Sports Narratives and the Examination of Athlete Activists in the Field of Sports

Sharon Singh
sharon.singh2013@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.usfca.edu/thes

Recommended Citation
https://repository.usfca.edu/thes/1292

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, Capstones and Projects at USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.
Sports Narratives and the Examination of Athlete Activists in the Field of Sports

A Thesis Proposal Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Human Rights Education

By
Sharon Singh
May 2020
Sports Narratives and the Examination of Athlete Activists in the Field of Sports

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

by

Sharon Singh

May 2020

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this field project (or thesis) has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Approved:

Jessie Blundell  EdD
Instructor/Chairperson

19 May 2020
Date
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I – Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and Need</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual/Theoretical Framework/Rationale</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Project</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Project</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II – Review of the Literature</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme #1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme #2</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme #3</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III – Results</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV – Conclusions and Recommendations</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendixes</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe for their narratives. Their stories and engagement in protesting social injustices allowed me to write on a topic I care about deeply. Both athletes allowed this writing process for me to be authentic and one of a kind. I also wish to kindly thank Jessie Blundell, who encouraged and supported me in this writing process. Without her encouragement I don’t see how I could have finished this thesis. Her support got me through the difficult times of writing. She is a true inspiration to her students leading with kindness. I want to thank the School of Education at USF and the professors that helped me on my journey: Professor Monisha Bajaj, Professor Rosa Jimenez, Professor Susan Katz, and Professor Meetali Jain. A thank you to Chiseche Mibenge for her guidance and inspiring words. And a special thank you to my classmates who have been bright souls in this process: Amanda, Sal, Anthony, Meaghan, Daisy, Saniyyah, and Morgan.
ABSTRACT

Building on the scholarship of Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer (2018), the purpose of this study was to explore the narratives related to Colin Kaepernick’s and Megan Rapinoe’s athlete activism. This research was generated by conducting a thematic inductive analysis of 927 Twitter comments collected from the Twitter feeds of Kaepernick and Rapinoe during the time period of August 14th, 2016 to October 18th, 2016. The purpose of this analysis was to understand (a) how an athlete's right to protest can result in an Anti-American narrative (b) the language that characterized the public sentiment toward Kaepernick and Rapinoe (c) the ways in which the public understand, or misunderstands, Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s intended message.

Results from this study indicate that media and media-framing had a negative impact on the public discourse related to Kaepernick and Rapinoe. Both Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory are used to understand Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s complicated and intersectional narratives and agendas. Recommendations based on these conclusions include (a) public engagement on the issue of police brutality (b) media framing strategies to mediate public discourse (c) suggestions for addressing bias in the media (d) the use of theoretical frameworks for future research (f) addressing how athlete-advocacy may result in changes in attitudes and behavior that are either reflected in, or influence, public discourse.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Professional athletes in the United States, throughout the country’s history, have faced criticism of their professional and personal lives. This criticism is accessible to the public and available to sports fans through various media outlets. Through this public conversation, athletes can be dehumanized, objectified, and sexualized, experiencing discrimination based on their gender, race, sexual orientation, and/or social class (Lee & Cunningham, 2019). This criticism, fueled by the media and influenced by the national political climate, often debates the Americanness of popular sports figures. For example, Colin Kaepernick faces race-based discrimination and a critique of his patriotism for taking a knee during the national anthem (Intravia, Piquero, & Piquero, 2017). Similarly, Megan Rapinoe faces gender discrimination and homophobia, and is also criticized for being unAmerican for taking a knee during the national anthem (Schmidt, Frederick, Pegagaro, and Spencer, 2018). In both cases, media framing, including social media framing, impacts how and what narratives are told about these two athletes.

Dumitriu (2013) shares how sports and media are similar because they both require audiences. Both industries need to have an attractive story or event for spectators. In the case of sports, Dumitriu demonstrates how media is used as a tool for framing, and creates a competitive, winner and loser environment that gets audiences bought into an us-versus-them mentality. The media uses emotions to get audiences to conceptualize athletes as heroes or as villains. According to Dumitriu, if the media wants someone to be viewed heroically, they will
use emotional framing. Emotional framing is a strategy that frames positive personifications of athletes which results in the public approval and likeness of the athlete. However, if the media wants an athlete to be viewed as a villain they will use a rational framework. A critical framework is a strategy that frames athletes in an irrational and argumentative way, resulting in debatable public discourse. The use of a critical framework can be seen in the case of Colin Kaepernick.

In 2016, during a preseason game in the National Football League (NFL), Colin Kaepernick decided that he would sit/kneel during the national anthem. Kaepernick’s choice to not participate during the national anthem was symbolic during this time. Around this time, people of color were facing increasing rates of police violence and racial oppression (Martin & McHendry, 2016). Kaepernick continued to protest in the following weeks and Kaepernick’s teammates, other NFL players, and other athletes playing in different sports organizations started to protest as well. According to Martin and McHendry, Kaepernick eventually started to get violent push back for his protest. Fans started to burn his jersey at games and scream death threats, audiences labeled him as unpatriotic and un-American, communities started to tell Kaepernick to leave the country, and social media platforms started to attack him verbally (Martin & McHendry, 2016). The use of a critical media framework can be seen through the fans reactions to Colin Kaepernick’s protest.

As a result, the NFL began controlling Kaepernick’s visibility to football audiences. According to Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoradro, and Spencer (2018), once Kaepernick was labeled as an Anti-American by the media and his audience, the stakeholders and owners of the NFL turned their back against Kaepernick. The 49ers soon released Kaepernick, sending a message to
the other 31 NFL teams who chose to follow the same path and not hire Kaepernick as their quarterback. Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoradro, and Spencer conclude that the critical framing of the story by the media framed Kaepernick as an Anti-American archetype. This framing was the result of the relationship between the media and the sports industry. In this case, the partnership allowed limited information to reach the public, prioritizing the NFL and NFL media sponsor/stakeholder perspective and deprioritizing Kaepernick’s own narrative (Joseph, 2018).

A similar critical framing has been applied to the athlete Megan Rapinoe.

While in one scenario media Megan Rapinoe is characterized as a hero because she scored the winning goal for the U.S. women’s soccer team, in another media scenario Rapinoe is viewed as an Anti-American because she supports the Supreme Court ruling for gay marriage. According to Cavalier and Newhall (2017) Rapinoe defies many of the dominant American culture norms because she is a symbol of support for gay marriage. According to Travis and Roxane (2018) the media uses sports to frame heteronormativity and misogynistic gender norms as American cultural norms. Similar to Colin Kaepernick, this has resulted in the critical framing of Megan Rapinoe. She is criticized on social media, and the media limits her visibility and silences her narrative of political resistance (Cavalier & Newhall, 2017). In both cases, whatever the athlete’s own narrative may be, the media has control of the frame that influences the attitudes of fans and ultimately the success of the athlete.

**Background and Need**

In order to understand the media framing of professional athletes, it is important to understand the myths, stereotypes, and racist ideologies that have resulted in discriminatory policies and practices that target African American people in the United States (Smiley &
Fakunle, 2016). According to Smiley & Fakunle (2016) Blackness and criminality are linked due to historical accounts of myths, stereotypes, and racist ideology. In 2014 and 2015, tensions between the police and the Black community were high (Martin & McHendry, 2016). Eric Garner, Michael Brown Jr., Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Tony Robinson, and Freddie Gray were victims of excessive force and police brutality in high-profile media cases during these years. Kaepernick began taking a knee in response to these events, refusing to honor a flag that stands for freedom for some and death for others (Martin & McHendry, 2016). Kaepernick used his media platform, as a professional athlete, to draw attention to the hurting and suffering of the Black community. The myths, stereotypes, racist ideologies, and discriminatory policies and practices that target African American people were at the heart of his protest. A similar stance for protest is generated for Megan Rapinoe.

According to Subhrajit (2014), in order to understand the media framing of professional athletes, it is also important to understand the American cultural, religious, and political beliefs that fuel the fear and hatred of people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA). Members of the LGBTQIA community are harassed and discriminated against in every aspect of their life and the forms this can take can include jokes, physical abuse, lack of visibility in the workplace, and negative connotation narratives in the media (Subhrajit, 2014). Related to this, it is also important to understand gender norms in American culture in order to understand the media framing of professional athletes (Vertinsky, 1994). According to Vertinsky, historically women were discouraged from participating in sports in the United States because it was seen as a threat to childbearing; in heteronormative American culture if a female does not have a child, it is looked down upon her as if she lived an
unsuccessful life. Not until the passing of Title IX in 1972 did American women have access to a legal precedent that supported, and provided for the funding of, women in sport. Like Kaepernick, these forms of discrimination are at the heart of Megan Rapinoe’s protest.

**Purpose of the Study**

Building on the scholarship of Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer (2018), the purpose of this study was to explore the narratives related to Colin Kaepernick’s and Megan Rapinoe’s athlete activism. This was done by investigating responses on Twitter regarding the two athletes. This research was generated by conducting a thematic inductive analysis similar to the one conducted by Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoradro, and Spencer on Facebook. The study used qualitative software, called Leximancer, to conduct a thematic and semantic analysis of Twitter posts (Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoradro, & Spencer, 2018, p. 3). Data was collected on Twitter from August 14th, 2016 to October 18th, 2016. The dates were chosen because they reflected the time period when Kaerpernick began his protest. While the backlash to his protest started August 28th, the first time he took a knee during the anthem was August 14th. During this time period Megan Rapinoe began to kneel in solidarity with Kaepernick, and to protest gender inequality in professional sports. The purpose of this analysis was to understand how Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe’s activism was understood over time, and if it reinforced or shifted dialogue rooted in American nationalistic commentary regarding their original message to protest (Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoradro, & Spencer, 2018, p. 3-4).

**Research Questions/Hypotheses**

The questions that guided this research are informed by Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoradro, and Spencer (2018, p. 3-4) and include:
1. On the Twitter platform, how does an athlete's right to protest result in a Anti-American narrative?

2. On Twitter, what language characterized the public sentiment toward Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe?

3. According to the dialogue on Twitter, how does the public/fans understand, or misunderstand, Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe’s intended message to protest?

Theoretical Framework

This thesis was guided by two theories: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Queer Theory. Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoradro, and Spencer (2018, p. 27) recommend CRT in the field of sports to examine the oppression of athletes of color. Similarly, Cooper, Macaulay, and Rodriguez (2019) suggest CRT to explore the intersection of race, racism, and athlete activism in the field of sports. CRT acknowledges white supremacy and the State control of athletes voices, narratives, and archetypes. This results in ideologies that discriminate against black athletes. CRT will frame this thesis because it allows for an in-depth analysis of racism in sports. Another theory that will frame this thesis is queer theory. Queer theory identifies intersectionalities between gender and heterosexuality and acknowledges identity based oppression. Queer theory in the field of sports provides a lens for understanding resistance to heteronormativity. In the case of Megan Rapinoe, this resistance fights against gender constructs that limit female-identifying, lesbian athletes. Queer theory and CRT will be the two theories used as lenses to understand how and why Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe are misunderstood in public discourse on social media.
Methodology

The research methodology for this study was an inductive thematic analysis. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted by Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer (2018) in order to analyze Facebook posts on the topic of Kaepernick’s controversial kneel in 2016. The researcher planned to use the methodology employed by Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer in order to analyze Twitter posts concerning Kaepernick and Rapinoe in relation to their kneeling protests. The time period of the study will be from August 14th, 2016 to October 18th, 2016. An inductive thematic analysis is the study of themes that are drawn from data; the main goal of this inductive thematic analysis provided an in-depth understanding of how fans/audiences responded to Rapinoe as a female, lesbian, professional athlete and how fans/audiences responded to Kaepernick as an African American, male, professional athlete (Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer, 2018, p. 13-14). The qualitative software that was used for this study is called MAXQDA. MAXQDA is a content analysis software for qualitative data that interprets written texts of users on different platforms (MAXQDA, 1995-2020). MAXQDA gathers and represents main themes and ideas within texts and how they relate to other themes (MAXQDA, 1995-2020). MAXQDA uses a categorical model to help users generate topics and correlate relationships between themes by using keywords to organize data (MAXQDA, 1995-2020). As a result, MAXQDA generates reliable and valid data.

Significance of the Project

This study is important for athletes because it might help athletes, who are in similar situations as Kapernick and Rapinoe, navigate complex American cultural norms and the negative human interest that can result from media framing. This study might also be of interest
to media outlets and social media platforms who wish to shift away from traditional negative media framing of athlete’s who advocate for social change. Finally, this study may be of interest to other researchers in the field of sports, social justice, and gender equality who want to understand the social impact American culture has on minority groups within the field of sports.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited by Twitter activity posts, the Twitter word count of 280 characters, and the exclusion of Facebook and Instagram posts. If Kaepernick and Rapinoe are active on Twitter during this study, there will be more data to analyze. If they are not very active, it will result in a limited field of data. Twitter's limit on characters per tweet may result in limited audience expression, masking the full thoughts of public social media users. Only analyzing tweets, and excluding other activity on other social media platforms, also limited the available data. Due to these limitations above, this study was not a representation of the framing of all female, lesbian, black, and/or male, professional athletes.

**Definition of Terms**

- **Archetype**: A symbol/label that is given to describe athletes personalities/character in the field of sports.
- **Female/Woman**: Is the term used in all queer theory sections based on language that is not up to date. It was used in prior research resulting in the same usage in this thesis.
- **Media framing**: The language the media outlets use to influence large groups of fans/audiences.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Professional athletes in the United States face criticism of both their professional and personal lives. Because sports and media both require audiences, the stories about athletes are constructed in the public domain (Dumitriu, 2013). This is often influenced by the current political climate and by the media. In many cases, the athlete’s own narrative ends up being controlled or changed by professional sports organizations/stakeholders, the media, and social media. Because the political climate is dynamic and conversations on social media transition quickly from topic to topic, it is important to understand how the narratives of athletes change over time. This is particularly important because athletes who use their platform to fight against social injustices may experience dehumanization, objectification, and discrimination based on factors such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and/or social class (Lee & Cunningham, 2019).

The claim for this literature review is that the narratives and agenda of athlete activists addressing social injustices is important to explore over time. Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory are effective lenses to explore the narratives and agenda of athlete activists and three reasons justify this claim. Three bodies of literature, related to this claim, are also explained. These include research on the (a) impact of media-framing on the public discourse related to athletes (b) impact of athletes’ narratives/agendas on the media that influence public discourse (c) impact of race on public discourse related to athletes. Side by Side reasoning is used to connect these claims because the literature includes different authors, theorists, experts, studies, and/or statistics. A visual representation of the logic equation is as follows: \( R_1, R_2, R_3 \ldots \vdash C \) (Machi & McEvoy, 2012, p. 97).
Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a beneficial lens to understand the field of sports. CRT claims that race is socially constructed and this is related to the oppression of Black athletes because the structure of professional sports gives agency and voice, without consequence, to white athletes. This section includes (a) a brief history of CRT composed by De La Garza and Ono (2016) (b) the ideas developed by Hylton (2005) who proposes CRT as a methodology that allows for Black athletes to challenge discriminatory practices and social structures through the power of their consciousness and voice (c) the concept of racial projects, developed by Hylton (2010), who explains how Black athletes can be subject to tokenism in professional sports (d) the work of Cooper, Macaulay, & Rodriguez (2019) who argue the importance of CRT as a framework for understanding African American activism in sports. This progression of thought is important because it describes how CRT can be used to understand how race is related to inequities in professional sports.

According to De La Garza and Ono (2016) CRT is a lens that clarifies the role of white supremacy in politics, law, and culture. The authors claim that this theory is an extension of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), and Marxist critical theory, that centralizes race. CRT focuses on the experiences of race and racism in everyday life. and is defined by five tenants. De La Garza and Ono summarize the tenets of CRT as

1. Race still matters; the centrality of race to scholarship
2. Narrative telling and storytelling as a method of analysis
3. Critique of liberalism
4. Commitment to social justice

5. Acknowledgment of the importance of interdisciplinarity; to connect with other relevant bodies of literature and to share their scholarship with others (p.3-4)

These five tenants are important because they can be used by scholars to demonstrate the relationship between race, racism, and social, political and legal structures and power. This theory can be applied to professional sports as well, because of the relationship within the sports world between politics, race, and the production of narratives on public platforms.

Building on this foundation Hylton (2005) explains how a CRT lens is a form of resistance because it is the direct opposite of the established racist practices and knowledge that is used to marginalize Black athletes in sports. Hylton centralizes race, racism, and race equality to show how social structures and processes of power subjugate Black athletes. CRT critiques the dominant ideology in academia and has evolved over time to address the law, education, and sports. The transformation of CRT, over time in sports, links social issues to wider structural and power relations. Hylton gives an example of this by explaining how sports and the law are similar. Both are systems impacted by racism and both require a critical framework for understanding discrimination and oppression in the two arenas. In short, Hylton recommends the use of CRT in the field of sports to explain why sports operate on a racially contested stage. This theory can be applied to sports because it brings to light the bias of white social scientists who do research in the field of sport. It is an important framework for understanding the narratives of Black athlete activists.

A more recent work by Hylton (2010) describes how CRT can be used to understand how sports organizations portray themselves as anti-racist through racial projects. According to
Hylton, sports organizations often use the term *anti-racist* as racial projects, or fronts, in order to secure monetary endorsements or gain support for policies that support discriminatory practices within the organization or in the larger industry. If an organization can demonstrate that it is *anti-racist*, for example by commercializing benefits awarded to Black athletes - even when those benefits are less than their white counterparts - then the critique of traditional inequities can be avoided or ignored. Using a CRT lens, Hylton critiques these racial projects, and the appropriation of the term *anti-racist*, and tries to refocus the conversation on why change is necessary in sports. Hylton shares how using CRT in sports is a form of resistance that can stop the reproduction of racial projects that perpetuate the status quo that creates and reproduces racial injustices.

A different progression in this field of thought is represented by Cooper, Macaulay, and Rodriguez (2019) who argue the importance of a CRT framework for understanding social justice activism in sports. The authors also investigate the intersectional identities of Black athletes to better understand why athletes advocate and fight for change. The authors explain that Black athletes must use their platform to challenge an existing hegemonic idea, structure, or practice in order to create change. White supremacy is about privilege and power. Using a CRT frame, it is possible to understand how athletes can use their own power and privilege to fight against structures of white supremacy and inequities in the sports world, and in the larger society. The authors argue that sporting spaces offer Black athletes uniquely different platforms and agency to fight for social justice issues. In this way, CRT can be used to acknowledge the history of how Black athletes have - and continue to - demand change by, for, and through sports.
In summary, CRT theorizes how athlete activism connects to the broader structures of American Society with a central focus on race and the experiences of Black athletes within the field of sports. This includes (a) brief history of CRT (De La Garza & Ono, 2016) (b) a review of Hylton (2005), who proposes CRT as a methodology for challenging discriminatory practices and social structures (c) a summary of a later work by Hylton (2010), describing racial projects (d) the importance of CRT as a framework for understanding the social justice activism of Black athletes in sports (Cooper, Macaulay, & Rodriguez (2019). Related to this is a body of research that explores a second lens for understanding athlete activism: queer theory. Both CRT and Queer Theory will be used to frame this thesis.

Queer Theory

Queer theory claims that gender and sexuality are social constructs that can be used to form categories of oppression. In addition, queer theory also claims that American cultural gender norms force individuals to pick and identify in one of two binary categories. Queer Theory explains how this categorization reinforces dominant sexuality and gender norms. This section includes a brief summary of relevant queer theories which includes (a) Broad (2001) who examines the construct of sex and gender in sports (b) the use of queer theory to understand the culture and structures of sports (c) the ideas developed by Linghede and Larsson (2017) illustrate how queering (shifting) narratives of sports, teams, and athletes can result in new narratives. This summary of queer theory related to sports is important because it claims that the act of queering in the field of sports can disrupt dominant heteronormative ideologies. It provides a body of evidence that supports the claim that the narratives and experiences of athlete activists need to be analyzed over time.
The work done by Broad (2001) states that Queer Theory in the field of sports analyzes the constructs of sex and gender among women. According to Broad, the need for Queer Theory in sports arose from the assumption that female athletes are lesbian because sports are masculine, meaning that women must be lesbian if they participate in a masculine field made for men. In the 1990s, queer politics began to fight dichotomous constructs of gender in sports. As a form of resistance to heteronormativity in sports, queer theory rejects the notion of stable sexes, gender, and sexualities. Queer theory that addresses the world of sports offers a lens that provides fluidity within these identities.

According to Broad (2001) queer theory in sport also recognizes the use of appearance to control female athletes. The author claims that an attractive traditional feminine appearance is often used to control female athletes, many of whom try to compensate or overcompensate for their non-normative behaviors by maintaining a heteronormative feminine appreance. Broad claims that female athletes can be categorized in one of two groups (a) women who assimilate to traditional femininity and heterosexuality in order to participate in sports (b) women that Broad calls “boundary-strippers” who complicate the category of women and heterosexuality (p.199 ). By not conforming to traditional concepts of femininity, women in this second group muddy the waters of gender performance by refusing to apologize or overcompensate for participating in a traditionally masculine arena (p.199 ). This act works to destabilize the boundaries created around male and female athletes.

Building on this foundation, King (2008) also works to destabilize boundaries by critiquing lesbian-centered theory and promoting queer theory as an alternative. King claims that lesbian-centered theory can limit the visibility and legitimacy of women in sports by limiting the
flexibility with which female athletes can navigate their identities. The inflexibility of lesbian theory is compounded by the rigid understanding of gender in the world of sports in general. King talks about the act of coming out of the closet for athletes, and the impact of this decision on their ability to participate in sports or to be accepted by the organization for which they play professionally. King critiques the ability of lesbian theory to increase the visibility of women who participate in the field of sports and claims that it obscures the real issue - discrimination and marginalization of queer athletes.

King outlines five key purposes of using Queer theory to understand gender identity in the field of sports (p. 421-426):

1. Anti-Identitarianism: Queer theory resists stable notions that link biological sex to gender, and sexual desire. Queer theory claims that normative categories of identity are not a true representation of the full spectrum of identity experiences. It is important to use queer theory to resist normative categories of identity in sports, heteronormative categories have been used to limit the participation of female athletes in professional sports.

2. Poststructuralism and Psychoanalysis: Identities can change over time, depending on the social, psychic, cultural, and economic conditions. Queer theory can allow the destabilization of dominant heteronormative categories of identity by rejecting the masculine image of athletes in the media.

3. Antinormative (sexual) Politics: Queer is what is different from the normal. Queer theory addresses the intersectionality of gender discrimination with other common forms of discrimination in sports, such as racism and class.
4. A Critique of Heteronormativity: Heteronormativity takes form in a hierarchy. This hierarchy can be used to limit the visibility and participation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Ally (LGBTQIA+) athletes. Queer theory is needed to critique the existence of heteronormativity in sports, just as it is needed in the larger society to critique the negative impact of heteronormativity - such as discrimination against non-traditional family structures and the inequitable allocation of state resources.

5. Contingency and Multiplicity: Traditionally, the culture of sports is masculine. Queer theory focuses on sexual identities, practices, and desires, and refuses to put these in a hierarchy. Queer theory contests the dominant notions of what sports can look like.

The use of queer theory to understand the culture and structures of sports is important because queer theory can be used to explore different layers of intersectionality and their relationship to social injustices.

Another progression of thought in the field of queer theory in sports is represented by Linghede and Larsson (2017), who illustrate how queer narratives can result in critical and creative new possibilities of thinking and writing in the field of sports. According to the authors, traditional ways of reporting sports fail to consider stories about athletes that address complex issues of intersectionality. Linghede and Larsson claim that the stories of athletes should include race, class, and ethnicity, and that refiguring and queering up narratives can allow stories to be told in new and challenging ways (p. 293). This process challenges heteronormativity because it allows for masculinity and femininity to fluidly exist together and not compete against one another.
In addition to refiguration, the queering of critical narrative writing in sports can also create alternative spaces that open up new possibilities of thinking and analyzing what is wrong with the political world in general. The queering of athlete narratives takes many different shapes and variations, and can therefore influence many different political arenas. Sport is shaped in heteronormativity and creates hegemonic masculinity which then turns into homophobic and racist stories. But, the refiguration and the queering of stories can be used to explore the experiences of LGBTQAI+ athletes and to queer up what is heteronormative, and unjust, with the world in general. This addition to the field of queer theory, as it realtes to sports, is important because refuguration and queering up, in sports writing, can be used to explore the narratives of athletes over time.

In summary, queer theory proposes for a shift in dominant gender and sexuality constructs that force athletes to have an identity of some sort. This includes (a) an examination of the construct of sex and gender in sports (Broad, 2001). (b) how queer theory can be used to explore different layers of intersectionality and their relationship to social injustices (c) how the act of queering athletes narratives can be used to shift static and oppressive narratives about athletes. This is closely realted to the discussion of the use of CRT to understand that narratives of athletes, and both CRT and Queer theory can be used to frame the claim that injustices occurring within minority groups who participate in athlete activism in the field of sports should be observed and understood over time. The next three sections review studies from various academic fields that support this claim as well. These include (a) media-framing impacts the public discourse on athletes (b) social media impacts the public discourse on athletes (c) media
framing and social media can have a negative impact on the narratives and agendas of athletes who use their platform to advocate for social change.

**Impact of Media-Framing on the Public Discourse Related to Athletes**

Research demonstrates that the media, and how it frames professional athletes’ narratives, can be negatively impactful. This includes (a) a study that examines the negative impact of the *us-versus-them* mentality on women in sports (Burch, Billings, & Zimmerman, 2018) (b) an exploration of the objectification and dehumanization of professional female athletes (Daniels, 2009) (c) a discussion of how media limits the narratives that can be told about women in sports (Dumitriu, 2013) (d) a description of how narratives used to frame athletes may be negatively influenced by bias (Joseph, 2018), (e) describes how the media is used to oppress athletes who exist outside heteronormative and other dominant norms in American culture (Knight and Giuliano, 2003), (f) claims that media cover male sports at a significantly higher level than women’s sports (Travis & Roxane, 2018). This is important because taken together, these studies support the claim that the need for understanding narratives of athlete activists addressing social injustices is important.

To begin, Burch, Billings, and Zimmerman (2018) address how media framing is used to describe a men’s soccer team as more successful than a female soccer team. This study was conducted on Twitter to analyze how fans reacted to both the male and female soccer team. This study included Twitter users who commented on a particular U.S. soccer match. The results of this study demonstrate that a male dominant culture in the U.S. is the reason why men get most of the media coverage, regardless of women being at a competitively higher level of play. Burch, Billings, and Zimmerman suggest that the self-categorization in sports produces an
us-versus-them mentality (p. 1048). This influences the public perception of women’s sports because men’s teams are categorized as us while female teams are categorized as them. This explains why women are not seen as worthy of media coverage. This is related to the work of Daniels (2009) who also explores the devaluation of women in sports.

Similar to the findings of Burch, Billings, and Zimmerman (2018), Daniels (2009) addresses how the sexualization of female athletes in the media often results in the devaluation of women’s athleticism. Daniels studied how the objectification and dehumanization of professional female athletes impacts younger generations. In this study, the participants were white-identifying college students who were studying psychology on the central coast of California. The findings of this study demonstrate that beauty and physical attributes, such as being thin and feminine, were preferred in female athletes. Daniels concludes that pictures of female bodies can empower youth but only if the media stops sexulazing female athletes. This is important because young girls tend to self-objectify and media representations of female athletes must normalize a range of female bodies in sports in order to give girls an alternate narrative. Daniels scholarship is related to the work of Dumitriu (2013) because both authors discuss the inaccurate representation of female athletes in the media.

Similar to Daniels (2009) discussion of the limited representation of female bodies in sports, Dumitriu (2013) addresses the binary framing often used by the media that covers women’s sports. The purpose of this study was to identify dominant media framing strategies and how they impact the discussion of women in sports. This case study of two European Women’s Handball Championships, conducted in 2010 and 2011, utilized thematic selection to help narrow down different mechanisms the media used. The findings demonstrate that media
coverage of women’s sports tends to frame athletes in one of two ways. Media outlets name one individual a hero, who has the characteristics that bring out positive emotions in audiences. However, when a negative entertainment narrative is told about a player, the player is criticized. Responsibility framing is used to identify who is blamed, and who is named as a hero, in competitive outcomes (p. 68). This process limits the narratives that can be told about women in sports, and is related to the ways in which media control the accessibility and visibility of athletes in general.

Joseph (2018) addresses how the local and national media control the accessibility and visibility of certain topics. Joseph studies this in relation to Colin Kaepernick, by investigating how local, national, and regional media outlets portrayed Kaepernick’s protests. This study used software called the Crimson Hexagon to allow for data collection from social media outlets. The results of this study demonstrate that the media framing of athletes who identify as part of a minority group is inconsistent across various media outlets. In addition, if the media outlet has a financial relationship with a sports league, the narratives used to frame these athletes may be negatively influenced by bias against groups such as African-Americans. This is also related to the work of Knight and Giuliano (2003) because heteronormative culture is another category that creates discrepancies in the narratives told about professional athletes.

Related to the findings of Joseph (2018), Knight and Giuliano (2003) addresses how a heterosexist media lens creates negative perceptions and narratives of male and female professional athletes. Knight and Giuliano critique the assumption that male and female athletes are heterosexual. The purpose of the study is to understand how this heteronormative assumption affects audiences towards male and female athletes. This study took place in the American
Southwest at a private liberal arts university and included 91 white participants who played soccer for the university. The results of this study demonstrate that media uses appearances to make assumptions about whether athletes identify as heterosexual or LGBTQIA+. In addition, this study found that the use of a heteronormative lens in sports media can cause homophobic responses among fans, including slurs and threats. This is related to the work of Travis and Roxane (2018) who discuss how the media is used to oppress athletes who exist outside heteronormative and other dominant norms in American culture.

Similar to the findings of Knight and Giuliano (2003) and Daniel (2009), Travis and Roxane (2018) address how bias in sports media puts a focus on covering male sports. Travis and Roxane wanted to find out if media outlets were giving female athletes a fair share at representation. They did this by conducting a context analysis on newspaper articles after the 2015 Women's World Cup. This study included newspapers from 50 different states and two national newspapers. The results of this study demonstrate that although the women’s soccer team was advertised in the media, the media covered male sports at a significantly higher level.

In summary, research demonstrates that the way the media frames narratives can be negatively impactful for an athlete. This includes (a) Burch, Billings, & Zimmerman (2018) illustrate how male and female sports are covered differently in the media (b) Daniels (2009), who explores the objectification and dehumanization of professional female athletes (c) Dumitriu (2013), who discusses how media limits the narratives that can be told about women in sports, (d) Joseph (2018), who describes how narratives used to frame athletes may be negatively influenced by bias (e) Knight and Giuliano (2003), who discuss how the media is used to oppress athletes who exist outside heteronormative and other dominant norms in American culture (f)
Travis and Roxane (2018) who found that media cover male sports at a significantly higher level than women’s sports. Taken together, this body of research justifies the claim for the need to examine athlete advocates narratives over time. Related to this is how the media defines a hero in the field of sports by using popular public discourse.

**Impact of Athletes’ Narratives/Agendas on the Media that Influence Public Discourse**

Research demonstrates that politics influence social and other media which in turn impacts public discourse. This body of research includes two studies. The first study offers an examination of pro-marriage equality posts on Facebook and Instagram by the U.S. women’s soccer team (Cavalier & Newhall, 2017). The second study includes a content and discourse analysis of athlete role models (Lines, 2001, p.285). This is important because taken together, these two studies support the claim that over time the need for understanding athletes activists is important.

Cavalier and Newhall (2017) address the role of politics in the public discourse on gay marriage, and how this leads to tensions within the field of soccer. Cavalier and Newhall explore the history of heteronormativity in the U.S. women’s soccer team. Historically, players on the team only went public with their romantic partners if they represented the heterosexual norm. Recently, after the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of gay marriage, the team began to publically declare their support for gay marriage as well. Cavalier and Newhall examine the pro-marriage equality posts, made by US women’s soccer team members on Facebook and Instagram. This study included 1243 participants’ comments in total. The results of this study demonstrate that sports fans frequently discuss their political views when commenting on topics related to sports and athletes. However, it seems that fans want athletes to be apolitical, and
refrain from using their celebrity status to advocate for political issues or minority groups. This is related to the work of Lines (2001), who further addresses how the public discourse on professional athletes is influenced by social media.

Similar to the findings of Cavalier and Newhall (2017), Lines (2001) addresses how professional athletes are portrayed as villains, heroes, and fools in the media. Lines studies how social and cultural constructs influence this process in the media. This discourse analysis of sports articles in newspapers in the United Kingdom demonstrates that public understanding of the triad of hero, villain, and fool reinforces paratricular norms and masculinity in male sports. The findings of this study also demonstrate that the media thrives on scandal and can influence who the public perceives to be a hero or villain. However, this does not always reflect the opinions of sports fans. The article suggests that this is also true for young people who look up to athletes as role models, even if an athlete is seen as a villain.

Taken together, these two studies demonstrate how politics influence social media and public discourse. Cavalier and Newhall (2017) do this by analyzing pro-marriage equality posts of the US women’s soccer team, on Facebook and Instagram. Lines (2001) offers a discourse analysis of how athletes are portrayed as heroes and villains. Because this small body of research explains how narratives of athletes can shift in the media, it helps to justify the claim that athletes activists’ narratives are important to understand over time. Related to this is a body of research that explores the impact of race on public discourse related to professional athletes.

**Impact of Race on Public Discourse Related to Athletes**

Research demonstrates that race impacts the public discourse related to athletes. This body of literature includes (a) a study that explores the public discourse related to national
anthem protests in the NFL (Intravia, Piquero, & Piquero, 2017) (b) a study that demonstrates how public discourse interferes with Kaepernick’s national anthem kneel, that protests racism and police brutality (Martin & McHendry, 2016) (c) a study that illustrates how social media content reflects discriminatory nationlistic themes and articulates how athletes are expected to conform to these bias ideas and values (Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, & Spencer, 2018). This is important because taken together, these studies support the claim that the need for understanding narratives of athlete activists addressing social injustices is important to understand over time.

Intravia, Piquero, and Piquero address the national anthem protests of NFL players, through the eyes of students studying criminal justice at a large Midwestern university. The results of this study demonstrate that Black survey takers tended to be in favor of the protests, and thought that Black athletes should get a consequence from neither the NFL nor the team owner for protesting. This was true despite the fact that many respondents supported the reason for the protest, even if they did not support the means of the protest, for example taking a knee. It also remained true even after the researchers controlled for independent variables such as race, sex, age, political ideology. This is also related to the work of Martin and McHendry (2016) who also analyze the role of race in protests in the NFL.

Similar to the findings of Intravia, Piquero, and Piquero (2017), Martin & McHendry (2016) address why Kaepernick’s kneel was very controversial in the NFL. Martin and McHendry study the public discourse on Kaepernick’s protest by organizing it in three categories: race, protest, and patriotism. The authors find that the discourse mainly focuses on “who is ‘offended’ or ‘disrespected’ - and whether or not they ought to be,” instead of Kaepernick’s actual message (p. 98). The findings of this study also demonstrate that Kaepernick’s supporters and
nonsupporters were successful in not allowing Kaepernick to have a conversation with a larger public audience on the original motivation for his protests. This is because the focus of the public discourse kept going back to who was offended and disrespected by his kneel. Martin and McHendry believe that Kaepernick has the right to protest, but point out that the public narrative - even among Kaepernick’s allies - focuses on defending or critiquing Kaepernick’s actions, rather than discussing racism and police brutality. This scholarship is related to the work of Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer (2018) because the authors also discuss how issues related to race and social justice protests silence the narratives of athlete activists.

Similar to the findings of Intravia, Piquero, and Piquero (2017), and Martin and McHendry (2016), Schmidit, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer (2018), address how Colin Kaepernick - and also Megan Rapinoe - are labeled as anti-American for protesting. Schmidit, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer studied how Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s athlete activism narratives were created and influenced by nationalism. Data was collected and analyzed from Facebook posts regarding the two athletes’ national anthem protests. This study included 85,649 participants' comments on the protest from Facebook. The results of this study demonstrate that social media content reflects discriminatory nationalist themes, debates American ethical values, and articulates how athletes are expected to conform to these racist and sexist ideas and values. This conversation includes both the influence of racism and heteronormativity. Schmidit, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer conclude that both athletes face consequences for kneeling. Kaepernick is jobless and receives pushback from the media and social media and Rapinoe was forced to stand during the national anthem under new rules created by the national soccer organization.
In summary, research demonstrates that it is important to understand the impact of race on public discourse related to athletes. This includes (a) a study that explores national anthem protests in the NFL (Intravia, Piquero, & Piquero, 2017) (b) a study that demonstrates how public discourse interferes with Kaepernick’s national anthem kneel (Martin & McHendry, 2016) (c) a study that illustrates how social media reflects discriminatory nationlistic themes and forces athletes to adhere to these norms (Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, & Spencer, 2018). Taken together, this body of research justifies the importance of understanding activist athletes over time because public discourse can confuse and silence the narratives and agendas of athletes who use their platform to protest social injustices.

Summary

The claim for this literature review is that the narratives and agenda of athlete activists addressing social injustices is important to explore over time. Three sets of literature were used to justify this claim, including literature that explores (a) the impact of media-framing on the public discourse related to athletes (b) the impact of athletes’ narratives/agendas on the media that influence public discourse (c) the impact of race on public discourse related to athletes. Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory were used to frame the claim, and to explore the narratives and agenda of athlete activists. To add to this literature, this thesis examines the Twitter accounts of two well-known athletes, Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe, in order to understand their activism, and social justice agendas and narratives, over time.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

In America professional athletes are attacked for the way they live their lives as a whole. Intimate details on and off the field/court they play on are analyzed for fault. Professional athletes are censured to this level of criticism because the field of sports, along with multiple media outlets sustain monetary reward by capturing large audiences at once. This capturing of large audiences thrives through story telling of professional athletes in the public world for communities to observe. This transitions the ownership of one's own narratives to the sports organization, stakeholder, or media outlet. The control of an athlete's narrative is often influenced by politics in that time period. Therefore, this transition period and constant shift due to multiple political conversations results in the significance of needing an in-depth understanding of how athlete's narratives transform over time. The understanding of change is important because athletes may experience dehumanization, objectification, and discrimination based on social categories like gender, race, sexual orientation, and social class because they wish to use their sports platform to educate others on social injustices (Lee & Cunningham, 2019).

The following research questions guided this thematic inductive analysis:

1. On the Twitter platform, how does an athlete's right to protest result in an Anti-American narrative?

2. On Twitter, what language characterized the public sentiment toward Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe?
3. According to the dialogue on Twitter, how does the public/fans understand, or
misunderstand, Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe’s intended message to
protest?

Data for this thematic inductive analysis was gathered through Colin Kaepernick and Megan
Rapinoe’s social media platform on Twitter. Tweets were collected with a specific date range in
mind to collect the best results during these athlete’s protests. The results of this process were
winnowed according to themes that had a sufficient amount of tweets to provide dialogue on (see
Appendix A). The following sections present the results of this study, organized by research
question, and according to theme.

**Research Question One**

Research question one reads: *On the Twitter platform, how does an athlete’s right to
protest result in a Anti-American narrative?* The data gathered in response to the first research
question can be organized according to one theme: America values. This theme presents
findings related to key terms including (a) USA/US (b) America (c) law. Samples of tweets that
include each of these terms are found below. Tweets were chosen because they represent a larger
body of tweets that express how athletes are perceived as Anti-American. Tweets that were
excluded were those that included target terms related to an athlete’s right to protest but were
unclear or redundant.

**USA/US**

Tweets related to the theme of *American Values* and include the key terms *USA or US* include:

- “You don’t represent me or the USA”
- “She mocks Trump for quoting the Bible, then she refuses to stand for the US anthem”
• “These people are disgraceful to the USA”
• “U kneel for US but stand and honor country last leads world in sex slvaes and human rights violations”
• “Unsuccessful QB makes himself relevant by disrespecting the USA. Smart”
• “Where is the outrage for black on black murder rate across the US?”
• “Thankless for the honor of living in the great USA and playing a great sport. You are an embarrassment.”

America

Tweets related to the theme of American Values and include the key term America include:

• “Another anti-american spoiled brat”
• “Nobody is freaking oppressed in America”
• “Black Lives Matter hate cops and America”
• “Seems to me you disrespected all who have fought for civil rights in America by kneeling”
• “God Bless America”
• “You have disgraced America and its people”
• “All Lives have value but not all lives matter in America”
• “You are what is wrong with America, spoiled self important, egotistical dummy”
• “Cloin you are what is wrong with America”
• “Get the fuck out of America you fucking piece of shit”

Law

Tweets related to the theme of American Values and include the key term Law include:
“So you stand during the national anthem of a country under military martial law: Thailand”

“Shame you can’t also promote all the good work US law enforcement do everyday”

“Obama signed a law to protect the police”

“There is no justice until the law is enforced for all”

“Colin, who do you call when you have a crime problem. BLM or law enforcement”

In conclusion, the first research question, On the Twitter platform, how does an athlete's right to protest result in an Anti-American narrative? elicited responses that can be organized according to the theme of America values. Other tweets related to this included sub-themes such as Freedom and Religion but there were too few of those tweets to warrant organizing them in a stand-alone sub-sections. The next section presents findings that address research question number two.

**Research Question Two**

Research question two reads: On Twitter, what language characterized the public sentiment toward Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe? The data gathered in response to the second research question can be organized according to the following themes:

1. Representation
2. Race
3. Masculinity

Theme one presents findings related to tweets that include the terms (a) national (b) America (c) US/USA (d) represent/representation (e)country. Results that describe race include tweets that include the terms (a) white (b) black (c) race (d) racism, and are presented under the heading
theme two. Finally, theme three presents findings that address Masculinity, including tweets related to the terms (a) coward (b) man/men. Samples of tweets that include each of these terms are found below. Tweets were chosen because they represent a larger body of tweets that express the language used to characterize Kaepernick and Rapinoe on Twitter. Tweets that were excluded were those that included the target term but were confusing or repeated a sentiment better-articulated by another tweet.

Theme One: Representation

The following section is organized into subsections including: (a) national (b) America (c)US/USA (d)represent/representation (e) country.

National

Tweets related to the theme Representation and include the key term National include:

- “Learn your nationality according to bible”
- “How a disrespect to our national symbol will solve such problems”
- “I would never disrespect the flag or our national anthem”
- “you’re getting paid to be on national team”
- “You need to be terminated from the national team”
- “Join me and HRC this national coming out day and be proud to live your truth”
- “Your on a national team, you represent your nation”
- “Stand during our national anthem”
- “Did you refuse to stand for the national anthem, are you kidding me”
- “Should be banned from playing on the national team”
- “Hope they rip that damn flag off your chest the next national game”
“I vote that you stand when the national anthem is played”

_America_

Tweets related to the theme of *Representation* and include the key term *America* include:

- “By symbolically peeing on the American flag”
- “No respect for America?”
- “You are what's wrong with America, spoiled self important, egotistical dummy”
- “Thank you for making America great again”
- “You should never disrespect the American flag”
- “you like American money too much!”
- “I’m not the one angry at the leader of America”
- “You disrespect the leader of America which makes you un-American”
- “You disrespect the leader of America, you are not patriotic at all”
- “Much love from the National African American Gun Association”
- “Colin you are also what’s wrong with America”
- “Get the fuck out of America you fucking piece of shit”
- “You have disgraced America and its people”
- “You’re thanking her for disrespecting the American flag”

_US/USA_

Tweets related to the theme of *Representation* and include the key term *US/USA* include:

- “To me he has become one of the most liked players in the US”
- “Stand. USA together please”
- “Same Kap who was fined by the league for racial slurs and made 30 million US dollars”
• “U are not USA worthy”
• “Unsuccessful QB makes himself relevant by disrespecting the USA”
• “You play for the USA stand your sorry ass up”
• “You don’t represent me or the USA”
• “What have you done for your black community build them a school with your millions you get in the USA”
• “Learn some respect 4 USA”
• “Take him out of USA”
• “Leave USA we don’t need anyone like you”

Represent/Representation

Tweets related to the theme of Representation and include the key term Represent/Representation include:

• “Take the flag off, it represents oppression”
• “You represent USA on the field as member of US Soccer”
• “Stand or take off the uniform hypocrite, represent”
• “You don’t represent me or the USA”
• “You’re on a national team, you represent your nation”
• “you represent the USA”
• “U don’t represent US people so quit Natl Team and spend the abundance of time for your new cause”
• “U have represented the USA”
• “You represent the US, you respect the flag/did you cash that check last night?”
“They are who you represent when wearing our colors, not your agenda”

“Finally not just our voice is represented by Elmo, btw the voices of Elmo is a child molester”

**Country**

Tweets related to the theme of *Representation* and include the key term *Country* include:

- “Quit being a bitch if you don’t like the country”
- “Go to as Islamism communist country and enjoy their freedoms”
- “Please find another country that better suits you”
- “it makes no sense to disrespect your country because of white police violence”
- “Show some respect for your country”
- “You represent our country at the highest level of women’s sports and this is how you show respect.JOKE.”
- “It's the system, not the flag and country”
- “Go play for another country”
- “I unfollowed you after what you did disgracefully toward our country and flag”
- “At least he loves our country you fool”
- “Shame you disrespect your country and those who have fought for that flag”
- “He also has more pride on this country than you Megan”
- “This country only succeeds by joining together, not by tearing each other apart”
- “You are a stupid scum bag withc, why don’t you just leave the country if you’re catered”
- “A country where everyone has to stand for the flag”
● “Not honoring the flag of the greatest country on earth is hateful”

Theme Two: Race

The following section is organized into subsections including: (a) White (b) Black (c) Race (d) Racism.

White

Tweets related to the theme Race and include the key term White include:

● “How dare white people that adopted you support and love you now hate them”
● “Aren’t your parents white”
● “Thank you for showing us white people another way”
● “White America be like yea the guy who wrote the anthem owned slaves but why not stand”
● “We get it the white man oppressed people, play football
● “Police do it to white women and elderly whites also”
● “So white people killing white people isn’t a problem”
● “I am 67 year old white girl and i get what you are doing”
● “Are your loving white parents prejudice”
● “White people attempting to silence Kaep is oppression”
● “You were given a better life because of white people”
● “It makes no sense to disrespect your country because of white police violence”
● “AWW poor white people wanna be victimized and oppressed so bad”
● “Why does it have to be just black people there are more white people shot than black”
● “It’s not easy living in a white world”
“How about black crime on whites”

**Black**

Tweets related to the theme *Race* and include the key term *Black* include:

- “don’t make black kids angry”
- “Just goes to show you killing black men is a normal day at the office for some”
- “what part of America that elected a black president for 2 terms is oppressive”
- “It's not a white versus black issue”
- “Pretty sure 90% of those shootings have been black on black”
- “He is a racist and a black racist”
- “I’m a mother of 2 black boys and I’m tired of living in fear”
- “Colin’s black daddy abandoned him so he wants to blame whites instead of holding his dad accountable”
- “We have a black president in a racially oppressed country”
- “The way you stood up for black lives, you made us matter”
- “Black community oppressing themselves voting democrat for the last 60 years and relying on the welfare system”
- “It’s a shame blacks were born without a brain”
- “You keep promoting your garbage u disgrace black lives matter”
- “Shut the fuck up if u cared about black people being killed go to Chicago ya know address the real”

**Race**

Tweets related to the theme *Race* and include the key term *Race* include:
・ “The human race”
・ “Are you taking a knee for all white folks too they way out number any race who are killed on”
・ “So get out there and try to fix those problems for many other races”
・ “This is wrong, and there are injustices and wrongdoings all races of people, not a perfect world we live in”
・ “This isn’t a race issue”
・ “There is only one race”
・ “We all know there’s evil in every race”
・ “All races and creeds”
・ “People like you are the reason the “race” convo doesn’t exist in our country”

Racism

Tweets related to the theme Race and include the key term Racism include:

・ “Used to like you but now i see you have been reading leftist bullshit racism stories”
・ “Racism causes black people to kill blacks right”
・ “U act like racism is only against black people”
・ “Reverse racism”
・ “Being a millionaire does not exclude him from racism”
・ “We need to stand together to fight racism not cause more divide”
・ “Sending my highest regards for your courage and commitments to telling the truth about racism in America”
・ “Also smart Canadians don’t buy the systemic racism”
• “Bring racism to an end”

**Theme Three: Masculinity**

The following section is organized into subsections including: (a) Coward  (b) Man/Men.

**Coward**

Tweets related to the theme *Masculinity* and include the key term *Coward* include:

• “Instead of kneeling why don’t you put your game check on the line instead of acting like a coward”
• “Coward”
• “Cowards who don’t know loss if u don’t love it, leave it”
• “Coward. Then!”

**Man/Men**

Tweets related to the theme *Masculinity* and include the key term *Man/Men* include:

• “They will nail you to the cross man i don’t want to see it happen”
• “Men and women have lost limbs and lives”
• “Disrespecting the men and women who provide you with ur freedom is not acceptable”
• “What’s with the fro man?”
• “Stay off twitter man”
• “Where’s all the black men who have served?”
• “You the man, stay strong”
• “As a veteran and a black man don’t stop”
• “You are brave and generous man”
• “Beware the fury of a patient man”
● “One in four black men are in prison due to sentencing disparity”
● “Off the flag just as vigorously as you do the right to say marriage is between a man and woman”
● “He can speak to black men and tell them to be good father’s for a start”
● “But now i admire you as a man of our community”
● “He’s the most important man in politics”
● “I respect you as an athlete and even more as a man”
● “Why can’t men be men and woman be woman”
● “I remember when men used to look like men”

In summary, the second research question, “On Twitter, what language characterized the public sentiment toward Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe?,” elicited responses that can be organized according to 3 themes. These include theme one, which describes representation. Theme two describes race. Finally, theme three describes masculinity. Other tweets related to this included topics such as sexism, attention-seeking, and attacks but there were too few of those tweets to warrant organizing them in a theme. The next section presents findings that address research question number three.

Research Question Three

Research question three reads: According to the dialogue on Twitter, how does the public/fans understand, or misunderstand, Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe’s intended message to protest? The data gathered in response to the third research question can be organized according to one theme: social justice activism. This theme presents findings related to key terms including (a) kneel/kneeling (b) protest (c) fight/fighting. Samples of tweets that
include each of these terms are found below. Tweets were chosen because they not only represent a large body of tweets but also express how Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protest was understood or misunderstood. Tweets that were excluded or cut were those that did not have a large number of tweets or were excluded because the tweets did not provide dialogue to the topic at hand.

**Kneel/Kneeling**

Tweets related to the theme *Social Justice Activism* and include the key term *Kneel/Kneeling* include:

- “But yet you kneel behind these marines during the anthem?”
- “By kneeling you’re an embarrassment to all that died for ur freedom”
- “Doesn’t kneeling actually show pride”
- “Thank you for taking a stand by kneeling”
- “This is why we kneel”
- “Reason you started kneeling and more are following suit”
- “How ironic that you have a flag on your shirts yet kneel down during the anthem”
- I fought for your right to kneel, I also fought for my right to call you a douchecanoe every action”
- “Seems to me you disrespect all who have fought for civil rights in America by kneeling”
- “Not sure why you kneel for anthem while wearing the flag of the same anthem you are kneeling for”
- “She can teach you how to kneel”
“Are you going to kneel in front of those girls and teach them the lack of respect to their country too”

Protest

Tweets related to the theme Social Justice Activism and include the key term protest include:

- “You could of picked a better way to protest”
- “Protesting 2 improve things in 1’s country is the ultimate patriotism”
- “Move to Chicago and protest”
- “Seems like the protest are causing more confusion rather than diffusing the issue”
- “Paid 14 million to sit on the bench i think you should be working on your fame rather than protesting”
- “He is entitled to the same free speech that you are using in your protest to gain 15 minutes of fame.”
- “So Megan you gonna protest the bible now”
- “People will disagree but a real American will stand for your right to protest”
- “‘He’s protesting police brutality and mass incarceration”
- “He is Muslim protesting our government”
- “Thank you for your public protest”
- “Why don’t you protest those Muslim countries where you could be executed just for acting on your homosexuality?”
- “I agree this is wrong but protest on ur own time not while us at work”

Fight/Fighting
Tweets related to the theme *Social Justice Activism* and include the key term *Fight/Fighting* include:

- “Kneeling or sitting during the national anthem isn’t going to accomplish anything except fighting”
- “We need to stand together to fight racism not cause divide”
- “They seem to fight against each other”
- “Fighting for use of hands”
- “Especially for the fight of equal pay”
- “Your fight is far bigger than you can imagine globally, so keep going strong!”
- “I just saw this video today and it is the evidence of what you are really fighting”
- “Keep fighting man”
- “The fight isn’t over”
- “Fight for what you believe in”
- “Keep fighting”
- “Keep up the good fight”

In summary, the third research question, “*According to the dialogue on Twitter, how does the public/fans understand, or misunderstand, Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe’s intended message to protest?*,” elicited responses that can be organized according to the theme of *social justice activism*. Other tweets related to this included topics such as *athlete’s role* and *shunning* but there were too few of those tweets to warrant organizing them into a theme.

**Conclusion**
The data gathered for this thematic inductive analysis are presented in the sections above. These findings are presented by theme and according to the research questions. The results of the first research question, “On the Twitter platform, how does an athlete's right to protest result in an Anti-American narrative?” are organized by American values. The results of the second research question, “On Twitter, what language characterized the public sentiment toward Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe?” are organized by (a) representation (b) race (c) masculinity. The results of the third research question, “According to the dialogue on Twitter, how does the public/fans understand, or misunderstand, Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe’s intended message to protest?,” are organized by Social Justice Activism. The next chapter presents a discussion of these results, as well as conclusions and recommendations based on the findings presented in this chapter.
CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the United States, professional athletes are vulnerable to disapproval from sports fans/audiences and media outlet viewers. Sports organizations, sports teams, media outlets, and sports commentators can influence public discourse in public conversations. Athletes can be dehumanized, objectified, and sexualized, experiencing discrimination based on their gender, race, sexual orientation, and/or social class in these public conversations (Lee & Cunningham, 2019). This criticism can also influence, and be influenced by, the national political climate. Political discourse in the field of sports often criticizes athletes and judges athletes on how well they align dominant American norms. The control of narratives, and the influence of politics develops a need for an in-depth understanding into how athletes' narratives shift over time.

This chapter includes sections titled (a) discussion (b) conclusions (c) recommendations. In the discussion section, the evidence presented in chapter three is explored. The discussion is organized by research questions and includes a discussion of each theme presented in Chapter Three. The conclusion section presents conclusions based on the results of my study. It also relates my findings back to the body of literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The conclusion section is organized according to the themes used in Chapter Two. The final section of this chapter includes evidence-based recommendations related to (a) educational practices and actions that may be taken based on the study results and my conclusions (b) future research studies that may be carried out to advance the work begun in this investigation. The chapter ends with a conclusion.
Discussion

In this section the evidence presented in Chapter Three is discussed. The discussion is organized according to the research questions that guided this study. These include:

1. On the Twitter platform, how does an athlete's right to protest result in an Anti-American narrative?
2. On Twitter, what language characterized the public sentiment toward Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe?
3. According to the dialogue on Twitter, how does the public/fans understand, or misunderstand, Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe’s intended message to protest?

The following theme is discussed under the heading Research Question One: (a) American Values. Under the heading Research Question Two, the following themes are discussed: (a) Representation b) Race (c) Masculinity. Under the heading Research Question Three, the following theme is discussed: (a) Social Justice Activism. This section ends with a brief conclusion.

Research Question One: Athlete’s Right to Protest Results in an Anti-American Narrative

Theme One: American Values

The theme American Values demonstrates how public discourse can impact an athlete’s right to protest. Both Kaepernick and Rapinoe protested the national anthem by kneeling at sports events. To answer this question I investigated content on Twitter regarding both athletes’ accounts and how their followers/public reacted to their right to protest. Both athletes protested the national anthem to advocate for social change and to protest police brutality. Kaepernick and
Rapinoe were both criticized heavily for their protest and faced backlash for their activism. Both protested in the same way, and claimed that their protest was neither anti-American nor hate-driven. The public discourse in both cases focused on the athletes' right to protest by taking a knee, instead of on social change and police brutality. However, there were some important differences in the public reaction on Twitter to the two athletes.

Kaepernick, who is considered a Black athlete on the Twitter platform (although his adopted parents identify as White), was criticized in tweets as Anti-American because of his national anthem protest. Kaepernick’s right to protest was seen as a disgrace and a disrespect according to many Twitter users. For example, several tweets read:

- “You have disgraced America and its people.”
- “Another anti-american spoiled brat”
- “Get the fuck out of America you fucking piece of shit”

Many on Twitter felt that Kaepernick violated his allegiance to the US and insulted those who identified as veterans. Evidence of this can be found in the following tweet: “But yet you kneel behind these marines and vets during the anthem?” This illustrates the anti-American sentiment for Jaerpernick on Twitter.

Kaepernick’s protest was also seen as Anti-American because of the symbolism Twitter users associated with the American flag. Data from my study indicates that many Twitter users believe that the American flag is an important symbol. When Kaepernick kneeled in protest during the anthem, these Twitter users understood Kaepernick as a threat to the US. These tweets included:

- “You should never disrespect the American flag”
Many tweets collected for my study believed that Kaepernick should not be allowed to maintain his citizenship if he continued to kneel during the national anthem. His refusal to stand during the national anthem, and the Twitter backlash, resulted in an Anti-American narrative. By exercising his right to protest, the narrative about Kaepernick changed from hero to villain.

Similarly Rapinoe, who identifies as female and lesbian, was critiqued on Twitter as Anti-American because of her national anthem protest. Rapinoe took a knee while the national anthem played during the US team’s games in the 2018 Women’s World Cup. She stood when the anthem of the opposing team played. Data from my study indicates that Twitter users questioned Rapinoe’s right to represent the US national soccer team, and to wear the red, white and blue colors of the country. Examples of this include the following tweets:

- “You don’t represent me or the USA”
- “Should be banned from playing on the national team”
- “Hope they rip that damn flag off your chest the next national game”

Twitter users were less concerned with Rapinoe’s right to protest. Similar to Kaepernick’s refusal to stand during the national anthem, Twitter backlash resulted in an Anti-American narrative of Rapinoe. By exercising her right to protest, the narrative about Rapinoe changed from champion to unworthy benchwarmer.

Research Question Two: Language That Characterized the Public Sentiment

Theme One: Representation

This theme discusses the language that the public used to represent Kaepernick and Rapinoe. Both athletes faced similar push back by the public on Twitter. The public sentiment on
Twitter presented a strong nationalistic influence. Tweets related to representation can be organized according to five key terms: (a) national (b) america (c) US/USA (d) represent/representation (e) country. Kaepernick and Rapinoe were both criticized by Twitter users for taking a knee during the national anthem. Twitter users wanted both athletes to conform with the tradition of standing. For example, in Rapinoe’s case a majority of public users felt that Rapinoe was not a good representation of her country and the colors she wore on her jersey because she got involved in politics. Examples of these kinds of these kinds of Tweets include:

- “How ironic that you have a flag on your shirts yet kneel down during the anthem”
- “Stand or take off the uniform hypocrite, represent”
- “They are who you represent when wearing our colors, not your agenda”

As for Kaepernick, when it came to the theme of representation, Twitter users were also angry and concerned that Kaepernick was not a good role model.

Many Twitter users felt betrayed by Kaepernick for kneeling during the national anthem. Twitter users questioned Kaepernick’s protest because of his adoptive parents, who identify as white. Samples of tweets on this topic include:

- “How dare white people that adopted you support and love you now hate them”
- “You were given a better life because of white people”
- “Are your loving white parents prejudice”

Many Twitter users thought that Kaepernick was unappreciative of the privileges he may have experienced because of his White parents. Kaepernick was characterized as a man who refused to acknowledge his history and privilege. The next section continues this discussion of race.
Theme Two: Race

Language addressing race was another component that characterized public sentiment toward Kaepernick and Rapinoe. Twitter users specifically gravitated towards 4 words: Black, White, race, racism. On Kepernick’s feed, one group of tweets can be understood as racist. For example, “It’s a shame blacks were born without a brain.” Another group of tweets demonstrated a denial of racism characterized by the following tweets:

- “This isn’t a race issue.”
- “There is only one race.”
- “Are you taking a knee for all white folks too they way out number any race who are killed on”
- “What part of America that elected a black president for 2 terms is oppressive”
- “It's not a white versus black issue”

Another group of tweets illustrated an acknowledgement of race and racism but a wide range of different understandings of how race and racism work. Examples of these tweets include:

- “Racism causes black people to kill blacks right”
- “U act like racism is only against black people”
- “Reverse racism”
- “People like you are the reason the “race” convo doesn’t exist in our country”

Overall the tweets on Kaepernick’s Twitter feed demonstrate that the public discourse on racism is not very sophisticated and includes very little accountability.
On Rapinoe’s Twitter feed, tweets on the topic of race critiqued the legitimacy of Rapinoe’s claims. Twitter users were focused on proving Rapinoe wrong, and invalidating her protest. Tweets that illustrate this include:

- “Why does it have to be just black people there are more white people shot than black”
- “Black community oppressing themselves voting democrat for the last 60 years and relying on the welfare system”
- “This is wrong, and there are injustices and wrongdoings all races of people, not a perfect world we live in”

In addition, some Twitter users argued that Rapinoe was the reason Kaepernick’s protest was not taken seriously. This seems to imply that white female athletes should not protest police brutality in solidarity with an male African-American athletes.

In summary, Twitter users react to Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protests with impulsive language that undermines the athletes’ ability to protest police brutality on the Black community. This language denies the legitimacy of the athlete’s claims. This discourse both negatively characterizes and influences the public sentiment on Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s character and right to use their platform as famous athletes, to protest. This negative characterization of the two athletes was not only based on discourse about race but also through a Twitter debate on traditional masculinity and traditional gender roles. The next subsection discusses this topic.

**Theme Three: Masculinity/Traditional Gender Roles**

Similar to the discourse on race, Tweets on the subject of masculinity and traditional gender roles were characterized by impulsive language and negatively influenced the public
sentiment on Kapernick and Rapinoe’s character. For example, the majority of the public sentiment related to Kapernick’s masculinity was negative and became a distraction from the intent of Kapernick’s protest. Examples of these kinds of tweets include:

- “I remember when men used to look like men”
- “He can speak to black men and tell them to be good father’s for a start”
- “Instead of kneeling why don’t you put your game check on the line instead of acting like a coward”

The effect of these tweets was that they invalidated Kapernick’s protest and distracted the public from the issue of police brutality. Related to this, Rapinoe experienced a critique for straying away from traditional gender norms.

Rapinoe faced personal attacks on her identity for refusing to conform to traditional gender norms. Twitter users critiqued her support of gay marriage and her choice to be an out lesbian. They were angry with her for mixing politics and sports, because traditional gender roles assign a passive role to women. Many Twitter users seem to conceptualize both sports and politics as male dominated arenas. They seemed to tolerate Rapinoe in one traditionally male arena, because she is a superstar athlete, but were unwilling to tolerate her presence in two masculine arenas: sports and politics. Tweets that illustrate this include:

- “Off the flag just as vigorously as you do the right to say marriage is between a man and woman”
- “Coward”
- “Why can’t men be men and woman be woman”
These tweets demonstrate how many Twitter users ascribe to traditional gender roles. Rather than considering the meaning behind Rapinoe’s protest they act off impulse. This results in a shift away from the topic of police brutality and negatively characterizes the public sentiment Rapinoe’s character.

However, it is important to note that a small surge of public sentiment on Twitter used positive language to describe Kapernick and Rapinoe. This positive language characterized Kaepernick as a community man, a role model, and a symbol of generosity and bravery. At least one tweet thanked Rapinoe for her commitment to her social justice agenda. Tweets that illustrate this sentiment included:

- “Thank you for taking a stand by kneeling”
- “You the man, stay strong”
- “As a veteran and a black man don’t stop”
- “You are brave and generous man”
- “Beware the fury of a patient man”
- “But now i admire you as a man of our community”
- “He’s the most important man in politics”
- “I respect you as an athlete and even more as a man”

Research Question Three: Dialogue on Twitter and Misunderstood Protest Messages

Theme One: Social Justice Activism

On Twitter, the theme that emerged in relation to research question three was Social Justice Activism. Data from my study demonstrates that Kapernick and Rapinoe both articulated a clear protest message, and that both athletes were highly misunderstood. Data from their
Twitter feeds demonstrate that Kaepernick and Rapinoe made multiple efforts to clarify the meaning of their protests. Kaepernick specifically clarified that he was fighting against police brutality on black bodies. Similarly, Rapinoe clarified that she was protesting the treatment of marginalized groups (see Appendix B). Despite this, the data collected from Twitter demonstrates that the public discourse on Twitter allowed only a narrow conversation about the social injustices experienced by marginalized groups.

This conversation was influenced by two main groups of Tweets. One group of tweets critiqued the athletes' protest including sentiments such as:

- “Seems like the protest are causing more confusion rather than diffusing the issue”
- “You could of picked a better way to protest”
- “Are you going to kneel in front of those girls and teach them the lack of respect to their country too”
- “Not sure why you kneel for anthem while wearing the flag of the same anthem you are kneeling for”

This data shows that Twitter users did not successfully grasp the true meaning of both athletes' protests. Another group of tweets denied the marginalization of minority groups. Tweets that illustrate this include

- “Reverse racism
- “Pretty sure 90% of those shootings have been black on black”
- “Nobody is freaking oppressed in America”

This denial of the marginalization of minority groups is related to a term described by Schmidt, Pegoraro, Frederick, and Spencer (2018) as blind obedience. Blind obedience is a synonym for
nationalism, which is based on the belief of the superiority of a particular country and its unwillingness to engage in the critique of a country when necessary. In this case, Kaepernick and Rapinoe are critiquing the unjust treatment of African-American people by the police. The two athletes can be understood as patriots according to the definition of blind obedience. But most Twitter users are more like nationalists because they refuse to acknowledge that anything is wrong.

However, it should be noted that a small number of Twitter users did understand Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s intended message of protest. At least one Twitter user actually identified the two athletes as patriots. Tweets that illustrate this include

- “Protesting 2 improve things in 1’s country is the ultimate patriotism”
- ”He’s protesting police brutality and mass incarceration”
- “I just saw this video today and it is the evidence of what you are really fighting”
- “One in four black men are in prison due to sentencing disparity”

This small number of Twitter users appreciated the protest and defended Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s message by encouraging them to keep on fighting the social injustices in America experienced by marginalized individuals.

**Conclusion**

The previous sections discussed the evidence presented in Chapter Three. The discussion was organized by research questions and included, under the heading *Research Question One*, a discussion of: (a) American Values. Under the heading *Research Question Two*, (a) Representation (b) Race (c) Masculinity were discussed. Under the heading *Research Question*
Three, the following themes are discussed: (a) Social Justice Activism. The next section draws conclusions based on this discussion.

Conclusions

In this section conclusions from the results of this study are reviewed and related back to the body of literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The claim made in Chapter Two was that the narratives and agenda of professional athlete activists fighting social injustices is important to understand over time. The evidence used to support that claim included (a) impact of media-framing on the public discourse related to athletes (b) impact of athletes’ narratives/agendas on the media that influence public discourse (c) impact of race on public discourse related to athletes.

This section is organized like Chapter Two and includes: (a) conclusions related to media-framing impacts the public discourse on athletes (b) conclusions related to social media and other media outlets impact the public discourse on athlete (c) conclusions related to the impact of racism on public discourse related to athletes. In each section, the conclusions are linked to the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Queer Theory, employed by this study. This section ends with a brief summary.

Conclusions Related to how Media-Framing Impacts the Public Discourse on Athletes

According to the existing literature, athletes in sports experience discrimination. Knight and Giuliano (2003) demonstrate how heteronormative norms are used by the media to marginalize female athletes who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Ally (LGTBQAI+). In addition, male sports are covered at a higher level than women’s sports and there is a negative impact of the *us-versus-them*
mentality on women in sports (Burch, Billings, & Zimmerman, 2018; Travis & Roxane, 2018). The literature demonstrates that women in sports are often objectified and dehumanized (Daniels, 2009). The literature also explores how the media limits the narratives that can be told about women in sports and can negatively frame African American athletes (Dumitru, 2013; Joseph, 2018). The findings from my study confirm the existing literature by demonstrating how the media impacts public discourse on professional athletes.

My study results indicate that the media can have a negative impact on both female and African American athletes. For example, my study shows that non-conformity to traditional gender norms results in professional female athletes being silenced. Queer theory suggests that it is important to recognize multiplicity of identities and narratives, but these are often neglected by media outlets that prefer to report on scandal (Linghede and Larsson (2017); Lines, 2001). My results also indicate that race is heavily used in the media to criticize athletes that are non-white. For example, Kaepernick was, and still is, criticized for his protest of racism and the killings of black men by police. In chapter two, I claim that it is possible to understand how athletes can use their power and privilege to fight against white supremacy and other social injustices in the field of sports, inequities in sports and in the world. Cooper, Macaulay, and Rodriguez (2019) argue that sports offer Black athletes a platform to fight for social justice and it is important to remember that CRT can be used as a framework for understanding the history of Black athletes - like Kaepernick - demanding change, even at a great personal expense. Because race is leveraged in the media to influence public discourse on African American athletes, like Kaepernick, it is important to conduct research like mine in order to understand how athletes narratives can change over time, due to the influence of the media.
Conclusions Related to How Media About Athletes Impacts Public Discourse

Related to media framing, a body of research demonstrates how social and other media, related to athletes and sports, can impact public discourse. This literature includes an examination of pro-marriage Facebook and Instagram posts by the U.S. women’s soccer team and an exploration of athlete role models through a content and discourse analysis (Cavalier & Newhall, 2017; Lines, 2001). The findings from my study confirms the existing literature by demonstrating how social media and other media outlets impact public discourse. For example, my study shows that sports, politics, and the media are linked together because they all need large audiences to survive. This link results in the transfer of natiolistic, patriotic, homophobic, and discriminatoriary perspectives from the world of sports, out into the larger world of public discourse on social media. According to the CRT framework provided by Hylton (2005), black athletes like Kaepernick must use their platform to challenge the public discourse and initiate real change. CRT, with a commitment to social justice, can make room for understanding this kind of critique of traditional social structures in arenas such as sports. CRT allows for this because it reminds us that race matters and all scholarship should centralize race (De La Garza & Ono, 2016; Hylton, 2005). Similar to this Queer Theory, with its focus on intersectionality, suggests that the rejection of heteronoramtive norms is needed to fight back against traditional gender constructs in sports. As a result, both CRT and Queer Thoery can be used by athletes and academics who study sports, in order to destabilize the public discourse on race and gener norms.

Conclusions Related to the Impact of Racism on Public Discourse Related to Athletes

Finally, the existing literature illustrates that race impacts the public discourse related to athletes’ narratives and protest agendas. The literature includes an examination of how public
discourse is related to NFL national anthem protests and how public discourse disrupts the message of social injustices in the black community on racism and police brutality (Intravia, Piquero, & Piquero, 2017; Martin & McHendry, 2016). The literature also demonstrates how discourse that reflects the influence of White supremacy and the patriarchy is highlighted in social media posts about athletes (Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, & Spencer, 2018). The findings from my study confirm the existing literature by demonstrating strong nationlistic, white supremacist, and mysogenist themes.

For example, my study shows that both Kaepernick and Rapinoe protested to fight against the oppression of marginalized communities by the police, in the public discourse on Twitter, both faced criticism unrelated to their activism and protest narratives. According to Martin and McHendry (2016), “Some of Kaepernick’s defenders focus on his right to protest arguing that it is not unpatriotic, but even his supporters essentially avoid any discussion of the actual topic of concern for which he is protesting.” This was true in my study for both Kaepernick and Rapinoe. This had a negative impact on the public discourse related to Kaepernick and Rapinoe because it shifted the conversation from police brutality to an argument between supporters and allies on the right of these athletes to participate in protest. Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s true intent to protest was made invisible due to this unnecessarily distracting and messy public conversation.

This conversation, understood through the lens of CRT, explains how racism negatively affects athletes’ ability to get their messages understood efficiently. According to Hylton (2005), employing a CRT lens is a form of resistance against established racist practices that are used to marginalize Black athletes in sports. Hylton identifies how social structures and institutional
racism subjugate Black athletes. CRT has been used to analyze institutional racism in law and in education, and can be used to transform the discourse on sports as well. Hylton explains that sports are impacted by racism and require a critical framework like CRT for understanding. In addition, the authors of the study on which this inductive thematic analysis is based suggest that, “The inclusion of theoretical foundations presented in Critical Race Theory in future research of the comments received by individual athletes engaged in activism would be an important addition to the body of research” (Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer, 2018). This study implemented this suggestion and used CRT to understand the impact of racism on the discourse found on Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s Twitter accounts. The results demonstrate that CRT can be used to understand athlete activism in sports.

Finally Queer Thoery, which can be used to refigure and queer up narratives, can allow researchers to tell stories about athlete in new and challenging ways (Linghede and Larsson 2017, p. 293). As mentioned in Chapter Two, Linghede and Larsson (2017), suggest that the use of queer theory in sports can result in critical and creative new possibiltites of thinking and writing. According to the authors, public discourse on sports often fails to address complex issues of intersectionality but queer theory can be used to create new narratives in which multiple identities fluidly exist together and do not compete against one another. This is related to the conversation of race in the public discourse on sports because, as the data for this study demonstrates, it is impossible to discuss race without also discussing themes such as masculinity and gender identity. Therefore, both CRT and Queer Theory can be used to understand athletes’ activists agendas and narratives over time.
Summary

In this conclusions section, the results of this study were reviewed and related back to the existing body of literature. In summary, evidence suggests that (a) media-framing impacts the public discourse on athletes (b) how media about athletes impacts public discourse (c) how racism can impact athletes and public discourse. These conclusions are important because both CRT and Queer Theory are used to understand professional athletes complicated and intersectional narratives and agendas for athlete activism. CRT and Queer theory, as frameworks, can help put into perspective the need for athlete activism and why athletes narratives should be observed and understood over time.

Recommendations

In this section, I make evidence-based recommendations based on the findings of this inductive thematic analysis. These include (a) public engagement with Kaepernick and Rapinoe on the issue of police brutality (b) media framing strategies that might mediate the public discourse (c) suggestions for recognizing and addressing bias in the media. This section also includes recommendations for future research. These include (a) the use of the theory of sports for social justice (b) the use of a reflective essay on Ethics in American Sports (Eitzen, 1988) (c) addressing how athlete-advocacy may result in changes in attitudes and behavior that are either reflected in, or influence, public discourse. Following this, the chapter ends with a brief conclusion of this thesis as a whole.

Recommendations Based on the Findings of This Study

Recommendations for educational practices and actions include (a) how researchers, allies, and even the general public can engage with Kaepernick and Rapinoe on the issue of
police brutality (b) media framing strategies that mediates the public discourse and considers the
opinions of sports fans (c) suggestions for how media outlets can recognize their
heteronormative bias and ask the public to hold them accountable to more inclusive practices.
The following paragraphs discuss these recommendations.

Related to how to engage with Kaepernick and Rapinoe on the issue of police brutality, I
recommend that allies, supporters, and those who understand why Kaepernick and Rapinoe are
protesting engage in a conversation that stays true to the athletes’ agenda. Being an ally or
supporter and then participating in public discourse by defending an athlete’s right to protest can
be a distraction from the protest altogether. Instead, I urge allies, supporters, and fans to talk
about police brutality, as well as issues related to racism, equal pay, gender equality, and
homophobia in the United States. This is why Kaepernick and Rapinoe are kneeling and their
protest deserves acknowledgement.

Related to understanding the direct impact of media framing strategies on public
discourse and sports, I recommend that large audiences who partake in the watching of televised
news daily, take into account that sports fans may not necessarily agree with how media and
social media outlets portray athletes. The disconnect, and the assumption that sports fans feel the
same way as the general public is dangerous because it allows politicians, sports owners, and
those in power in sports to align their agendas with a misinformed public. I recommend that
sports fans share how they feel when a story or narrative comes out about an athlete that they
may not see in the same light. The stories and opinions of true fans might provide a counter-story
to those in the media and on social media. This is important because the media’s main goal is to
attract large audiences, while the main goal of sports fans is to support the athletes playing for their sports team.

Finally, related to how media outlets can recognize their heteronormative bias and ask the public to hold them accountable to more inclusive practices, I recommend that social media and other media platforms first recognize that they often normalize and reinforce heteronormativity through sexualized/gendered images of female athletes. The media has to acknowledge the harmful impact they have on youth by exposing young women to judgement and self-objectification. I also recommend that media outlets ask the public to hold them accountable to more inclusive practices by calling them out on their image appearance agendas, or the “objectifying, sexualizing, and capitalizing on monetary reward through images.” (Daniels, 2009). This might also include boycotts of media outlets that display only heteronormative images and exclude images that challenge traditional gender norms and expectations. In addition to these recommendations, the following section described an additional set of recommendations, for future research.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations for future research include (a) the use of the theory of sports for social justice (b) the use of a reflective essay on *Ethics in American Sports* (Eitzen, 1988) (c) addressing how athlete-advocacy may result in changes in attitudes and behavior that are either reflected in, or influence, public discourse. These types of research may provide an important critique of the existing literature by challenging and surfacing conversations about diversity, inclusion and intersectionality. They may also provide athletes with an opportunity to develop a complex narrative that is understood through public discourse, especially on social media outlets.
like Twitter. This may also enable fans and the public to understand why an athlete feels responsible to use their platform to protest a particular injustice, and to try to make a specific change in the world of sports, or in the world in general.

My first recommendation for future research is related to sports for social justice. Scholars such as Lee and Cunningham (2019) and Virginia and Boehmer (2019) demonstrate how sports can be an agent for change. They suggest that the theory of sports for development and peace should be applied to the field of sports research. Lee and Cunningham, and Virginia and Boehmer, discuss how the sports industry oppresses athletes based on their gender, race, sexual orientation, and social class. They also discuss how this oppression can be used to open the doors for communities to face the realities of oppression together, more inclusively. Based on my research, I agree that the theory of sports for the development of peace can be an insightful lens for understanding professional athletes activism and their motivations for fighting social injustices. Just like Schmidit, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer (2018) recommended the use of CRT, I recommend that the theory of sports for the development and peace be used to frame, or as a rationale, for research. This may be particularly useful to those studies that seek to understand how athlete activism and narratives shift over time.

A second piece of scholarship that might be used to frame future research is a reflective essay on Ethics in American Sports (Eitzen, 1988). Search results suggest that this piece of scholarship is less well-known but I believe it provides an important discussion of how behavioral and social issues affect American sports in an unethical way. The purpose of this article is to consider: “(a) the ethical principles that should guide sport; (b) the ethical dilemmas that confront various constituencies in sport; and (c) the structural sources of unethical behaviors
The author concludes that, “Sport has the potential to ennoble its participants and society. Athletes strain, strive, and sacrifice to excel. But if sport is to exalt the human spirit, it must be practiced within a context guided by fairness and humane considerations” (Eitze, 1988, p.27). This is an important framework or rationale for studying athlete activism because the field of sports has many complex ethical issues that are directly related back to the complex social structures in the US. This framework might provide future researchers with an understanding of why athletes are treated the way they are in the field of sports, and a rationale for critiquing these traditions.

In addition, the recommendations discussed in the previous section may allow for the public to become more educated on topics of oppression, and to be included in more nuanced conversations on social media. According to Virginia and Boehmer (2019) dialogue and the power of being educated by sports results in information and solutions being created within different communities. In addition, Lee and Cunningham discuss how athlete-activism within the field of sports can raise awareness that results in other athletes using their platform to address issues of oppression. If any of my recommendations are implemented, it will be important for future research to address how athlete-advocacy results in changes in attitudes and behavior that are either reflected in, or influence, the public discourse.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Kaepernick and Rapinoe are two examples of how narratives and agendas of athlete activists addressing social injustices are important to explore over time. Professional athletes, like Kaepernick and Rapinoe, that decide to use their platform to advocate against social injustices can be discriminated against and can face dehumanization, objectification, and
discrimination based on social identities like gender, race, sexual orientation, and social class (Lee & Cunningham, 2019). This is seen through the impact media framing and race have on public discourse and athletes narratives/agendas. This impact results in the critical analysis of professional athletes' character. US citizens criticized Kaepernick and Rapinoe for using their professional platforms to advocate for marginalized groups. This thesis tries to understand Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s narratives on Twitter in relation to their protest to kneel during the national anthem. This thesis does this through using a Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory framework. This thesis carefully analyzed responses on Twitter to Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protest. A total of 927 comments on Twitter were analyzed. By analyzing these tweets many dominant themes explained how many Twitter users were distracted by Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s intended protest by focusing conversations on politics, race, gender, identity, White supremacy and nationalism. All the themes listed above influenced the negative narratives attributed to Kaepernick and Rapinoe.
REFERENCES


Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972.


APPENDIX A

Table 1

*Winnowing Data: Kaepernick/Rapinoe Twitter Accounts Aug 14, 2016 - Oct 18, 2016*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Key Terms</th>
<th>Total Number of Tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity</td>
<td>Man*, Real men, Men*, Real man, Coward*</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Culture, White*, Black*, Race*, Racism*, Discrimination</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice</td>
<td>Kneel*, Protest*, Fight*, Kneeling*, Fighting*</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexism</td>
<td>Women, Woman, Gender, Sex, Sexism</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>God, God Bless America, Religion, Catholic, Christian, Bible</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Freedom, Speech, Constitution, Rights</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention-Seeking</td>
<td>Seeking, Attention, Skill</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete’s Role</td>
<td>Athletes, Politics, Role, Privilege</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attacks</td>
<td>Piece of shit, POS, Insult, Cursing</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shunning</td>
<td>Reject, Not True, False, Fake, Unacceptable, Welcome</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Dominant key terms that represent the majority of tweets in a particular topic.*