An Analysis of Athlete Activism, Endorsed Brand, and Media Effects

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Communication - Other (Other)  
Poster  
Abstract 2019-081  

On August 26, 2016, Colin Kaepernick, the starting quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, remained seated and later transitioned to taking a knee during the United States national anthem to spotlight racial injustice (Wyche, 2016). Other NFL players joined Kaepernick in his protest for social equality (Breech, 2016). This “kneeling down” protest captured great media attention, as many fans and media labeled Kaepernick as unpatriotic and anti-military for refusing to stand during the national anthem (Peter, 2016).

Despite Kaepernick’s repeated claims that his action was about the oppression of people of color in America, he was perceived as disrespectful toward the military, as the media focused on nationalism (Martin & McHendry, 2016). A public figure’s protest has been considered a useful tool for spreading claims, but this can be achieved most efficiently when mass media cover and portray messages accurately (Lee, 2014). For example, positively portraying media coverage can help the protest to gain public supports (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Whereas, unfavorable media coverage can downplay protesters and cause negative effects (McLeod, 2007). Along this line, we hypothesize that news media framing (i.e., positive, negative) will affect individuals’ perceptions (Hypothesis 1).

After the protest, Kaepernick faced an extensive backlash from NFL fans, executives, and politicians (Robinson, 2016). Moreover, Kaepernick was unable to continue his career as an NFL player; no team wanted to sign with him after the protest (Kilgore, 2017). Even though many sponsors canceled endorsement deals with athletes who participated in the protest (Garcia & Dotson, 2016), some sponsors still maintain their relationships with the athletes, and a few athletes signed new endorsement deals (Draper & Belson, 2018). The effects of athlete endorsement are proven to be positive according to previous research (Carison & Donavan, 2008). However, there is a lack of empirical research surrounding athlete activism and endorsed brands. Namely, little is known about consumers’ responses to athlete activism and their associated brands. In this regard, we will examine whether the protest affects the endorsed brand, Nike, which recently featured Kaepernick in their new advertising campaign. Based on the previous literature we propose attitudes toward an endorsed brand will be influenced by an athlete’s protest (Hypothesis 2).

We will conduct a single factor, two-level (positive vs. negative media framing) between subject-design study using an online survey. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of two conditions. The survey will include a manipulation check to ensure whether the manipulation measured intended media framing (positive, negative). To consider preexisting individual differences, we will measure participants’ identification level with the athlete and brand before the stimulus exposure with a 3-item scale (Robinson & Trail, 2005). The attitude toward an endorsed brand will be measured with a 3-item scale (Mackenzie & Lutz, 1989).

Through this study, we will empirically analyze athlete activism, an endorsed brand, and media effects, which have not been previously investigated in detail. This study can shed light on the concept of athlete activism and can be widely applied to many areas. For practitioners, this study will serve as supporting evidence for athlete endorsement deals.