trend of perspectives that link politics and religion to conditional fandom and support. It is important to note that the Spiral of Silence is about people who conform to the opinion of the majority in fear of isolation (Gearhart and Zhang 2015).

According to Neuman (1974), the more a person's opinion is backed by the majority's point of view, the greater the likelihood that they are prepared to communicate it in the public arena. Consequently, individuals who are identified to be in the minority tend to continue being silent and keep opinions to themselves owing to the fear that if they share their point of view, they will experience isolation. In the Lebanese sports context, this theory helps investigate whether the minority are able to voice their opinion about Lebanese sports teams, especially when these sports teams are controlled by a majority with specific political and religious affiliations. Furthermore, it is essential to mention that so far, no study known to the researchers on sports has utilized this theory to explain different factors related to the functionality of sports in Lebanon.



The hostile atmosphere that surrounds Lebanese politics and sports, as aforementioned in the literature review, can perhaps be linked to the fans' reactions to opinion leaders and to the opinions of other fans. As Hayes (2007) suggested, people are more likely to voice their opinion in a friendly environment than in a hostile one, thus in hostile environments people might confirm, or become silenced (e.g., not claiming a different political affiliation than the group).

If indeed political or religiously affiliated sponsors are helping the team financially then fans might not speak out about the political/religious party or leader. For example, if a person (a fan) is criticizing the team, then that means they are indirectly criticizing the political party that the sports team is affiliated with, and perhaps for the same reason they might remain silent.

Two-Step Flow Theory

This particular theory was selected to represent the social influences that delineate the identity of the dominating opinion in every segment of the Lebanese sports community. It deals with the role of the mainstream media in addition to the present day's social media influence. The theory makes the argument that notions and ideas will emanate from the mainstream media to leaders who are opinionated and thereafter from opinionated leaders to the segments of the populations that are less active and are less knowledgeable (Katz 1955). An opinionated leader is delineated as a renowned individual or entity that can influence or sway public opinion on the topic, subject matter, or notion that the leader is known for. Often, opinionated leaders are business leaders, journalists, as well as celebrities or sports superstars. Lately, they have also included bloggers (Uzunoğlu and Kip 2013) as well as social media influencers. The engagement of opinions on social media known as "social percussion" has a great influence on the leading opinion of the day (Sāmbhar 2009). This analogy of social percussion denotes that the leaders set the tempo, and all then march to the beat, speculating a bandwagon media effect from an active as opposed to a passive audience. Social media serves as a powerful social platform for the spread of mass opinion, and it is one of the objectives of the study to explore the influence of opinion leaders on fan base in sports as well as the reaction of the latter on popular opinions set by the former.

In the context of sports, the Two-Step Flow communication model delineates that information flows from the media to the general public are intermediated and facilitated by opinion leaders who tend to be more exposed to media messages and who exercise personal influence on the attitudes and the opinions of others (Choi 2015). Most of the people within the Lebanese sports federations have obtained particular positions simply because they are representatives or supporters of a political party (Nassif and Amara 2015). This perhaps can negatively influence the further advancement of the team.



People tend to react to messages or opinions about matters that interest them but tend to avoid expressing their opinions about topics that might spark conflict or speak against their collective ideologies. Thus, the fans' decisions to accept or reject a given message and their values, options, and beliefs are the most important and influential elements that affect the acceptability of the theories under study.

Research Questions

RQ1: What is the impact that the interrelation of politics and religion in Lebanon has on the sport (football and basketball), team, and fans?

RQ2:

How does an interplay trichotomy exist in relation to sport opinion leaders, teams, and fans?

Methodology

This study makes use of mixed methods research design, which includes both quantitative (survey to understand fans attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews with team players) in order to depict the relationship between politics/religion and sports in Lebanon.

Sample and Procedure

Interview

In order to gain one-on-one insight that is comprehensive from the respondents regarding the subject matter in question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with various football and basketball players. These interviewees included ten professional players (1st division players), five football, and five basketball players from different basketball and football clubs across Lebanon. All interviewees were male except for one female (football). Due to the limited number of female football and basketball teams in Lebanon and the lack of their popularity compared to men's teams, only one female football player was interviewed to get a female's point of view and the influence of politics on women's teams. The interviewees' names are represented by letters and numbers in order to protect the privacy of the players. The basketball players were identified with the letter "B" along with a number while the football players were identified with the letter "F" along with a corresponding number in accordance with the order in which they were interviewed (example: B1 is the first player interviewed in basketball; F4 is the fourth player interviewed in football etc.). The fifth player of each category (basketball and football) are captains of their teams. Table 3 below specifies the player, along with their club affiliations.



Table (3): Player Club Affiliations (Both Football and Basketball)

| Player | Club Affiliation | Team Political and Religious Affiliation |
|--------|------------------|---|
| F1 | Ansar | Future Movement/Sunni Muslim |
| F2 | Al Ahed | Hezbollah/Shia Muslim |
| F3 | Nejmeh | Future Movement/Muslim (ownership) fans: Shia/Sunni Muslim |
| F4 | Safah | Progressive Social Party/Druz |
| F5 | Hoops | Al Baath/Shia Muslim |
| B1 | Riyadi | Future Movement/Sunni Muslim |
| B2 | Homentmen | Armenian Revolutionary Federation/Christian Armenian Orthodox |
| B3 | Byblos | NA/Christian |
| B4 | Beirut | NA/Christian |
| B5 | Homentmen | Armenian Revolutionary Federation/Christian Armenian Orthodox |

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the players were interviewed using Whatsapp or Skype. The players were individually contacted and asked for willingness and availability to participate in the interview. Most of the answers were in Arabic, so they needed to be translated.

Survey

The survey aimed at investigating how fans from different political backgrounds behave and support specific sports teams. The questionnaire enabled the researcher to identify how politics integrates with sports and how this integration affects fans' behavior.

The sample consisted of 301 fans, out of which six were removed, resulting in a total sample of 295 respondents who support numerous teams in Lebanon and prescribe to different religions and political affiliations. Respondents were between 18 to 27 years old ($M = 26.63$, $SD = 6.70$). Out of the 295 respondents, 68.13% were male, and 31.86% were female.

The survey was carried out by using an online link (via Google Forms) sent out to the target population. All respondents volunteered to participate. Anonymity was ensured to minimize risk to the survey participants.

Variables

Demographics and Traits

Aside from age and gender, it was important for this study to ask the participants to specify their political and religious affiliation. Participants were asked to identify which sports team they are a fan of, their fan behavior (e.g., supporting the team), as well as their attitude about the sports team that they support (e.g., the best team) and if the team is affiliated with a certain political party.

Political and Religious Impact



Survey participants were asked a series of eight questions related to their attitudes towards the influence of politics on sports, specifically on the sports team that they are a fan of. These sets of statements were measured on a Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Four additional questions were asked about religion's influence on sports.

Level of Engagement with Sports Team

This variable measures the players' level of support to the club and dedication in both football and basketball. It also measures the fan's willingness to blindly support their team, attend games, and support the team players in victory and loss.

Team Players' Perceptions about the Club

This variable was measured by how team players view their clubs, whether they are fully engaged, and whether their level of engagement affects their behavior with their fans.

The Opinion of Fans towards any Game: Two-Step Flow

The research aims to consider fans' attitudes towards games and whether owners of sports teams communicate with fans and affect their opinions, and whether fans feel their opinion matters. A total of 11 statements were used, four statements directly relating to the fan's behavior such as "people ask my opinion about any game related to my favorite team," and seven statements relating to the fan's perceptions of the owners. All statements were measured using a Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Fans: $\alpha = .800$, $M = 3.561$ $SD = .770$; Owners: $\alpha = .779$, $M = 3.345$ $SD = .570$).

Influence of Opinion Leaders: Spiral of Silence

The study aims to determine the impact of opinion leaders on the mass fan base and whether their political and religious status, along with their financial investment in the team, influence the fans in either way, positively, by providing them a sense of solidarity and loyalty, or negatively, by silencing the expression of fans. Three statements were measured on a Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree ($\alpha = .758$, $M = 3.300$, $SD = .819$).

Results

Demographic Analysis

Participants ($N = 295$) were asked to specify their political and religious affiliations. Politically, 44% participants stated that they were independent; 17% stated that they supported Hezbollah party, 12% Future Movement, 7% Lebanese Forces, 5% Civil Society and Amal Movement, 4% Free Patriotic Movement, and the rest of the participants were divided amongst Phalanges, Progressive Socialist Party, and those who did not answer the



question (2% each). However, the majority of the respondents' religious affiliation were divided amongst Shia Muslim (46%), Maronite (20%), and Sunni Muslim (19%).

All of the respondents who chose Hezbollah as their affiliated political party identified themselves as Shia Muslim, while 63% stated that they supported the Al-Ahd football team. Twenty-eight percent stated that they support other football teams whose religious affiliation is also Shia Muslim. Less than 4% support Ansar while about 6% stated that they do not support any football team. Similarly, out of the 12% who stated that they support the Future Movement (Tayyar el Moustakbal), approximately 91% were Muslim Sunna, and all support Al-Ansar football team. Moreover, out of the 23% of respondents who claimed they did not support any basketball team, 84% were Muslim Shiaa. In addition, out of the 17% who support Al-Ansar team, 94% support Al-Riyadi basketball team, which is also affiliated with the Future Movement; 91% of those are Muslim Sunna.

Among the 61 respondents who support Sagesse, 59% are Christians (72% Maronites) and 36% are Muslims (95% of which are Shiaa). Out of 87 respondents who stated that they do not support any football team, 72% were Christians. Out of 72%, 79% were Maronites. Finally, there was a variety of football and basketball teams that the 130 politically independent respondents supported.

RQ1: What is the impact that the interrelation of politics and religion in Lebanon has on the sport (football and basketball), team, and fans?

Participants did not deny that sports in Lebanon, specifically football and basketball, are highly affected by politics and religion. The majority portrayed a more negative perspective on the influence of politics and religion on sports after stating that their favorite team is funded by political or religious groups.

Political Impact

More than half of the participants agreed that the team they support belongs to the political party they support, and roughly 50% stated that the political party they belong to funds the team they support. On the other hand, more than 50% of the participants who identified themselves as independent politically (44%) claimed that their favorite team is not funded by a political group. This suggests that the funding of their favorite team might come from independent donors or is funded by a religious figure or sect. While in the Lebanese context religion and politics are inseparable in most cases, there are teams funded by certain religious figures or are more known to have religious rather than political affiliations although the latter might still be interfering subtly. However, the fans might be unaware of that, and many fans tend to have a more positive attitude towards religion than politics, hence separating the former from the latter.



Approximately 73% of respondents claimed that the impact of politics on sports is not positive (disagreed or strongly disagreed), and 88% strongly agreed or agreed that politics affects sports negatively in Lebanon. Respondents agreed or strongly agreed that politics influences many factors including how a game is played (71%), how fans act (82%), how players are selected (70%), and how teams behave (75%). Also, 80% of the respondents believe that the teams are financed by political parties. However, when it comes to winning games, around 50% believe that politics interfere in the games' outcomes.

Religious Impact

Mainly, 63% of respondents noted that the team they support is affiliated to the religious group they belong to or identify with. Eighty-six percent of Maronites do not support any football team and roughly 50% of Shia Muslims do not support any basketball team. The rest are mostly divided amongst Riyadi and Sagesse clubs.

Slightly less intense than the effect of political integration, 72% of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the fact that religion has a positive impact on sports. While this is still a high number, the negative impact of religion on sports is less dramatic since many might regard politics as dirty while religion is considered noble. Also, 80% agreed that religion impacts the way people participate in sports, and 58% admitted that religious affiliation affects the team they select to support.

Similar to fan responses, team members, or all interviewees, football and basketball, admit that sports in Lebanon is highly influenced mostly by politics. The majority of the players stated that religion and politics have a negative impact on sports, and many emphasized that sports should not interfere with politics. However, three interviewees, all basketball players, highlighted the positive aspects of the influence of politics for different reasons. For instance, player B3 argued that the financial support of the political parties on the clubs has a positive effect on the game in general and on the financial aspect in particular:

The integration of politics in sports helped Lebanese Basketball in two ways. The first factor is the financial support for the teams; the second factor is attracting the fans. The money factor is because of political clashes and that led to the support of these political parties to these teams.

B4, on the other hand, also focused on the financial aspect but emphasized the importance of having a financial supporter of an overlooked domain in Lebanon. He views political interference “in a positive way because political parties tend to support the teams financially, and this helps a lot because there are times when there are no sponsors to pay a huge amount of money [sic].” Similarly, B5 also highlighted another pragmatic aspect of interference of politics:



Yes, I hate politics' interference with sports, but I don't really hate politicians interfering with sports as sponsors. For example, if someone wants to declare his candidacy for his next election, like why not choose a sports platform or a team as a sponsor [in order] to grab the attention of the fans... That's not bad.

However, despite their statements, like the other players, both still agreed that this interference has its unfavorable outcomes. None of the football players expressed any positive aspects regarding this interference. A possible explanation could be recent support that basketball has been receiving over football. Perhaps the new fame of many players is one of the possible reasons why the funding system in basketball is more welcomed than football. When asked about how politics and religion are integrated with sports in Lebanon and what the impacts of this integration are (questions 7 and 8 of the interview), the answers varied, but all pointed out the negative impact of this integration in the sports world.

Football

All football players recognized the negative impact on sports of politics and religion in Lebanon, but there were various inputs regarding the issue. Some conveyed their belief that the impact is not that detrimental. For example, F2 and F5 both argued that while the influence is present and disadvantageous, there are ways to overcome or at least ignore its involvement. In her interview, when asked about the results of the integration, F5 stated that “[she doesn’t] think this [the results of the integration] is a big deal as long as it does not affect the teammates,” yet did not fail to recognize how it is not often the case and how teammates can be caught in the political battle. F2 provided a more progressive interpretation of the issue. While he also recalled the damaging effects, he believes that this issue can be mended if the “fans’ mentality” changes. F2 endorsed a more cultural and tolerant approach towards sports where political interference does not create a conflict of interest. At the end of the interviews, all interviewees, particularly F5 and F2, stressed the importance of removing this interference to create a better environment for both teammates and fans.

“Because of that [extremism], we hope these types of things go away... These issues [of political and religious intervention] are rarely found abroad and that positively impacts the game over there, so I am hoping this phenomenon disappears from our games (in Lebanon).” *Statement by F2.*

“When politics gets involved, things may become dirty, and in Lebanon, it usually does. We must work to ensure that this is no longer the case.” *Statement by F5.*



Basketball

Basketball players were less determined to consider the interference of politics in Lebanon as negative. All interviewees agreed that each team is affiliated with a certain political and/or religious group, and player B5 even provided some examples. While most of the basketball interviewees had the same opinion as football interviewees, in the case of basketball, two highlighted some positive outcomes to this integration. For instance, B3 stated: “The clash between Riyadi and Sagesse helped basketball in one way and showed in the other way the problem that was present in Lebanon between Muslims and Christians.” In other words, B3 believes that the “cold war” between religions has been playing out on the basketball court by fans who feel that their teams, that represent a certain religion or sect, are a means to express their grievances towards the other by supporting their teams. A win for their teams means a win for their religion/political parties. Moreover, B5 stated that while interference is negative, any financial support from political candidates is welcome, because they can use this as an advantage for their political campaigns and connect with the people. In such cases, the financial aspect was considered more of a positive point than a negative point among basketball players.

Player Political Status and Personal Goals

In questions 3 and 6, the basketball and football players interviewed were asked about their status within their teams in terms of the nature of their affiliation and their career goals. When asked to evaluate their motivation for wanting to win a game (patriotic vs. political), answers leaned mostly towards patriotism. Many found pride in winning for their country and not for their political party (F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, and B4), but B2 and B5 pointed out that since teams represent political parties, it is inevitable not to represent them, and this sometimes overshadows a national or patriotic spirit. The players also highlighted other reasons. For example, F1, F5, B3, and B5 highlighted the importance of personal achievements and career growth in winning trophies, while F2 only stressed the financial aspect. Moreover, F2, F5, B1, and B2 also emphasized on the importance of sportsmanship and using sports to build an ethical environment. On the other hand, B1 and B3 did not give any national or political lean to the question and pointed out that playing or winning games was purely for financial or career-oriented reasons. This section clearly defined the conflict of prioritizing one’s loyalty to their country versus the political party of their team, and it was observed that most were inclined to serve their country.

Question 6 targeted a sensitive subject and asked players to discuss or comment about the player’s political affiliation vis-a-vis their team. None of the interviewees admitted their political affiliation except for B5, who stated that he prescribes to the same political views as his team, but he also



emphasized the fact that his statement derives from a cultural perspective (Armenian bondage). He also stated that even if he is affiliated, he does not follow them blindly:

I support this party, if I am talking about myself... but not blindly, you know. There is nothing wrong with people or athletes supporting political parties or having religious philosophies, but extremism and blind following is something that I don't like and don't practice. I keep the balance between what is best for me and my team. In the end, it is a sport, so it is not a place where I fight for the cause of the political party; it's not the case; definitely, it's not how I work at least. So, I proudly support it because perhaps we as Armenians have a different approach to this idea.

All interviewees also highlighted the fact that one should not necessarily be affiliated to a certain political party in order to be part of the team. However, some did point out that there might be some favoritism and in certain cases, dismissal, if grave issues arose. For instance, B4 stressed on the fact that while one does not need to be affiliated with the team's politics, there are clubs who would favor some players over others because of their political affiliation. Additionally, F5 noted that sometimes, getting caught in politics is inevitable for players and might have dire consequences.

Players, and good players, get caught in that wildfire battle of politics. Some players get kicked off a team. Fans intervene if a player ends up giving his opinion on a political party that contrasts his team's belief.

To gain fans, some players choose not to reveal their political affiliation, and in some cases, clubs might even ask them to remain politically and religiously neutral in order to maintain a good reputation and avoid trouble.

RQ2: How does an interplay trichotomy exist in relation to sport opinion leaders, teams and fans?

Fans: Voice or Voiceless

The vast majority of fan participants (65%) stated that they do not fear voicing their opinions to religious leaders and political figures who are affiliated with their favorite team. However, 50% would feel silenced by them if they offered financial assistance to their teams. Similarly, participants also prefer not to voice their opinions (43%) if it contradicts with the owners of the team and continue supporting the team; the rest of the participants were neutral. Finally, 62.3% of respondents claimed that they have a high sense of solidarity with the team they support no matter what.

Fans as Opinion Leaders or Followers

With respect to fans' attitudes towards voicing their own opinions and in



relation to the Spiral of Silence, the fan participants (65%) claimed that they are often asked about their opinions regarding the games and believe that they can influence other fans (58%), while 14% did not believe they could, and 28% were neutral. Likewise, approximately half of the participants expressed their opinions on social media and did not hold back, while 19% hesitated and 31% preferred to remain neutral.

Interview results from the closed-ended question portion of the interview show that players view themselves as influencers when it comes to decisions regarding their teams. For example, 70% either agreed or strongly agreed to the fact that they can influence decisions in their areas. Moreover, only 20% do not believe that they have access to information that they need. Finally, 60% disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that highlights their absence of involvement in politics, or as the statement says, “in what the government does.” They believe that they can express their opinions towards governmental decisions. However, when it comes to getting involved in specific issues that matter, there were no significant results due either mixed opinions (f) or their refusal to reply to the statement (g). In the former statement, 50% believe that they cannot contribute to issues that they care about while 30% disagree. The rest 20% are either neutral or refuse to answer the question. While in the latter statement, 60% refused to reply to the statement, marking the results to be inconclusive.

On the other hand, government-related statements showed accurate results. The majority of the interviewees do not trust the government altogether. For instance, 80% agreed or strongly agreed that politicians are not capable of telling the truth, and 70% agreed that politicians do not involve themselves with important matters. Only 10% agreed that the government strives to do what is right. While these are general viewpoints regarding the attitudes of players towards the government, the results here are significant in a sense because they relate to the perception of players to politics. This is related to the fact that many of the government positions in Lebanon are occupied by its main political parties that usually interfere in different areas including sports.

Communication with Fans

Questions 4 and 5 were directly related to fans. Question 4 was focused on the means of communications. Most of the interviewees stated that they connect with their fans via social media platforms. Some others stated that they were also ready to connect with fans on a personal basis, including but not limited to during practices, after games, and in public spaces (restaurants, streets, and cafes). None of the interviewees denied communication.

The extent of communication and its impact were discussed in question 5. All respondents agreed that as team members, they can influence their fans



in general, except for F4, who stated that he can only encourage fans to do what is right. All expressed their concern about fans' behavior during games and how it was important for them to be on their best behavior during and after games. The characteristics mentioned across the interviews related to this question included being respectful, ethical, tolerant, fair, civilized, supportive, humble, and sportsmanlike. They also conveyed their desire to have fans that cheer for the team rather than the political party or religion the team is affiliated with and avoid trouble. Many of the interviewees also deemed themselves partly responsible for their fans' behavior. They considered themselves as potential role models for the fans, and therefore, their behavior should also be exemplary and reflect positively to the fans.

In some of the interviews, some players recalled certain events that influenced fans. For example, B1 stated that he "once asked fans of [his] club to stop chanting certain derogatory terms to a specific group, and they accepted and never did it again." Also, B5 mentioned that he had on many occasions influenced his fans: "I do have the ability to influence our fans because fans need guidance and whichever way you guide them, they will react upon that." The results show all players have effective ways to communicate and are mostly able to influence their fans to behave in a more respectful and sportsmanlike manner.

Owners as Opinion Leaders or Followers

The following summarizes the communication methods used by the opinion leaders and how they share their thoughts to followers. More than 64% of the respondents stated that the owners of the team that they supported hold media conferences or releases to announce their opinions, and 50% stated that the owners are usually active on social media, communicate with their fans, and have a strong influence on the fans. However, only 26% stated that they follow what the owners ask them to do while 43% disagreed with this, 30% neither agree nor disagree with this statement. Thirty-three percent of fans admitted to replying to owners' comments, 27% preferred not to reply at all while 40% were neutral.

Discussion

Integration of Politics and Religion in Sports

Religious Impact on or Religious Devotion to the Game

The results of this study show that the political parties in Lebanon are supported by their corresponding religious sects. It then follows that to understand the game, one must understand its people (Montague 2008). For Lebanon, it is hardly surprising that religion and politics become intricately intertwined within and across both communities and states in the region (Maliks 2018). This was confirmed in the results, as a clear link was established between the political and the religious affiliations especially in



the Muslim community where the majority of Suuni Muslims support the Future Movement while the Shia Muslims are affiliated with the Hezbollah party and respective teams. These seemingly transparent diverse representations and/or boundaries present in the sport are governed by their corresponding political party to maintain political security and balance (Faour 2007). This interrelatedness of sports, religion, and politics in Lebanon creates a chain reaction effect; if sports are influenced by one then it must be influenced by the other and similarly if anything impacts politics then the sport (team, fans) too is impacted. Nassif and Amara's (2015) research show that the over-representation of religious and political communities in the sports industry is inevitably existent in sports. Likewise, Karami (2013) lists important basketball teams, such as Sagesse and Riyadi, and links them to their corresponding political parties, Lebanese Forces (Christian) and Future Movement (Muslim), respectively. He discusses that politics and sectarianism have damaged basketball in Lebanon since this was reflected in a prospective ban of the Lebanese Basketball Association from being a member of FIBA. Similarly, when it comes to football, the intervention of politics in sports is consequential. In their interview, F2 and F3 pointed out how the interference might result in a FIFA ban, similar to the one that occurred in Kuwait. A similar occurrence took place in Egypt, where the politicization of the Ultras caused a football ban by FIFA (Ennarah 2017).

Belonging to a political party is not a determinant of religious affiliation. Many of the respondents claimed to be independent however identified themselves as part of a religious group, and few claimed that they are non-religious (e.g., atheist, agnostic etc.). Yet, since many of the politically independent participants were still affiliated religiously as the results suggest, there is a probability that their choice of team support is linked to that of religion rather than politics. This could also relate to the mistrust in politics but not in religion in general. As the majority of respondents indicated one's religion affects one's team choice (e.g., Maronite Christians selecting to support Sagesse, Muslim fans selecting Riyadi). Based on the numbers, there was more loyalty to religion than politics, and this could be due to the increase in the number of independents and the ongoing corruption in politics that many of the youth in Lebanon are recognizing.

Perception of Politics and Religion on Sports by the Fans and Players

The impact of politics and religion on sports was mostly seen negatively, especially among the fans. On the other hand, while all interviewees pointed out the negative impacts, some also considered some of the positive outcomes of this intervention such as the budget. This is the case for the players, as the interviewees indicated, because the world of sports is rarely considered a domain of importance in Lebanon and building a career in the sports industry is often discouraged. Many teams, as a result, resort to



politics to secure a budget. Likewise, political candidates resort to sponsoring a team to gain popularity among the people, and this has helped with the advancement of sports. Due to the lack of budget within a sports team, funding has become a necessity no matter the means (Nassif 2010).

However, it was acknowledged by the interviewees that political intervention can damage sportsmanship, decrease the productivity of teammates, open doors for discrimination of players, and affect the overall atmosphere of the games, where winning a game can be represented with a symbolic victory of a certain political party or religious sect. These types of political conflicts represented within the teams can promote conflict between the fans (Karami 2013).

While politics can encourage an increase in the number of fans, as results suggest, so can religion. However, violence can also spark as a result of religious and political tension between the fans of the teams (Maugendre 2018). This can be seen during games when fans of one team can get physically and verbally violent toward the fans of another.

Matches between Homentmen and Riyadi, for example, have become increasingly popular since they are often a venue for political and religious clashes. This was exacerbated by the fact that the former advanced to a higher rank due to the financial support it began receiving from an Armenian sponsor, Guy Manoukian (Naharnet Newsdesk 2018). The fans usually get heated up in these matches, which either take place in Aghpalian Club (Home Stadium for Homentmen) or the Riyadi Stadium (Manara). The political and religious tensions between the fans are often highlighted during those games, especially due to the former's affiliation to the Tashnag Armenian party and their zealous campaign against the Turks for the recognition of and reparations for the Armenian Genocide, and the latter's alliance with the Turkish government (MTV 2017). The games, on multiple occasions, have turned into verbal, emotional, and physical disturbances as Riyadi fans tend to provoke Homentmen fans by raising and waving the flags of Turkey in the stadium and cause violent physical clashes among the fans (MTV 2017).

At these games, aggressive rivalry dominates the sports arena, and as shown in the Facebook post below with the caption "It is not a story of commission nor trophy nor triumph. Our passion is Al Riyadi, a passion since childhood (sic)." The extreme loyalty is evident in the picture as Riyadi fans, who most likely belong to *Al Mostakbal* (Future Movement) political party, are Sunni Muslim.



Fig. (1): A Facebook Post of a Riyadi Fan during a Homentmen vs. Riyadi Game

The Turkish flag they are carrying has multiple connotations. On one hand, it represents their support of Turkey, since their affiliated political party has a strong alliance with the country. On the other hand, the Turkish flag is insulting to Homentmen fans, who belong to the Tashnag party and are of Armenian origin. This Armenian-Turkish rivalry dates back to the times of the 1915 genocide, and relations between them are severed and personal. Even today, any association with Turkey is intolerable and sensitive to most members of the Armenian community. The Turkish flag, therefore, carried by Riyadi fans, is only a means to provoke Tashnag Armenian flags and challenge their identity. An attack on the player, team, political party, or religious sect is an attack on the identity of the fan, an identity that fans most often seek to protect no matter the cost.

Opinion Leaders, Team, and Fans: An Interplay Trichotomy

Opinion Leaders' Influence on Followers

This study has shown that the majority of the owners influence their followers on social media and occasionally announce their opinions and guide the fan base. However, only a quarter of participants emphasized that they agree with statements, and a slightly higher percentage of fans admitted to avoiding replying to comments and remaining neutral to avoid conflict. Most of the neutral answers were confined to questions concerning vocalizing opinions on social media or disagreeing with opinion leaders. Also, and surprisingly, many fans replied with “neutral” when asked about who funds their favorite team. Whether the reason is their lack of knowledge, fear, or preference not to reply remains unclear. This shows how opinion leaders remain a source of influence, on some issues, for the fans and indirectly govern their behavior or at least manage unwanted reactions.



On the other hand, fans do not want to increase conflict for their teams and thus remain neutral or at times confirm the sentiments of the opinion leaders. Some fans seem to be driven by the system as they do not prefer to be involved in the decision-making process and rather prefer to enjoy the game as fans and not deal with the bureaucracy of it. Moreover, respondents claimed that although access to social media can make opinions more accepted, the greater power resides in the hands of those who have more access to media outlets/platforms, who can make their opinions dominant and accepted by the majority, especially when providing seemingly valuable content.

Slight Paradox Shift

It is worth noting that owners value their business (their club). That being said, especially with the crises in Lebanon, the club is a priority to fund so that would naturally mean that they would accept funding from various sources, even if they do not prescribe to the same political or religious affiliations. However, opportunities of that sort are rare or do not tend to present themselves, unless the sponsor is affiliated. This was the case with Guy Manoukian, who is a Lebanese-Armenian musician who financially supports the Lebanese Armenian team (Homenetmen) as opposed to any other Lebanese team (Nabarnet 2018). The teams get external sponsors, like Manoukian, and are not funded by the actual political party the team is affiliated to, nonetheless the political connection remains, more so with the fans than the players or owners – resulting in this paradox.

Also, if owners perceive the club as their business, they would be more likely to recruit the ‘best’ players for their team and that too means recruitment across political and religious affiliations. An example of this, and an exception to the aforementioned arguments, is the current change with the teams that have been mentioned throughout the paper as predominately Christian (Sagesse) and the Muslim (Riyadi). The captain of the Sagesse team is Ali Mezher a Shia Muslim, and the captain of Riyadi is Jean Abdelnour who is Christian (Lebanese Forces) (LBF 2022) – another paradox relating to the players.

Team Players Influencing Decision Making and Fans

The results showed that most team players view themselves as valuable members of the team; however, they did not deny the occasional pressure that might arise from the administration. This is in accordance with Nassif and Amara (2015) who stated that the hiring process of both administration and team can be biased towards those who support the political agenda. In the case of the Lebanese league, religious and political considerations can be integrated into the selection process, but many team members that were interviewed denied any political connection and stated that they were content in their team and were involved in the decision-making process.



Players do not try to claim affiliations because they often get recruited from one team to another, and thus want to widen their opportunities.

Teammates believe that they can influence decisions made in the team. Research shows that many sports teams in Lebanon are funded by certain political figures or parties, and this creates a complex club-team-fan dynamic (Nassif and Amara 2015). Needing the sponsorship and the funds, teams sometimes tend to accept or overlook certain decisions made by owners, and even if some do not agree with the decisions, they tend to continue supporting them.

This influence in decision making can also be the result of the incompetence of decision-making members. As previously stated, around 90% of the team organizers are considered unqualified for the positions they are in and were only selected because of their political or religious affiliation (Nassif and Amara 2015), this creates an antagonistic perspective of the club management from both the fans and teams perspective, especially if the fan is independent (not belonging to the team's political party). The interviewees also pointed this out, and some considered that this has also affected the hiring process. Although the majority of the interviewees claimed that they were not politically affiliated, they stated that most of their team members belong to the political party and/or religion the club is affiliated with and probably have more influence in the decision-making process.

Moreover, the players emphasized their influence on the fans in general. All players stated that they may influence the way that their fans behave in and outside of the arena. Most players even considered themselves as strong influencers and do not entertain foul behavior from the fans. As a result, many of the players consider themselves potential opinion leaders capable of influencing the public, particularly their fans.

Fans: Leaders and Influencers

The results of this study showed that more than half of the fans believe that their opinions regarding games matter and are also able to influence other fans. In relation to the Two-Step Flow theory, some fans consider themselves opinion leaders in relation to the other fans. Many of the fan respondents consider themselves as potential leaders capable of affecting other fans. In the trichotomy, fans in numbers are the majority, however in decision making and power, they are the minority. Minority groups can become opinion leaders if they believe they can make a difference or are capable and have the means (e.g., social media platforms) to share their opinions (Bastos et al. 2013); as was the case with the fan participants who believe that they can influence their teams. Perhaps then being fans of major sports teams creates a force to speak up and/or challenge authority, or even how sports (e.g., football) has the potential to be a cultural tool that can change the social order (Dorsey 2016). Even though sports in Lebanon



are influenced by politics and religion, many of the fans believe that they can influence the team and that their opinion matters. This could be due to the spread of social media platforms that encourage freedom of expression. Also, it can potentially be attributed to a younger generation of fans who are willing to freely express their thoughts and challenge the status quo. Yet, it might also be that their opinions are already synced with and/or invested in the political parties involved and thus feel as if they have a sense of power to speak up and contribute to the team, hence the interplay trichotomy.

However, this interplay is dynamic, and fans feel that they prefer not to voice their opinions when a matter could endanger the overall wellbeing of the political party, especially if that political party is funding the team, hence the Spiral of Silence effect. Fans do not deny the influence of owners and political leaders on mass opinion but deny the fact that they are silenced. This does not mean though that they would not voice their loyalty to the team. There are several reasons this may be the case. Many of the fans consider themselves extremely loyal to the political party they belong to, and even in the sports sector, they tend not to express their opinions since they do not want to upset their political leaders (again especially when they are team sponsors) or the mass opinion. This Spiral of Silence effect in which fans, depending on their level of belonging to a certain political party or religious sect, would hesitate to share any form of opinion on social media fearing criticism and isolation from other devoted fans. This too is in line with the Two-Step Flow theory, which posits that depending on a person's perceived level of prominence (e.g., the higher the level of belonging the greater the support and power) others will then choose to follow in the same direction.

Since this study was aimed at fans who would be influenced by others on social media rather than in a physical setting, it is perhaps easier to avoid providing opinions online when the comments they might be receiving are hostile while in a supposedly friendly environment (i.e. social media team page). However, the fact that they refuse to be silenced could be a pride issue as most stated that they tend not to give their opinions if it contrasts the majority view. This does not deny the presence of a power struggle but also seems not to accept full affiliation to the opinions of owners.

Fans might not psychologically accept the fact that they are fully governed by a higher political body and might want to assert individual thinking and autonomy. This perspective allows the individual to have a sense of freedom; a feeling that they can separate their passion for the sport from their political ideologies. Also, since the discussions are usually put forward on social media, many participants would want to display their loyalty to their team, and as the results indicated, 65% of participants would be ready to voice their opinions against political and religious figures. Perhaps only those who are particularly confident and those who are independent in



thought might express their opinions more freely. Needless to say, many have lost trust in the government all together.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. One of the major limitations was time constraint and the global situation (e.g., COVID-19). Because of the pandemic, the interviews could not be conducted face to face, so most of them were done through Skype and Whatsapp. What complicated data collection was that some interviewees refused to answer certain questions, and this did not allow the interviewer to have substantial content for some questions.

The sample representation and size were also an issue due to the limited time and religious affiliation. The respondents were mostly Shia Muslim, which did not provide an equal demographic distribution. This was also due to the fact that many sports platforms, which belonged to different political/religious affiliations, refused to post the questionnaire on their sports pages.

Implications and Future Research

This study examined the inevitable influence of politics and religion on sports in Lebanon. The results clearly indicated how both fans and players were fully affected by this phenomenon, and while team independence was highlighted in certain cases and most were looking forward to having this interference removed, it was clear that this influence will continue in sports since the issue of finance still stands, especially after the economic crises in Lebanon. This study has highlighted the attitude of both fans and players regarding the integration of politics in sports and has shed light on both the negative and positive aspects of this integration. Also, the different attitudes of fans towards loyalty to political parties and religious sects and their connection to the respective teams were a novel point in the study. Interestingly, the slight difference in attitude between basketball and football is also a key finding from this study as the rise in popularity of basketball due to increased funding is viewed favorably by fans and players regardless of political affiliation. The results of this research, however, could inspire future complementary research. For example, research should be done comparing the situation of men's teams versus women's teams.

Finally, to tackle the issue of political and religious interference in Lebanon, it is crucial to introduce laws that do not allow the interference of politics and religion in sports by managing the source of funding the team receives and ensuring that each team includes people of all religions and minorities. This can also allow fans to make their decisions based on the qualifications of the teams and their players rather than the club's political or religious affiliation. This might be difficult to achieve, considering the context of Lebanon, but it is not impossible. The teams can ask for financial help from



organizations/companies/institutions that do not have any political or religious affiliation. Also, monitoring players, fans, coaches, and administration from clubs help in keeping the political and religious tension at bay. Finally, raising awareness by organizing campaigns can also be a small yet positive step towards achieve political and religious segregation from sports.

There is no doubt that politics and religion play a major role in sports in Lebanon. Many fans and players are caught between the tumultuous political battles that subtly reflected in the administration of clubs and games. It is safe to assume that the involvement of politics and religion in Lebanon's many fields, including that of sports, is a complicated matter and will need years to resolve.

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