An Analysis of Colin Kaepernick, Megan Rapinoe, and the National Anthem Protests

Samuel Schmidt, University of Louisville
Tyler Spencer, University of Louisville
Evan Frederick (Advisor), University of Louisville
Ann Pegoraro (Advisor), Laurentian University

Communication - Social Media (Professional Sport) Thursday, June 1, 2017
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) 8:30 AM
Abstract 2017-004 Room: Columbia

On August 26th, 2016, African-American quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, Colin Kaepernick, sat on the bench during the national anthem of a preseason football game against the Green Bay Packers to protest the treatment of Black lives in the United States (Wyche, 2016). For his actions, Kaepernick received backlash from players, National Football League (NFL) executives (Tennery, 2016; Mandell, 2016), videos of fan’s burning his jersey (Breech, 2016a), others using it as a doormat (Breech, 2016b) and death threats (Boren, 2016). After discussing his actions with former Green Beret and former NFL player, Nate Boyer, Kaepernick decided to kneel during the anthem instead of sitting to show his respect for the military (Schilken, 2016). Kaepernick has continued to kneel during the national anthem and has not received a penalty from the NFL, while seeing his jersey sales increase after his protest (Heitner, 2016).

On September 4th, Megan Rapinoe, a White female soccer player for the Seattle Reign of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL), and United States Women’s National Soccer Team (USWNT), kneeled during the national anthem of a NWSL game as a “nod to Kaepernick” (Brinson, 2016, para. 3). Three days later, during another NWSL game, the Washington Spirit organization played the national anthem before Rapinoe was allowed to take the field to prevent Rapinoe from “hijacking our organization’s event to draw attention to what is ultimately a personal-albeit worthy-cause” (Becker, 2016, para. 4). During two USWNT games, Rapinoe continued to kneel during the anthem. Rapinoe has not received punishment from U.S. Soccer, but the organization indicated they would re-evaluate any disciplinary action if Rapinoe continued to kneel during the anthem (Hays, 2016).

Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s activism provides a unique opportunity to examine the backlash these athletes received for their activism efforts. Organizationally, Kaepernick has not received any disciplinary action and the NFL has not indicated they will discipline the African-American quarterback. Rapinoe has not received a suspension. However, she has met resistance from organizations within the NWSL and may be facing punishment for her continued actions. Outside of the organization, Kaepernick and Rapinoe have had substantial backlash from fans and the media, but not in a formal manner. Investigation into the social backlash Kaepernick and Rapinoe received will provide valuable insights into the social climate towards the two athletes for similar activism efforts and causes.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the narrative similarities and differences between the backlash Kaepernick and Rapinoe received for their activism efforts. Organizationally, Kaepernick has not received any disciplinary action and the NFL has not indicated they will discipline the African-American quarterback. Rapinoe has not received a suspension. However, she has met resistance from organizations within the NWSL and may be facing punishment for her continued actions. Outside of the organization, Kaepernick and Rapinoe have had substantial backlash from fans and the media, but not in a formal manner. Investigation into the social backlash Kaepernick and Rapinoe received will provide valuable insights into the social climate towards the two athletes for similar activism efforts and causes.

Theoretical Framework
Nisbet (2010) argued that there is a need to study framing in digital media from a different perspective, one that will mark a shift from previous studies which focused on the “transmission model of traditional news framing effects to a more interactive, social constructivist” (p. 75), to one that focuses on a ‘bottom up’ model of framing. This shift to a bottom up, or emergent framing conceptualization is important to consider because it changes the focus of framing studies from traditional media and hierarchical gatekeepers to ordinary, everyday individuals that easily and regularly produce (online) media, and who ultimately become “active contributors, creators, commentators, sorters, and archivers of digital news content” (Nisbet, 2010, p. 75). Research has also suggested that content circulated on Social Networking Sites (SNSs) cannot only follow and repeat official agenda items and media frames, but also
reciprocally enter the mainstream media agenda and lead framing of certain items and issues (Meraz, 2011; Ragas & Kiousis, 2010; Sayre, Bode, Shah, Wilcox, & Shah, 2010). Additionally, SNS sites provide an important role in setting political agendas and advancing or reiterating certain frames and that a variety of non-elite actors can be pivotal in this process (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013).

Methodology
The study investigated the mentions of Kaepernick and Rapinoe via Facebook. Specifically, an inductive thematic analysis of the narratives around Kaepernick and Rapinoe was conducted on mentions and comments on their official Facebook pages. Facebook was chosen as it the social media website has the most active users compared to Twitter, Instagram and SnapChat (Maina, 2016). Additionally, Facebook’s lack of a limit on characters allows for users to freely express their views and opinions without being constrained.

Data were collected from August 27th, 2016, to October 20th, 2016. A total of 85,649 user posts and/or comments were taken from the Facebook walls of the athletes. Colin Kaepernick, who has not been active on his account since 2014 (though his account is still verified), accounted for 27,510 user posts and/or comments. Megan Rapinoe had almost double with 56,402 user posts and/or comments. The data points were analyzed using the Leximancer software, which conducts thematic and semantic analysis on written words as well as visual text (Bals, Campbell, & Pitt, 2012). An advantage of the automated approach of Leximancer is that it generates a concept list (i.e., descriptors) that is statistically reliable and reproducible, as it was generated from the input text itself, whereas manual lists require checks for coding reliability and validity (Angus, Rintel, & Wiles, 2013). Themes at or above a 50% connectivity were reported in the results.

Results and Interpretation
A total of seven major themes emerged: (a) country, (b) athlete’s role, (c) control, (d) athlete’s right, (e) racial divide, (f) entitled athlete, and (g) masculinity. The first three themes (country, athlete’s role, and control) were specific to Rapinoe, while the final three themes (racial divide, entitled athlete and masculinity) were associated with Kaepernick. The theme athlete’s right emerged from the data for both Rapinoe and Kaepernick.

The comparisons between the two athletes gave researchers and practitioners a view into the social treatment of an African-American male quarterback for the NFL and a White female soccer midfielder for the NWSL and USWNT for their similar activism efforts and causes. The rhetoric surrounding Kaepernick was focused on his standing and masculinity. Comments towards Rapinoe were geared toward questioning the values held by the country, athlete, and manager. The major themes depicted a picture of support and opposition for what the nation believes is deemed appropriate behavior for the three entities, which may stem from Rapinoe representing the United States through her participation for the USWNT. Comments pertaining to Kaepernick were more around the specific issue of racial injustice and his masculinity. Stemming from his position as a quarterback for the NFL, the narrative attempted to cut through the method of his activism to target the reason for his activism: racial injustice. Additionally, comments specific to Kaepernick noted the bravery or cowardice associated with taking a stand against a social injustice. Both athlete’s experienced debate about an athlete’s right to protest in sport, speaking to the popular notion that sport and politics are mutually exclusive (Kaufman, 2008). Further implications surrounding the social impact of this study will be discussed per acceptance.