

**THE KNEEL FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: COLIN KAEPERNICK, MEGAN
RAPINOE, AND THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT**

by

Andrew P. Surya

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Abstract

In 2016 Colin Kaepernick captured the attention of America when he did not stand for the playing of the national anthem before a National Football League preseason game to protest racist police violence. Shortly thereafter, Megan Rapinoe a female professional soccer player chose to support Kaepernick and knelt during the national anthem as well in protest. The media and public reaction towards the athletes was influenced by the racial landscape of the United States in 2016. This thesis is a critical discourse analysis of user generated comments on the social media platform Instagram in response to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest to determine public perception of athlete activism, racism, and other social issues. Utilizing critical race theory, I argue that dominant discourses in opposition towards the athletes reflect colourblind ideologies and appear race-neutral, but in reality reinforce a white racial hierarchy. In addition, I contend that online social media platforms can function as spaces where hegemonic ideologies around race can be contested.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In 2016, National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick gripped the attention of the American public when he chose to kneel during the playing of the American national anthem. Kaepernick stated that the purpose of his protest was to bring attention to the racial inequality pervasive in United States culture and ongoing police violence against people of colour, especially black people. Since before the civil rights movement black people have been fighting for equal treatment in the United States. One of the more recent movements in the fight for equality is the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The BLM movement emerged in 2012 after George Zimmerman, the man who killed unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin, was acquitted for his actions. Since the creation of the BLM movement there have been many high-profile videos of unarmed black men, women, and children being killed by the police (Almukhtar et al., 2016). Since many of the police officers went unpunished for their actions, Kaepernick decided to kneel during the national anthem to bring light to racist police violence in the United States (Almukhtar et al., 2016).

The immediate, dominant reaction towards Kaepernick's protest was one of outrage and anger over his perceived disrespect of the American flag, anthem, and the ideals that they both symbolize. However, some members of the public, media, and athletic community chose to support Kaepernick and his message. One of these athletes was Megan Rapinoe, a white professional soccer player. Rapinoe sympathized with Kaepernick and his message, and also chose to kneel during the national anthem to show her support.

In this thesis, I analyze Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's self-presentation of their protest on Instagram. In addition, I conduct a critical discourse analysis of user comments posted on Instagram in relation to their protests in order to determine the public's perception of athlete

activism, racism, and other related social issues. My analysis of responses to Kaepernick and Rapinoe on their Instagram accounts will elucidate how race, sport, and politics intersect to shape public perceptions of racial injustice and best practices to address it. Furthermore, analyzing user comments on Instagram in response to their protests will provide further insight into how the public perceives athletes who use their platform to protest social injustice.

Rationale

I believe that the protests by Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe are important events for analysis and critique. The high-profile nature of each athlete and the interconnections of their protests between race, sport, and politics provides a unique opportunity to examine the relationship between popular cultural figures and their influence on social issues. With technology advancing rapidly, the use of social media sites to obtain, process, and react to news is steadily on the rise. Citizens and politicians are increasingly using social media to voice their opinions on highly visible and contentious media worthy events. With some celebrities having followers in excess of a million individuals, their messages have the power to influence how many people think and respond to an issue. As such, I believe that celebrity postings concerning racism and user responses to these posts on Instagram can reveal public perceptions around race and racism in the United States. With the increasing number of racialized people enjoying success, such as Barack Obama's election as the President of the United States, there is a growing ideology that racism no longer exists in society. Sport, especially, is seen as one sector where racism has been overcome and no longer influences how individuals are viewed and treated. However, videos of racist police violence and black athletes receiving racist messages online provide evidence that race still matters in today's society. Kaepernick and Rapinoe have

both used the social media platform Instagram as a means to promote their message of social justice around racist police violence.

My thesis will explore how users are responding to these images of athletes in protest to determine the public's perception on race, racism, and athletic based protest. Analysis using critical race theory and the theory of colourblind racism reveals that the discourses produced in opposition to the athletes' protest reinforce a white racial hierarchy that continues to impact the lives of racialized people. In addition, my thesis will contribute to the growing literature on the role that athletes play in social activism against racism as well as the developing field of social media sport research. My first intent in this thesis is to utilize critical race theory about colourblind racism to reveal the increasingly covert way in which contemporary racism operates. Secondly, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge that will help to facilitate a critical and productive conversation around racism and the best practices to address it. In addition, my thesis will contribute to the literature on sport and social media activism by analyzing responses on Instagram and their relationship to ideologies on race. Athletes increasingly are utilizing social media platforms as a means to bring awareness to social justice issues and in conjunction with their cultural capital they have the potential to change hegemonic ideologies that contribute to discrimination and in this case racism. Lastly, I hope to contribute to the spread of anti-racist discourses in society that can be used to contest the notion of a post-racial era in the United States.

Research Questions

My research study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe represent their activism on Instagram?

2. What do public responses to their Instagram feeds suggest about public perceptions of athlete activism, racism, and related social issues?

Background

Kaepernick is a biracial black man who was born on November 3, 1987 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and adopted into a white family soon thereafter (Biography.com Editors, 2016). After moving to California with his new family, Kaepernick quickly fell in love with the game of football. As a star quarterback at the University of Nevada, Kaepernick was chosen in the second round of the NFL draft by the San Francisco 49'ers. He found early success in the NFL and made national headlines when he led his team to within a few plays of winning Super Bowl XLVII in 2013 (Biography.com Editors, 2016). Recently, however, Kaepernick has made national news for an entirely different reason: His decision to kneel for the playing of the national anthem in protest against racist police violence and other forms of racist oppression.

Despite all the attention that his protest would receive, Kaepernick's refusal to stand for the national anthem during the first two preseason games of the 2016 football season initially went unnoticed by the public and the media, perhaps because he was not in uniform for these games. His protest first caught attention when Jennifer Lee Chan tweeted a stadium photo of the anthem ceremonies before the 49'ers third preseason game on August 26, 2016 (Sandritter, 2016). In the bottom of the photo, Kaepernick can be seen sitting on the bench between two water jugs as the rest of his teammates stand for the national anthem (Sandritter, 2016). A few days after Chan's tweet, Kaepernick released a detailed explanation of the reasons for his protest:

I'm going to continue to stand with the people that are being oppressed. To me, this is something that has to change. When there's significant change and I feel that flag represents what it's supposed to represent, and this country is representing people the

way that it's supposed to, I'll stand. This stand wasn't for me. This is because I'm seeing things happen to people that don't have a voice, people that don't have a platform to talk and have their voices heard, and effect change. So I'm in the position where I can do that and I'm going to do that for people that can't. It's something that can unify this team. It's something that can unify this country. If we have these real conversations that are uncomfortable for a lot of people. If we have these conversations, there's a better understanding of where both sides are coming from. I have great respect for the men and women that have fought for this country. I have family, I have friends that have gone and fought for this country. And they fight for freedom, they fight for the people, they fight for liberty and justice, for everyone. That's not happening. People are dying in vain because this country isn't holding their end of the bargain up, as far as giving freedom and justice, liberty to everybody. That's something that's not happening. I've seen videos, I've seen circumstances where men and women that have been in the military have come back and been treated unjustly by the country they have fought for, and have been murdered by the country they fought for, on our land. That's not right.

(Sandritter, 2016, para. 9)

Kaepernick has since faced intense backlash for his ongoing protest, with critics calling him un-American and disrespectful towards 'the troops'.¹ Other critics argue that as the son of middle-

¹ Since the completion of my research Kaepernick remains unsigned by an NFL team and thus out of the league (Heifetz, 2017). In October 2017 Kaepernick filed a grievance under the league's collective bargaining agreement that accuses the league's owners of collusion to keep him out of the NFL (Heifetz, 2017). In February 2019 the NFL and Kaepernick reached a settlement to Kaepernick's grievance against the league and its owners (Tynes, 2019). Kaepernick has remained largely silent and out of the public spotlight since exiting the NFL, but continues to be involved in numerous social justice efforts (Bishop & Baskin, 2017). Just before the start of the 2019 season, the NFL announced the creation of the Inspire Change initiative that will focus efforts on education and economic advancement, police and community relations, and criminal justice reform (Lockhart, 2019).

class white parents, he cannot possibly know about the racial injustice that he protests.

Kaepernick has consistently reiterated that his stand is not anti-American, anti-military, or disrespectful of troops; rather, his goal is to bring serious social issues to light.

After seeing the protest by Kaepernick, a former Green Beret and retired NFL player named Nate Boyer felt compelled to write an open letter expressing his feelings towards the protest and his willingness to listen to Kaepernick's message (Boyer, 2016). Upon reading the letter Kaepernick reached out to Boyer. As Boyer recalls, the first thing Kaepernick said to him was "I want you to know first and foremost, I really do respect the heck out of the military, and I really want to thank you for your service. I just wanted you to know that" (Wagoner, 2016). Over the next 90 minutes Kaepernick, Boyer, and Eric Reid, a teammate of Kaepernick's at the time, discussed their different perspectives on the issues at hand (Wagoner, 2016). During the conversation Boyer showed Kaepernick and Reid a text message from a friend in the military that encapsulated what would become the dominant perspective on the issue. The message to Boyer stated:

Hey brother, at first I was with you on the Kaepernick issue, however I just stood in formation while one of our brothers was pulled off of a plane with our nation's flag draped over a coffin. I had to fight back tears as I saw the pain in the eyes of staff sergeant Thompson's wife and his family. While I would like to sit here and tell you that I rose above it all, I have to be honest, my heart filled with rage. Rage for anyone who takes for granted the ideals of the symbols that we fight and die for. (Wagoner, 2016, para. 6)

Kaepernick understood the point that Boyer was trying to make and said "How can I show respect to people like that, but still get my message across that I'm not satisfied with the way

things are going in this country?” (Wagoner, 2016). Reid who had been supportive of Kaepernick, but who was uncomfortable with sitting, suggested kneeling as an alternative. Reid states that Boyer had shown them text messages from friends saying they were angry about his letter and his meeting with Kaepernick, but that they understood why he was doing it (Wagoner, 2016). Reid goes on to state that these messages all contributed to the decision to kneel rather than sit, to show respect to the people that felt hurt by that specific action (Wagoner, 2016). Boyer agreed with Reid that kneeling would be more respectful to the military (Wagoner, 2016). Furthermore, Boyer also suggested he re-join his teammates during his protest rather than isolating himself like he did in the past (Wagoner, 2016). On Kaepernick’s decision to kneel Boyer’s response to him was as follows:

I told him, ‘It’s a good step, and it shows progress on your part and sensitivity and that you care about other people and how this affects them, their reaction, it’s still definitely a symbol. People take a knee to pray. In the military, we take a knee all the time. It’s one of the things we do. When we’re exhausted on patrol, they take knee and face out. So we take a knee like that. We’ll take a knee as the classic symbol of respect in front of a brother’s grave site, a soldier on a knee. (Wagoner, 2016, para 14).

After the meeting with Boyer, Kaepernick chose to kneel rather than sit during the 49’ers final preseason game on September 1, 2016 (Sandritter, 2016). Kaepernick was reported to have said that he hoped this would allow him to refocus people’s attention on racial inequality rather than on him as an individual (Witz, 2016). Since kneeling has been used as a sign of respect in the military, the decision to switch from sitting to kneeling by Kaepernick was a way to symbolize his reverence for the military, while still addressing issues of racist police violence.

Shortly after Kaepernick's initial protest, other athletes began to join him in the fight for social justice. One of the more high-profile athletes to do so was Megan Rapinoe. Rapinoe is a soccer player who is best known for playing on the US women's national team (USWNT) and the Seattle Reign of the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL). She has become increasingly recognizable for her success on the international stage with the USWNT having won a silver in the 2011 Women's World Cup, a gold in the 2016 Olympics, and back to back gold in the 2015 and 2019 Women's World Cup (Carlisle, 2019). In addition to her team success she also won the 2019 Golden Boot and Golden Ball awards at the World Cup which are awarded to the top goal scorer and best player at the tournament (Carlisle, 2019). Rapinoe is also an openly gay athlete who has spoken out about inequality in sport in the past (McKirdy, 2016). Outside of soccer, she is known for her work with Athlete Ally, an organization that is dedicated to ending homophobia and transphobia in sports (Athlete Ally, 2016). She is also an openly gay athlete who has spoken out about inequality in sport in the past (McKirdy, 2016). Rapinoe initially knelt for the playing of the national anthem on September 4, 2016 before her team played the Chicago Red Stars in a NWSL regular season game. The team's next opponent, the Washington Spirit, who they were due to play on September 7, did not support Rapinoe's act of solidarity with Kaepernick (Associated Press, 2016). In an attempt to prevent her protest, the Spirit moved up the pre-game ceremonies, including the playing of the national anthem, so that they took place before the players took to the field (Associated Press, 2016). Rapinoe continued her protest in her next game, however, at a USWNT match against Thailand. She also knelt for the next USWNT game against the Netherlands on September 18, 2016.

Following these events, she wrote an October 6, 2016 article for the sport media website the *Players' Tribune* where she explains her reasoning for kneeling:

I can understand if you think that I'm disrespecting the flag by kneeling, but it is because of my utmost respect for the flag and the promise it represents that I have chosen to demonstrate in this way. When I take a knee, I am facing the flag with my full body, staring straight into the heart of our country's ultimate symbol of freedom- because I believe it is my responsibility, just as it is yours, to ensure that freedom is afforded to everyone in this country. I have chosen to kneel because in the time it has taken me to write this article, many more Americans have been lost to senseless violence. I have chosen to kneel because not two miles from my hotel in Columbus, Ohio, on the night before our USWNT match against Thailand, a 13-year old boy named Tyre King was fatally shot by a police officer. I have chosen to kneel because I simply cannot stand for the kind of oppression this country is allowing against its own people. I have chosen to kneel because, in the words of Emma Lazarus, "Until we are all free, we are none of us free" (Rapinoe, 2016)

Like Kaepernick, Rapinoe received a lot of negative attention in response to her protest for social justice. Conservative media personality Tomi Lahren called Rapinoe "selfish" and a "crybaby," among other negative comments, in a video on the website theblaze.com (Rodriguez, 2016).

Similarly, when the Washington Spirit were asked why they chose to move up the playing of the national anthem they issued this statement: "We understand this may be seen as an extraordinary step, but believe it was the best option to avoid taking focus away from the game on such an important night for our franchise, while we respect every individual's right to express themselves, and believe Ms Rapinoe to be an amazing individual with a huge heart; we respectfully disagree with her method of hijacking our organization's event to draw attention to what is ultimately a personal- albeit worthy - cause" (Associated Press, 2016). In addition,

teammates of Rapinoe on the USWNT have called her actions a distraction to the team. When Carli Lloyd, a teammate of Rapinoe on the national team was asked about the protest, she stated:

I've had a lot of conversations with Megan, we're both on the same page. We both respect one another. I'm not trying to diss her cause in any fashion. I think it's great. I think she's bringing conversation to the table about some tough situations that are going on in the world. What is a distraction is the actual action of it. People are only talking about the kneeling aspect of it. I think it becomes more of a distraction because it gets our coach involved, our support staff involved and we as a team. We as a team have dealt so many things along the ways whether it's off the pitch or on the field. We can handle it. At the end of the day, we're pros. Whatever us going on, we need to forget about it and just play soccer. But we do want to get back to playing soccer but that's not to say Megan can't continue to pursue what she's pursuing. I love Megan. We're good friends. I've got her support and her back all the way. (SI Wire, 2016)

A major difference between Kaepernick and Rapinoe was that she performed her protest while directly representing the United States as a member of the national soccer team. The U.S. soccer federation, the governing body of the national team, did not directly punish Rapinoe for her actions, but they have since enacted a rule that requires all players to stand respectfully for the national anthem (Williams, 2017). The new rule states "All persons representing a Federation national team shall stand respectfully during the playing of national anthems at any event in which the Federation is represented" (Williams, 2017). Following the 2017 season the NFL enacted an anthem policy which requires all players and team personnel to stand and show respect for the flag and anthem if they are on the field (Seifert, 2018). Players also have the option of remaining in the locker room if they do not feel they can stand for the national anthem

(Seifert, 2018). After resistance from the national football league's players' association the anthem policy was put on hold and was not implemented (Seifert, 2018). The National Basketball Association (NBA) and Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) both have policies that state "players, coaches and trainers are to stand and line up in a dignified posture along the sidelines or on the foul line during the playing of the national anthem" (Seifert, 2018). Major League Baseball, Major League Soccer, and the National Hockey League do not have specific rules specifying player conduct during the playing of the national anthem (Seifert, 2018). Both the rules enacted by the NBA and the U.S. soccer federation as well as the proposed rule by the NFL came after an athlete protested during the anthem. The reaction by the leagues to enact rules that limit the actions of the players during the national anthem signals that they view anthem protests as negative and harmful to their image. The belief in a post-racial world has led to a flawed perception that race no longer matter, yet professional leagues are enacting rules that seek to limit players' actions that may have a racial connection. It should be noted that Kaepernick and Rapinoe are not the first athletes to protest against racist police violence. In 2014, LeBron James and his Miami Heat teammates at the time wore "I Can't Breathe" t-shirts before one of their games as a response to the death of Eric Garner during an arrest by police (McMenamin & Mazzeo, 2014). In 2016, members of the WNBA championship team, the Minnesota Lynx, wore t-shirts that stated "Change starts with us. Justice & Accountability" (ESPN.com news services, 2016). On the back of the t-shirt were the names "Alton Sterling" and "Philando Castile", the Dallas Police Department shield and the phrase "Black Lives Matter" (ESPN.com news services, 2016). The players did this to bring awareness to the racist police violence that resulted in the deaths of Sterling and Castile and the need to fix the problems of racial injustice in America. The protests by the WNBA and NBA players were different than the

protests by Kaepernick and Rapinoe and resulted in a lot less criticism from the media. Since the basketball players' protests only spanned a few days and did not take place during the national anthem they received a lot less criticism from the media as compared to Kaepernick and Rapinoe. Furthermore, the basketball players also received less attention from the media for their actions. While the actions of the WNBA and NBA players have largely faded from the media spotlight, Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's actions are still being discussed today. Based on the preceding examples athlete activism can be viewed by the public in many different ways. Despite having similar messages, the protest by the WNBA and NBA players was received and viewed differently than the protests by Kaepernick and Rapinoe. By analyzing responses to the protest on Instagram I aim to understand how the public views race based athletic protest and if they are reflective of the dominant conservative views on race or resistant towards it.

Chapter Outline

In this thesis, I analyze the comments posted on Instagram as a means to understand how the public views race-based athlete activism. Given the reasons both Kaepernick and Rapinoe knelt in protest, I contend that their activism and responses to it are important sites from which to explore structures of dominance along racial lines. Throughout this thesis I confront claims of racial transcendence and seek to demonstrate the ways in which race continues to play a significant role in the social world. In order to address my research questions this thesis is organized into the following sections. In Chapter Two, I outline my theoretical framework and the methods I employed to analyze user comments created on Instagram. I describe the importance of analyzing sport critically and outline critical race theory as a useful framework to center race as the focus of my analysis. Following that, I describe the theory of colourblind racism to demonstrate the different and subtle ways that racist ideologies can be communicated.

These approaches compliment one another as reading sport critically, critical race theory, and the theory of colourblind racism allows one to specifically examine how particular sporting narratives contribute to cultural meaning on race and racist police violence through the dominant discourses that are articulated. I also utilize Douglas Hartmann's (2000) conception of sport as a "contested racial terrain" to demonstrate the importance of sport and sporting icons in constitution of race, racial identities, and social relations. I provide a brief summary of framing theory and the concept of bottom up framing as a useful model to understanding how individual users are interpreting the protest. Next, I summarize grounded theory and critical discourse analysis as the methods I utilized to organize, code, and analyze the data collected from Instagram.

Chapter Three contains the literature review in which I locate my research as part of the larger body of work that examines the intersection of race and sport. This includes a focus on how mediated depictions of black athletes contribute to ideologies of race that shape a racist social system. I then locate my study as part of the growing body of literature on athlete activism and highlight the important role that athletes have in the formation of racial ideologies. I also outline the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement to contextualize the role that social media and videos of police brutality had in sparking the protests by Kaepernick and Rapinoe. Lastly, I review studies in the area of sport and social media research to emphasize how discourses created on social media can reinforce or challenge hegemonic ideologies around race.

Chapter Four provides an analysis of Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's self-presentation on Instagram in relation to their protest. I focus on how their protest was never against the military, country, or the anthem and how kneeling in other contexts is viewed as a sign of respect and reverence. Following that, I present the findings of my critical discourse analysis to understand

how the public was discursively constructing the protests online. I argue that the discourses in opposition to Kaepernick and Rapinoe are built upon colourblind ideologies that lead to a reinforcement of a white racial hierarchy in the United States. Discourses in support of these athletes help to change dominant discourses by exposing colourblind explanation as false portrayals of black reality. This chapter is dedicated to understanding how users were interpreting and discursively constructing Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest for social justice, and how the discourses in response to the athletes' actions and message relate to the construction of larger racial social structures. Chapter Five reviews and summarizes the main outcomes and key observations made in my analysis, and outlines the importance of examining the public's response towards Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest against racist police violence.

Chapter Two: Theory and Methods

This chapter discusses the conceptual framework I used to assess the discourses produced on Instagram and how they maintained—or undermined—white racial hierarchy. The white racial hierarchy can be conceived as a system of stratification based on race in which those who are viewed as white are seen and treated as dominant and superior (Feagin, 2013). In the white racial hierarchy “whites” occupy the top position and experience the invisible benefits of white privilege (Feagin, 2013). Whites receive benefits based on racial ideologies that keep them at the top of the hierarchy. Therefore, finding ways to maintain and reproduce their privilege and position becomes crucial to preserving their power. The white racial hierarchy shapes, interprets, and explains race related events in ways that result in racial inequality.

As Phillips and Joergensen (2002) argue utilizing Norman Fairclough’s methodology of critical discourse analysis, discourses can be used to maintain unequal power relations. Discourses are the languages and texts used by people that ascribe meaning towards an object and they reflect a point of view towards that object (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). When discourses are voiced publicly they have the potential to influence other people’s ideologies (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). In this thesis, race is viewed as a social construction that is actively shaped and and given meaning by discourses (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). Discourses can communicate a representation of the social world that reinforces past knowledge and views, but if divergent they have the potential to reshape and change the social world for the future (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). Therefore, changes in dominant discourses could lead to changes in the social world and how racial identities are viewed. Analyzing the discourses created by users in response to Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s protest for social justice can reveal how the

public constitutes athlete activism, racism, and other related social issues, and by extension, how it relates to racial structures in society.

In this chapter I first outline the importance of analyzing the response to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest against racist police violence. Second, I describe critical race theory and its key tenets as a framework from which to center and understand the role of race and racism in the responses produced on Instagram. Third, I outline the ideology of colourblind racism and its use in reproducing the current white racial hierarchy. I then utilize Hartmann's (2000) conception of sport as "contested racial terrain" to illustrate the importance of sport and cultural icons in the formation of racial ideologies (p.230). Following that, I outline the concept of framing as a means to interpret the public's perception towards athlete activism, racism, and other related social issues. Lastly, I discuss the method of critical discourse analysis where I describe my data collection and analysis process of determining emergent themes from Instagram comments.

Reading Sport Critically

I understand the protest by Kaepernick and Rapinoe to be an important event for analysis and critique because of the international media attention that it received and the diverse array of reactions towards the two athletes for a non-violent peaceful protest. My analysis is informed by the works of Susan Birrell and Mary G. Macdonald who advocate for reading sport critically. Birrell and Macdonald (2000) write:

Reading sport compels us to read in a different more theoretically charged manner. The methodology of "reading" sport-- that is, of finding the cultural meanings that circulate within narratives of particular incidents or celebrities--also requires attention to the ways

the sexuality, race, gender, and class privileges are articulated in those accounts. (p.10-11)

Reading sport critically can enhance our understanding of the larger world we inhabit by developing our knowledge of social categories such as race and their relationship to power. Mediated cultural events, such as the protest by Kaepernick and Rapinoe, offer a unique site for understanding a specific articulation of power. My own analysis of the comments posted on Instagram revealed the ways in which power and the dominant views on race are articulated in online social media spaces. Birrell and Macdonald's methodology predates the use of Instagram, but I contend that it is still useful for understanding the cultural meanings that are circulated within social media platforms. The discourses that emerge from the comments posted to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's timeline are significant as they influence the way individuals view and think about race, racism, and racist police violence. It is important to consider that cultural spectacles performed by athletes take place during particular historical moments which impact how they will be interpreted and responded to by the public. The national attention that Kaepernick and Rapinoe received for their protest for social justice and the public's subsequent reaction towards the two athletes offers a unique opportunity to critically examine the public's perception towards athlete activism in relation to racist police violence. I have built upon the works of Stuart Hall (1997) who views racial representations as signifying practices that can reflect, extend, reinforce, and in some cases even challenge racial hierarchies. I performed a critical analysis of competing comments posted on Instagram to identify the ideologies from which they stem. It is important to remember that race and racism are part of the everyday experience of racialized individuals (Agyemang, Singer, & Delorme, 2010). Views on race and racism continue to change, evolve, and shift as attitudes and ideologies surrounding these

concepts change as well. Hall reiterates that racism is socially constructed and context specific. He states:

Racism is always historically specific. Though it may draw on the traces deposited by previous historical phases, it always takes on specific forms. It arises out of the present-not past-condition. Its effects are specific to the present organization of society, to the present unfolding of its dynamic political and cultural processes-not simply to its repressed past (quoted in Gilroy, 1990, p.265).

The importance of using a specific event as a point of analytical analysis is precisely due to their uniqueness and their potential to reveal what is occurring at that particular moment in time (Birrell & Macdonald, 2000). Reading sport critically can therefore be an effective means for revealing the unequal power relationships that are embedded in dominant racial discourses, but also for uncovering the counter discourses that seek to challenge the current racial hierarchy and which have been hidden, dismissed, or obscured by dominant discourses (Birrell & Macdonald, 2000). With race and racism central to my analysis, critical race theory provided a framework from which to explore underutilized perspectives on race.

Critical Race Theory

Race and racism have and continue to be contentious issues in the United States. There is a wide spectrum of views on race and racism that has continually shifted over time (Ferber, 2007). As stated before, one of the popular views is the that race no longer matters and that a colourblind outlook is the best practice to overcoming racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). With a myriad of perspectives and views on issues of race, critical race theory offers a framework from which to “read sport” and make sense of racialized issues such as protests against racist police violence.

Given the centrality of race and racism in my thesis as well as its presence in sport and society, critical race theory offered a useful theoretical starting point. In general, critical race theory provides scholars with a theoretical perspective from which to challenge dominant ideologies around race that are often passively reproduced, especially in the world of sport (Hylton, 2010). Critical race theory is structured around several key tenets that have changed and continue to evolve. For my analysis I utilized the following tenets that summarize the key concepts from which critical race theory is structured around. First, critical race theorists argue that racism is normal part of everyday life and therefore should be viewed as a central focus of analysis (Hylton, 2005). Racism does not happen occasionally or sporadically, but is part of the social structure of American society (Hylton, 2005). It is the everyday lived reality of black people that continually reproduces inequality and as such it should be viewed as a pervasive permanent part of how social identity and the social structure are built (Hylton, 2005). Second, race is viewed as a socially constructed category (Hylton, 2005). The concept of race is based on physical characteristics that have no relationship to personality or behaviour, but are often applied as if they do (Hylton, 2005). For example, the stereotypes that black men are inherently dangerous attempts to link behavioural characteristics as a product of skin colour (Hylton, 2005). The categorization of people based upon their race is a product of human thought that has been primarily used to oppress and marginalize (Hylton, 2005).

The third tenet is material determinism also known as “interest convergence principle” (Singer, Weems, & Garner, 2017, p.21). This tenet is based on the concept that racism persist because one group benefits at the expense of another and so there is very little incentive for the beneficial group to want to eradicate it (Singer, Weems, & Garner, 2017). Since the beneficial group is the dominant group, most likely from the benefits gained from a racist society, there is

an incentive to maintain the current unequal racial hierarchy (Singer, Weems, & Garner, 2017). The dominant group utilizes a variety of tools that promote a post-racial society as a means to maintain the status quo (Singer, Weems, & Garner, 2017). For example, incidents of racism are promoted as simply isolated incidents rather than what they actually are; a permanent part of society that is perpetuated (Singer, Weems, & Garner, 2017). Furthermore, the dominant group will only support the advancement of the oppressed group when the benefits from doing so outweigh the benefits gained from their oppression (Singer, Weems, & Garner, 2017).

The fourth tenet of critical race theory challenges dominant ideologies of colourblindness, meritocracy, objectivity, and race-neutrality (Singer, Weems, & Garner, 2017). Critical race theory vehemently opposes the notion of a post-racial society and works to expose the ideologies that allow inequality to persist (Singer, Weems, & Garner, 2017). Critical race theory works to demonstrate how these race-neutral dominant ideologies maintain an unequal white racial hierarchy rather than reduce racism in society by removing race as a possible explanation for the inequality (Singer, Weems, & Garner, 2017). The dominant group benefits in two ways from ideologies of colourblindness; now racism cannot be used as an explanation for inequality, and at the same time the myth of a post-racial society strengthens their dominance (Singer, Weems, & Garner, 2017; Tillotson, 2011). The fifth tenet is concerned with centralizing the marginalized voice (Hylton, 2010). Critical race theory recognizes that racialized issues have two sides that can be divided into the dominant group's and oppressed group's perspective (Hylton, 2010). It is often the dominant group's or white individual's perspective that is seen as truth, which again is detrimental for racialized people (Hylton, 2010). Part of this reaction is based on the fact that the dominant group's perspective is utilized to explain racialized events that are based on stereotypes that have become to be seen as truths (Hylton, 2010). For example,

it is often why police officers' accounts of feeling "threatened" or "in danger" in incidents of racist police violence are believed as truths over the accounts of black individuals because the police accounts align with historical inaccurate stereotypes of black people as inherently dangerous and violent. Critical race theory works to fight against these one-sided perspectives by centralizing and focusing on the knowledge of the lived experiences of racialized people (Hylton, 2010).

The last tenet states that critical race theory is transdisciplinary in nature and recognizes the role of other forms of oppression (Hylton, 2005). Critical race theory recognizes that racism is not the only form of oppression in society and that to only focus on race actually works to exclude other forms of oppression that individuals may experience (Hylton, 2005). Critical race theory seeks to overcome excluding other forms of oppression by considering race in conjunction and as equally important as other form of oppression as they all contribute to shape how one is treated (Hylton, 2005). By considering all forms of oppression as equal and utilizing the lens of critical race theory this can help to facilitate the creation of a more equitable society (Hylton, 2005).

By utilizing critical race theory in my thesis it provided a framework to describe how public reactions towards Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protests work to reinforce dominant ideologies around race, racism, and athlete-based protest. In addition, through my analysis I was able to identify barriers that race based social activists will need to overcome in order to achieve more equality in society. One such barrier is the use of colourblind ideologies to explain racialized issues.

Colourblind Racism

According to Bonilla-Silva (2015) racism produced “races” out of groups of people based on their physical characteristics and is the basis for the claim that race is a socially constructed category. He argues that racism is essentially the actions and behaviours that produce a hierarchy of people based on their racial categorization (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). It is then the racial structure that directly affects the individuals’ lives as races higher in the structure are seen as superior. The racial structure in the United States is responsible for the material advantages for those viewed as ‘white’ and the disadvantages for those who are viewed as ‘non-white’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). The concept of race can be viewed as an invented social category used to delineate groups of people, but it has real material effects that manifest in everyday life in a variety of contexts and spaces (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). The racial structure in the United States shapes how individuals interact with or deal with situations that involve race (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). The white racial hierarchy is maintained through a variety of different techniques, but what remain consistent is that ‘whites’ remain at the top of the hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva, 2015).

As race and racism are understood as social constructions, they are subject to changes and shifts over time. From the overt racism in the pre-civil rights era, to Jim Crow laws, to over-policing and mass incarceration, racism has taken many forms and continues to be fluid and ever-changing (Ferber, 2007). One form that racism has taken in the present context has been termed “colorblind racism”. According to Bonilla-Silva (2015), colourblind racism is an ideology that is centered around the extension of liberal democratic ideals towards racial events in order to produce race-neutral or “colourblind” justifications for their outcomes. For example, he explains that racial segregation in housing is justified through the notion of individual choice and the idea that people should be able to choose where they live (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). What colourblind racism ignores is the historical context and discrimination that resulted in the

segregation in the first place (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). According to Omi and Winant (2014), there is a perception that “race thinking” no longer significantly informs our perceptions, shapes our attitudes, and influences our individual, collective, and institutional practices. Furthermore, Omi and Winant argue that many people believe the most effective way to overcome racism is to simply ignore the concept of race. Ignoring the concept of race unfortunately does not erase the material inequality that it has produced in the past and continues to reproduce today (Tillotson, 2011). Bonilla-Silva (2015) argues that individual prejudice is not sufficient enough to maintain a racial structure of inequality. Furthermore, racism and the racial hierarchy it produces can only be sustained by an underlying ideology that can justify the racial projects upon which the racial structure is built (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Colourblind ideology and the racist social structure in the United States work in conjunction with each other to maintain a white dominated society. The end result of colourblind thinking is the appearance of a race-neutral system that continues to support white dominance (Haney-Lopez, 2006).

The racial structure in the United States is maintained in covert and subtle ways that appear race neutral. According to Bonilla-Silva (2015) the racial structure of the United States is maintained through colourblind ideologies that propose equality, yet continue to position whites at the top of the hierarchy. Bonilla-Silva (2015) proposes four frames of colourblind ideology that are routinely used to express racial events in race-neutral ways. The cultural racism frame explains that racial inequality is due to cultural differences between the races (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Therefore, inequality is not due to racism, but the inherent deficiencies in racialized cultural practices (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). The naturalization frame posits that racial segregation is the result of individual free choice and is not connected to any systemic racist social structure (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). For example, the over-abundance of white male in as CEOs is a result of

individual free choice of those companies and is not related to institutionalized racism or white privilege. The minimization of racism frame builds upon the idea that racism only affected people in the past and that it is no longer a large factor affecting people's lives (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). The final frame is the abstract liberalism frame that takes liberal principles such as equal opportunity, free choice, and individualism, and utilizes them to appear racially progressive when in actuality it reproduces inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). For example, the abstract liberalism frame would reject affirmative action policies on the basis of equal opportunity and individualism, but in reality it reproduces inequality as it reproduces the existing racial hierarchy rather than promoting change (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). More recently, Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) have built upon Bonilla-Silva's work and have proposed an additional colourblind racism frame, the disconnected power-analysis frame. This frame is characterized by the ability of white individuals to appear supportive of anti-racist claims, while evading a critical analysis of their own position and experiences within the racial hierarchy (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017).

Similarly, Haney-Lopez (2006) argues that the new racial hierarchy has three key elements that contribute to a colourblind white racial hierarchy. One element is the continued dominance by white people at the top of the racial hierarchy (Haney-Lopez, 2006). If we are living in a post-racial society then how come white people continue to operate from positions of power in almost every aspect of society (Haney-Lopez, 2006)? A second element is an expansion on who can be viewed as white in society (Haney-Lopez, 2006). White status and the privileges that come with it are now not only limited to those with white skin (Haney-Lopez, 2006). Rather those who adhere to colourblind and other related white racial hierarchy ideology can be extended provisional white status (Haney-Lopez, 2006). Therefore, the dominant group is now structured more along sociocultural ideologies rather than solely physical characteristics (Haney-

Lopez, 2006). The last element is the commitment to a colourblind ideology that promotes inequality, but in actuality prevents effective solutions (Haney-Lopez, 2006). As stated previously, colourblind ideologies are not effective in reducing racism despite their stated commitment to an anti-racist society (Haney-Lopez, 2006).

Likewise, Amy Ansell (2000) argues that the white racial hierarchy is maintained in four key ways. First, a coded language is used to maintain a white racial hierarchy (Ansell, 2000). Rather than use explicitly racial terms the categories of race and racial language are avoided (Ansell, 2000). Instead coded words such as “thugs” are used in discourse to refer to black people without use direct racial terms (Ansell, 2000). Using coded language helps to disguise the racial practices as beneficial to all society without drawing attention to the racial inequality and oppression it results in (Ansell, 2000). Second is a denial of any racist intent (Ansell, 2000). The use of coded language helps here to deny the racist intent of any actions even if it results in inequality (Ansell, 2000). Third is the circumvention of classical antiracist discourse (Ansell, 2000). This characteristic relates to colourblind ideology and the removal of programs such as affirmative action that are meant to level the playing field (Ansell, 2000). Again stating that people should be judged by their character and not their skin colour, as seen in colourblind ideology, merely presents the illusion of equality while resulting in the opposite (Ansell, 2000). Lastly, a shift from race and biological relations of inequality to a cultural explanation of inequality (Ansell, 2000). This characteristic is based on shifting the reasons for inequality from biological to cultural explanations (Ansell, 2000). Rather than biology being an explanation it is actually the dysfunction of black culture that is the root cause of inequality seen in society (Ansell, 2000). The defining characteristics of the current racial structure have made racism

more difficult to identify and locate (Ansell, 2000). The race-neutral language has made racial discourse appear non-racial, but in fact it still produces a racialized effect (Ansell, 2000).

The current racial hierarchy is also maintained in part through the dominant group's belief in a post-racial society amid mounting evidence to the contrary. Despite videos of black men and women being killed by police many still believe that we have reached an era of racial equality. In order for the racial hierarchy to be maintained the dominant group must provide an explanation for these types of racial interactions. Joe Feagin (2013) has written about the white racial frame, which refers to a form of racial framing that routinely privileges white perspectives. Racial framing refers to the racial perceptions, stereotypes, images, and ideologies used to make sense of a given situation or issues that involve racial matters (Feagin, 2013). The white racial frame can be used to justify incidents of police brutality by framing innocent black victims as dangerous criminals and the white officer as defending themselves. The white racial frame allows the dominant group to rationalize the unequal racial structure as well as the processes that maintain a white racial hierarchy (Feagin, 2013). In addition, Feagin (2013) also states that one of the tools that the white racial frame employs is the continual obscuring of attention towards the existence and consequences of racial structural inequalities, and instead offers those who employ the frame a convenient rationale and perspective for maintaining everyday discrimination.

The shifting and fluid nature of racism has resulted in racist discourses that are now more difficult to locate and resist. Race scholars have recognized the importance of unpacking these new forms of racialization as they produce real world effects that proliferate inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011; Cole & Andrews 2011; Douglas, 2005; Lorenz & Murray, 2014). These insights provide a foundation to make sense of why Kaepernick's and

Rapinoe's protest for social justice was met with antipathy and how responses on Instagram worked to contain future threats to the current white racial hierarchy. The world of sport is often seen as a positive progressive force for black men as they have achieved great success, most notably in the professional sports of football and basketball. However, upon close examination sport often reproduces racial inequalities and through the structure of professional sports has also effectively neutralized threats to the white racial hierarchy. Sport and its relation to race should not be viewed in binary positive and negative terms, but should be viewed as space where the shifting meanings of race and racism are reinforced, but also challenged.

Sport as a Contested Racial Terrain

In order to fully understand Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest and its impact it is important to discuss the complex relationship between sport and race. Hartmann (2000) proposes a way to think about the relationship between sport and race. He contends that sport should be viewed as a "contested racial terrain" in which sport is understood not just as a site where racial interests and meanings are inhibited or advanced, but as a site where racial formations are contested and fought over (Hartmann, 2000, p.230). In contrast to past scholarly views on sport as simply reinforcing racial inequality or sport as a positive progressive force, Hartmann argues that viewing sport as a "contested racial terrain" has the possibility to provide a better understanding of the influence of culture on formations of ideologies on race in society (Hartmann, 2000, p.230). Hartmann (2000) argues popular cultural identities such as celebrities and athletes play a central role in the composition of racial identities in society. Popular mediated cultural sites where black people have experienced success and visibility, such as in athletics and entertainment, play a large role in the formation of racial discourses and racial identities (Hartmann, 2000). The visibility of success of black men in athletics has led to the formation of

the stereotype that black men are inherently athletic and therefore should be encouraged to pursue sports (Hartmann, 2000). Despite no evidence linking skin colour and athletic ability, narratives that promote the natural ability of some of the world's most prominent black athletes play a role in the way that black people are viewed and talked about (Hartmann, 2000).

Hartmann (2000) further argues that positive and progressive image of blackness in sport can actually reinforce racial stereotypes, ideologies, and racial hierarchies. Analyzing sport and how positive images of black athletes can work to reinforce negative racial ideologies helps to reveal how black success can be manipulated into a false assumption of a post-racial society (Hartmann, 2000). By highlighting a few instances of black athletes' successes, one may be led to believe that racism is over; however, it is quite the opposite (Hartmann, 2000). In addition, the meritocratic nature of sport can reveal how these race-neutral ideologies do not always lead to equality (Hartmann, 2000). Colourblindness in sport has been shown not to achieve the goals of racial equality in sport and in fact has been demonstrated to be a barrier towards reaching those goals (Hartmann, 2000). Analyzing how these ideologies leads to inequality in sport can help to reveal how they serve as impediment to equality in everyday life (Hartmann, 2000). Lastly, Hartmann (2000) argues sport can act as a site where racial hierarchies can be reinforced, but also actively resisted. Hartmann (2000) emphasizes that racism will not be eradicated unless it is actively resisted. Sport is an area of social life where racialized people have the most power due to their success. The cultural capital in conjunction with the platform that athletes are given through sport media coverage provides popular black players with the power to voice social issues and not be ignored. For as much as sport may reinforce racist ideologies; it has also afforded black athletes a platform and social power from which to fight against it (Hartmann, 2000).

In summary in relation to my thesis, Hartmann's approach has helped to reveal the deeply complex impact that Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest has had on understandings of race within American culture and the need for popular cultural icons in the fight against racism. For as much as sport may reproduce existing racial inequalities that are seen in society, the uniquely racialized structure of professional football and basketball provides athletes with large scale opportunities for social justice and racial change. Due to social media platforms, athletes today are able to connect with the public directly and more rapidly than ever before. Given the rise in videos of racist police violence and athlete activism in response, investigating the public's reaction towards athletic based protest is necessary. Public responses to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest have the ability to influence future athletic based protest as well as challenge or reinforce dominant ideologies around race and racism. Framing theory can serve as a useful tool to examine the public's response to race-based protests.

Framing

According to Robert Entman (1993) framing means to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). The concept of framing, according to Entman (1993), consists of ways of describing the power of a communicating text. Gamson and Modigliani (1987) built upon this concept and write that a frame is a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning" to events and issues that are related. Therefore, the ways in which an event is framed are essential to how the information will be received and interpreted (p. 376). The concept of framing has been mainly applied to traditional media outlets, but more recently has also been extended into online social media research. Matthew Nisbet (2010) has

argued for a new conceptualization of framing that shifts from traditional top-down models as seen in newspaper framing to a bottom up approach. The bottom up model is useful for social media research as it changes the focus of framing from newsmakers to individual citizens who, through their own smartphones can regularly produce online media content (Nisbet, 2010). There has been past research that has utilized the concept of bottom up framing as it relates to sport (Fredrick, Sanderson, & Schlereth, 2017). My thesis makes use of the concept of framing as a means to understand how the public perceives athletic activism as it relates to a race-based protest. More specifically, I analyzed comments on Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's Instagram posts about them kneeling in protest to determine how individuals were framing the protest and by extension what the discourses contained in the frames suggest about athlete activism, racism, and related social issues.

Methods

To investigate what public responses to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's Instagram feeds suggest about activism, racism, and related social issues, I employed a mixed methods approach. I performed a grounded theory thematic analysis of user comments posted to each athlete's Instagram photo related to their protest against police brutality (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Dey, 2007).

Instagram is a free photo and video sharing social networking media platform that is currently owned by Facebook. It was originally created and launched by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010. The Instagram application is primarily accessed through an individual's smartphone, and users can post a photo or video to their profile. Users can pick and choose other users to follow, and photos posted by other users will appear in their photo feeds. In addition, users can "like" photos by double tapping them or by single tapping a heart icon at their base.

They can also post comments to describe their own image or express an opinion about those of other users. Users can also control access to their profiles using the application's privacy functions. They can set their profile to private so that only users who follow their profile will be able to see their posts, and they can also accept or reject other users requests to follow their account. In contrast, public accounts can be accessed and viewed by any Instagram user.

The increasing popularity of Instagram as a social media platform makes it a fruitful site of study. In 2016, Instagram had over 500 million users and more than 300 million of those use the social media platform everyday (Instagram Statistics, 2016). The increasing use of Instagram to report and consume news stories, as well as the ability to comment and voice an opinion on popular news pieces, makes it an important avenue through which to examine framings of, and reactions to, popular news events. Instagram can therefore be viewed as a space where varying discourses on race-based athletic protest, such as that performed by Kaepernick and Rapinoe, can be presented and consumed.

At the time of access, there were 46,333 comments on Kaepernick's photo post and 624 comments on Rapinoe's photo post. The posts analyzed were first published on October 6, 2019, the date Rapinoe posted her Instagram photo of herself kneeling in protest, and continued until no new thematic categories emerged. All posts analyzed were copied into a word document and each individual comment posted on Instagram served as a separate unit for analysis. The postings analyzed spanned approximately 6 weeks. I performed an active reading of the data, which entailed searching for meanings and patterns among the texts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using a constant comparative methodology, user comments were initially sorted according to whether they were supportive or opposed to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's messages of social justice. The focus of the analysis was to analyze reactions to the protest by Kaepernick and Rapinoe on their

Instagram feeds and so only comments that referenced an opinion on the athletes, their actions, or the context surrounding the protest were included for analysis. Comments that did not indicate a textual viewpoint on the protest, such as those only containing emoticons or links to other user profiles, were discarded from data collection. A second close reading of user comments allowed for subthemes to emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Subthemes were named based upon the commenters reasoning for being supportive or opposed to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest. Subthemes were then further refined by analysing comments for word patterns that indicate a similar frame or viewpoint on the protest. For example, comments that referenced the protest as disrespectful towards the 'troops', 'military', or 'soldiers' were subsequently coded together as they indicated the same frame or viewpoint on the protest. I continued my development and refinement of thematic categories until new observations did not afford additional insights or there were no new emergent categories. As is consistent with grounded theory thematic analysis, categorical themes were not determined in advance, but rather emerged as part of the data analysis process (Dey, 2007). A total of 478 comments from Kaepernick's timeline and 345 comments from Rapinoe's timeline were analyzed, coded, and sorted into thematic categories. It should be noted that on September 12, 2016 Instagram introduced a commenting filtering function where users can create a list of words that they find offensive (Tsukayama, 2016). Comments that contain words in the list will then be filtered out and hidden from the user's post (Tsukayama, 2016). It is unknown if Kaepernick or Rapinoe had utilized the filtering function on their accounts to edit out offensive comments or if inappropriate comments were deleted by the athletes. The geographical location as well as the demographics of the users was unknown. Comments produced on Instagram can originate from anyone and from anywhere around the world that has access to a mobile phone and internet connection. However, considering that the

NFL and American football more generally is predominately viewed and played by those in the United States, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of comments were produced by individuals living within the United States or North American more generally. Therefore, based on the preceding assumptions the comments will be analyzed within the context of American culture and influence. Admittedly, the relatively small sample size and the anonymity surrounding the demographic, and geographic locations of the users generating the comments can make it difficult to draw concrete conclusions, but the data gathered does provide insight into larger racial issues surrounding athlete activism and can offer a starting point for more in depth discussions around racism and the best practices to address it.

The discourses on Instagram related to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protests are socially and culturally influenced and both reflect and shape the broader social context of the society from which they emerge (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). Thus, I perform a critical discourse analysis of the emergent themes in order to assess what each discourse suggests about activism, racism, and related social issues. In order to do so, I link the emergent themes to the larger racialized social system of the United States. Instagram users are social agents whose comments constitute discourses on social issues that in turn influence the ideologies surrounding race (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). It is here where critical discourse analysis comes to inform my perspective on discourse, power, and race.

Critical discourse analysis provides methods for the study of the relationship between discourse and social relations in different societal contexts. According to Fairclough (2012) critical discourse analysis is not only the linguistic analysis of texts, but also how those texts are interconnected to social practice and social structures in society. Fairclough (2012) views the use of language, such as text in a book, as a social event in which information is communicated.

Social events are linked to social practices, which are the particular ways of acting or communicating. Social practices can be genres, styles, and discourses (Fairclough, 2012). Genres refer to the specific ways that people act in certain situations, for example interviews (Fairclough, 2012). The genre of interviews requires a certain interaction between interviewer and interviewee, which in turn influences the social event or use of language (Fairclough, 2012). Styles refer to specific social or personal identities that can shape how language is used (Fairclough, 2012). For example, the personal identity of a disciplinary teacher can influence the language that is used depending on whether the individual wants to maintain or resist their associated identity. Discourses are the different ways in which the world can be represented that are influenced by the position and perspectives of the groups with which they identify (Fairclough, 2012). For example, the lives of black people are constructed through different discourses that are based on the position and perspective of the individual or group from which it originates. Social practices or the processes through which discourses are produced, distributed, and consumed are different based upon the social position and perspective of the individual (Fairclough, 2012). Social practices are then linked and influenced by larger social structures (Fairclough, 2012). Social structures are the social organization of people into groups that in turn influences the relationships and interactions between the different groupings (Fairclough, 2012). For example, the organization of a population into different classes affects how each group interacts within itself and with different groups.

Phillips and Joergensen (2002) further explain that Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis methodology is based upon the general idea that languages and texts are structured in patterns depending on the context and society from which they originate. Critical discourse analysis is an examination of these language and textual patterns and how they relate

to unequal power relations in society (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). In the context of my thesis, I examined the patterns and themes that are common in responses to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest and how they contribute to or reduce racial inequality in society.

Critical discourse analysis is built upon five key attributes. The first is that the social world and social interactions are shaped by discursive practices (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). Discursive practices are the processes of communication production and consumption that ascribe meaning to socially constructed categories such as race (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). It is through discursive practices that a person's social world, in relation to race, is shaped both positively and negatively (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). The aim of critical discourse analysis is to examine the role that discourses play in shaping how individuals view the social world (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). The ways in which individuals communicate and consume information about race influences how they interact or approach racialized situations in society (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). Second, the discursive practices that each individual participates in each day both builds the social world that one inhabits but also influences one's communication practices (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). Discourses and how one communicates shape the social interactions that one encounters, but they are also reflective of the specific social context from which they originate (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). As individuals we are all influenced by the social world that we inhabit, which in turn influences how we communicate, and how we communicate in turn helps to shape the social world around us (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). Third, since the social world can vary widely from region to region, in order to properly understand the meanings embedded in discourses they should always be analyzed in the specific social context from which they originate (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). Fourth, discourses can function ideologically (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). As stated previously

discursive practices are the means of communication that provide meaning to categories such as race (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). The discursive practices, or the ways in which certain races are spoken or written about, can become key contributors to the creation of unequal power relations between different groups or races of people (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). Groups of people are shaped by the information that others communicate about that particular group (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). One of the main research focuses of critical discourse analysis is to examine how the information that is communicated about particular groups can lead to inequality in society (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). In the case of race, the information that is communicated about black people shapes a non-black person's ideology about black people, which in turn influences how they treat black people. Critical discourse analysis seeks to understand the ways in which how and what we communicate contribute to unequal power relations in society (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). Fifth, critical discourse analysis is an approach that is concerned with progressive social change (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002). Critical discourse analysis aims to uncover the role that discourses play and how it relates to unequal power relations, with the greater goal of using the information to create more equality and positive change in society (Phillips & Joergensen, 2002).

Utilizing Norman Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis, I analyzed the discourses reproduced on Instagram in response to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protests in order to elucidate how users constructed representations of athlete activism, racism, and other related social issues, as well as the role that these representations play in the maintenance or resistance of a white racial hierarchy. A key feature of Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis that makes it distinct from other forms of discourse analysis is that he views discourse as a "form of social practice which both reproduces and changes knowledge, identities and social relations

including power relations, and at the same time is also shaped by other social practices and structures” (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p.65). Fairclough understands discourse as a way of communication that ascribes meaning to a specific experience from a particular perspective (Fairclough, 2012). The ways in which the protests by Kaepernick and Rapinoe are communicated provide meaning to the event from a particular perspective. The perspectives or viewpoints can then function ideologically to reproduce or challenge unequal power relations. Ideologies are produced and reflected through discourses and are indicative of the ideologies of the groups or individuals producing the text (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). The main goal of critical discourse analysis is to understand the role language use, discourse, plays in the creation of social structures in society (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). In my thesis I analyzed the discourses on Instagram in order to understand the role it plays in the maintenance of racist social structures in society. From a broad perspective the discourses that viewed Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s protest for social justice negatively actively reinforce the current white racial hierarchy, while the discourses in support challenge it.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

The following literature review positions my analysis of Instagram comments in response to the protests by Kaepernick and Rapinoe within existing relevant bodies of knowledge. First, I locate my analysis as part of the larger academic scholarship that examines the intersection of race and sport. The concept of race and racial ideologies are intimately linked to sport within the context of the United States. In this analysis race is defined as a socially constructed category that is used to label people based on the colour of their skin (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Historically, race in the United States has been used to exclude, marginalize, and discriminate against groups of people based on certain hegemonic ideologies that promote racism. The ideologies around race are built through dominant representations of those races. Sport has, and continues to be, one area of society where there is a large number of black people. The representation of black athletes in the media contributes to hegemonic ideologies surrounding race and the need to fully consider the implications that such representations have on racism.

In relation to the field of race and sport, my analysis can be placed as part of the growing body of literature on athlete activism. In today's sporting context, athletes are uniquely empowered with the social, economic, and cultural capital that affords them the ability to influence the beliefs and ideologies of those who follow them (Melnick & Jackson, 2002). With a large number of black individuals experiencing success in sport they are well positioned to challenge dominant racial ideologies. Lastly, my analysis can be viewed as part of the emerging and growing body of literature of social media and sport research. Social media sites, such as Instagram, offer athletes the ability to control the content they produce rather than being filtered through an intermediary such as in traditional media sources. In addition, social media platforms give the public direct access to interact with the athletes. Therefore, social media sites can serve

as spaces for athletes to directly challenge dominant ideologies and as a space from which to evaluate the public's perception of particular issues.

In this chapter, I examine the following; how black athletes have been framed by traditional media sources, the discourses used to describe black athletes, how the frames and discourses relate to broader racial ideologies, and social media and sport research. My analysis of the representations of Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest against racist police violence aims to inform and extend the existing bodies of scholarship around race and sport, athlete activism, and social media sport research. With acknowledgement to gender there is a gap in the literature with regard to female athletes. There has been very little focus on black women athletes in research of black athletes. Furthermore, women's elite professional sport has been unfairly marginalized to the periphery of sports coverage and sports research as well.

Media Framing of Black Athletes

David J. Leonard and C. Richard King (2009) argue that media framing of athletes involved in social activism plays a key role in reinforcing unequal racial hierarchies and ideologies. Media discourses of athletes involved in activism commonly celebrate the actions of past black male athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Jim Brown, Curt Flood and many more (Leonard & King, 2009). The actions of past activist athletes are admired, but are also used to denigrate modern day black athletes for their associations with celebrity culture, hip-hop, and wealth (Leonard & King, 2009). The celebration of past athletic activism works to reinforce a white racial hierarchy by first juxtaposing the actions of today's athletes as bad compared to the good actions of past activist athletes as a means to signal their behaviour as unacceptable (Leonard & King, 2009). Second, it promotes a false narrative of progress and gives support to ideologies of colourblindness as effective means of achieving equality (Leonard & King, 2009). In

addition, media discourses about modern 21st century athletes explain their political inaction as a result of a culture obsessed with greed and ignorance of the past (Leonard & King, 2009).

Leonard and King (2009) argue that what is often left out in these discourses of past athletic activism is any in depth discussion of the athletes' ideals, struggles, and backlash that they faced during their protests. As one example, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf faced severe public criticism for his protest of the national anthem and in a few years was out of the NBA. Media discourses often ignore the past negative treatment of athlete activists as reasons for the modern athlete's political neutrality (Leonard & King, 2009). Furthermore, the racial context of the United States is also often ignored in media discourses as explanations for the inaction of modern day athletes (Leonard & King, 2009). Black athletes who adhere to the white racial hierarchy standards of acceptable behaviour are often more popular among white fans and white owners, which in turn leads to both a financial and occupational incentive to remain apolitical (Leonard & King, 2009). The racial hierarchy and ideologies are further extended by the media continually silencing athletes who do partake in movements for social justice (Leonard & King, 2009).

Leonard and King (2009) argue that the efforts of these modern day athlete activists are often ignored in favour of stories that focus on the criminal behaviour of black athletes. The media creates a particular view of present day black athletes that promotes them as unenlightened, ungrateful, and problematic and uses past athletic activism as evidence of benefits of colourblind ideologies, but in reality it merely obstructs the public from seeing the racist social system from which it originates (Leonard & King, 2009). A study by M. Candace Christensen, Emmett Gill, and Alfred Perez (2016) analyzed newspaper depictions of NFL player Ray Rice's domestic violence case. The authors argue that newspaper discourses related

to the Ray Rice case reflected dominant racist ideologies about black men that not only reinforce a white racial hierarchy but also are used as a justification to control and contain black men (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016). Black masculinity concepts of colourblindness, binary depictions, and commodification were routinely used in narratives of Ray Rice that only portrayed the dominant white view of black men (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016). Reports on Rice did not address the role of race in his case (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016).

Colourblind narratives ignore how the dominant white group has historically constructed black masculinity in a way that promotes violence to both the detriment of black men and the benefit of the white racial hierarchy (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016). Binary depictions of black masculinity work to contain how black men can act as they delineate acceptable forms of behaviour (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016). Those black men who do not adhere to acceptable standards of behaviour as defined by the white supremacist hierarchy are denounced for their actions (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016). Portraying Rice's cases in terms of binary depictions of good black behaviour and bad black behaviour serves the white supremacist hierarchy in two main ways (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016). First, it allows the dominant group to define what acceptable behaviour of black men is, which then allows the white supremacist patriarchy to neutralize any threat to the racial order as unacceptable bad black behaviour (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016). Second, if and when black men return to white defined acceptable standards of behaviour, the white supremacist hierarchy's strategy of control over black men can appear beneficial to society (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016).

Commodification discourses that render black men into objects of monetary value allows the white supremacist patriarchy to shift the focus away from race and towards narratives that help support the containment of black men (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016). By structuring

discourses around the negative monetary impact that Rice's actions will have on his team it serves to obscure the true victim Janay Palmer from view and portrays the white controlled organizations of the NFL and Baltimore Ravens as victims (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016). Furthermore, it promotes a financial incentive for exerting more control over black athletes (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016). The consistent use of stereotypical narratives serves to portray black men negatively and further reinforces a racial hierarchy through presenting a view of black men that is in consistent need of control by those in power (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016). Furthermore, these discourses extend beyond the Ray Rice case into society and present racist stereotypical portrayals as norms that then allow violence against black men and women to become permissible (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016).

A study by Coombs and Cassilo (2017) examined the media framing of LeBron James, not in his most well known role as a professional basketball player, but as an activist. As one of the most popular athletes in the world today, LeBron James wields a significant amount of influence when he speaks (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). The authors were interested in exploring how athletes are covered within sports media on topics outside the world of sport. On November 22, 2014, 12-year-old Tamir Rice was shot and killed by police officers in a Cleveland playground close to where James's Cavaliers played when he was on this NBA team, and not far from where James grew up in Akron, Ohio (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). The location of Tamir Rice's death by police officers was an important factor as many expected James, an Ohio native, to speak up about the issue (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). Through an analysis of online media articles the authors found that the media framed James in his role as an activist that was overall reflective of his cautious approach to activism and social issues (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). Influenced by past discourses on athlete activism, the specific cultural context, and the political

climate of the time, James has approached activism and social issues in a very thoughtful and restrained manner (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). The restrained approach to his activism has resulted in sport media discourses that have, for the most part, framed James positively (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). It is important to note that James' actions are influenced by the discourses around black athlete activism in the past and that his actions influence discourses about athlete activism in future (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017).

The preceding studies are influential to my own work because of the role media plays in how black athletes are viewed, as well as their influence on how athletes act. The media's reconfiguration of racial discourses in ways that reinforce the current racial hierarchy are similar to how the public reconfigures the discourse surrounding Kaepernick and Rapinoe. The discourses are often re-framed in ways that are detrimental rather than beneficial to the athletes when their views do not align with current racial hegemonic ideologies. The media handling of athletes that do not conform to expectations often follows a model that works to obscure the role of whiteness from the narrative and instead focuses on the negativity of blackness. Consequently, the athletes that promote a colourblind ideology are the ones that are portrayed positively in the media. Unfortunately, a colourblind ideology reinforces a white racial hierarchy at the detriment of black athletes.

Whiteness and Colourblind Racism in Sport

A study by Albert Bimper Jr. (2015) investigates the influence of colourblind racism on black college students' athlete experiences. Using a critical race theory perspective, the author reports that colourblind frames of abstract liberalism, naturalization of racism, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism as common themes that affected how the students perceived race and racism (Bimper Jr., 2015). The athletes' experiences with school officials, their education,

and their daily interactions on campus were all influenced by colourblind post-racial ideologies (Bimper Jr., 2015). Bimper Jr. argues that the colourblind frames that the athletes experienced allowed for the dismissal of white privilege and obscured racial realities in ways that can sometimes result in an unknowing support for these racially constraining ideologies (Bimper Jr., 2015). This study provides further evidence that race and racism is systemically a part of all aspects of social life even in the world of sport where the popular view is that race is no longer a factor (Bimper Jr., 2015).

Delia Douglas (2005) argues that ideologies that reinforce whiteness can manifest in many different forms in everyday life. She explores this concept through an examination of how whiteness is communicated through the atmosphere present during tennis matches involving black tennis players Venus and Serena Williams (Douglas, 2005). In the early 2000s Venus and Serena Williams would routinely meet up in the semi-finals or finals of professional tennis tournaments (Douglas, 2005). Due to their sibling relationship, both Venus and Serena would often be accused by the media and other players on the tour of match fixing (Douglas, 2005). Douglas (2005) argues that the immediate credibility of the notion of match fixing between the sisters reveals a racialized narrative that is influenced by historical racial discourses that have positioned black people as untrustworthy. In addition, Douglas highlights how the dominant white racial narrative was positioned as the true version of events by using the power embedded within its invisibility (Douglas, 2005). Tennis has historically been a white dominated sport that situates whiteness and white success in the sport as the norm (Douglas, 2005). The success of Venus and Serena Williams in a white dominated sport ran opposite to racial expectations (Douglas, 2005). Whiteness attempts to restore the racial order through suggestions that the two Williams sisters' success should be valued less because matches against each other were

predetermined (Douglas, 2005). Douglas (2005) further argues that whiteness expressed and reasserted its dominance through the hostile crowd atmosphere targeted towards Serena at the 2001 Indian Wells and 2003 French Open tennis tournament. The lack of decorum during these two tennis matches involving Serena against Kim Clijsters and Justine Henin-Hardenne, two white women, can be read as a racial demarcation of space (Douglas, 2005). The power embedded within whiteness manifested itself through the hostility of the crowd positioning Serena as inferior to her white counterpart and therefore unworthy of the audience's respect, and symbolizes her blackness as unwelcome (Douglas, 2005). The fact that the crowd feared no repercussions for their actions, in addition to the race neutral and victim blaming explanations for their hostility, further reveals the ways in which the power of whiteness can be expressed (Douglas, 2005). The lack of acknowledgment of the role of whiteness in any of these examples speaks to ways in which whiteness can avoid critical examination in racialized situations (Douglas, 2005). The invisibility and normativity of whiteness, especially in white dominated spaces such as tennis, allow for a minimization of racial intent by those in power, which then reinforces the current racial hierarchy (Douglas, 2005). It is the continual denial of racial intent in these atypical racialized situations that reproduces a white racial hierarchy as their ideologies extend beyond the context of the tennis match and into everyday life (Douglas, 2005).

In a more recent study, Hartmann (2007) examined the pervasiveness of whiteness in sport through an analysis of a 2003 incident involving conservative media personality Rush Limbaugh and black NFL quarterback Donovan McNabb. Hartmann analyzes the following statement by Limbaugh as well as the dominant discourses that emerged in response:

Sorry to say this, I don't think he's been that good from the get-go... What we have here is a little social concern in the NFL. The media has been very desirous that a Black

quarterback can do well- Black coaches and Black quarterbacks doing well... There's a little hope invested in McNabb, and he got credit for the performance of his team that he didn't deserve. The defense [has] carried this team.

Hartmann argues that Limbaugh's comment, as well as his defense that the remarks contained no racial intent, signifies a key feature in the power of whiteness (Hartmann, 2007). The normativity of the white dominant perspective in racialized situations in part led to the lack of in-depth explanation by Limbaugh for his statement (Hartmann, 2007). Limbaugh believed that his comments represented a world view about black quarterbacks that was so obvious in nature that it needed no further explanation (Hartmann, 2007). Limbaugh's criticism of McNabb reflects ideologies of colourblindness as well as his comments seek to ignore race and evaluate his play objectively as opposed to the other commentators who Limbaugh believes are giving McNabb a pass on his play in order to ensure the success of a black quarterback (Hartmann, 2007).

Similar to how Serena and Venus were unfairly criticized for their success in tennis, McNabb's praise for his play is also questioned in terms of its legitimacy. The criticism of the success of black athletes may reflect the white racial hierarchy's uneasiness with black success and can be read as a possible attempt to ensure the racial order remains the same (Hartmann, 2007). Hartmann also argues that the response to Limbaugh's comments, while critical, actually work to reinforce a white racial hierarchy (Hartmann, 2007). The dominant response to Limbaugh's comments were that he should not have brought race into the arena of sports because there does not exist any in sport (Hartmann, 2007). The dominant discourse is built upon ideologies that the world of sport is structured on rules of meritocracy and fairness and as such has achieved a post-racial existence (Hartmann, 2007). Hartmann (2007) argues that the criticism of Limbaugh also reflects colourblind ideologies just from different viewpoints. Limbaugh's

comments indicate that he felt the media was allowing race to bias their view of McNabb and that he should call out their violation of colourblind ideals (Hartmann, 2007). The critical discourse around Limbaugh is framed by ideologies that believe colourblindness has led to a post-racial era in sports even though race has and continues to be an influential factor in the NFL (Hartmann, 2007). The deployment of colourblind ideologies in different ways results in the same racist effect as it allows for those in power to promote sports as being devoid of racism while simultaneously being able to pronounce any racial views, positive or negative, as unnecessary (Hartmann, 2007). The fallacies promoted by colourblind ideals allows for the racial hierarchy and white dominance to remain as people are led to believe that racial change is not needed (Hartmann, 2007).

These studies are influential to my thesis as they emphasize how whiteness and colourblind ideologies affect black athletes and the different ways they can manifest in our everyday lives. Whiteness and colourblind ideologies guide the public's perception of black athletes and black individuals. These studies demonstrate that whiteness can operate in the context of a tennis match, in the media, and on college campuses. My own analysis of user comments on Instagram in opposition to Kaepernick and Rapinoe articulate the workings of whiteness in online spaces, and how in conjunction with colourblind ideologies they work to maintain a white racial hierarchy. My project is situated within this literature as it explored how whiteness manifests itself through online discourses surrounding Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest for social justice. It also built upon this preceding literature by locating whiteness and the ideologies it promotes in the context of Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's activism.

Athletes and Activism

Sports continue to play an important role in American society and in the lives of millions. Mega events such as the Super Bowl and March Madness are among some of the most watched events on television (Perez, 2019; Porter 2019). In addition, there are dedicated sports sections in newspapers, and television channels exist that are devoted solely to the coverage of the latest sporting events, and sports are an effective vehicle for disseminating marketing messages, which explains why brands pay millions of dollars to be associated with certain teams and players (Kim & Hull, 2016). Sports is often an escape for many from their normal everyday lives, and is part of the reason for the popularity of sports in the United States. The escape function that sports provides is the basis for the argument that sports and politics should not mix and any disruption of sports is often met with a negative reaction from the public.

Furthermore, many still believe that sports are a universal force of good that is separate from political and social life, but a closer examination shows that sports is intimately entwined with the social and political world. Increasingly, professional sports leagues are becoming more involved in philanthropy as a means to improve their image (Kim & Hull, 2016). The military also uses the popularity of sport to increase support for their war efforts and recruitment (Butterworth, 2005; Butterworth & Moskal, 2009; Butterworth, 2012; Jenkins, 2013; Butterworth, 2014; Fischer, 2014). In some cases, individual athletes are even more popular than their teams and leagues thus commanding even more influence over the public. Athletes occupy a special position within American society, and for black athletes their success in sport empowers them with social, economic and cultural capital (Hartmann, 1996). The influence of sports stars can extend beyond simple admiration for their athletic abilities and can directly impact beliefs and behaviours of the fan base (Melnick & Jackson, 2002). Given their increased visibility and notoriety, sport stars often have the power to become agents of social change and

can use their elevated status in society to become actively involved in movements for social justice (Pelak, 2005).

Simon Darnell (2012) writes that there are different types of athlete activism that can be distinguished by the extent to which they either align or challenge current dominant ideologies. Depending on the type of activism that athletes become involved in, they may have to pay a price for engaging in events that challenge dominant institutions and ideologies (Darnell, 2012). Organizational as well as political isolation, and personal fatigue, are some costs athletes may have to pay when engaging in activism that challenges society's dominant ideologies (Darnell, 2012).

Kaufman (2008) writes about the intense backlash athletes faced when involved in activism. When considered in conjunction with the possible negative effects on their earning potential he argues that this is a possible reason why many athletes do not get involved in controversial social justice movements (Kaufman, 2008). The topics of race and racism continue to be controversial, and athletes that become involved in movements for racial justice are often challenging dominant ideologies rather than aligning with them (Kaufman, 2008). Activism becomes even more politically unpalatable when it occurs during nationalistic and sacred rituals, such as the playing of the national anthem (Kaufman, 2008). Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who raised their fists during the 1968 Mexico City Olympics medal ceremony and national anthem, present one of the most iconic and well-remembered examples of athlete activism (Kaufman, 2008). Smith and Carlos sought to bring attention to the unequal treatment of black people within the United States (Kaufman, 2008). Unfortunately, due to their activism challenging dominant ideologies as well as disrupting the national anthem, the athletes were met with harsh criticism from the media and were eventually run out of the sport of track and field

(Kaufman, 2008). Similarly, NBA basketball player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf chose to remain in the locker room rather than stand for the national anthem (Kaufman, 2008). His justification for this was that he saw the flag as a symbol of oppression and tyranny and that it did not agree with his Muslim religious principles (Kaufman, 2008). He witnessed the oppression of black people in the United States and he used his platform to bring attention to these issues. Like Smith and Carlos, Abdul-Rauf's activism challenged dominant ideologies and took place during a sacred ritual of American culture. Not surprisingly, Abdul-Rauf received harsh criticism from the media and he was out of the NBA within a short few years (Kaufman, 2008).

Scholars note that there was a dead period in athlete activism from 1970-2005, with Abdul-Rauf being one of only a few exceptions, that in part can be attributed to the backlash that past activist athletes received (Cooper, Macaulay, & Rodriguez, 2017). In addition, this period saw a rise in colourblind discourses and the use of prominent black athletes as examples of racial progress, which also contributed to the decrease in athlete activism (Cooper, Macaulay, & Rodriguez, 2017). The visibility of black people in areas of entertainment and sports led to the widespread belief that the United States had entered a post-racial era where issues of race and racism no longer mattered (Cole & Andrews, 2011). This era also saw a rapid increase in the economic success of black athletes (Andrews, 2001). The rising salaries of professional sporting leagues led to economic power for the top black athletes and the potential to leverage that power into social change. Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods are just two examples of black athletes who enjoyed lucrative economic success during this era (Andrews, 1996; Andrews, 2001; Cole & Andrews, 2011). However, they were both careful to remain apolitical in their opinions in order to protect their marketing potential (Andrews, 1996; Andrews, 2001; Cole & Andrews, 2011). Whereas the economic success of Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods serves as a deterrent to be

involved in activism, in the current era, the athlete activists are using their economic power to become more engaged (Andrews, 1996; Andrews, 2001; Cole & Andrews, 2011). The economic value that high profile players such as LeBron James bring to their team, league, and sport allows these athletes to challenge dominant ideologies with less fear of a significant financial or institutional backlash as was seen with Abdul-Rauf, Carlos and Smith (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). In other words, certain high-profile athletes are simply too valuable to punish and keep out of a sport regardless of their activism.

The more recent era of activism is also characterized by technological advancements and the use of social media in organizing activist efforts. A study by Annelie Schmittel and Jimmy Sanderson (2015) explores how NFL players used Twitter to discuss the George Zimmerman murder trial. The results of their study suggest that Twitter and other social media platforms can serve as a mechanism for athletes to engage in activism and start conversations about social justice issues (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015). With the advancements in social media athletes can voice their opinions on social issues to a large audience at any time and from anywhere (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015). Whereas past athletes needed to be interviewed by newspapers or television stations to have their message heard, today's athlete is constantly connected to the public through their smart phones (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015). Social justice organizations have leveraged the power of social media to not only organize protests, but also to expose the racist acts that they encounter and which the dominant group insists no longer exists (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015).

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is one notable social justice organization that utilizes social media to enhance its activism, awareness, and social justice causes (www.blacklivesmatter.com, n.d.). The BLM movement began in 2012 when 28-year old George

Zimmerman was acquitted after shooting and killing Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year old black high school student (Carney, 2016). Earlier on the night of the shooting, Zimmerman phoned the police about Martin, stating that he had seen a suspicious person walking around the neighbourhood (Carney, 2016). The police advised Zimmerman not to leave his car or engage the individual. Martin was walking home from a Seven-Eleven with a bag of skittles and an iced tea when Zimmerman decided to ignore police instructions and confront Martin (Carney, 2016). Zimmerman claims that Martin attacked him and that he only shot him in self-defence, despite Martin not carrying any weapon. Zimmerman was acquitted of the shooting (Carney, 2016) and outraged by this verdict, three black women, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, posted the hashtag #blacklivesmatter on Twitter (www.blacklivesmatter.com, n.d.). Their call to action has since grown into an international movement dedicated to fighting racial injustice.

More recently, the movement focuses on police killings of black men, women, and children, and the lack of accountability for these killings. Videos on social media of unarmed Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and countless other black men and women being harassed and killed by police are characteristic of the current wave of activism. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michele Alexander (2010) outlines how the current system of mass incarceration is a well disguised system of racialized social control that disproportionately targets black men. Today, it is not socially permissible to explicitly use race as a justification for discrimination and exclusion, and therefore the criminal justice system becomes the new way to exclude black men (Alexander, 2010). Black men are incarcerated at a ratio of 6:1 compared to white men, making them easy targets for this form of racial exclusion (Alexander, 2010). While the high rate of black men in jail is a problem, the crisis goes far beyond that. In *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016) writes that that the perpetuation of deeply ingrained

stereotypes of black men is equally as great a problem as mass incarceration. The perpetuation of stereotypes of black men as dangerous, impervious to pain, careless, carefree, and exempt from empathy and basic humanity are what leads to the toleration of police killings without repercussion (Taylor, 2016).

Reflecting on the pervasiveness of racism in the United States, Russell Rickford (2016) discusses how the social landscape has changed in recent years and how it affects the fight for racial justice. The author references how Barack Obama and his election as President of the United States became the symbol of a post-racial American society, and how his rise to office occurred simultaneously with the mass incarceration of black people (Rickford, 2016). The visibility of a black man in the White House created the illusion of racial progress, but such superficial measurements obscure the persistence of systemic racism (Rickford, 2016). Rickford (2016) argues that “mass incarceration and the techniques of racialized policing on which it depends— ‘broken windows’, ‘stop and frisk’, ‘predictive policing’, and other extreme forms of surveillance—have exposed the refurbished, but no less ruthless, framework of white supremacy” (p.38). George Zimmerman claims that the unarmed Trayvon Martin was threatening his life, and that he only shot him in self defence. It is the claim of self-defence against an unarmed black teenager that enables him to escape any repercussion for his actions (Rickford, 2016). When unarmed black men and women are killed and those who are responsible are not held accountable, it signals to society that black individuals are inherently dangerous and black lives do not matter.

The BLM movement is making a concerted effort to use social media to bring videos of racist police violence to the forefront to illustrate the gross injustices that black individuals are facing today. The BLM movement utilizes direct action tactics that are designed to make

individuals uncomfortable so that they are forced to address the racial issues being presented (Hegg, 2015). By disrupting the normal everyday routines of individuals through protests, rallies, and die-ins, and by spreading videos of racist police violence, BLM forces people to confront the issues of police brutality and racism (Hegg, 2015). The success of the BLM movement in garnering national, and even international attention helps to encourage others, including professional athletes such as Kaepernick and Rapinoe, to get involved in the fight for social justice. The overwhelming evidence of racial injustice that people of colour face at the hands of law enforcement are too much to ignore, even for celebrity sport stars who are regarded as privileged individuals and therefore perceived to be exempt from such treatment. Kaepernick is aware that his athletic ability has empowered him with social capital that has propelled him to a level in society where he is revered and watched by millions of fans. Therefore, with this heightened status, 'his life does matter' and his athletic stardom gives him a platform from which to voice these important issues. Over the past few years social media platforms have been utilized by athletes to connect directly with the public.

Social Media and Sport

With the rapid advances in technology and the increase in mobile phone use, the media landscape is shifting from more traditional news sources such as newspapers and television into online social media platforms. These social media platforms now allow users direct access and communication with athletes and vice versa. Twitter and Instagram are both social media platforms through which users can interact with each other. Twitter users communicate through comments called 'tweets' to which other users can respond. Tweets were originally restricted to 140 characters, but in 2017, twitter expanded the limit to 280 characters. Instagram differs from Twitter in that it is primarily a visual based platform where users upload, edit, and share photos

taken with their mobile phones. In addition, users can also comment on photos posted by other users they follow. Unlike Twitter however, Instagram allows its users to post comments of any length. The unrestricted comment character limit can allow users to participate in a deeper collective discussion around cultural events and their meaning, which researchers can then analyze for patterns and trends. There are a number of studies that examine traditional media coverage of race and sport and have found that race does impact how news sources report, frame and cover athletes (Andrews, 1996; Andrews, 2001; Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016; Cole & Andrews, 2011; Jackson, 2014; Lorenz & Murray, 2014). The findings of these studies can be extended and applied to social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram to examine how race impacts and is impacted by online discourses.

To date, there is limited research on the utilization of Instagram as it relates to sport. Most of the sport related scholarly research on Instagram focuses on the self-presentation of athletes, or how teams are using the platform as a marketing tool (Guerin-Eagleman & Birch, 2016; Kim & Hull, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). A study by Ann Pegoraro, Gina Comeau, and Evan Fredrick (2018) examines the portrayal of women athletes by individual users during the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. The study investigates the visual images being circulated by users to identify how users are framing identity, as well as how these images challenge or reinforce gender stereotypes from "the bottom up" (Pegoraro, Comeau, & Fredrick, 2018). The authors find that most of the images portray the women as athletes and that the photos challenge stereotypical depictions of women athletes in the past (Pegoraro, Comeau, & Fredrick, 2018). This study is influential to my own work as it demonstrates how Instagram can be used as a site, albeit in a visual manner, to challenge dominant discourses in society (Pegoraro, Comeau, & Fredrick, 2018). My thesis is built upon the emerging literature that utilizes Instagram as a data

source as I explored how users utilized this social media platform to interact and communicate with Kaepernick and Rapinoe in response to their protest for social justice. The responses on Instagram can reveal whether hegemonic ideologies surrounding race are reinforced or challenged.

While there is limited inquiry into sport related Instagram research, there is a growing body of literature of sport-related Twitter research. More specifically, there are a number of studies that explore the public's perception towards a sporting event through an analysis of user generated tweets. My thesis explored the discourses on Instagram to elucidate the public's perception towards Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest for social justice. The controversy surrounding the protest centered around the dissonant action of Kaepernick and Rapinoe kneeling during the national anthem. As such, Instagram offers a unique site where individuals can express their opinion in response to a mediated image of Kaepernick and Rapinoe kneeling in protest. The images of Kaepernick and Rapinoe kneeling have since evolved into a symbol of resistance against racist police violence. Therefore, the comments in response to these images on Instagram can elucidate the public's perception of athlete activism, racist police violence, racism, and other related social issues.

Social media offers users a chance to interact with individuals from all around the world. The flow of information and knowledge is delimited by social media as users can disseminate ideas within seconds using their smart phones. Therefore, online social media spaces should be conceptualized as platforms where ideas can be put forth, but also challenged and reinforced. A study by Mark Norman (2012) explored this concept through an analysis of the public's consumption and subsequent reaction towards the mediated production of the Canada Broadcasting Company's (CBC) production of the 2011 Hockey Day in Canada broadcast. The

author explores “how Twitter users reproduced or contested dominant discourses about hockey and Canadian culture in reaction to a real-time televised broadcast” (Norman, 2012, p.307).

Norman (2012) concludes that the nature of social media platforms such as Twitter have the potential to build “new knowledge communities” whereby individuals can be brought together to share their knowledge on a topic of interest (p.319). Norman’s (2012) study highlights the ways in which viewers of the Hockey Day in Canada broadcast became ideological producers through their tweets on the social media site Twitter. Viewers would consume the ideological messages promoted in the broadcast and in turn become ideological producers themselves as they reproduced or resisted the hegemonic ideologies in discussions on Twitter.

Similarly, Courtney Szto (2016) analyzes tweets to gain insight into the Canadian public’s reaction towards Hockey Night in Canada (HNIC) Punjabi. The author sought to evaluate the public’s acceptance, ambivalence, or resistance towards Canada’s multicultural identity through the discourses being circulated on Twitter in relation the HNIC Punjabi. Szto’s (2016) study similarly demonstrates how users can reproduce or resist ideologies around nationalism and race on a social media platform. Szto’s analysis finds that a majority of tweets were supportive of HNIC Punjabi and reinforced Canada’s multicultural image and acceptance of racialized cultures, but that there were also comments that pointed to ambivalence and even resistance to the broadcast. The author’s analysis challenges the assumption that sport is a universal force for good that can serve as a common interest to connect people of diverse backgrounds. Rather than as a means to inclusion, sport, and in this case hockey, reveals the limits of a Canadian multicultural identity. Despite sport often being promoted as a place of meritocracy it can also serve to reinforce inequality in society especially in relation to race. Similarly, Hartmann (2000) finds that sport can often reveal the limitations of sport as a

progressive force as it can fail to live up to the ideals of meritocracy that it is often associated with. Due to hockey's historic nature as a predominantly white sport, the appearance of racialized figures in a white space can serve to unnerve individuals at the top of the racial hierarchy, which can then elicit a response to protect their power and privilege. Szto's (2016) findings are consistent with the reaction that McNabb received for being successful at the primarily white dominated position of quarterback and that Williams received for her success in the primarily white sport of tennis (Hartmann, 2007; Douglas, 2005). Szto's (2016) analysis demonstrates that resistance to multiculturalism can manifest in online spaces, but that these can also function as a space for inclusion as well.

Twitter is also being used by scholars to evaluate the public's perception towards athlete activism. Emmett Gill Jr. (2016) led a case study analysis to understand fan views in regard to the NFL St. Louis Rams' Hands Up Don't Shoot demonstration in support of Michael Brown, a black male who was shot and killed by police. The author finds that comments by users could be categorized into two main overarching themes. The first theme relates to the concept of the "good" black male athlete and the users' opinion that athletes should not engage in activism and instead follow the expectations of the white supremacist patriarchy (Gill Jr., 2016). User generated tweets within this theme support concepts of commodification, containment, and criminalization of athletes who protest (Gill Jr., 2016). The second major theme relates to the concept of the "bad" black male athlete and contains comments that supported the five players and their protest (Gill Jr., 2016). The author notes that users who support the athletes' activism were aware of the larger implications of athletes involved in activism and that they did not support the current white supremacist patriarchy (Gill Jr., 2016).

A study by Jimmy Sanderson, Evan Fredrick, and Mike Stocz (2016) similarly examined fan reactions on Facebook and Twitter in response to the “hands up” gesture by players of the NFL team St. Louis Rams in support of Michael Brown. When player’s actions do not align with dominant group values fans can perceive the actions as an attack on group values (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016). Furthermore, the authors found that the group will respond in certain ways as a means of containing the threat (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016). Renouncing their fandom and calling for punishment of the athletes were threat management strategies employed by fans in response to the players’ activism (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016). The authors concluded that online social media such as Facebook and Twitter can function as spaces where group values are discussed and can be transformed in response to athlete activism (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016).

A study by Evan Fredrick, Ann Pegoraro, and Jimmy Sanderson (2018) examines the framing of activist efforts by LeBron James, Dwayne Wade, Chris Paul, and Carmelo Anthony during the 2016 Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly Award Show (ESPYS). The authors perform an analysis of Facebook comments in relation to the activism efforts of the athletes in order to understand how individuals frame athlete activism and how comments reinforce or challenge racism in sport (Fredrick, Pegoraro, & Sanderson, 2018). The authors found users introducing unique narratives related to the call to activism by the NBA players, but that they were influenced by racist stereotypes of the past.

My thesis contributes to the growing social media and sport research by adding my analysis of user comments on Instagram in response to Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s protest against racist police violence. I discuss the themes that emerged from user comments in response to the protest in order to determine the public’s perception about athlete activism, racism, and

related social issues. To do so, I first analyzed the Instagram posts by Kaepernick and Rapinoe to which users are responding.

Chapter Four Instagram Reactions: Reproduction or Resistance

In this chapter I present the analysis of the Instagram posts by Kaepernick and Rapinoe and suggest that their actions and intent were to address issues of racist police violence and were not intended to disrespect the military. I provide a brief overview of how the national anthem became integrated into sports and became associated with the military and then, I outline how kneeling has been used a sign of respect and reverence in different contexts. This will provide evidence that their actions were for positive progressive change, and from a different perspective can be viewed as a peaceful and respectful form of protest rather than as destructive and divisive as so many have labelled it. The last section of this chapter describes the emergent themes derived through analysis of Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's Instagram feeds.

When Kaepernick first sat for the national anthem no one seemed to care or notice the quarterback. When spectators attend sporting events they are often still busy at the concessions, going to the washroom, trying to locate their seats and/or are on their phones during the playing of the national anthem, however, none are labelled as disrespectful or against the military. It was only when Kaepernick vocalized that he was trying to bring more attention to racist police violence through his actions that there was a marked shift in public perception of Kaepernick.

Since the beginning of the protest, the symbol of kneeling has transformed into a marker for those against racist police violence. Similar to the black power salute used by Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the gesture of kneeling during the anthem has become a racialized symbol of resistance against racism and racist police violence. Part of my rationale for choosing the social media platform Instagram was to see how individuals were reacting to the symbolic act of kneeling during the anthem. Instagram provides a visual medium of Kaepernick and Rapinoe

kneeling in protest, and the comments reflect the public's reaction towards their actions and the message behind it.

The practice of facing the American flag with a hand over the heart during the playing of the national anthem is seen by most Americans as a representation of an act of patriotism and an affirmation of love of the United States. Furthermore, standing during the playing of the national anthem has become normalized and naturalized as an act of respect towards the military and is expected during certain social engagements (Forst, 2017). Part of this normalization is due to the extensive relationship between football and the military that will be addressed more thoroughly later on in this thesis. As will be discussed, Kaepernick and Rapinoe disrupted these norms by kneeling during the national anthem. The images of the athletes kneeling in protest is a dissonant act that deviates from the expected norm of standing.

It should be noted that what is viewed as a respectful action is context specific to the location, time, and cultural influences that are associated and linked to the action. Respect in this context is linked to the cultural and historical influence of the military on American values. For example, traditionally in American culture individuals would demonstrate their respect or admiration for the military by standing for the national anthem (Forst, 2017). However, in other countries standing for the national anthem may have a different meaning or association based on that country's historical and cultural influences around the national anthem. Respect can be defined as demonstrating high regard or admiration for something or someone, but it is always subjective to the cultural and historical context surrounding the action and how that influences the individual perspective of the viewer.

To provide context around why kneeling during the anthem was viewed as such a controversial act, a brief history of the anthem and its connection to sport is required. The "Star

Spangled Banner” is the official name of the national anthem and was written by Scott Francis Key in 1814 while watching the Battle of Fort McHenry (Beauchamp, 2017). In 1889 Secretary of the Navy Benjamin F. Tracy called for the song to be played whenever the flag was being raised. The first time the Star Spangled Banner was played at a professional sporting event was in 1918 during the seventh inning stretch of the World Series between the Chicago Cubs and Boston Red Sox (Beauchamp, 2017). Due to the positive reception from the crowd and as the series moved back to Boston, the song was played before the start of each game (Beauchamp, 2017). The Star Spangled Banner continued to be played at baseball games, but only for special occasions such as opening day, holidays, and the World Series. The song was made the national anthem in 1931 (Beauchamp, 2017). The start of World War II and technological advances in public address systems at stadiums saw the playing of the national anthem regularly before every baseball game (Beauchamp, 2017). The playing of the “Star Spangled Banner” at sporting events began as way to generate public support for World War I and World War II, but continued as professional leagues found that infusing sports with patriotic imagery helped to generate support for their leagues as well (Beauchamp, 2017). After the war ended the pregame ritual of singing the national anthem before baseball games had become permanent, and even spread to other professional sports (Beauchamp, 2017). The playing of the national anthem at NFL games was instituted shortly after the end of world war II, but it was not until 2009 that players were on the field for the playing of the national anthem (Beauchamp, 2017). Before this time, players had remained in the locker room until after the anthem was played (Beauchamp, 2017). The playing of the national anthem before professional sporting events in North America is commonplace and an expected part of the sporting experience. The NFL, NBA, Major League Soccer (MLS),

National Hockey League (NHL), and Major League Baseball (MLB) all play the national anthem before games.

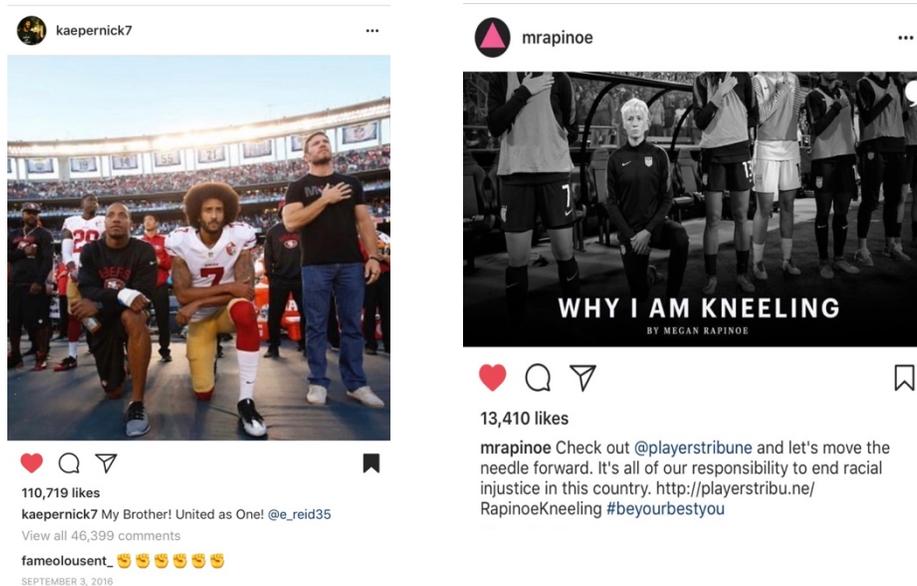


Figure 1. Instagram posts of Kaepernick and Rapinoe kneeling in protest. (Instagram, 2016).

Standing for the national anthem has since become a symbol of respect towards the country, military, and other patriotic ideals. This line of reasoning is built upon the implicit assumption that military members have fought for the ideals symbolized by the flag and the anthem and so to show anything other than respect towards those symbols is to also show disrespect to the people in the military (Martin & McHendry, 2016). The United States has a strong attachment to its patriotic symbols, and any perceived slight towards these symbols usually results in a strong negative reaction. As mentioned previously, black athletes are held to a higher standard than their white counterparts, and this can be evidenced from an incident that occurred during the 2016 Olympics. Black gymnast Gabby Douglas was harshly criticized for not having her hand over her heart during the playing of the national anthem at a medal ceremony (Schilling, 2016). Yet, white swimmer Michael Phelps received no backlash for

laughing during the national anthem at his medal ceremony (Schilling, 2016). Furthermore, at many sporting events there are spectators who are not standing at attention during the national anthem. Fans can often be spotted buying concessions, talking, and walking around during the anthem at sporting events. Fans watching the game at home most likely do not stand when the national anthem is being played on television and yet these individuals are not labelled “disrespectful” for their actions like Kaepernick and Rapinoe have been.

Although the choice to kneel was rarely discussed in the media, scholars have argued that historically the act of kneeling has been used as a symbol of reverence, respect, and humility (Bretherton, 2017). The act of physically lowering one’s body in front of another demonstrates a submission to another person that is more powerful, while simultaneously signifying the lesser significance of the individual who is kneeling (Bretherton, 2017). From a religious context, kneeling is used as a position of prayer as it signifies submission and respect towards God (Bretherton, 2017). In contemporary times, kneeling is commonly associated with marriage proposals, signifying offering one’s self towards another without reservation (Bretherton, 2017). Kneeling during a proposal is an act of submission towards another and elevates that person to a position of power to determine the course of the relationship (Bretherton, 2017). From these perspectives, kneeling is the opposite of disrespectful. In the military, taking a knee in front of a fallen soldier’s gravesite is seen as a sign of respect and it is why Boyer suggested that Kaepernick shift from sitting to kneeling, to be able to show respect while still sending a very important message (Wagoner, 2016).

In a sporting context, kneeling is used in football to show respect to a player who is being carted off the field for injury. In the locker room players often kneel when a coach addresses them as a sign of attention and respect. Former NFL quarter back Tim Tebow made the act of

kneeling on one knee in prayer trendy after he did it following an overtime victory against the Miami Dolphins in 2011 (Kleinstejn, 2011). In fact, “tebowing”, became a word used to define the act of getting down on a knee and starting to pray, “even if everyone else around you is doing something completely different” (Kleinstejn, 2011).

The act of kneeling can be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on the context and intention behind the action. In the case of Kaepernick and Rapinoe, the act of kneeling was intended to bring awareness to racist police violence. The fact that it took place during the national anthem does not mean that the athletes were against the military or the United States. It would be the equivalent of Rosa Parks being against buses just because her protest took place on a bus. The location does not equal the intent behind the actions. Kneeling during the national anthem is only made negative if you do not believe that racist police violence is a problem. The belief in a post-racial colourblind society by the dominant group results in the protest by Kaepernick and Rapinoe being viewed as unintelligible because they see race and racism as no longer an issue. Whether implicit or explicit, the opposition towards Kaepernick and Rapinoe resulted in the maintenance of the white racial hierarchy by discrediting race-based dissent. The ways in which the public responded to and framed the actions of Kaepernick and Rapinoe are not homogenous or straightforward. They involve complex interactions between the military, football, patriotism, and race that spectators interact with and consume as fans of the NFL.

Kaepernick and Rapinoe have become icons of cultural resistance towards racist police violence. Kneeling has since come to symbolize the collective resistance towards racism and police brutality. Since Kaepernick and Rapinoe first knelt, their protest has since spread to other professional sports and even down to the college and high school level with athletes following their lead and kneeling in protest during the anthem (Matiash, 2016). Part of the power and

notoriety behind Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest lies firmly in the context surrounding it. First, Kaepernick and Rapinoe were able to interject the issues of racist police violence into a space that has always been resistance to progressive racial politics. Sport history demonstrates that American sporting society has always been resistant to athletes that have tried to use their platform to voice racial issues, just one example being how Muhammad Ali was thrown in jail for his resistive politics (Jackson, 2014). Second, racist police violence is part of a system where white supremacy and racial inequality exists. The underlying structural racism largely influences the ideologies that informs the response towards Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest. As I will demonstrate in the following section those individuals in opposition to Kaepernick and Rapinoe are actually working to maintain the current white racial hierarchy to ensure that their privileges are maintained.

Analysis of Comments

In this section I outline the key themes that emerged from the analysis of the comments written on Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's Instagram posts. The main purpose of this section is to elucidate how individuals are framing the protest by Kaepernick and Rapinoe, and what these comments reveal about the public's perception of racism, athlete activism, and related social issues. This section will be divided into two main parts. Part one will present and analyze the major themes in opposition to the protest. These narratives construct Kaepernick and Rapinoe as disrespectful, ignorant, divisive, and hypocritical for their protest. Using critical race theory and the concept of colourblind racism, I argue that while appearing race-neutral, the comments actually work to maintain a white racial hierarchy. Part two will examine the themes that supported Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest. These themes indicate an understanding of the racist culture of the United States and promote a counter discourse to the dominant white racial

hierarchy. I argue that athlete activism in conjunction with social media can have the potential to combat racial inequality.

Black Lives Do Not Matter

I am calling the first theme, “Black Lives Do Not Matter” because this theme placed Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s message of social justice as subordinate to the military and reputation of the United States. This theme contains two subthemes: military disrespect; and United States disrespect. Those commenting within these two themes ignored the victims of racist police violence that Kaepernick and Rapinoe were protesting and portrayed the military and the United States as the real victims. The commenters indicate that by kneeling during the national anthem the athletes are being disrespectful towards military service members. With respect to the military, commenters express that it is only because of the sacrifice of the military that Kaepernick and Rapinoe can enjoy the safety of the United States and play a sport for a living, and yet they show their thanks by disrespecting the national anthem and what it represents. In addition, many commenters felt that the freedoms that Kaepernick and Rapinoe have as American citizens are only possible through the sacrifice of the men and women in the military, and that everyone should stand to honour the people that “died for this country”. The following comments demonstrate the perception that Kaepernick’s actions were wrong and disrespectful towards the military:

Stand up you probably aren’t thankful for the people who die for you everyday and you can’t even stand up to honor them for their service to help you have freedom” (posted by: Keaton.r.55)

Thousands of ppl have died for you to even go on that field and allow families to gather on a Sunday night and watch y’all. The least you could do is pay some respect to all the

people that have sacrificed their lives and more things beyond that for you (posted by: Zane.ovo)

Similar comments were posted to Rapinoe's timeline and include:

Hey I hope you are reading this Megan and your not going to like what I say to you. You where born in this country and you grew up here this country gave you everything you need to became a soccer player and I'll be so happy if you get kicked of this team. People died for your freedom and yours so give some respect. You're a disgrace to our country I hate you so much. (posted by: Allstaravanala7)

If you kneel during the anthem, it's disrespectful for the ones who have sacrificed their lives for our country. Stand for those who can't (posted by: meridithsprague)

For these users, the athletes' activism and their message of social justice for the victims of racist police violence is less important than the need to show respect to members of the armed forces. Consistent with critical race theory, the athletes' perspectives on race are marginalized in favor of the dominant group's perspective (Hylton, 2010). Therefore, they frame the military and their country as the true victims while ignoring the larger issue of unarmed black men, women, and children being shot by the police. Users re-appropriate the activism on their own terms and focus on how it affects them rather than trying to understand the deeper message that Kaepernick and Rapinoe were trying to get across. When viewed from a colourblind perspective, racism is no longer a significant issue in society, and so the message of racial inequality can be ignored.

When Kaepernick and Rapinoe chose to protest during the national anthem many users interpreted it as an attack on the American way of life, and therefore a more important issue than the deaths of innocent black men, women and children. The privileging of one perspective over another with regard to racial issues only reinforces a white racial hierarchy and is consistent with

white ideology where the expectation is that their definition is to be viewed as the one true version of events. In this particular instance due to the popularity of the military it can serve as an effective tool to silence a growing resistance to racist police violence as it frames the protest in a race neutral way, but produces racist effects.

The military has become a key feature of American society and is engrained as essential to an American identity. Professional sports in the United States have been used by the United States (U.S.) military to promote a culture of militarism (Moskal & Butterworth, 2010). The playing of the national anthem and the use of patriotic displays at games works to generate support for the sport of football. Similarly, the sport of football, and in particular the NFL, has been used to sustain and extend support for the U.S. military. Ivie (2007) argues that when the military is combined with popular discourses such as sport it works to normalize the actions of the military. The relationship between football and the military allows the culture of militarism in the U.S. to appear as standard and even essential to everyday life. The military uses the NFL as a platform to express militaristic displays that are meant to create an image of overwhelming support for the armed force and, by extension, the nation for which it represents (Moskal & Butterworth, 2010). Spectators are encouraged at sporting events to stand and cheer for military fly-overs and for members of the armed forces who are in attendance. It is this relationship between the military and football that can, in part, explain the backlash that Kaepernick and Rapinoe received as sports has a tendency to transform fans into supporters of the military whether they are aware of it or not.

The parallels between football and the military make it a convenient vehicle to promote a culture of militarism. The sport of football in itself has been used as a metaphor for war (Jenkins, 2013). Having a clear opponent, the goal of acquiring territory from said opponent, and the

sacrifice for a common goal are all descriptions that could reasonably describe both a football game and a country at war (Jenkins, 2013). The relationship between the U.S. military and sport has been a useful tool to emphasize certain ideas around sport and war, while serving to suppress others (Butterworth, 2012; Butterworth & Moskal, 2009). For example, the reunion of a military service member with their family before games or during halftime evokes feelings of happiness and hero worship from the crowd. The highly emotional reunion between family members suppresses discussion around the costs of war, why the military member had to be sent to war, and the reasons for starting the war, as the crowd focuses on the single event - the happy reunion. According to Michael Butterworth (2012) sport is an institution of social life that is commonly viewed as separate from other aspects of the social world. The assumption that the sporting world is distinct and separate from other aspects of social life allows sport to evade critical examination even as it produces and extends problematic discourses (Butterworth, 2012). Thus due to sport's ability to work as an influential form of popular culture and its ability to evade critical scrutiny it becomes an effective means by which to extend controversial discourses such as militarism and war (Butterworth, 2012). Michael Oriard (1993) argues that the ways in which football is described and represented by the media is a large factor in its popularity. The use of masculine traits in conjunction with concepts of teamwork and overcoming adversity as ways to describe the sport of football by the media has led to its attractiveness (Oriard, 1993). Football's cultural influence is further enhanced by its ability to permit people to take part in the sport either as players, fans or through consumption of media depictions (Oriard, 1993). In other words, sport has the power to influence millions of Americans whether they watch the sport or not through the narratives that media outlets create around the sport. Even if you did not watch the Super Bowl the amount of media coverage around the game is likely to influence your views

on the sport. Butterworth (2012) states that football's cultural power works similarly to a public memory in that it has a material effect through the way it influences how people think and view the sport. Football's popularity stems from its link to masculine concepts of power, control, and domination, values that many Americans espouse. As an example, the mythologization of football players as 'warriors of the gridiron' helps to link the sport to masculine ideals and influences people to view the sport positively (Butterworth, 2012). According to Oriard (1993) it is the narratives that surround the sport that are most important to its popularity. Narratives that focus on power and masculinity, while ignoring issues of injury and racism, are part of why football appeals to many Americans.

It is the unique means in which football is described by the media, and not the sport itself, that reinforces ideologies around the sport. Currently, football is still viewed positively due to media portrayal of the sport to the public as one that promotes 'beneficial' attributes of masculinity, teamwork, and self-sacrifice for the team. The U.S. military uses similar means to promote the culture of militarism in the United States by producing narratives that emphasize masculinity and power, and like how football narratives work the public is influenced to view the military in positive terms. The overlap between the NFL and the military has served to benefit both organizations. The NFL incorporates militaristic and nationalistic spectacles in order to create a narrative that the sport of football is an essential part of the American identity. Likewise, the military uses the relationship between war and football to normalize and gain support for its war like tendencies. As Marita Sturken (1997) explains:

The national anthem performed at NFL games is obviously a highly visible method of demonstrating patriotism. However, during the Iranian Hostage crisis, Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, and the terrorist attacks of 2001, the NFL not only used its

game, it used its stadiums, tapped its resources, and even modified its uniforms to honor America, salute her heroes, and inspire patriotism (as cited in Butterworth, 2012, p.250). Similarly, the same overt displays of patriotism can be seen in the NFL games played just after the tragic events of 9/11. These patriotic images of sacrifice have made militarism and the sacrifice of soldiers in the pursuit of freedom normal in American's everyday lives. Standing for the national anthem before professional sporting events in North America has created a climate in which many Americans believe that militarism and soldiers dying in war are a just cost to live "free" in the United States. By equating war and militarism as patriotic it serves to suppress any competing ideas because not many are willing to challenge the dominant popular view of the military. As Butterworth (2012) explains, "when we make myth of war, we also delimit our expression of appropriate citizenship" (p. 254). The numerous displays of patriotic expression seen at NFL games creates an image and narrative of an ideal type of American. In this case, the idealized American is one who is unquestionably patriotic and loyal to their country and one who respects and honours the sacrifice of the men and women in the military as the normal price for freedom in the country. It is the narrative created by the media that gives football and the military its popularity in society. Just as the popularity of football can be used to promote the military and vice versa, the popularity of the military can be used to suppress dissenting opinions as well. Similar to how colourblind ideologies can create a post-racial image of sports that can render individuals unable to see a connection to race in racialized situations, the normalization of patriotic displays can also condition individuals to be unable to see how race can be connected to the anthem or the flag despite Kaepernick's explanation of its link. As seen in the comments, users mobilized a narrative of Kaepernick and Rapinoe hating the military in order to trump any discourse that might question the need to improve the relationship between black people and the

police. The popularity that surrounds the military makes it an effective tool to oppose the protest in a race neutral way as opposing narratives can be framed in defense of patriotism rather than as an attack on social justice.

I argue that patriotism in this instance has become the veil behind which racist attitudes can be conveyed. The insistence upon universal freedom and equality, for which democracy and the United States is known, is restricted to those who are perceived as American. Whites are more closely associated with the U.S. 'ideal American' than any other racial group (Devos & Banaji, 2005). Parker, Sawyer, and Towler (2009) write that "since they are perceived as prototypical Americans, Whites represent the base-line from which other racial groups are then subordinated or seen as less American. Whites then appropriate symbols of U.S. patriotism as a mean of perpetuating domination" (p.197). Whites do so because the public institutions that have elevated and maintained the current white racial hierarchy are represented by national symbols (Sidanius & Petrocik, 2001). Symbols such as the flag and the national anthem in the United States represent the political community that has allowed white privilege to thrive and endure at the expense of racialized communities. The protests disrupt symbols of U.S. patriotism by voicing how only whites are afforded the full freedoms and rights that are supposedly given to all Americans. As Hartmann (2007) states "whiteness is a whole set of ideologies, discourses, and identities that serve to produce and perpetuate existing racial hierarchies and White domination more specifically" (p. 56). The military discourse serves to reinforce the existing racial hierarchy and ensure that white privilege remains intact. Furthermore, this explains why Whites tend to identify more with the flag than subordinate groups do. In other words, the love of country implies the endorsement of the country's racial hierarchy, at least among the dominant groups (Parker, Sawyer & Towler, 2009). The attachment to national symbols and the

white privilege they safeguard can explain why commenters felt a stronger association with the flag and national anthem than they do with Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's message of social justice.

Similarly, within the subtheme of disrespect of the United States, users created a rhetoric that showing respect towards the United States by standing for the national anthem is more important than issues of racist police violence. The dominant narrative of the United States is that it is a country that exemplifies democratic principles and is promoted as a place where the ideals of equality and freedom are afforded to all its citizens regardless of race (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011). In the image of a country that is no longer plagued by the racist practices of its past, America has assigned itself a privileged and superior moral position on the world stage. Based on the rights and freedoms afforded to its citizens as stated in the constitution, many Americans would label the United States as the "best country in the world". Despite both athletes stating that they were not against the United States, many users perceived their actions as an attack on the United States and what it represents, as demonstrated in the following comments posted to Rapinoe's Instagram account:

It is not about race, homophobia, etc. It has to do with our country that we are so lucky as of now to be free in. Take a look at other countries and see what they are going through. Like soldiers, I am a paramedic. I work damn hard for little pay to help people. Our soldiers keep us free just as they have always done. I believe in the 2nd amendment and 5th amendment. Just as you are showing your 5th amendment (allowing to disgrace our country) you would be beheaded in other countries. I lost my brother-in-law in the war who fought for your freedom. The freedom which allows you play soccer for the USA.

Just play for Germany or another country if America is so horrible. (posted by: Aquilafish)

Stand up for the flag/anthem as respect for a country that may not be perfect but is incredibly giving to all its citizens. If you don't believe that and feel that strongly enough that you have to disgrace it on an international level, you shouldn't represent it. Why do you think you are the #1 team in the world and the team is comprised of different races, religious opinions, sexual orientations, etc. Because America have given all of its citizens that benefit. Other countries have not, especially for women! Stand up so that you pull your head out of your butt and look around. Don't be easily misled by statistically inaccurate facts and figures. Do real homework, help where you think it's needed and take pride in your country. (posted by: Dancvmi93)

In line with the military subtheme, users are positioning the United States as the victim. Users are once again ignoring the victims of racist police violence that Kaepernick and Rapinoe are fighting for, and instead are interpreting the protest as an attack on American values. Users have created a discourse where they believe that respecting your country by standing for the national anthem is more important than fighting for the black men and women affected by racist police violence. The belief in American exceptionalism and of a post-racial era in the U.S. can in part explain the backlash that Kaepernick and Rapinoe received. When the athletes' protested they deliberately confronted and challenged the supposedly post-racial meritocratic America. Through their protest Kaepernick and Rapinoe violated what David L. Andrews and C. L. Cole (2011) call "America's unwritten racist code" in which a national critique, particularly in terms of racism, is not allowed (p.29). This may stem from white expectations that black athletes should remain consistently grateful for being given the opportunity to achieve success as well colourblind

ideologies where the invocation of race is seen as detrimental to racial progress. Furthermore, the perception of the protest as an attack on the United States and the military can stem from historical representations of black men as violent and threatening (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016). The inherent assumption of an attack on the United States and the military by users in this theme is similar to how the reactions to Serena Williams's and Donovan McNabb's action were influenced by racist historical representations of black people (Douglas, 2005; Hartmann, 2007). The continual use of racist stereotypes of black people presented in race neutral ways contributes to reinforcement of the white racial hierarchy.

What is consistent between the two subthemes is the expectation of gratitude towards the military and the country for the opportunities they provide American citizens. Despite being white, Rapinoe received similar criticism for supporting Kaepernick and his message. This supports Haney-Lopez's (2006) concept that the current racial hierarchy has expanded its definition of who counts as 'white' along socio-cultural rather than bio-racial lines. By aligning herself with Kaepernick, Rapinoe's views are dismissed as she is not considered part of the dominant group. By positioning the military and the United States as victims, the users are reinforcing the white racial hierarchy in two main ways. First, they minimize black people's experiences of racism within the United States. By routinely ignoring the victims of racist police violence users are effectively sending the message that these issues are not important. The denial of racism, whether actively or passively, has a detrimental effect on the black community while simultaneously privileging the white community. Furthermore, the discourse that the flag and the anthem have nothing to do with race and are only representative of the military and the country points to the power of whiteness in racialized situations. The power to dismiss Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's racial perspective on the flag and national anthem and instead frame the protest

according to the white racial hierarchy's point of view speaks to the power of the invisibility of whiteness. The dominant discourse that the national anthem and flag have nothing to do with race is not framed as the 'white perspective', but as the normal view. Therefore, even though the discourse is racialized from a white racial hierarchy point of view, it appears race-neutral in nature.

Second, the comments also promote a discourse that privileges military casualties over that of black deaths, even though military and black death often occur simultaneously. This analysis does not want to position military deaths as unimportant, but instead argues that they should be viewed as equally important to those of black deaths by police brutality by giving the same time and attention to deaths by the police as we give to deaths in the military. The user *Meredithsprague* comments that by kneeling Rapinoe is being "disrespectful to those who have sacrificed their lives for the country and that she should stand for those who can't." Since Rapinoe stated in her *Players Tribune* article that she is kneeling for the individuals who can't, the innocent black men and women who have died at the hands of the police, the comments reflect a hierarchy of whose deaths really matter. The rhetoric within the comments positions the military as victims of disrespect by two ungrateful athletes who refused to stand. When examined from a critical race theory and colourblind racism lens these comments reinforce a white power logic that continues to view black bodies as subordinate and unimportant, and therefore black deaths as acceptable and, in some cases, as necessary to maintain order. Critical race theory states that race as a social category works to create a racist "other" from which the dominant group can then marginalize to their benefit (Hylton, 2005). Furthermore, the benefits afforded the dominant group in a racial hierarchy provides a reason as to why many would be opposed to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's message of social justice. Dylan Rodriguez (2011)

writes that one of the key features that allows white privilege to continue across different historical moments and shifting political landscapes is the acceptance of the denigration of racist bodies. He states:

The ascendancy of white life, as both a civilizational imperative and affective structure (that is itself not exclusive to “white people”), is preceded and accompanied by a profound familiarity with coordinated human subjection and an intimacy with systemic human fragility. This is how the death of the slave, the native, and the human Other becomes symbiotic with the white subject’s socially produced presumption of entitlement to physiological and spiritual integrity: that death, their death, is tolerable though tragic; it is not cause for emergency even as it suggests disaster; and it finally restates the sanctity of white existence as the earthly project of transcending the condition of unexpected fatality (p. 74).

The discourses circulated on Instagram position a black person’s death as less important than those of the military and therefore helps to reinforce the current racial hierarchy present within the United States. The deaths of black US citizens, at the hands of police are even made more tolerable through the criminalization of black bodies as justifications for their deaths. The white racial hierarchy wants to maintain the current racial order and often does so by framing the United States as a country that does not need improvements.

Maintaining the Racial Order

User comments within the “maintaining the racial order” theme frame Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s actions as criminal and infer that the athletes should be punished for their actions. Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s actions were not illegal in any way and their right to protest is protected by the U.S. constitution. Despite this fact, many commenters called for the two athletes

to be punished, or at least forced to stand. The “maintaining the racial order” theme contains two subthemes: general criticism and “leave the country.”

The general criticism theme contained comments that expressed the users’ displeasure with the athletes’ actions but did not give a specific reason as to why. More specifically, users were adding their ‘two cents’ to both Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s timeline by expressing their displeasure and venting their frustration towards the athletes’ protest. Commenters express targeted criticism of the athletes to illustrate their disapproval of their actions. Comments posted to Kaepernick’s timeline contained insults, death threats, racist comments, expletives, and expressions that he needs to “stand up”. Comments posted to Rapinoe’s timeline contained expletives, expressions that she needs to “stand up”, and that commenters had “lost respect” for her. For instance, from Kaepernick’s timeline the following was written; “You’re a fucking moron. Someone needs to put a bullet in your head” (posted by: Davidgiddens); “I can’t respect someone who won’t stand for our national anthem.” (posted by: Sammeykeith). Similar comments were posted on Rapinoe’s timeline, and included: “Your entire statement was moronic and ignorant” (posted by: Itssecova); and “Just shut up and stand up” (posted by: Drkdiamond27).

With respect to the “leave the country” theme, commenters in this sub-theme declared that if Kaepernick and Rapinoe are so unhappy with the current racial climate of the United States, then they should simply leave and live somewhere else. A central narrative within this theme is the consistent reiteration of the “love it or leave it mentality” by commenters. Many users expressed that if the athletes do not fully love the United States and what it has to offer, then they should find somewhere else to live. The following comments demonstrate the “love it or leave it” mentality by users posted to Kaepernick’s Instagram:

Stand up put your hand over your heart and show some respect for your country or leave and you won't have to worry about" (posted by: Jakednly)

LEAVE AMERICA IF YOU GOING TO DISRESPECT THE NATIONAL ANTHEM (posted by: Devindavis_30).

Similar comments were posted to Rapinoe's timeline:

My grandfather fought for ur right to kneel. Just going to tell u that @mrapinoe... It's idiots like u we don't need in our country. If u don't like our flag or national anthem, THEN GET THE HELL OUT" (posted by: Eric_anderson8)

being white has nothing to do with the issue. I don't break laws, I respect and obey the police officers and I am a productive member of society. That's why I don't have to worry about being mistreated by police. Like I said, if you don't like it..LEAVE!! I'll pay for a one way ticket for you to go back wherever you or your ancestors are from" (posted by: Amber74772000).

For these users, the athletes' activism, and more specifically their alternative perspective on racist police violence, were unwelcome. These comments reinforce the current white racial hierarchy by indicating that a change is not necessary.

Consistent with critical race theory and the material determinism principle, racism advances the interests of the dominant group and therefore there is very little incentive to want to eradicate it (Singer, Weems, & Garner, 2017). As such the protest is framed in a way that seeks to resist the need to critically examine the issues that are the cause of racist police violence. The general criticism of their actions stems from the belief that the United States is serving the interests of all its citizens. These users support the white controlled institutions in society, such as the military and the police, and believe that challenges to these ideologies are unacceptable.

These comments provide further evidence of the damage of a colourblind perspective. These users' colourblind view of the protest makes them unable to conceptualize a society in which racism and racist police violence still exist. As such they interpret the actions of Kaepernick and Rapinoe as disruptive and wrong. The users therefore react defensively to the protest and label it as 'stupid', 'dumb', and firmly believe that the athletes 'should stand'. The unquestioning belief in the benevolent nation of the United States also leads these users to support the disciplining of Kaepernick and Rapinoe. Deaths threats and comments that wished harm towards the two athletes indicate that users believe that Kaepernick and Rapinoe should face some sort of repercussion for their perceived egregious actions. This response is not unexpected as past black athletes who voiced alternative perspectives on the country in relation to race have received similar treatment and calls for punishment (Kaufman, 2008).

In addition, the criticism of the athletes' actions also works to signal acceptable white standards of behaviour. The treatment of athletes who protest speaks to the transactional relationship between athletes and those who consume the sport. Athletes' have been routinely commoditized for their social capital and their productive labour on the field or court (Andrews, 1996). Athletes who are popular with the public are marketed in ways that mute their differences from the current status quo so as to appeal to the largest possible audience (Andrews, 1996; Cole & Andrews, 2011). Unfortunately, when the athlete's profitability begins to decline, for example by voicing an unpopular social view, their differences come to the forefront (Christensen, Gill, & Perez, 2016; Cole & Andrews, 2011). Kaepernick has become a prime example of how the white racial hierarchy maintains its power. By celebrating black athletes who conform to acceptable standards of the white racial hierarchy the media presents a view of the acceptance of black people and a post-racial society. Only two years prior to Kaepernick's protest he was seen as a

rising star in the NFL and was featured on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *GQ* for his popularity (Corsello, 2013; Axson, 2014). Yet, when the behaviour does not conform to white normative standards the individual is denigrated and criticized to signal that their behaviour is not acceptable. The white racial hierarchy employs this tool in the hopes that the individual will return to acceptable white standards of behaviour.

The comments posted to Rapinoe's timeline indicate that the policing of acceptable behaviour is not limited to racialized bodies. Hughey (2010) contends that whiteness maintains its conceptual superiority in two main ways: "(1) through positioning those marked as 'white' as essentially different from and superior to those marked as 'non-white', and (2) through marginalizing practices of 'being white' that fail to exemplify dominant ideals" (p.1290). Rapinoe's statement behind her reasons for her protest clearly do not align with white normative behaviour. Therefore, despite her skin colour she is subject to the same policing practices that were employed towards Kaepernick. Rapinoe is marginalized due to her lack of alignment with dominant forms of whiteness.

The criticism and displeasure expressed by commenters towards Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest for social justice creates a discourse that reinforces a white racial hierarchy. Openly criticizing the athlete's actions signal to Kaepernick and Rapinoe the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and further serves to "other" the athletes' message of social justice as aberrant and isolated. The discourse of disapproval produced by the public reveals that actions that do not conform to white normative standards are not acceptable, regardless of skin colour. Through the marginalization of whites who fail to adhere to hegemonic forms of whiteness, the white racial hierarchy effectively neutralizes white allies of racial equality.

In relation to the "leave the country" theme, users commented that Kaepernick and Rapinoe should leave the country if they believe it so problematic. Commenters are attempting to end any debate or critique of the United States, and in turn its institutions, by emphasizing the "love it or leave it" mentality. Commenters are under the assumption that the United States is the best country in the world, and as such, it is beyond the need for improvement or critique. For these users, the solution for individuals unhappy with the current status quo is to simply leave and find a better place to live. Reacting to the protests, users created a discourse that signals a resistance to change or improvement. Belief in a post-racial society can lead users to believe that Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protests are unnecessary and that there is nothing to improve. In addition, it signals that those who do try to improve racial issues are not welcome in the United States. From a racial perspective, those in support of Kaepernick and Rapinoe are only given the illusion of free choice. Rather than ensure that each person's individual rights and freedoms are being upheld under the law, users are instead presenting those in support of Kaepernick and Rapinoe the freedom to simply move and live somewhere where these issues do not exist. Users are privileging the dominant white perspective and position over those of the athletes. They believe that white lives and white perspectives should be given precedent over the safety of black people. As a result, the athletes are only given one choice to deal with racial matters and that is to simply leave and find a better country to live in. What becomes lost in this particular discourse is that if users are unhappy with two athletes protesting for racial equality they too could leave and find a better country in which to live. In addition, Kaepernick, Rapinoe, and their supporters are being restricted in where they can live in this example as they are clearly not welcome in the United States. Furthermore, since there is ample evidence for the existence of racial inequality, this rhetoric reinforces the white racial hierarchy by positing that the United States will not and

does not need change. As a result, Kaepernick and Rapinoe are perceived as unpatriotic and against American values. The use of patriotism and the “love it or leave it” thinking serves only those in power and dominant ruling classes within the United States. Patriotism is being used as a political tool to both alienate and silence those who want to challenge the current status quo.

Commenters value unconditional love for the United States over trying to improve its problems. Ideologies such as the “love it or leave it” mentality can help to explain how the powerful elite continues to stay in power and how the myth of equal opportunity continues to be reproduced amid evidence to the contrary. The recurrent suggestions that Kaepernick and Rapinoe leave the country serves to undermine their identity as American citizens. Despite both being born in the United States and exercising their right to free speech as explicitly stated in the United States constitution, Kaepernick and Rapinoe are treated as insignificant foreign invaders whose rights should be taken away. The rhetoric that Kaepernick and Rapinoe should leave the country for exercising their constitutional rights helps to reveal the deeply racial construction of appropriate American citizenship. Those who use their rights to support the dominant white racial hierarchy are seen as patriots, while those who use those same rights to oppose racism are deemed foreign and are invited to leave the country. It is as if being born in America does not matter, it is more important that you reproduce the white racial hierarchy. From a critical race theory perspective this aligns with the material determinism principle, where the dominant white group continues to benefit from a white racial hierarchy and therefore will have very little incentive in wanting to remove it. The “love it or leave it” rhetoric works to maintain the racial order and the privileges inherent in a white racial hierarchy.

Furthermore, both the “love it or leave it” discourse and criticism of the athletes’ discourse also protects the white racial hierarchy by discouraging future race-based dissent.

Commenters are demonstrating how athletes who protest will be treated to prevent others from joining their cause. In addition to the criticisms of Kaepernick's actions on Instagram, people also burned his jerseys and in some cases their season tickets as a signal of disapproval of his actions (Boren, 2016). Another way in which racial dissent can be neutralized is by framing the protest as a publicity stunt meant to benefit only the athletes.

Discrediting the Protest

The "discrediting the protest" theme was characterized by comments that question the athletes' justification for their protest, as these users instead believed that Kaepernick and Rapinoe were only protesting to benefit themselves. This theme is comprised of two subthemes: questioning the motive and questioning the method of protest. These comments demonstrate that the users questioned the athletes' motives and believed strongly that they had ulterior motives beyond the social justice angle. Commenters on Kaepernick's timeline focused on his demotion to a backup quarterback role and perceived the protest as a means to remain in the public spotlight to revive his NFL career. Similarly, comments on Rapinoe's timeline framed her motivation for protesting as a means to bring more attention to women's soccer and as a way to boosting her career by being in the public spotlight. The following two comments from Kaepernick's timeline demonstrate the perception that he is only protesting to benefit himself:

You did this to prop up your failing career. How dare you use the struggles of others to save your mediocrity in your chosen profession. You are the definition of a coward
(posted by: jcdubya82)

It's not the fact that you're discriminated. It's the fact that the media shows all the black killings instead of gang wars, robberies, failing economy, the people that actually do serve. Yes there are bad policemen. That's something that we are trying to work on as a

country. But Kaepernick should not be taking a kneel. Cause he's doing the same thing the media is doing. He's getting it for extensions, higher ticket prices, and better ratings. He's not doing something about it. He is saying he is but he's not. He's taking a kneel to the founding of America. He's doing a good thing in a terrible way. And I don't see why he is doing it, he never had to face the hardships of being a black person cause he has been rich his whole life (posted by: will._.wilson).

Comments on Rapinoe's timeline demonstrate similar doubts about the athletes' motives:

You want to make changes? Get off your knee and actually go out and do something.

Bring attention to what needs to be different. This only brings attention to you. Be grateful you live in a country that gives you that right. (posted by: Tayjakeparkersmom)

Your fucking sad, your just using this as a pr stunt to get more attention towards womens soccer and let me say it's not working. Theres many other things you can do, and not only that people die for u and people have dedicated there whole lives for fighting for your rights. And if it wasn't for them you wouldn't be playing this game. Show a little respect. (posted by: Jonesvs6)

With respect to questioning the method of protest, commenters took issue with the protest taking place during the playing of the national anthem. Users focused on the national anthem being the wrong time and place to protest, and many referenced that it actually has a negative impact on racial issues by sensationalizing the problem. Commenters indicate that bringing up the past only serves to divide the nation even more and that Kaepernick and Rapinoe should be focusing on solutions rather than protesting. In addition, many users felt that both Kaepernick and Rapinoe, as professional athletes with ample resources at their disposal, could have found a more effective

way to promote their message that was not so divisive. The following two comments from Kaepernick's timeline demonstrate the users' problem with the method of protest:

@nwamaka2014 he isn't taking a stand. Taking a stand would not be kneeling for the flag salute. Taking a stand is donating for better relationships between cops and citizens, or donating his millions of dollars to donations that help. (posted by: Joe_sils23)

The only thing ur doing rn is sucking a the game of football. Not doing anything to top any of the "oppression" going on. Get out in those communities and organize some football games with law enforcement like the NBA coaches and players r doing. Black people should b taking example from those guys not this loser who hates America. Well, guess what, America doesn't hate u or else u wouldn't b one of the very few to have the privilege to play in the NFL. Scumbag. (posted by: Alex.kern)

Comments posted to Rapinoe's timeline demonstrate a similar criticism of her choice to protest during the national anthem:

Hahaha @vogue.usqnt how can you not see that it's creating a larger divide between people in this country? It's not bringing people together. And THAT'S what we should be trying to do right now. (posted by: Ashliestokes`4)

I feel like if you play for our nation you shouldn't kneel. I feel like the kneeling divided us as a nation and pulls us apart. I don't really feel like it helps your cause. There are several other positive ways that you can share your message and actively be really doing something to impact people. The kneeling tears us apart. (posted by: Shannyk333)

For these users', activism by professional athletes is seen as incompatible and therefore framed the protest as divisive and problematic. Commenters view professional athlete activism as incompatible because they believe that professional athletes are inherently selfish and cannot be

altruistic. From a racial perspective these users are signaling that racist police violence is not an important issue. The comments frame both Kaepernick and Rapinoe as rogue individuals that are using the national anthem to further their careers, though this has since proved to be false.

After the 2016 football season Kaepernick chose to opt out of his contract with the San Francisco 49'ers in the hopes of becoming the starting quarterback for a different team. Kaepernick was unfortunately not given the opportunity to showcase his talents as a quarterback as he was not signed or invited to training camp by another team. Comments by New York Giants owner John Mara strongly indicate that Kaepernick's protest is a factor in him being unsigned by NFL teams. Mara is quoted as saying "All my years being in the league, I never received more emotional mail from people than I did about that issue, *If any of your players ever do that, we are never coming to another Giants game.* It wasn't one or two letters. It was a lot. It's an emotional, emotional issue for a lot of people, more so than any other issue I've run into." (ESPN news services, 2017). Similarly, the NFL team the Baltimore Ravens showed some interest in signing Kaepernick until owner Steve Bisciotti expressed some resistance to his signing. Bisciotti even went so far as to speak to season ticket holders to gauge their reaction to a possible signing of Kaepernick (Hensley, 2017). This indicates that teams are evaluating Kaepernick beyond that of his football talents and are taking into account the potential impact he could have on their fan base. This type of treatment exposes the world of sport as being thoroughly racist and not the beacon of meritocracy many assume it to be. As of the end of the 2018 season, 85 different quarterbacks have been signed before Kaepernick, indicating that his protest for social justice has had more of a negative impact towards his career and has not bolstered it as many commenters felt was the real reason behind his actions (Johnson, 2018).

Rapinoe's protest has not had the same negative impact on her career that it has had on Kaepernick's. She continues to play professionally for the Seattle Reign of the NWSL and is regarded as one of the top female soccer players in the world. Commenters perceived that she was protesting to bring more attention to women's soccer or to bolster her fame personally. Users did question her motives because of the timing of her protest. Commenters felt that she was only protesting because Kaepernick's protest had just been thrust into the national spotlight and that she was using it as a way to become more well known. The inherent sexism present within these comments speaks to the subordinate position that female sports holds in society. In addition, the assumption that women need to resort to sensationalist acts to gain support speaks to the inequality that is so often prevalent in sport.

Furthermore, users indicated that kneeling does not actually help the problem of racism, but only serves to promote herself. These implications do not hold up as Rapinoe has been a staunch supporter of many social justice organizations such as Athlete Ally and the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (Athlete Ally, 2016; GLSEN, 2016). Her past work with social justice organizations and her statement about the reasons for her protest indicate an understanding of being denied rights and freedoms that are supposedly given to every American. The notion that Kaepernick and Rapinoe are protesting for personal and professional gain is in actuality a method that has worked negatively against their careers. The movement of the playing of the national anthem by the owner of the Washington Spirit to subvert the protest indicates a negative view of Rapinoe by that team, and most likely precludes her from playing for that team and other team owners who share a similar view of the protest.

These comments reinforce a white racial hierarchy and exemplify what Ansell calls a "rhetorical circumvention of classical antiracist discourse" (p.30). Circumvention discourses

assert that antiracist programs or any programs that insert race are themselves to blame for the continued inequality seen in society. These discourses are built upon tenets of colourblind ideology that views the elimination of race as the best way to overcome racism. Therefore, when Kaepernick and Rapinoe inject the problems of racist police violence into the national spotlight these commenters feel as though they are exacerbating the problem. The firm belief in colourblindness as the best way to overcome racism leads both these commenters to lash out at the athletes' and to the perception of their actions for personal gain rather than to address racism.

With respect to questioning the method, users are reinforcing the often-used discourse that sport and politics do not mix. In the comments above, users referenced the need for athletes to focus their efforts on other ways to improve inequality rather than protesting. Users inferred that kneeling does nothing to stop the oppression, and that “there are several other positive ways that you can share your message and actively be really doing something to impact people”. These comments do not see the protest as effective in combating racial inequality, and strongly suggest that the athletes find a more appropriate venue to express their opinions. In this case, the appropriate venue, according to users, is through charitable donations or outreach with law enforcement. When viewed through a racialized lens, these users are signaling that athletes should keep racial politics away from sports. There is a perception by users that bringing up racial injustice causes a larger divide between people, but when innocent black men and women are being killed by police the gap is already extremely evident.

The mentality of blaming those who are fighting for racial equality in the face of their own oppression is in part how a white racial hierarchy is maintained. By denouncing threats to the current racial structure and providing alternatives to combat racism that pose no threat to the current order, the white racial hierarchy is preserved. The comments reflect what Haney-Lopez

(2006) writes is one of the keys to the current racial hierarchy, “a colourblind ideology that simultaneously proclaims a robust commitment to antiracism yet works assiduously to prevent effective remediation” (p.148). For example, one user suggested that they “organize some football games with law enforcement” as a better alternative to protesting, but if it does not result in less racist police violence it would not be a better alternative. It is unclear if Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s protest will result in less racist police violence, but at the very least it keeps the issues of racism from being ignored, or worse from it being believed that racist police violence no longer exists in society.

Furthermore, the suggestions that users are offering as alternatives are methods in which white life is not inconvenienced. Part of the sport and politics do not mix rhetoric stems from the fact that an area of white entertainment is being disrupted. This is why athletes are often told to “stick to sports” or that they should “just shut up and play”. Supporters of this rhetoric both neutralize threats to the status quo and keep the entertainment world of sports, which serves as a marker of racial progress, from being further disrupted.

The comments above can also be read as a moralization of the athletes’ actions. Through the policing of actions that do not adhere to white ideologies, the racial hierarchy in the United States is maintained. By characterizing their actions as “misguided”, “shameful”, and “wrong” in conjunction with the suggestion that they act more like the “NBA coaches and players”, users are defining what is acceptable behaviour in relation to racial matters. Additionally, by comparing Kaepernick and Rapinoe to the supposedly “good” activism of NBA players and coaches, users are signaling that their activism is essentially “bad” and therefore should not be supported. Supporting other acceptable forms of black activism also helps to alleviate any notions of racist intent in their demonization of Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s method of protest.

What is prevalent in the comments in response to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's method of protest is that the national anthem was not the right place or time to bring up racial issues in America. However, this then highlights the question of just when the appropriate time is to bring up issues of police brutality and racial oppression. As *USA Today* sport's columnist Nancy Armour writes "Protests by their very nature, are not meant to be popular or even comfortable" (Armour, 2017). The protest brought forth an issue that many Americans had thought was a thing of the past, and that has not been adequately addressed by the current political system. The indication that Kaepernick and Rapinoe should be donating money or volunteering in the community as a way to combat police brutality discounts the fact that many social justice organizations have and continue to do these things, but there is still widespread racial oppression within American culture. These comments also reflect the "white privilege" that whites possess in racial matters. Whites have the privilege to comment that the protest was not the right time or place because it does not affect their lives either way. However, for minorities waiting for a more convenient time to protest can literally result in the loss of a life. Working within the white racial structure that is pervasive throughout American culture has not resulted in justice for the black men, women, and children who have been victims of police brutality. The police officers involved in the unarmed shooting of black individuals have largely gone unpunished by the law, and it is an indication of how the current racial and political system works to protect those viewed as upholding white normativity to the detriment of those who are black (Ellis & Kirkos, 2017).

There are two additional sub-themes within this category, but they differ from the two previous themes in that they only appeared on one of the athlete's timeline. The two subthemes

are: hypocritical of actions from Rapinoe's timeline and a privilege discourse from Kaepernick's timeline.

With respect to hypocritical actions, comments were characterized by Rapinoe's actions being perceived as hypocritical since she protested as a member of the USWNT. More specifically, commenters found it hypocritical of her to criticize the United States, but still take a pay cheque from playing for the national team. The following comments exemplify the users' perception of her actions being hypocritical:

I guess you'll be giving back your paycheck from USA soccer. Your conscience couldn't possibly accept that blood money it coming from a national organization. (posted by: Jerseyjanet)

I just find it hypocritical that you kneel but take a paycheck from the nat'l team... (posted by: Minnieshell)

For these users, Rapinoe's activism is incompatible with her playing for the national team. Users cannot understand how an individual can criticize the United States for not upholding its ideals, and then go out and represent that country on the soccer field. Rapinoe's message is met with skepticism based on the premise that if this were truly an important issue, she would give up her salary as confirmation of her dedication to social justice. What becomes lost in this particular discourse is that Rapinoe has never stated that she is against the United States, the anthem, or the flag, and she therefore should not feel guilty playing for the national team. In addition, it omits the hard work, dedication, and training that she has put in to earn both her salary and spot on the USWNT. Furthermore, it limits athletes who represent their country to unquestionably support said country and its policies regardless of their impact.

With respect to the privilege discourse, comments in this subtheme referred to Kaepernick's privileged upbringing and his status as a professional athlete. Users suggested that due to his background and current profession he could not possibly know about the racial injustice that he is protesting about. The following comments demonstrate the users doubting Kaepernick's personal experience of racial oppression:

This is not your fight your white raised by whites what oppression do you no you were a star athlete that never felt the desperation of the day to day life (posted by: Tonyapa24)

There's no time for social justice warriors in the NFL. I mean why they hell should you complain you're a damn millionaire. In conclusion just play football and stop being a dumbass. (posted by: Meyer_blake)

lol this guy has obviously never been to a place where real oppression occurs. Let's see this punk go do this in Syria. Oh wait, he won't. Just a couple more spoiled millionaires who are complaining about oppression. @kaepernick7 (posted by: Deleted121ddf)

For these users, Kaepernick's economic success as a football player and his middle-class upbringing by white parents serve as evidence of the absurdity of his protest. Users posit that if there was widespread racism within the United States, then he would not have been able to be so successful as a football player. Commenters trivialized Kaepernick as a "spoiled millionaire" who complains about "oppression" as a means to discredit his message. The comments imply that Kaepernick should not be "complaining" about oppression because he himself makes millions of dollars a year and therefore is not qualified to pass judgment. Furthermore, they believe that because of his economic success, Kaepernick is out of touch with the "real world" and the oppression that he speaks about. The overriding discourse related to these comments

suggest that because of his success Kaepernick could not possibly understand the true meaning of oppression, and therefore he is only choosing to protest for his own personal benefit.

The comments reflect an assumption by users that because of his economic success Kaepernick does not experience racism and that only individuals who have experienced racist oppression first hand are qualified to speak up about these issues. Consistent with critical race theory, these athletes' versions of events are seen as subordinate to the dominant group's version of events. Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's perspective is marginalized and deemed illegitimate by these users. From a colourblind perspective, these users are unable to see how racist police violence could be affecting the family, friends, and communities of black players. Due to the privileges that come with the white racial hierarchy, users may not be motivated to learn about white supremacy and racism. For equality to be achieved, the dominant group must be willing to understand their role in racial inequality and be willing to give up their privileged position. It should not be the burden of people of colour to educate the dominant group on how their whiteness gives them access, control, and power over many aspects of society. Furthermore, wealth does not change the colour of one's skin and therefore the assumption that wealth serves as a protective barrier to racism is false. For example, Cornel West (1993) describes in his book *Race Matters* his trouble with getting a cab to pick him up in New York City despite being dressed in a nice suit and possessing wealth. These users do not understand that there is no escaping one's blackness and that race continues to significantly impact the lives of those who are labelled black.

What is consistent between the hypocritical actions and privilege subthemes is the focus on the economic success of the two athletes. For Rapinoe her salary precludes her from being committed to her cause and serves as evidence for her lack of conviction to issues of racist police

violence. For Kaepernick his economic success invalidates him from being able to speak on issues of racism and police brutality. For these users, Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's activism is incompatible with economic and sporting success. The user responses towards Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protests against racist police violence suggests that racism is still not viewed as a significant issue in society. Racism is still viewed as an individualized issue that can be solved with not seeing race rather than as systemic and ingrained in the fabric of society.

Naming Race and Racism

The racial theme only appeared on Kaepernick's timeline and contained comments that denied racist police violence. In addition, users reiterated common stereotypes around black people to explain the recent deaths of black individuals by police and are demonstrated in the following comments:

@shoeashie If you were to attack and kill a policeman, you would and should be in jail regardless of whatever emotion you were feeling at the time. If you were defending yourself against an unwarranted attack, the circumstance is different. If a police officer shot you, circumstance is even more important. Many black teens are shot by police because they attacked the officer, made threatening and aggressive movements during a high-risk incident, and many more justified causes. I can debunk almost all commonly cited cases of "systemic racist police brutality." Also, he doesn't understand what's going on and is directly disrespecting our country and military. Furthermore, he is a stuck-up idiot. Many more deserving people would give anything to be in his place. He's not even that good at football. (posted by: Lit_fam_777)

@blacklivesfuckingmattr first of all what you need to understand it white cops are not out to get black people! Choosing to abandon your freedom to protest for a safe place makes

no sense... when a black lives matter rally comes around you threaten to start killing white cops/people because they are racist. Black men and women who choose to arm themselves illegally and break laws have it coming when they threaten an officer of the law. You can't threaten a police officer and point a gun at them and expect nothing to happen. Police officers are trained to use as much force necessary until they believe the threat is eliminated! So when you say black lives matter then, they don't, start calling yourself blacklivesplatter if you want to keep protesting violence against a flag that men and women have died for so you can have the right to be an idiot... (posted by: Mike_jano)

For these users, Kaepernick's protest is unwelcome because they believe racism does not exist in society and that incidents of police brutality are justified by officers just doing their job. It is interesting to note that the racial discourse only appeared on Kaepernick's timeline and was less than two percent of the total comments. The small percentage of comments that referenced race in relation to a race-based protest indicates the pervasiveness of colourblind ideologies in dealing with racial issues. Users expressed stereotypical portrayals of young black men as dangerous, threatening, and violent towards the police as justifications for their deaths. Ansell (2000) states that one of the four key features to maintaining the current racial hierarchy is through "a shift from a focus on race and biological relations of inequality to a concern for cultural differentiation and national identity" (p.30). Users are placing the blame of police brutality upon the black individuals involved and are attributing it to black culture. For these users, it is not racism that is to blame, but the individuals fostered by black culture who are responsible for their own deaths. Users comments exemplify what Bonilla-Silva (2015) calls "cultural racism" in which blacks inadequate or deviant status in society are viewed as a product of their adherence to

inappropriate cultural values. Denying incidents of racist police violence and shifting blame towards the victims works to eliminate the possibility of racial profiling by the police. Critical race theory states that race and racism are ingrained in the fabric of society, but these users do not see race as a significant factor in cases of racist police violence (Hylton, 2005). The pervasive nature of racism in society can make its detrimental effects invisible to the dominant group or appear as a natural part of society rather than as a process that reproduces inequality.

Studies have shown that Americans demonstrated a systematic bias in their perceptions of the physical formidability imposed by black men (Wilson, Hugenberg, & Rule, 2017). Black men are perceived as more dangerous than a white man of similar build and stature (Wilson, Hugenberg, & Rule, 2017). The racial bias implicit in the perception of an individual's formidability can lead to a black person being more susceptible to increased force in police confrontations. If a police officer suspects an individual to be a threat to their life, physical force may be employed in order to deal with such a threat. Misperception and stereotypical assumptions can be very problematic for black people in that if they are inherently and biasedly seen as dangerous, then the police will more often than not resort more quickly to physical force to deal with what they perceive to be a legitimate threat (Wilson, Hugenberg, & Rule, 2017). Cultural biases based on race influence the subjective nature of determining whether an individual is dangerous. Being black does not make you a violent or dangerous person, though being black does mean that you are seen as more of a physical threat, regardless of whether or not you are following the law (Wilson, Hugenberg, & Rule, 2017). The stereotypical assumptions around black people can explain why in so many unarmed shootings of black individuals, police officers describe their suspects as physical threats that posed a danger to the officers. The comments above reflect that of the white racial hierarchy's view of black life. By

focusing the gaze toward black people, the comments are essentially obscuring the role of whiteness in the incidences of police brutality. The commenters are highlighting the conduct of black people as the problem, while giving the white officers a pass for their actions. When read through a racialized lens, the white officers are given the benefit of the doubt as the black victims are assumed to be guilty. The normalization of the narrative of black criminality and white innocence plays a huge role in the perception of the existence of racist police violence. Bonilla-Silva (2015) states that the racial structure of colourblind racism is built upon “the re-articulation of some racial practices of the past” (p.1362). The use of black stereotypes as a justification for more aggressive police practices leads to the reinforcement of the current white racial hierarchy. The commenters’ interpretation of events of police brutality “naturalizes racialized interactions that privileges white perspectives,” (Lewis, 2003, p.170) and thus removes the white officers from suspicion. The norms that are being presented in the comments benefit the interests of the white racial hierarchy in a country where racial integration has been slow.

Themes in Support

This section seeks to build upon Hartmann’s (2000) view of sport as a “contested racial terrain” in which sport is not just a site where racial interests and meanings are inhibited or advanced, but as a site where racial formations are contested and fought over. My thesis has sought to demonstrate that sports are more “complicated and contradictory” than many would think especially when concerning race. In the preceding section, I have shown how the relationship between the military and professional football has worked to elevate the military to a revered status and how this framing was then used to suppress the protests by Kaepernick and Rapinoe. Furthermore, the nature of professional sports led many to question the motives and methods of the athletes and to the belief by users that race had nothing to do with the protest.

These discourses are especially troubling as they work to sustain a white racial hierarchy not only in sport but in society as well as the racist ideologies from which they are built upon continue to persist long after the games are played. However, despite the inequality that sport can re-produce it does offer athletes a site of resistance. As Hartmann (2000) states “racial struggles occur within areas of social life that are thoroughly racialized because this is where communities marginalized by race often have the most power” (p. 246). This section will examine the themes in support of Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s protest to demonstrate that sport and its athletes can play an important role in combatting racism and that resistance can occur in online spaces.

Kneeling For Those Who No Longer Can

I am calling this theme, “kneeling for those who no longer can” because this theme was characterized by users supporting Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s protest for their message for social justice. User comments indicate that by kneeling Kaepernick and Rapinoe are trying to bring attention to the larger issue of racist police violence and are not being disrespectful towards the military. Users are supporting Kaepernick and Rapinoe because they agree with their message that there is a problem with racist police violence that needs to be addressed. The following comments demonstrate an understanding that racism and racist police violence exist in the United States:

Ok but I agree with him. In America people always say it’s justice for all but tbh it really isn’t for example a white man and a black man can do the same crime and the white men gets less time and the black man gets more time bc he’s black (posted by: Zaniya1456)

What’s wrong is when we stand up for a cause it’s a problem buhh we don’t get Any justice for police brutality. That’s what he’s standing for not disrespecting the flag or the US. (posted by: Jayyy_16_)

Similar comments were posted to Rapinoe's timeline:

If you don't get why she's kneeling you're part of the problem. people can love this country and still be upset over our social injustices (posted by: _elocution_)

Everyone disagrees with what she is doing but she is doing it for equal treatment and she is still be respectful by putting her hand over her heart. She disagrees with what the anthem says about everyone being equal and didn't want to support it. It's not meant to disrespect the people who fought for our country or the people who lost there lives for us. (posted by: Amelia_sperling)

The comments posted to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's timeline praised the athletes for "standing up" against the "hardships and injustices" seen in the United States. For these users, the athletes' activism and their message of social justice is something that is to be commended and applauded. Users agree and understand Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's message that police brutality is an important issue that should be addressed immediately.

Similar to past athlete protests, commenters praised Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's actions and message as a form of truth telling of the black experience within the United States (Jackson, 2014). Commenters demonstrate an understanding that we live in a racist world that has differing outcomes depending on where you are positioned within the racial hierarchy. Bonilla-Silva (2006) explains that real race effects are produced because we live in a racialized social system or hierarchy that disproportionately benefits those individuals who have been racialized as "white" over those who are "non-white". The following comment emphasizes an understanding that black people live a racialized experience that is markedly different from those individuals who are racialized as "white":

Ok but I agree with him. In America people always say it's justice for all but tbh it really isn't for example a white man and a black man can do the same crime and the white men gets less time and the black man gets more time bc he's black (posted by: Zaniya1456).

Consistent with Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's message, the comments reflect an understanding of the "oppression" that both athletes speak of and are trying to address. For these users, they recognize that basic American rights are applied differently to racialized individuals. When unarmed men, women, and children are killed by police officers on video and those officers go unpunished it signals society's acceptance of innocent black deaths. In addition, the use of excessive force by the police is built upon racial stereotypes that lead to a perception of black people being inherently dangerous, criminal, and violent. The racist experience of black people is often minimized or explained through a colourblind lens that places the blame on black culture. Therefore, when Kaepernick and Rapinoe chose to publicly voice these issues users' felt "thankful" for finally being heard, but also for the hope that the problems of racist police violence might hopefully be addressed.

Kaepernick and Rapinoe are fighting for all those who have felt the effects of racism. The athletes' kneeling in protest has become a symbolic act that signifies a challenge to racist police violence. It symbolizes two American citizens exercising their right to protest and expressing their patriotism for the benefit of all. Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos were all eventually celebrated for their social justice activism and yet Kaepernick and Rapinoe who are similarly fighting against racism are vilified for their actions (Jackson, 2014; Kaufman, 2008). As long as there is racial injustice there will be a need for individuals to become symbols of standing up to it if change is to occur.

Right to Protest

The “right to protest” theme is characterized by user comments expressing that Kaepernick and Rapinoe have the right as American citizens to peacefully protest. Users expressed that both athletes have a constitutional right to peaceable protest and not stand for the national anthem, and therefore the athletes should not be treated with hatred for simply exercising their rights. The first amendment of the United States’ constitution states “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment or religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances” (U.S. Const. amend. I). The following comments demonstrate users advocating for Kaepernick and Rapinoe based on their rights as American citizens:

It’s mostly white people threatening him: using the statement “It’s disrespectful to the people who died to give you that Right” but if they gave him the right, why is he not allowed to use it? (posted by: Youngwokeblackgirl)

Wow, some people get really irked by someone exercising their right to protest injustice in this country. If you don’t like Americans protesting, mayhaps you should reconsider your understanding of what “freedom” actually means. (posted by: Djshiva)

Commenters continually emphasized that Kaepernick and Rapinoe both have the freedom and right to free speech presumably in response to the critics who have articulated that both athletes should be forced to stand, and their opinions silenced. Users are questioning the meaning of freedom within the United States if law abiding citizens are being openly criticized for voicing their opinions. More profoundly, it speaks to the core message that sparked Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s protest, the realization that freedom should be afforded to everyone in the United States, and that it simply is not.

Users also presented a counter-discourse to the dominant narrative that the athletes' actions were disrespectful towards the military. Commenters showed support for the protest through references to the military. Users argued that military veterans fought for American rights and freedoms, and that it is paying tribute to their sacrifice to exercise those freedoms to further social justice. Military veterans also rose to the defense of Kaepernick after seeing headlines that cited the military as the reason to hate and denigrate the quarterback. One military veteran that rose to the defense of Kaepernick was U.S. Army Veteran Robert Allen Smith. After seeing people burning Kaepernick jerseys with the military being the main motivation, Smith felt compelled to write a letter as a way for he and other veterans to counter that reasoning. In his letter Smith counters the narrative that athletes protesting is disrespectful towards the military stating:

Far from an anomaly, athletes leading social change has been the norm in America. The right for those athletes, and all Americans, to protest is one we all pledged to defend with our lives if necessary. Far from disrespecting our troops, there is no finer form of appreciation for our sacrifice than for Americans to enthusiastically exercise their freedom of speech (Walker, 2016).

The letter was signed by numerous military veterans in support of Kaepernick and others who have protested for social justice. The comments similarly reflect the message stated in Smith's letter, that Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protests were not disrespectful but a celebration of the rights and freedoms that the military has fought to defend.

Users are also actively creating a counter-discourse that locates and exposes the hierarchy of whiteness. By commenting on whiteness and the privileges that come with it, users are seeking to take some of its power. The power of the white racial hierarchy lies in its ability to

remain hidden and unspoken. By making whiteness visible, the ways in which the racial hierarchy is reproduced can be illuminated. The use of the military, the flag, and the anthem conceals the fact that whiteness is the standard from which Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's behaviour is being labelled unacceptable and deviant. Furthermore, it absolves whiteness from blame for creating the conditions that sparked the protest in the first place while also regulating future black dissent. Users are trying to fight back against racist police violence by locating white privilege and pointing out how individuals who adhere to the white racial hierarchy are viewed as legitimate, while those who fight against the white racial hierarchy have to fight to be recognized as lawful.

While most of the comments within this theme are supportive of Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's main message, some were in opposition but supported their right to freedom of speech. For example:

Dear Kaepernick, I am sending you this message to tell you that even though I may not agree with you! As a civilized human being I still respect you and defend your right to protest!!! In what you believe in! I hate the way everybody is treating you!!! If I was in your shoes I would not like to be treated that way either!!! I admire your strength and courage!!! Always be true to yourself!!! (posted by: Abbatiellofrank)

My dad dies for this country and he was black so if you don't think America honors people of color your wrong, but you got the freedom of speech that's what makes this country so great, so honor it (posted by: Jakeywilkes61)

The comments above, while not necessarily in support of the motivation or method behind the protest, are respectful of the athletes and their constitutional right to voice their opinion. This reaction was a common response by many athletes and sport media commentators to

Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest. NFL quarterback Drew Brees expressed a similar reaction when commenting on the protest. He states "I disagree. I wholeheartedly disagree. Not that he wants to speak out about a very important issue. No, he can speak out about a very important issue. But there's plenty of other ways that you can do that in a peaceful manner that doesn't involved being disrespectful to the American flag" (Flaherty, 2017). Comments such as these appear partly supportive of the protest, but in actuality work to reinforce the white racial hierarchy. These commenters are only supportive of the right to protest but not necessarily the message behind them. Therefore, limitations on the location and method of protest are imposed to limits the protest's effectiveness. Kaepernick and Rapinoe technically have the right to protest, but any real use of that right against racist police violence threatens the white racial hierarchy and is consequently labelled "disrespectful" and "divisive" in order to limit its success. The ability of the white racial hierarchy to define which protests are acceptable and which are not ultimately leaves athletes seeking racial justice with no acceptable or effective methods of resistance. The discourses in support of Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest reveal the "depth of problems of race and racism within American culture" (Hartmann, 2000, p.246). The commenters have emphasized the contradictory and racist nature of a country that routinely values "freedom" but then seeks to control and silence those who point out its shortcomings.

Gratitude Discourse

The discourse of gratitude towards the athletes is indicative of the importance of popular cultural figures in the composition of racial identities and ideologies. Commenters within this sub-theme express support for the bravery and courage it took both Kaepernick and Rapinoe to use their platform to protest for social justice. The protest by Kaepernick and Rapinoe signifies a resistance to stereotypical portrayals of athletes being uninformed about social issues. A

common conservative outlook on athletes is that they should stick to sports and keep politics separate.

The support the athletes both received highlights the cultural capital and influence that athletes have within American culture. The influence and ability to reach a large number of people is precisely why the US government uses the vehicle of sport to promote its nationalistic and militaristic message (Butterworth & Moskal, 2009; Butterworth, 2012; Jenkins, 2013). Kaepernick and Rapinoe have used their cultural capital as athletes to express their discontent with the evidence of racist police violence that has emerged on social media over the past few years. Many commenters express “thanks”, “respect”, and “love” for Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s actions. I believe that these comments are “thanking” the athletes for voicing a reality that many “non-white” people experience, and up until this point has largely been ignored or dismissed as no longer a significant factor in a person’s life outcome.

Kaepernick stated that “This stand wasn’t for me. This is because I’m seeing things happen to people that don’t have a voice, people that don’t have a platform to talk and have their voices heard, and effect change. So I’m in the position where I can do that and I’m going to do that for people that can’t” (Sandritter, 2016, para. 9). His statement and his actions were for the many racialized Americans who are subject to discrimination every day. Rapinoe’s statement similarly echoes Kaepernick’s in that she too is standing up for those who are not receiving justice. Whether through overt practices such as ‘stop and frisk’ or through racialized micro aggressions, black Americans have to contend with the dual role of being both ‘black’ and ‘American’ whereas ‘whites’ do not. The racialized experience that black Americans face is often explained away as cultural deficiencies rather than the systemic racism that it is.

Commenters are expressing gratitude towards Kaepernick and Rapinoe for giving a voice to their experience rather than remaining neutral.

Users also voiced their gratitude for the courage and resolve both athletes showed by protesting and for not backing down amid mounting public pressure. For Kaepernick and Rapinoe it would have been easier to conform to white standards and ignore social issues as many athletes do. Kaepernick would have benefitted financially if he had just ignored the issues of racist police violence facing the nation. Rapinoe, as a white athlete risked being alienated from the dominant racial group, but as an openly gay female athlete who has felt the pain of discrimination, she felt that fighting for equality was worth the sacrifice.

The discourse of gratitude towards the athletes for protesting racist police violence is indicative of the importance of cultural icons to combatting racism. Football is thoroughly racialized in its organization and structure, and as such it is one area of life where black communities hold power. The discourse of gratitude is important as it signals to athletes that their efforts and sacrifice are not in vain and that there are supporters who appreciate the stand they are taking. The discourses in support of Kaepernick and Rapinoe and their protest against racist police violence point to Instagram as a site where social justice discourses can be circulated.

For these users, athlete activism is seen as a positive method of achieving social justice. Hartmann (1996) has written “cultural arenas provide one of the few public spaces in which otherwise marginal and disempowered groups can express social grievances and begin to fashion some sort of mobilization on their behalf” (p.549). Popular cultural arenas such as sport have provided black athletes with a direct platform from which they can influence the public. The attention that professional athletes receive speaks to their influence over the public, and to

activists they are an important piece in the fight against racist police violence. Kaepernick and Rapinoe are fighting to change cultural and ideological perceptions of black people. Users are recognizing that they are risking their careers and salaries in order to try and change the perception around black crime and the police. In addition, they understand it is not about the flag or the anthem, but about finding a way to elevate the issues of racist police violence to a level where it can no longer be ignored. From these users' perspective racist police violence and the stereotypes around black crime are an issue that has been ignored for too long. Scholar Louis Moore does not think "that society has given police brutality its right dues as a civil rights issue" (Reid, 2017). Moore's statement is similar to other comments within this theme that are expressing disbelief at critics who are attacking Kaepernick and Rapinoe for wanting justice and equality for everyone. Users are challenging the white racial hierarchy by pointing out the unequal treatment of black people at the hands of the police and by refusing to ignore them any longer.

The importance of sport cannot be understated in the relevance to the protest and its visibility. The special space that sports occupies in American culture is a large reason for the national attention that the protest received. The fact that such an important issue was only noticed by the mainstream media when it became intertwined with sport speaks to the importance of athletes in the struggle for racial justice. Professional sports still remain one of the few visible spaces of black success and as such it remains a site where social consciousness and awareness is embraced and encouraged. Whether it be through a celebration of past athlete activism or through the symbolism of protest, sport remains an area where racial resistance persists despite the white racial hierarchy attempts to neutralize it.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This final chapter will revisit some of my key observations and the importance of examining the public's response towards Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest against racist police violence. In this thesis I have sought to understand what public responses on Instagram suggest about public perceptions of athlete activism, racism, and related social issues. I chose the social media platform Instagram as a site through which to evaluate the public's response to the protests as it presents users with a visual image of the athletes' kneeling in protest, to which users could respond through comments. Since most of the controversy centered on Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's actions, Instagram offers a unique site where users can respond directly to an image of the controversial action. The responses on Instagram are best understood as part of the larger media landscape where, in addition to traditional media sources, users can create discourses that reflect and shape ideologies around race, athlete activism, and racist police violence.

In this particular medium, users utilize Instagram to inform the athlete directly of their thoughts, most often in response to an image that the athlete has posted. In contrast to previous eras where direct access to athletes was limited, social media platforms now provide users a direct link where they can express their opinions. Past reactions to athlete protests are often filtered by traditional media sources to reflect a certain narrative, whereas the comments posted by users on social media sites reflect a more accurate sample of the public's views on a particular issue. In this thesis I demonstrated how the discourses in opposition to Kaepernick and Rapinoe reflect a colourblind ideology and rather than reduce racism, it actually worked to reinforce the current white racial hierarchy. In addition, I illustrated the importance of popular cultural figures in the fight against racism. The discourses in support of Kaepernick and Rapinoe reflect a

resistance to the white racial hierarchy, and how popular figures such as athletes can play an substantial role in ensuring these issues are heard.

Key Observations

First, I have analyzed Instagram posts made by Kaepernick and Rapinoe that correspond to their protest against racist police violence. In their respective photos posted to their individual accounts, the two athletes are kneeling among their teammates during the playing of the national anthem. In the statements explaining the reasons for their actions the athletes reiterate that they were kneeling to protest police brutality and that they were not against the United States, the U.S. military, or the flag. My primary goal in the analysis of their self-presentation on Instagram was to emphasize that the act of kneeling in itself is not usually seen as disrespectful, and that Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's actions are motivated by the systemic racism that is still pervasive throughout the United States. While many would like to believe that racism is a thing of the past, the inequality between people of colour and those who are viewed as "white" continues to persist. The act of kneeling became to be seen as disrespectful only after Kaepernick had stated the reasons behind his actions. When Kaepernick was seated during the anthem and nobody knew the reason why, his actions were ignored and given a pass, but when his reasons were revealed the dominant discourse shifted in ways to suppress his message. In addition, the posts by the two athletes and the corresponding responses can be understood in the context that athletes and athletics still play an important part of life for many Americans. Athletes are revered by many Americans, and as such their cultural capital has the potential to inform social change. Furthermore, athletics is an area of life where black people have experienced fame and therefore it provides racialized athletes a platform from which racial issues cannot simply be ignored. Social media sites like Instagram offer athletes the opportunity to interact directly with the public

to disseminate their message rather than through an intermediary, such as in traditional media representations. Social media platforms, in conjunction with an athlete's cultural capital, have the potential to challenge dominant narratives and enact significant social change. At the very least, social media can allow athletes to keep racial issues from being forgotten, or worst yet from being believed that they have been solved. I contend that the analysis of how Kaepernick and Rapinoe represented their activism on Instagram, and the documented user reactions, is important because it reveals the ways in which the white racial hierarchy is maintained and fortified at the expense of people of colour through race neutral colourblind ideologies.

Second, after establishing that the athletes presented their protest against racist police violence in a non-violent and peaceful manner I performed a critical discourse analysis of user comments in order to determine how the public was interpreting their message and actions. The discourses created by users on Instagram reflect ideologies that can reinforce or challenge the current racial structure. My thesis explains how support for the military was used as tool to frame the protest as a violation of sacred American values. The results of the analysis of data reveals that the culture of militarism continues to be a major part of American life and in this particular case has been used to reinforce the current white racial hierarchy of the United States. As sports leagues continue to partner with the armed forces to honour, promote, and celebrate American military actions, this serves to elevate the military and other symbols of American patriotism to a sacred status beyond reproach and leads to professional leagues, such as the NFL, benefitting from increased support. In an era when the playing of the national anthem before any North American professional sporting event has become the norm, so too has the culture of militarism and patriotism. Whether intended to or not, the military was used as a tool by users to frame the protest as unpatriotic to the detriment of people of colour.

The celebration and assumption of militarism as a universally good and progressive force in the United States functions to de-racialize the criticisms of Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's actions. Threats to the current white racial hierarchy are contained in a race neutral manner by utilizing colourblind ideologies that ignore the racial context of the protest as well as remove race as a possible cause of the increased racist police violence caught on video. By framing the protest as against sacred American values, users are creating a discourse that restricts a critical evaluation of the systemic racism that Kaepernick and Rapinoe are actually fighting against.

White racial hierarchy is especially troubling because of how race is so easily dismissed within this structure. The power of colourblind ideologies lies within their ability to appear invisible and neutral while reproducing inequality and racism. The military, flag, and the country are used as justifications and promoted as the real victims in Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest for social justice and equality. What remains hidden are how those discourses work to further entrench colourblind ideologies that restrict critical evaluation of the systemic racism that is prevalent in American society.

The "maintaining the racial order" theme is built upon the assumption that the United States is a post-racial society. With race no longer being a significant influence on the life chances of racialized people, racist police violence is seen as black people not following the rules rather than as racism. Therefore, Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's actions are invalid and viewed negatively. In addition, the "discrediting the protest" similarly is built upon the assumption that racist police violence is not an important issue and that there must be another explanation for their actions. Users created a discourse where the message behind their actions was deemed untrue and instead framed the protest in a way that aligns with the view of a post-racial United States and by extension the racist hierarchy embedded in society.

Third, my thesis explains how discourses in opposition to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protests work to sustain a white racial hierarchy. Consistent with critical race theory and keeping race as the main focal point, the dominant group favoured their own perspective on the racial protest rather than acknowledge the message of social justice that was the motivation behind Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's actions. Favouring one perspective over another allows the dominant group to frame the protest on their own terms and create discourses that not only align with the white racial hierarchy, but also obscures and contains dissenting viewpoints. Creating frames of the protest built upon colourblind ideologies permits discourses that appear reasonable, but in actuality work to reinforce a white racial hierarchy that continues racial inequality. The discourses created on Instagram emphasize defending the military, flag, and the United States from being disrespected by Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's actions. Since Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest was against police brutality, those users opposed to the athletes' actions are not defending the military, flag, or United States but instead they are racially targeting U.S. citizens who are using their democratic rights to bravely speak up against systemic racism. At no point was Kaepernick's or Rapinoe's protest against the military, the flag, or the United States, and yet users created a discourse that the military was being harmed by their actions. These discourses signal that individuals who contest racial injustice will not be welcome within the United States. Put another way, it is those who do not adhere to the current white racial hierarchy and who pose a threat to the current status quo who will be vilified.

The lack of support for Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's message of social justice can be explained using critical race theory key tenets. Critical race theory states that race and racism are central to society and therefore racist police violence is part of a system where a white racial hierarchy exists. The dominant group benefits from a racist social system where white

supremacy exists. The reactions to the protest can be understood as part of a racist social system where the dominant group would have an interest in maintaining the current system. The underlying structural racism that is embedded within U.S society largely influences the ideologies that emerge in the discourses in opposition to Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest.

Lastly, user generated comments suggest that social media platforms such as Instagram provide the potential for athletes with cultural capital to promote social change. Social media has made it possible for athletes to interact with their followers rapidly and directly. Rather than having to rely on intermediaries in traditional media sources, athletes can now disseminate their opinions through their social media posts. Technology has made it possible to interact with millions of people and provides a space for counter-narratives to be voiced. The comment section on Instagram functions as a space for alternative frames of Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest to be presented alongside dominant representations that work to maintain the status quo. The change in racial thinking was most evident among comments that pushed back against dominant discourses. As stated previously, changes in discourses have the potential to change the social world, social identities, and social relations. The white racial hierarchy is maintained by the dominant group through circulating ideologies and discourses that support and extend the power of their dominance, while appearing natural and beneficial for all. My analysis has sought to reveal how colourblind ideologies are distortions of the social world intent on maintaining an unequal racist social system.

Discourses in support of Kaepernick and Rapinoe similarly challenged dominant ideologies in the hopes that others may see past the ideologies that distort the social world and maintain racial inequality. While discourses that challenged the hegemonic white view of Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's protest were in the minority, the potential for social media sites to

function as sites where racial ideology can be contested and transformed is promising. User generated comments that opened different views of race-based protest beyond dominant understandings contributes to a sense of optimism that racial equality might one day be achieved.

Social media research and its potential to inform us about social issues is continuing to grow. As technology continues to advance and more people become connected through social media platforms, the discourses that are circulated online have the potential to inform us about how the public views social issues. My project was based on previous social media research methods by using the platform Instagram as a site to gather data to examine the reproduction and resistance to dominant racial discourses surrounding police brutality and athlete protest. In addition, my research adds to the scholarship of the pervasiveness of colourblindness in sport by utilizing critical race theory to reveal how dominant discourses in opposition are founded upon colourblind ideologies that ultimately reinforce a white racial hierarchy. Furthermore, I have argued that patriotism has been used as a veil to misdirect and hide the racial inequality that continues to exist in the United States. The military, flag, and national anthem were all used to de-racialize the discourses in opposition towards Kaepernick's and Rapinoe's peaceful protest for social justice, but in reality they produced real racist effects. My project has provided insights into how deeply engrained and unnoticed the ideologies that maintain the current white racial hierarchy are still present in this supposed "post-racial society" in the online discourses on Instagram.

A limitation to my research is that I was unable to explore the demographics of the users, and as such it brings the question of "who" the public is into my project. Further research that explores the commenters demographics could gain a deeper and more insightful understanding of the public's perception of race based athletic protest. However, despite this limitation this study

has demonstrated how Instagram can be a site where social change and resistance to dominant discourses can occur. In particular, this study has shown the cultural capital that is afforded to professional athletes due to the importance of sport in American life allows them to voice their opinion on social issues that might otherwise be dismissed. As illustrated through the analysis, Kaepernick and Rapinoe have come to symbolize the motivation behind the BLM movement and other social justice organizations. Radio host Mark Thompson is an activist who was part of the organizing committee for the “United We Stand Rally for Colin Kaepernick” that brought activists together in front of the NFL league office in support of Kaepernick. In relation to the rally and why activists are standing up for Kaepernick he states “we’re here because he has come to really symbolize everything about this Black Lives Matter movement, and what we are most appreciative of is that he showed courage in doing that. One of the challenges we’ve faced is getting more black athletes to do what Colin is doing.” (Reid, 2017). He goes on to further explain the importance that Kaepernick as an athlete plays in the fight for social justice when he states “when you realize how much attention professional athletes get, how much our young people look up to them, you understand how important it is to have them involved” (Reid, 2017). They are fighting for justice for not only black people, but for all who are racially discriminated against. The issues of racist police violence have only been amplified by Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s protest. Racism and racist police violence has and continues to be a serious issue that needs to be addressed. Kaepernick and Rapinoe are using their voice to ensure that those who are fighting have allies.

Research that continues to study the intersection of race, sports, politics is important in order to build knowledge about the potential for activist athletes to contest and change public ideologies that continually reproduce inequality. Social media offers athletes a way to directly

connect with the public where their message cannot be co-opted or filtered to express a particular viewpoint as if often seen in traditional mainstream media sources. Hartmann (2000) argues that because of sport's prominence in American culture and its unique racial composition it has the power to reproduce or transform how individuals view race. The success of black athletes in the sports of football and basketball empowers them with a source of economic, social, and cultural capital that can then be directed towards larger struggles concerning racial issues. The discourses in support of the athletes' reveal the importance of cultural icons and the cultural power of sport in American society in battling racism. Racism continues to plague society and the longer we choose to discount the impact of race as seen in colorblind ideologies the worse it will become. Promoting sport as a meritocratic space where race does not matter reveals the complex ways in which colourblind ideologies actually work to exacerbate inequality. By extension the more people continue to avoid talking about race in society due to an adherence to colourblind ideologies the worse racism will actually become. In September 2018 Nike released an advertisement that featured Kaepernick speaking about athletes dreaming to do the impossible and achieving those dreams. Combatting racism may seem like the impossible, but as Kaepernick states in the ad "believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything" (Abad-Santos, 2018).

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