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# TAKING A KNEE: AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY ON PRINT NEWS COVERAGE OF THE COLIN KAEPERNICK PROTESTS

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TAKING A KNEE: AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY ON PRINT NEWS COVERAGE  
OF THE COLIN KAEPERNICK PROTESTS

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
Communication Studies

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by  
Kriston Costello  
June 2019

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June 2019

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## ABSTRACT

This study addresses the media depiction of professional athletes involvement in protest and its impact for public consumption. This paper will further seek to analyze the role of social media and its framing of political protest specifically within professional sports. The purpose of this research is to study the progression in professional athletes' participation in protest and through textual analysis aim to understand how newspapers frame an athlete's message. The more recent study that will be used as a frame of reference is the newspaper coverage on the Kaepernick protest and the dual relationship that the local/national media and social media had in its framing and impact on sports and society. There is existing work that has focused on the up's and down's for African Americans in sports, but those sources only highlight small political protest in professional sports without highlighting newspaper coverage. This study will display through three top nationally circulated newspaper companies (and the top circulated newspaper in San Francisco where the Kaepernick protest started) how the media illustrates protest and the reaction to protest through the lens of social media.

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late father, since I wouldn't receive my master's degree in this fashion without his help. Also, I would like to thank my loved ones that inspire me to reach for the stars as much as possible.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

“The Black male athlete has played an integral role in the process of civil rights because Civil Rights activists have successfully mobilized and voiced their opinions, through addressing social ills that plagued American society” (Agyemang, 2012, p. 435). A small portion of the Civil rights groups consisted of Black athletes, such as Colin Kaepernick supporting the Black Lives Matters movement. Black athletes have a platform and pathway laid by these activist groups in order to promote equality for all. “[Black] athletes were among the most important/ influential voices during the 1960s civil rights movement, and their role is important because professional athletes are positioned to serve as agents of social change and their influence can potentially affect the attitudes and beliefs of their fans” (Coombs and Cassilo, 2017). This has been shown when influential Black athletes, such as Muhammad Ali, speak out against social injustices. Minority athletes appear to take a big role in social justice issues particularly focused on African American subjects (Sanderson, 2016).

“Both amateur and professional Black male athletes were involved in activist feats” (Agyemang, 2012, p. 435). After refusing to serve in Vietnam, Muhammad Ali stated, “I ain’t got no quarrel with those Viet Cong, anyway. They never called me a nigger”(2012). Muhammad Ali is one of the forefathers for Black athlete activism because he took charge in standing up against the Vietnam War. He firmly believed that Black’s had no right in fighting in a war

against a country that hadn't committed any violent acts against African Americans. Ali stated,

Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bomb and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs? I have nothing to lose by standing up and following my beliefs. So I'll go to jail. We've been in jail for four hundred years (Agymegang, 2012, p. 435).

It is interesting to see how this ideology has slightly changed over time because athlete activism has changed from taking a position against certain actions the government commits towards fighting against inequalities in the minority community.

Some other famous known figures taking part in activism in the last 60s and early 70s were, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Russell and Jim Brown, (Agyemang, p. 435). All of these individuals are pioneers for today's athlete activism movements. They have helped shape the minds of young Black athletes and other minorities all around the country that have benefited today's society. If it wasn't for them sharing their past experiences and perspective on issues, our athletes would possibly be less outspoken because they would feel as if it wasn't their place, or they receive consequences from their respective sports organizations they play in because they did speak out.

Sports has always been used to promote political movements (Kaufman, 2010, p. 156). As sports grow, more people pay attention to the responses

formed from when athletes go on record and say in interviews. Athletes have grown from individuals that play a sport just for entertainment and money, to people who grow into role models in order to inspire the youth to want to bring change to the world. They are the ones that publicly support majority of today's activism protest. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement is a huge phenomenon currently. Athletes all over the United States have shown their support for the BLM movement. According to Coombs and Cassilo (2017), athletes have been among the most publicly visible supports of the Black Lives Matter movement (p. 426). This is because the youth look up to athletes as their role models or inspirations. Most of the time, athletes are the embodiment of success and a part of the American dream people strive for. Even if a person doesn't play sports, majority of the time that person can still look up to a well-known athlete because they have achieved a high-level of success and people would love to replicate that if they can. "[Dwayne] Wade and Derrick Rose, who are two well-known superstar basketball players, led the charge in the NBA, with posing in a hoodie to call attention to the Martin case and wearing a t-shirt alluding to Garner's death during game-day warm-ups setting a trend then followed by other basketball players" (Coombs and Cassilo, 2017, p. 426). This moment in American history is important because athletes decided to speak on social injustices. They use their voice to shape the lives of many young children and adults in order for them to bring fourth a brighter future. Young children and adults in this generation receive these athletes' messages in numerous ways, but

the one that stands out the most is the information expansion speed rate of media.

Throughout the history of professional sports, there have been athletes that have decided to stand up to injustices that plague our country through activism. Slowly but surely, individuals showed their support and helped advocate for their causes. The ones who show support towards athlete's being activist understand the athlete's narrative, which binds their fans and them together. An athlete's story can enable readers to make sense of news reports in the media (Herman, 2003). Once people are able to understand the stories athletes tell about their upbringing, people can interpret news reports better than if they didn't understand where the athletes ideals spawned from.

This study will mainly focus on the Colin Kaepernick for the methodology and analysis section. During the 2016-2017 NFL season, pro football player Colin Kaepernick sat down during the National Anthem. Copeland (2016) recorded a response from Kaepernick, he said "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color...To me this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way" (p. 86). His political protests were promptly committed when racial tensions were at a high due to the police brutality cases. The cases happened due to police killing African Americans unruly. Alton Sterling and Philando Castile were the two gentlemen who were killed that Kaepernick showed support for. Once the story gaining more and more coverage through

social media, many people were either supporters or protesters for his political protest. After speaking to former Army Green Beret (Nate Boyer), he chose to alter his protest in order not to insult veterans (Copeland, 2016). He switched from sitting during the National Anthem to taking a knee during it, and this changed the story of the protest. Kaepernick made it clear that this was not against the military by any means. Coombs (2017) recorded his statement, which was,

We were talking to him [Boyer] about how we can get the message back on track and not take away from the military, not take away from pride in our country but keep the focus where the issues really are...there are issues that still need to be addressed and there was also a way to show more respect for the men and women that fight for this country (p. 49).

Down the line some media sources misconstrued Kaepernick's message. They framed it to where they wanted to show that he was protesting the military and police in order to get message across for the betterment of African Americans in society. Many media sources drew comparisons from Smith and Carlos "Black Power" salute to Kaepernick's kneeling. Both times the media misdirected moments and that resulted in the disenfranchisement of these athletes in their respective professional careers. Coombs (2017) said, "when athletes choose to take public stands on controversial issues, including police shootings, social justice, and racial equality, they take on considerable risk. Athletes of

Kaepernick's stature often have substantial endorsement deals that can be cut due to backlash" (p. 49). This statement has been proven to be correct completely. The NFL has been known to shut down any type of political protest that doesn't line up with their pro-American branding that the country loves them for (Coombs, 2017). After his protest, he was ousted from the NFL due to his political protest, but the league did it in a more underhanded way without breaching any amendments that go against his rights.

Pena's study in regards to Kaepernick highlights the importance of protesting depending on the time and manner they're commenced. Pena (2017) believed that people seem to value and support protest as long as they agree to protest at the right time and fashion. This played a huge role in the support and opposition in Kaepernick's protest, due to the fact that he kneeled during the National Anthem before a national football game. Usually place and manner are at the core of supporting or opposing a cause (Pena, 2017). Many people may have supported Kaepernick more if he protested another time that didn't involve the National Anthem. Pena believed that the dislike towards Kaepernick's protest might be truer when protest occur when people are trying to entertain themselves (Pena, 2017). This seems to be true because a lot of American's past time is spent watching sporting events. But, politics have been entangled in sports, such as football for a very long time (Pena, 2017). Over time, the NFL has had patriotic and militaristic ideologies engrained in them, which has been set to oppose protest that resembles Kaepernick's cause. Pena believed that

the public didn't have a problem with the reasoning for the protest, but they were upset how the protest happened continuously. This phenomenon highlights the role of the First Amendment and the role of nationalism/patriotism within sports (Pena, 2017). The First Amendment played a huge role in this phenomenon. There were debates that discussed whether or not his First Amendment rights would be breached if he were silenced. Zeide (2005) stated, "the First Amendment prohibits the government from 'abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press' " (p. 1324). It does protect speakers in democracy (Zeide, 2005). The First Amendment highlights the protection of the press, as well as the self-expression of individuals. Pena brought up an interesting about the role of nationalism/patriotism in sports vs. the First Amendment. On one hand, all citizens of the United States have the right for self-expression through protest, which Kaepernick successfully conducted; but on the other hand, in the eyes of many he isn't patriotic and doesn't love America if he doesn't stand for the National Anthem. Pena (2017) stated, "in the case of the national anthem, its presence is political because it defines a game in terms of nationalism, suggesting that a sporting event is an appropriate place to affirm the principles that Americans as a people" (p. 11). Many people believe that if you do not stand during the National Anthem, you're going against America, which is a very interesting dilemma that Pena brought up. People are forced to act upon patriotism because of the meaning and the historical value behind the National Anthem.



Currently, Kaepernick hasn't been able to find a job in the NFL due to the owner's alliance towards one another to not sign him. In February 2019, he won a settlement in his court case against the NFL, but the amount of money he won and the reason why, has been disclosed from the public. There can be various reasons why this information was disclosed; but in the end the NFL won the political battle by giving Kaepernick hush money, and not allowing him to play in the professional football league as of now.

Political protests with professional athletes who are the front-runners have become inspiring moments that help create change for social justice issues, such as the Kaepernick protests being tied into the Black Lives Matter movement. Kaepernick's protests are documented in traditional print newspapers, which have benefited and hurt professional athletes that are supporters of political protests. In order to understand how traditional print newspapers framed Kaepernick in political protests, a textual analysis that identifies frames was conducted through analyzing newspaper articles that focused on his political protests derive from the top nationally circulated newspapers and a top circulated local newspaper in San Francisco. This study also discusses how social media depicted the Kaepernick's protest based on my observation of numerous tweets shown in various stories from the newspaper articles I chose as well as by focusing on related hashtags on twitter.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review will discuss the historical documentation of political protests in professional sports that has led to Kaepernick's protests against social injustices. This section will derive from the works of Zirin (2008), and Davis (2008). Also, this chapter will discuss the importance and role athlete activism has played in the history of sports, and this will be addressed through Agyemang article (2012). The theoretical framework section will discuss how newspapers can frame a phenomenon in professional sports through certain lenses that have been developed through an interpretive process while reading the Kaepernick protests print news articles closely.

#### Historical Political Protest in Sports

The purpose of this section is to outline certain significant points in sports history that involves media coverage in regards to political protest in professional sports. The origin and historical background will discuss David Zirin's book *A People's History In the United States* (2008) and Timothy Davis book *Race and Sports in America: An Historical Overview* (2008). Zirin's work is based the historical background of how sports were created and the changes it went through throughout the historical eras of time, including political protests by professional athletes. Davis' research walks you through race and sports in America. He focuses on the historical eras as well, especially through the

slavery era, post-reconstruction era and the Civil Rights era. Zirin and Davis' work have many similarities through outlining how race and sports go hand and hand because of the value of minorities, especially African Americans and their role in the history of sports. Through understanding the historical background of sports will lead us into the start of athlete activism and why it is important.

### The Slavery Era

Davis (2008) stated, "sports have revealed the dominant attitudes and practices regarding race relations in the United States throughout the country's history". "Despite efforts to cast sports as competitive activity in which anyone with the requisite skill can both participate and succeed, racial discrimination in American society at large has played a persistent role in American sports" (Davis, 2008, p.292). During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans were held down by the greatest oppression.

### Slaves and Sports

Davis (2008) stated, "the institution of slavery left little opportunity for the vast majority of African Americans to engage in leisure or recreational activities" (p. 292). Games/sports on slave plantations meant something completely different from today's meaning of it. Between themselves, slaves saw it as a different representation of what whites saw it as. For example, if slaves played dodgeball, no one would be eliminated (Zirin, 2008). Researchers believed that this was their way to escape the harsh reality of slavery where their family

members could be eliminated by being sold at random (Zirin, 2008). Dodgeball was used as symbolic meaning to keep slave families together.

Zirin (2008) believed that plantation owners promoted sports in slavery in order to create harmony while being in bondage. Owners thought if their slaves were together playing sports and games around the plantation, they would never want to leave their family where they were forced to stay on plantation grounds since masters owned them at the moment. Davis (2008) argued that the slaves who participated in sports, their involvement reflected the superiority complex in the whites attitudes in regards to race. "One such attitude was that whites were dominant and in control, so that African Americans assumed subordinate roles" (Davis, 2008, p. 292). This is the very reason why some former slaves/abolitionist despised sports due to the corruption that plantation owners developed over time. If slaves were always playing sports being issued out by their masters, they more than likely would never want to seek freedom because their friends and family were stuck on the plantation and this was the only recreational fun they were handed after long grueling days of forced servitude. Fredrick Douglas didn't believe sports could be the source of comfort and expression that many believed it was (Zirin, 2008). He believed sports were what held down slaves from seeking freedom. Douglas stated,

to make a contented slave, you must make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and as far as possible, to annihilate his power of reason. He must be able to detect no

inconsistencies in slavery. The man that takes his earnings must be able to convince him that he has the perfect right to do so. It must not depend upon mere force; the slave must know no Higher Law than his master's will. The whole relationship must not only demonstrate, to his mind, its necessity, but its absolute rightfulness (Zirin, 2008, p. 6).

He believed that sports aided to the harmony of plantation life for slaves. Many believed this to be true because masters made slaves very thoughtless individuals where they manipulated them to believe without the use of sports on the plantation, they would lose everyone around them, and which would create inconsistencies in their work due to the emotional stress of always seeing their friends and family leave. Without the inconsistencies, slaves became happy with what they were given, which Douglas saw during his years of slavery. Davis (2008) revealed, for the plantation owners and their friend's entertainment, they entered slaves into boxing matches. These matches were some of the most brutal and cruel events that people have witnessed. The boxing matches brought together wealthy and poor whites (Zirin, 2008). Sports were declared to have a community symbolic affect on sports fans in the South, rather than being divided due to social economic status.

The status and role slaves were assigned for sports had a ripple effect throughout history and how others view certain positions in sports. For example, slaves served as jockeys and trainers under the supervision of white owners (Davis, 2008). Most whites after the Civil War didn't like being associated or tied

to “slave roles” in sports. Blacks were allowed to be jockeys for horse riding and whites had no interest in performing this sport till late the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Slaves and their owners found a new meaning specific in sports and what they meant to themselves over time. Davis (2008) stated, “not only did slaves’ participation in sports serve as a source of slaveholders’ entertainment, sports were viewed as having an anti-rebellion effect. A prevailing theme of this era was that sports were a safe venue within which slaves could vent their anger, aggression, and hostility” (p. 293). The use of sports and what they meant to slaves helped transpire and revolutionize how African Americans view sports. In 1830, there was a law passed that cemented the barrier between blacks and whites at sporting events. This law was called “Black Codes”. It stated, “that is shall not be lawful for any white person or free Negro, or mulatto, or persons of mixed blood to play at any game of cards, dice, nine-pins, and any game of chance or hazard whether for money, liquor, or property or not, with any slave or slaves” (Zirin, 2008, p. 10). These Black Codes regulated social interaction amongst slaves, free blacks, and whites (Zirin, 2008). This law made sure black slaves and the poor whites wouldn’t speak to each other and become a close community.

On the other hand, the Blacks located in the North of the United States at the time viewed sports differently. African Americans participated in various sports and recreational activities in urban centers (Davis, 2008). Research found that blacks in the north, did indeed endure racial discrimination in sports (Davis,

2008). The racial discrimination they faced served as barrier in utilize public recreation centers.

### Moses Fleetwood Walker

Walker was the first African American professional baseball player. Unfortunately, his professional career didn't last too long because of the discrimination dished out by his fellow white players, not by the white owners. Teams that Walker would play against sent him threatening letters. Mobs were ready to harm Walker if he had played in games. His career quickly declined and he went on to run a hotel and become an inventor of early movie cameras (Zirin, 2008). Walker created a pamphlet in 1908 named *Our Home Colony*. He was very adamant about blacks escaping white supremacy through seceding from America (Zirin, 2008). His pamphlet contained early markings of athlete activism. It focused on the race problem in America. Walker said, "We see no possible hope that the Negro will ever secure the enjoyment of this social freedom and equality. Without it, he can never expect full and complete development" (Zirin, 2008, p. 23). Walker believed that the only way to get rid of the white supremacy that plagues their race was to move to Liberia. His blackballing from professional baseball left scars that never healed and his life's mission was to combat racism against Blacks. "The sham of baseball's 'level playing field' created a man with no illusions in the promise of America" (Zirin, 2008, p. 24). The promise of America Zirin spoke about in regards to how professional baseball left Walker is how the American idea or promise of equality for all wasn't given to him. Being

discriminated due to the color of your skin in sports isn't the country, Walker envisioned. He showed the first form of legitimate athlete activism. The pamphlet he produced to outline his ideals shined light on obvious social injustices many people dismissed at the time. Over the years, Blacks who are aware of this action by Walker have drawn inspiration from his courageous actions.

### Blacks in Baseball

Most owners and coaches didn't agree with kicking out African Americans out of their league. Those individuals were thinking about the sake of their team more than the players themselves. "The forceful excising from the league of black players led to tragicomic episodes of managers trying by any means to get the best talent on the field" (Zirin, 2008, p. 24). Coaches and owners lied about the background of some of their players in order to bypass their players being kicked out from the league if they were African American. For example, John McGraw signed Charley Grant and told the press he was a great Cherokee sports star (Zirin, 2008). These tactics didn't last for too long. According to Zirin (2008), "the whitening of the national pastime became a living symbol of the exclusion of blacks from all walks of public life" (p. 24). Ousting Blacks from professional baseball was only the beginning in the separation of Blacks and Whites in sports.

Over time, Blacks were able to play with white players. In 1877, seven African Americans were on rosters of baseball's most prestigious minor league,



which was the International League. Despite those players being in the spotlight due to their athletic gifts, they were still looked down upon because they were African American. “Blacks were on teams of other minor leagues and continued to play on major league baseball minor league teams until the mid-1890s” (Davis, 2008, p. 284).

### The Birth of Babe Ruth and Sports Journalism

In the 1920s, Babe Ruth was accredited for saving baseball despite the 1919 Black Sox scandal (Zirin, 2008). The Black Sox scandal pertains to eight players from the Chicago White Sox were accused of conspiring to throw the World Series in 1919 (Zirin, 2008). Due to this accusation, they were banned from the major leagues from the baseball commissioner, but they were found innocent in the court of law.

Sports media propelled Ruth’s popularity through establishing his presence in the major leagues and it created a new age in sports celebrity. During this golden age of sports, columnist in newspapers provided opportunities for athletes to be well known. This opened the floodgates for athletes to utilize their popularity to spread their voice and utilize activism in a positive light. “It served to create outsized heroes out of ordinary jocks” (Zirin, 2008, p. 55). Without the news print coverage of Babe Ruth as entertainment as a sports celebrity, athletes like Muhammad Ali and Colin Kaepernick wouldn’t have had a platform to become political protest pioneers.

## The Birth of Negro Leagues

In the 1920s, the Negro leagues were the production of segregation (Zirin, 2008). Majority of the fans going to these league games were African Americans since those Blacks who attended major league games were seated in the outfield seats. But, the culture at Negro leagues shifted the ideals of segregation, which seemed to be a cultural protest at the time. Whites and blacks were able to sit by one another even though there were still dividers in the stands sectioning off each other (Zirin, 2008). The Negro Leagues became the largest and most geographically black owned business in the United States (Zirin, 2008).

The creation of this league could be seen as a utilization of economic activism. According to Cooper (2017), “economic activism refers to actions by individuals and/or groups connected to sport who intentionally create businesses in historically disadvantages communities with a keen focus on stimulating economic and social empowerment, stability, and mobility” (p. 25). The Negro leagues were created upon the notion of giving an abundance of opportunity for African American athletes that would help them be successful in sports on their own terms. Economic activism is the ideal term to define early actions of athlete activism. Athletes that played in this league were given the chance to create mobility in their economic stature due to them earning a professional athlete salary, even if it was different from the other sports leagues at the moment. Negro leagues gave birth to athletes that can make headway to the segregated

sports leagues, such as Jackie Robinson and Marion Motley, whom played professional baseball and football.

### Jackie Robinson

Robinson was a very talented baseball player who would create groundbreaking momentum for all African American athletes to come. The general manager and part owner of the Dodgers, Branch Rickey, became very interested in Robinson. Zirin (2008) stated, "Rickey thought Robinson could be the person to finally break through the color line that garroted major league baseball" (p. 98). Together, one would say they were the pioneers in creating a non-segregated major league for baseball. Rickey believed Robinson had the tools to become very successful to the point where more Blacks would be open to play in the major leagues. "[Rickey] believed that breaking the color line wouldn't be just about skill, but also about the ability to endure the harassment, threats, and daily pressure to perform" (Zirin, 2008, p. 99). Despite Rickey's kind act, he saw African American's playing in the major leagues as a cash cow. He believed that Blacks would make his team winners for the foreseeable future. Rickey said "The Negroes will make us winners for years to come...and for that I will happily bear being called a bleeding heart and a do-gooder and all that humanitarian rot" (Zirin, 2008, p. 99). He saw the future of sports coming ahead before any other owner and he stood up for Robinson in order to reap benefits for him and to see his new player successful. Rickey and the president of the NAACP teamed up through setting up lectures to multiple African American

audiences in order to calm the tempers of many disgruntled Blacks (Zirin, 2008). Some African Americans at the time didn't want to desegregation and they wanted to stick to themselves. Robinson was fighting a race war from both sides, but at the end he was successful due to his notion of being patient and successful. His successfulness is one of the highest marks of athlete activism due to Robinson's fight against race equality to help professional baseball leagues desegregate.

Since Robinson's success in professional baseball was shown to everyone in the country, more African American players started to join the major leagues. This move led to the demise of Negro Leagues. Branch Rickey started to strip the league of talented players left and right in order to win. According to Zirin (2008), "baseball became not only a means to assimilate but also a black cultural and commercial venture. Black baseball demonstrated black independence as much as it showed whites that blacks were able, competitive, and desired very much to play baseball with them" (p. 105). Due to more Blacks joining the major leagues, the Negro League true purpose had been fulfilled as a political goal (Zirin, 2008). This can be seen as another notion as economic activism as well. The desegregation of professional led opened the floodgates for professional football to join in on the crusade as well.

#### Professional Football: Breaking the Color Barrier

Football took the same approach the government had when they drafted soldiers to the Army during WWII. In Zirin's book, he states, "negro and white

soldiers fought together during World War II, and many of them died together. They certainly should be good enough to play football together anywhere in these United States” (Zirin, 2008, p. 107). Many people agreed and wanted to follow how professional baseball broke the color barrier and desegregated the sport. At this time, professional football was concerned a second-tier sport at the moment and pushed for integration (Zirin, 2008). From 1934-1945, the color line was staying put due to owners being pro-segregation (Zirin, 2008). The AAFL (All-American Football League) broke the color barrier when two African American pro-football players, Marion Motley and Bill Willis signed to the Cleveland Browns in 1946. Soon after, the AAFL was taken over by the NFL in 1950. Motley was looked at as one of the greatest football players to ever play in the AAFL/NFL. Despite the new age of African Americans being integrated in professional football, they still weren’t given a fair shot to coaching in the NFL after they retired.

### 1960s Movements

Schmittel & Sanderson stated, “in the 1960s, the United States experienced a wave of social movements in response to racial injustice across the country and the world” (2015, p. 3). The Civil Rights movement was in full affect throughout the 60s with important athlete protest through the actions committed by Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith and John Carlos. “[Ali] used the sport platform to shed light on issues ranging from racial inequality to war involvement...[also] the signature event of African American athletic activism,

American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists to display the Black Panther salute at the 1968 Olympics” (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015, p. 3). Smith and Carlos raised their fist in order for the world to become aware of the racism and poverty that has plagued Black America. Zolov (2004) stated, “the ‘black power salute’ by Smith and Carlos was and remains a contested image that has come to symbolize the unfulfilled promises of American justice and equality for all” (p. 187). Athletes were banned from committing political protest during the Games, but their actions inspired thousands in advocacy (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015). African American athletes were inspired by their activist peers who were engaged in human and civil rights (Cooper, 2017). For example, Muhammad Ali drew inspiration from both Martin Luther King Jr. and one of his best friends for a certain amount of time in Malcolm X.

### Muhammad Ali

“Muhammad Ali was among the most visible and outspoken of the African American sport activists during this [1960s] period” (Cooper, 2017, p. 8). His actions throughout his peak of athletic prowess helped propel activism. He found similarities in his ideology about Civil Rights with Malcolm X. Eventually, the two became practically best friends for a certain amount of time. X’s ideals on rejection of nonviolence inspired Ali. Zirin (2008) stated, “He [Ali] heard Malcolm say, ‘You might see these Negroes who believe in nonviolence and mistake us for one of them and put your hands on us thinking that we are going to turn the other cheek — and we’ll put you to death just like that” (p. 136). Even though X’s

ideals were extremely aggressive and against the norm of the Civil Rights movement, he attracted Ali towards his political goals through racial change. Malcolm X announced that Ali “is the finest Negro athlete” that he’s ever known (Zirin, 2008, p. 137). He was greater than Jackie Robinson because Robinson was the white man’s hero due to his nonviolence ideals as opposed to Ali’s more upfront/fighter mentality towards progression.

A political power move that Ali enacted was his announcement that he was a member of the Nation of Islam. This caused a huge uproar because the Nation of Islam were known for their militant mind individuals, who were defined by their self-defense and racial separation tactics. Ali went against Dr. King’s movement in attempting to have a unified front with Blacks and Whites together, and he joined the Black superiority complex that Malcolm X spread to the Black community. Many politicians didn’t like the Nation of Islam and saw them as an enemy, thus having him in the spotlight. The Nation of Islam had an African American superiority complex that was a political and Civil Rights statement by itself. Supporting Islamic culture disrupted his popularity in America until he broke off from them and Malcolm X together.

Later on in 1964, Muhammad Ali became a significant symbol of the black power movement (Zirin, 2008). Many people adopted his courage that propelled them to overcome their fear of the dangers of the Civil Rights movement. In 1965 when Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) volunteers launched an independent political party that used the symbol of a black panther

(Zirin, 2008). They also started to use his slogans to draw inspiration from. This helped propel the Black Panther movement. Though he wasn't a leader in the party, he was looked at as a figure because of Ali's figurative fight against White America.

After removing himself from the Nation of Islam, his political protests were still at an all time high. He was one of the few athletes at the time to discourage people from going to Vietnam War. Once the army called him to serve, he said, "Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong" (Zirin, 2008, p. 141). This spread throughout the media throughout the country, and now the public believed Ali was apart of the antiwar movement. A world famous Olympic athlete in Ali boosting the anti-war movement subliminally did encourage more African Americans anti-war takes, though he didn't start it. Many people were hurt of his decisions because they people that he owed them since Ali made millions off of the American fans during his fights. Zirin (2008) stated, "his refusal was gargantuan because of what was taking place in U.S. There was the black revolution over here and the draft resistance and antiwar struggle over here" (Zirin, 2008, p. 144). In addition to protesting the draft, his close friendship with Dr. King was another step for the antiwar movement (Zirin, 2008). They came together in order to create a better future African Americans everywhere. He cemented himself at the pinnacle of the forefront between the freedom struggle and the antiwar struggle (Zirin, 2008). He was willing to lose everything as a millionaire who achieved the most as an athlete at the time and that spoke



volume to the masses. One would say that Ali is the ideal representation of what an athlete who part takes in political protest and with the help of the media he achieved his goal.

### 1968 Olympics

During the 1968 Olympics during the medal stand for the victory of track runners, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the most enduring image in sports history happened. They extended their black-gloved fist into the air issuing out the Black Power/Black Panther symbol. Smith and Carlos committed these actions in order for the world to realize the depths of their commitment to political protest against African Americans and for the world to understand what is truly happening in the United States. Zirin (2008) stated, “their goal was nothing less than to expose how the United States used black athletes to project a lie, both at home and internationally” (p. 162). Many Black athletes were looked down upon in society, but were used as a prop due to their athletic prowess and ability to win competitions. The Olympic gold medalist believed this was the best approach to showcase their opposition towards America’s treatment towards minorities.

Zolov (2004) stated, “the ‘black power salute’ by Smith and Carlos was and remains a contested image that has come to symbolize the unfulfilled promises of American justice and equality for all” (p. 187). He also said Smith and Carlos were booed, stripped of their medals and forced to return home (Zolov, 2004). The Olympic stars sacrificed a moment of success in their job field to protest political injustices that were occurring in their homeland. America

projects its ideals and false promises on justice and equality for all, but during the 60s throughout the peak of the Civil Rights movement, that wasn't shown. Many African Americans were beat and had the potential of being killed due to the countries White superiority complex being acceptable in society.

### Activism in Professional Sports Withering Away

After the prevalent time of the 60s for political protest in sports, between the 1970s-2005s athlete activism reached an all time low. Cooper (2017) stated, "the African American sport activists faced a significant backlash from coaches, peers, media, law enforcement agencies, political figures, and at times, family members and friends (p. 9). Athletic protest disrupted and threatened the homologies between sport culture and liberal democratic ideology (Cooper, 2017). The connection between sports culture and democratic ideology draws to back to politics being tied into sports due to economic reasons. Most athletes do not have the power behind their personal brand due to a certain level of success they haven't achieved that comes from winning in their sports field; thus when their sports league they work for does/doesn't support a certain political ideals, it is difficult to keep your job and support certain political causes while being a professional athlete.

Cooper (2017) mentioned, "the decline in African American activism, both within and beyond sport, was also a result of the widespread acceptance of the disillusioned notion that Civil Rights legislation, the adoption of affirmative action policies, and increased access to White-owned capitalist spaces albeit tokenistic

in many instances served jointly as the benchmark for true racial equality” (p. 11). In simplistic terms, once the Civil Rights movement proved to be successful, assimilation into White America happened slowly throughout the years. This became the victory activist wanted to achieve for years, and it is exactly what happened for African Americans everywhere in our country. The assimilation into White America helped quell activist actions in sports and with politicians. Even though athletes past protest proven to be successful, contemporary athletes, such as Colin Kaepernick took it upon himself to fight social injustices through protest during his professional football games.

### Activism

Many scholars have difficulty defining athlete activism as a whole because there are many components to it. In order to understand the impact of athlete activism, we must understand the in’s and out’s of activism. Cooper (2017) believes activism is an “engagement in intentional actions that disrupt oppressive hegemonic systems by challenging a clearly defined opposition while simultaneously empowering individuals and group’s disadvantaged by inequitable arrangements” (p. 4-5). Activism goes into depth in the specific demands that social justice movements bring into play (Cooper, 2017). For example, when Colin Kaepernick spoke out against police brutality against African Americans, he was engaging in a social justice issue that needed to be talked about and a professional athlete is the perfect person to bring awareness

to certain social justice movements. Kaepernick is one of the most recent athletes to utilize activism in order to shine light on social injustices.

Cooper outlines the components of activism throughout his article. Cooper (2017) believes activism must include a clear opposition, concrete disruption and challenging of hegemonic structures/norms/mental processes, specific goals and objectives to assess their personal progress, and connection to broaden current social justice movements. Activism utilized through history has been shown in some doses throughout sports history.

#### Kaepernick's Protests Represented in Social Media

Social media creates new limits of freedom of expression (Suciu, 2018). A traditional medium news source such as newspapers once controlled the flow of information to the public. For example, Kaepernick has spoken his mind in both newspaper articles and social media post. In the newspaper articles that are focused on him, they share some of his thoughts. On social media, he has the ability to go against company censorship and say what he actually desires. Suciu (2018) believes that the barriers set by newspaper distribution networks have disappeared due to the rise of social media. While, Suciu discusses the benefits of social media assurgence, she brings up an interesting point, where people aren't always able to differentiate between good and bad news since there is always news available to the public (Suciu, 2018). It is difficult for people to decide whether a news article in newspapers and social media sites support or oppose certain causes due to the consistent framing of stories by the publishers.

Suciu (2018) believed using social networks could work to target supporters. They can be utilized for this purpose through paid advertisements, such as political ads that target a certain demographic. For example, a targeted audience was reached that was selected by Donald Trump's staff during his presidential campaign against Hilary Clinton.

Social media platforms, such as Twitter allow individuals the ability to share their thoughts and feelings on anything, especially to create dialogue on political views (Sanderson, 2016). It is very interesting how social media connects individuals, as a community through interest is incredible because users can converse and debate on whether some issues are at the pinnacle of importance in society. These platforms hold a great potential to reshape the way users generate, spread and consume content (Peng, 2018). They also allow the users to create an identified force that can exhibit positive reform in reality (Sanderson, 2016). The biggest benefit that can sway athletes to utilize social is how athletes and their fans have an open dialogue to see and understand an athletes' perceptions on any topic. Social media has become an athletes' biggest platform with positive and negative drawbacks. Advocacy efforts have a potential to trigger different responses from fans and their social identity may be threatened and this can affect an athletes activism efforts. Usually fans identify with an athlete and when an athlete shares his/her point of view through advocacy, their fans can feel triggered and will cause uproar due to a difference of opinions in regards to activism and politics.

During the Kaepernick protests, social media has become the tool where all types of fans create a forum to discuss the situation, but on the other hand traditional print journalism was being used to frame the story in the journalist eyes. For example, more conservative newscasters and networks were on the opposition side. Most of the time, the more conservative networks, such as FOX were very opposed to his protests. News analyst, such as Tomi Lahren were the main journalists fighting against Kaepernick's actions and framing it to where people believed he was being disrespectful to our country and its veterans.

## Theoretical Framework

### Framing Theory

Lakoff (2003) believed that all words are defined relative to some sort of frame. For example, Lakoff (2003), said words such as victim, crime and villain have their framed meaning. A hero is the reliever, victim is meant for the afflicted, a crime is the affliction and a villain is meant to be the cause of affliction (Lakoff, 2003). In regards to this, he created the relief frame. He stated, "in order for there to be relief, there has to be a blameless, afflicted person with whom we identify and whose affliction has been imposed by some external cause. Relief is the taking away of the pain or harm, thanks to some reliever" (Lakoff, 2003, p. 32). This model can be used to examine the Kaepernick phenomenon for this study. In regards to the relief frame, newspapers have been known to make him out as a hero or victim. If he were framed as a hero, it

would be a social justice hero who is fighting for justice for minorities who suffer from police brutality, but on the other hand, if he were framed as a villain, its context would pertain to him being a social justice menace, who has disrespected America, its flag and its veterans by kneeling during the sacred National Anthem. The relief would pertain to his collusion case result to push Kaepernick out of the spotlight with “hush money.” Lakoff’s relief frame is a great tool to examine the Kaepernick phenomenon by dissecting the framing of his actions from both positive and negative angles.

Wendland (2010) stated, “framing is an art” (p. 6). Lakoff believed that in order to frame words or phrases, it needs to be done correct. He created a set of Framing Moral Principles that help understand and utilize framing. His Framing Moral Principles are as follows: “a word evokes a frame”, “words defined within the frame evoke the frame”, “negating a frame evokes the frame”, and “evoking the frame reinforces the frame” (Miller, 2005, p. 205). These principles showcase that essentially everything is framed a certain way, and that all depends on the messenger. For example, in regards to the Kaepernick protest, some newspapers framed stories to where he is a social justice hero. This was a product of writing stories on his reasoning behind his protest, as well as showcasing relatable background story to sway the public to support him.

In Wendland’s article, Lakoff stated, “frames are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality—and sometimes to create what we take to be reality” (Wenland, 2010, p. 31). Framing theory, expresses the

process of how the public takes in information from media sources. He explains “these mental structures, or frames appear in and operate through the words we use to discuss the world around us, including politics...Framing simultaneously shape our thinking and language at multiple levels” (Wendland, 2010, p. 31). Scholars like Lakoff, have proved this to be true. Framing shape how we perceive messages and essentially sets our mind in a certain way, where our thinking and actions are changed due to the information was given. Jaspert (2011) says, “framing—roughly, the way in which the verbal perspectivisation of a real-world phenomenon highlights certain aspects of that phenomenon at the expense of others, and thus suggests a particular way of thinking about the phenomenon in question” (p. 460). For example, when a print journalist writes a story, he or she only emphasizes certain angles in the story in order to achieve their goal. This goal is all dependent on if they are in opposition or support of what is happening in their news story. Through projecting their goals and views by angling the story a certain way, this creates a framing on the phenomenon at hand, thus a newfound way of thinking about the certain phenomenon has originated. Miller denotes that Lakoff believed that if the public knows that newscasters or politician’s use selected words to evoke a frame, it would give you the chance of avoiding an immediate reaction of the story (Miller, 2005). Knowing these tactics will sway the public from being influenced to evaluate their message in favor or go against their message. “The frame cannot convey ‘all’ about the subject any more than the map can fully convey the territory it



represents” (Miller, 2005, p. 206). For stories projected from the media, we would need to know the full background in order to make a decision on how we truly feel about a phenomenon without a journalist’s belief. “In fact, framing, for them, is a necessary tool to reduce the complexity of an issue, given the constraints of their respective media related to news holes and airtime” (Scheufele, 2007, p. 12). Without framing a story, it is difficult for people to sway in your favor without the context behind a phenomenon. It describes how people utilize information and presentation as they form impressions (Scheufele, 2007).

In Miller’s article, Lakoff brought up an interesting point. He believed that frames couldn’t convey all of the subject matter any more than a map can fully convey the territory and its terrain (Miller, 2005). Lakoff is correct in this sense. Framing doesn’t tell you everything about the story. For example, when some media sources cast off a negative perception of Kaepernick due to the idea he is intentionally disrespecting veterans and the United States, it doesn’t tell the full story behind his motivations. Miller brought up an interesting point on how to understand framing. He stated, “knowing that politicians or newscasters might use selected words to evoke a frame that will influence your ability to evaluate their messages gives you some chance of avoiding the immediate reaction in favor of a more considered” (Miller, 2005, p. 206). Understanding the way a newscaster’s frame a story can help the reader interpret the story differently.

Wendland brought up an interesting point on Lakoff’s ideals. He stated, “negative campaigns should be done in the context of positive campaigns. To

avoid negating the opposition's frame and thus activating it, do the following: start with your ideal case of the issue given. Pick frames in which your ideal case is positively valued. The contrast will attribute the negatively valued opposite quality to the opposition" (Wendland, 2010, p. 6). Most of the opposition against Kaepernick and other protests from professional athletes usually blind side readers by giving positive campaigns, while the articles displace the real problem. For example, many articles from many newspaper companies shared positive background stories behind Kaepernick's campaign, while bringing up their ideals that pertained to him disrespecting the American flag and its veterans.

#### Research Question

Based on the literature review denoting the evolution of political protests by professional athletes in professional sports from 1908-2019, the evolution of athlete activism emphasizes the use of media to in order to spread an athlete's message to the public in order for their political protests to be successful. The literature review reveals that traditional print news coverage framed recent political protest stories by Colin Kaepernick. It is important to recognize how the media frames an athlete's message and if it actually presents their messengers motive. The following research question refers to an analysis that addresses Colin Kaepernick's protests being framed by traditional print journalism.

RQ1: How did newspaper articles frame Kaepernick's protests during key moments in August 2016 and March 2019?

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

In order to understand the message encoded by media's framing of Kaepernick's political protest in newspapers and social media, I will conduct textual analysis of the newspaper article that cover the protest. Textual analysis helps gather information about how others make sense of the world (McKee, 2003). When using this type of analysis, researchers want to understand the ways in which cultures and subculture make sense of who they are, and how they fit in the world (McKee, 2003). We use this type of analysis to make an educated guess in order to make sense of the phenomenon. " 'Textual analysis' whereby we attempt to understand the likely interpretations of texts made by people who consume them" (McKee, p. 2, 2003). Understanding the interpretations of text will help uncover the truth one would seek while using textual analysis.

For this study, textual analysis will be utilized to analyze news articles that were fixated on the Kaepernick protest. The articles were chosen from the top news companies in order to find credible news sources for this study. The news articles will tell the public information they need to know about the background of the phenomenon.

The articles have been selected, range from online news sources compiled by the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, USA Today and San

Francisco Chronicle. The chosen timeframe I selected starts specifically at the beginning of the protest during August 2016 and the end in March 2019, when Colin Kaepernick settled in court with the NFL.

The New York Times, LA Times and USA Today were chosen as sources because of their high national audience and their high circulation numbers. The SF Chronicle was chosen because Kaepernick played for the 49ers, and the tone of their local coverage was important to understand for the purposes of this study. While reading articles specifically based on the beginning and end of the Kaepernick protests, there was a interpretive process conducted, meaning I am interpreting the framing for what it is and I am closely reading in to what the journalists say without looking it from there perspective. The analysis will be categorized by the framing themes that were found in the newspaper articles that were studied. Four major frames emerged as a result of the analysis: the social justice hero frame, unpatriotic villain frame, neutrality frame and the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment frame. Through utilizing these frames, I found positive, negative and neutral articles through my own interpretive process.

The sources for the analysis were based on extremely high circulation numbers from a credible pr newspaper source that professional pr analysts use on a daily basis. The research regarding the New York Times and LA Times articles was conducted through utilizing the CSUSB library database ProQuest. The New York Times and LA Times database on ProQuest was an excellent tool that was narrowed down specific points that were of interest in the study. The

USA Today search focused on using their database that contained the most sports articles on Kaepernick, and they contained the most involved social media in their articles. The SF Chronicle search focused on their database as well that targeted 2016 and 2019 Kaepernick protest/collusion based articles.

The New York Times is one of the top circulated newspapers in America. They're known for being one of the most influential newspaper companies in the United States. Their circulation numbers according to Cision is 483,701 as of January 04, 2019 (Cision, p. 1). Dunlap from the NY Times, wrote an article named *1913-2017 The Record of the Newspaper of Record*. Dunlap outlined the long history of the NY Times and how it has a long index since 1913. It has an extensive search engine and the historical value shows through the hundreds of subscribers from college students to industrial and financial corporations (Dunlap, 2017). Dunlap states, "a journey through the Times Index is like a journey through any great encyclopedia" (Dunlap, 2017). It is held to the highest esteem as a newspaper source as a paper of record that is held in a computerized database now.

The LA Times is a source because it is one of largest metropolitan daily newspapers in the country. The LA Times is an extremely credited news source that has been around for decades. According to Cision, their circulation numbers are currently 417, 936 throughout the country (Cision, p. 1).

USA Today is a source because of it is the widest circulated newspaper company throughout the country, especially for sports articles according to

Cision. USA Today has one of the largest audiences in America and it has documented many incidents in the Kaepernick protests. USA Today has an incredibly huge archive of sports articles that go into depth on their articles. The online articles were chosen due to companies esteemed popularity in the sports world. According to USA Today, they made their mobile app accessible to anyone in order to read stories anywhere and at anytime the viewer sees fit. Currently, their circulation numbers are at the top of the charts sitting at 1,621,091 throughout the country stated by Cision (Cision, 2019).

The San Francisco Chronicle has the highest circulated and popular local newspaper where the Kaepernick phenomenon started. It is very interesting to see the differences between a highly circulated local newspaper where a phenomenon started versus high circulated national newspapers. Their local perception is interesting because most articles are in support of his protest, but not the manner in how he executed it.

Also, I will include observations from Twitter and tweets from the public in regards to Kaepernick and his protests. The social media site that I chose was Twitter. In order to find these observations, I used the search bar on Twitter's website and typed in "#Kaepernick2016" and "#Kaepernick2019" in order to observe the public's view on Kaepernick during the height of his protests and during the conclusion of his collusion case against the NFL. Vann (2014) suggest, "social media is now an integral part of modern sports broadcasting [journalism], which combines old and new media into redefined and

multidimensional experience for fans” (p. 438). The redefining of new media broadens the horizon of journalists because they have different platforms to publish news. In the past, journalists only could mass-produce news through traditional print journalism. Now, they have all of the social media outlets (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat) to use to produce use. Miller (2010) (as cited in Anwar & Matthews, 2013) stated “twitter is a social network and micro-blogging site established in 2006 with its unique difference of all updates being public by default and restricted to 140 characters as status updates” (p. 305). More journalists use Twitter to produce sports articles now. It is the quickest and most resourceful tool to mass production of news. Individuals who have the app can simply follow their favorite analyst and set phone notifications to get quick news as soon as the journalist publishes it. Many people download this app to stay up to date with their favorite sports teams or players. It’s very useful because you get in-depth analysis on breaking news in now 280 characters and with hyperlinks to longer articles. Twitter is a very useful tool to create a dialogue with other sports journalists on their opinions on certain issues in the sports-world. If people aren’t on the app at the moment, they can always turn on account notifications for their favorite journalists. This feature will always allow followers to receive news while they’re not on the app at that current moment. Another useful tool on Twitter is retweeting a tweet. Anwar (2013) stated, “retweeting is an important feature – if a user believes another user’s tweet is particularly interesting they can “retweet” it, which places it in the



news feed of all of their own followers” (p. 305). Retweeting a tweet can spread journalist’s news in a timely fashion where others who don’t follow a certain person can still receive news through the follower that follows the sports journalist.

An important note to bring into the Twitter discussion is the legitimacy of the Twitter post used in newspaper articles. Grimmelikhuijsen (2015) stated, “legitimacy stems from an internalized feeling to willingly obey authority or rules, without any actual coercion from authorities” (p. 600). Many users of social media sites believe that their news sources are legitimate because of the reputation that is built from the accounts that post their news. Grimmelikhuijsen believes “that legitimacy isn’t built overnight and takes some time to develop, which is true. But, it is socially constructed” (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2015, p. 600). The highly trusted sources gain a reputation over time by the community that supports them. Grimmelikhuijsen (2015) believed that legitimacy “reflects the relationship between the acts of the organization and the shared beliefs of a community” (p. 600). As long as the organization produces content that is similar to the beliefs of the demographic it targets, sustainable legitimacy is gained and shared to other communities to build a bigger following. Grimmelikhuijsen (2015) stated legitimacy theorists reiterate that organizations interact with relevant individuals in their field to support their legitimacy. The emergence of social media helped issue legitimation to a higher level. A strategy that Grimmelikhuijsen (2015) brought up was to have the organizations that run social

media sites produce concrete and admirable material. If social media accounts produce this type of material, they can gather legitimacy through producing truthful and factual articles. For example, Twitter has the ability to increase transparency and participation in order to prove legitimacy for twitter post. As long as the account proves transparent and truthful stories that correspond with other sources, the legitimacy of social media post can flourish.

Sears (2011) said “sports journalism, in particular, seems to be a realm where Twitter has assumed much influence as a journalistic tool, perhaps for such reasons as a highly routinized news cycle and dedicated fan following” (p. 1). The news cycle on Twitter is always circulating news rapidly and consumers love quick and important news. Most of the time people read articles for about 30 seconds-two minutes and Twitter is set up to where you can appeal to the demographic by producing short and concise news. Twitter is one of the most used social media networks (Bastos, 2015, p. 307).

Anwar (2013), iterated “Twitter has even more uses for sports journalists including audience interaction to inform and feed back on work, driving audiences to their work, increasing their audience by establishing a profile or ‘brand’ and, of course, finding news and stories” (p. 304). Sports journalists can create their own brand through the news they produce. They can also establish high credibility through producing real news (as opposed to fake news) and journalists need a huge audience to write to. Building a brand for journalists is very important because without the proper branding, their news will go unnoticed

and the online audience will be close to none. The utilization of twitter is becoming a huge trend in the professional world and it is spreading quickly. Sears (2011) said "Twitter has taken hold of American culture in a relatively short amount of time" (p. 1). More journalists are realizing Twitter is a necessary piece to their job now. Without it, it would be difficult to deliver breaking news to the public as quickly as possible.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANALYSIS

As previously stated in my methodology section, the news sources that were chosen that covered the Kaepernick's protests are from the New York Times, LA Times, USA Today and the San Francisco Chronicle. Newspapers played a huge role in this phenomenon through their certain style of framing. Some sources are fixated on a supportive approach and others go against Kaepernick. Many believed he is doing his citizen's due diligence by utilizing his 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment rights. Others agreed he is utilizing his rights properly, but they still felt it was disrespectful towards his country and veterans since they fight for these rights to protect America. From Kaepernick's standpoint, he wasn't being disrespectful towards America and it's veterans, but he wouldn't stand for a symbolic flag that represented bigotry in a country that he loves. Furthermore, the analysis section will summarize examples from only August 2016 and March 2019 that focused on Kaepernick's protests that were framed through certain lenses; such as the social justice hero frame, the unpatriotic villain frame, the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment frame and the neutral frame. These frames emerged from my close readings of the New York Times, LA Times, USA Today and San Francisco Chronicle. I also will include my observations regarding Twitter's presence.

#### Social Justice Hero Frame

Out of 35 articles, the NY Times had 34 of supportive articles that showed Kaepernick in a positive light during the beginning and end of the protest timeline (2016 and 2019). Throughout reading cataloged Kaepernick related articles, the New York Times wrote many pro-stance articles on the behalf of Kaepernick. They covered and explained the in's and out's of his opinions on what spurred his protests in the first place. Throughout the articles, they specifically talked about the root of the protests. Christine Hauser wrote an article named *Why Colin Kaepernick Didn't Stand for the National Anthem*. Kaepernick in Hauser's article (2016) stated, " 'I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color'... 'To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way' "(Hauser, p. 1). The New York Times showcased that this isn't just a publicity stunt, but it was a valued cause behind a star quarterback in the NFL. Kaepernick said in Hauser's article, " 'this is not something that I am going to run by anybody,'... 'I am not looking for approval. I have to stand up for people that are oppressed.' " (Hauser, 2016, p. 1). Hauser documented his legitimate reasons why he started the protest and his strong opinions for who he was doing it for as well.

Out of 20 articles, the LA Times had 20 of supportive articles that show Kaepernick in a positive light during the beginning and end of the protest timeline (2016 and 2019). In another article written in the LA Times, they highlight some of Kaepernick's goals. Doing this, frames their story to sway the audience to show support towards his cause. In Haugh's article *Colin Kaepernick a*

*compelling figure, no matter where you stand on his message*, he quotes Kaepernick and says, “ ‘I [Kaepernick] want to empower people and help empower other organizations that are trying to help people, and ultimately it’s going to take a lot of people, a lot of effort, a lot of time to create the true change that needs to happen’ ” (Haugh, 2016, p. 1). Haugh framed this story to show Kaepernick’s efforts towards empowering people to fight for what they believe in no matter the cost. He also says,

Kaepernick’s approach has been unorthodox and perhaps unexpected, but nobody can say it was wrong because of the conviction with which he has spoken. He nobly wants to solve problems but has yet to offer clear-cut solutions. He wouldn’t be the first millennial awkwardly finding his way; he just has an NFL platform (Haugh, 2016, p. 1).

Hatch has outlined his opinion through showing that Kaepernick wants to solve police brutality issues, but what’s to work with society in order to find success in his mission. Throughout this article, the author frames the story to show that Kaepernick is an NFL player, who has started a great mission to create social change in our country through utilizing media coverage.

Out of 33 articles, USA Today had 30 stories that supported Kaepernick’s stance. USA Today wrote articles to frame their stories to support Kaepernick by highlighting the great reasons why he’s conducting his protest. Bell (2018) in *With Nike ad campaign, Colin Kaepernick can take activism to all-world level*, he mentioned Kaepernick’s main points during his acceptance speech while being

award the Ambassador of Conscience Award from Amnesty International. Bell wrote that Kaepernick believed NFL players protest because they love themselves and their race since no one else stands for certain discussions (Bell, 2018). He also mentioned that Kaepernick thought dehumanization and racialized oppression is deeply embedded in our country (Bell, 2018).

Highlighting Kaepernick's deep thoughts can frame a story to where he becomes more relatable and understanding to why he kneeled during the national anthem.

The SF Chronicle had 12 of supportive articles that showed Kaepernick in a positive light during the beginning and end of the protest timeline (2016 and 2019). They wrote an important piece that wasn't found in other news source didn't write about in the beginning of the protest timeline. Aleaziz wrote the article *Colin Kaepernick and other pro athletes pay a price for activism* that was written around the start of the protest. Aleaziz documented that some NFL executives saw Kaepernick as a traitor and wouldn't sign him ever (Aleaziz, 2016). Many NFL executives didn't appreciate his protest and going against America in their eyes. Aleaziz brought up past professional athletes who were activist during their careers such as Muhammad Ali and Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf (former NBA Denver Nuggets player).

#### Unpatriotic Villain Frame

Throughout the SF Chronicle's database, a negatively framed article was found. Al Saracevic wrote *Kaepernick anthem protest: Wrong place for a noble cause* that was published on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016. According to Al Saracevic from

the SF Chronicle, “Kaepernick is fighting the good fight. But he’s using the wrong weapons” (Saracevic, p. 1). He believed that Kaepernick is fighting the good fight, but he’s actions should be thought about better, since he thought he was being disrespectful to the military veterans. Saracevic had an interesting point in his article, he stated, “So who could blame Kaepernick for this political awakening? He’s been the target of racially motivated criticism on the job... You just wish he would think these things out a bit more” (Saracevic, p. 1). Saracevic’s ends up believing that Kaepernick could’ve protested in a less disrespectful way.

While researching the Kaepernick protest only during August 2016 and March 2019 specifically, there was one negatively framed article found in USA Today publication. An article published by USA Today focused on the NFL commissioner, Rodger Goodall’s message. In the article, Goodall states,

...I support our players when they want to see change in society, and we don’t live in a perfect society...On the other hand, we believe very strongly in patriotism in the NFL. I personally believe very strongly in that. I think it’s important to have respect for our country, for our flag, for the people who make our country better; for law enforcement, and for our military who are out fighting for our freedoms and our ideals (USA Today, pg. 1).

From this point of view, this was framed negatively because the journalist have given Goodall the platform to bash Kaepernick and his protests



because of Goodall's beliefs that pertain to kneeling during the National Anthem.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment Frame

The 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment frame was discovered in an LA Times article that focused on his rights as an American citizen and they supported Kaepernick's choice of utilizing his free speech and freedom of expression. For example, the LA Times published an article written by The Times Editorial Board named *Colin Kaepernick shouldn't stand up if he doesn't want to*. This was written at the beginning of his protest. Their take on this pertained on his fundamental right as an American citizen utilizing his 1st Amendment rights. The writers from The Times Editorial Board (2016) stated, "Isn't that kind of basic and fundamental to the American system? Should we really have to explain to presidential candidates (or, for that matter, veterans of an industry uniquely guarded by the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment) that even dissenters and protesters have a right to be here?" (p. 1). The authors take on defending Kaepernick is based on the fact that he can protest whatever he wants in his way, especially since it is for a just cause. The writers also said, "he's entitled to his protests. The simple fact is that Americans are not obligated to say the Pledge of Allegiance or to stand for the national anthem or to be grateful that they've been allowed to become wealthy quarterbacks" (Times Editorial Board, p. 1). The editorial board from the LA Times are framing their stories to where people should respect the fact that

Kaepernick is protesting injustices in order to make America safer for minorities by utilizing his 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment rights.

### Neutral Frame

The LA Times story about the collusion case was neutrally framed. Belson, for example wrote, *N.F.L. Said to Have Settled Collusion Case* on March 22, 2019. Belson wrote a very informative article that highlighted the amount of money that was settled between Kaepernick/Reid and the NFL. He stated, “specifics of the settlement were not disclosed when the deal was reached Feb. 15, ending an 18-month standoff over claims by Kaepernick and Reid... They accused the league’s 32 teams of colluding to keep them out of the sport” (Belson, 2019, p.1). He believed the NFL will pay less than \$10 million in its settlement of grievances, but the pro-football players aren’t authorized to speak publicly on the matter (Belson, 2019). But, the New York Times brought up an interesting point the other companies didn’t write about, he said most of the settlement will cover the fees of the lawyers that represented the professional players, and they will receive smaller and close to equal amounts when it is all settled (Belson, 2019). The confidential clause stopped any other information from leaking to the press.

Out of 14 articles from August 2016 and March 2019, there was one neutral framed article from the SF Chronicle. SF Chronicle writer Eric Branch wrote an article about the NFL settlement between the NFL and Kaepernick. He

cited a report from the Wall Street Journal, which they believed Kaepernick and Reid will receive around \$10 million for settling the dispute and this deal included a confidential agreement (Branch, 2019). It is very difficult to know the amount of money the two NFL players received, but Branch believes they received more money to settle with the NFL because of their passion and reasoning for the protest (Branch, 2019). Majority of the articles that were written by other companies didn't follow up on the settlement amount like the SF Chronicle did.

### Twitter's Presence

While researching social media's correlation to this phenomenon, Twitter can be seen as the medium that has played a role in Kaepernick's protest at the beginning and end of the whole ordeal. According to Boyce (2017), "#ColinKaepernick was by far one of the most recognized hash tags on social media during the second half of 2016 and early 2017" (p. 23). By searching #ColinKaepernick, there are thousands of twitter posts that reflect the intensity of this debate. These twitter posts are potentially powerful because the most outrageous ones appear to gain the most traction. Thousands of users posted unfiltered hateful messages that traditional media did not publish. Since Twitter is an unfiltered social media app, many people talked down Kaepernick and how he was being disrespectful towards America and its' veterans. For example, when Nike released an ad that featuring Kaepernick, the Twitter response was swift and brutal. The majority of the posts found, utilized #ColinKaepernick in order to spread the news everywhere about their disposition on the ad. One user

named @Twentyoz\_ said “Hey #Nike. I don’t wear politics or anything related to #ColinKaepernick I no longer buy 5 to 6 pairs per year of Air Monarch Black size 9 anymore either. Just do it? I did. I set my bunions free. #RemovetheSwoosh” (@Twentyoz, 2018). The tweet contained a picture of a pair of Nike shoes with their trademark check symbol cut out of the shoe. That post is one of many, framing Kaepernick as the bad guy. Once users started to speak their mind freely on this topic daily, more and more people saw him as an unpatriotic American (Boyce, 2018).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

Social media seems to have played an outsized role in shaping public perceptions about Kaepernick. Some stories focused on his 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment rights, others kept the focus on Kaepernick's social justice stance, while others expressed a more neutral tone. There were very few negative stories from the print sources studied, yet the NFL has seemingly succeeded in silencing Kaepernick's calls for social justice.

This study shows the media framing Kaepernick's message to the public through the four frames, the positive frame, negative frame, neutral frame and the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment frame. The rapid circulation spreads opinion based topics through utilizing hashtag, such as #ColinKaepernick. This hashtag was spread around throughout social media extremely quickly and it showed thousands of hateful tweets that went against Kaepernick. Yes, there were many good uses of the hashtag, but people mostly utilized it to show their disinterest in the NFL quarterback.

### Conclusion

Activism has a rich history in the United States. Understanding the originators can give future athletes the blueprint for creating their own radical change in society. The relevance of baseball and the Black Sox scandal is important because it showed that African Americans were banned from a sports

league due to racism and Jackie Robinson was an athlete to propel change in sports through peaceful protests against White supremacy in sports.

Through the research conducted, this study shows the various lenses newspapers employed to frame the Kaepernick protest story. The articles focused on the social justice hero frame, the unpatriotic frame, the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment frame and the neutral frame. I also learned that these news sources did not foreground Kaepernick's ethnicity in the contexts of the protests. The articles gloss over that racism in America is still alive and well, but it is hiding in plain site behind professional sports. In regards to the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment theme, the 1968 Olympic coverage draws similarities to Kaepernick's protests. Both political protests were covered by traditional news media during the heights of racial unrest in this country. Kaepernick's protests were successful in that he was able to garner media attention in order to closely examine social injustices committed against African Americans. He was also successful in bringing attention to the plight of Black athletes who risk their livelihoods and reputations in bringing attention to social injustices.

### Limitations

These are the four apparent limitations that I need to discuss before I recommend future research for this particular study. This study was limited to the analysis of two months worth of stories in four newspaper outlets, and although twitter responses were considered, I could not discern the credibility of

those posts. I also did not consider the terms of the debate as it played out in other sports specific news sources such as, television (ESPN), radio, sports magazines and the like. Third, the sample in this study does not include most of the period of conflict, including the time period during which Kaepernick was blacklisted. Lastly, I did not acknowledge the limitations of an interpretive approach while developing this study.

### Future Research

For future research, I recommend a study that would include systematic sampling methods that can get a more reliable sample of twitter users/producers to understand Twitter's role in the Kaepernick protests. Another study might include interviews with sports fans about social justice issues. One might also look at a larger sample of newspapers over a specific timeline to gauge whether the counter narratives identified in the Twitter space are having any effect on more traditional news coverage that pertain to Kaepernick's protests.

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