A Dent in the NFL Shield? Investigating the Kaepernick Effect

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According to Anson (2015), the National Football League (NFL) remained a $25 billion brand despite concussion issues, cheating (spygate, deflategate, bountygate), animal abuse, domestic violence and rape problems along with a murder conviction across the past decade. Instead of diminishing the NFLs brand equity, the league managed to increase strength via an unusual “brand buoyancy”, across the decade Anson (2015) analyzed. Yet, according to various media reports, the social protests by San Francisco 49ers backup quarterback Colin Kaepernick has seemingly become an issue threatening to put a dent in the shield of America’s most prominent and powerful sports brand. For instance, several outlets report the effect of Kaepernick’s protests of kneeling during the playing of the national anthem before games includes television ratings declines and sponsorship boycotts. In contrast, additional athletes across multiple sports have joined the quarterback with their own version of protesting the national anthem, and Kaepernick’s jersey sales and social media followership have skyrocketed.

The purpose of this investigation is to analyze the effects of the “Kaepernick Effect” on the NFL brand. Specifically, we will examine whether there is a relationship between NFL television ratings and the #BoycottNFL movement. A content analysis of the #BoycottNFL Twitter hashtag and of the television ratings decline of NFL broadcasts will be conducted to address this research question.

Theoretically, the NFL is an iconic brand based upon its capacity to endure ever shifting paradigms and ideologies of society (Holt, 2007). Moreover, the NFL brand’s iconic status serves to “organize collective identities, as expressions of the major social axes…within a particular national discourse” (Holt, 2006, p. 357). Holt’s explanation of the NFL brand would fringe on the assertion that the NFL brand operates as a cultural product and encapsulates a certain national mythical ideology or “imagined nation.” According to various news and media outlets, Commissioner Roger Goodell’s mission to “protect the integrity of the NFL”, encapsulated in the emblematic shield, highlights the grandeur of the NFL and its brand associations, as well as, intimates a delicate cultural ideology imbued in that integrity. League rules seek to regulate the uniformity, as opposed to individuality, within the league and teams through uniform and celebration regulations. Moreover, personal conduct policies serve to govern players’ behavior and actions on and off the field to ensure adherence to the NFL brand image. The NFL brand, represented by the patriotic shield logo, has remained the strongest sport brand in America backed by its viewership and resiliency despite the aforementioned issues.

These specific issues pertaining to the NFL represent general discrepancies that affect brands. Brands that adapt to resolve social, cultural, or ideological tensions in society are able to attract new and retain existing consumers (Holt, 2007). However, a brand that fails to uphold the prevailing values, belief, and expectations of consumers will ultimately replace positive brand associations with negative or inconsequential associations and reduce brand equity.

Unique to the NFL, and arguably all sport leagues, is the role of its players as both the product and endorsers of the product. Although, the NFL aims to unify its teams and maintain parity within the league, certain iconoclastic individuals inevitably proffer a diversion from the status quo based on a myriad of qualifications. Athlete brand image comprises three domains for an athlete to exude their juxtaposing individualism to the NFL and attract endorsements. These domains: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle, place Tom Brady, Colin Kaepernick, Rob Gronkowski, and Von Miller in positions to be the top jersey sellers through the first couple of months of the NFL season, as well as, public discussion and debate.

Notable among the four aforementioned athletes, Tom Brady and Colin Kaepernick represent controversial league outcasts and engender a dichotomous love-hate relationship from fans. On-field domination and murky ethics fuel
Brady’s image as a champion willing to win by any means. Nonetheless, Brady’s status and public reception is bolstered by both his celebrity model wife and brand ambassadorship for TAG Heuer.

Colin Kaepernick presents an inverse to the notion of fans, or consumers, sympathizing with players facing unnecessary restrictions on uniforms, celebrations, and even tackling. Kaepernick’s protest of the National Anthem, termed the “Kaepernick Effect”, is accused of plaguing the NFL’s viewership and damaging the NFL’s brand. Numerous sources indicate the stark decline of NFL’s Sunday Night Football, Monday Night Football, and Thursday Night Football TV ratings. The “Kaepernick Effect” serves as the impetus for the #BoycottNFL, a direct redress to Kaepernick’s, as well as other players who’ve joined in the protest, perceived disrespect of American patriotism and the military.

Interestingly, while the NFL and Commissioner Roger Goodell are receiving the brunt of the #BoycottNFL backlash, the “Kaepernick Effect” has socially and financially given Colin Kaepernick relevance. Juxtaposed to the declining viewership and social media boycott movement of the NFL and its brand, Kaepernick’s personal brand has experienced a meteoric rise in jersey sales and influx of social media followers. Choi and Rifon (2012) offer a useful interpretation of brand image as an extension or reflection of its consumers’ self-image, or self-concept, which raises the questions: how can Kaepernick’s brand benefit while the NFL’s brand suffers behind the “Kaepernick Effect? What forces are at play in Kaepernick’s increased following and support, but NFL’s decreasing fan base and positive brand associations?

To understand how the “Kaepernick Effect” has affected NFL television ratings, the Twitter posts associated with #BoycottNFL will be collected. Hashtag features, such as the number of tweets and retweets, will be documented. Additionally, differences in the NFL television ratings will be charted and compared with the frequency of posts on the dates when NFL games aired. Researchers will also identify the potential marketing implications of the boycott on the NFL brand and will provide recommendations for sport organizations who may experience similar marketing backlashes.