
The Impact of Colin Kaepernick's Protest on Public Perception of Athlete Activism

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the influence of Colin Kaepernick's protest on the public's perception of athlete activism. This will entail doing a thorough examination and analysis of pertinent previous research related to the NFL game that had similar activities to those of Colin. The primary data comprises the results of American Football matches, the performances during NFL matches, the pre-game, which includes the kneeling protest by various sportsmen, and noteworthy findings from earlier studies. The study will undergo a comprehensive examination and analysis. This involves analyzing the intricate correlation between race, racism, athlete activism, and how these interconnections reflect broader societal inequalities and power dynamics. There are three keyways in which researching the linkages between professional football and social movements sheds light on the interplay of sport, politics, and culture. In addition, this article shows some of the various ways that professional football players have utilized the game for purposes other than just earning money and enjoying a love of the game. In this instance, the NFL and the press got along well throughout the decade, therefore, the public's perception of the NFL's responses to social movements was largely determined by the press's coverage of the events.

Keywords: *American football; athlete activism; Colin Kaepernick*

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INTRODUCTION

The enduring prevalence of Black sportsmen's increased vocalization on social concerns persists to this day. Athletes like LeBron James, a prominent forward in the National Basketball Association (NBA), and Kaepernick actively advocate for raising awareness about the challenges that minority communities in the United States currently encounter. When NFL players, many of whom are Black, knelt during the national anthem, it elicited diverse reactions from fans and the media. There was a division among people over the acts of the players. Some viewed it as a threat to their feeling of national pride or patriotism, while others admired the players for their skill in expressing themselves and advocating for causes that they deeply care about. Hence, media coverage possesses a potent capacity to shape the perceptions of audiences regarding player protests during the national anthem (Lanham, 2018).

In the United States, the increased focus on athlete activism began with Colin Kaepernick, the ex-quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers, who

knelt during the national anthem in 2016 to protest racism and police brutality against Black Americans and show support for the Black Lives Matter movement (Lewis, 2016). Several sportsmen and teams participated in Kaepernick's anthem protest. Players from the National Football League, college football teams, and the National Basketball Association protested during the national anthem by kneeling, raising their fists, or making similar gestures. Multiple teams, including some from the Women's National Basketball Association, demonstrated by wearing shirts that included messages such as "Black Lives Matter" or "Change Starts with Us" (Cooky and Antunovic, 2020). Naomi Osaka, a tennis star, and Lewis Hamilton, a Formula 1 driver, showed solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement by wearing specific facemasks (Müller et al., 2023).

Athletes who engage in activism are often confronted with two interrelated challenges: public backlash and potential repercussions for their professional careers. Given their visibility, athletes who take public stances on social or

political issues frequently provoke strong reactions from fans—ranging from support and encouragement to pressure for greater involvement, as well as resistance or hostility (Leppard, 2022).

For athletes in team-based sports, challenging racist or oppressive institutional practices may jeopardize their team membership and negatively affect their professional reputation. By contrast, athletes in individual sports, while also subject to pressures such as sponsorship obligations, generally possess greater autonomy to withdraw from competitions and exercise agency over their participation. Notably, existing scholarship on mobilization in sport has given limited attention to these dynamics (Leppard, 2022).

Minoritized athletes who engage in social justice advocacy often disrupt established norms within sport, and thus it is unsurprising that such actions have historically provoked negative reactions, ranging from public criticism and audience hostility to institutional sanctions and exclusion from competition. Speaking out on political and social issues may also result in marginalization, social

isolation, and the forfeiture of commercial endorsements. In recent years, scholars in sport communication and media studies have increasingly focused on public perceptions of athlete activism (Frederick et al., 2018), with particular attention to the role of social media and how fans resist such forms of advocacy. Schmittel and Sanderson (2015), for instance, contend that while social media platforms provide athletes with significant opportunities to engage in activism, fans often continue to expect them to remain apolitical and to limit their activities to the athletic domain rather than serve as vocal agents of change (Kluch, 2020).

Stepp & Castle (2021), explained However, the protests have consistently sparked political disputes, frequently instigated by remarks made by President Trump. The subject of political engagement by Black athletes has garnered attention since the 1960s, when Dr. Harry Edwards played a pivotal role in establishing the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), an organization dedicated to challenging racial discrimination in athletics and advocating against racial segregation. The display of the 'Black Power

salute' witnessed at the 1968 Olympic games by numerous Black athletes and members of OPHR elicited significant negative response from the sports community and widespread contempt towards political involvement by Black athletes (Edwards, 1969). Black athlete activism has evolved in several stages over time, with the most current phase being marked by protests against police brutality targeting Black Americans (Edwards, 2016).

Colin Kaepernick's act of sitting during the national anthem during a 2016 preseason game was intended to initiate a dialogue regarding the systematic mistreatment of black individuals and the persistent issue of excessive force by law enforcement in the United States (Wyche, 2016). The act of sitting or kneeling during the national anthem caused a significant amount of criticism (Rorke & Copeland, 2017). This criticism escalated when President Donald Trump, during a rally, suggested that NFL owners should terminate players who knelt as a sign of disrespect towards the flag. He also encouraged fans to leave if players knelt (Tatum, 2017). The controversy resurfaced in 2020 when well-known Black athletes expressed their

intention to kneel during the anthem as a means of drawing attention to racial injustices, particularly in light of George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police (Broussard et al., 2021).

As mentioned by Intravia et al., (2018), In August 2016, during a pre-season game of the National Football League (NFL), Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, chose to remain seated on the bench while the national anthem was being played. At first, just a small number of people paid attention, but with time, more and more focus was directed towards Kaepernick's protest, especially when several of his colleagues joined him and started kneeling during the national anthem. Kaepernick stated that his protest during the national anthem was motivated by the discrimination faced by people of color, including instances of police brutality in the United States (Stites 2017).

The action taken by Collin Kaepernick is a form of protest against the brutal actions taken against civilians by the police, which has become a hot topic for all Americans, including athletes in all sports in America, including Lebron James and several

athletes in the NFL. The protest was carried out in its own way, for example, LeBron James showed by posting an article on social media and was responded to by many parties. This protest has at least generated some controversy in many sports because it is considered to have crossed the ethical boundaries that should not be done as a professional athlete. This action is widespread throughout America, known as Black Lives Matter (BLM), in which American civil society, especially "blacks" take action by taking to the streets to protest against the American government, which is considered racist against black citizens in America.

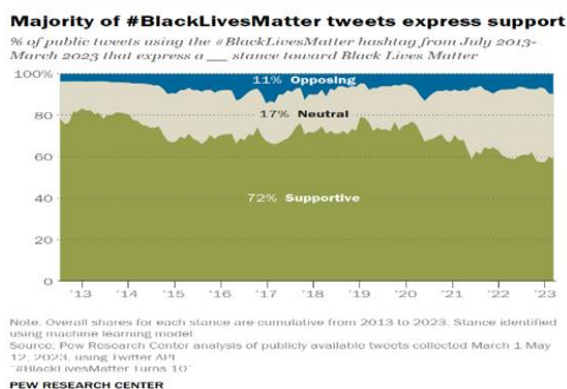


Figure 1. Majority of #BlackLivesMatter Tweets Express Support

Sources: Pew research Center

Over the past decade, the overwhelming majority of tweets with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter have expressed support for the larger social movement that

the hashtag represents, usually in a positive manner. From 2013 onwards, a total of 72% of tweets with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter have unequivocally shown support for the broader campaign and its goals. In contrast, 11% of these tweets have clearly indicated opposition to the movement. Approximately 17% of the tweets do not explicitly express a definite stance. There has been a minor increase in the proportion of tweets expressing a neutral viewpoint in recent years. However, the overall distribution of opinions in these tweets has consistently shown support for the movement as a whole (Bestvater et al., 2023).

As stated in Boykoff & Carrington, (2020), The action gained widespread attention as he explicitly expressed that his act was not arbitrary, but rather a deliberate political declaration against the systemic discrimination and excessive use of force by law enforcement towards individuals belonging to marginalized racial groups in the United States. He expressed his commitment to support those who are under oppression. This paper aims to (1) analyze the coverage of the controversy surrounding Kaepernick's choice to protest by kneeling during

professional sports events in mainstream US newspapers and (2) examine this sheds light on the intersection between media communication and significant worldwide matters relevant to the study of sports sociology, particularly in relation to topics such as authority, communication, protest, and societal transformation (Dart and Wagg, 2016).

Kaepernick aspired to leverage his prominent status to align himself with the grievances expressed by numerous individuals within the broader black community against the persistent absence of racial advancement, grievances that frequently went unnoticed by the unresponsive white majority. Discussions on the definition of racial progress and the feasibility of achieving it are expected to persist in the foreseeable future. An increasing number of black individuals have engaged, or reengaged, in endeavors to oppose private actions and official policies that put black people and other marginalized groups at a disadvantage. Athletes, such as Colin Kaepernick, exemplify this dedication. Adaptive activist athletes have shown a newfound dedication to participating in civic activities and asserting their

own power, therefore emphasizing the constraints on racial advancement in the United States (Martin, 2018).

Kaepernick's protest is in line with the deliberate protests carried out by sportsmen in past generations, such as Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who notably protested during the playing of the U.S. national anthem at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, which brought them significant attention. Considering the importance of Kaepernick's protest, it is crucial to analyze the reactionary response from far-right social media against him. Celebrities have consistently asserted their entitlement to partake in social activism, arguing that their prominence affords them a platform that entails an obligation to tackle societal concerns. However, several far-right critics argue that athletes' fame and recognition should disqualify them from participating in political discussions (Duvall, 2020).

Athletic activities have been of paramount importance in cultures throughout history, from the inception of the ball and competitive sports. Sports have garnered immense followings and have become one of the most lucrative domains within the entertainment industry.

Countless individuals aspire to join a professional team or pursue a career in this industry. However, political scientists, fans, and sports organizations frequently neglect the political aspects of sports, as the primary objective of the sector is to amuse the public and generate financial gains. Notwithstanding this omission, athletes have gradually gotten politically engaged as they have grown to recognize that they possess a prominent platform to disseminate their message to the public. Jackie Robinson, Muhammed Ali, and Fritz Pollard are among the early athletes who utilized their sport as a platform to convey political views (Drayman, 2020).

As also mentioned by Drayman, (2020), despite facing criticism, non-violent protests proved far more efficacious than their counterparts. This is because individuals opposing this type of activity lacked a means to counter these demonstrators, as they were not violating any laws or aspects of the Constitution. Conversely, the minority communities of that era faced adverse media coverage due to the occurrence of violent protests, which were effectively manipulated by those advocating against

changes in segregation laws (Wasow, 2020). Non-violent protest has emerged as the prevailing method of activism to advocate for political transformation, and it is the preferred form of protest among athletes in all sports (Wasow, 2020).

Indeed, whenever a well-known individual, sometimes referred to as a "public figure," expresses a viewpoint that is deemed "controversial," it inevitably sparks a debate within the public domain. This leads to a range of ideas and reactions from the community, with some offering support while others express opposition. Studying the scientific reasons behind why athletes, particularly "black athletes", persist in voicing their opinions on social and political matters will always be intriguing. The intersection of sports and politics often sparks a contentious relationship, as some view it as an unnecessary and potentially problematic connection. There is a fear that this association can lead to outcomes that extend beyond the realm of sports. Many argue that sports should remain separate from external factors, particularly political and social issues. However, numerous viewpoints argue that sports not only

serve as entertainment and competition but also provide a platform for athletes to express their intentions regarding social and political matters. If it is perceived that sports demonstrate impartiality towards certain groups, particularly minority groups in America, they can have a significant impact.

The study of athlete activism is important as it demonstrates how athletes leverage their visibility and influence to contest social injustices and draw attention to broader political and societal concerns. Athletes from marginalized communities, in particular, frequently encounter inequality within both personal and professional domains, and their decision to engage in activism disrupts conventional expectations that they remain politically neutral and confined to athletic performance. Examining this phenomenon offers critical insights into the intersections of sport, identity, representation, public opinion, and institutional transformation, while also revealing how athletes navigate resistance from fans, sponsors, and governing organizations. Accordingly, athlete activism extends beyond the realm of sport, serving as a lens

through which to understand wider struggles for equity and justice in society.

METHODOLOGY

This research applies library research by collecting data and information from relevant documents, both printed and electronic versions, which are books, journal articles, articles in mass media such as newspapers or magazines. Internet sources are needed to get the latest information and issues of American Football in America, taken from any reliable U.S sports media like The New York Times, Washington Post, TIME, Bleacher Report, Politico, Deadline and NFL (National Football League) website, etc. The second, the researcher identified, defined and made some notes on important facts that gave clearer information about American football.

During analysis, data are organized and reduced through summarization and categorization to make patterns and themes in the data so that they can be identified and linked. The data is collected and then categorized and clustered into some criteria to ease the understanding and interpretation of the data.

Since Horkheimer's first statement of the necessity for critical theory (or, at least, a revitalized awareness of its importance for the moment in which Horkheimer was writing), this theoretical discourse has not stagnated and is flourishing in the same way that traditional theory did in the 1930s. Critical theory has exploded throughout the theory landscape in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as an empirical, practical, and normative discourse that embeds within its conceptual purview the attempt to both understand the conditions of oppression and exploitation as well as the possibilities for human emancipation that exist within each historical period (Macdonald, 2017).

Critical theory approaches the contemporary social environment warily, constantly and militantly in "conscious opposition" to and "tension" with the existing society. Thus, it cuts through the professed and proclaimed pretenses of a society's institutions and examines how they live up to the empirically grounded underlying potentialities nourished within that society. Such an assessment is carried out by assuming two important aspects and conditions: first, that while society appears to be a

ready-made, law-like structure whose existence is external to the individual, such structures, as Horkheimer clarified, are the products of human activity and can thus be changed and transformed and second The possibility of creating a logical society that allows for critique is inherent in human effort, but not fully understood by individuals or the general public (Macdonald, 2017).

The perception that White culture is the prevailing racial norm in America extends to sports. Feagin (2013), for example, suggested that the White racial frame is "ideal" in sports. Because societal systems often favor White identity, he claimed that Whites are the dominant in-groups in athletics, with Blacks and other people of color viewed as outliers (Flores, 2022).

Smith (2019) also advocated for a Whiteness standard in the sports media since it frequently shows Whiteness as superior to media portrayals of Blackness. She went on to say that the archetypal sports hero never has a racial identity, although the public generally perceives the archetypal sports hero to be White (Flores, 2022).

Critical theory can be employed to analyze and evaluate the influence of social media on the formation of public opinions regarding Kaepernick's protest and the broader phenomenon of athlete activism. This entails examining the role of social media platforms and algorithms in propagating specific narratives while marginalizing others, and how these mechanisms both mirror and strengthen existing power dynamics in society.

The study can utilize critical theory to examine the convergence of racism and athlete activism, specifically within the framework of Kaepernick's protest. This entails studying the complex relationship between race, racism, athlete activism, and how these connections mirror larger societal disparities and power structures.

Jhally (1984) examines the sports/media complex as a prominent illustration of how modern capitalism is formed by tangible and cultural connections. Jhally argues that the sports/media complex is a significant example that vividly demonstrates the interconnected and contradictory link between material and cultural aspects in advanced capitalist societies (1984, p. 55).

Jhally employs a Marxist framework to contend that the sports/media complex serves as the central point where consumer audiences engage with sports. The phrase refers to the combination of traditional broadcast media, print media, and the new media that make up the practical aspect of consuming sports. The term "sports/media complex" refers to the contemporary concept of spectator sports and the historical evolution of the material consumption practices associated with viewing sports (Walizer, 2023).

In this research, the researcher applied the concept of critical theory has the potential to question and contest the prevailing myths that surround athlete activism and protest. This entails analyzing the way Kaepernick's protest was depicted in the media and public conversation, and how these depictions either mirror or strengthen established power dynamics and disparities. It also delves into the connection between celebrity culture and athlete activism, utilizing insights from Critical Theory to comprehend how celebrity culture influences and is influenced by social movements and protests. This entails analyzing the incorporation of Kaepernick's protest into

celebrity culture and the subsequent influence on public perceptions of athlete activism.

DISCUSSION

As explained by Smith (2019), athlete activism is a longstanding occurrence that has evoked intense emotional responses. President Donald Trump incited widespread anger by expressing his belief, during a speech in 2017, that NFL owners should terminate the contracts of players who kneel during the national anthem ("Remove that individual from the field, as they are the offspring of an unpleasant woman"). He has been terminated!" said the individual who choose to kneel during the national anthem (Jenkins, 2017). The president has consistently utilized athlete activism to energize his support base, employing a "us" versus "them" storyline. He has labeled kneeling athletes as "un-American" and protesting athletes as "whiny," while also casting doubt on the intellectual capabilities of Black athletes. Furthermore, he has criticized athletes who have declined invitations to visit the White House (Boren, 2018). Following LeBron James and Kevin Durant's expression of criticism towards the president, Fox News host Laura

Ingraham seized the moment to emphasize, "While you are undoubtedly talented athletes, it is important to remember that you do not hold elected positions." Millions choose Trump to be their leader. Please refrain from engaging in political commentary, or as a notable individual once expressed, kindly refrain from expressing opinions and focus solely on your athletic performance" (Chavez, 2018, p. 1).

Athletes Activism

Every type of activism and protest has a distinct objective, and it is not accurate to categorize all protests under a single unified purpose. Nevertheless, the prevailing unfavorable opinions appear to revolve around the idea of perceiving the protesting athlete as a menace to collective identity. According to the literature previously examined, when an athlete participates in an activist protest, such as kneeling during the national anthem, it has the potential to jeopardize the social identity of a certain group. The group that would be at risk is the one whose members have a strong sense of pride and emotional attachment to their country. The act of an athlete kneeling would be perceived as a challenge to the principles

cherished by the in-group (Smith, 2019).

The benefits and drawbacks of celebrities expressing their opinions on socio-political matters have been noted in fields beyond sports, such as entertainment, where audiences and followers often retain intense and intricate connections with them (Van den Bulck, 2018). Simultaneously, it is crucial to take into account the particularities of the various individuals involved and their connections within the celebrity system. Although the BLM (*Black Lives Matter*) movement and Kaepernick's activism had a significant impact worldwide, the issues of racial injustices, race relations, and racial identities that Kaepernick focused on are primarily rooted in the historical and societal context of the United States.

The actions taken by Collin Kaepernick will more or less be carried out by other athletes from various sports, as if these athletes have the same feelings experienced by most "minorities", this is due to social justice or feelings of injustice that occur in the public space, especially in the US. It will affect the quality of the matches displayed by the National Football League (NFL), as well

as the number of viewers, which will have a significant impact on the diverse public perceptions of controversies that occur on the field.

Newly disclosed data indicate that the NFL witnessed an 8% decline in television viewership during the 2016 regular season compared to 2015. According to ESPN.com's Darren Rovell, the average number of viewers for an NFL game decreased from 17.9 million in 2015 to 16.5 million in 2016. According to A.J. Perez of USA Today, there was an 8% decrease, which was an improvement from a 14% decrease in the first nine weeks of the season. Brian Rolapp, the NFL's executive vice president of media, ascribed this reduction to the presidential election (Chiari Mike, 2017).

Presidential elections have always had an impact on our ratings, so we were prepared for a dip this season. ... We're pleased at how our viewership rebounded after the election and are looking forward to what should be a very competitive and exciting postseason.

As mentioned by Rorke (2017) in a post-game interview with Steve Wyche of NFL.com on August 26th, Kaepernick was questioned about his rationale for choosing to remain seated

during the national anthem. In response, Kaepernick 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, 2016).

Athletes Voices

The act of "taking a knee" during the national anthem altered the narrative of the protest. Other NFL players, renowned soccer athlete Megan Rapinoe, and high school athletes, notably those in Beaumont, Texas, showed their support for Kaepernick both politically and physically. The protest rapidly adopted an action frame, as described by sociologists studying social movements. It involves individuals aligning themselves with a particular cause, actively seeking ways to participate as agents rather than passive observers, and expressing their discontent with an injustice (Johnson & Noaks, 2005). A significant number of individuals, predominantly African-American, were drawn to this course of action, while others perceived the protests as exacerbating divisions within American society along the lines of "us" versus "them"

(often, this allegation was made as if the Kaepernick protest was the initial occurrence in this societal realm). The protest appeared comprehensible; however, the numerous interpretations of the case were influenced by historical context (Rorke, 2017).

It is evident in sports such as American football and basketball, where Black athletes make up a significant majority. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Black Americans in these sports does not necessarily imply that their political views are embraced. Peterson (2009) observed that there exists an unspoken rule or standard in sports where participants are expected to refrain from expressing their political views and engaging in social activism within the confines of the arena or stadium (p. 101). Simply said, athletes have been regularly told that it is acceptable to hold political views, but they should refrain from expressing them in public, where the majority of Americans are likely to encounter them. Athletes may face consequences when they decide to openly voice their political views. Indeed, these threats are genuine: When personal matters intersect with politics in sports, the act of

cheerleading frequently ceases suddenly (Coombs et al., 2020).

Politics and Sports

As stated in Mueller (2022), political communication is not limited to a one-way flow from elites, such as Trump, to the general people. Mass media also amplify the voices of non-elite actors who present powerful alternative narratives (Wasow, 2020, p. 638). The phenomenon of media framing may account for the findings of a Washington Post poll, which revealed that 62% of Americans believe that professional athletes should utilize their platforms to voice their opinions on national matters. Additionally, 59% of football enthusiasts consider kneeling during the national anthem as an acceptable means of protesting racial inequality (Maese & Guskin, 2020). According to a different survey, there is a significant disparity in opinions based on race, with Black individuals showing a much higher level of support for the players compared to white ones (Quinnipiac University, 2016).

Although there are similarities in the protests carried out by Black athletes, there are also significant differences. Specifically, the

protests carried out by NFL players are notable due to their overt demonstrations of patriotism during American football matches. According to Sorek and White (2016, p. 274), there is a positive correlation between being an American football fan and having a stronger sense of national pride. However, being a fan of baseball or basketball does not exhibit the same correlation. Consequently, the objections made by players during the national anthem might be readily misconstrued as lacking in patriotism. This may elucidate the reason behind the significant presence of NFL demonstrations in public discussions regarding sports activism. These protests strike a sensitive chord among individuals who identify themselves as American patriots, encompassing both supporters and critics of the demonstrators. Approximately 50% of the news pieces analyzing Kaepernick's choice to kneel during the national anthem portrayed the protest in relation to his patriotism (Mueller, 2022).

Suchman (1995) contends that statements aligning with a society's core cultural and political values are more likely to achieve moral legitimacy, whereas those that

conflict with these values risk being perceived as illegitimate. In the context of athlete activism, most political expressions do not directly oppose foundational societal values but instead tend to align, at least partially, with certain social values embedded within broader political discourse. Consequently, individual legitimacy judgments may be influenced by personal value systems. This perspective is further supported by theories of psychological balance, which suggest that individuals seek consistency between their values and their evaluations of others' actions (Meier et al., 2024).

At first glance, this narrative seems to be politically unbiased, but in reality, it effectively suppresses social protest in the sports arena. Specifically, it sends a clear message that politically active players, especially those without exceptional talent, will not be hired by the NFL (or other sports leagues). However, it is important to note that the distraction theory is not limited to activist players alone: Michael Sam, who was named the Defensive Player of the Year in the prestigious college football league, the

SEC, in 2013, was not selected until the last round of the 2014 NFL draft and did not get the opportunity to play in any regular season games (Hawkins et al., 2022).

Media's Representation of Black Social Action

The illusion of meritocracy is reinforced by the high number of African American athletes in sports like American football and basketball, leading to the notion that racism in sports is not a significant issue or that affluent athletes of color are perceived as entitled or unappreciative. Carrington warns that the idea of fair competition in sports can mislead people into believing that Western societies have achieved a merit-based system that overlooks racial inequalities. Sport provides a symbolic unity that is threatened when African American athletes like Ali, Carlos, and Smith question the unwritten social and political conventions (Butterworth, 2020).

According to researchers, the relationship and role of an athlete in a particular sport has a significant influence on the formation of public opinion on social issues that occur, especially in America where society is very

pluralistic and as the facts occur that it is not uncommon for those who are different from the majority to experience unpleasant treatment from the majority community, especially cases of racism that are still rampant in American public spaces.

These things triggered several athletes from various sports in the US, including in this case. Kaepernick, who loudly participated in the process in his way, which was then also followed by other athletes around the world to show their solidarity, especially black athletes (African-American). Athletes also on the other hand according to researchers are social beings who will certainly socialize in the midst of a pluralistic American society and with the injustice felt by fellow minorities, they will spontaneously feel the same way, therefore according to researchers based on the facts and data described by previous researchers that the activities of athletes will form their respective perceptions and will take actions that can at least influence public opinion towards minorities and similar cases experienced by others.

After Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem,

other players have participated in symbolic protests like sitting, raising fists, and linking arms. Kaepernick's protest at an NFL game is just one instance of social activism in sports, but his act of kneeling during the national anthem is considered one of the most contentious actions in professional sports history. Kaepernick's actions sparked a nationwide discussion over the suitability of social protests in professional sports (McNeal, 2018).

During critical moments, pre-game demonstrations and gestures disrupt expected messages and performances. These exhibits push audiences and leaders to reflect on Black victims' stories, racial justice movements, policing, and Black athletes' political voices. Sports and news media outlets, including Sports Illustrated, ESPN, CBS News, Al Jazeera, CNN, Washington Post, The Guardian, The Nation, USA Today, and Quad Cities News ABC (Illinois), summarized the purpose of the protests and documented responses from organizations like the NFL and Knox College (Hartmann et al., 2022a).

As explained in Hartmann et al., (2022), athletes' voices in traditional media can oppose racial oppression on

more than one stage, including pre-game exchanges and ritualized ceremonies. Post-game and pre-game news conferences, as well as interviews with local and national sports media, give opportunities for players to challenge accepted cultural norms and express significant social messages. In this scenario, the focus switches from bodies to voices. In July 2016, Maya Moore, Rebekkah Brunson, Lindsey Whalen, and Seimone Augustus held a pre-game press conference to explain why they were wearing shirts that read "Change Starts With Us", "Justice and Accountability", "Black Lives Matter", and the names of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille, as well as the Dallas Police Department emblem. Moore and Brunson, in particular, directly called for an end to racial profiling and senseless violence, as well as sharing their own concerns with the realities of racism in the United States as Black women (Shoichet and Martin 2016).

These athletes are legally practicing their First Amendment right to freedom of expression, despite facing criticism. As people nationwide discussed the suitability of Kaepernick's protest, a quiet movement was

gradually growing in high school football. High school students across the country started emulating Kaepernick by kneeling during the national anthem to protest police violence (McNeal, 2018).

While individual action was emphasized, the coverage of Kaepernick's protest gained widespread attention and aligned with the concept of a "protest wave" observed in previous research by Andrews & Biggs (2006). Kaepernick's initial choice to sit during the national anthem appeared to be personal, but it soon gained widespread attention as a form of protest against police brutality and in support of social justice, spreading rapidly both within and beyond the NFL (Coombs et al., 2020).

A significant advantage of using social media for athletes is the ability to engage in open conversations with fans to share and comprehend athletes' viewpoints on various topics. Athletes now primarily use social media as their main platform, which has both positive and negative consequences. Advocacy efforts might elicit various responses from fans, potentially threatening their social identity and impacting an

athlete's activism. Followers often relate to athletes, and when athletes express their views through advocacy, followers may react strongly, leading to controversy due to differing ideas on activism and politics (Costello, 2019).

Hartmann et al., (2022), explained Athlete perspectives in conventional media environments. Athletes can oppose racial discrimination beyond pre-game exchanges and ritualized ceremonies. Athletes use postgame and pre-game press conferences and interviews with local and national sports media to challenge cultural norms and convey impactful social messages. The focus transitions from physical forms to vocal expressions in this scenario. In July 2016, Maya Moore, Rebekkah Brunson, Lindsey Whalen, and Seimone Augustus conducted a pre-game press conference to discuss their decision to wear shirts with messages such as "Change Starts With Us," "Justice and Accountability," "Black Lives Matter," and the names of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille, as well as the Dallas Police Department emblem. Moore and Brunson explicitly demanded the cessation of racial profiling and senseless violence, expressing their unhappiness with the realities

of racism in the US as Black women. Shoichet and Martin (2016).

There are numerous additional instances where politics and sport have overlapped beyond these three examples. It is not evident what specific criteria need to be met for a decision or acts to be considered the blending of politics and sport. The mentioned stories demonstrate instances of individual protest, organized terrorism, and government policy utilizing sport as both a resource and a platform for political activities. The absence of consistency in the three cases emphasizes the challenge of establishing a specific and comprehensive definition of politics (Coakley & Dunning, 2000).

An emphasis on the politics in sport is based on a perspective that disregards the distinction between the public and private spheres and considers politics as a pervasive element in all social organizations, such as schools, sports clubs, and governing bodies. The ability to engage in political actions is based on several resources, such as knowledge, wealth, and credibility, which are spread out among many social institutions. Examining politics in sports involves

analyzing how organizations wield power to further their own goals over other social groups. Gender fairness, racial prejudice, and class advantage are all valid topics for investigation (Coakley & Dunning, 2000).

One other issue that may contribute to the unfavorable backlash against athlete advocates is the presence of patriotism or nationalist views. Kaufman (2008) posited that sports cultivate an augmented sense of patriotism and a robust national identity among enthusiasts. Nationalism is commonly defined as an individual's unwavering and favorable feelings towards their country, which includes unquestioning endorsement and a sense of pride in one's homeland (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). Individuals who have strong nationalistic ideas perceive their homeland as superior to other nations and tend to unquestioningly support national, state, and political authority. On the other hand, patriotism can encompass a more discerning perspective on one's homeland, yet the person still possesses affection and admiration for their country (Flores, 2022).

One important component that greatly influences the meaning and impact of race-based athletic activism is the

cultural norms and beliefs surrounding sports, including its highly regarded place in society and the ideas people have about it. Although a comprehensive analysis of the underlying cultural framework of sports is not within the scope of this section, we will emphasize many crucial elements (Hartmann et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

To truly comprehend the significance of Colin Kaepernick's protest, when he knelt during the national anthem to bring attention to racial injustice and police brutality, it is necessary to analyze it from Horkheimer's perspective, which will provide a deeper understanding of how it influenced the public's perception of athlete activism.

Primarily, Horkheimer's argument necessitates our acknowledgment of the impact of prevailing ideas on public opinion. During Kaepernick's protest, there were conflicting narratives in circulation. Others perceived his action as a valid expression of freedom of speech and a potent form of activism, effectively increasing awareness about urgent social concerns. However, many others

criticized Kaepernick's actions as showing contempt towards national symbols and disregarded his concerns.

Horkheimer's theory urges us to scrutinize the impact of power structures on the shaping of public opinion. Kaepernick's protest immediately challenged deeply ingrained norms and hierarchical systems in both the sports industry and society as a whole. The challenge to the current status quo sparked intense debates and revealed societal divisions about issues of race, patriotism, and involvement in activism.

Horkheimer's critical theory ultimately prompts us to scrutinize the broader ramifications of Kaepernick's protest that extend beyond personal interpretations. This requires a thorough evaluation of the reactions and actions done by numerous institutions, such as sports organizations, media outlets, and political leaders. The range of responses, varying from approval to disapproval, demonstrates the intricate interplay between authority and ideology in influencing the public's perspective on athlete activism.

Ultimately, we may comprehend the interplay

between prevailing ideologies, systems of authority, and the intricacies of societal transformation by employing Horkheimer's critical theory to scrutinize Colin Kaepernick's protest and its impact on the public's interpretation of athlete activism. This highlights the significance of understanding the social context and the various stakeholders' responsibilities in shaping public opinion.

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