

**Black Athlete Activism in the United States**  
Is the Game Changing Again?

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## Abstract

Scholars investigating black athlete activism and anti-racist protests seem to have unanimously identified two time periods: the so-called “golden age” of activism and an era of political apathy. The golden age of activism was characterised by vigorous outspokenness, with politically engaged athletes; however, these were treated as deviants and punished for their forthrightness. The golden age of athlete activism has ended, and the era that followed is characterised by political apathy and passiveness. Arguably, athletes have begun pursuing financial wealth rather than focusing on addressing prevailing social issues.

New and scholarly un-investigated examples challenge the perception that political commitment of black athletes is a story from the past. The changing media landscape seems to be playing an important role in this. An objective for this thesis is to identify the particularities of today’s protests and, in doing so, try to understand some of the factors that may be behind the potential re-politicisation of black athletes; specifically, new media. It will do so by analysing a case study about NFL player Colin Kaepernick, who has initiated a national anthem protest against racial inequality in the United States. The following research question has been posed: *How does Colin Kaepernick use the media for activism and what does this say about the opportunities for anti-racist protest among top athletes nowadays in the United States?*

To answer the research question, Kaepernick’s activism from August 2016 to June 2017 is used as a case study. Additionally, a simple quantitative content analysis and an in-depth qualitative content analysis are carried out on data from January 2017, which is retrieved from Kaepernick’s personal Twitter account. The simple quantitative content analysis is used to quantify and directly detect patterns in the data. The in-depth qualitative content analysis is applied to analyse the content and meaning of Kaepernick’s media activism. The coding frame for this part of the analysis is built on theories of mediatisation, gatekeeping, new racism and previous research among others.

The results show that, on the field, Kaepernick’s protest resonates as a revival of athlete activism. The number of athletes who have joined him, or in other ways protest themselves, indicates that a need for anti-racist protests remains despite the challenging social environment of new racism. In his online activism, it is found that Kaepernick functions as a gatekeeper, where he gives voice to not only those who currently do not have a platform, but also those who did in the past, but are now for one reason or another silenced. He does so by frequently referencing and establishing links to black social movement leaders of the past. It is found that athlete activism carries features of being mediatised. Conclusively, the results show that a trend of political engagement is -once again- emerging in sports. However, it seems that political outspokenness in sport venues still comes with career-compromising consequences.

**KEYWORDS:** Black athlete activism, Racial inequality, Political engagement, New racism, Mediatisation, Gatekeeping, Twitter, Colin Kaepernick.

## Table of Content

ABSTRACT.....	1
1. INTRODUCTION .....	3
2. THEORY AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH .....	8
2.1. <i>From racism to “new racism”</i> .....	8
2.2. <i>Protests in a changing media environment</i> .....	12
2.3. <i>The rise and fall of black athlete activism</i> .....	14
3. METHODS.....	18
3.1. <i>Methodology</i> .....	18
3.2. <i>The case study</i> .....	19
3.3. <i>Sample, units of analysis and time period</i> .....	23
3.4. <i>Data collection</i> .....	25
3.5. <i>Data analysis and operationalisation</i> .....	26
4. RESULTS.....	29
4.1. <i>Overview of the case study</i> .....	29
4.2. <i>Findings from the content analyses</i> .....	35
4.2.1. Overview of the data.....	36
4.2.2. Discussion of main themes .....	44
4.2.2.1. Kaepernick’s presentation of his activism .....	45
4.2.2.2. Racism then and now .....	46
4.2.2.3. References to the past .....	48
4.2.2.4. Socio-political context.....	52
4.2.2.5. Media.....	54
4.3. <i>Kaepernick as a gatekeeper</i> .....	56
5. CONCLUSION .....	59
5.1. <i>The price of activism</i> .....	59
5.2. <i>Conclusion on findings</i> .....	61
5.2.1. Kaepernick’s activism on the field and through media.....	61
5.2.2. The influence of new racism on athlete activism .....	63
5.2.3. The influence of mediatisation on athlete activism .....	63
5.2.4. The political sport scene nowadays .....	65
5.2.5. Opportunities for anti-racist protests.....	66
5.2.7. Methodological evaluation, limitations and suggestions for further research.....	68
6. REFERENCE LIST .....	70
7. APPENDIX A.....	79

## 1. Introduction

In the literature on politics and the media there is some nostalgia about the political engagement of black athletes in the United States. The literature refers to the 1960s and 1970s as a 'golden age' (Leonard & King, 2009), where protagonists such as boxer Muhammad Ali and others fought for civil rights and equality in the public sphere. Perhaps, most famous is the 1968 protest at the Olympic Games in Mexico, where black athletes John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised their clenched fists in silence. Men such as these have raised the bar for the possibilities of black athletes in the United States. Throughout time, athletes have fought for a variety of human rights in the United States and abroad, among others racial equality, social justice, workers rights, gender equality and free speech (Kidd & Donnelly, 2000). In the 1960s and 1970s, the political landscape was not like today and the black athlete had a very different position in society. Generally, the black athlete was told to know his/her place and stay there (Powell, 2008, p. 26). Along with Muhammad Ali, who refused to fight in the Vietnam War, this makes Carlos and Smith originals. Their silent protest resonated loudly across the Olympic stadium and into people's homes through the media. Before, athletes did not have other platforms on which to protest, as the media was a fraction of what it is today (Powell, 2008, p. 26). As such, the Olympic Games presented itself as an opportunity to speak out and reach an audience bigger than ever before.

The golden era of activism has ended and the political commitment of black athletes is for some a story from the past (Powell, 2008; Leonard & King, 2009; Roach, 2002). Authors attribute the end of the golden age to different factors. The political landscape has changed; racism is no longer carried out as a direct agenda against people of colour and consequently blacks are seemingly positioned as equals to whites in society (Ansell, 1997; Leonard & King, 2009; Rhoden, 2006). For this reason, some scholars argue that the explicit need for activism is less apparent and that this is the reason why, today, black athletes do not engage in political discussions (Leonard & King, 2009; Cunningham & Regan, 2011). Others argue that financial concerns have influenced the de-politicisation of sports (Agyemang, 2011; Rhoden, 2006). A striking example of the political apathy from black athletes comes from basket baller Michael Jordan. When asked why he continuously refused to publicly endorse Harvey Gantt, who was a black, democratic candidate running for a senate seat against incumbent Jesse Helms (Powell, 2008, p. 27), Jordan allegedly replied, "Republicans buy sneakers, too," (Powell, 2008, p. 27). Jordan was criticised for this, mostly because Helms had a reputation of being a racist, which was exemplified by an incident where he, supposedly, whistled "Dixie", a song which expresses nostalgia for the "good old days of slavery" (Granderson, 2012, August 14), with the intention to provoke a black member of Congress who shared an elevator with him. Regardless of reason, black athletes are, arguably, no longer openly, politically committed. Jordan's comment indicates a priority of financial prosperity over activism for equality between

racism among other socio-political and cultural problems, which is symbolic for the general lack of political engagement among black athletes.

However, new and scholarly un-investigated examples challenge the perception that political commitment of black athletes is a story from the past. The changing media landscape seems to be playing an important role in this along with Black Lives Matter, the social movement that has, arguably, created a momentum for athletes to protest in. The movement started as a hashtag on Twitter as a response to the murder of 17 years old Trayvon Martin in 2012 ([www.blacklivesmatter.com](http://www.blacklivesmatter.com)). It has now grown to become an organised social movement. On the movement's website, it is stated that “#BlackLivesMatter is a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society.” ([www.blacklivesmatter.com](http://www.blacklivesmatter.com)). Black athletes who have publically supported the movement include basketball player Steph Curry (Wilkinson, 2016, July 14) and tennis player Serena Williams among others (Zirin, 2016, July 8). Since the emergence of Black Lives Matter, several other black athletes have showed support for the movement and/or engaged in protests with similar objectives.

A case that illustrates an athlete who has utilised the opportunities of new media and the political momentum presented by Black Lives Matter is found in the activism of the San Francisco 49ers' quarterback Colin Kaepernick (hereafter simply referred to as Kaepernick). In August 2016, he began what has become known as his national anthem protest. He kneels when the national anthem comes on before playing NFL football games, because he does not support what the American flag represents (Schwarz, 2016, August 28). Kaepernick has stated that he will not stand for the national anthem and flag before a conversation about racial tensions is initiated and significant changes happen so that black people are no longer oppressed in the United States (BBC, 2016, September 2). Kaepernick's activism has been given a lot of media attention and has therefore become well known. From the day his protest was first noticed, the press covered the story extensively. Most news outlets described how Kaepernick had landed himself in the midst of furor and how he was subject to “online beating” (David, 2016, August 28). A lot of people were angry; most of them because they saw his actions as disrespectful of the men and women of the United States military and others because they thought he, being an athlete, should not engage in political conversations but rather leave those to politicians (Gregory on The Dan Patrick Show, 2016, September 22). For others, his point of view did not seem to be the problem but rather the way in which he chose to protest, yet, those who criticised how he exercised his protest failed to suggest how he could do so in a different, appropriate way with similar impact (Pavlovitz, 2016, September 3). However, people also spoke in defence of Kaepernick. This even applied to veterans, where some argued that Kaepernick was exercising his right to speak and act as he should like, which they demonstrated by making the hashtag #VeteransForKaepernick trend<sup>1</sup> on Twitter (Park, 2016, August 31). In addition to protesting on the field, Kaepernick has also taken several initiatives to work to

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<sup>1</sup> A hashtag can ‘trend’ on Twitter, which means that tweets containing this particular hashtag have been retweeted multiple times. When this happens, the hashtag is featured on the start page of Twitter. This ensures that a lot of people are exposed to it.

better black communities in the United States. An example of this is a campaign called Know Your Rights Camp, which Kaepernick has founded ([www.knowyourrightscamp.com](http://www.knowyourrightscamp.com)). The campaign aims at educating black youth on, among other things, how to safely interact with law enforcement ([www.knowyourrightscamp.com](http://www.knowyourrightscamp.com)). However, regardless of such initiatives, Kaepernick continues to be a polarising figure. Enthusiastic supporters of his activism see him as “the modern day Muhammad Ali” (Allen, 2016, September 18). Others have labelled him unpatriotic, like other athletes of colour have been labelled before him (Myrdahl, 2011, p. 160). Some journalists attempting to analyse the situation say that those who insult Kaepernick are more unpatriotic than he is (Abdul-Jabbar, 2016, August 30). *Time Magazine* journalist Sean Gregory has said on radio that Kaepernick is a part of a bigger trend of athletes who are beginning to step out of their comfort zone of zero political engagement (Gregory on The Dan Patrick Show, 2016, September 22). When discussing the apparent shift from political detachment to an eagerness for political engagement, Gregory said: “We are seeing a total reversal of that” (Gregory on The Dan Patrick Show, 2016, September 22).

Another example of a politically engaged athlete is basketball player LeBron James. He showed his support for the fight against police brutality against black Americans by wearing a black t-shirt with the print “I can’t breathe”, words repeated by a 43 year-old black man named Eric Garner, as he was held down by a New York City Police Department officer, who put him in a chokehold on July 17, 2014 (Video, The Guardian, 2014). Garner died from the injuries he suffered during the arrest (Video, The Guardian, 2014). While LeBron’s statement is recognised, it is worth mentioning that he only started speaking out on political issues in 2009 (Westman, 2009, April 9). Before that, LeBron was known to shy away from political discussions (Westman, 2009, April 9). Another case was found when five footballers from St. Louis Rams, also in the NFL, entered the pitch with their arms raised in the air. The incident took place after 18 year-old Michael Brown was shot dead in Ferguson on August 9, 2014. According to the autopsy report, Brown was shot as he had his hands up (BBC, 2014). The five footballers’ raised arms are assumed symbolic for the violence of his shooting. A fourth case illustrates footballer Andrew Hawkins wearing a t-shirt that demands justice for 12 years old Tamir Rice and 22 years old John Crawford. Both are black individuals killed by police officers, while holding toy guns in their hands. Hawkins’ action was described as ‘pathetic’ by the head of the Cleveland Police Union and he was asked for an apology (McManamon, 2014, December 16). Hawkins addressed the media, where he said that justice is something every American should have, and also that “justice should be the goal for every American” (Hawkins quoted in McManamon, 2014, December 16). Together, these examples show that a new trend of political engagement is emerging in sports, where the black athlete once again displays an eagerness for political commitment. This indicates that a need for activism remains and signifies that racism in the United States prevails.

This thesis explores how prominent, black athletes in the United States are re-politicising sport arenas through activism in their attempt to fight racial inequality and how they do so in a changing media environment. Specifically, the thesis will focus on the case of football player Kaepernick. Kaepernick's activism has received a lot of attention in the media, both traditional and new media, and has sparked heated debates about its purpose as well as what is appropriate to bring into the sport arena as an athlete and what is not. In the United States, it is a widely held belief that the combination of sports and activism does not exist and that attempts to make the connection by for example engaging in protests are by no means accepted (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010, p. 158). This may be the reason why, historically, politically outspoken athletes have been treated as deviants (Kaufman, 2008). However, according to Edwards (2010), sport institutions should be used as a political platform (in Myrdahl, 2011, p. 154). But the apolitical view of sport venues more often than not result in critical responses from the public as well as discussions about the relationship between sports and politics (Myrdahl, 2011, p. 154). Furthermore, aiming one's activism at the flag or the national anthem means to many that one goes against unspoken (national) values (Myrdahl, p. 159). This is interesting because, as Kaufman (2003) notes, "sports are inextricably political" (p. 218) most directly because of the respect that is paid to the national anthem before a game and its links to nationalism.

Moreover, I will place this case study in a historical context. It is interesting to do so because Kaepernick frequently refers to the past while carrying out his own activism. Also, he is known to be friends with sports sociologist Harry Edwards, who encouraged Tommie Smith and John Carlos to protest during the Olympics back in 1968 (Wiggins, 2014; Hartman, 2003). A historical contextualization will also allow an examination of the changing role of the media in black athlete activism, as activism is no longer carried out *in front of* media but *through* media. This research will therefore contribute to our understanding of the mediatization of protests. Mediatization is considered to be crucial, because, as this thesis will show, Kaepernick's protest is exclusively shaped by media, possibly, as a consequence of the fact that the logic of protests has changed. Thus, an objective for this thesis is to identify the particularities of today's protests and, in doing so, try to understand some of the factors that may be behind the re-politicisation of black athletes; specifically, new media. The research question that will be applied for this study is as follows:

*How does Colin Kaepernick use the media for activism and what does this say about the opportunities for anti-racist protest among top athletes nowadays in the United States?*

Black athlete activism is worth studying, because, arguably, a re-politicisation of sports in the United States is taking place. This re-politicisation is visible in black athletes protesting in which media have played a key role. It remains largely unexplored in common research. This indicates that a study regarding the new politicisation of sports should prove to contribute to understanding athlete activism. This is important because the study could fill gaps in literature on the relationship between sport and politics and could also

further develop the understanding about how sports can be used for social change. Ideally, this would challenge black athletes to reflect on the role they hold in society, as has also been the objective of literature about apolitical athletes before (Agyemang, 2011). Moreover, it may challenge sport fans to demand action from their role models rather than widely accepting their preference for political silence (Jackson 2006 in: Leonard & King, 2009, p. 222).

Considering the social relevance of the study, the proposed research has two main areas of contribution. The first area of contribution is that the re-politicising of the sport arena has deeper and more extensive consequences for the cultural environment in the United States, specifically regarding the black community in America. The game is changing. Tendencies are found which indicate that the sport arena is being politicised once again by athletes who do not fear to take a political stance in public, despite risking reputations, contracts and sponsorship deals. This politicisation may not only change the environment in the sport arena but spark political movements in its most idealistic sense and place black athletes -once again- as advocates in the fight for social justice and race equality. The second area of contribution regards the opportunities of new technologies. The rise of social media has fundamentally changed the way protests are carried out, as they enable the protesters in ways previously unseen. As already mentioned, protests are no longer seen as a performance *in front of* media but *through* media. The world of professional sport is mediated, today's athletes are media-savvy and protests show traces of being mediated.

To answer the research question, this thesis is going to use Kaepernick's activism as a case study, which covers the events that took place since Kaepernick began his activism to now. In doing so, it will include different sources of media material to provide a comprehensive narrative on the events that have taken place. These include interviews, which Kaepernick have consented to participate in, newspaper articles that have covered his activism, and his website [www.knowyourrightscamp.com](http://www.knowyourrightscamp.com). In order to examine Kaepernick's activism in detail, a quantitative content analysis and a qualitative content analysis will be conducted. The material that will be applied for the content analyses consists of tweets from Kaepernick's personal Twitter account @Kaepernick7 combined with links attached to those tweets. The timeframe is January 2017. Twitter is chosen because it is the social media platform on which Kaepernick is most active. The quantitative content analysis will be used to provide an account of the data, which serves to give the reader a sense of what it looks like. The qualitative content analysis will be used to zoom in on the particularities of Kaepernick's activism and discover how Kaepernick speaks for those who suffer under the unequal treatment of blacks in the United States. Conclusively, this means that this thesis investigates how Kaepernick, arguably, strategically uses the media to give a voice to those who do not have one in his fight for racial equality.

## **2. Theory and previous research**

This study aims at investigating how Kaepernick uses media for his activism and what this says about the opportunities for anti-racist protests among top athletes nowadays in the United States. The theoretical framework will therefore include theories that can help explain the state of racism today and the role played by the media in protests. First, it is crucial to discuss racism and in this connection define and conceptualise the term ‘new racism’, as socio-political developments have changed not only the perception of racism but also the way it is carried out. Secondly, regarding the specific role played by the media, this theoretical framework will explore theories of mediatisation, as the way in which protests are carried out is changing because of media. This section will also argue that one of the key ways in which the relationship between activists and the media is changing is in terms of gatekeeping. Thirdly, an account of previous research on black athlete activism will be provided. This will make the contextualisation of this study not only theoretical but historical as well.

### **2.1. From racism to “new racism”**

According to several scholars, in the United States today, like in other Western societies, the state of racism is changing (Ansell, 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2014). There has been a shift from overt to covert racism. Before, black people were presented with a specific context for opposition to and expression of racism, as a distinct hierarchy between races was a societal norm. But over the past half century, things have changed, the political landscape has changed, and as a consequence racism now takes a more covert shape (Leonard & King, 2009, p. 216). The lack of direct context for opposition to racism does not mean that racism does not exist, but rather that it presents itself differently and certainly more indirectly. Racism has taken a form that some describe as ‘new racism’ (Ansell, 1997; Bonilla-Silva; 2003, Collins, 2005 in: Leonard & King, 2009, p. 217). Thus, the literature suggests that previous definitions of traditional racism have been modified, as racism has changed (Leonard & King, 2009, p. 216- 217). Leonard and King (2009) argue that the re-articulation of traditional racism is caused by a change in the political landscape. As such, the contextual conditions, which would encourage opposition towards racism, are no longer present. Another reason for the re-articulation of racism is found in the creation of consent, which states that racism is over (Leonard & King, 2009, p. 217). This consent has been produced by powerful institutions such as traditional media. They “present hegemonic ideologies that claim that racism is over. They work to obscure the racism that does exist and they undercut antiracist protest.” (Collins, 2003 quoted in: Leonard & King, 2009, p. 217). This makes the concept ‘new racism’ relevant for this study, as it concerns a process of delegitimisation of anti-racist protests by claiming that there is no longer a need for them. Presumably, this makes it more difficult for anti-

racist protests, such as the one carried out by Kaepernick and others, to develop.

Three key features of new racism, which function to deny predominantly racial hierarchy, have been identified by Ansell (1997, p. 59):

1. “a sanitised and coded language about race [...];
2. avid disavowals of racist intent and circumvention of classical anti-racist discourse; and
3. a shift from a focus on to race and biological relations of inequality to a concern for cultural differentiation and national identity.”

What is potentially relevant from these features of new racism is that Ansell (1997) argues that the anti-racist discourse has undergone a change. Here, Ansell (1997) and Leonard and King (2009) agree that a change has taken place, and they underline that a consequence of this change is that people take a different approach to racism. In other words, racism is performed differently so that it does not cross the line and becomes overt and thus unacceptable for today’s apolitical environment. The new racism, which Ansell (1997) and Leonard and King (2009) talk about, rejects direct racist intent, which was dominant in the past, and instead, as the third key feature argues, focuses on culture. This means that new racism operates without addressing the classification ‘race’ and is described as “race-neutral” (Ansell, 1997, p. 21). As Ansell (1997) puts it: “we are seeing a new racism without race.” (p. 67). Ansell’s (1997) third key feature, which describes a “displacement of race by culture” (Leonard & King, 2009, p. 217), can be explained further through discussing naturalisation. According to Hall (1997), the ‘culture’ of black people has been reduced to ‘nature’, which is a strategy called naturalisation (p. 245). Hall (1997) describes naturalisation as a tool to ‘fix’ differences (p. 245), which is believed to have been the objective under racist discourses in the past. By naturalising certain types of behaviour as ‘black features’, and by making ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ interchangeable, the representation of black people becomes negative. More correctly, the equation of ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ is a stereotype, and I argue that some stereotypes about black people have persisted into the twenty first century. Conclusively, these shifts in meaning entail that, nowadays, racism is approached fundamentally differently through denying racial hierarchy. Ultimately, this makes it difficult for activists to carry out anti-racist protests, as the literature suggests that they are no longer perceived to be legitimate; at least not to the same extent as before (Leonard & King, 2009, p. 217). Conclusively, Ansell (1997) argues that, while perhaps not intentionally, new racism fundamentally serves to shift ideologies towards benefitting white privilege (p. 22).

In connection with the discussion about the state of racism today, it is relevant to discuss the concepts “white privilege” and “reverse racism”. McIntosh (1990) presents white privilege as a daily advantage white people have simply because of their skin colour (p. 31). White privilege is relevant not only because Ansell (1997) suggests that new racism benefits white privilege, but also because new racism denies the existence of racial hierarchy. McIntosh (1990) explains that white privilege represents an unearned set of

assets, which most white people remain oblivious to possessing (p. 31). Arguably, this is because, generally, white people are taught to see their lives as the norm (Minnich in: McIntosh, 1990, p. 32). This perception of normality implies that white people consider themselves “morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal [...]” (Minnich quoted in McIntosh, 1990, p. 32). The conclusion of this is that when white people work to help or say benefit others, it comes with the underlying, often unconscious, intention to “allow “them” to be more like “us”.” (Minnich quoted in McIntosh, 1990, p. 32). This line of reasoning indicates that we are shaping a racially unequal society without intending to do so, where white people systematically, and unfairly, become over-empowered and assert dominance over others on the foundation of race. This line of reasoning also implies that meritocracy, the philosophy holding “that democratic choice is equally available to all” (McIntosh, 1990, p. 36), a philosophy deeply rooted in the culture of the United States, is a myth. To substantiate this perspective with a concrete example and turn to the field of sport, Powell (2008) explains that white and black people are not treated the same in sports. Specifically, he addresses the hypothetical situation when a white athlete and a black athlete exhibit bad behaviour. According to Powell (2008), the black athlete will always have more to lose image wise and regarding public perception, and can expect that black culture be blamed (p. 9-10). In contrast, when white athletes misbehave no one blames white culture but rather the individual (Powell, 2008, p. 10). This aspect opens the discussion of white privilege up to dealing with white and black culture rather than only white and black individuals. McIntosh (1990) emphasises that white people individually prosper more easily in society and Powell (2008) understands that when it comes to assigning blame, white people are blamed individually at the same time as the actions of black people become a question of black culture. Furthermore, Norton and Sommer (2011) identify reverse racism as an emerging trend in which white people feel that they are subject to discrimination to a larger extent than black people (p. 215). This belief in anti-white prejudice is controversial because almost any statistic on race relations will reveal that blacks are at a disadvantage in regards to, among others, jobs, police treatment and education (Norton & Sommer, 2011, p. 215). Reverse racism is relevant as it reveals that racism exists, because by stating something is ‘reverse’ one agrees that a concept in its ‘non reversed state’ exists. Together, these arguments could explain why Kaepernick is struggling with opposition to and criticism against, among other things, the legitimacy of his protest.

The discussion about the new kind of racism can help explain the context of Kaepernick’s protest. The two aspects that are most relevant to examine to shed light on this are the Obama presidency and Black Lives Matter. Kaepernick started his protest when Barack Obama was president of the United States. For some, Obama’s presidency could be interpreted as direct proof that racism was over. After all, a black man held the highest office in the country. López (2010) described 2008, the year of Obama’s election, as “racially momentous” (p. 1023). After the election, it seemed to have become a widely held belief that the United States had entered a time, in which the notion of race as a factor that influences social order had passed

(López, 2010, p. 1024). However, scholars argue that the idea of a post-racial United States is fake. Race has not become irrelevant but temporarily superseded under the Obama Presidency (López, 2010, p. 1025). For the United States, this meant a polarisation. For some, the racial struggle was over with the election and Obama was living proof, yet others kept arguing that his presidency could not say anything about the daily struggles faced by black people (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p. 256). As Bonilla-Silva (2014) puts it, Obama's victory in 2008 was not the end of racism but "part of and parcel of the "new racism" in the United States [...]" (p. 256). The Obama presidency is important to keep in mind because it, to some extent, can be expected to have contributed to shaping the opinions of the critics of Kaepernick's activism. For some, it may be used to delegitimise his purpose, which is to fight racial inequality. The fact that a black man is president serves as a counterargument for the statement that blacks have less opportunity in the United States.

In contrast to the Obama presidency, Black Lives Matter clearly signifies that racism still exists. The movement challenges the dominant consensus that the United States has entered a post-racist era. Yancy and Butler (2015) write that while the chant Black Lives Matter states the obvious, "the obvious has not yet been historically realized." (p. 2). The social movement makes it difficult for people to argue that racism is over, because it points out the killings of black men and women at the hands of police officers. The message that this sends to black communities is that black lives do not matter (Yancy & Butler, 2015, p. 2). By highlighting that black lives are, allegedly, considered less valuable than white lives, it is believed that Black Lives Matter has created a momentum. First, this momentum presents a chance to re-engage in discussions about racism. Secondly, it creates a context in which black athletes can protest. Kaepernick in particular has utilised this momentum. Leonard and King (2009) state that there is no "modern-day counterpart" (p. 219) to the protagonists who were prominent half a decade ago, which is something this thesis aims at challenging by focusing on Kaepernick's case and the context of Black Lives Matter. Not only does Black Lives Matter challenge the dominant consensus about racism, it has made people talk about the issue, which may have encouraged black athletes in the United States to speak up. Kaepernick's activism seems to be directly inspired by Black Lives Matter, which is exemplified by their shared goal that is ending police brutality and achieving racial equality. Arguably, Black Lives Matter has been successful in creating aforementioned momentum for athletes to protest in because it has adopted the media logic as a set of ground rules and ways of operating. The relevance of media logic is explained below.

## 2.2. Protests in a changing media environment

As mentioned earlier, the way in which top athletes protest nowadays in the United States is fundamentally different from how protests were carried out half a century ago. The new media environment has changed the game. Protests take place through media, as is seen with the case of Kaepernick, instead of in front of them, as was the case with for example Smith and Carlos in 1968. For Smith and Carlos an opportunity for exposure presented itself with the Olympic Games. Kaepernick appears to have the opportunity of exposure every day. Arguably, new media is changing protests, which can be seen as part of a larger phenomenon of mediatisation. Mediatisation is a theory, which argues that media influence other fields in society over time. In other words, mediatisation refers to the process “by which social change in particular (or all) fields of society has been shaped by media” (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014, p. 704). Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby (2015) add that studies of mediatisation pay attention to “the interplay between media, culture and society” (p. 314) all the while taking a holistic approach to understand how the different social forces interact (p. 316). Regardless of how one describes it, studies of mediatisation show how the logic of the media has affected multiple social domains. The media is changing as a result of technological developments. In turn, this means that the influence and effect that media have on institutions and practices are changing as well (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014, p. 706).

Livingstone and Lunt (2014) identify two features that characterise a study of mediatisation. The first is that the study should focus on a domain that is “historically separate from the media” (p. 706). As this thesis focuses on activism in the sport arena, it qualifies to be a study of mediatisation in regards to this aspect. Sports and games have taken place without any interference of media for centuries, although later, professional sport has been reported on, with the emergence of mass communication media. The second feature identified by Livingstone and Lunt (2014) is that the effects that media now have on this domain, develop over time, as mediatisation is a process (p. 706). The second feature commonly entails that a historic perspective is included in the study to exemplify the changes, which have taken place and how media have influenced the particular domain. Again, this thesis qualifies to be a study of mediatisation, as it investigates not only Kaepernick’s activism but also how political protests of athletes are different now compared to the pre-digital media era. Kaepernick’s activism is fundamentally different from Smith and Carlos’ Olympic protest in 1968. Most strikingly, this is because Kaepernick’s protest takes place not only on the football pitch, where it is covered by traditional media, but he uses social media platforms to continue his protest off the field as well and with a higher degree of autonomy.

Mediatisation studies specifically focus on the effects of media and are as such not media-centric (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014, p. 706), which means that focus is not on the media. The most important factor is the particular domain, which the media have an influence on, and it is this domain that is the centre of attention in mediatisation studies (Livingstone & Lunt, 2014, p. 706). The domain is most important

because it is being influenced. In this study, the domain that is being investigated is athlete activism, the specific way in which their protests are taking place. To address this further, Altheide and Snow (1979, 1988, 1991) explain that media logic, the standard conventions and the way the media operates, has become the “dominant way of perceiving social and public affairs.” (quoted in Strömbäck, 2008, p. 233). Or as Hjarvard (2012) puts it, the structure of a domain is being changed through interaction with media, as it is influenced by media logic “i.e. their institutional, aesthetic, and technological affordances.” (Hjarvard, 2012, p. 30). The media has become so powerful and important that it is necessary for social actors to adapt to its logic (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 238). Athlete activism is an example of this. The nature of protesting has changed and protesters are enabled through social media. The logic of protests is changing, which can be seen in the novelty of the way protests are being carried out. A key way in which it is clear that the relationship between media and activists is changing is in terms of gatekeeping.

In his classic study on gatekeeping, White (1950) describes gatekeeping as a process in which information goes through several ‘gates’ where it is approved or dismissed by ‘gate keepers’ (p. 383). These gatekeepers decide what news is important and good enough to be brought further in the system, which is how they govern the ‘gates’ (White, 1950, p. 383). Ultimately, in this system, the gatekeeper has the final say, where he/she decides whether a news piece is published. White (1950) found that the gatekeeper plays an important role through his/her say and power over what information is newsworthy (p. 384). White (1950) understood that the gatekeeping process, the decision-making process of selecting material, was “highly subjective” and “how reliant upon value-judgements based on the “gate keeper’s” own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations the communication of “news” really is.” (p. 386). While Kaepernick does not perform journalistic practices, he does spread information and at times news through his social media activities particularly on Twitter. Previously, mainstream media had a monopoly on what is good and important news. Today, new media is challenging this monopoly. Because the journalistic monopoly no longer exists, Kaepernick and others can utilise the power that gatekeeping brings because they are enabled by social media and share stories and other content, which they deem to be important. Gatekeeping in itself is considered a powerful tool, as it can influence the minds of the people through agenda setting, the theory which argues that the media “force attention to certain issues” (Lang & Lang quoted in McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177), and because control of information “is seen as a power resource” (Pettigrew, 1972, p. 187). Nowadays, the social media user, including activists, can participate in the powerful gatekeeping process.

To conclude the discussion about protests in the changing media environment I shall discuss literature that explores the relationship between social movements and social media. McCurdy (2012) discusses this relationship. He finds that before, social movements relied on the attention from mainstream media to a great extent (McCurdy, 2012, p. 248). Today’s activism is believed to be different, because individuals control protesting to a larger degree. According to Bosch (2016), protesters can shape their activism via social media

(p. 224); however, I believe that even though they can shape it, they can never fully control it. Regardless, social media does provide a tool through which protesters can attempt to manage their own representation. Media have become a resource for protesters (McCurdy, 2012, p. 248), including Kaepernick in whose case it is indeed actively utilised. Twitter, especially, has gained scholarly attention in the quest to investigate how it is being used to mobilise, communicate and organise within social movements (Gleason, 2013 in: Bosch, 2016, p. 224). While there are examples of these (Bosch, 2016), in other cases of online activism, scholars have found that new media has had an important role yet has not had a determining effect (Robertson, 2015, p. 538). Again, what can be said about new media though, is that it has provided activists, among others, with the opportunity to reach an audience and spread their message without having to engage with traditional media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Cammaerts et al. 2013; Donk et al. 2004; Dahlberg and Siapera, 2007 in: Robertson, 2011, p. 531). The old pattern of communication has been changed and so has the nature of protesting, which is most directly seen in terms of gatekeeping.

### **2.3. The rise and fall of black athlete activism**

In order to make sense of the current political landscape in the sport arena, it is crucial to understand its history. Literature on the topic of black athlete activism in the United States appear to have unanimously defined two time periods in the history of activism: ‘the golden age’ which was an era of vigorous and continuous activism, followed by an era characterised by passiveness and political apathy (Cunningham & Regan, 2011; Agyemang, 2011, Leonard & King, 2009, and Roach, 2002).

A classic example of the so-called golden age is found in the 1968 Olympics. During the games, sprint runners Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in a black power salute protest against poverty, inequality and racism (Leonard & King, 2009, p. 218). The protest was orchestrated by former athlete turned sports sociologist Harry Edwards (Hartman, 2003, p. 21). Edwards was the man behind the group Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), whose goal was to stage a collective black athlete boycott of the games (Wiggins, 2014, p. 761). Though unsuccessful, the group included several black athletes counting Tommie Smith and John Carlos (Wiggins, 2014, p. 761). Smith and Carlos’ protest caused outrage within the U.S. delegation, and among sports writers and the American public (Bass, 2002; Hartmann, 2003 in: Leonard & King, 2009, p. 218). As a consequence of their activism, the athletes were sent home and stripped of their medals. The U.S. delegation warned other participating athletes that the display of political protests would be punished, which, according to Leonard and King (2009), sent a clear message that a choice existed between being an athlete and being politically committed (p. 218).

Another milestone in the golden age of black athlete activism is Muhammad Ali’s refusal to enlist to the Vietnam War. In 1967, the heavyweight boxer, formerly known as Cassius Clay, was called up

to join the army in the Vietnam War (Saeed, 2010, p. 60). Ali refused and publicly stated his political and religious objections to the war (Saeed, 2010, p. 60). Ali was mostly alone in his outspokenness about the war at the time, where even black leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had not yet expressed their opposition against it (Saeed, 2010, p. 60). As a consequence of refusing to serve his country, Ali was stripped of his title as a heavyweight champion and was banned from professionally competing (Saeed, 2010, p. 60). Saeed (2010) describes that Ali went from being the embodiment of American patriotism to “a symbol of a divided America” (p. 60). Ali’s outspokenness and criticism of the Vietnam War and the involvement of the United States awarded him nicknames such as ‘instigator’ and ‘troublemaker’ from the public and media (Saeed, 2010, p. 60).

Smith, Carlos and Ali are, among others, considered examples of athlete activism from the golden age of activism. The political landscape at the time was shaped by social movements led by black social leaders such as Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and civil rights fighter Malcolm X. The reasons to protest were multiple, as racism was overt. In literature about the golden age of black athlete activism, the question set by scholars is then whether the likes of Smith and Carlos would inspire the next generation of athletes to fearlessly fight inequalities by using their celebrity to change society (Miklasz, 1992 in: Leonard & King, 2009, p. 219). The answer found in scholarly literature, dating up until 2014, appears to be a unanimous no. Scholars agree that today’s athletes have not embraced activism in similar ways as previous generations, and there are several interpretations as to why that is (Cunningham & Regan, 2011, p. 658).

Cunningham and Regan (2011) present the argument that prevailing social and political changes have resulted in less explicit racism (p. 658). The issues that face black individuals today take a different shape than those in the 1960s and 1970s, where an agenda against black people was explicit in society and openly discussed. Racism is no longer, in a generalisable sense, overt but covert, which has been examined above as ‘new racism’. According to Cunningham and Regan (2011), this new narrative has diminished the apparent need for activism against racism, as it is no longer presented as a direct agenda against black people (p. 658). However, current political situations and protests taking place in the sport arena and the reactions these have received heavily indicate that there still is a need for activism and signify that racism in the United States is indeed still very real. Another presumed reason presented by Cunningham and Regan (2011) is that athletes stay quiet because they fear the consequences that follow from speaking up. This argument mainly revolves around financial benefits being taken away such as endorsements and sponsorship deals because corporations do not wish to be connected with political standpoints in public from their front figures (Cunningham & Regan, 2011, p. 658). In connection with this, Jackson (2006) argues that keeping quiet has emancipated the black athlete (in Leonard & King, 2009, p. 222). Jackson (2006) states that “we live in the era of the silent athlete” (in Leonard & King, 2009, p. 222), and he emphasises that athletes have thrived financially by keeping quiet. Additionally, he underlines that from this behaviour they have become heroes who are applauded by their audience. The audience accepts their silence and as such do

not motivate or encourage change (Jackson in Leonard & King, 2009, p. 222). This role, which the audience accepts athletes in, is one in which they feature in commercials and occasionally give to charity. A final reason is that the media have been known to demonise athletes who have attempted to use their celebrity to initiate socio-cultural change (Leonard & King, 2009, p. 223). This is believed to have generated fear among those who would otherwise be inclined to speak up and now choose not to.

An often mentioned black athlete who has become symbolic of the political apathy of athletes is Michael Jordan. Jordan has been celebrated as a hero on and off the pitch throughout his active years as a basketball player and after retirement (Agyemang, 2011, p. 433). Mostly, his hero status is due to his athletic excellence, which awarded him global recognition and fame (Crowley, 1999, p. 41). While one must imagine that the influence, of a person who holds such a status, is wide reaching, Jordan has done nothing to affect change or discuss social issues such as racism. In contrast, Crowley (1999) argues that he has done everything to avoid this (p. 42). Linked to the discussion above, there may be several reasons for Jordan's reluctance to address for example racism. Crowley (1999) suggests that the main motivation behind Jordan's political apathy has been money (p. 43). Jordan was endorsed by Nike and has also featured in several other commercials of which one with Gatorade stands out because of its slogan 'be like Mike' (Agyemang, 2011, p. 434). Jordan has been greatly criticised by a lot of scholars, but, in fairness, he was not alone in his political silence. His contemporaries, such as golf player Tiger Woods and football player O. J. Simpson, were also not politically engaged. Not only did O. J. not work to better black communities, he is known to have worked hard to not be associated with black America at all, doing so by surrounding himself with white friends and marrying a white woman as well (Strachan, 2016, June 14). This is exemplified by a conversation between then *New York Times* journalist Robert Lipsyte and O. J. about a wedding he had attended while being seated at an almost exclusively black table (Strachan, 2016, June 14). O. J. had overheard a woman saying "look, there's O. J. sitting with all those n\*\*\*rs" (Strachan, 2016, June 14), to which the journalist expressed how that must have been an uncomfortable situation for O. J.. O. J. allegedly replied: "No, it was great. Don't you understand? She knew that I wasn't black. She saw me as O. J." (Strachan, 2016, June 14). Jordan's, O. J.'s and other athletes' political apathy was how sponsors wanted it (Powell, 2008, p. 26). Crowley (1999) suggests that while the likes of Ali and Smith and Carlos embodied the political environment of their time, Jordan stands for the imperious commercialism of his (p. 43).

Rhoden (2006) best describes this commercialism. He argues that a new type of slavery has emerged among black athletes, where they may be rich and believe they are liberated as they thrive financially, yet they are not free (Rhoden, 2006). Rhoden (2006) states that while black bodies are commercialised and used to sell endless amounts of products, black athletes still do not have true power despite the fact that the football industry is predominantly built on black talent (p. 2). Aforementioned sports sociologist Harry Edwards has said: "The athlete in the 21st century has become completely commodified." (quoted in Powell, 2008, p. 17). As Rhoden (2006) puts it, this generation of athletes are not politically

engaged, because they do not have a mission (p. 2). He describes the mission as a pursuit for power, which white people have denied blacks throughout history (p. 6) and that is fuelled by knowledge of “the legacy of struggle that made possible this generation’s phenomenal material success.” (Rhoden, 2006, p. 3). However, despite being wealthier than ever, black athletes are, historically, at a low point exactly because they are unaware of their past and the people who have sacrificed careers to open doors for them (Rhoden, 2006, p.7). Rhoden (2006) argues that the athletes that are role models today, such as boxer Mike Tyson and basketballer Kobe Bryant, are proof of the collapse of said mission because of their political apathy (p. 7). Rhoden (2006) labels black athletes as slaves to their contracts and endorsements, because they are ignorant of the past, which obstructs their sense of purpose, and because they have a false sense of freedom and power. In an additional perspective, Sage (1998) argues that athletes no longer view sport arenas as a place for political expression but as neutral instances (in: Kaufman, 2008, p. 216). Yet, Rhoden (2006) argues that black athletes are a symbol of black achievement, who have the opportunity to address the power imbalance of their industry, and if they have motivation to do so, they could be implementers of social change. However, according to Rhoden (2006), their wealth keeps them streamlined and ensures that they abdicate their sense of responsibility (p. 8).

### 3. Methods

This third chapter of the thesis outlines in detail how the research is carried out. First, it states the choice of methods and explains why these particular methods are not only appropriate but ideal. Secondly, it will discuss how a case study is useful when examining a larger phenomenon, as this thesis does with its focus on black athlete activism through investigating Kaepernick's activism. Thirdly, the full data set will be described along with the sample that is subject to the analyses. This section will justify the sample theoretically. Finally, the specific way of analysing and interpreting the data will be presented. Moreover, it will argue for the study's reliability and validity.

#### 3.1. Methodology

This thesis will use a case study approach to investigate how Kaepernick uses media for his activism and discover what that means for anti-racist protests among top athletes nowadays in the United States, as is the objective for the thesis. Using a case study allows the researcher to examine if there are novelties within the phenomenon of black athlete activism, where a consensus that black athlete activism is a story from the past rules among some scholars. Arguably, the case study can be used to challenge this consensus.

Several types of data will be used in this study, as is conventional when using a case study approach. To describe the case study, I will use four types of data: 1. interviews, which Kaepernick has consented to participate in, 2. content from his website [www.knowyourrightscamp.com](http://www.knowyourrightscamp.com), 3. newspaper articles that describe his activism and relevant contextual events, and 4. his and others' Twitter content. These sources of data will be used to provide a comprehensive narrative on the events, which have taken place since Kaepernick initiated his national anthem protest and provide thus an overview of the case study.

To analyse the case study, this thesis will take a multi-methodological approach. It will engage in a quantitative content analysis and a qualitative content analysis. These methods will focus on a specific set of the data, the sample, which is Kaepernick's personal Twitter content from January 2017. The sample is explained and justified later. The quantitative content analysis will be used to categorise and quantify the data. This is beneficial because it allows me to provide a detailed overview of what the data looks like, which is essentially a summary of the data (Silverman, 2011, p. 382). Not only does this make it easier to detect patterns in the data (Silverman, 2011, 382), but it also makes it easier for the reader to follow the statements and arguments I present based on these patterns. The qualitative content analysis will be used to go into depth with an examination of how Kaepernick engages with key topics. Appropriately, qualitative content analysis is regarded a flexible approach to analyse text data (Cavanagh, 1997 in: Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277), which is suitable, as this thesis is attempting to understand Kaepernick's communicative

process through his engagement with media, but most specifically written tweets and retweets. An understanding of how Kaepernick deals with key topics can only be reached through qualitative research.

A multi-methodological approach is suitable, because it enables the researcher to engage with the data in a comprehensive way. The combination of a quantitative and a qualitative content analysis is preferred because it ensures the inclusion of the objective and logical approach of quantitative research (Berelson, 1952, p. 15) and the understanding processes and meaning making qualities of qualitative research (Forman & Damschroder, 2008, p. 41). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the different types of content analyses share the feature of “systematically categorizing textual data in order to make sense of it” (in Forman & Damschroder, 2008, p. 40). Naturally, this aspect makes it feasible to combine these methods.

Scholars who have investigated black athlete activism have also approached the topic through both quantitative methods (Cunningham & Regan, 2011) and qualitative methods (Leonard & King, 2009; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010) or via a combination of the two. In their study about black athletes as product endorsers, Cunningham and Regan (2011), for example, use a quantitative experimental study to measure the influence of activism on the trustworthiness of athletes in relation to product fit. This thesis’ focus on black athlete activism and the consequences of carrying out protests is in many ways similar to Cunningham and Regan’s (2011), which indicates that a quantitative approach is applicable. In contrast, Leonard and King (2009) use a qualitative approach in their investigation of the politicisation/depolicitisation of sport arenas combined with an examination of the implication of new racism on black athlete activism.

‘Politicisation/depolicitisation of sport arenas’ and ‘new racism’ are topics that this study has in common with said scholars, which indicates that including a qualitative methodological approach is also appropriate. Conclusively, using a mix of quantitative content analysis and qualitative content analysis appears to be the most suitable methodological approach, for this thesis, to analyse the topic of black athlete activism. Combining methods will be beneficial, as it will enable the researcher to more accurately and directly answering the research question, mainly because the data is examined in detail from different perspectives.

### **3.2. The case study**

To understand how anti-racist protests led by black, top athletes take place in the sport arena nowadays in the United States, this thesis will approach Kaepernick’s activism as a case study. This particular case is relevant to investigate, because it can reveal societal tendencies, i.e. reformulations of the limits for what athletes can and cannot do, and shed some light on whether conditions for black athletes have really changed since the activism of the golden age. Additionally, it will help answer the research question, which means that ultimately it will add to previous research on athlete activism by extending the conversation to questioning

whether or not the sport arena is once again becoming politicised. Case studies are favourable when the researcher has little control over the events that are being examined and when “the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context.” (Yin, 1994, p. 1). Generally, ‘contemporary phenomenon’ entails factors of development i.e. that the case stretches over time (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 301). Case studies are also the preferred strategy when the research poses *how* questions (Yin, 1994, p. 6). Finally, case studies require that various sources of data be included in order to make the case (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 181). This means that the data will naturally “converge in a triangulation fashion” (Yin, 1994, p. 13), which gives an accurate and detailed description of the case. What separates case studies from historic studies then, is the fact that case studies will always focus on current events, which gives an opportunity for direct observation (Yin, 1994, p. 8). Kaepernick’s case study does exactly this. In chapter 4, it is described from when his activism began in August 2016 up to January 2017, which is the month that is used as the sample for this study. This, and the fact that I rely on different kinds of data, allows the reader and researcher to go into depth with the details of the investigated phenomenon and put the quantitative content analysis and qualitative content analysis into context in chapter 5 i.e. the conclusion.

While there are other cases of athlete activism in the United States, as already discussed, Kaepernick’s national anthem protest is the current activism in sports, which has been given the most media attention and, therefore, it may be symbolic for a social change where other athletes become inspired to speak up as well. Movements such as Black Lives Matter and the fact that the United States has had its first black president have, arguably, instigated such social change. Although Kaepernick’s activism has been criticised greatly, this criticism may be the exact reason why others not only chose to support him but also speak up for themselves on similar matters. For these reasons, this thesis will carry out its research in depth on a single case study i.e. Kaepernick’s activism.

According to Flyvbjerg (2011), an additional reason for using case studies is that they allow the researcher to enter into a detailed analysis through examples, which makes it possible to commit to a particularly in depth research (p. 301). This also applies to case study research with a single case such as this one (Yin, 1994, p. 14). However, some misunderstandings rule how case studies are perceived academically, which have given them, according to Flyvbjerg (2011), an unfair portrayal (p. 302). Flyvbjerg (2011) lists five common misunderstandings about case studies. Every one of those are broken down and counter argued for. Thus, Flyvbjerg (2011) makes the case that: 1. case study knowledge is valuable because universals “cannot be found in the study of human affairs.” (p. 304), 2. formal generalisations are overvalued compared to the knowledge and transferabilities that can be found in a specific example, which tend to be underestimated, 3. that case studies can be used to both develop and test hypotheses, but are in no way limited to this type of research activity, 4. that the case study does not contain bias towards verification to a larger extent than any other methods, and 5. that though summarizing the case study is challenging, it is definitely possible with the case outcomes. Also, he underlines that it is not always the objective to

summarize and then generalise case studies as “Good studies should be read as narratives in their entity.” (p. 313). These 5 arguments, serve to argue that case studies carry great significance for research, be it quantitative or qualitative, in terms of obtaining knowledge through example(s). They also make the reader understand that case study research carries an importance, which is, according to Flyvbjerg (2011), commonly underestimated, as there is a lot of value to be put in the information and knowledge from a case study regardless of whether or not it can be formally generalised. For these reasons, an attempt will not be made to formally generalise the findings from the case study about Kaepernick. However, the findings might be transferable to other cases and should therefore be considered a contribution to the knowledge in the field of black athlete activism, which is now examined in a changing media environment. Hence, the goal is not to generalise but to learn about the specific phenomenon through the case study. The example of Kaepernick’s activism might challenge the perception that athlete activism is a story from the past and, possibly, even deny it.

As previously discussed, multiple sources of data are used when dealing with a case study approach. To describe the case study, I will rely on the following data: interviews, the website [www.knowyourrightscamp.com](http://www.knowyourrightscamp.com), newspaper articles and Twitter content. The case study, a timeline of Kaepernick’s activism and relevant contextual events, is provided in chapter 4. In table 3.1, on the next page, four interviews that Kaepernick has participated in are described. The first interview was conducted on August 28 2016 (two days after Kaepernick’s national anthem protest was first noticed) and the last interview was conducted on November 27 2016 (approximately three months after the beginning of the protest).

Table 3.1  
Interviews

Interview	Date of release	Name of interview	Type of interview and medium	Length	Link
1	Aug. 29 2016  (Conducted on Aug. 28, 2016)	“Colin Kaepernick explains why he won’t stand during national anthem”	Raw video of Kaepernick with media. Released on YouTube by KTVU News.  Interview is given to a group of sports journalists, at the 49ers training grounds.	18:23 minutes.	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ka0446tibig&amp;t=6s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ka0446tibig&amp;t=6s</a>
2	Sep. 1 2016	“Colin Kaepernick post game interview in San Diego, California”	Post-game interview in San Diego after final preseason game. Broadcasted on <i>NFL Network</i> .  Interview is given to a group of sports journalists in a press conference like setting.	16:04 minutes.	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIWa1Q8M94">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIWa1Q8M94</a>
3	Oct. 29 2016	“Watch Colin Kaepernick’s first 1-on-1 video interview since the start of his national anthem protest”	Kaepernick sits down with <i>The Undefeated</i> , an online platform for exploring race, sports and culture. Piece of interview is shown on <i>Complex Sports</i> , which the link in the sixth column takes the reader to.	2:47 minutes.	<a href="http://uk.complex.com/sports/2016/10/colin-kaepernick-first-1-on-1-video-interview-since-start-national-anthem-protest">http://uk.complex.com/sports/2016/10/colin-kaepernick-first-1-on-1-video-interview-since-start-national-anthem-protest</a>
4	Nov. 27 2016	“Colin Kaepernick Speaks on Fidel Castro and Malcolm X   49ers vs. Dolphins   NFL”	Part of post-game interview given after game between San Francisco 49ers and Miami Dolphins. Released YouTube by <i>NFL</i> (official YouTube channel for the <i>NFL</i> ).  Reporters ask Kaepernick to clarify issues about prior statements he has made regarding his activism.  Interview is given to a group of sports journalists in a press conference like setting.	3:14 minutes.	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZSlknTp0o8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZSlknTp0o8</a>

### 3.3. Sample, units of analysis and time period

While there is a lot of media content on Kaepernick and his activism, this thesis focuses on the main ways in which Kaepernick has, arguably, instrumentally used the media. These are by consenting to do interviews, creating a website for his campaign and, most significantly, posting content on social media. These interviews, his website, Twitter content combined with newspaper articles about Kaepernick will, as mentioned, be used to describe the case study. For the content analyses, Kaepernick's Twitter content is examined.

The sample, on which I will use a quantitative content analysis and zoom in on key topics by using a qualitative content analysis, consists of Twitter posts that have been tweeted or retweeted by Kaepernick in January 2017. This thesis focuses on Twitter, because it is the social media platform, which Kaepernick has the strongest online presence on. He actively tweets and retweets an average of 8 posts a day in January 2017. Upon writing, Kaepernick has more than 1 million followers, precisely 1.040.521 million, which means that Twitter provides him with a platform through which he can get his message across to a rather large immediate number of people. The sample is chosen because it is relevant to study keeping the research question in mind (Silverman, 2011, p. 390). Theoretical sampling is used when the aim of the study is to test a theory held by the researcher (Silverman, 2011, p. 390). In this case, the acting theory is that Kaepernick may be reviving athlete activism. This sample should be able to explore and theoretically propose whether or not this is true. Table 3.2 shows what the sample looks like.

Table 3.2

*January tweets and links*

Sources	Number
@Kaepernick7	11
Retweets	227

*Note.* N=238 (including 100 links).

The sample contains 238 tweets and retweets where 100 of those have a link attached to them. These links are predominantly to the social media platform Instagram and various newspaper articles or videos and images with quotes. This thesis will analyse the Twitter content from January 2017 in detail, by categorising it with regards to source, topic of content and type of tweet. As this thesis pays attention to how Kaepernick uses media for his activism, it seems reasonable to include all the media content that he exposes his followers to in the selected time frame.

August 2016 marks the beginning of Kaepernick's national anthem protest and he has, upon writing, continued to kneel ever since. Kaepernick's activism is the current protest in sports, which has been

given the most attention in the media both traditional media and new media. Also, this protest is significant, as it has inspired other athletes to engage in political protests as well and it has triggered national conversation and controversy. For these reasons, his activism will be discussed in its entirety as the case study ensures. The time period that is set for the quantitative and qualitative content analyses is, as mentioned several times at this point, January 2017. The decision to focus on one month's content has been made to ensure that an in depth analysis can take place. January 2017 is chosen for two main reasons: availability and attractiveness. Technical limitations do not allow average Twitter users to view significantly older tweets, which eliminates the option of investigating Kaepernick's activism prior of November 2016. So, January was, in part, chosen because of availability. Moreover, January 2017 is attractive to analyse because controversial political occurrences took place that month. An example of this is what became known as the "Muslim Ban" implemented by the United States President Trump on January 27th 2017 (The White House), which prompted Kaepernick to tweet about immigrants and religion at large.

As is also clear at this point, Kaepernick frequently refers to the past, be it social movement leaders or protesting athletes, in his activism. The historic contextualisation these references give is highly interesting, as a main objective of this thesis is to discover if conditions for protesting black athletes have changed since the golden age. However, the activism of the 1960s and the 1970s will not be subject to the content analyses, as this is not a comparative study that will look at archival data. Information about past athlete activism has been accounted for in chapter 2. Nonetheless, what Kaepernick has to say about the past and which he expresses on his Twitter account will, naturally, be subject to the quantitative and qualitative content analyses.

In order to make the results more valid, this thesis will apply two methods presented by Silverman (2011). These are comprehensive data treatment and the use of tabulations (Silverman, 2011, p. 374). Comprehensive data treatment means that all data is "inspected and analysed." (Silverman, 2011, p. 379). As will be explained when discussing how the data is analysed, it will become clear to the reader that all data was accounted for throughout this research. The sample of this study is rather small, which on a positive note, makes it possible to inspect the data multiple times. With regards to the use of tabulations, as already mentioned, this thesis will quantify all of the data by using a quantitative content analysis. This is done in order to make it easier for the reader to evaluate the validity of the statements made about the data presented and to help the researcher make these statements. Qualitative research may not rely on statistical logic but that does not mean that it pledges innumeracy (Kirk & Miller, 1986 in: Silverman, 2011, p. 379). Thus, the data is quantified in order to ensure everything is accounted for.

### 3.4. Data collection

The material will be chosen to best show Kaepernick's activism through his use of media. Only this way, will it be possible to draw conclusions about what his activism says about opportunities for anti-racist protests among top athletes nowadays in the United States. The data has been gathered by focusing on what Kaepernick puts on the internet, what interviews he has consented to participate in, including the content of these and how he has answered the journalists, and what media content there is about him and his activism. All of these data have contributed to building the narrative of the case study.

The content, which Kaepernick puts online, is found on Twitter and the website for his campaign Know Your Rights Camp: [www.knowyourrightscamp.com](http://www.knowyourrightscamp.com). As already mentioned, it is his Twitter account @Kaepernick7 that this thesis will pay attention to and analyse in most detail. The tweets and retweets, subject to the content analyses, were collected by deciding on a timely time frame that was politically interesting. Other, older, tweets and retweets, will be included when describing the timeline of the case study up to January 2017. The content on [www.knowyourrightscamp.com](http://www.knowyourrightscamp.com) will also be used to build the narrative of the case study. This website explains what the campaign is about, its motives and objectives. It describes that the goal of the campaign is to educate youngsters about how to take care of themselves in regards to health, higher education and interaction with law enforcement. The campaign is founded and funded by Kaepernick and is therefore appropriate to include.

The four interviews presented in table 3.1 were gathered through online searches. They are beneficial to include in the description of the case study, because personal opinions and motivations for the activism are discussed. While researching for data for this thesis, it became evident rather quickly that Kaepernick does not frequently talk to traditional news media about his activism. Most interviews that are found online are about football and his professional career. However, the four interviews that are included here do address his activism. Though they differ in length and the extent to which they go into detail, they are found to be relevant as information from Kaepernick to news media about his activism is scarce.

Finally, several online news articles have been gathered to help design the case study narrative. Through such articles, it is possible to understand the events that have taken place from the moment Kaepernick initiated his national anthem protest until January 2017, and what consequences it has had not only for him and his career but also for trends in society. Additionally, the use of newspaper articles makes it possible to assess the impact Kaepernick's protest has had on other athletes. The newspaper articles are found through online searches and a few have been taken of his Twitter account. No articles that have been posted attached to tweets and retweets in January 2017 have been included as articles used for background information. Linked newspaper articles from January 2017 will as such only be used in this thesis for the actual content analyses. Together, this variety of sources should provide hints about how

Kaepernick uses media, how he reflects on it and how it enables and shapes his activism. All data has been gathered by the author of this thesis.

### **3.5. Data analysis and operationalisation**

To analyse the data quantitatively, the study will categorise, quantify and organise the data. It will do so by counting the data, which is classified according to: 1. which topics emerge more frequently (derived from the qualitative content analysis, see explanation below), 2. what types of tweets and accompanying links Kaepernick posts, 3. the original medium of the links accompanying tweets and retweets in the selected time period (for example news channels and blogs) and 4. what sources Kaepernick retweets from. These four categorisations have been created from going over the data repeatedly, while keeping the theoretical framework in mind, and deciding on what is interesting, for this study, to account for. Counting the data ensures that I can objectively state, for example, which topics are most frequently discussed and what people, institutions or organisations Kaepernick often retweets from. By quantifying the data this way, it becomes possible to detect patterns in the data (Berelson, 1952, p. 17). Quantitative content analysis is in this way useful when the objective is to say something about the extent to which a concept or theme is mentioned in the data (Berelson, 1952, p. 17). This is also a goal of this study, as discovering frequencies and pattern would give an idea of how Kaepernick uses the media.

To analyse the data qualitatively, the study will follow Schreier's guidelines for conducting content analysis. The guidelines contain 8 steps: 1. deciding on a research question, 2. selecting material, 3. building a coding frame, 4. segmentation, 5. trial coding, 6. evaluating and modifying the coding frame, 7. main analysis, 8. presenting and interpreting the findings (Schreier, 2013, p. 7). The research question and the material that are used in this study have been explained. Below, I will go through how theoretical concepts have been operationalised into a coding frame and how the systematic analysis is carried out. I will attempt to make the process as transparent as possible. The objective of the qualitative content analysis is to identify how Kaepernick uses media for his activism and derive information about new racism, historic references to the golden age and his attitude towards traditional media in particular.

Ideally, the coding frame meets the requirements of unidimensionality, mutual exclusiveness and exhaustiveness (Schreier, 2013, pp. 8-9). Unidimensionality refers to the requirement that main categories have to cover only one part of the material (Schreier, 2013, p. 8). Mutual exclusiveness relates to the fact that subcategories cannot overlap, and thus, a segment can be coded only once under a main category (Schreier, 2013, p. 8). If this requirement is not met, the construction of the coding frame becomes pointless,

as divisions between segments cannot be made. Exhaustiveness means that all segments of the material have to be assigned a code i.e. “must be covered by a category” (Schreier, 2013, p. 9).

The coding frame was constructed by keeping the theoretical discussions from chapter 2 in mind while going over the data in the sample (tweets and retweets from January 2017) multiple times. This led to the phase of structuring and generating where the main categories were created. Schreier (2013) describes how one can do this by using either a concept-driven approach or a data-driven approach (p. 10). In this study, the main categories were developed through a deductive, concept-driven, approach where the theories, concepts and previous research presented in the theoretical framework of chapter 2 were used as foundation. This has led to five main categories:

- **Kaepernick’s activism**
  - Segments belonging to this category are direct examples of Kaepernick’s activism. This includes for example how he addresses the different charities he donates to, how he promotes himself and his work.
- **Challenging racism**
  - Segments that are assigned to this category revolve around race and colour. References that are made to racism are an example of this. Additional aspects that could be included are cases of police brutality where black people are being targeted specifically and the exhibition of white privilege.
- **Historical references**
  - Segments in this category mention the past be it social movements, the golden age, contextual events or front figures and leaders who fought for racial equality.
- **Socio-political context**
  - Segments belonging to this category are about current events. They provide the context to understanding the case study, and include examples of current social movements, other trends of athlete activism and political developments.
- **Media**
  - Segments in this category relate to media. Should it be direct mention of media; media agendas; the power of the media, framing and/or falsely media fabricated narratives etc.

The coding frame was adjusted by going over it repeatedly until any overlaps or weak categories were removed and the categories were clearly defined. It was then used for a trial coding on the entire sample, after which it was adjusted again. After finalising the coding frame, the main analysis was

conducted. Here, the coding frame was used, once again, on the full sample (tweets and retweets on @Kaepernick7 from January 2017), where segments are assigned one or more codes. Because of its limited length (maximum 140 characters), in this study, a tweet is considered a segment. After applying the categories to the segments (by using the definitions of these), the data has been quantified, using the quantitative content analysis, which makes it possible to look for patterns. The tables in the result section will show what the data looks like after being quantified and coded. The findings of the qualitative content analysis will be presented in chapter 4.

To analyse the data further, this study will consider intertextuality. Bazerman (2004) describes intertextuality as the relations, implicit or explicit, which a text has “to prior, contemporary or potential future texts.” (p. 8). This allows the researcher to make connections between some of the (intertextual) statements that are found and Kaepernick’s activism; and examine how it is used and what position it gives the context in which it is found. Bazerman (2004) distinguishes between levels of intertextuality and types of intertextuality (p. 86). The ones that are relevant to this study will be discussed in the following.

I have identified two levels of intertextuality, explained by Bazerman (2004, p. 86-87), which appear to be relevant when considering the topic of this thesis and the knowledge I have, at this point, about Kaepernick’s activism. The first level uses intertextuality with the objective to attain credibility i.e. using texts from sources of authority. This level is interesting because it may reveal whether Kaepernick uses sources strategically with the purpose, in this context, of strengthening his message by enhancing its credibility. The second level of intertextuality uses intertextuality to back up assertions and statements. This means that other texts are included as background and/or support for what is said.

Regarding types of intertextuality, I have identified two different ones. The first is direct quotations. While this category is self-explanatory, it is important to keep in mind that the writer who uses direct quotations has the freedom to choose what words are repeated and the new context in which they will be used. The second is indirect quotations. This way of quoting is done when the author uses another text and specifies the original source, but writes in words that “reflect the author’s understanding, interpretation, or spin on the original.” (Bazerman, 2004, p. 88). In addition to these two types of intertextuality, another concept is worth mentioning here and that is ‘intertextual distance or reach’. Bazerman (2004) explains that this type of intertextuality is most easily detected because the text that is used is older (p. 89). Intertextual distance is relevant for this case study because Kaepernick often refers to the past in his activism. He does this, for example, by wearing statement t-shirts depicting social movement leaders of the past. For this study, the point of looking at intertextuality is thus to understand how Kaepernick makes connections to the past and how he strengthens his own position and activism by doing so.

## 4. Results

This fourth chapter of the thesis will present the case study and the findings, which have been derived through conducting both the quantitative and qualitative content analyses on data from January 2017. First, a detailed timeline of the case study will be presented from August 2016 to January 2017. It is constructed through sources found online and by using the interviews presented in table 3.1 to bring concrete examples. This overview of the case study aims at illustrating what has happened since Kaepernick began his protest and how Kaepernick has tackled the support and criticism of his activism. This section will end with a discussion about Kaepernick's relationship with traditional and new media. Secondly, the results from the quantitative content analysis and qualitative content analysis will be presented. In the presentation of these, each section below is structured thematically. The kind of findings, which the investigation of the main categories reveals, will be combined with appropriate tabulations from the quantitative analysis of the data. Together, the findings that are presented in this chapter, the overview of the case study and the results from the content analyses, will be used to draw conclusions about how Kaepernick uses media for his activism and what his activism says about the role and opportunities for black top athletes protesting nowadays in the United States.

### 4.1. Overview of the case study

In August 2016, Kaepernick started what became known as his national anthem protest. Before professional football games, while other athletes, coaching staff and the audience stand to honour the national anthem and the American flag and what these symbolise and stand for, Kaepernick does not stand when the national anthem comes on. The reason is that he does not support what the American flag represent (Schwarz, 2016, August 28). He first sat during the national anthem on August 14. At this time, his protest went unnoticed. On August 20, he sat again and once more his protest was not noticed. The third time Kaepernick carried out his silent protest, on August 26, was when people began to notice. After the game, Kaepernick briefly told the media that his decision to sit during the national anthem was motivated by injustice. Specifically, he referred to the oppression of people of colour and issues with police brutality, which Kaepernick explained is on-going (Sandritter, 2016, November 6). He said that he would not stand and show pride in a flag, which does not represent equality for all citizens (Hauser, 2016, August 27). Since this day, did the nation pay attention to his protest. Jennifer Lee Chan, a writer for *Niners Nation* (the established San Francisco 49ers fan blog), posted a photo of the arena during the anthem on twitter (appendix A). The photo showed the arena, standing athletes, coaches and audience, yet, zooming in; it was possible to detect one athlete silently sitting on the bench. People realised that Kaepernick was sitting on the bench during the national anthem and

the story gained national attention already later that evening (Sandritter, 2016, November 6). Chan gave several reporters permission to use the photo via Twitter: Associated Press, Fox News, ABC News, CBS News, Sports Illustrated and a number of foreign journalists among others (Chan on Twitter, 2016, August 26). The same night, the 49ers issued an official statement regarding Kaepernick's decision to sit during the anthem:

"The national anthem is and always will be a special part of the pre-game ceremony. It is an opportunity to honor our country and reflect on the great liberties we are afforded as its citizens. In respecting such American principles as freedom of religion and freedom of expression, we recognize the right of an individual to choose and participate, or not, in our celebration of the national anthem." (49ers statement in: Wyche, 2016, August 27).

Kaepernick met with the media two days later on August 28. Here, he spent almost 20 minutes talking about his protest and the motivations for it, while answering reporters' questions in length. During this interview (Interview 1, *KTVU News* on YouTube, table 3.1), Kaepernick explained how the protest is not about him, but a demonstration, which objective is to give voice to those who do not have one:

"This is because I'm seeing things happen to people that don't have a voice, people who don't have a platform to talk and have their voices heard, and affect change. So, I'm in the position where I can do that, and I'm going to do that for people that can't." (Kaepernick, Interview 1)

Kaepernick continued to discuss the effects his protest had had, saying that it was positive that had blown up to the extent that it had for the simple reason that it brings awareness (Kaepernick in interview 1, table 3.1). Later, Kaepernick was asked about the reception the protest had gotten from the NFL and whether it could be considered a distraction. Kaepernick immediately rejected the idea of it being a distraction and argued that the protest might bring the country together in a form of unison, which is not only previously unseen but which could also initiate change:

"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. And if we reach common ground, and can understand what everybody is going through, we can really affect change. And make sure that everyone is treated equally and has the same freedom." (Kaepernick, Interview 1)

A reporter reminded Kaepernick that the United States is “a country that has elected a black president twice.” (Interview 1). To this Kaepernick responded that regardless of the fact that the sitting president was black, a lot of things have still not changed, while adding that there is much the President cannot control or influence. Two additional topics from this interview are interesting to mention here. The first one is that when Kaepernick was asked if the NFL or teammates had asked him to “tone it down” (unknown reporter in interview 1, table 3.1), he made it clear that this is not a topic he is going to be quiet about. Kaepernick underlined that everything he says about the issue, the examples he brings, is true, which is a reason why it has to be said. He then clarified that his protest was not for publicity but repeated that it had the objective of giving a voice to people who do not have one (Kaepernick in interview 1, table 3.1). The second topic regards the fact that Kaepernick, at the time the interview took place, was the only player in the NFL who spoke about these issues and actively carried out a protest. When asked by a reporter why he believed he was the only one taking a stand, Kaepernick mentioned that there might very well be consequences, which come along with carrying out a silent protest such as this one. He acknowledged that many might fear losing jobs and endorsements, simultaneously stating that that was something he was prepared for (Kaepernick in interview 1, table 3.1). Also on August 28, several news media published articles describing Kaepernick’s relationship with Harry Edwards (Fucillo, 2016; Maiocco, 2016). Edwards (the man behind the 1968 Olympic protest) has worked as a staff consultant for the 49ers for about 30 years (Inman, 2016, August 28). The newspaper articles discussed how he and Kaepernick often engage in conversations and many framed the story as if Edwards, who is known for being involved in protests and civil rights causes, might be consulting Kaepernick about his activism (Inman, 2016; Fucillo, 2016; Maiocco, 2016). According to Kaepernick, they share a lot of similar views, however, he maintains that he did not consult Edwards before sitting for the national anthem (Maiocco, 2016, August 28). On September 1, Kaepernick moved from sitting to taking a knee during the national anthem, which is how he since has continued to protest. Kaepernick’s protest had already at this point received a lot of criticism, with people accusing him of being un-American and disrespectful of the men and women of the United States military (Craven, 2016, August 30). In the post-game interview from September 1, Kaepernick defended his message and said that the media had made his activism come across in a way he did not agree with, removing the focus from the actual message of the protest with a narrative that portrays Kaepernick as anti-American (Interview 2, broadcasted on *NFL network*, table 3.1):

“The media painted this as I am anti-American, anti men and women of the military, and that is not the case at all. I realise that men and women of the military go out and sacrifice their lives and put themselves in harm's way for my freedom of speech and my freedoms in this country, and my freedom to take a seat or take a knee. So I have the utmost respect for them.” (Kaepernick, Interview 2)

The decision to kneel rather than sit came after conversations with Nate Boyer, a former Seattle Seahawks player and Green Beret (United States Army Special Forces). It was supposed to represent a compromise between continuing the protest but respecting the American flag and those who have fought for it (Brinson, 2016, September 22). Kaepernick allegedly said to Boyer that “it would be really powerful” to kneel (Boyer quoted in Brinson, 2016, September 22). That day, Kaepernick was joined by teammate Eric Reid, who also took a knee, and Seattle Seahawks player Jeremy Lane, who sat during the anthem (Sandritter, 2016, November 6). Kaepernick was for the first time not alone in his protest. After the game, he announced his intention to donate 1 million dollars to organisations that focus on racial inequality (Sandritter, 2016, November 6). This became known as his Million Dollar Pledge. On September 9, Brandon Marshall, the Denver Broncos linebacker, took at knee during the national anthem. After, he said that, like Kaepernick, he was not against the military or the police but injustice (Sandritter, 2016, November 6). After kneeling, Marshall immediately lost a sponsorship agreement with Air Academy Federal Credit Union, which stated that while Marshall had every right to kneel and address social issues, it was the opinion of the union that its spokespeople should show allegiance to “our common bond as a nation. [...] In our view, the national anthem is one of those moments.” (CenturyLink statement on Twitter, September 12, 2016). After, Marshall expressed that he had no regrets and was not surprised that his actions had had repercussions (Jhabvala, 2016, September 9). From September 11 to September 21, several accounts of athletes joining Kaepernick in his protest have been found. This list is from Sandritter (2016, August 6):

- September 11: Players from NFL teams Seahawks, Dolphins, Chiefs and Patriots demonstrated during the national anthem (after standing for 9/11 acknowledgement).
- September 12: Eric Reid continued to kneel with Kaepernick. Other 49ers teammates raised their fists and Rams players joined them (opponents that day).
- September 16: Players and coaches from Garfield High School’s football team in Los Angeles knelt during the national anthem. 12 football players from a high school in Sacramento took a knee during the national anthem.
- September 18: More 49ers teammates joined Kaepernick in his protest.
- September 19: Four Eagles football players raised their fists during the national anthem.
- September 21: NBA player Iman Shumpert announced donations to organisations with the objective to “improve the struggle between the badge and the citizen” (Shumpert quoted in Sandritter, 2016, August 6)

On September 22, *Time Magazine* announced via Twitter that Kaepernick would feature on the cover of the magazine released on October 3. The reveal showed the American flag waving in wind, then after a while

becoming transparent, to eventually clearly display a kneeling Kaepernick. The magazine included a piece on Kaepernick, athletes, sports and patriotism (Gregory, 2016, September 22). From that day, several other examples have been found, of players and sympathisers kneeling or raising their fists during the national anthem. The support for his activism grew, and Kaepernick's protest resonated through not only him but through those who joined him in his protest. They extended his activism by carrying it out as well. On October 29, Kaepernick participated in an interview with *The Undefeated*, which is a platform that brings stories about race, sports and culture. Kaepernick was asked about the negative feedback he had received for his protest and whether it outweighed the positive. Kaepernick dismissed this by saying that the support he had received was greater than he had ever imagined (Interview 3, *The Undefeated*, table 3.1). On the negative reactions, he said:

"Part of the oppressive system is that you're going to have that backlash for trying to fight for people. And that was something I was fully prepared for, fully aware of, so when those things came it was expected, it wasn't an issue for me." (Kaepernick, Interview 3)

On November 6, Brandon Marshall announced that he would stand for the national anthem again because he was encouraged by the many conversations the protest had lead people to have (Sandritter, 2016, August 6). Marshall went on to be honoured by Harvard for taking a stance against social injustice in February 2017. He received the 2017 Alumni of Color Conference (AOCC) Courage Award in March 2017 (AOCC, 2017, p. 9). On November 27, Kaepernick gave a post-game interview following a game against the Miami Dolphins. During this interview the conversation turned from football to Kaepernick's activism. Apparently, Kaepernick had before been questioned about his motivations of wearing a t-shirt of Fidel Castro and Malcolm X together with the phrase "like minds think alike" (Wagoner, 2016, November 28). During this interview (interview 3, table 3.1), Kaepernick clarified his reasons for expressing support for the now deceased Cuban President, who in many ways is considered an enemy of the United States:

"What I said was I agree with the investment in education. I also agree with the investment in free universal healthcare as well as the involvement in him helping end apartheid in South Africa. I would hope that everybody agrees those things are good things. Trying to push the false narrative that I was a supporter of the oppressive things that he did is just not true." (Kaepernick, Interview 3)

Kaepernick has continued his protest since August 2016, and while he speaks out on social media, it has in every other way been silent. He has rejected to speak to any major news outlets in the United States despite having been approached by practically all of them for one-on-one interviews (Rosenberg, 2017, March 30). Kaepernick has so far fulfilled his Million Dollar Pledge, donating 100.000 dollars each month to

different organisations for social change. Examples of these organisations are Mothers Against Police Brutality (support for people who lose loved ones in law enforcement killings) ([www.mothersagainstpolicebrutality.com](http://www.mothersagainstpolicebrutality.com)), Urban Underground (education support for economically challenged teenagers) (TMJ4), Black Youth Project (activist organisation fighting for justice and equality for black youngsters) ([www.blackyouthproject.com](http://www.blackyouthproject.com)), Appetite For Change (project to switch to 100% organic food) (Nosowitz, 2017, January 16) and 350 (organisation working towards implementing renewable energy and increasing climate change awareness) (Grossman, 2017, March 21). The focus has been expanded to not only involve organisations dealing with issues that relate to race, but he has also given money to for example homeless people in the United States and the Somali people, who face an intense famine throughout their country (Gajanan, 2017, March 21). In addition to this, he has founded and funded Know Your Rights Camp, which is a campaign that aims at educating youth on how to properly and safely interact with law enforcement (<http://knowyourrightscamp.com>). Tips are also given on how to pursue higher education and how to live a healthy life. During events of the campaign, key speakers share their knowledge by giving lectures or workshops. The speakers are professionals, scholars, college programme directors and health coaches (<http://knowyourrightscamp.com>). On Twitter, Kaepernick frequently retweets posts from Know Your Rights Camp's Twitter account, thus exposing its content to his followers on his personal Twitter account.

Kaepernick's activism has according to Allen (2016, September 18) had an unexpected impact, which shows the reach that athletes that are politically engaged can have nowadays. This reach has perhaps been strengthened or further legitimised, because it is being carried out in a time where tensions are dividing the United States, specifically exemplified by the movement Black Lives Matter and frequent stories of police brutality (Allen, 2016, September 18). As discussed earlier, in interview 1, Kaepernick directly stated that he was aware that there might be consequences of protesting. The history of athletes protesting in the past shows that there is. He also underlined that not only was he prepared to face those potential consequences, but that they would also serve to emphasise that he stood up for something real:

"I know the consequences that come along with my decision. [...] At the end of the day, if something happens, that's only proving my point." (Kaepernick, Interview 1)

Overall, the presentation of the case study above underscores that a significant part of Kaepernick's activism is carried out directly through media, mainly, Kaepernick's own use of social media. It has also been established that he does not often engage with traditional media. The interviews that have been included to describe this case study are from the beginning of the NFL season of 2016/2017, and are, interestingly, not given to any of the major news outlets in the United States. As mentioned previously, interview 1 was the

first interview Kaepernick gave that concerned the protest. He used this interview to clarify his intentions for protesting and offered sports media journalists an opportunity to ask questions about it. Interview 2 and 4 are post-game interviews, which means that the intention of the interviews was not to discuss Kaepernick's activism but an NFL game. It is likely, that the conversation during interview 2, given on September 1, turned to revolve around Kaepernick's protest because he had only recently started his protest and reporters still had a lot of questions. Interview 4 was given on November 27. At this time, the media was used to seeing Kaepernick kneel once a week during the national anthem. The questions reporters asked him during this post-game interview regarded clarifications about apparent support for Fidel Castro, which again brought up discussion about his protest. Interview 3, October 29, was published on *Complex sports'* website and is part of a longer interview Kaepernick conducted with *The Undefeated*. In this interview, Kaepernick primarily expressed gratitude for everyone who had shown him support. Together, these interviews provide a detailed overview of Kaepernick's motivations for protesting and his opinion on topics such as education and health care. Kaepernick has rejected to give interviews to any of the major news outlets, which supports that he is being strategic in how he engages with and uses media. This makes Kaepernick's relationship with the media revealing.

#### **4.2. Findings from the content analyses**

The findings from the content analyses will be presented below. First, an overview of the data based on the quantitative content analysis will be provided. In this section, the different tabulations that have been created to categorise the data will be explained and discussed. It will become clear that a distinction has been made between content, the topics that Kaepernick discusses on his Twitter account, and type, the general function of the tweet and retweet. Finally, two tables exhibit to sources. One considers the specific individuals, organisations and institutions behind the Twitter accounts, which Kaepernick retweets from, and one considers the sources of the links that accompany some of the tweets and retweets. Secondly, the overview of the data based on the qualitative content analysis will be provided. In this section, the findings from the in-depth analysis are structured on the basis of what kinds of findings they are i.e. thematically. Five different themes will be discussed, which emerged from analysing the data in detail. As explained in the methodological chapter these are: Kaepernick's presentation of his activism, racism then and now, references to the past, socio-political context and media. It should be mentioned that in this study, the tweets and retweets are analysed as a whole. This means that if a tweet or retweet is accompanied by a quote, image or link, these attachments have contributed to deciding which main category from the coding frame the tweet has been assigned to. At the end of this chapter, I will take a look at which sources appear on Kaepernick's

Twitter account, and attempt to establish how he in some ways functions as a gatekeeper by using his social media to create a network in which he gives voice to those who do not have a platform to speak from.

#### **4.2.1. Overview of the data**

In this section, an overview of the data from January 2017 is provided based on the quantitative content analysis. The following tables will be presented:

- Table 4.1 on page 37 shows the distribution of tweets in regards to content
- Table 4.2 on page 38 shows the distribution of tweets and links in regards to type
- Table 4.3 on page 39-40 shows the distribution of links in relation to source
- Table 4.4 on page 41 shows the distribution of sources of tweets and retweets
- Table 4.5 on page 43-44 shows the tweets that are unaccounted for

The first table, which I will present, shows the categories that were presented in the coding frame from table 3.3. This table is included to give an overview of the extent to which Kaepernick mentions the different topics on his Twitter account. It should be mentioned that while this table does give the reader an idea of the content of Kaepernick's tweets and retweets in January 2017, it might be very different from other months of his activism. This is best exemplified through the frequent references he makes to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King's birthday is on January 15, and Martin Luther King Day is also celebrated yearly during this month. This example is brought to underscore that though January 2017 does represent a part Kaepernick's activism, it is only a part of a bigger scope of his activism, which is why the social media content from this month cannot be expected to be the same in another month. However, it is interesting to give an overview of what the January data looks like in regards to content, because it shows what topics Kaepernick has engaged in more intensely. Some tweets and retweets have been assigned to more than one main category from the coding frame, simply because these covered content that was relevant for more than one category. For this reason, the total number of tweets noted at the bottom of this table is not 238 (the sample size) but 270. Tweets and retweets that are unaccounted for (see table 4.5) are not included in table 4.1, as it is difficult to classify these since they do not fit the topic that is under investigation in this thesis.

Table 4.1

*Distribution of codes to tweets and retweets in relation to content*

Category	Number of tweets assigned to a category
Kaepernick's activism	78
Challenging racism	57
Historical references	38
Socio-political context	64
Media	14
Others	19
Total: 270	

*Note.* N=238. The total of tweets and retweets in this table is 270. This is because some tweets and retweets were assigned to more than one category.

By examining this table, it becomes clear that in January 2017 Kaepernick focused a lot on discussing his own activism, pointing out racism and the socio-political context. This indicates that he considers what happens around him as he carries out his protest. For the purpose of this study, the most important thing is not to discover how frequently Kaepernick discusses different topics, but rather to understand how he discusses them, what he says about the different ones and the function he has when he does so. Nonetheless, this table provides a general insight into what Kaepernick focused on in January 2017, which is valuable when going in depth with one month's data content, regardless of the fact that it can in no way be generalised to represent Kaepernick's monthly way of communicating on Twitter.

To get a better understanding of the purpose of the tweets and retweets on Kaepernick's Twitter account, a table has been created, which gives an overview of the function that the different posts have. Hence, the tweets and retweets are divided according to type. Categorising the tweets and retweets according to type, will potentially contribute to discovering not only what Kaepernick discusses on Twitter but also how he goes about addressing different topics. This is beneficial because the content of a tweet may incline the researcher to perceive the tweet a certain way, which the classification of type of tweet would challenge. A hypothetical example of this would be a tweet, which discusses the unfair treatment of blacks in society. Classified in relation to content, this tweet would be considered an example of racism, where in relation to its function, its type, it would be classified as a post that contributes to underscore the legitimacy of Kaepernick's protest.

In the table below, the links that may accompany a tweet or retweet are assigned to the same category as the tweet or retweet. This is because it has been found that when a tweet or retweet addresses the link, it fits the same type, as the general message of the link is made clear in the tweet. The 19 tweets and retweets that are unaccounted for (see table 4.5) are not included in this table, as an estimation of the type of tweet or retweet is difficult given that tweets or retweets that are unaccounted for do not fit the topic that is under investigation in this thesis.

Table 4.2

*Distribution of tweets in relation to type of tweet and link*

Type of tweet	Number of tweets/links assigned to a category
Tweets/links that show appreciation for Kaepernick's activism	76
Tweets/links that underline the legitimacy of Kaepernick's activism by addressing racial issues	57
Tweets/links that establish links to the past	36
Tweets/links that address the media	14
Tweets/links that discuss current events and put things into context	36

*Note.* N=219.

The table above shows that the most used type of tweet in January 2017 were ones that showed appreciation for Kaepernick's activism. Another significant finding is that the second most used type were tweets and retweets that function to prove the legitimacy of Kaepernick's activism. As discussed in the theoretical framework, it is challenging to lead an anti-racist protest when the dominant consensus in society is that racism does not exist. Kaepernick may use this type of tweets and retweets so frequently with the intention to not only strengthen his credibility but also to educate people who deny the existence of racism. Combined, tweeting and retweeting about the support of his activism and underscoring its legitimacy sends the message that Kaepernick is fighting for something that presents itself as a real issue for many in the United States. It is unlikely that the support for his protest would be big, should people not agree with the reason for and cause of the protest to begin with. Therefore, table 4.2 is useful when trying to discover how and if Kaepernick in some ways is strategic in the way he uses the media.

A way in which it could be possible to discover if Kaepernick is strategic in his use of media, is to examine the different sources that can be found on his Twitter account. Table 4.3 and 4.4 represent the sources found. Table 4.3 examines the original sources of the 100 links, which Kaepernick tweeted or retweeted in January

2017. This means that the individual, organisation or institution behind the Twitter account that first posted a tweet with a link is not accounted for here, but where the link comes from. Should someone have linked an article from e.g. a major news outlet, then, that particular news outlet is accounted for. Instagram is included as one source in this table, however, not all links are from the same Instagram account. It should be mentioned that captions on Instagram can be up to 2,200 characters. This is mentioned because some links to Instagram revealed lengthy discussions and stories as captions. In that way, Twitter is limited with its 140 character limit.

Table 4.3

*Distribution of links in relation to source*

Source	Number of links from this source
<b>Instagram</b>	53
<b>YouTube</b>	4
<b>Online journalism media</b>	
The Guardian	3
Detroit Free Press	1
Daily News	2
The New York Times	2
CSN Sports	1
Atlanta Black Star	1
New Yorker	1
The Atlantic	1
CNN	1
Huffington Post	3
Washington Post	1
Reuters	1
The Age	1
USA Today	1
The Independent	3
The Australian	1
The Hill	1
Fusion	1
SF gate	1
Inc.	1
Vanity Fair	2
	Total: 30
<b>Blogs</b>	
Niners Nation	2
49ers webzone	1
juancole	1
	Total: 4

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<b>Academic publications</b>	
aaish (Black Perspectives)	2
Boston Review	1
	Total: 3
<b>Organisations</b>	
Zinn Education Project	1
Uptown Collective	1
NILC	1
Know Your Rights Camp	1
	Total: 4
<b>Other</b>	
VH1	1
Shoepalace	1
	Total: 2

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*Note.* N=100.

Table 4.3 shows the original sources of the links that Kaepernick has tweeted or retweeted. Instagram and online news make up most of the links. Instagram is interesting because it, as mentioned above, presents an opportunity to write longer captions on posts. The Instagram account for the Know Your Rights Camp was for example frequently linked in January 2017. On these posts, longer discussions were presented about various topics, such as people participating in the Know Your Rights Camp events, news stories about police brutality and other educational posts about social movement leaders of the past. Considering the online news articles on Kaepernick's Twitter, these predominantly bring stories about contextual events that are taking place. An example of this is President Trump's Muslim Ban (Shear, Kulish & Feuer, 2017, January 28). This particular article gives an overview of the consequences of the Muslim Ban and what happened in airports after Trump's order. The news articles that are linked in January are up to date (all of them are published in January) and seem to provide a context for Kaepernick's activism but also, and maybe more importantly, they keep Kaepernick's Twitter followers updated on important socio-political issues and developments.

Another way of considering the sources on Kaepernick's Twitter account is presented in table 4.4 below. This table provides an outline of the people, organisations, institutions etc. which Kaepernick has retweeted from. By looking at whom he retweets from, it may be possible to draw conclusions about how he, arguably strategically, uses media for his activism. In this table, tweets and retweets that are unaccounted for are included (see table 4.5), as it is straightforward to identify their source.

Table 4.4

*Sources of tweets and retweets*

Sources	Number of tweets assigned to this type of tweet
<b>Colin Kaepernick</b>	11
<b>Retweets</b>	
Academics	76
University/college	1
Journalists/writers	8
Merchandise websites	1
Alternative news	6
Major news outlets	11
Know Your Rights Camp	86
Other organisations for change	6
Blog posts (Niners Nation)	2
Supporters (celebrities)	6
Supporters (unknown individuals)	4
Radio shows/hosts	19
Athletes	1
	Total: 227

*Note.* N=238.

From the table above, two different categories of sources stand out. The first is the group labelled ‘Academics’. Kaepernick retweets from people with an academic background frequently. It is interesting to mention that these academics appear to be a carefully selected group of individuals, all of which are educated or have done research within the field of black history, social issues for blacks today or something similar. This is found via an online search looking into the background of all of these. By retweeting from them, Kaepernick exposes his Twitter followers to knowledge that is written by credible individuals. These are individuals that in many ways share similar views as Kaepernick himself. The decision to retweet from a selected group of individuals seems strategic, and by doing so, Kaepernick can be seen to function as a gatekeeper. Via his platform on Twitter, he decides what information is important enough to be shared, just like editors of newspapers do around the world. He decides not only what content goes on his Twitter account but whose voice is allowed a platform through him. In interview 1, as mentioned in the overview of the case study above, Kaepernick says that the objective of his activism is to give a voice to those who do not have one. He does so not only by preaching a message that many seem to agree with, but also directly by retweeting the words and opinions of others. This gatekeeping function that I claim Kaepernick exercises, will be explained in more detail later.

The second group that stands out is ‘Know Your Rights Camp’. Funded and founded by Kaepernick himself, it makes sense that he would retweet a lot from this account. Yet, going into the content of the tweets from this account, it becomes obvious that the retweets are not only for promotional purposes.

The content, which is not about the campaign itself, is educational and often brings contemporary news stories or stories from the past. The stories are almost always about the challenging conditions for blacks in the United States. The content of tweets from this account does also on occasion discuss the excellence and achievements of blacks. The effect of retweeting for this account will also be discussed in more detail later in the section about how Kaepernick functions as a gatekeeper.

Only a few times has he retweeted from Twitter accounts of alternative news and major news outlets. Below is a complete list of the different news outlets Kaepernick has retweeted from in January 2017:

#### Alternative news:

- RA Vision Media  
Media production company, which focuses on “showcasing highlights in diverse film and television” (RA Vision Media on Twitter). RA Vision Media has produced videos for Kaepernick in which he addressed his followers and talks about history, his activism, today’s social movements and other relevant content.
- Fusion  
Television channel with online presence that features news, satire and entertainment. The target group is millennials, specifically those of Hispanic background (James, 2013, October 28).
- Uptown Collective  
Established organisation and blog, which is described as “the voice of Uptown Online” ([www.uptowncollective.com](http://www.uptowncollective.com)) and represents an area of Oakland named Uptown. It is made up of writers, photographers, activists and filmmakers etc., who report on “the streets” ([www.uptowncollective.com](http://www.uptowncollective.com)) while trying to better conditions for black Americans.

#### Major news outlets (newspapers and broadcasters):

- Al Jazeera
- CNN
- Reuters
- Associated Press
- Daily News
- ABC News
- The Independent
- The Australian
- Atlanta Black Star
- The Hill

As already mentioned, Kaepernick's activity in January does not give the reader specific knowledge about which news outlets he prefers to retweet from with any certainty, but it does very clearly show, his preference for sharing content created by people with scholarly backgrounds over traditional news outlets.

The final table, which I will present, shows the tweets and retweets that are unaccounted for. I will not imply that these tweets and retweets are necessarily apolitical or unrelated to the research question of this thesis. Indeed, further research could broaden the scope of the data and reveal their relevance. In this case, however, a decision has been made to focus on tweets and retweets, which more explicitly demonstrates Kaepernick's activism and political engagement online. 19 tweets and retweets were unaccounted for during the coding.

Table 4.5

*Tweets that are unaccounted for*

<b>Text of tweets and retweets</b>	<b>Topic</b>
Israeli police question Benjamin Netanyahu in corruption inquiry - the guardian	Foreign policy: Israeli Prime Minister is being questioned.
Protesting inmates refuse meals at western U.P. Prison	Prison protest.
Donald Trump is destroying the illusion of American democratic integrity and fairness. He is that magician that exposes how magic is fake.	Opinion on President Trump.
Donald Trump is both the confirmation and the continuance of the America that we both struggle in, and struggle against.	Opinion on President Trump.
Happy founders day to all my Nupes out there!!! YO!!! #J5	Kappa Alpha Psi. Predominantly African-American fraternity.
Thank you so much for this, @janeosanders!	Quoted tweet.
A long-lost data trove uncovers California's eugenics sterilization program:	Eugenics movements in Western America. Discusses how California sterilised 20.000 patients who were thought to be insane.
Alabama's Crimson Tide is rolling in green: The football program reported \$103.9 million in revenue for 2016 <a href="http://cnn.it/2iwOQAJ">cnn.it/2iwOQAJ</a>	Alabama Crimson Tide's economy.
(Clapping emoji x2)	Quoted tweet.
#Repost via @nessnitty Turned down A MILLION dollars with only \$500 in his pockets to survive... <a href="https://www.instagram.com">instagram.com</a>	Radio host and girlfriend of Colin Kaepernick Nessa Diab interviews owner of The Master Sauce.

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#DeleteUber? Trump ban stirs Lyft to ACLU donation as Uber takes heat	Uber's actions during Trump's Muslim ban are criticised.
Uber and Hyper-Gentrification are Heading to Oakland and Some Residents Are Unhappy	Uber moves into former Sears building in Oakland.
This was necessary! #MahershalaAli left the room in tears at the #SAGAAwards tonight	Black actor Mahershala Ali becomes the first Muslim to win a SAGA Awards.
QUEEN @violadavis	Black actress Viola Davis wins SAGA Awards.
YES!!! @violadavis is now the first black actress to win 5 #sagawards #BlackMagic #BlackGirlsRock #ViolaDavis	Black actress Viola Davis is acknowledged for her multiple SAGA Awards wins.
fucken love them!! @kehlani @iamcardib watch the whole interview @HOT97.com @NESSAONAIR	Radio host and girlfriend of Colin Kaepernick Nessa Diab interviews two celebrities on her radio show; Kehlani and Cardi B.
Say what?! @Kehlani deciphers slang with @nessnitty and gets a major surprise by @iamcardib	Radio host and girlfriend of Colin Kaepernick Nessa Diab interviews two celebrities on her radio show; Kehlani and Cardi B.
"@kehlani: thanks nessssyyyyyy, this was a good wonderful interview. twitter.com" my sister forever! I'm so proud of you ALWAYS	Radio host and girlfriend of Colin Kaepernick Nessa Diab interviews two celebrities on her radio show; Kehlani and Cardi B.
Nailed it.	Gif about coffee describing how to make life decisions.

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*Note.* N=19.

#### 4.2.2. Discussion of main themes

In this section, findings from the in-depth analysis of the data from January 2017 are presented. The analysis will outline the themes, which have emerged from the coding and analyse what they mean for Kaepernick's use of media and the opportunities for anti-racist protests among top athletes nowadays in the United States. Below, I will discuss five themes that are thought to be interesting and relevant in relation to understanding black athlete activism today. I will make clear references to the findings, which have been presented above in an attempt to bring them all together. The end of this section engages in a discussion about the sources that appear on Kaepernick's Twitter account, and attempts to establish how he uses social media to create a network in which he gives voice to those who do not have a platform to speak from by in some ways functioning as a gatekeeper.

#### 4.2.2.1. Kaepernick's presentation of his activism

The first aspect that was investigated was the way in which Kaepernick uses his tweets and retweets to refer to his own activism. These references most directly show themselves in the way that he refers to his Million Dollar Pledge and the way that Kaepernick promotes his Know Your Rights Campaign, either by tweeting about it or retweeting posts about it. In addition to this, as table 4.2 also shows; it has been found that Kaepernick frequently retweets from people that show him and his activism support. In the following, a discussion will provide an overview of how Kaepernick goes about doing this.

In September 2016, Kaepernick publically announced that he would donate 1 million dollars to charity. Since then, over the course of four months, Kaepernick has fulfilled his promise and given money to organisations that work to better society in various ways. Examples of these were provided in the outline of the case study. While he rarely composes tweets himself, Kaepernick does post on Twitter when he has donated his monthly fee. An example of this is a tweet from January 6:

“Starting off the New Year strong! The third month of my Million Dollar Pledge is complete! 330k...” (Kaepernick)

The tweet is accompanied by a link to Instagram, where Kaepernick in a longer caption describes how he has now donated \$300 000 and has \$700 000 to go. He underlines that the money goes to organisations helping oppressed communities. Through posting tweets about his charity, Kaepernick reminds his followers that he is actively helping communities and takes part in making a change. Moreover, it challenges those who may think that his activism is a publicity stunt, as he has had to argue against in Interview 1 (table 3.1).

As briefly mentioned before, Kaepernick retweets a lot from the Twitter account Know Your Rights Camp. In the data from January 2017, the retweets that directly revolved around actual events organised by the campaign seemed to come in waves. These waves, or times of high-visibility, emerged whenever something had happened, which would invite that the campaign was promoted. Examples of this are the promotion before an event is taking place or with announcements that pictures from past events are not available on their website. While this type of retweets was frequent, as is understandable given that it is Kaepernick's campaign, another type of retweets from this particular Twitter account emerged at a more steady rate. These are retweets about blacks, be it black history, current events such as police brutality or the occasional news story about how blacks in the past have been wrongfully imprisoned and are now set to be released. Together, these two ways of retweeting provide insight about Kaepernick's activism. On one hand, he promotes his campaign and showcases how he makes a difference in society, by taking in black youth and offering tips on education, health and interaction with law enforcement ([www.knowyourrightscamp.com](http://www.knowyourrightscamp.com)). On the other hand, Kaepernick shows a more critical way of demonstrating how conditions for black people

in the United States are still unfair compared to those of whites. This way of protesting is what this thesis will pay specific attention to in the following discussions in this chapter, by looking at his online behaviour and analysing what Kaepernick is trying to do.

The final aspect of how Kaepernick presents his activism on his Twitter profile regards retweets from people who in their tweets express appreciation and support for what he is doing. This indicates that a part of Kaepernick's way of carrying out his activism online extends to showing his followers that people support him. Table 4.2 shows that a substantial amount of tweets and retweets were of the type that show appreciation for his activism, which further substantiates the argument that Kaepernick is interested in showing the support he has received. There are several potential reasons for this. The first is that Kaepernick retweets appreciation posts about his activism to show that he is grateful for the support. The second is that he retweets them because it sends the message that his activism in its entirety is appreciated and that people think that it is important. What is meant here is that while it makes sense that no one would post negative or critical stories about themselves on social media, Kaepernick may retweet appreciation posts to give his followers (and others paying attention to his Twitter activity) the impression that the support for his activism is great. An example of such a retweet is provided here:

“Thank you, @Kaepernick7 for your support, bravery and tireless work! We are honored to stand with you in this movement for change!” (SOUL in Chicago, January 9)

The source of the tweet is SOUL (Southsiders Organised for Unity and Liberation), an organisation for change, which fights for low-income people of colour in Chicago. The tweet came after Kaepernick donated \$25 thousand to the organisation (Moore, 2017, January 11). Regardless of the motivations behind the retweet, it becomes evident that Kaepernick offers a lot of space on his Twitter account to others than himself (see distribution of tweets and retweets table 3.2). It is important to keep this in mind for the discussions that follow.

#### **4.2.2.2. Racism then and now**

From the discussion about new racism in the theoretical framework, it became evident that racism, whatever shape it takes, has a significant influence on anti-racist protests. This is because the public's perception of racism may shape the level of acceptance and tolerance that is given to such a protest. As previously argued, it is difficult to lead an anti-racist protest, when the dominant discourse in society claims that the time of racism is over. In his tweets and retweets, Kaepernick often discusses racism be it in a direct or a more subtle manner. The examination of the data showed traces of new racism, which is why a discussion about the way

racism is presented on Kaepernick's Twitter account is provided below. In addition, it has been found that Kaepernick, on numerous occasions, retweets content which shows that racism is still a problem, that it still needs fighting today, and that, despite a political eroding of racial hierarchy, blacks continue to be mistreated in the United States. The mistreatment of blacks is most directly seen with examples of police brutality targeted at black people and the momentum, which has been created by Black Lives Matter. These examples strengthen the argument that there continues to be racial differences in the United States.

As discussed in the theoretical framework, a distinction is made between traditional racism and new racism. Traditional racism is somewhat straightforward to deal with as it presents itself as a direct agenda against black people in society. In contrast, new racism takes a different form in which race is not directly addressed and, according to the dominant consensus that traditional media help to enforce, racism no longer exist. I have attempted to identify this new engagement with racism through finding denials of the denial of racism in the data. That is the most direct way of detecting new racism. An example of the presentation of new racism is found in a series of retweets, which were originally written by Ameer Hasan Loggins on January 3. Loggins is usually a part of the Know Your Rights Camp, where he is a lead speaker. He has also done research on black history in the United States.

"By claiming reverse \_\_\_\_ you're admitting that said situation not only exists, but is regularly practiced, and normally to your benefit."

"If you say that reverse discrimination benefits "people of color," are you then admitting that regular discrimination exists against them?"

"If someone says that, "you're being a reverse racist," wouldn't that leave you acting in a manner opposite of a racist, hence the reversal?"

"And if one accuses another of being a reverse racist, does that mean that the accuser is admitting that racism comes from a central source?"

"Or are they using the "reverse" in reverse racism to be representational of the reversal of power structural access by the racialized?"

In these tweets, Loggins challenges the use of the phrase "reverse racism" because it insinuates that racism indeed does exist, an idea, which as a dominant discourse in society, has been unanimously rejected by traditional media (Leonard & King, 2009). Again, it is difficult to lead an anti-racist protest under these conditions, because the issue such a protest attempts to fix does, allegedly, not exist. However, through these

tweets, it seems that Loggins easily presents arguments, which show, that racism does still exist by simply breaking apart a commonly used phrase. The discovery that racism still exists means that Kaepernick's activism becomes legitimate and necessary. Another example of how racism is represented of Kaepernick's Twitter account is seen in a retweet from January 26. Here, Kaepernick has retweeted an opinion on the conditions of black youngsters in the United States, which quite radically states that the Government or the country in general will not do anything to help better conditions and equality among its citizens.

“Perfect timing! Via @oldmanebro at #KnowyourrightsNYC: "Just know America isn't designed to help you or save..." (yourrightscamp)

The tweet reposts an Instagram post from radio host Ebro Darden, who is also a speaker at the Know Your Rights Camp events. His full caption on Instagram is written below:

“Just know America isn't designed to help you or save you... So know we must work to save ourselves from the cages prepared to hold us & poison they feed us. #KnowYourRightsCamp” (Ebro Darden)

Through Darden's tweet, Kaepernick presents the argument that the United States will not do anything for its black youth and that it is up to the youth to work hard and change society. This retweet is an example of the challenges, which new racism brings to not only anti-racist protests, but also blacks in everyday interactions. If racism does not exist in the United States, nothing needs fixing and as such the country is not inclined to work for change if it does not believe that conditions are unfair or unequal. This attitude directly exemplifies the conditions the new way of engaging with racism has brought with it.

#### **4.2.2.3. References to the past**

This section discusses the data, which establishes links to the past. Kaepernick's activism as a whole has been significantly influenced by not only athletes protesting before him, but also human rights fighters and leaders of social movements. Signs and references to the people, who have fought similar battles before him, are portrayed in Kaepernick's everyday way of carrying out his protest. This section discusses such references to the past and its leaders and also relevant parts of the historical context.

As presented in the overview of case study, Kaepernick frequently establishes links to the past. The links to the past most often refer to social movements and their leaders. The references to the past are believed to have several functions. They serve to strengthen Kaepernick's credibility, they ensure that the

messages that these leaders preached are still voiced today and they legitimise his activism. Regarding credibility, Kaepernick uses intertextuality to for example give his activism a voice of authority, because the people he quotes or mentions in other ways are ones that hold a certain status. These are usually civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Regarding giving voice to those who can no longer speak for themselves, it is clear that Kaepernick shares similar views as some of the leaders of the past, and to show this he revives their words by quoting them. He shows that the message they carry still is relevant today. By doing so, Kaepernick confirms that his activism is legitimate. This legitimisation takes place simply from acknowledging that while society may have politically created equal opportunities for blacks and whites, what leaders of social movements fought for more than half a decade ago continues to be an ongoing battle. These arguments are addressed further later. An example of a reference to Malcolm X is found in a retweet from January 5:

“March '64: NY Gov. Rockefeller sign his #stopandfrisk bill into law. June '64: Malcolm X denounces it at Audubon Ballroom. @LeftSentThis” (Christopher Petrella)

The tweet is written by Christopher Petrella, who is yet another of the lead speakers at Kaepernick’s Know Your Rights Camp. With it comes a photo of Malcolm X and a quote, which is taken from Malcolm X’ talk at the Audubon Ballroom back in June 1964:

“Where this police brutality also comes in the new law that they just passed, the no knock law, the stop and frisk law, that’s an anti Negro law. That’s a law that was passed and signed by Rockefeller. Rockefeller with his old smile, always he has a greasy smile on his face and he’s shaking hands with Negroes, like he’s the Negro’s pappy or granddaddy or great uncle. Yet when it comes to passing a law that is worse than any law that they had in Nazi Germany, why, Rockefeller couldn’t wait till he got his signature on it. And the only thing this law is designed to do is make legal what they’ve been doing all the time.” - Malcolm X.

In the quote, Malcolm X discusses police brutality and the perceived agenda police officers have against black people, which are issues that are still relevant today. He also presents a President of the United States in the context of apparently being dishonest in his interactions with black people. On January 5, a transition period was underway where President Trump was to be instated as President of the United States. Prior to this tweet, Trump had openly stated that he supported the controversial police tactic ‘stop and frisk’, a law which is also mentioned in the tweet above (Jacobs & Siddiqui, 2016, September 22). The law from 1964 had a reputation of enforcing racial profiling (Gelman, Fagan & Kiss, 2007, p. 813) and it seems that some fear it will build a similar reputation, should it be put into action once again. By retweeting the twitter post,

Kaepernick shares Malcolm X's opinion that the stop and frisk law was used to legalise what police officers had been doing for years before. Through making the connection between this perspective and the prospect of reinitiating the law, Kaepernick underlines that the same events, which openly took place more than half a decade ago, still present themselves as issues today. This substantiates the argument that referencing leaders of social movements reinforces his credibility and legitimises Kaepernick's activism. This is because he draws links between the present and the past, which show that the issues the leaders of the past faced are still faced by people nowadays. Moreover, this is an example of intertextuality, where Malcolm X is directly quoted and used both as a voice of authority, but also as support for the argument that the law is radical.

Malcolm X is by far the most mentioned leader of the past, whom Kaepernick quotes in his tweets and retweets from January. Not only is he mentioned in relation to what he has achieved and said in the past, but he is simultaneously presented as a person whom is paid tribute to and celebrated. Two examples of this are found in tweets that were posted on January 14, where a subtle comparison between Malcolm X and Kaepernick is present. This way of representing Malcolm X can be found on several occasions in the data. He is portrayed as a figure who died fighting for what he believed in, while serving the greater good. He is portrayed as a hero. Arguably, he is also portrayed as a symbol for what Kaepernick has the possibility to become.

“To speak to Black and Brown youth at the same spot where Malcolm X was martyred at the Audubon Ballroom was transformative. #KnowYourRightsNY” (Ameer Hasan Loggins)

“Powerful moment today at @yourrightscamp. Colin talks about Malcolm X at exact spot Malcolm X was assassinated. #AudubonBallroom #MalcolmX” (Christopher Petrella)

Besides Malcolm X, other leaders or front figures are also mentioned in Kaepernick's tweets and retweets. On the third Monday of January, Martin Luther King Day is celebrated in the United States. The holiday honours King's life and achievements, and most importantly his fight for racial equality ([www.timeanddate.com](http://www.timeanddate.com)). For this reason, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is mentioned several times in the data that has been investigated in this thesis. A tweet, which celebrated his and his wife's fight for racial equality was found on January 15:

“As we remember Martin Luther King on #MLKDay, don't forget that Coretta Scott King was on the frontlines with him.” (Ameer Hasan Loggins)

This tweet acknowledges King and his wife Coretta Scott King in their fight for racial equality. In doing so, Kaepernick shows respect to the leaders, who have fought similar battles before him. This way Kaepernick ensures that Martin Luther King Day is not only about remembering the past, but also about reflecting on the present and identifying whether the fight King fought in the 60s still needs fighting. According to Kaepernick's actions, it can be deduced that he believes it does. In addition to Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, other known black leaders/activists/writers fighting for racial equality were mentioned in Kaepernick's January tweets: Ida B. Wells, Audre Lorde, James A. Baldwin, and Angela Davis.

The findings also revealed that Kaepernick focuses on placing current events into a historical context. Most frequently, he does so by comparing current events to what has happened in the past, thus presenting predictions for what could happen again and what is still relevant. This way, Kaepernick presents material, which directly insinuates that historic events, which humans should have learned from, are either being or are likely to be repeated. A few examples of this are presented below. The first regards Trump's intention to build a wall separating the United States and Mexico and the others come in the wake of President Trump's infamous Muslim Ban.

"Berlin's mayor just issued this message for Donald Trump. It's quite something." (Jeremy Cliffe, January 27)

Kaepernick retweeted this from Jeremy Cliffe who is a journalist for *The Economist*. It comes as a response to President Trump's intentions of building a wall between the United States and Mexico. The tweet came attached with a letter written by the Mayor of Berlin, which in part read:

"One of the finest moments of the 20th century was when at the Brandenburg Gate - the most important symbol of the divide - ordinary citizens seized control of the wall and demolished it brick by brick. [...] Now, in the early years of the 21st century, we cannot let all our historical experience get trashed by the very people to whom we owe much of our freedom: the Americans. I call on the President of the USA not to go down that road of isolation and ostracism. [...] I call on the American President: remember your forerunner, Ronald Reagan. Remember his words: "Tear down this wall." And so I say: "Mr President, don't build this wall."'" (Mayor of Berlin Michael Müller)

In addition to drawing direct references to a past, which few would wish to see repeated, this quote also uses intertextuality to emphasise the message. A historic event is used to support the main argument that building

a wall would have negative consequences, and a President is directly quoted. Below is a tweet from Garrett Felber. It reveals a letter written by Malcolm X to then Secretary of State Dean Rusk:

“Nothing new here: #MalcolmX denied entry to France, held for 2 hours, deported to London, citing his "undesirable presence." #MuslimBan” (Garrett Felber)

“Dear Sir, While in possession of an American passport I was denied entry to France with no explanation. I would like to lodge an official protest in this matter and insists upon an investigation being made to determine why this incident took place with no intervention from the United States Embassy. Malcolm X.” (Malcolm X)

A final example that emphasises the argument that Kaepernick seeks to use contextual references to among other things strengthen his credibility and legitimacy is a retweet from January 28. It shows Kaepernick’s intention to make people aware that minorities have been wrongfully treated in the United States and still are.

“#MuslimBan just "immigration freeze" #ChineseExclusionAct just "ban on labor" #LiteracyTests just "check on democracy" Been here before.” (Christopher Petrella)

#### **4.2.2.4. Socio-political context**

This section discusses the data, which is about the current events that are taking place alongside of Kaepernick’s activism. The socio-political context is relevant to consider when trying to make claims about Kaepernick’s activism, especially with regards to the opportunities for anti-racist protests among top athletes nowadays in the United States. During the coding, two aspects emerged, which need to be investigated further. The first is the apparent re-emergence of political athletes and the second is social movements and what these mean for, among other things, the re-emergence of political athletes.

In January 2017, on his Twitter account, Kaepernick mentions two other athletes who currently speak out on political matters. The first is Eric Reid, who is one of Kaepernick’s teammates with the 49ers. Reid was quick to join Kaepernick in taking a knee and he has continued to do so throughout the 2016/2017 NFL season. Though not mentioned in the data from January 2017, it should be noted that other 49ers teammates have also knelt with Kaepernick. Actually, the support from the 49ers players, coaches and fans appears to have been huge (Lynch, 2017, January 24). The other athlete, whom Kaepernick mentions, is

an Australian boxer named Anthony Mundine. Kaepernick has retweeted a post about him from the twitter account of the newspaper, *The Australian* on January 31.

“@Anthony\_Mundine says he's trying to unite and educate Australia by refusing to stand for the national anthem” (The Australian)

There may be several reasons as to why Kaepernick retweets stories about politically outspoken athletes. While I cannot say that these cases provide hints about a re-politicisation of sports directly, it indeed seems like that is the case that Kaepernick wants to make. From the content of Kaepernick's Twitter profile, the viewer gets the impression that there is a trend of athletes - once again - becoming politically engaged.

In addition to showing that athletes are becoming political, Kaepernick also mentions the social movements that give a momentum for these athletes to protest in. As discussed in chapter 2, Black Lives Matter is a great example of this. The movement has given others a context in which to start their protests. Kaepernick is no exception and one can only assume that he is directly inspired by the movement, after all Black Lives Matter and Kaepernick share the same views on social issues relating to race. The most significant similarity between the two is the focus on police brutality, where the general perception from the supporters of Black Lives Matter is that black are being unequally treated and targeted by police officers. A way in which Kaepernick represented this attitude on his Twitter account was by retweeting from, again, the Twitter account of Know Your Rights Camp on January 29.

“Do we really need a caption for this?? Tag this guy if you know him so we can thank him via @chakabars...” (yourrightscamp).

The tweet was attached with a video in which a young man walking on the street is engaged in a discussion with a man in a car, which drives next to him while recording. The man in the car seems offended (the beginning of their discussion is not included in the video). The man, who is walking, repeatedly says ‘black lives matter’ referring to the slogan of the social movement carrying the same name, while the man in the car argues that ‘all lives matter’. It is likely that the video was retweeted by Kaepernick (and the Twitter account for Know Your Rights Camp) because it exhibits a common discussion between those who understand the message of Black Lives Matter and those who disagree with the exclusive focus on black lives. While, of course, all lives do matter, the debate regards the fact that, according to Black Lives Matter, black lives are not considered equally important to white lives, and by saying ‘all lives matter’, one continues to disregard the need to focus on black lives (Damiani, 2016, July 15). The premise behind saying ‘black lives matter’ is that it is important to highlight the unequal treatment of black people to the criminal justice system in the United States, because here evidence show that they matter less than white lives (Damiani, 2016, July 15).

#### 4.2.2.5. Media

The final theme that will be discussed is about how Kaepernick presents the media. While it at this point is clear that Kaepernick does not talk to bigger media corporations (he has said no to one-on-one interviews with virtually every major news outlet (Rosenberg, 2017, March 30)), he does at times address how these talk about him or addressed media in general. The most interesting aspects Kaepernick discusses are the power of the media and framing/false narratives.

Kaepernick mentions the power of the media, which is interesting because it directly shows his attitude towards traditional media institutions. He does so by retweeting and by using intertextuality. For instance this is seen in a retweet from Loggins from January 4. The tweet comes with a photo of Malcolm X with a direct quote attached. In this quote, the power of the media is directly mentioned.

“Never forget what Brother Malcolm said about the media, and ALWAYS remember that the media is more pervasive and powerful today than ever.”

“The media’s the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent. And that’s power because they control the minds of the masses.”  
(Malcolm X).

Kaepernick’s criticism of the media does not end here. He also retweets posts, which show that the media at times present false narratives. This regards other people and Kaepernick himself. Here, retweets about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. are particularly important. Below, in a series of tweets from January 11, Loggins suggests that the media promotes King’s speech “I Have A Dream because” it is ‘media appropriate’; because it preaches a message that the media can at least tolerate and potentially agree with. Other sides of a more radical King are never shown in the media.

“Go out and learn about Martin Luther King Jr. For yourself. There is a reason the "I Have a Dream" speech is showed down your throat.”

“Please listen to Martin Luther King Jr. speaking out against the Vietnam War. This is the MLK they assassinated.”

“America feeds its people a "safe" version of Martin Luther King. The "I Have a Dream" King. They never show the King protesting Vietnam.”

“They never quote this Martin Luther King Jr.”

“THEY definitely don't quote this Martin Luther King Jr. Hell, to some reading this, it doesn't even sound like MLK.”

The first quote was attached with a video of King talking about Vietnam and the negative consequences it has for poor Americans, as the majority of men who enlist for the war come from poor conditions (King, 1967, April 4, YouTube). The third and fourth tweet came with quotes from King's last speech “I've been to the Mountaintop”. In them, King encourages mobilisation of black people in the fight for freedom. He says that unity is the way forward while referencing the slaves from ancient Egypt and how the Pharaoh would have them fight each other to ensure his authority. King says: “When the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery.” (King, 1968, April 3). This more radical way of talking about race, slavery and racism has been sanitised in the media according to Loggins. Arguably, they have chosen the version of King they could agree with, as he was too well-known to ignore. Considering Intertextuality, these quotes are examples of direct and indirect intertextuality techniques. The indirect technique mentions a source, here King, and presents the views of that person, as the new author understands it. Loggins presents King as a more radical individual than the media have done throughout time.

Another example directly revolves around how the media is framing Kaepernick. In a linked article that accompanied the retweet, sports journalist Kevin Lynch questions why Kaepernick is being portrayed wrongly in the media. According to Lynch, the media say that Kaepernick's teammates do not support him and that the 49ers fans want him gone (2017, January 24). Lynch also states that those things are simply untrue, thus questioning why the media would present Kaepernick as a person who is unwanted on the football field in San Francisco.

“Colin Kaepernick - 49ers fan showed character this year. So why this shadow narrative about Kaepernick?” (Kevin Lynch, January 24)

It is interesting how Kaepernick chooses to not comment on the negative framing he has been subject to in the media. Rather, he clearly states his opinion by retweeting the words of others. This may further show how little interest he has in traditional media or it may be his way of challenging their power.

A final example of the media giving false narratives about Kaepernick is given by Kaepernick's girlfriend Nessa Diab, who is also part of the team behind Know Your Rights Camp. She retweeted an article with statistics that present statistical evidence that Kaepernick is a good football player. The writer of the

article, Anwar Jamison, states that what is unusual about Kaepernick is the fact that he is constantly evaluated in the media “devoid of any statistical facts” (2017, January 23). Hence, the media assess Kaepernick on the basis of other things, which in theory should be irrelevant especially because the numbers suggest that he is a very able football player.

“WOMEN LIE MEN LIE... NUMBERS DO NOT! An Honest Statistical Evaluation of Colin Kaepernick I 49ernswebzone.com” (Nessa Diab, January 24)

Conclusively, the attitude that Kaepernick has chosen to exhibit to his followers shows a very critical stance towards the media. He demonstrates how powerful the media are and how they, according to Kaepernick, will not shy away from brining false stories. It comes across as a warning to his followers. Perhaps not with the intention to directly say that one cannot trust the media, but, the message is accusatory and it underscores the fact that many stories that the media bring can simply not be trusted. This way, Kaepernick’s references to and mentions about the media encourages his followers to find their information elsewhere, to fact check and remain critical. He emphasises this point, by setting an example for his followers in the sense that he does not give interviews and rarely engages with major news corporations.

#### **4.3. Kaepernick as a gatekeeper**

The final section of this chapter makes connections between the findings presented above in an attempt to analyse how Kaepernick in some ways functions as a gatekeeper. In the results, which have been presented above, certain patterns can be found. What is interesting to look at extends beyond content. As was argued in the theoretical framework, Kaepernick can be said to function as a gatekeeper. As established in the case study, Kaepernick carries out his activism for those who do not have a platform to speak from, those who do not have a voice of their own. He does this by retweeting on his personal Twitter account. In table 4.4, an overview shows what sources he includes. Two types take up the vast majority of space here: the group labelled ‘Academics’ and the Twitter account for his Know Your Rights Camp. It must be concluded that these two groups carry great significance to him.

While the retweets from the Know Your Rights Camp could be presumed to be a type of promotion, it seems unlikely that it is the sole objective. This is because the tweets from this account do not only describe the campaign itself, but also bring content that shows, among a variety of other things, the history of black people, and touches upon the current socio-political context as well. This way, the retweets have an educational theme, which it seems that Kaepernick wants his followers absorb.

The other group, academics, is also highly interesting. 75 tweets in January 2017 alone were originally written by academics. The content varies of course, but the focus is almost always on the black person and his/her struggle with life and values of the United States, official instances performing justices and law enforcement, be it current or a historic perspective. From taking a deeper look into the previous work on the scholars, one finds that they all have an academic focus on black America. While some have researched the history of blacks others investigate conditions for blacks today. These scholars make points about black America, which are in strong resemblance to the messages Kaepernick spreads. Through his platform, with followers who cannot be assumed to be students of black history; Kaepernick can share the work of these academics in a 'media friendly' way. This way, the knowledge of these scholars reaches an audience, who may not otherwise have been exposed to it. They are given access to information about what has happened historically, what should change now and why these changes need to take place. Heleta (2016) wrote an article, which argues, as the title states, "Academics can change the world - if they stop talking only to their peers". This may be something, which Kaepernick agrees with and is attempting to change. Or maybe he just wants to be seen as credible with good background information. Regardless, Kaepernick can be said to function as a gatekeeper in similar ways as the term is used about news media and mass communication, as presented by White (1950). He is the powerful 'keeper' who decides what and, importantly, who gets to be featured on his Twitter account. In similar ways to the journalistic use of the term, he opens and closes doors to writers, journalists, academics, news outlets, organisations etc. This way, it seems to be the core of his activism to challenge dominant media discourses. He has the final say in what information comes from him and how it is presented. To do so, he has created a network on his Twitter account, where he ties people and events together. This network is further extended through his use of intertextuality, which draws links to the past and its leaders.

Kaepernick frequently uses the level of intertextuality, which Bazerman (2004) describes will emphasise value on a point because the person, who the text is taken from, carries authority (p. 86). This level of intertextuality typically strengthens the message, because a source of authority invites credibility. He also uses references to past situations to back up claims about what is happening nowadays. I propose that Kaepernick uses these levels of intertextuality extensively to legitimise his activism. Examples are also found of both direct and indirect quotation techniques of intertextuality on Kaepernick's Twitter profile. With these quoting techniques it is important to remember that the context of the quotes can be manipulated. However, I argue that Kaepernick uses direct and indirect quotations to give a voice to not only those who do not have one today, but also those who did and had it taken away. If this is the case, it is unlikely that the quotes would be too significantly taken out of context, as Kaepernick agrees with and extends the message of the past without trying to change it. It seems the whole point is that the message is the same nowadays. Conclusively, it can be said that Kaepernick, through his gatekeeping function, has created a network on his Twitter profile. A network, which is represented by academics and others, who share his vision for the cause

to symbolise the present, combined with a representation of quotes and historical moments to symbolise the past. Together, they appear to prove his main point: that while changes have happened in the United States politically, the struggle of the black person remains similar to, what in dominant conversation in news media today, are presented as stories from the past.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. The price of activism

Kaepernick continued his national anthem protest throughout the NFL season of 2016/2017. It persisted to arouse polarised reactions, but at the same time the conversation about it slowly changed come the end of the football season. In the beginning of March 2017, after the official end of the season, Kaepernick opted out of his contract with the San Francisco 49ers<sup>2</sup> and he became a free agent (here, 'free agents' refers to athletes who are not signed with an NFL team) looking for a new team to play for in the coming season. As suggested by Wagoner (2017, March 4), it is possible that Kaepernick made this decision to get a head start in the race for a new contract. Another option is that he wanted to see how the NFL would handle his unemployment; after all he could have stayed with the 49ers one more year, but I cannot say anything about his intentions for opting out of his contract, as he has not spoken about them. Yet, while both colleagues and coaches with the 49ers seemed to be under the impression that Kaepernick would land a contract in no time, it has not been the case. Upon writing, Kaepernick remains unemployed and has been since March 6, 2017 (Rosenberg, 2017, March 30).

It is of course difficult to say with any certainty, why an NFL team has not signed Kaepernick. It is a fact that he, statistically, is a good quarterback, who surpasses many others, who were signed somewhat immediately after becoming free agents, which underscores the controversy of his unemployment (Rosenberg, 2017, March 30). Brandon Marshall, a former teammate of Kaepernick, tweeted on April 17, 2017: "It's time my Brother @Kaepernick7 gets signed. He's better than every QB that got signed in Free agency" (in Jhabvala, 2017, April 25). Discussions about the reasons for his unemployment have emerged in the media (Rosenberg, 2017; Breech, 2017; Arnold, 2017). Theories include that teams are punishing him for his protest, that a continued protest in the next season is feared, that he can not play good football anymore, that football is no longer his first priority and that the distractions he creates are not worth it (Rosenberg, 2017, March 30). While there may not exist a simple answer to this question, there appears to be a consensus among sports presenters and other athletes that Kaepernick's unemployment is due to a profound disapproval for his silent protest (Jhabvala, 2017; Blackistone, 2017).

Kaepernick himself has not commented on the issue, yet one can assume that he is not surprised by how events have turned out. Already in August 2016, he was aware that there might be

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<sup>2</sup> While still under contract, footballers can chose to 'opt out' of their contracts, which means that they terminate the contract early. Kaepernick had one year left on his contract with the San Francisco 49ers, but decided to release himself from the contract, allegedly because he was not the first choice quarterback (which means that he spent a lot of time on the bench while another quarterback was playing). According to Wagoner (2017, March 4) Kaepernick was expected to opt out, as the 49ers would look to sign another quarterback to strengthen the team regardless of him staying on the team.

consequences to the, for some unpatriotic, decision to kneel for the national anthem, which to so many meant a disrespect for the military, the United States as a country and, ironically, freedom of speech (Graham, 2016; Sidahmed, 2016). In interview 1, as described in chapter 4, Kaepernick said that he was prepared for whatever consequences that may come and that these would only prove his point by showing that he stood up for something real (Kaepernick, 2016, August 28). It seems that Kaepernick was right. From what can be found in newspaper articles online, no team has called his agent to request a meeting about a potential contract. This punishment makes one think of the activism of the 1960s and 1970s.

Almost 60 years after the likes of Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith and John Carlos were punished for their political outspokenness, by having titles and medals taken away, the consequences of taking a political stance in the sport arena currently may remain equivalent to those. It is possible that Kaepernick is being 'blackballed' by the NFL by being forced out like other athletes before him (Blackistone, 2017, March 23). Again, it would not be the first time it happened. An example of this is basketballer Craig Hodges, who played for the Chicago Bulls. In 1992, during the era where political apathy from athletes dominated sport venues, Hodges was forced out of basketball, apparently, for being too politically outspoken (McRae, 2017, April 20). Hodges attempted to organise collective team sit-outs to protest the unequal treatment of black Americans and he encouraged teammate Michael Jordan, among others, to speak up on political issues, which he/they failed to do (Rhoden, 1992). He identified the problem that players were apolitical and not unified (Rhoden, 1992). Hodges was unsuccessful in his attempt to mobilize his teammates, and, eventually, he was forced out of the NBA on grounds he assert to be political outspokenness (McRae, 2017, April 20). Should Kaepernick remain unsigned come next season, it sends the message that times may have changed, but unmodernised conditions for black athletes have endured. While there may be a revival in athlete activism, the re-politicisation of sports seems to come with a price.

During the latest of his Know Your Rights Camp events, which was held in Chicago on May 6, 2017 ([www.knowyourrightscamp.com](http://www.knowyourrightscamp.com)), Kaepernick appeared optimistic when addressing his crowd of black youngsters:

"Let's get to work. We have a lot of work to do. And no one is going to change this other than us." (Kaepernick, Know Your Rights Camp, Chicago)

One might be reminded of words spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." (1963, April 16). Kaepernick continues to fight for racial equality and social justice off the football pitch, while encouraging the youth to join him in the fight.

## **5.2. Conclusion on findings**

NFL teams' reluctance to hire Kaepernick may be proving his point – as Kaepernick himself announced in interview 1 – as well as it seems to underscore the importance of the case analysed in this thesis. Furthermore, this indicates that the circumstances for political athletes are similar to those of more than half a century ago, which means that Kaepernick's predictions about the consequences that follow with being politically outspoken were true. After investigating Kaepernick's activism on the football field and through media, this thesis now attempts to suggest what it means for anti-racist protests among top athletes nowadays in the United States. While I am aware there is no simple answer to this, it has been possible to look for clues in the presentation of the case study and in more detail through the data that was subject to the content analyses. The systematic analysis of Kaepernick's social media activity in January 2017 has proved to be helpful to detect certain patterns. From these, I will draw conclusions for the findings of this thesis. I have divided this part of the conclusion into different segments, because there are theoretical aspects that I wish to go over separately and in more detail. I will start by presenting my understanding of how Kaepernick uses media for his activism. Then I will move on to talk about the influence that new racism has on athlete activism and the influence mediatisation has on athlete activism. This will be followed by a discussion about the opportunities for anti-racist protests among top athletes nowadays in the United States, which will be completed by a clear answer to the research question. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of this study and bring suggestions for further research. It should be mentioned that the findings of this study are not generalisable in the statistical sense. They are however deduced from a careful and detailed investigation of a case study and they can therefore provide rich information about the phenomenon that is being examined.

### **5.2.1. Kaepernick's activism on the field and through media**

Throughout the previous chapters of this thesis, it has become evident that Kaepernick is a polarising figure. Not only is the polarisation seen among the general public, which is divided in regards to whether or not they support his protest, but also in the way discussions about him in the media are taking place. Without going into an analysis of how Kaepernick is covered in mainstream media, one can somewhat easily claim that while he is still a topic of discussion for news presenters and sports commentators in the United States, the specific story has changed. It appears that it is no longer most important to evaluate the legitimacy of his protest. Now, main focus of interest lies in anticipating whether or not Kaepernick will be signed by an NFL team for the season of 2017/2018, and if the reason for his unemployment is a consequence of his national anthem protest. It seems likely. Sports writer Anwar Jamison (2017, January 23) argued that Kaepernick is the only player that is not assessed on statistical facts but on his actions. Harry Edwards, the man behind the

1968 Olympic protest, has said: “You can’t have a league that’s approaching 80% black, and then say if you stand up and say anything relevant to these issues – especially in the age of (President) Trump – this is what happens to you. You can’t do that. You can’t just up and write off black protests as if this were 1950.” (Edwards to USA Today Sports). However, it seems that it is possible indeed. Literature on the topic describes the same phenomenon: in the United States, black athletes are appreciated. They have the potential to become the commercial faces of products and can easily land lucrative sponsorship deals. However, should they speak up on political issues all of this is taken away. Political outspokenness is not appreciated and it will be silenced.

The more I read about the Olympic activism of 1968, the more the pieces about Kaepernick’s activism come together. It is almost as if history is repeating itself. The link to Harry Edwards binds the silent protests of 1968 and 2016/2017 together. He was the “the architect behind the 1968 Olympics” (Hartman, 2003, p. 21). Today, we know that he holds a close relationship with Kaepernick and that they frequently speak. While it is possible that Edwards is influencing Kaepernick on some level, Kaepernick maintains that they share similar views, but the decision to protest was his own. Edwards’ perhaps most famous work is the book “The revolt of the black athlete” from 1969. It discusses the protests of the likes of Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Muhammad Ali (Edwards, 1969). One could wonder, depending on the extent on Edwards’s influence on Kaepernick’s decision to protest, if Kaepernick represents Edwards’ revival of ‘the revolt of the black athlete’; a modern-day counterpart to the political athletes of the past, which Leonard and King (2009) stated did not exist.

Regardless of who originally initiated the national anthem protest, this thesis suggests that Kaepernick’s activism presents itself as an important milestone in the history of athlete activism; perhaps as a rejuvenation of it. He neatly uses all platforms available to him to spread his message be it on the football field or via social media. As mentioned in interview 1, Kaepernick protests to give a voice to those who do not have a platform to speak from. He does this via Twitter, where he retweets from people who support him and the cause. Furthermore, his actions indicate an untrusting relationship with traditional media. Through everything that he does, the audience of his activism is exposed to an opinionated and persistent individual who does not shy away from making statements and setting an example. He grew out his natural hair, embracing an Afro, and he is often seen wearing statement t-shirts with known figures such as Malcolm X. He transfers this idolisation of the leaders of the past to his social media. As was found in the previous chapter, Kaepernick frequently tweets and retweets about these leaders and what they fought for. In addition, he includes current cases about police brutality and other examples of how black people are mistreated. All this information comes together through Kaepernick and the connections he makes between the past and the present.

Because Kaepernick carries out much of his activism online, one could be inclined to wonder whether it is a case of slacktivism rather than ‘real’ activism. Rotman et al. (2011) defines slacktivism as

“low-risk, low-cost activity via social media, whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity (p. 821). From this definition, it becomes clear that Kaepernick cannot be placed under this category, since he has different initiatives going on in which he actively participates. The most comprehensive one is his Know Your Rights Camp.

### **5.2.2. The influence of new racism on athlete activism**

With regards to the discussion about new racism and its influence on athlete activism, it is interesting to discuss three aspects. The first regards the Obama presidency. López (2010) found that the Obama presidency does not present itself as a strong enough argument that racism is over. It has been falsely used as an excuse to stop working to better the rights of black people. The vagueness of new racism ensures that this is possible, arguably because many do not understand the specific ways in which racism is still a problem. His election seems to be a politically symbolic change rather than one that means that racial inequality is over. In interview 1, Kaepernick says that even though a black man was elected President twice, the struggle of blacks is not over, thus contradicting the people who would use Obama as an argument for the end of racism and legitimising his protest. The second aspect revolves around the fact that examples of new racism were scarce on Kaepernick’s Twitter account or it was difficult to detect traces of. Naturally, I did not expect him to address the issue theoretically. A series of tweets (presented in chapter 4) best showed how new racism was dealt with in the data. In addition to this, interview 1 was helpful, because it addressed the connection Kaepernick made between Obama’s presidency and the actual socio-cultural changes that have (or have not) occurred as a consequence of it. The third and final aspect is the argument that new racism makes it difficult for athletes to legitimise their protests. This is difficult to discuss with any certainties considering the scope of the study, however, it is deduced that in a society in which there is a dominant consensus that racism does not exist, leading an anti-racist protest is difficult. One must assume some would struggle to see the purpose of it. The momentum created by Black Lives Matter challenges this perception, which Kaepernick and others have taken advantage of. Kaepernick draws connections to the past and exhibits societal norms and conventions that may have changed politically, but which take place in everyday life for black people. He demonstrates how the struggles people fought for in the past are still worth fighting for today. And should the same issues, predominantly caused by racism, which were relevant more than half a decade ago, still be relevant nowadays, it is only logic that racism still presents itself as a problem as well.

### **5.2.3. The influence of mediatisation on athlete activism**

As established in the first chapter of this thesis, the media (any type of media) have profoundly changed the

way athlete activism takes place today. While Smith and Carlos utilised the platform the Olympic Games offered in 1968, Kaepernick has a platform everyday; be it once a week on the football field during the season or online via Twitter, other social media and his website. The role the media play seems to have changed the role of the activist as well. Kaepernick does not represent one person. In contrast, he diligently orchestrates a network of voices, opening up opportunities for others to be heard, all the while neatly tying them all together as one force, which objective is to achieve racial equality in the United States. Many cases of activism from the likes of Smith and Carlos have had similar objectives, and Smith and Carlos too said that in their fight they represented black America. Only the difference now is that Kaepernick can, literally, expose opinions from members of black America and others who participate in or support the fight for equality to his followers. This exclusively becomes possible because of the mediatization of protests. It has become obvious that athlete activism carries features of being mediated.

It has been found that the logic of protesting has changed, as it has adapted to the media logic as a result of the changing media environment. I see that by looking at how Kaepernick uses the media, which has been analysed in chapter 4. Via his function as a gatekeeper, his social media followers are given access to information they may not otherwise have had the opportunity to see. Kaepernick successfully establishes a link between his followers and the academic world of sports and politics in which history and current circumstances of blacks have been researched. This is most directly seen in the large amount of retweets from what looks like a carefully selected group of academics. Literature on the political apathy from athletes argues that athletes do not know their history and per se do not know what to fight for (Rhoden, 2006). Kaepernick challenges this argument. This is concluded because he shows how conditions for blacks have and, more importantly, have not changed on his Twitter account. He does so through exposing academic knowledge and work to his followers, black youngsters among others. This is how Kaepernick uses the media for his activism.

Moreover, by paying attention to how Kaepernick uses intertextuality, two conclusions are drawn. The first is that he attempts to legitimise his activism through illustrating that the issues the leaders of the past spoke about are still unresolved and therefore relevant today. The second is that he is attempting to give them back their voice. From the findings and conclusions about his role as a gatekeeper, I presented the idea that Kaepernick is creating a network in which he represents the present and the past. The past, I argued, is represented by the use of intertextuality, where he quotes the leaders of the past. Through this line of thinking, Kaepernick is not only providing a platform for those who have no voice today, but also to those who had their voice taken away while fighting for racial justice in the United States in the past. As discussed in chapter 4, examples of Kaepernick using intertextuality show how he is spreading a similar message as others did before him. His function as a gatekeeper is important. By retweeting messages from people who support him and his cause, he proves that his activism is appreciated, which ultimately means that people believe there is something to fight for. By retweeting the work and opinions of a carefully selected group of

academics, he substantiates this belief with valid arguments. And, finally, by referencing, quoting and in other ways relating to the likes of Malcolm X, Dr. King, Jim Brown and others, he extends his network to including voices from the past, all the while fighting for the same cause. The cause that was fought for more than half a decade ago, a fight that scholars today argue is yet to be won.

#### **5.2.4. The political sport scene nowadays**

Kaepernick's case study presents itself as an example of a changing political scene in sports. Although he is the protesting athlete most extensively covered in the media and the one to have caused the most controversy and outrage, he is not the only one who speaks up on social issues. Besides the examples given in the introduction of this thesis, and the findings from his January tweets, other cases indicate that a trend may be taking place. Even Michael Jordan, whom this thesis and many scholars have criticised (Powell, 2008; Rhoden, 2006; Kaufman and Wolff, 2010), seems to have woken up. In an open letter titled "I can no longer stay silent", he addresses the shootings of black Americans by the hand of police officers (Jordan, 2016). One could wonder why it has taken so long for Jordan to do so, especially because his father was the victim of gun violence (though not by law enforcement). Perhaps retirement made it easier for him, as one could suspect he has less to lose in terms of his career. Jordan's hero status may very well invite others to speak up as well. Whatever happens in the future, this thesis will conclude that, at this time, there are signs of a trend of re-politicisation of sports. Clues from the case study indicate so, and the contextual cases, which have been described in this thesis, substantiate this argument.

Nonetheless, it is important to consider that while I may be able to argue that it is possible to find hints of a re-politicisation, all evidence of it shows that there are still severe consequences of speaking out politically. Kaepernick's current unemployment exemplifies it. Hodges experiences, though some twenty-five years ago, show it. Dating all the way back to the actions of Muhammad Ali, the consequences remain the same. The difference is that now, authorities can no longer punish the athlete as openly as before. What we see are statistically good players, who are being forced out of the game. The punishment and the 'blackballing' takes place behind the scene, where athletes are silently rejected rather than having medals taken away as before. It seems that athletes speaking up politically are unwanted, at least from the people in power of taking away those athletes' contract. Kaepernick was prepared for it; he expressed so in the interviews. And even though Tommie Smith and John Carlos have publicly expressed support for his activism calling it "proactive", they remain sceptical about how much more of his activism will be accepted by the NFL, as it is a known fact that backlash comes with speaking up politically (ESPN, 2016, September 29). Kaepernick is already feeling this backlash through his unemployment.

### 5.2.5. Opportunities for anti-racist protests

Arguably, Kaepernick's protest symbolises a breakthrough in the history of athlete activism. It is found that it represents a re-politicisation of sports. Besides the data from January, this revival presents itself in several ways:

1. Through the amount of support, which can be interpreted to mean that some people agree there is cause for the protest;
2. The support that Kaepernick has gotten from his teammates where some have joined him in kneeling or raised clenched fists;
3. Athletes receiving awards for the work in communities and political outspokenness regardless of losing sponsorship deals (e.g. Brandon Marshall, as mentioned in the overview of the case study);
4. Reports of other cases of athlete activism, and finally;
5. Athletes, previously politically unengaged, now speaking up on racial issues. LeBron James and Michael Jordan are mentioned in this thesis. Another more recent example, which has not yet been discussed in this thesis, is that the NBA team The Golden State Warriors have unanimously agreed to not go on the traditional White House visit after winning the NBA on June 12, 2017. Allegedly, the players chose to do so, as they do not approve of President Trump (Florio, 2017, June 13).

Together these five perspectives indicate that there may be a trend of re-politicisation of sports. These aspects illustrate a context in which other athletes are invited to engage in political discussions. Kaepernick is setting the example for them, as the modern-day counterpart that scholars have been longing for. Kaepernick broke the ice by going against the political silence and ventured onto an unknown yet predictable odyssey as support for Black Lives Matter was growing. The momentum, which the movement created and which was utilised by athletes to protest in, presents itself as contextual evidence that now is the time to once again engage in political discussions despite being an athlete. The environment in the sport arena indicates that it is possible. The 49ers accepted Kaepernick's protest fully. What I see from investigating the case study about Kaepernick is that media are offering new tools and that now, more than ever since the golden age of activism, is the time to join the movement of athlete activism.

### 5.2.6. Answer to the research question

This thesis has investigated the topic of black athlete activism and posed the following question: *How does Colin Kaepernick use the media for his activism and what does that say about the opportunities for anti-racist protest among top athletes nowadays in the United States?*

Bringing the discussions of this chapter together, it has been found that Kaepernick uses the media as a platform to bring the message of his activism to his followers. He does so both via his website [www.knowyourrightscamp.com](http://www.knowyourrightscamp.com) and his social media activity, where he is most active on Twitter. Through Twitter, Kaepernick is trying to give a voice to those who do not have a platform to speak from. These are, according to Kaepernick, people who are oppressed, because racial injustice prevails in the United States (Interview 1). Cases of police brutality aimed at black people are examples of this. Because these people cannot speak for themselves, as they do not have a voice that is strong or influential enough to be heard, Kaepernick has taken it upon himself to speak for them. He brings his message across by literally giving people a voice. He does so by functioning as a gatekeeper, where he decides who he retweets from on his Twitter account. The tweets of these people are then subject to exposure to Kaepernick's more than 1 million followers and whoever else is watching his online activity. The majority of the people, he retweets from, are those who support his activism combined with a carefully selected group of academics, who are educated in the field of black history, conditions for blacks in contemporary America or something similar. Another way that he uses the media is by making historical connections to the past and illustrating that the same issues these men and women fought for more than half a century ago still present themselves as issues in today's America. The connections he makes to the past, add credibility and authority to his activism, as Kaepernick directly underscores that racial issues of the past still need fighting. He shows that these older issues still matter by using techniques of intertextuality through which he positions himself among the leaders of the past. This way he shares their fight for racial justice in the United States by quoting the likes of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and using intertextual distance to emphasise that his points are valid. By making this connection between the racial issues of the past and the present, Kaepernick challenges the concept of new racism. Combined, the momentum created by Black Lives Matter and Kaepernick's direct approach to addressing racism makes it difficult for critics to argue that the cause of his protest is irrelevant. Eventually, this legitimises his activism. This novel way of carrying out his protest is only possible because the media environment is changing and the logic of protests is as well.

Together, the momentum created by Black Lives Matter and the changing media environment seems to have offered athletes an opportunity in which they can once again engage in political discussions. Though the dominant discourse appears to be that racism does not exist, this thesis and the data, which has been gathered to build the case study, have identified multiple examples of racial inequality, which I believe now make it difficult to deny the existence of racism. When there is an open discussion about racism, anti-racist protests against it will appear more legitimate. This may be the reason why not only Kaepernick but several other athletes have made the decision to speak up on social issues such as racism including police brutality targeted at black people. The most striking examples of this seeming trend of re-politicisation in sports are not only found in the young athletes who disagree with today's conditions for blacks in the United States but also with older athletes, who have previously maintained positions of silence with regards to

politics. It is possible that these examples of athletes protesting will inspire others to follow suit. Either way, it appears that the opportunities for black athletes to engage in political discussions are better now than since the golden age of activism in the 1960s and 1970s, as the momentum that invites such discussions is now.

### **5.2.7. Methodological evaluation, limitations and suggestions for further research**

As discussed in chapter 3, the case study is a favourable strategy when the research deals with contemporary events, which cannot be influenced by the researcher. The choice to present Kaepernick's activism as a case study was appropriate because this thesis meets these requirements. After carrying out the analysis, I can only conclude that the case study has contributed extensively to the knowledge about the relationship between sports and politics in times of new media. As mentioned in chapter 3, the case study as a methodological strategy relies on numerous sources of evidence that leads to a natural type of triangulation, which gives an accurate and detailed description of the case. Arguably, the natural triangulation of sources has made it possible to maintain a holistic view on the entirety of the case while simultaneously going into detail with the investigation of the specific time period. The findings, both quantitative and qualitative, have made it possible to understand the particularities of the social phenomenon that is black athlete activism. Throughout the process, I have attempted to make the analysis of the data transparent, so that the reader is able to follow my line of thought. In addition, the theoretical stance this thesis takes has been obvious from the very first chapter.

A limitation for this study is the fact that the time period for the data, which is subject to the content analyses, is limited to one month. After conducting the analyses, it became clear that one month cannot represent an activism, which had taken place over five months beforehand. The content from month to month simply varies too much, be it because of current contextual occurrences or the occasional birthday of a leader from the past. January was for example Martin Luther King Day, so, naturally, a lot of content was directed at honouring his memory. That being said, going in depth with the analyses on one month's content proved insightful and the level of detail made the analyses interesting to learn from.

The modernity of the phenomenon black athlete activism, that is the hints of shifting tendencies leaning towards a re-politicisation of sports in times of a changing media environment, is largely unresearched. For further research, I would suggest that this study be repeated on a larger scale. This could be done by including several other case studies with the objective to discover links and regularities between them. Comparing cases would be beneficial because it could reveal the extent of the pattern I have found through researching only a single case. More case studies would also make it possible to carry out analytic induction. Maybe this could invite an attempt to propose analytic generalisations for the trend. Perhaps Kaepernick would be willing to do interviews for such a study, as it is for academic purposes. His great favour for academic knowledge over mainstream news would indicate that there is a chance he might. I for

one would eagerly study this phenomenon further and in doing so overcome the biggest disadvantage of this study, which is its scope that was limited due to time constraints. Additionally and conclusively, previous research on the topic has predominantly focussed on male athlete activism specifically (Agyemang, 2011; Cunningham and Regan, 2011). However, while writing this thesis, I have come across several examples of female athletes engaging in political discussions as well. Serena Williams is for example mentioned in this thesis. New research on black athlete activism should therefore consider widening the focus to include female athletes as well.

## 6. Reference list

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## 7. Appendix A

### Jennifer Lee Chan on Twitter



**Jennifer Lee Chan** ✓  
@jenniferleechan

+ Følg

This team formation for the National Anthem is not Jeff Fisher approved. **#HardKnocks**

🌐 Oversæt fra engelsk



RETWEETS

**23**

LIKES

**58**



19.02 - 26. aug. 2016