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Sponsors and how consumers react to controversial athletes

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Abstract

The protest by NFL athletes against police brutality have split public opinion in surveys pretty evenly. Our study fills a gap in sponsorship literature which have focused on impact of illegal acts by sponsored athletes, not acts both widely admire and widely disliked by audiences. A content analysis of 1097 comments on the NFL context were carried out to examine how firms should react when sponsored athletes takes a controversial stand. The study finds a majority of commenters support sponsors which pull their support for controversial athletes. Commenters supporting the athletes protest appear to have stronger commitment to boycotting sponsors that pull their support for athletes compared to the other group. We also find that eight percent have stopped watching games due to the protests which is consistent with viewership figures from the period. There is also evidence of several commenters planning to make a purchase because a sponsor has pulled support for the athletes. A factor that appear to play a large role is political orientation of fan base, which needs to be considered by managers when deciding how to handle controversial sponsored athletes.

We would like to thank Erik Olson for guidance and help throughout our thesis process.

1.0 Introduction

The recent support for colored people to be treated equally started when NFL player Colin Kaepernick refused to stand when stars spangled banner was played before kickoff (Babb, 2017; Jennings, 2017; Mindock, 2017; Sandritter, 2017). His actions sparked fury amongst several fans resulting in people even burning his jersey (Bishop, 2017; Mindock, 2017), they argued he was disrespecting the Flag of the United States, armed forces and the constitution. On the other hand, several people supported his stand under the argument of free speech, amongst them where even members of armed forces (Jennings, 2017; Woody, 2017). All of this have sparked support from several other players, and even though Kaepernick have not been signed for the 2017 season other players have continued the stand (McManus, 2017; Reid, 2017; Sandritter, 2017). But not all agree with the protest players, even within the NFL team owners, the league and most importantly the general public seems to be fairly even split. Our study is looking into the sponsorship consequences of an athlete's controversies, in which the audience is pretty even split. The study will give insight in the benefits and negative outcome of sponsored athletes doing something controversial in which the audience both widely admire and widely disliked. This have led to a highly engaged debate among the public. Research on this kind of split public opinion regarding sponsorship are lacking in contrast to previous research with clear benefits and negatives of sponsoring. To our knowledge, research looking at this particular situation does not exist. Our research aims to contribute towards filling this gap. We seek to provide insights on how a socially controversial topic may influence the effect of sponsorship. Studies behind the sponsorship field is solid, and on the daily basis it has an important role on businesses. Our study gives managers insight on how to respond, if they experience controversies among their sponsored athletes.

The sponsor market in 2017 where a whopping 62.8 billion USD worldwide (IEG, 2018a). Making it a very lucrative business for sponsor objects. For example,

worldwide sponsorship revenue for the entire NFL 1.25 billion USD (IEG, 2018b). Businesses have long known about the potential benefits of sponsorship (Cornwell, Roy, & Steinard, 2001). Research have identified which sponsor objects to choose to acquire the desired attributes. For instance, do consumers regard sponsors of the Olympics to be among the best companies within its field (Miyazaki & Morgan, 2001). Because of the gap in the research mentioned before and the size of the market we believe our study provides managers insights on the impact of split public opinions. Consequently, improve their decision-making towards managing sponsorship in analogous events.

Research question:

HBO Real Sports/Marist Poll conducted a poll (Miriginoff, Carvalho, Griffith & College, 2016) showing how evenly the American public is split regarding NFL players taking a knee. But a majority disagree with president Trump's encouragement to fire and discharge any player who takes a knee. A possible explanation for this could be the majority of Americans feel the punishment (being fired) do not fit the crime. This is supported by the evenly split public on how vice president Pence demonstrated his dissatisfaction when several players knelt down during a game he attended.

Kate Kaye (2017) present in her article how 25 percent of all Americans have chosen to boycott brands based on politics. Supporting this article are for example the comments found in the Dylan Gwinn article (Gwinn, 2018). Here several people are swearing off the NFL all together because of the political stand taken by the players.

Because consumers are willing to boycott brands, research aimed at filling this gap should contain several interesting implications. To help bridge this gap and provide valuable insight our research is going to answer the following research question: ***How should firms react when sponsored athletes take a socially controversial stand?***

2.0 Literature review and hypothesis development

While the fundamental part of sponsorship studies covers how companies or brands can leverage benefits from sponsorship. Numerous of studies have also covered the negative outcomes of sponsorship. Most of the cases in past researches within sport sponsorship have looked into different consequences of athletes doing either very good or very bad. However, a very limited number of studies have looked into the effects of athletes' controversial stand, which have resulted in split public opinion. This study's contribution will give managers insight in this potential sponsorship scenario, and how to deal with them. The next sections will consist of relevant theories of this matter, content analysis of readers' comments on news articles, and conclusion to the study.

2.1 Sponsorship

Previous research acknowledge that the purpose of sponsorship is to construct a business collaboration between the sponsor and the sponsored object. A transaction usually exists between the parts. The sponsor invests in the object, and in return they get the rights to use the sponsored associations for commercial advantages (Meenaghan, 1983; Meerabeau et al., 1991; Olson, 2010; Walliser, 2003). The effect of sponsorship is that the brand of the sponsor leverages secondary associations from other entities like places, people, things or other brands. For example, a brand may leverage secondary associations from an event, organization, bloggers, athletes or cultural personalities (Keller, 2003).

If a brand manages to provide their consumers strong associations and positive attitude toward their brand, it is not given that negative publicity will damage the brand. (Monga & John, 2008) In some of the cases, consumers will even defend the brand against the negative exposure (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000). These theories explain the reason why companies should use sponsorship as a

strategy to expose their brand. There are a great deal of benefits utilizing brand sponsorship.

2.2 Potential negative effects of athlete celebrity sponsorship

Studies about negative effects of athlete celebrity sponsorship compared to positive effects is less substantial. Negative information contrary to positive is common to attract more attention, it is also weight more in evaluation of people, objects and ideas. (Fiske 1980; Mizerski, 1982). When there exists an associative link between the celebrity and the brand, and the celebrity gets associated with negative attention. Consequently, the brand evaluations will get affected in the same direction (Till and Shimp, 1998). Furthermore, Pornpitakpan's (2003) study were consistent, concluding that whenever a celebrity gets associated with bad publicity it will affected the image of the sponsoring firm negatively. Ahluwalia, Burnkrant and Unnava (2000) examined consumers response to negative publicity. In their research, consumers with low-commitment to the brand indicated a greater negative attitude change when exposed to bad publicity. Mainstream media has a preference of reporting negative news, therefore companies are most likely to receive post negative press (Dennis & Merrill, 1996). Negative publicity caused by athletes has the capability to harm a brand, or corporate image. Moreover, the financial performance of a firm (measured by stock returns) will also be negatively influenced. (Mizerski, 1982; Louie, et al., 2001)

In Louie, Kulik and Jacobson's (2001) study, they investigated whether spokesperson's blameworthiness of an unpleasant event had a positive or negative overall effect firms' value. When the spokespersons with high responsibility for the event, that resulted in negative firm value. Interestingly, when the athletes got low or no blame for the incident, the firm had an overall positive effect on the stock market. The proposed findings are fascinating, because they indicate that not all unfortunate incident have a bad outcome for the firm. Furthermore, the result shows that consumers felt sympathy for the spokesperson, and expressed affection and visibility, which transferred over to the brand. To

conclude the research, if the sponsored spokesperson gets involved with an unpleasant incident, the firm's decision-maker will achieve the best result if they manage to exonerate the person from the blame. Basically, if the blame is not put on the athlete or spokesperson, and the firm manage to get the audience's sympathy. The outcome of may be positive for the company. Lastly, the authors also discovered that when the company released the spokesperson with high blameworthiness, the financial performance increased. From a marketing perspective, any firm with a valuable brand and a sponsoring strategy should be aware of these consequences. The firm need to have the capability and insight to evaluate whether or when it is right to pull the sponsorship and protect their brand.

2.3 Controversial act

By taking a stand, the professional athletes have created a debate splitting the American people. The high level of engagement reflects an important matter for the population. By Oxford Dictionaries, a controversy is defined as a heated discussion or prolonged public disagreement. (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018) The act of the athletes may therefore be characterized as controversial.

As a more specific research question we want to examine the following based on the above theories: Are consumers more likely to drop the sponsor's product or services, if they publicly support controversial athlete?

2.4 The effects of fans involvement

Effects of sport sponsorship may vary with respect to the level of involvement by the fans (Meenaghan, 2001). High involvement reflects strong engagement. Furthermore, research have shown that the sponsorship activities are more effective towards the biggest fans. Those are the consumers who interact, remember and support the brand (Clark, 1991; Quester, 1997,). The concept of fan involvement is connected to whether consumer identify themselves with, are motivated by, feeling engaged to or affiliation to the athletes. T. Meenaghan (2001) also described the extreme part of fan involvement as "praising" responses

to rock stars, and the extreme loyalty of sports fans. A study by Heider (1946), continued by Crimmins and Horn (1996) claimed that sponsorship is balancing out the object with lesser value (i.e. sponsored brand), when it is connected with a highly valued object like an athlete. Meaning, that sponsorship indirectly strengthen the likability of the sponsor in the customers mind (Gwinner, 1997; Heald & McDaniel, 1994; McDaniel, 1999; Pham, 1992). Clearly, managers should target the biggest fans of the player or the team they are sponsoring to leverage return on investment efficiently.

2.5 The political split

In relation to public opinion split. We see that the split lies within the political differences, leftist and rightist stand. The players are taking a left stand protesting the US flag, national anthem or the police when kneeling, while the leftist who support the players action are not particularly loud or noticeable. There is a tendency that the rightist is more visible, expressing their anger loudly on comments sections (Astor, 2017; Crabtree, 2016; Denver CBS, 2017; Harriot, 2017; Pengelly, 2016; Schwab, 2017). The inconvenience risk for the sponsor is that the player is upsetting a large proportion of the audience.

The *FiveThirtyEight*, (Paine, Enten, & Jones-Rooy, 2017) measured the NFL fans general political stand using Google Trend and SurveyMonkey Audience poll. Compared to other sports leagues like NASCAR or THE NBA, NFL had the least partisan fan base. They found no correlation between Democratic or Republican area and how frequently the area populations made online NFL relevant search. Nonetheless, Democrats tend to be located among teams based in big metropolitan areas, where the kneeling protest have been more active (Paine, Enten & Jones-Rooy, 2017). Taking the managerial perspective into consideration, the sponsoring firms may lose or upset fans with right politically stand because of the act, but they may also gain leftist.

2.6 Balance theory

Eagly and Chaiken state: “balance theory has proven to be one of the most enduring of the theories that have been applied to attitudinal phenomena, and it has been pursued with considerable rigor” (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 144). The theory postulate that people generally strive to have balance/harmony in their lives. Meaning if they become imbalanced, people change their attitude and behavior to reassert balance. (Heider, 1958). The implication of balance theory on sports sponsorship are quite clear. A fan with strong attachment towards a sports team or athlete are likely to have similar positive attitudes towards any sponsors attaching themselves to the team/athlete. Contrary, if fans dislike a competing athlete/team they are likely to attach the negative feelings towards sponsors connected with the athlete/team. Based on the balance theory, it is expected in relation to the controversial stand by NFL athletes, that people who supported the team would more likely keep on supporting the athlete. Opposite politically right people claiming their love for the country, it would not be in balance when the players protest during the national anthem.

2.7 Social identity theory

A person’s perception of their identity is compromised with an amount of self-identities, each differ along a continuum from personal identity at one end to social identity at the other. Personal identity express different characteristics of an individual, while social identity obtain characteristics from a group affiliation. Social identity theory can be seen as the individual’s oneness with a team (Madrigal, 2001). In terms of fans level of attachment or concern about a sports team is defined as team identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

Looking at the Kaepernick situation, we believe with social identity theory is consistent with ‘high involvement’ theory, and that the most involved fans would probably identify themselves as one with the team. In an unpleasant event solid research have shown that the athlete-loyal fans will defend the athletes. (Fink, Trail & Anderson, 2002; Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999; Wann & Branscombe, 1990) On the other side, it is also expected that politically right people will

express oneness with the country. Respecting the national anthem, the US flag and supporting Trump and the US flag is important for them.

It is expected for fans to react emotionally or strongly whether the sponsor chooses to support or drop the athletes after an incident. It seems also reasonable that the likeability of the sponsor may increase among fans, if the sponsors chooses to support the player after a controversial act. Contrary, we argue that the politically right people will be furious because of the act. Additionally, they should support the sponsors who dissupport the players.

Looking at the above theory we want to answer the following research question: How does fans involvement and social identity affect consumers response to controversial act?

2.8 Sensory input

We perceive sensory input differently, this have been well documented in market communication research (Elder & Krishna, 2012; Krishna, 2012). When people read articles, what they chose to focus on in the article can be attributed to their interpretation of it. What influence people's interpretation have been attributed to several concepts, for example: Gestalt theory (Loewenstein, 1994), culture (Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005), beliefs and inferences (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975). We argue that this will influence how you interpret a social stand by an athlete.

2.9 The impact of media - News

Findings suggest that mass media's effect on the individual's attitudes and opinions is far from conclusive. However, it is also documented that they have the power to affect a nation's agenda and to choose which public issues for the public to focus on. The pictures of people's mindset are influenced by the mass media. For many people, the information in mass media becomes the only contact they have with politics. (McCombs, 2002) Moreover, studies have shown that media's effect have an influence on the people's perceptions as a community (Mutz &

Soss, 1997). Doling (2003) noted that unpleasant news coverage of an athlete endorser can entail unfavorably of the consumers attitude towards the endorsed product and their purchase intention. This implies the importance and crucial role the media has. Their opinion and stand of their publication have the capability to influence a community. How the news company present the articles in relation to their stand of the subject may affect the readers.

2.10 The persuasion knowledge model

Sponsorship motives are accepted among consumers, its effects can be explained by Friestad and Wright (1994) persuasion knowledge model(PKM). Friestad and Wright (1994) state how consumers become aware of the persuasion attempts by company communication and develop mechanisms for coping with the attempts. Connecting PKM with sponsorship it appears consistent with T. Meenaghan (2001) and Webb and Mohr (1998) findings how consumers generally attribute sponsorship to one of two sets. Either caring, sincere sponsor-object serving or egoistic sponsor serving. This should again impact the amount of goodwill a company receives from the sponsorship deal. Because we are looking at sport sponsorship there is inherently less goodwill from consumers largely thanks to the commercialization of sports (T. Meenaghan & Shipley, 1999). In addition, T. Meenaghan (2001), Cornwell et al. (2001) and T. Meenaghan and Shipley (1999) state how consumers have accepted the fact, that events need sponsorship to survive and companies use this to enhance their image. For marketing managers, this implies that firms can sponsor athletes, teams or events without risking the consumers acceptance.

2.11 Sponsorship Scandals

Messner and Reinhard (2012) studied the effect of terminating a sponsorship deal after the event experienced scandals. The scandal used in the study where allegations of doping. In their study, they look at the difference in effect for companies with good and bad initial reputations and how it affects an exit from a sponsorship deal. Looking at the findings it is very interesting to see when no

reason behind, the exit is provided companies with a bad reputation experience a decrease in reputation. And companies with good reputations experience an increase in reputation. Meaning initial company reputation is very important when deciding to exit from a sponsorship deal after a scandal. By providing the reasoning behind the terminated sponsorship deal, bad companies could mediate the negative effect (Messner and Reinhard, 2012). This solution gave good reputation companies no significant effect. However, one of the issues with the study is a sample of only 84 students, which raises issues about generalizability. Previously mentioned research from T. Meenaghan (2001) divided audience into three: *Light involvement*, *moderately involved* and *highly involved*. His study connected the level of involvement of sports fans with their level of praise. High praise led to high degree of loyalty, which indicated that highly involved fans have higher threshold for tolerating negative actions from athletes. Several studies have shown that athlete-loyal fans will counter-argue and defend the athletes. (Fink, Trail & Anderson, 2002; Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999; Wann & Branscombe, 1990)

3.0 Method and results

3.1 Data collection

This high engagement has led to a massive coverage of the NFL protest in the media around the world. With this engagement the coverage attracts a high number of commenters particularly on online news coverage. The large number of comments is why we decided to conduct a content analysis, it would allow us to collect and categorize a large amount of data relatively easy (Stemler, 2001). The advantage of collection from comments are people are very likely to express their honest opinion. Building on this fact most comment sections allow the publisher to appear anonymous this relieves some of the issues connected to social proof (Cialdini, 2001). This however means that all our data is anonymous, and we cannot collect any demographic data on from the sample. Allowing us to avoid the need to assure the anonymity of participants and eliminate demand artifacts (Szmigin et al., 2009; Thompson and Sinha, 2008).

We have chosen to look at the American market due to access to data and the location of the sponsors and athletes. Additionally, NFL clearly have their majority of fans from the US. Therefore, our population is the general US public. For obvious reasons we are not able to choose our sample based on demographics or other variables, we have to accept the comments we find on the chosen sources (Appendix 1). We examine pros and cons with this approach in the next paragraphs.

Finding articles with comments for use in content analysis were challenging because not all articles allow for people to post comments. To ensure we had articles with a decent discussion in the comment field, we used the following criteria for selecting articles. Both authors of the paper did evaluate the articles to have content about sponsor reaction toward players in the NFL kneeling during the national anthem. Meaning the article had to contain the subject: “sponsor dropping sponsorship of player, team or league” or “sponsor stands behind athletes, team or league”. Our reasoning behind this choice where it should

provide higher engagement content and allowing us to view the comments in connection with the subject of the article.

We also agreed upon the minimum number of 25 comments for an article to be included. To avoid any bias, we have chosen to only include one article from a particular source. This should provide a better diversity of comments, because different mainstream media often have a majority of its readers from one of the political wings. For example, is Fox news pro president Trump and CNN against him (Choi, 2017; Curl, 2017; Marcin, 2017; Goodykoontz, 2018). We believe if the majority of comments will come from the regular readers of the source.

Six articles were collected from mainstream media and taken into the final analysis. The widespread nature and large base of readers provided a good base for collecting comments. Additionally, we included two blog post, because the people reading blogs are usually more invested in the content of the blog (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014; Yang & Kang, 2009). Based on criteria mentioned, the data gathered for the content analysis is the readers comment from following articles: *The Root* (Harriot, 2017), *Denver CBS* (2017), *The Guardian* (Pengelly, 2016), *Yahoo Sports* (Schwab, 2017), *NY Times* (Astor, 2017), *NBC Sports* (Crabtree, 2016), plus two blogs, *CNS News* (Bannister 2017), *Jonathan Hurley* (Smith, 2017). Two of the six articles will be opinion editorials published by mainstream media, we found these pieces attracted a high number of comments. Among the eight articles 37.5 percent are judged to be supportive of the players protest. Similarly, 37.5 percent are judged to be neutral, just reporting the story without taking a side. And 25 percent are judged to against the players protesting. The total number of comments collected from the articles was 8015. One of the articles had over seven thousand comments. For this specific article we chose to examine the first and last two hundred comments. The remaining comments in the article only every 20th comment was considered to be included. Further guideline for comments not to be discarded are presented below. Having considered all of the comments 1097 was found to have relevant viewpoints for the chosen coding parameters.

One of the most covered cases of a sponsor dropping an athlete is the case of the Denver car dealership Phil Long Ford pulling its ads with Denver Broncos star Von Miller. The case got national coverage and got a huge engagement around the country. Why it got such a huge coverage the is probably due to the high profile of Von Miller (Super Bowl 50 MVP, participated on Dancing with the Stars) and being among the highest paid athlete in the world (Forbes, 2018). Because of the high engagement news sources reporting the case attracted a high number of comments, for example the article from Yahoo Sports that have 7037 comments (Appendix 1).

3.2 Coding

After collecting the data, we are going to conduct individual coding of the data using *propositional units* (Stemler, 2001). Using *propositional units* allow us to code the attitudes and preferences by examining underlying meaning of the collected content. The following categories were developed through the examination of the comments described above. Our method for developing the coding guidelines was we started out with a rough outline for what we thought we could get out of the comments. Through a common examination of the comments while we conducted the first cleaning as described above we discussed the initial categories and made necessary adjustments based on what we saw in the comments. The final categories are outlined below, including our rules for the first wash of comments.

3.2.1 Coding guidelines:

The comment needs to contain the following information to not be discarded: (1) Subject of the comment have to be linked with the article subject. A clear argument for or against the actual support/dissupport of the sponsors action. (2) The comment can not contain any ambiguous language. (3) If the comment is included the following rules have been used by the researchers to code the data sheet independently:

Variable	Rule	Definition
Angle of article	1= Supporting athletes 0=Otherwise	What is the article subject? Does it speak about a sponsor leaving the NFL and/or player or not?
Support of sponsor in comment	1=YES 0=Otherwise,	Commenter openly and clearly states his/her support towards to sponsor dropping the athlete.
Support of player in comment	1=YES 0=Otherwise	Commenter openly and clearly states his/her support towards to players actions.
Changing watching behavior	1=YES 0=Otherwise	Commenter claiming to either start watching/attending or stop watching/attending games as a result of the protest.
Purchase intention from sponsor	1=YES 0=Otherwise	Commenter expressing a clear desire or intention to purchase from the sponsor because of the sponsors action.
Promising boycott of sponsor(s) due to player action	1=YES 0=Otherwise	Commenter states an intention to boycott brands due to player

		action.
Promising boycott of sponsor due to the sponsor action	1=YES 0=Otherwise	Commenter expresses intention to boycott sponsor because of the sponsor action in article.

3.3 Validity and reliability

Researchers have pointed to reliability issues in regard to content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Our coding guidelines as presented above will increase our internal reliability. Dealing with validity concerns are addressed through discussion of coding guidelines, good literature review allowing for a sound conceptual background and a strict evaluation of collected content. Rejection of unsuitable material will have a very high focus to achieve a valid study.

To ensure coding reliability we coded a selection of 30 comments individually. Comments chosen for this was judged to be both difficult and easy comments to code. Both coders chose 50 percent of the comments for this test. Having completed coding to the selection individually, we compared our results and found we agreed in 82 percent of the cases. Meaning both of the coders had a good understanding of the coding parameters.

Having established inter-coder reliability, we coded the entire sheet of 1098 lines. Identical to the pre-coding test we coded the sheets individually. Having imported both data sets from Excel to SPSS we compared the two sheets using SPSS comparison function. Doing this allowed us to compare the entire data sheet rather than using Cohens Kappa on each column. This yielded an agreement rate of 67.5 percent and identified the cases of disagreements. Having identified these cases, we discussed them until reaching agreement for each one. By the end we had an agreement of 100 percent and one data set ready for analysis.

4.0 Results

Analyzing the comments, we found some interesting common features. Our examination revealed that the majority of the arguments against the players action consist of criticism of the players respect for the flag, or the timing of their action. Additionally, some of the people indicated that they would stop watching the NFL games. Contrary, the ones who supported the players mainly criticized the dropping sponsors' insignificance and their unimportance. But even though they seemed to have inferior numbers, commenters supporting the athletes seemed to have a higher engagement. Furthermore, the population who reject the sponsors action, expressed that they would boycott the dropping sponsors products or services. Many also wrongly condemned the quality of Ford cars. The ones who supported the sponsors action generally acclaimed the (representatives of) sponsors to be a proper American, and also expressed purchase intention. Lastly, a noticeable amount of the comments consisted racist content.

After categorizing the comments as described in the previous chapter our analysis produced the following tables. Table 1 show the distribution of the number of comments in each of the categories shown in the method section. Underneath Table 1 display the mean from each of the categories. Subsections 4.1 to 4.8 will discuss the results in the different categories and present different examples within the different categories.

Table 1

Variable	Sum	Percentage of total comments
In support of sponsor dropping athletes	661	60 %
Supporting athletes protest	225	21 %
Stopped watching games due to protests	81	7 %
Intention to purchase from sponsor	140	13 %
Boycotting sponsor because of sponsor	116	11 %
Boycotting sponsor because of athletes	126	11 %
Sponsor action in article	76	7 %

4.1 Support for sponsor dropping athletes

As seen in Table 1, 60 percent of all observations are judged to be in favor of sponsor dropping their sponsorship of the protesting athlete. Meaning of the 1097 comments, 661 expressed a clear enough statement to be classified as being supportive of sponsors dropping their sponsorship of players. There is varying degree of support from commenters, some are very offended the players are by the protest during the anthem. Others have a calmer approach to their statement of sponsor support. The examples below aim to illustrate the nuances within the category support of sponsor:

NFL sponsors are being boycotted, tweeted and emailed and Papa John got a head start. Good on them. (From Johnathan Hurley)

My hats off to the dealership and any company that follows suite. I would not want someone who disrespects the many men and women who served this country to represent me or my company. (From Yahoo Sports (Schwab, 2017))

I have contacted every single advertisers of the NFL to tell them I stand for the flag I stand for the anthem, but I will never stand for a racist, hate group that spreads violence and Division. In other words black lives matter and these kneeling athletes who support them (From NY Times)

Note to self, avoid RushCard. (From NBC Sports)

4.2 Supporting athletes protest

A lower number of comments came in support of the athletes' protest, 225 of 1097. Meaning 21 percent of all observations are judged to be in support of the athletes' protest. To be sure the commenters were in support of the athletes, the clear statement of support in the comment had to be present. As the following examples illustrates commenters also have different degree of supportiveness of the players:

Thank you Von Miller! I WILL NEVER BUY ANOTHER FORD AGAIN! (From Yahoo Sports (Schwab, 2017))

Bravo Colin Kaepernick for getting the ball rolling, well done Brandon, shame on AAFCU for their spineless actions - I thought America was the land of the free and home of the brave - AAFCU are neither.

I'll applaude the Seahawks if they go ahead with a team-wide protest - I only hope my team, the Raiders show similar balls. (The Guardian)

Von, if you're reading this hit me up. Our dealership would be proud to sponsor you.(From Yahoo Sports (Schwab, 2017))

19 percent of the comment did not contain enough information to be classified as being in support of the sponsor or the athletes. Meaning it was not classified as in one of the above categories. We did not discard the comments that could not be placed in one support categories because of the alternative information they contained about the commenters in regard to boycotting behavior or change in watching behavior. For example:

So long, NFL. I'm diverting funds I would spend on your hyped-up games to give to those who really need it in this beautiful nation. Deplorable! (From Yahoo Sports (Schwab, 2017))

If the games don't get the eyeballs promised, advertisers (USAA) get \$ back. Just don't watch. (From CNS News (Bannister 2017))

4.3 Stopped watching games due to protest

7 percent (81 commenters) claimed to change their watching behavior because of the protest. They were all exclusively from commenters stating they will not watch the games anymore. Examples of these claims is illustrated below:

#IWillNotWatchTheNFL (From Yahoo Sports (Schwab, 2017))

Thanks for the list, I wouldn't have known in the past either because I haven't watched a live football game in years, I DVR'd the game of the team I followed and watched it, skipping the commercials...and the national anthem.

As of last Sunday, I dont even DVR the game. (Extracted from a comment from Denver CBS)

4.4 Intention to purchase from sponsor

Intention to purchase from sponsor indicates whether the commenter intend to support the sponsor financially due the action disclosed in the article (either support or dissupport of the athlete's action). In our sample 141 commenters (13 percent) state they are going to buy from the sponsor because they support their action towards the athlete. Several of the commenters express a surprising willingness to travel across the country to support the sponsor financially. Examples of this are illustrated below:

Phil Long Ford has a new customer. My next car comes from there. I have lots of free time on Sundays now that Im no longer watching the traitors play in the NFL. (From Yahoo Sports (Schwab, 2017))

I'm in NC and I'd drive there to buy my next car. (From Yahoo Sports (Schwab, 2017))

I will be buying my next car from Phil Long already checked it going to cost me \$0.40 a mile to have it shipped to Florida 1841 miles to be exact (From Yahoo Sports (Schwab, 2017))

4.5 Boycotting sponsor due to sponsor

22 percent of all commenters state an intention to boycott a sponsor either due to the players protest or the sponsor action described in the article. 11 percent (116 commenters) claim a boycott based on the sponsor action described in the article. This is illustrated by the comments below:

Any sponsor who pulls out of the NFL and I use their product will NO LONGER get my business and any of my friends and family. (From NY Times (Astor, 2017))

I will be buying a car from Phil Long Company BECAUSE he dumped Miller! (From The Root (Harriot, 2017))

Good point. I didn't realize USAA is two faced, time to move on to GEICO or some one else. (From CNS News (Bannister 2017))

Note to self, avoid RushCard. (From NBC Sports)

4.6 Boycotting sponsors due to players

126 commenters (11%) state they are boycotting sponsors of NFL or NFL players due to the players. Several of commenters claim the act of taking a knee during the anthem is comparable with burning the American flag, as shown by the examples below:

Taking a knee for the anthem is the same as burning the American flag. It is total disrespect for our country and those who died for our freedoms.

These players need a reminder that the fans pay for their over-priced salaries.

Disrespect to veterans should not be tolerated #BoycottNFL #BoycottNFLSponsors (Denver CBS (2017))

BOYCOTT ALL NFL SPONSORS: Nike, Pepsi, Bridgestone, Bose, Under Armour, Budweiser> Show them they can't side with THUGS (From Yahoo Sports (Schwab, 2017))

4.7 Sponsor action in article

76 of our comments came from content reporting on sponsors support for the athlete's actions. The remaining comments are collected from content sources writing about sponsors dropping their support for the athletes.

4.8 Data split

We wanted to see whether the consumers were claiming to boycott the sponsor because of the sponsors decision to either support or drop the athletes. To examine this, we divided the data by the sponsor's action described in the articles, we then combined this with our chosen coding in the category: *Boycotting the sponsor*, allowed us to extract Table 2. We were able to this because our coding in the category were dependent on the article content.

Table 2 show commenters often promise a boycott of the sponsor because of the action taken, but the number of people boycotting the sponsor are significantly higher when the sponsor stands by the athlete compared to dropping the athlete 38%>9%. This indicate that there is a significantly higher number of people boycotting a sponsor that are supporting the athlete's actions.

Table 2

Variable	Sponsor action in article: Supporting	Sponsor action in article: Dropping
Boycotting sponsor because of sponsor	38 %	9 %

5.0 Discussion and Managerial implications

A substantial amount of research has looked at the potential backlash that affects the sponsor if the sponsored athlete does something illegal. Additionally, the benefits of athlete sponsorship have been well documented. Our study explores the implications when an athlete chooses to do something controversial. Since we are looking at a specific context, our finding may not always be present in a different context. FiveThirtyEights (Paine, Enten, & Jones-Rooy, 2017) findings on political orientation in different sports franchises fan bases for the NFL, found it to have a politically neutral fan base on average. There are of course differences, when looking at the individual NFL fan bases due to geographical location. However, NASCAR were found to have a very politically right fan base which could be why few NASCAR drivers have been vocal in the debate. Conversely, NBA fans are oriented far more leftist, and are having athletes that are far more vocal in supporting the protests (Paine, Enten, & Jones-Rooy, 2017). Based on this, our findings from a NFL context are not necessarily translatable to different context with other fan bases.

Support towards either the *athletes protest* or *sponsor dropping the athletes* in our findings show a heavy weight of comments supporting *sponsors dropping the athletes*. This is in contrast to the Marriot Poll (Miriginoff et al., 2016) with an equal split between support and dissupport of the players. And the sponsorship acceptance, that exist in sports as stated by T. Meenaghan (2001), Cornwell et al. (2001) and T. Meenaghan and Shipley (1999) where a high degree of sponsorship is accepted in sports. Meaning our findings suggest dropping a sponsor could be a smart move financially. The indication that once the public is made aware of a sponsors' supporting a controversial athlete through the news, we see 38 percent show an intention of boycotting the sponsor provides further evidence of this being a financially sound option. Managers of firms where short-term profits are particularly important should consider this option as the public attention span are generally short (Shuart, 2007) minimizing of backlash from supporters of the athletes.

But on the contrary, Louie, et al., (2001) states if the sponsor sticks with athletes through a low blame situation it has a positive effect on the sponsorship. Because of the relatively equal split in the population when talking about a controversy a low to moderate form of “blame” is arguably comparable to each other. Sticking by a controversial athlete can therefore be beneficial in the long run. Our finding showing that 11 percent choose to boycott the sponsor should they withdraw the support for the athlete, lend support towards Louie, et al., (2001) findings. Should managers share the view of the athletes a long-term view on the sponsorship could lead to an increased reputation of the firm. But managers should but vary of a potential short-term drop-in revenue as a consequence of the choice.

Several of the commenters show sincere support one way or the other and show good reasoning behind the comment. For example, commenters provided a well formulated reflection on the player protests. Some commenters went even further when showing support to a player who has been dropped by offering the dropped athlete a new sponsorship. The support/disupport from consumers towards sponsor are likely to be connected to the political orientation of the fan base described above. This could also explain why some NFL franchises have been more vocal surrounding the protest compared to others. An important aspect when considering how to react when dealing with a controversial action for sponsorship manager are the fan base political orientation.

Looking at the number of comments above we see very clearly a massive engagement in the protest by athletes. This level of engagement means it is very important to reflect on how to handle the situation as a sponsor. One underlying reason for the high engagement is the fact one of the incidents that contributed to forming the movement Black Lives Matter was proven to be fake (Shooting of Michael Brown, 2018). But several other incidents of police brutality against African Americans have been shown to be true (Yan, 2017). Evaluating the impact of choices is therefore paramount for managers when dealing with issues that carry a high public engagement.

We chose to look at a change in watching behavior as it is one of the primary driver of return of investment for sponsorships (Tjømmøe, Olsen, & Brønn, 2002). Exposure of the sponsor brand are necessary to achieve several of the reasons for sponsorship: attribute transfer, brand awareness, etc. (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998). Therefore, should a change in watching behavior be of major interest to sponsorship managers. We found that 8 percent claimed to stop watching the games because of the protest conducted by athletes. This is consistent with the drop-in viewership reported by Sports Illustrated (Rapaport, 2018), The Wall Street Journal (Flint, 2018) and others. Providing evidence for NFL sponsorship and sponsorship of NFL athletes being potentially less desirable in term of exposure and worth. However, our findings provides no evidence indicating if this is also the case or just a short-term dip in viewership. Manager should keep this in mind if they are thinking about engaging in a sponsorship agreement with the athlete and monitor actual viewing numbers published by broadcasters.

Another very interesting finding in our study 13 percent of all commenters express a clear willingness to purchase from the sponsor because of sponsors action. As mentioned above Kate Kaye (2017) findings support the fact people are willing to go out of their way to avoid financially supporting firms who disagree with their beliefs. Again, indicating how dropping a controversial athlete can be decision leading to a short-term increase in revenue or customers. Looking at the number of how many of the commenters who state their support for the sponsor dropping the athlete in relation with purchase intention, it appears to be a clear majority. The difference between the numbers show that there is a long way from commenters declaring support for sponsors dropping an athlete and stating a purchase intention.

We would like to raise a concern, there is a difference between purchase intention and an actual purchase. Auger and Devinney (2007) have for example shown a difference in consumers intention to purchase ethical products and the actual purchase of these products. Based on this, it is reasonable to expect actual purchase numbers to be lower than purchase intention. Manager must therefore be

very aware of this connection when evaluating their sponsorship of a controversial athlete.

If commenters can identify with the player or like the player this is consistent with balance theory (Heider, 1958) and social identity theory (Madrigal, 2001), as discussed in the theory chapter. The need to support the players is significantly reduced when only looking at articles where sponsors are supporting the athletes. Based on Mutz & Soss (1997) the wording and angle in the articles could play a part as to why supporters are less vocal when sponsors are supportive. But when coding the comments, we saw a higher engagement from commenters when defending the athlete's actions. The high level of engagement behind the defense are consistent with Meenaghan (2001) findings. For brands with a very direct sponsorship with a single athlete with KPI of image transfer or increased brand equity (Keller, 2003; Meenaghan, 1983; Meerabeau et al., 1991; Olson, 2010; Walliser, 2003) for example need to be aware of the athletes' fans have a very high involvement. This appears to be the case for our controversial athletes. Additionally, and consistent with Fiske (1980) and Mizerski (1982) studies, perceived negative information also attracts more attention and is weighted more contrary to positive.

Blaming athletes as the reason for boycotting the sponsor is done in one tenth of the comments. This supports the findings from Kate Kaye (2017), where 25 percent have claimed to stop buying a product due to political issues. Several commenters even claim to boycott sponsors not mentioned in the article because of the athlete's actions. We believe the boycott of a sponsor not mentioned in the article shows a higher engagement in the case compared to commenters claiming to boycott sponsors mentioned in the respective article.

Almost one in ten of commenters state they will be boycotting the sponsor because of the sponsor dropping athletes. This is mean half of commenters that support *the athletes protest* also claim to boycott *sponsor that drop their support* for the athletes. This indicates a stronger commitment to their beliefs compared to people who support sponsors *dropping their support* for controversial athletes.

If we compare this to the number of people boycotting the sponsor when sponsor state their support for the athlete, we see a significantly higher percentage of sponsor boycott. As stated above surveys have provided evidence that people are willing to boycott brands because of statements or actions from the brand. Again, our results lend support to these surveys. Looking at the discussion at the start of this chapter we argue that politically orientation of the fan base will have an impact on the boycott reaction of consumers. Because such a large number of people claim to boycott when sponsors publicly state their support for the athletes it supports McCombs (2002) finding that the angle of an article is important to how it is perceived in the general public.

We argue that even though not explicitly stated when you boycott a sponsor because of their *support for athletes*, the reason behind the boycott is not just because of the sponsors statement. It is also most likely connected to the engagement caused by the “Hands up do not shoot case” (Shooting of Michael Brown, 2018). Based on this sponsorship manager for brands planning to stick with controversial athletes should consider not making a public statement, when looking at the potential impact it could have on sales.

Conclusion

Summing up the discussion manager needs to consider several aspects when evaluating what to do if sponsored athletes does something controversial. Fan base political orientation together with the public engagement in their case, are important factors to consider what to do when dealing with a controversial athlete. Considering the firm's target audience reaction to support or dissupport of the controversial athlete are a key analysis for managers when looking at this case. It appears that no action is without consequence when dealing with a controversial athlete, as people claim to be boycotting sponsor who have not made any statement. Careful consideration seems therefore to be key until a long-term study has been conducted.

Limitations and future research

By not using Cohens Kappa to establish intercoder reliability we did not account for cases where we agree by chance in our reliability measure. However, because we used discussion between the coders as the method to reach 100 percent agreement and the size of our data agreement of chance should not be a problem. Ditching Cohens Kappa does however mean we do not account for cases where the raters agreed by chance. But because of the large dataset and the discussion protocol to resolve coding disagreements we argue that this should not affect the validity of the study.

As described in the results to ensure reliability we had a clear guideline for when to classify a commenter as supportive of athletes. Our strict guidelines surely eliminated some comments from the “supporting athletes” category.

Because this is an exploratory qualitative study we call for a quantitative study to verify findings in a more controlled setting. A study looking into different sports to examine if controversial athletes’ actions create similar engagement and in other contexts. We also call for a deeper examination of the bond between support/dissupport by sponsor on athletes and boycott of sponsor due to this action. Further the angle of long-term effects of sponsors supporting a controversial athlete should be explored. Lastly looking at if controversial athletes create a possible increase in fan engagement for the teams and the sport.

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Appendix 1

Publisher	Dato published	URL	#comments	Type	Stand of sponsor
The Root	26.09.2017	https://www.theroot.com/sponsors-are-dropping-nfl-players-for-protesting-this-1818811912	138	Mainstream	Dropping
Denver CBS	25.09.2017	miller-loses-sponsorship/ ndon-marshall-sponsor-national-anthem- protest#comments	64	Mainstream	Dropping
The Guardian	10.09.2016	https://sports.yahoo.com/von-miller-loses-endorsement-deal-kneeling-anthem-225340969.html	142	Mainstream	Dropping
Yahoo Sports	26.09.2017	https://sports.yahoo.com/von-miller-loses-endorsement-deal-kneeling-anthem-225340969.html	7037	Mainstream	Dropping
NY Times	27.09.2017	sponsors-anthem-protests.html	358	Mainstream	Supporting
NBC Sports	15.09.2016	ndon-marshall-picks-up-new-endorsement-after-losing- two-following-anthem-kneel/#comments	28	Mainstream	Supporting
CNS NEWS	13.10.2017	https://www.cnsnews.com/blog/craig-bannister/usaa- rejects-military-members-calls-pull-nfl-sponsorship	154	Blog	Supporting
Jonathan Hurley	30.09.2017	https://jonathanhurley.org/2017/09/30/nfl-logo-no- longer-shown-on-nfl-sponsor-papa-johns-website/	94	Blog	Dropping