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Taking a Knee: A Framing Analysis of NFL Protests Through Editorial Media

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TAKING A KNEE: A FRAMING ANALYSIS OF NFL PROTESTS
THROUGH EDITORIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has demonstrated that athletes are often framed in a variety of ways through media based on a myriad of factors such as race and other forms of social issues. However, Black athletes have also been at the forefront of athlete activism, which has seen a resurgence in popular sports like football and basketball. One example of athlete activism within recent years has been the national anthem protests occurring in the National Football League (NFL) being conducted by the players. As a result, these protests have gained widespread media coverage and put the players at the forefront of conversations of race and social issues.

The purpose of this study seeks to explore the framing of media coverage surrounding national anthem protests in the NFL. Through a qualitative thematic analysis, this study analyzed 80 editorials from media publications across the United States discussing the NFL protests. By doing so, this study aimed to analyze the media discourse surrounding concepts of social issues in sports and athlete activism. Additionally, this study sought to add to existing media literature while encouraging readers to better understand dynamic conversations occurring within journalistic coverage of sports and social issues. Future applications of research beyond this study include the exploration of different new media platforms and emerging initiatives beyond traditional media outlets.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Wenner (1989) described sports press as a socially sanctioned gossip sheet for men in America in ways that fashion magazines were for women. However, sports have turned into something more than an epicenter for entertainment, culture, and amazing physical feats. It has become a platform through which athletes have an opportunity to promote awareness on many issues that they feel passionate about. This is especially the case for Black athletes, who have a well-charted history regarding subjects such as race and other forms of political protest. The public image of the Black athlete has been charted throughout the years. Spivey (1983) noted the history of Black athletes in the post-Civil War era and the challenges they have faced despite their performance. As a result, athletes of those early days became activists for the sake of equality in sports.

One example is the "Black Power" salute in the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, where Olympic sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos removed their shoes, rolled up their track pants, revealing long black socks. Each man also slipped on one black glove, which they each raised during the Olympic medal ceremony (Peterson, 2009). This signified the athletes' defiance of inequality, and demonstrated that they, as Carlos states, "sought to defy the hypocrisy of the United States and the way she treats people of color" (Peterson, 2009, p. 335). Another example was heavyweight boxing champion and devout Muslim Muhammad Ali, who was stripped of his championships and ability to box for three years during legal cases that ensued from his claim to avoid Army service during the Vietnam War as a conscientious objector. Athletes like Ali are

also well known for being trailblazers in their respective sport and etching their place in history as activists (Agyeman, 2011).

Modern Athlete Activism

Such activism from Black athletes has only been reinvigorated in the wake of various events such as the 2016 United States presidential election. One example that has become a prominent news story is the actions of National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who, while playing for the San Francisco 49ers of the NFL during the 2016 season, surprised many by kneeling during the United States national anthem, which is played before the start of all games in the NFL. He revealed that he did so to protest social issues plaguing African American communities such as racial inequality and police brutality (Siegel, 2017). Kaepernick's former teammate Eric Reid, was among the first to join him in the national protests and has continued to be outspoken in bringing social issues forward (Reid, 2017).

When the realm of politics and other subjects intertwine with the world of sports, the adage of "sticking to sports" enters the narrative. This statement is touted by some journalists, media personalities, and fans, who claim that sports should be separate from political deliberation and thought. However, events like the NFL player protests lead to the following questions: How might the media portray, or frame, its coverage around such athletes, who happen to hold many of the roster positions within the popular sports they cover? And how might these athletes be perceived by the viewing audience at large, especially given the historical complexities that surround them? This once again brings to

the limelight the idea of athletes using their public platform to speak out on various issues, especially since many athletes in the NFL are Black.

The influence of Black athletes being more vocal on social issues remains prevalent today. Athletes such as National Basketball Association (NBA) star forward LeBron James and Kaepernick are active in promoting awareness of the issues facing minority communities in the U.S. today. So, when NFL players (many of whom are Black), knelt during the national anthem, it led to a variety of responses from fans and the media. Many opposed their actions, seeing it as a blow to their sense of country pride or patriotism; meanwhile, others supported the actions of the players, praising their ability to express themselves and promote issues about which they feel passionate. As a result, media coverage can have a strong influence on audiences and how they perceive the player protests during the national anthem.

Additionally, other factors can serve to further ignite and influence journalists' coverage of the NFL protests. For instance, when current United States President Donald Trump called NFL players who knelt during the national anthem sons of bitches who deserved to be fired during a rally in Huntsville, Alabama in September 2017, it created a wave of player action throughout the league (Stites, 2017). Several teams either knelt during the national anthem or locked arms as a means of solidarity, further demonstrating the kind of impact that politics has in the world of sports (Stites, 2017). Kneeling during the national anthem evolved into an act that has only served to further intertwine sports and politics while reinvigorating athlete activism among professional athletes.

These actions demonstrate the continued presence of athlete activism, particularly among Black athletes, who are taking advantage of the large platform that sports provide. U.S. professional sports leagues largely benefit off the backs of Black athletes' labor, as they make up 69.7% of NFL players and 81.7% of players in the NBA, two of the most lucrative sports leagues in the United States (Lapchick, 2016). Given the huge demand for sports in the U.S., when athletes like Kaepernick and others speak out politically, it generates a lot of discussion about their actions.

The kind of influence the media can have in sports in the United States is evident, which makes it essential that the messages athletes convey be delivered responsibly by the media. While conveying player protest behaviors may be straightforward when journalists are simply recounting events that took place during a game, mediated discussions of athlete behaviors can become much more politically charged when opinion-driven media is considered. The actions surrounding the NFL player protests have resulted in a wide array of opinionated media coverage such as editorial columns, which will be the focus of this study.

Theoretical Approach

By examining the actions of players like Kaepernick and his contemporaries towards social issues or activism, one helpful framework is *framing theory*. Framing is "based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). In addition, framing also acts as a macro level and micro level construct. As a macro level construct, framing refers to modes of presentation that journalists and other mass

communicators use to present information in a way that resonates with existing underlying schemas among their audience; as a micro level construct, it describes how people use information and presentation features regarding issues as they form impressions about them (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

For instance, at the macro level, mass communicators take a big picture approach in the way information is presented to their audience, what is most important to them, and the means through which they deliver it. This includes the headline, images shown, statistics or quotes used, and amount of content within said coverage. From there, at the micro level, smaller aspects such as specific language, spokespeople, and the implicit messages within the information are constructed from the message. In addition, the term "frame building" refers to a macroscopic mechanism in which the activities of groups interested in shaping media frames (i.e., policymakers, journalists) can have an impact on the volume and character of news messages (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p.12). From there, the processing of these news messages can result in a variety of competing frames for audiences, which adds to the increasingly complex ways in which these frames might be adopted or understood by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Previous communication research has produced findings in relation to how media coverage frames Black athletes in the U.S., such as the case with Black and White quarterbacks in the NFL (Mercurio & Filak, 2010). This research displayed the means in which Black and White quarterbacks were framed and attributed with differing skills sets. Black quarterbacks were often attributed with being more athletic and as "dual threats" (i.e., able to have success running and throwing as a quarterback), but lacking the mental

capability to succeed. On the other hand, White quarterbacks, while attributed with less athleticism, were considered harder workers and more mentally capable than their Black counterparts (Mercurio & Filak, 2010). As a result, the findings from the study demonstrate how audiences can be influenced through attributing skills to quarterbacks based on skin color (Mercurio & Filak, 2010).

Typically, these types of studies primarily focused on the use of traditional media outlets who rely on journalists for their news coverage. This research will explore the themes that emerge through journalists' coverage of the NFL player protests through editorials from media outlets. Exploring the framing of these editorials will present an avenue to display the media narratives that form regarding social issues and player protest within the context of sports.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Black Athlete Activism & Media

Pre-World War II Era of The Black Athlete

Black athletes have historically added a great deal to U.S. national discussions on the intersection between sports and society. Even during a time of racism and discrimination in the early 20th century, the performance of Black athletes rang louder than the color of their skin (Spivey, 1983). Being caught between this notion of being loved playing sports but discriminated off the playing field was later described by Martin Luther King, Jr. as an American society that "both loves the negro but is repelled by him" (Spivey, 1983, p. 117).

Despite the racial discrimination they faced, Black athletes were successful during the pre-World War II era. Notable athletes during this time included prominent football players such as Brud Holland of Cornell University and Willas Ward, who attended the University of Michigan. Additionally, the trio of running backs in Kenny Washington, Woody Strode, and Jackie Robinson were highly regarded at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), as all three starred in multiple sports during their collegiate careers (Spivey, 1983).

These were just a few prominent of the Black athletes who excelled despite racial discrimination at the hands of various fans, media, and the wider cast of sports communities (Spivey, 1983). One example of such discrimination occurred when Washington, a running back for the Bruins, rushed for over 1,000 yards in 1939 to lead

the country, yet was left off the All-American list and did not receive an invite to play in the College All-Star Game. Washington attributed this to the NFL not wanting to admit a Black player into its ranks. He was subsequently ignored in the 1946 NFL Draft as well (Spivey, 1983).

This led to NBC broadcaster Sam Balter strongly criticizing the league's color ban in an open letter over the air, wondering why no one selected the league's leading rusher in college football, stating that anyone who watched him knew that he was easily one of the best players in the last ten years (Smith, 1988). Balter even offered time to publicly sit down and talk with other NFL teams to hear their reasoning for why Washington was not drafted, but his offer was not accepted. This led to other media outlets blasting the NFL for their refusal to accept Washington and criticizing the league's color ban (Smith, 1988).

Washington was not the only athlete to receive such discrimination despite his performance. Star running back Lou Montgomery, who played for Boston College, could travel with the team to Dallas to play in the Cotton Bowl against Clemson University, but not participate in the game. To protest, Montgomery stated he would not travel to Dallas if he did not play (Spivey, 1983). The media subsequently framed the running back's alma mater, Boston College, as the true loser in the incident for not sticking up for their star player, and to the system of segregation for letting it happen (Smith, 1988).

The Black and White presses subsequently framed Montgomery's incident in a comparable manner and criticized the Cotton Bowl for spurning the star running back. One letter even lamented that "Jim Crow practices have become living denials of our

democracy—the discrimination, with official tolerance, against Negro football stars, in particular" (Smith, 1988, p. 270). The Black press also began devoting coverage to the NFL and its color ban, which further demonstrated how athletes like Montgomery have ability to drive action through the media.

World War II opened doors for more Black athletes to participate at the professional and collegiate levels, as both were forced to further tap into the African-American communities to find players who could perform at the necessary levels (Spivey, 1983). Soon after World War II ended, Robinson and Larry Doby broke the Major League Baseball (MLB) color barrier in the National League and the American League, respectively (Spivey, 1983).

Civil Rights Era of Athlete Activism & Media

Black athletes began actively and openly pushing for equal rights during the latter half of the Great Migration. The Great Migration was a period from 1941-1970 in which large numbers of African Americans moved to more urban and industrialized communities seeking improved educational, employment, and public opportunities following World War II (Ruffin, 2014).

In 1968, Black athletes began publicly voicing their struggles, despite the unwritten rule that Black athletes should be grateful for their lot in life and simply stick to playing their sport (Smith, 2006). As more African Americans began protesting and fighting for equality, athletes' status as simple bystanders shifted. The demonstration by Smith and Carlos in the 1968 Olympics was one example; iconic boxer Muhammad Ali

used his access to *Sports Illustrated* as a significant platform to publicly voice struggles of racial inequality (Smith, 2006).

The protest actions by Carlos and Smith during the 1968 Olympics did not resonate well within the media. Many reporters framed the demonstration from Smith and Carlos as a violation of the righteous, competitive nature of sports. The unwritten rule of leaving the politics out of sport began circulating in the media narrative (Peterson, 2009). One such narrative was furthered by *Chicago American* reporter Brent Musberger, who stated the pair behaved like "a pair of dark-skinned storm troopers," while citing the demonstration as "an ignoble performance that completely overshadowed a magnificent athletic one" (Peterson, 2009, p. 335). Smith and Carlos were previously lauded for their athletic prowess, and yet both were expelled from the 1968 Olympic Games and suspended from the U.S. Olympic team (Peterson, 2009). Events like this demonstrate the role athletes have had in social protest, especially when it comes to taking a stand in the manner that Smith and Carlos did.

The media played an instrumental role in how conversations regarding race were perceived in the United States during this time. Journalists reported only a limited number of racism and race-related incidents in sports during this time. Because of this, audiences were left assuming that racism was no widespread issue, especially since more sports leagues like the NFL, MLB, and the NBA had become integrated (Smith, 2006).

Modern Era of Professional Black Athletes & Media

While not necessarily facing the same set of challenges as their predecessors, professional athletes today still show concern about societal issues. Additionally, athletes

have acknowledged former icons like Ali in addressing social issues such as race and other forms of injustice (Agyemang, Singer, & Delorner, 2010). However, publicly speaking out on these issues has several types of risks for college vs. professional athletes. College athletes, for example, have concerns about their scholarship status and professional draft stock. Meanwhile, professional athletes risk losing endorsements or even getting cut by their teams (Agyemang et al., 2010).

The Jordan approach. Many athletes feel that leading by example could have more of an impact than publicly speaking out against issues. A prominent example of that standpoint is former NBA star and current entrepreneur Michael Jordan, who has been a subject of much attention over the course of his career (Agyemang, 2011). Having won six NBA titles, five NBA Most Valuable Player awards and a variety of other accolades, Jordan is undoubtedly one of the greatest athletes of all time in any sport (Agyemang, 2011). As a result, Jordan became a global icon with major influence. His image was on full display during the 1992 Olympic Games, when the star shooting guard drew worldwide attention during his time in Barcelona (Agyemang, 2011).

Despite his accomplishments, Jordan lacked in one area: speaking out on social issues. During his playing career, he was criticized for his non-response to a number of race-related issues, such as failing to support Harvey Gantt's North Carolina Senate run in 1990 against right-wing conservative Jesse Helms, stating "Republicans buy sneakers too" (Agyemang, 2011, p. 437). He also failed to speak up during the Los Angeles riots in 1992, stating that he was not informed on the events during the time (Agyemang, 2011).

Jordan's actions, or lack thereof, coupled with his controversial statements impacted his overall image, as media coverage positioned the Bulls superstar as caring solely for his financial status. Former Los Angeles Lakers icon Kareem Abdul-Jabbar even stated in an interview that Jordan cared more about his shoe sales than civil rights of people ("Kareem Abdul Jabbar," 2015). Charting Jordan's actions over the course of his career, his perceived lack of activism positioned him differently from athletes like Abdul-Jabbar, who actively spoke on social issues during the 1960s alongside Carlos, Smith, and Ali (Agyemang, 2011).

Social consciousness of modern professional black athletes. However, in recent years there has been a spark of athlete activism among the professional ranks. One such instance of this activism occurred with the St. Louis Rams in 2014, in which five Rams players—Stedman Bailey, Tavon Austin, Jared Cook, Chris Givens, and Kenny Britt—walked out during a football game with their hands raised above their heads (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016). The gesture was adopted by Black Lives Matter protesters following the death of 18-year-old Michael Brown, who was shot while unarmed by a White police officer. The pose became a symbol of various social issues such as police brutality and racial inequality (Sanderson, et al., 2016).

As a result of the Rams players' actions, a variety of themes emerged on social media from the Rams players' actions during that time, such as hashtags like #BoycottRams. Conversations within this hashtag criticized the players, stating they were being paid solely for their football ability and should not engage in activism on the playing field (Sanderson et al., 2016). However, there were also individuals who

supported the Rams players and praised them for their actions and for being civically

engaged (Gill, 2016).

Additionally, James has become a symbol of the modern athlete activist over the

last few seasons in the NBA, and has been especially active during his second stint with

the Cleveland Cavaliers. His increased activism was on full display in 2014 when 12-year

old Tamir Rice was killed by police in Cleveland (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). In

December 2014, he and several NBA players took to the court wearing "I Can't Breathe"

shirts to protest the killing of Eric Garner, an African-American male who died in New

York after being choked by police (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). This protest was one of the

first major social statements of James's NBA career. Two years later, he joined fellow

NBA colleagues Carmelo Anthony, Chris Paul, and Dwayne Wade on stage at the 2016

ESPY Awards in openly advocating for an end to gun violence (Coombs & Cassilo,

2017).

James's presence on these fronts is significant, especially when it comes to the

discourse surrounding sports and social issues. Already widely recognized as one of the

best basketball players of all-time, James is well-regarded for his brand. He has produced

television series, starred in major Hollywood films, and has exemplary endorsement

deals, one of which includes a lifetime contract from Nike worth $1 billion (Coombs &

Cassilo, 2017). Few athletes have the platform that James does, which he uses in a way

that emphasizes both the importance of his voice as well as his cautious and deliberate

approach to activism (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). His stances and approaches have been

framed as largely favorable by the media, especially given that such actions were not as

openly prevalent during the previous era when Jordan was the face of the NBA. While being a very brand-conscious athlete in his own right, James's activism has promoted more attention than aggression, and community outreach as opposed to protest (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017).

The success of James's activism has reawakened a modern form of athlete activism while demonstrating an ability to shape and frame the media discourse to reach a vast audience (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). While not all Black athletes will have the ability or platform James has built, his actions helped display a shift in players being more willing to speak on various social issues.

Emerging social consciousness of modern Black college athletes. As sports became integrated and more doors of opportunity were opened, Black athletes gained greater agency to speak on higher issues of race and society, especially once they reached the professional level. Today, that social consciousness has been felt on all levels of sports. The collegiate level has been especially influential in paving the way for a socially-conscious generation of athletes.

One instance of collegiate athletes speaking out occurred at the University of Missouri. When a series of racial incidents began plaguing the campus, some of which included racial slurs aimed at Black students and a swastika painted on the school's cultural center, the football players took a stand (Gleeson, 2015). More than 30 Missouri football players threatened to boycott their upcoming game against Brigham Young University unless their school's president, Tim Wolfe, was removed from office. It made

waves nationwide shaking both the political and sports worlds. Wolfe stepped down almost a day after the boycott was announced (Gleeson, 2015).

These events served to spark the conversations behind not only the racial status of athletes, who are labeled as "amateur" by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), but their legal and compensatory status as collegiate players who earn millions for their school (Epstein & Kisska-Schulze, 2016). The Missouri football team acted as a united front that included students and coaches. Additionally, media outlets focused on the larger frames surrounding racial issues in collegiate athletics, which pointed to the bigger questions surrounding similar events to those at Missouri (Nadkarni & Nieves, 2015).

These actions raised the stakes for collegiate athletics and the kinds of actions and impact athletes can have. As of 2015, the University of Missouri student body is 77% White and 7% Black, while 69% of its football team is Black in comparison ("How Missouri Has," 2016). This further raises the question of how conversations surrounding social issues among college athletes are perceived, especially among Black athletes in revenue-generating sports like football and basketball. With Black athletes making up a large amount of college sports' major revenue-generating sports—football (about 46%), men's basketball (about 60%), and women's basketball (about 47%)—their importance in the context of sport and social issues cannot be understated (Agyemang et al., 2010).

Sociological influences in sports. Black athletes have expressed various forms of activism throughout history. Given the intense demand for sports and the platform it creates for Black athletes to reach a wider and more diverse audience, it provides them

with the opportunity to bring awareness to different subjects within society. However, some debate whether sports can truly be that driving force. Some researchers even argue that sports further contribute to perpetuation of various forms of oppression and inequalities such as sexism and racism (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010).

In addition, sociologists debate whether sports further foster alienation, obscure class consciousness, and make athletes "less likely to develop personal awareness and growth" (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010, p. 155). Sociologists have further critiqued sports fans as well, stating that such individuals are missing out on opportunities to pursue more socially beneficial activities, while also leading to decreased individual and creative expression (Kaufmann & Wolff, 2010). However, creative expression in sports has only increased, especially as individual athletes like Ali, Smith, and Carlos have taken stances on social issues that have carried influence beyond their sport (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). Their subsequent activism continues to inspire athletes today.

Unlike their predecessors, the experiences of the Black athlete in today's modern society face a variety of challenges beyond blatant acts of racism and discrimination that would be worthy of the attention of athlete activism. Some of these challenges in collegiate sports today include a lack of diversity in coaching positions and administrative positions, student-athlete compensation (Agyemang et al., 2010). These challenges in college sports demonstrate the means through which athlete activism could play a major role in creating awareness of these issues. Additionally, these modern-day challenges of underrepresentation feed into the influence and structure of journalism, which plays a pivotal role in coverage of different issues within the context of sports.

Sports Journalism and its Impact on Black Athletes

Sports Journalism: No Longer the Toy Department

Over the last few decades, sports media has been devoting more coverage to societal issues impacting the world of sports. Once referred to as the "toy department" of the newsroom, sports journalism struggled to be taken quite as seriously, with sports journalists not being taken as seriously compared as other types of journalists (Cassidy, 2016, p. 535). However, sports are in a peculiar position within the news media, as they are economically important for drawing in readers because of their popularity. Past findings have demonstrated that 58% of sports pages focused on traditional, descriptive reporting and showed less interest in covering politics (5%) or the social impact of sports (2.5%) (Rowe, 2007).

 However, media outlets have gradually begun touching on social issues as they have grown more prominent within the context of sports. For example, the issue of sexuality came to the forefront when former NBA player John Amaechi announced publicly revealed his homosexual orientation in February 2007 (Kian & Anderson, 2009). Amaechi's disclosure did not receive prominent media attention until former Miami Heat point Tim Hardaway made a series of homophobic remarks aimed at Amaechi, stating "I hate gay people, so I let it be known...I don't like gay people, and I don't like to be around gay people. I'm homophobic. I don't like it. It shouldn't be in the world or in the United States (Kian & Anderson, 2009, p. 803).

Through various articles and columns, journalists were essential in establishing the frames and themes surrounding Amaechi and Hardaway. Additionally, the media

coverage addressed the status of homosexuality and homophobia in the NBA, a sports league often portrayed as being hyper-masculine (Kian & Anderson, 2009). The media narratives that emerged from Amaechi's revelation and Hardaway's comments were wide reaching. Some, media narratives supported Hardway's comments and stance against homosexuality and his stated homophobia (Kian & Anderson, 2009). Meanwhile, other media narratives commended Amaechi's bravery for coming out, compared his act to the Black Civil Rights Movement, and celebrated his actions as an integration of sport for openly gay men (Kian & Anderson, 2009). These diverse themes demonstrate the kind of influence mainstream media continues to have in driving and shaping the narratives surrounding events. They also highlight the shifting landscape between sports media and social issues like gay athleticism.

Moving Beyond the Toy Department

As sports journalists have expanded beyond being the toy department of newsrooms, they have gained greater influence in coverage of social issues. Such instances of further coverage include the stories of Jason Collins, a 12-year veteran in the NBA, and Michael Sam, an All-American defensive end from the University of Missouri, who both also came out as gay in 2013 and 2014, respectively (Cassidy, 2016). This was an especially big moment for Collins, who, unlike Amaechi, became the first openly gay *active* NBA player. These events offered a unique opportunity for sports journalists to touch on the societal impact they would have on two of the U.S.'s most popular sports, both of which are often defined by their masculine nature (Cassidy, 2016).

The conversations surrounding these two players, both of whom were at different points in their careers at the time, demonstrated that sports journalists went beyond simply reporting the basics of their decisions to publicly come out. For example, journalists focused on the challenges for Collins and Sam within their respective sports leagues and outlook for gay athletes in general (Cassidy, 2016). Sam's coming out was covered more extensively, as he made his announcement two weeks before the NFL Scouting Combine, a week-long event where college football prospects are heavily evaluated by teams. This greater amount of coverage surrounding Sam also demonstrates the kind of influence player actions in the NFL can have, especially around viewer-heavy events like the Scouting Combine (Cassidy, 2016).

Similar studies analyzed media coverage of Collins, who came out publicly after the 2012-13 NBA regular season. While not covered to the extent that Sam was, Collins's announcement furthered the discourse on masculinity and gay men in sports. A study by Kian, Anderson, and Shipka (2015) on media coverage surrounding Collins showed that media framing displayed reinforcement of traditional notions of masculinity and gender-specific roles. However, following Collins's announcement, studies began demonstrating sport media framing as also having more positive, even celebratory attitudes and narratives towards openly gay and lesbian figures in the world of sports (Billings, Moscowitz, Rae, & Brown-Delvin, 2015; Kian et al., 2015).

As traditional media continued to provide coverage on the Collins story, the depth of reporting increased. Topics included race, religion, and civil rights, which demonstrated the role media outlets can play in driving conversations within sports

(Billings et al., 2015). The discussion of broader subjects like homosexuality within the context of sports surrounding athletes like Amaechi, Collins, and Sam demonstrate how sports journalism has become a powerful orchestrating tool when it comes to discussing social issues within society.

Political Economy: Sports Journalism

Journalists have long been the cultural arbitrators of sports and society, having been invaluable parts of promoting and selling the events in the pre-television era. They would further become the storytellers and myth-makers as they embellished the abilities of athletes on the field and push them into the major icons we know today (Boyle, 2012).

From 1975 until today, media companies primarily evolved through four different strategies. The first strategy involved taking companies out of private hands (which were often in the control of private families with ties to media field) for the sake of raising more wealth with public stock offerings while reforming demands to meet bottom lines of stockholders (Klinenberg, 2005). The second step involved bringing in new corporate managers to streamline newsroom production systems while reducing labor costs.

Next, further investment in digital technology integration into the company and re-organizing corporate infrastructure came as audiences transitioned to Internet and new media platforms. Finally, content providers acquired or merged with other distributors, which led to multiple publications being owned through one company (Klinenberg, 2005). This allowed cross-promotions of the company's products and brands within its operations on the business side such as integrating advertising sales and the creation of special content packages for their clients (Klinenberg, 2005).

The convergence of the economy within journalism is in stark contrast to the state of the industry and is a far cry from its state in 1945, where roughly 80 percent of daily newspapers were independently owned; by 2000, 80 percent were owned and operated by publicly traded chains (Klinenberg, 2005). These shifts and convergence of media publications could also be a factor in the overall strategies, practices, and interests that shape major news corporations. It also feeds into determining news products and producing the power of defining and framing key issues and events (Klinenberg, 2005). This has a profound impact on the world of sports, in which many issues often mix and intersect into its coverage. As a result, this can affect how different subjects are covered or addressed can often fall to the decision of editors or corporate interests (Klinenberg, 2005).

There has been no shortage of the kind of change the field of journalism has gone through in the last few decades. While print journalists were a mainstay for decades, they often were at odds with each other, especially as the industry shifted to digital and online formats and the inclusion of new media platforms (Boyle, 2012). This feeds into the contemporary economy of journalism, which is essential in establishing the overall business model of the profession. An example of the contemporary and political economy within sports journalism is ESPN, which has changed the way viewers watch sporting events and how media covers sports (Gamache, 2014). Because of their leading status and control in production, distribution, and consumption of mediated sports, they hold a unique position by offering a wide spectrum of coverage. In a media landscape, sports are dominated by spectacle, which has emerged because of "an attempt to set up a separate

sphere of leisure uncontaminated by the world of work and politics" (Gamache, 2014, p. 75). Additionally, sport media has remained at the head of the economic competition due to its continually high demand, which makes corporations more willing to invest money into them. Because of this connection, there is often stated to be a "vested interest in promoting and presenting sports in a positive light" (Gamache, 2014, p.76).

In the case of ESPN, which hold lucrative deals with leagues such as the NFL, NBA, and college football, more positive coverage is usually dedicated towards them. However, they have demonstrated a proven a track record for covering controversial events relating to their league partners (Gamache, 2014). But, ESPN and other media organizations must continually create circuits of communication and advertising products that link various forms of products and services back into their production (Gamache, 2014). For large media organizations like ESPN, which often operate around similar kinds of journalistic production, priorities might revolve around values that advance their own corporate and commercial interests while protecting the status quo of politics and sports not mixing (Gamache, 2014). This also illustrates the impact within the changing field of journalism, especially as the inclusion of digital technology begins to change the structure of newsroom operations.

Digital journalism also brought with it something new: the breakdown of the traditional division between sports and news. Currently, sport media is about more than the competition; it has become about politics, business, and governance. The addition of social media networks like Facebook and Twitter have offered the challenge of audiences having more access to athletes and other public figures, further graying established codes

and conventions of journalism (Boyle, 2012). This has allowed the sport conversation between players, fans, and the media to grow more complex and dynamic, while also changing the role journalists can also have in framing and shaping the stories, issues, and events they cover (Boyle, 2012).

For a long time, sports journalists have enjoyed close (and some might argue, too close) relationships with their sources and the organizations they cover. In addition, competition from newer, online media sources and opportunities for teams to bypass the media have begun to threaten the role of traditional journalists and their work practices (Suggs, 2015). This has resulted in a transformation of traditional, journalistic work practices both in and out of sports, in which journalists and organizations negotiate access through various routines that have grown over the decades.In the college ranks of sports, media relations-professionals known as sports information directors (SIDs) are employed to negotiate such access to journalists, who in turn publish stories and work with them to maintain access (Suggs, 2015). This feeds into the political economy of sports, which centers on "the various kinds of social relations centered around the ability and power to control people, processes, and things" (Gamache, 2014, p. 77).

Within sports, access is often the most contested element alongside a reporter's ability to cover subjects objectively instead of being at behest of organization. This conflicts with media ethics of reporters, who do not want to lose valuable sources while retaining objectivity in their coverage (Suggs, 2015). This is especially the case at the college level, where some athletic programs do not necessarily grant as much access and independence to reporters. As a result, this restriction is implemented through limiting

and even fully sanctioning access for reporting information that might be viewed in an unfavorable light by the program (Suggs, 2015).

In addition, the emergence of online publications like *Bleacher Report*, Rivals.com, and SBNation.com, whose writers ask for the same credentials as traditional journalists, has grown the list of journalists who subsequently cover games. This effectively limits access further and makes it even more competitive for organizations to gain credentials (Suggs, 2015). This illustrates the types of challenges sports media can often have with sources and access, particularly in an age where, especially on the college level, organizations are curtailing access to frame their own agenda (Suggs, 2015). These growing sets of challenges affect the structural force within journalism, which has journalists facing a very uncertain time in the field, particularly in the political culture of their profession.

This relationship between journalists having to manage professional expectations of objective, critical coverage combined with the desired need for access from organizations looking for press and publicity leave them in a precarious position (Suggs, 2015). With sports organizations possessing the ability to handpick which media outlets to grant access to, particularly in intercollegiate athletics, these organizations could lose their political legitimacy. This could especially be the case as intercollegiate and professional teams' communication departments continue investing their own independent platforms and broadcast partners (Suggs, 2015). Sports matter because of what it can tell us about various aspects of society rather than the specific nature of the competition itself. Sports also offer valuable insights into character and the various

aspects of human nature and creativity (Boyle, 2012). Sports continually demonstrate an ability to connect people and their feelings through the conversations that occur within them. It is the unique nature of this connection that separates sports media from other forms of journalism (Boyle, 2012). It is also because of the business and financial boom sports coverage brings in by providing a wealth of media content that drives business models through attracting sponsors, advertisers, and audiences to their platforms. These incentives speak to the implications of sports and its connection into the domain of politics and culture that further illuminate the relationship between media and society (Boyle, 2012).

All the investments into the business of sports further emphasizes the significant role that journalists having in shaping the story surrounding events and athletes, especially around subjects such as the NFL protests. The structures of journalism as it stands now and how these stories are framed can have a substantial impact on how audiences perceive them and how journalists shape their coverage around them. The history of Black athletes and the media makes it even more important, especially as they begin speaking and acting on various social issues. It is this prominence of the economy of journalism in society that makes this study important in exploring the themes and conversations within sports media.

Framing Theory

The media is an important cultural and societal institution that plays a significant role in how audiences interpret and process news and information. Some of the most well-known mass communication theories include agenda-setting, priming, and framing.

All three have received significant amounts of scholarly attention since their introduction and emergence, and continue to remain heavily studied at the center of communication research. The main context of this NFL protest study will be focusing primarily on the use of framing theory. The emergence of framing theory comes primarily as a communication tool for modern political campaigns, and is primarily associated as a model within political communication research (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Scholars have often suggested the mass communication field experienced several paradigm shifts in the 20th century, with the 1970s being a particularly notable time, as agenda-setting research came to the forefront of political communication, sparked by the landmark 1968 "Chapel Hill" study by McCombs and Shaw (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

However, it wasn't until the 1980s and early 1990s that framing approaches became prominent, as political communication research began further observing the characteristics of audiences and how they processed messages in the mass media (Schuefele & Tewksbury, 2007). Framing is often defined and based on the assumption that "how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences" (Schuefele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11) But, to first better understand framing, one must have a proper understanding of agenda-setting.

Agenda-setting refers to "the idea that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media place on certain issues (often based on placement and amount of coverage), and the importance given to it by mass audiences" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, p. 11). In other words, mass media can make some issues more salient than others, and agenda-setting refers to the idea that there is a strong correlation between the

emphasis media place on these issues and the importance attributed to them (Schefele & Tewksbury, 2007). This is often done through the relative placement (i.e., front page, breaking news) or the amount of coverage media places on issues.

The initial stage of agenda setting focuses on the salience of objects, which usually amounts to things like public issues; however, these can apply in multiple contexts, and these objects abstractly define the agendas through a variety of attributes, traits, and characteristics (McCombs, 2005). Agenda-setting effects traditionally involve transferring salience and are often placed in two stages as first- and second-level agenda setting. In other words, agenda-setting states that elements on the media agenda become prominent over time on the public agenda, providing the media to be successful in telling us "what to think about" (McCombs, 2005, p.546).

While agenda setting and framing can both call attention to the perspectives of communicators and their audiences, how topics are perceived, and the attributes or frames attached to them, key separations are apparent (McCombs, 2005). It is argued that agenda setting is based more on accessibility effects, as it assumes that media can make certain issues or aspects of them more accessible for individuals and influence the standards they use when forming attitudes (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This contrasts with framing, which acts as more of an applicability effect, which is referred to as "the outcome of a message that suggests connections between two concepts to the point that, once exposed, audiences can accept that such concepts are connected" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 15).

Framing is often used to label similar yet distinct types of approaches. Some studies suggest that agenda-setting and framing effects are related, and deem it an extension of agenda setting. The term of "second-level agenda setting" is often used to describe the impact of the salience of media coverage on interpretation of news stories (Scheufele, 1999, p.103).

Applications of Framing Theory

To effectively process and understand additional information, Goffman and other researchers apply interpretive "frameworks" to classify them and interpret them meaningfully (Mattes, 2012, p.11). In other words, exploring relationships between framing demonstrates the effects of how messages are created, processed, and how the effects are subsequently produced from them. Because of this, framing can also be defined as "the modes of presentation that journalists and other communicators use to present information in a way that resonates with existing underlying schemas among their audience" (Scheufele, 2007, p. 12).

Framing theory also suggests that individuals "use certain assumptions and expectations to simplify the world around them and make sense of events" (Carr, 2012, p.541). From there, they select "a few elements of perceived reality and construct a narrative that connects those elements to promote certain interpretations" (Carr, 2012, p. 541). Frames are also described as "defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. Additionally, a frame can also be defined as an attribute of an object under consideration because it describes an object" (McCombs, 2005, p.546).

Individual and Media Frames

For journalists and other media producers, framing is often a tool needed to reduce complexity of issues given the unavoidable constraints of media and airtime. In other words, these frames "become invaluable tools for presenting complex information effectively while also being attributed as largely unspoken and unacknowledged" (Scheufele, 1999, p.106). Additionally, they are important in organizing the world for journalists, media professionals, and the mass audiences who rely on their skills to learn about the world (Scheufele, 1999).

Researchers have broken-down framing into two primary types: media and individual. Media frames are defined as central organizing ideas or stories that provide meaning to an unfolding strip of events and stating essence of issues. In other words, "news frames organize everyday reality and are a part of everyday reality, becoming an invaluable feature of news" (Schuefele, 1999, p.106). By extension, they operate as "working routines for journalists, allowing them to quickly identify and classify information and package it in ways for audiences to understand" (Scheufele, 1999, p.106).

On the other side, individual frames are defined as "small, mentally stored groups of ideas that guide the way individuals process and interpret information" (Scheufele, 1999, p.107). They have also been conceptually defined as "cognitive devices that operate as non-hierarchical categories that serve as forms of major headings into which any future news content can be filed." (Schuefele, 1999, p. 107). Additionally, the

concepts of individual frames are used to describe "how individuals might make sense of news and other types of issues or stories" (Scheufele, 1999, p.107).

In addition to individual frames, the major premise of framing theory is that issues can be viewed from a diverse number of perspectives and perceived as having multiple implications for many kinds of values or considerations. These frames can have impact in one's overall opinion. For instance, in politics, many politicians attempt to win votes through getting people to think topics or subjects of policy in a certain way (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The use of frames are an important part of our culture in guiding how information is constructed by the elite and how it is selected by journalists and other media professionals. These frames manifest themselves in influencing cognitions and attitudes of audience members (Matthes, 2012).

Frames can also have an especially major impact on their audiences when it comes to various issues or perceptions of certain kinds of policy. In many cases, politicians can also adopt frames from the media, citizens, and even their colleagues in the form of other politicians. Likewise, media frames can mimic similar types of frames used from a diverse number of sources such as other politicians, activists, or other media organizations (Matthes, 2012). However, it is also stated that "the idea behind these frames is that strategic actors, journalists, and audiences do not simply reflect political and social realities; by contrast, politics, issues, and events are subject to different patterns of selection and interpretations, which are negotiated, contested, and changed over time (Matthes, 2012, p.249).

There are many framing effects that can occur in a variety of contexts. However, for them to do so, a specific subject must be stored in memory to be available for retrieval and use. These subjects must also be accessible and the activation of framing effects must exceed a certain limit so it is retrieved from long-term memory through either passive or unconscious means (Chong & Druckman, 2007). People sometimes base their own opinions on available and accessible information without conscious or thoughtful deliberation, while others might make more deliberate evaluations.

In other words, the perceived applicability of communication frames and the likelihood of their effects on someone's opinion will increase alongside its perceptions or its strength of relevance (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The overall sum of framing effects is that it depends upon a mix of factors. These factors include "strength of repetition, the competitive environment, and the individual motivations. Additionally, the impact of a mix of frames may differ from the sum of its individual effects (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p.111).

By extension, people do not simply follow the framing of news media, as many factors can determine if individuals are influenced by various frames. Previous research has found that frames continuously on the agenda are likely to exert greater effect; by the same token, competing frames can also make the effect weaker (Matthes, 2012). The strengths of framing research bridge areas of mass communication and the journalistic process within news media, particularly when it comes to its production, content, and effects (Mattes, 2012). It is through bridging these disciplinary perspectives that some

researchers say separate framing from other communication theories like agenda setting
(Reese, 2007).

Cultural Framing in Social Movements

Framing theory is also an invaluable aspect within social movements that can be a large determining factor in whether these movements ultimately succeed or fail. For example, public perceptions of these movements can either help or hinder coalition building between organizations, which are essential to increasing a social movement's strength and potency. Movements often organize through various kinds of frames, which often come in the form of distinct symbols, slogans, speeches, and protest performances (Starr, 2017). These are then disseminated through local attention and media coverage, which effectively spread their messages. It is because of this that framing is often referred to as "the meaning and communication work of a social movement" (Starr, 2017, p. 1361).

Framing theory has been used widely in research surrounding the various dynamics of social movements. In these contexts, framing is often divided into three types: master frames, diagnostic frames, and motivational frames (Starr, 2017). In the case of social movements, master frames are used to present the general idea, overall cause, or purpose to participants, audiences, and the media. For instance, presenting the slogan of "equal rights" of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s; this slogan dictates the main idea of the movement and its cause. It is through this frame that signs, speeches, and activities center on the discourse surrounding the cause like the Civil Rights Movement (Starr, 2017).

Diagnostic frames are used to explain what the movement's grievance is and what it is perceived to be. In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, segregation was the main grievance and problem it sought to solve and act against; the activities organized around it were constructed to articulate the problems to the public at large (Starr, 2017). Finally, motivational frames seek to deliver and tell the actions that should be taken to solve the problem or obtain a movement's goals. in the case of the Civil Rights Movement, the frames were to end segregation and racism through actions such as encouraging lawmakers to pass anti-racist legislation and mobilizing protest events (Starr, 2017). Whereas diagnostic frames seek to tell the public what problems are, motivational frames tell them what actions should be taken to solve the problem (Starr, 2017). These three types of frames are often essential in social movements and within distinct types of organizations who seek to promote awareness to problems and strengthen support for their various causes, goals, and objectives.

Resonance in Mobilizing Movements

Coupled with cultural framing in social movements is the concept of frame resonance. When it comes to the success of frames' persuasiveness or message, researchers often refer to the concept of resonance to explain why some frames work better than others (Ketelaars, 2016). Resonance describes the extent to which a frame being used resonates with mainstream culture; in other words, it measures the means to which it favorably resounds with people. As a result, if a frame resonates highly with existing cultural values, it is more likely to be favorably received by the public, which in turn makes it more effective (Starr, 2017). The degree to which a frame resonates will in

turn affect the cohesiveness of a movement, which subsequently has an ability to either help or hinder its efforts to obtain support or strength through other means such as public participation, media coverage, and financial support (Starr, 2017).

Referring to the Civil Rights Movement, "equal rights" was a frame in which received high cultural resonance because it resonated well with a lot of people alongside the pre-established American values like "all men are created equal" (Starr, 2017). However, the frame of a movement can be weakened if it conflicts with a mainstream culture's dominant values. As a result, the movement will have low resonance (Starr, 2017). One prominent example is the frame of "socialism" in the United States, which is still a predominantly capitalist culture. A movement like Occupy Wall Street not only had lower resonance, but also came into conflict with the mainstream culture at large (Starr, 2017).

A principal factor that could influence a frame's resonance and its persuasive ability is the means through which it touches individuals on a personal basis. In other words, are the framings of a movement lining up with the everyday, subjective experiences of the targeted individuals? Or are the framings too distant from them? (Ketelaars, 2016). As a result, when issues or causes appeal to more relatable matters and daily life, they can appear more important to people. The resonance of frames is essential in gauging the effectiveness of not only social movements, but also in the kinds of diverse messages that may emerge from organizations (Ketelaars, 2016).This is especially the case for the NFL protests, as they have produced a wide array of opinions that resonate on varying levels among fans and media alike.

By using framing theory, this study will explore the frames that emerge within sports media coverage surrounding NFL protests. Doing so will also allow further insight into the patterns of media coverage that have taken shape regarding the protests. This study is also important in further exploring developments of athlete activism and social movements within sports. It will also allow for future applications of study within the communication field such as race, social issues, and sports media coverage.

Framing of Black Athletes in Sports Media

Over the years, many studies have addressed the use of framing theory in sports contexts. Research shows that traditional sports journalism narratives often focus on the performance of the athletes, while other stories place importance on information about athletes' personal lives. These are known as performance frames and character frames, respectively (Lewis & Weaver, 2015). Character frames could lead audiences to value an athlete's personality more than their on-field performance. Alternatively, when sports media make use of performance-focused frames, the featured athlete could be perceived positively because audiences associate their traits with that of other successful athletes (Lewis & Weaver, 2015). As a result, character and performance-based framing could lead to audiences and media evaluating athletes in very different ways.

Often at the forefront of culture and society, the media can create dominant interpretations of reality that appeal to the desired or anticipated audiences at large (Sterkenburg, Knoppers, & Leeuw, 2010). Sports media have an uncanny and powerful potential to render certain categorizations and traits more salient that others, which can

shape the world around them while demonstrating lasting effects on its audience. (Sternkenburg et al., 2010).

Framing Criminality of Black Athletes

In many forms of media coverage, Black athletes might be attached to certain stereotypes within the context of criminality (Seate, Harwood, & Blecha, 2010). When crimes or wrongdoings occur, media messages can shape or frame public opinion of the crime and the alleged criminal. This is done through framing of news stories surrounding a crime, which can emphasize pardoning or implicative information and influence message consumers (Seate et al., 2010). For example, researchers have demonstrated how photos of Black people in a news story could lead to people viewing an attributed issue as a "Black issue" (Seate et al., 2010, p. 344). Over time, certain attributes and stereotypes can be associated and steadily ingrained into mainstream culture (Seate et al., 2010). For example, Blacks are often shown in the news as violent and dangerous criminals, with heavy television consumers perceiving them as more culpable for their crimes (Seate et al., 2010).

Framing continues to play prominent a role in sports, particularly when it comes to race. For example, some media representations only perceptually equip Black athletes with superb bodies, yet implicitly give them unstable minds and treat Black success as something that might only be achieved on a sports field (Sterkenburg et al., 2010). Additional studies have also found Black athletes more likely to receive greater criticism than White athletes in sports coverage. Character descriptions of Black athletes in sport media have been ascribed as being more negative regarding potential criminal activities.

Meanwhile, Latino athletes, especially those born in the United States, are often

perceived as better role models despite also being minorities (Mastro et al.,

2011).However, in a similar fashion to the Black community, studies have also found

them to be overrepresented in news coverage as violent criminals, and often highly

charged with subjects like immigration (Mastro et al., 2011).

Criminality and athleticism are often closely linked in depictions of Black

athletes, with previous studies demonstrating that they are less likely than their White

counterparts to be shown in professional attire (Mastro et al., 2011). By extension, this

also feeds into cultural representations of Blackness in sports, which can often be

examined through media narratives.One example includes the league-wide dress code

instituted by the NBA in 2005, which prohibited t-shirts, sneakers, sandals, headphones,

chains, and other similar kinds of clothing and accessories. All the listed apparel were

trendy icons of hip-hop type clothing that young Black players wore on a frequent basis

(Lorenz & Murray, 2014). Given that Black players make up nearly 80% of the NBA and

the league's embrace of the hip-hop genre back in the 1980s alongside its marketing of

NBA legends like Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson, it appeared the dress code was

aimed at young Black players (Lorenz & Murray, 2014).

Today, Black players remain a prominent force in the NBA, and their faces and

bodies remain a dominant factor of the league's brand and advertising. As is the case

surrounding criminality and Black men, the NBA's implementation of their 2005 dress

code is a prime example in which the image surrounding Black athletes may be perceived

by audiences (Lorenz & Murray, 2014). During this time period where the dress code was

implemented, media discourses surrounding the regulations were found to have often connected basketball players to stereotypes of young Black men as criminals and gang members (Lorenz & Murray, 2014). One such instance included an article in the *Ottawa Citizen* titled "So it's goodbye to the gangstas, bye-bye bling" (Lorenz & Murray, 2014).

Further discourse also connected Black NBA players as resembling "recruitment officers for Bloods and Crips" (Lorenz & Murray, 2014, p.30). Throughout the discourse, constant references were made to "prison garb" and a "gangsta" style that underlined the connections between Blacks, fashion, and criminal behavior (Lorenz & Murray, 2014, p.30). This speaks to how Black athletes are framed in the media for not only their athletic bodies, but how they expressed themselves through the clothes they wore. It also demonstrates the kinds of frames that have been associated with these athletes and the discourse that can affect them in other areas of media coverage.

Media Narratives of Modern Black Athletes

Media coverage can establish narratives that have a lasting impact in how journalists and media organizations govern public discourses surrounding Black athletes. In the realm of sports, these narratives have influenced how athletes like NBA guard Kobe Bryant, former quarterback Michael Vick, and golfer Tiger Woods have been positioned in a manner that made them unredeemable (Leonard & King, 2011). Bryant is a unique case, as he often demonstrated a routine of going to kiss his wife and kids both at halftime and the conclusion of NBA games. This exchange gained traction online after Bryant became embroiled in a controversial case where was accused of sexually

assaulting a 19-year old in 2003. The charges were dropped and dismissed against

Bryant, who later apologized for his actions (Leonard & King, 2011).

However, this charge followed Bryant, with mainstream media charting every

move and decision he made; whether it was his appearance on Sesame Street or

advertisements he performed in for NIKE and Activision's *Call of Duty* video game,

Bryant's past was continually framed within the discourse for everything he did (Leonard

& King, 2011). Bryant's case emphasizes the difficult path to redemption that athletes,

especially Black athletes, can have, particularly when it comes to the frames within

media discourse surrounding them. Over time, research on sports media has also shown

that reporters have gender and racial biases, and that these biases play a significant role in

shaping individual attitudes and beliefs about athletes (Frisby, 2016).

Redemption Framing of Black Athletes

An example of a Black athlete who has been portrayed in a redemptive way by

sports media is former NFL quarterback Michael Vick, who is most remembered for his

time with the Atlanta Falcons and the Philadelphia Eagles. In 2007, Vick was arrested on

charges of dogfighting, as authorities found neglected dogs and evidence of the illegal

activities on his property in Virginia (Carr, 2012). He eventually pleaded guilty and was

sentenced to 23 months in jail. Once his sentence was served, he signed with the Eagles

and quickly played his way into a $100 million contract. However, despite his success

upon exiting jail, the discourse surrounding Vick focused less on his athletic

performance, and more on his status leaving prison.

The media coverage surrounding Vick during his return to the NFL displayed several distinct positions that influenced audiences in many ways. For instance, it was often displayed that Whites felt Vick served too light a prison sentence and should not have been allowed to play in the NFL again, while negative frames referred to wanting to see Vick openly uncomfortable during interviews (Carr, 2012). On the other side, non-Whites tended to think his sentence was far too heavy and he deserved another chance at restarting his life and career. (Carr, 2012). Media coverage surrounding Vick also tended to focus primarily on positive frames upon his return, positioning him as a heroic figure in the process of remaking his life. Dominant frames outside of his redemption narrative included his athletic prowess or professional troubles (Carr, 2012).

The findings within this qualitative framing analysis speak to the type of influence the media can have in shaping perceptions of athletes, particularly when it comes to dealing with race and sports. The frames surrounding Vick were essential in shaping the narrative surrounding the rest of his NFL and professional career. It also further ties into the challenges Black athletes face and the kinds of conversations that can emerge within the media coverage surrounding them.

In another study, Sanderson (2010) researched frames surrounding Woods, who, in an altercation with his wife, was the target of various media frames as his extramarital affairs were revealed to the public. Traditional mainstream media framed the initial altercation and subsequent revelations as a fall from grace for the former golfer, while simultaneously getting into the finer details of his extramarital affairs (Sanderson, 2010).In contrast, fans of Woods on social media framed his incident as a private matter

that demonstrated the golfer's human nature. Sanderson's (2010) study showed the active role fans now have in establishing frames and narratives because of the advent of social media (Sanderson, 2010).

The influence of framing is especially evident within media coverage surrounding Black athletes when they make decisions that become controversial in the eyes of audiences. One example is NBA forward LeBron James, who faced a lot of backlash and criticism during his 2010 nationally televised special "The Decision", in which he announced his free agent decision to join the Miami Heat in July 2010 (Banagan, 2011). Televised by ESPN, James was perceived as arrogant, selfish, and a traitor to his team by both audiences and media. This situation was unique in the amount of backlash James received from both fans and journalists (Banagan, 2011).

Due to his actions, many compared him to NBA players of previous generations such as Jordan, Earvin "Magic" Johnson, and Larry Bird, stating that they would never do something like join each other on the same team. To many, James's character had fallen and could not be redeemed for taking the effortless way out (Banagan, 2011). However, this points to a lack of understanding of today's modern athlete, who may not necessarily have that same mentality (Banagan, 2011). This case study regarding James further emphasizes the growing differences between generations as athletes become more outspoken and the evolving influence of media coverage over them.

Research Questions

The history and research surrounding athlete activism and protest are varied. The practices and institution of journalism have shifted from what it used to be in the 1960s,

and it is not simply because of the shift to digital and social media platforms. Rather, it has changed because sports media has had to delve more into discussing these issues, especially as athletes continue displaying bold forms of advocacy and activism. The same is true for the NFL, who, within the course of two seasons, became the subject of many mainstream media outlets in the wake of the national anthem protests.

These types of protests were unheard of for one of the most popular sports in the United States, and even more so to conduct it during the national anthem. Journalists remain the essential storytellers of our institutions, and the frames they construct surrounding ongoing events like the protests are invaluable in shaping the narratives of these iconic figures (Boyle, 2012). Because of media's role in fostering and guiding these conversations, this study will explore the following research question:

RQ: What themes will emerge in media's editorial coverage of NFL protests?

By exploring the themes surrounding the NFL protests, this study seeks to add to existing literature of media framing in sports. There has been a significant amount of research on coverage of individual athletes like Woods (Sanderson, 2010) and Vick (Carr, 2012). Previous studies such as the one conducted by Lane (2016), which explored the media coverage surrounding Title IX, demonstrates how uncovering themes are integral to understanding how journalists can frame various issues.

The study conducted by Kian & Anderson (2009) surrounding Amaechi and the narratives surrounding gay athletes demonstrate the importance of how these emerging themes can impact national conversations of social issues in sports. This research will aid in further exploring the themes and patterns surrounding one of the most unprecedented

protest acts within a major sport. This research study will also aid in diversifying

literature surrounding social movements, the re-emergence of modern athlete activism,

and the continuing role of media in discussing and framing these conversations to their

audiences.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

This study investigated the themes that emerged surrounding the NFL protests through examining the media coverage of editorial articles. To explore the conversations surrounding the NFL protests, the following study was conducted through a qualitative thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within research data that allows for minimally organizing and describing the data set in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a flexible method in allowing the researcher to determine themes in a variety of distinct ways (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis used in previous sports communication research include a study conducted by Schinke, Bonhomme, McGannon, and Cummings (2012), in which they sought to explore the adaptation processes of the boxers in the Showtime Super Six Boxing Classic. Another study by Kian, Anderson, and Shipka (2015) conducted a textual analysis on U.S. media framing surrounding Jason Collins coming out as the first openly gay athlete in the NBA to examine the intersection of broader conversations in sports and its intersection with subjects like homosexuality. The use of thematic analysis, which allows for a greater interpretation of various aspects of the data presented within the research, allowed each study to go beyond organizing and describing, (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, themes can capture aspects about the data in relation to the research question while representing some form of patterned meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, the use of a qualitative method also compliments

quantitative research findings and the ability to identify specific contexts (Vaughn & Turner, 2016).

Thematic analysis involves a six-step process, which, as described by Braun & Clarke (2006) includes the following: familiarizing oneself with research data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and producing the report. Through this process, the researcher became immersed in the data through active readings of the data. These readings allow researchers to search for different meanings and patterns within the data as opposed to just casually reading through it (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method also allows the researcher to engage in an "inductive and reflective process" to search for meanings within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The procedure involves either a data-drive inductive procedure or a deductive, theory-driven approach. This study opted for the use a data-drive procedure, which allowed frames to emerge from the data instead of a priori (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Sample

The current study was conducted through analyzing editorial articles from various media outlets to gain an understanding of the dominant frames (themes) that emerged within the subject of NFL protests. Editorials from major national and regional newspapers and online news sites were used for the context of this research. Journalistic content such as columns and editorials tend to incorporate more subjective opinion, and readers can expect the assertion of more in-depth analysis and opinion. (Hardin & Ash, 2011).

Editorials are also unique in acting as a historical record of sorts given their potential to have longer-last influence than standard news reports. Research also suggests that influences within the newsroom can add different layers to journalists' framing choices (Hardin & Ash, 2011). Journalists hold invaluable positions and advantages over other types of writers, such as bloggers, namely in the form of resources and access. In addition, many people still depend on journalists for most of their news and various forms of analysis (Hardin & Ash, 2011).

Editorials for this study were collected through the online database LexisNexis and a search of popular online sport websites. LexisNexis is a database that keeps records of a variety of popular press newspaper and online articles from media outlets that are kept on record and accessed by the public. The articles were selected from the timespan of August 26, 2016 to February 3, 2018. August 26, 2016 was the date where Kaepernick's decision to kneel was made public to the media and signaled the beginning of the protests, and February 3, 2018 was the date that concluded the 2017 NFL regular season. The time between these two dates is when NFL protests were receiving the most media coverage.

The key search terms used to gather the articles within LexisNexis were "editorial," "NFL," and "protest." The initial results conducted in LexisNexis based on the search criteria resulted in a population of 360 articles. From these results, international publications, wire press services, college press media, group duplications, letters to the editor, news reports, and cartoons were eliminated, which reduced the population to 170 articles.

Sampling strategy. Articles were selected for inclusion in the sample through a nonprobability sampling strategy known as purposive sampling. Also referred to as judgment sampling, purposive sampling is defined as "the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses. It is a nonrandom technique that does not need underlying theories or a set of participants" (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016, p. 2). In purposive sampling, it is up to the researcher to decide what needs to be known and to find people or materials that will provide information based on the context of the study (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research and employed through applying expert knowledge to nonrandomly selected components that represent pieces of the population. The study made use of the purposive sampling method known as homogeneous sampling, which "focuses on candidates who share similar traits or specific characteristics" (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 3).

To meet the criteria for inclusion in the sample, only editorials that offered related commentary towards the NFL protests as its central organizing idea, were longer than 75 words, and came from a daily newspaper or website based in the U.S. were selected. This process involved reading each article and determining whether they should be included in the final sample based on whether the commentary they provided was relevant and significant to the context of the study. For example, articles were deemed not relevant to the subject of NFL protests if they focused on subjects unrelated to protests or included headlines without offering any editorial commentary. A final sample of 69 editorial articles met the criteria.

To add further representation from online national sources, 11 articles were selected from the top five circulated national online sports websites, as reported by eBizMBA, a website which continually tracks updated averages of global traffic rank and U.S. traffic rank of popular press websites based on unique monthly visitors ("Top 15 Most," 2018). These websites included ESPN, CBS Sports, Sports Illustrated, Bleacher Report, and Sports Illustrated. Searches were conducted through their respective websites on opinion articles relating to the NFL protests using the same key words. Articles were sampled from Sports Illustrated ($n = 4$), Bleacher Report ($n = 4$), and Yahoo! Sports ($n = 3$) were subsequently analyzed, which brought the total sample to 80 editorial articles.

The units of analysis for this study was each editorial article. The final sample consisted of 42 publications from many regional media outlets[1] around the country, with most of them consisting of one to two articles. Some of the most prominent regional publications within the sample included the following: *The Dayton Daily News* ($n = 4$), *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* ($n = 3$), *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* ($n = 6$), and *The New York Post* ($n = 3$). In addition, the final sample included prominent publications that are more national in scope, such as *USA Today* ($n = 4$), and *The Washington Post* ($n = 8$). Word

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[1]*Akron Beacon Journal, Albuquerque Journal, Augusta Chronicle, Bangor Daily News, Bleacher Report, Boston Herald, Brunswick News, Charleston Gazette Mail, Chicago Tribune, Columbia Basin Herald, Daily Item, Dayton Daily News, East Bay Times, Florida Times Union, The Free Press, Investor's Business Daily, Keene Sentinel, LA Times, Mercury News, News & Record, New York Post, New York Times, Orange County Register, Philadelphia Inquirer, Philly.com Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Pittsburgh Tribune, Portland Press, San Bernardino Sun, Sentinel & Enterprise, Sports Illustrated, St. Louis Dispatch, Star Tribune, The Blade, Times Leader, Times Tribune, USA Today, Vallejo-Herald Times, Victoria Advocate, Washington Post, Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier, Yahoo! Sports*

counts for all the 80 sampled articles ranged from a minimum of 172 to a maximum of 1,688.

Coding Method

The search for themes was an active process; thematic categories were generated and constructed based on how editorials discussed the NFL protests. This basic process involved collapsing and clustering codes together that appeared to have unifying features in common so they reflect coherent and meaningful patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Once initial readings of the articles were conducted and a coherent set of themes were established, the data were reviewed and analyzed to uncover the dominant theme of each article. This was done to review each unit in relation to the entire data set and define them in ways that have clear purpose (Braun & Clarke, 2012). For the context of this study, editorials that appeared to involve more than one theme were placed into the thematic category believed to be most dominant. The dominant theme was identified for each article was determined based on the headline, lede, and central organizing idea of the article (Cassidy, 2016).

Given the nature of the study, it is possible that articles can contain multiple themes. But, it is important to note that while news events can be framed in a variety of ways, some frames can be more relevant to the nature of certain events than others. News events are often grounded in what is known as a core frame, which is defined as the basic element of framing that pushed an object or event into the news (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). Additionally, the concept of framing is not necessarily about exploring every aspect or attribute of an object, but its dominant characteristics (Chyi & McCombs,

2004). Because of this, and the ability of specific details of news events to shift from day to day, each editorial was assigned to a dominant theme to illustrate its most prominent characteristic. Previous research has demonstrated that the categorization of articles into dominant themes (frames) can provide the best representation of the data in relation to the research question. For example, dominant frames were the focus of research by Chyi and McCombs (2004), which sought to cover the dominant characteristics of media coverage related to the Columbine school shooting over time. Additionally, a study conducted by Cassidy (2016), which sought to explore media coverage of journalistic coverage regarding the coming out of Sam and Collins as gay athletes, did so through assigning dominant frames for each story.

The process of generating themes allows for the collapsing and clustering of codes that appear to share common features together. As a result, themes can be constructed in many ways based on the way codes are combined, which allows researchers to reflect more coherent and meaningful patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Ultimately, in a qualitative thematic analysis, it is the researcher that makes choices regarding how to shape and craft their raw data set into a proper form of analysis to tell a story about the data that answers the research question, rather than to represent everything that was said within the data itself (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

After completing the analysis process, six dominant themes were identified from

the sample of editorials and presented in Table 1. The identified themes included the

following: First Amendment & Expression, Significance of Protest Message, Framing of

NFL Players, President Trump's Impact, Framing of NFL, and Politicization of Football.

Additionally, several of the dominant themes within the study contained sub-themes,

which will be explored in further detail.

Table 1

Dominant Thematic Frames of NFL Protests

Frame	*n* (%)	Description	Example
Freedom of Expression			
First Amendment	15 (18.75%)	Emphasized players' rights to express opinions through first amendment	"Agree with Kaepernick's protest or not -- and we don't -- it is imperative we recognize Kaepernick, who says he wants to draw attention to how minorities are treated in the United States, is within his right to do so, especially when we all agree that in a free society a free and protected speech is a foundational element."
Professional Conduct	2 (2.5%)	Emphasized players' need for professional conduct during the anthem	"The NFL is not the government, nor are team owners. They are private employers, and depending on the players' terms of employment, entitled to determine what their players may or may not say while they are representing the team."
Protest Purpose/Message			
Social significance	12 (15.0%)	Emphasized the social influence of player protests	This is only getting larger, because Colin Kaepernick's ***protest*** was always genuine, because his words have been precise, his attitude has been thoughtful, his support has been growing, and his critics have been so predictably intellectually feeble."

Questions meaning	4 (5.0%)	Questioned whether the purpose of the protest retained significant meaning	"To me, continuing to protest is a must. But continuing in the same fashion is an obstacle. The meaning has been lost, and it's now more about a tweeting president or picking sides or (a lack) of patriotism or partisan politics, instead of uniting and uplifting."
Characterizing Players			
Admiration	13 (16.25%)	Emphasized the players' admiration and decision to protest during the anthem	"Reaching the next step is always a struggle, but players like Smith—who, for the first time joined safety Malcolm Jenkins in holding a fist in the air during the anthem— sound emboldened by the visibility that Trump has afforded their fight."
Condemnation	2 (2.5%)	Critiqued the players' decision to kneel during the anthem	"But we believe it is also the right of the NFL, as a private corporation, to institute rules that prevent political expression on the field of play. Politics have no place there.
President Trump's Impact			
Opposition to President Trump	12 (15.0%)	Criticized the role of the President's influence in player protests	"We think this is about respecting the flag, or police brutality, or Colin Kaepernick, or patriotism, or white privilege, or our complicated and painful racial history. And it is about all of those issues … to other people. To Trump, it's about Trump."
Support for President Trump	1 (1.25%)	Praised the role of the President's influence and connection to player protests	"Vice President Mike Pence made a powerful, patriotic statement when he performed his own National Anthem

protest: walking out of an NFL game after several players kneeled for The Star Spangled Banner. The vice president tweeted that he and the president "will not dignify any event that disrespects our soldiers, our Flag, or our National Anthem."

Criticism of NFL

Critical of response	7 (8.75%)	Frames that criticized the response of the NFL towards the protests	"These protests are divisive, distracting and pointless. They are a public relations nightmare that the NFL shows no sign of stopping. Goodell and others want to preach about free expression, but most fans probably prefer their football free of guilt-tripping toxic politics."
Preservation of image	5 (6.25%)	Frames that discussed the NFL's need to preserve their own brand and image	Though the dollar figure is jaw-dropping, the players who left the coalition say the NFL isn't actually donating any new money. Instead, Reid said that the money would simply be diverted from already existing programs, such as the NFL's breast cancer awareness initiative or Salute to Service, which honors the United States military, a charge the league denies."
Politicization of Football	7 (8.75%	Emphasized the impact of politics and sports not belonging together.	"But ultimately the players, the fans and the future of the game would be better served by focusing on the game of football -- and

kicking the political football to a more appropriate venue than the gridiron."

Freedom of Expression

One of the dominant editorial thematic frames to emerge from this study were the players' rights to speak freely ($n = 17$, 21.25%). . Within this thematic frame, editorials focused on the rights of players to speak freely and express themselves on the reasons behind their protest through their use of free speech. However, one of the subthemes to emerge was more critical of the players' use of free speech from a standpoint of professional conduct.

First Amendment. Some articles discussed that, whether fans agreed with player protests, both are well within their right to express themselves how they please thanks to the First Amendment ($n = 15$, 18.75%). One article states the following:

> Agree with Kaepernick's protest or not -- and we don't -- it is imperative we
> recognize Kaepernick, who says he wants to draw attention to how minorities are
> treated in the United States, is within his right to do so, especially when we all
> agree that in a free society a free and protected speech is a foundational element"
> ("Agree or Disagree," 2016, para. 4).

This article explicitly dictates their disagreement on the stance of the NFL protest, but notes that the message behind it should be recognized and that players, in this case Kaepernick, are within their rights to do what they did. In other cases, some articles and editorials highlighted the need for civility to be had from those who personally attacked the players. Such examples include the following like "It's fine to express opinions on social media or in news story comments. But it's important to do so in a civil manner. The

digital age's new public forums regrettably have brought out the worst in some people" ("Go Ahead," 2016).

Professional Conduct. On the other hand, some editorials repeated the fact that the players' use of speech was not due to the First Amendment, but to the duty of their private employers in the NFL ($n = 2$, 2.5%). One article focused on the need to differentiate "government speech" and the extent to which it applies to what could be called "on the job speech." One such example includes the following: "Contrary to myth, the First Amendment does not guarantee free speech across the board. What it does is prohibit the government from making laws that restrict speech. The NFL is not the government, nor are team owners" (The Columbia Basin Herald, 2017, para.4).

This thematic frame regarding freedom of expression is important in establishing a narrative pattern of discussion around the idea of free speech in sports. In the case of the NFL protests, it demonstrates the increased agency and extent to which players can express themselves. Likewise, supporters and critics should be able to freely express their thoughts on player protests without being attacked for their stances. By the same token, this thematic frame also emphasizes the need to differentiate the extent to which the governmental amendment of free speech extends into a private organization like the NFL. The subtheme of professional conduct was prominent in prompting discourse about the definition of free speech a private sector workplace like the NFL.

Protest Purpose/Message

One of the dominant thematic frames discussed the significance of the overall protest message in questioning its meaning and its overall social significance moving

forward. One of the dominant thematic frames discussed the significance of the overall protest message in questioning its meaning and its overall social significance moving forward.

Questions meaning. Some thematic frames questioned whether the original intent or message of the protest was lost amongst all the widespread media attention and discourse ($n = 4$, 5%). One article stated, "And through this evolution, I think— rather, I *know*—we have lost control of the narrative and the true meaning of why Colin first decided to kneel" (Perry, 2017). Additionally, this frame positions the protests as being communicated unclearly, in which the symbolic nature behind them loses value. One article states the following about the protest's message:

> "Famous athletes and entertainers may have legitimate concerns, and of course they have a right to be heard. But if they don't take care to communicate with precision, they cannot expect to be interpreted in the way they would prefer" (Swain, 2016, para. 8).

Social Significance. These frames also demonstrate that such protests have lasting power and will only serve to grow larger to empower other players and supporters of the players' cause ($n = 12$, 15%). One article stated how the message behind them will not be lost, stating, "This is only getting larger, because Colin Kaepernick's protest was always genuine, because his words have been precise, his attitude has been thoughtful, his support has been growing, and his critics have been so predictably intellectually feeble" ("Colin Kaepernick," 2016). One editorial also touched on the impact of new social media technologies in spreading these messages:

"Kids today have the entire world, and all of its problems and issues, right there in

their pocket. Everything is immediate, whether it is a flood in Bangladesh, or a

boy shot down on the sidewalk in Florida. Nothing is out of reach" (Pierce, 2017,

para. 9).

Overall, this thematic frame of protest message demonstrates the positive gain and

clarity of the protests for both the present and future generation of athletes. Additionally,

the subtheme of questions meaning also signifies the means through which the protest

message is losing clarity and the overall resonance of its message with audiences.

Characterizing Players

Admiration. Given that they are the ones initiating the protests, this thematic

frame positions the players who protest collectively in both positive and negative ways (*n*

= 15, 18.75%). Many editorials within this theme were largely supportive of the NFL

players who chose to participate in the national anthem protests. The players were often

positioned as being brave and patriotic for choosing to protest. As one article stated,

"There's nothing un-American about taking a knee as an act of respectful dissent. The

right to freely *protest* without hurting others or destroying property is at the core of what

makes our nation great" ("By Kneeling," 2017). Frames like these further noted that

players are taking a knee in protesting bigger issues, not to disrespect the flag, and that

such actions make them people to be respected and that they have been further

empowered.

One article stated "This group, exploited by a sport that threatens their long-term

health and tosses them to the curb without a second thought, now has a measure of

control. What a world" (Svrluga, 2017). Some of these frames even focused on the impact of specific players who participated in protest, framing them beyond a mere surface level of protest. Such an example included "NFL players are just like the rest of us. They watch and care about events happening in the country outside of their work" (Freeman, 2017).

Condemnation. To a lesser extent, NFL players were also framed negatively in editorials for their decision to not protest ($n = 2$, 2.5%). They were criticized as being disrespectful towards the flag, military, or the country for kneeling during the national anthem. One article stated "The players will claim that this was done to draw attention to the fact that many African-Americans have grievances with the United States. But much of it was about pettiness and politics" (Navarrette, 2017).

Additionally, editorials further stated that NFL players kneeling during the national anthem wasn't the proper place of protest. Such examples include "More importantly, we hope NFL players find a better way to make their statements off the field that does not include disrespecting the flag or the military" ("NFL Protests," 2017). Overall, this thematic frame centered around the actions and statements of the players who protested and what it represented. Editorials framed the players as becoming further empowered and patriotic for protesting in what they believed in. By the same token, articles also noted that the national anthem was not a time to protest, and that while players' concerns were valid, the football field is not the place to bring their problems to light.

President Trump's Impact

One of the prominent themes to emerge from the editorial analysis was the influence President Trump on the NFL protests ($n = 13$, 16.25%). Many editorials framed their opposition to President Trump, citing his negative influence on reinvigorating player protests and inciting divisive behavior. Meanwhile, other editorials framed their support for the President's stance toward player protests.

Opposition to President Trump. Several editorials referenced Trump's statement at a rally in Alabama as the spark for the 2017 protests, in which the president delivered the following statement about NFL players who protested: "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a b---- off the field right now. Out! He's fired. He's fired!' ("Trump and the," 2017). Within this subtheme, editorials framed their opposition to President Trump through citing his divisive nature and disrespect for the players' ability to speak freely. Such examples included the following article: "But Trump has turned it into something else. He has, as Sasse says, created a construct in which he can stand on the side of flag and country and put all the "elitists" on the other, never mind what the kneeling is actually about" ("The Tweeting President," 2017, para.4).

Additionally, this frame positioned President Trump as the main culprit for sparking an additional wave of league wide NFL protests while associating the actions of his administration as a representation of his divisive nature. Such examples included the following article, in which Vice President Mike Pence staged a walkout of an Indianapolis Colts game when several players knelt during the anthem. One article stated

how "Vice President Mike Pence turned the anthem into a prop Sunday, co-opting it for a stunt that served no other purpose than to sow division, further enrage the administration's conservative base and try to cow NFL owners" (Armour, 2017).

Support for President Trump. While editorial articles within the overall thematic frame regarding President Trump's impact were predominantly in opposition to his influence, there was an instance in which an editorial framed their support for him ($n = 1$, 1.25%). This was done in the wake of Pence's walkout of the Colts game. The editorial stated how "The question isn't whether it was a publicity stunt. The president and vice president of the United States don't need publicity stunts to get attention. The question is, why aren't more Americans following the vice president's example?" ("Pence Stood," 2017).

This thematic frame centered around the impact of President Trump and player protests. Editorials predominantly framed their opposition to President Trump as the primary source responsible for inciting further player protest and promoting division amongst the public. While the subtheme of support for President Trump was much less that the opposition to him, it is important in demonstrating how his stance towards players protests were an example that should be followed by more people.

Criticism of NFL

Furthermore, some editorials focused on the league's handling and significance in the protests coming from their players and whether its handling these players positively or negatively ($n = 12$, 15%).

Critical of response. Several editorials noted how the league and its owners poorly handled the protesting players (*n* = 7, 8.75%). Some articles criticized the league response towards not signing a protesting player like Kaepernick. One article stated "Not signing Kaepernick because there might be backlash is the coward's way out. The bravest person in this room is the man the cowards are running from (Feinstein, 2017). Further frames noted the league's double standard in dealing with its players and subjects surrounding them. It also signifies that the league would allow one controversial action from its players, yet reprimand actions from its other teams and players. Another article stated the following:

> "But why, oh why, did the *NFL* stomp on the Dallas Cowboys? The team wanted to wear a decal on their helmets this season to commemorate the five Dallas police officers slain in the line of duty last July. The league nixed the tribute, citing strict rules on uniform displays" ("An NFL Double, 2016, para.6).

Preservation of image. In addition, the league was also framed as wanting the overall subject of the protests to end to preserve their image, especially considering declining ratings and backlash from critics (*n* = 5, 6.25%). As a result, this frame focused more on the league's attempt for regaining control rather than hearing the voices of its players. For instance, their donation of $89 million to organizations to social causes was framed as an attempt to take control of the narrative from players.

One such article described it as the following: "By attempting to control which causes the players will be able to support, the NFL is showing once again how little it values the perspectives of its athletes" ("With $89 million," 2017). This NFL-related

thematic frame signifies the ways in which the league was seen throughout the player protests. Overall, while seemingly providing players freedom to protest, the league was criticized for previous actions such as not signing Kaepernick. Additionally, the NFL was as being non-empathic to their protesting players and caring more about their preserving their own image. As a result, this frame is important in further establishing a narrative of distrust towards the NFL.

Politicization of Football

Given the national anthem's place in United States politics, it was only natural to discuss the influence of politics in sports ($n = 7$, 8.75%). Editorials within this frame positioned the protests as being unnecessary distractions for the sport of football. For instance, some articles highlighted the necessity of NFL games as a much-needed escape from the continual political barrage the country experiences. One article stated the following: "Let's get back to football. Let's get back to rooting together for the Steelers. Let's not take more inflammatory bait dangled by those exploiting the anthem controversy to advance their own agendas." ("The Ravens Week", 2017).

By the same token, this thematic frame noted how the intersection of sports and politics is not effective in orchestrating change, and that it does little in way of tangible actions. One article stated "Using the sports arena to disseminate political views brings little change. Instead, players who feel passionate about what is going on in the country should take meaningful action" ("Trump's Tweet," 2017). This thematic frame closely demonstrates the degree to which media outlets choose to discuss these social issues to their audiences and their unwillingness to do so in the context of sports.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

NFL Protest Themes

This research study explored the themes that emerged from editorial coverage of NFL protests and the discourse within them. The findings of this study are in line with previous framing studies such as Kian et al. (2015), which found that media outlets were more supportive of athletes in their coverage of social issues. In this study regarding the NFL protests, the results demonstrate more support for the players exercising their freedom of speech and expression. While some editorials criticized that free speech did not apply in the players' context while they were working, overall support for them was evident throughout the study.

Given their profession operates based on freedom of the press, it makes sense that journalists would be largely supportive of the players' ability to freely express themselves as they see fit. Considering journalists' history in their framing of Black athletes and limited reporting of race-related incidents prior to the Civil Rights Era, this demonstrates the increasing depth of reporting on social issues levels in journalism. As a result, this frame may prompt audiences to think more about the role of players in different forms of protest and the degree to which their messages resonate with mainstream culture. The largely supportive coverage of players has an opportunity to change established frames around athletes as simply on-field millionaire talents or misbehaved criminals. It could also signal a shift in the ways players are positioned by the media, especially when it comes to other kinds of non-race related social issues such as gender or sexuality.

Additionally, just as journalists were largely supportive of the players' use of free speech in this study, their protest coverage positioned President Trump as being responsible for inciting protests with his comments aimed at NFL players. For example, many articles framed the president as divisive and unfocused. Taking Trump's tense relationship with the media into account, it is possible that journalists might sympathize with the players having their rights attacked.

Additionally, Trump's statements regarding the players harkens back to Musberger's statements casting Carlos and Smith as "dark skinned stormtroopers" (Peterson, 2009, p. 335). Musberger's words did not have quite the impact 50 years ago that they might today. Now, in a 24-hour media landscape, and social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, access to news and information has become much easier, which allows statements like Trump's to have much more influence on the public compared to Musberger's.

Additionally, the salience of the NFL's actions is also indicative of an increasing media narrative of a league that is not empathetic towards the needs of its players. The impact of such coverage also ties into other controversial actions associated with the league (i.e., concussions, player health). This could lead to a further decrease in trust in NFL when it comes to its players and how it handles controversial situations like player protests. Moving forward, this frame is important to further understand how other sports leagues like the NBA or MLB might be perceived by audiences regarding social issues and responding to their athletes.

Perhaps the most interesting frame to emerge from this study was the cultural significance of the protest message and how the act of kneeling had gotten lost amongst the media discourse. Several articles note how Kaepernick began the demonstrations during the national anthem to protest racial inequality and police brutality. However, the intent of player protests, according to these frames, soon turned into retaliation against the president's comments, and became a battle of patriotism, respecting the military, and partisan politics.

The aspects of this frame demonstrate the importance of the elements of cultural framing, especially when it came to the motivational framing of the player protests. Since there was never any kind of motivational framing to dictate what kind of actions to take, this could be a big point of contention regarding the continued purpose of the player protests. As a result, this could mean that the protests could lose their resonating power over time, especially without tangible actions recommended by NFL players to people in support of their cause. Without this, this social movement is weakened, and stands to lose ground in the mainstream. When that happens, media coverage is lost, which means fewer opportunities for the movement to gain ground.

On the other side, the cultural significance of protest message frame also demonstrated a subtheme of positive message gain in how the protests resonated with athletes throughout the world of sports. Additionally, the frame also notes how this player protest is one of the most prominent in United States history, which means it has more than left its mark. This ties back into the history of athlete activism, and how, over the course of decades, athletes have been some of the most instrumental figures in promoting

social issues and advocating for causes like racial equality. In much the same way, the other dominant frames that emerged within this NFL player protest study illustrate how today's athletes appear to be much more of a collective force when it comes to social movements within sports.

Influence of Contemporary Journalism

The advent of new media and increased connectivity can further enhance athlete's platforms in ways that their predecessors could not, particularly when it comes to reaching out to audiences. Additionally, it also demonstrates the increased level of critical investigation injected into more journalists' reporting when compared to sports journalism, which had long been quarantined within newsrooms as the "toy department" (Rowe, 2007). The results from this NFL protest study illustrates the willingness of journalists, and by extension, certain corporations and media conglomerates, to tackle social issues like players protests. On the other side, it also exposes the continued economy and processes these media outlets and corporations must consider.

The outlets that were examined for this study were a mix of online publications from across the United States. Most of them were owned by major media corporations or publishing companies, with *The Keene Sentinel* being the only locally-owned publication in the analyzed sample. This is important in signifying the structure of these organizations, particularly given their relationships (or lack thereof) with the NFL. Out of the top-circulating media outlets analyzed in this study, neither ESPN nor CBS Sports had any kind of editorial or columns weighing in on the NFL protests. Given the political economy of sports journalism, specifically the significant financial ties and relationships

between media outlets and the NFL, the coverage of the protests plays a factor in the overall relationship between these organizations and the messages they seek to deliver.

The same could be said for other major media organizations like FOX Sports and NBC, who also have significant contracts and financial obligations with the NFL (NFL, Verizon Agree, 2017). This is in stark comparison to websites like *Bleacher Report* or *Sports Illustrated*, who are all owned by corporations with no contractual ties to the NFL (Breech, 2017). It will be interesting to see whether the media coverage of the NFL from *Yahoo! Sports* changes over time. It was bought out by Verizon in 2017, a company that signed a five-year streaming deal with the NFL for $2.5 billion in January 2018 (Breech, 2017).

The number of media organizations owned by major corporations could play a role in the topics journalists cover. Specifically, in the face of prominent protests in sports, journalists might not be allowed to put forth columns or editorial content that give a respective sports league negative press. As a result, this could limit journalists' overall influence, and reduce them to becoming a mouthpiece for the sake of promoting their organization for financial gain. With the number of media outlets steadily converging under major media conglomerates, it is important for journalists to maintain their journalistic integrity in the events they cover. Additionally, the emergence of prominent digital media outlets such as *Deadspin*, *SB Nation*, and *Sporting News* have created more avenues through which diverse forms of sports coverage can take shape, including columns, special features, videos, and podcasts.

Sports has come to an interesting point in history, where today's athletes have a larger platform than those in the World War II and Civil Rights eras through which to create awareness of causes beyond the playing field. How this public discourse plays out will impact the future of athlete activism and protest moving forward. The themes that emerged from editorial coverage of the NFL protests were illustrated in ways that circulated well beyond the players and discussed the larger cultural and societal impact of athlete activism and protest. These frames are important because of their focus on the dynamic conversations that occur within sports media coverage, and how journalists can play a pivotal role in initiating conversations and narratives around subjects such as athlete activism. Scholars are in an advantageous position to continue investigating the larger social conversations within sports and how athletes bring these issues to the forefront using their platform.

Limitations and Future Directions

This research was limited in several facets. At 80 articles, the sample size is smaller than other standard framing studies, such as Billings et al. (2015) with sample sizes of 364 articles, and Cassilo and Sanderson (2016) with sample sizes of 112 print articles and 187 online articles. Because of this, gathering a greater number of articles from more national, online sources to gauge differences between online and print media coverage is an important avenue to be explored for future research. Doing so will allow for greater flexibility and variability between data and opportunities for a larger variety of themes to emerge.

Next, this study only looked at frames from editorials from U.S. daily online journalistic outlets, and did not involve any social media content surrounding the NFL protests. While this was determined as the best direction for the context of this study, it would be valuable to observe the social media conversations surrounding NFL player protests. This is especially important in further gauging the impact of the cultural and resonance frames of the NFL protests, and its attachment to exploring social movements in sports. While several articles used in this study were from top circulating online sites like *Bleacher Report*, *Yahoo! Sports*, and *Sports Illustrated*, news organizations like ESPN and CBS did not have any editorial or opinion coverage of protests. Considering their relationships with the NFL, it is possible this affected the ways in which they chose to provide coverage toward the protests.

Additionally, the study opted to explore the NFL protests through categorizing articles into the dominant theme that best fit them as opposed to analyzing multiple frames within a single article. Analyzing multiple frames within a single article could aid in providing further interpretations of the data regarding NFL protests. The use of a nonrandom purposive sampling method may lead to an inability to generalize overall research findings, higher levels of bias, and lower levels of reliability. Future studies or applications of this research may want to make use of alternative sampling methods with potentially lower levels of bias.

Future Research Directions

The advent of new media outlets has provided audiences with many options through which to obtain information, which has created more competing frames to

portray its various narratives. One example is a website known as *The Players' Tribune.* A venture started by former professional baseball player Derek Jeter, the website is described as "a venue for athletes of all sports...to tell their own stories, first person, exactly as they want" and also "provide(s) a community where they can connect directly with their fans, no filter" (Schwartz & Vogan, 2017, p. 46). The site, which launched in 2014, allows athletes to post content and exercise control over their own images by circumventing traditional media gatekeepers and gain more direct access to the public.

Jeter states that his goal for the site is "to ultimately transform how athletes and newsmakers share information, bringing fans closer than ever to the game they love" (Schwartz & Vogan, 2017, p. 47). The articles, produced with an athlete's byline, are produced and written by ghostwriters (i.e., professional writers who write on behalf of others, but cede editorial control of the message to the athlete). Topics discussed on the platform include Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson discussing domestic violence in the NFL, and Los Angeles Clippers forward Blake Griffin talking about the 2014 scandal surrounding former owner Donald Sterling (Schwartz & Vogen, 2017). Athletes address topics both in and out of sports, making this outlet a dynamic venture that gives them an opportunity to express themselves in ways they cannot on traditional outlets.

As innovative technologies and social media have become prevalent, opportunities for unique athlete and audience interactions have increased. As these interactions between athletes and their audiences expand, so should studies surrounding the use of these athlete-produced mediums. Their unique coverage provides an

opportunity outside of traditional journalistic storytelling that could continue shifting the media landscape. This could shed light on the distinction between *The Players' Tribune* and other media outlets, which could signify a potential shift in the political economy of journalism. If players would rather publish a full piece in *The Players' Tribune* than contribute to a journalist's story, that could also shift the narrative and model of traditional journalism. As new media outlets emerge in conjunction with online and traditional journalistic sources, there will be invaluable opportunities for scholars to examine the frames and themes that emerge within the intersection of sports and social issues.

Conclusion

As journalists continue covering social issues within sports, the patterns and themes that emerge from topics like the NFL protests can aid in increasing or decreasing the resonance of these movements. The results of this study show that media outlets tended to be more supportive of NFL players in their right to protest. The trend of this media coverage contrasts with both World War II and Civil Rights eras in which journalists were not overly supportive of Black athletes, especially in acts of open protest regarding social issues. It also illustrates the types of conversations that can emerge within sports media coverage about various kinds of social issues such as race. The resonance of these movements becomes especially important as multiple social and media platforms have changed and challenged the traditional structure of journalism.

More subjective reporting has empowered journalists to express opinions on events that transcend the ideal of objective reporting. As conversations between

audiences grow more complex and dynamic, so too does the media coverage around

them. Additionally, given the financial implications sports brings through driving

business models, sponsors, and advertising, journalism's connection to politics and social

issues make it an invaluable part of society. Through the exploration of editorial themes

within NFL protests, this study shows the expansion of conversations taking place within

sport media.. As athlete activism becomes a more prominent factor in sports, it is

important that audiences understand the complexities within social issues. In this diverse

media landscape, journalists are more important than ever in guiding these conversations.

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