Exploring Online Opinion Leadership: An Analysis of the Influential Users on Twitter During the Online Conversation Around Anthem Protests by Prominent Athletes

Brandon Boatwright
University of Tennessee, bboatwr1@vols.utk.edu

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Brandon Boatwright entitled "Exploring Online Opinion Leadership: An Analysis of the Influential Users on Twitter During the Online Conversation Around Anthem Protests by Prominent Athletes." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Communication and Information.

Courtney Childers, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Elizabeth Avery Foster, Erin Whiteside, Karen Freberg

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)
Exploring Online Opinion Leadership: An Analysis of the Influential Users on Twitter During the Online Conversation Around Anthem Protests by Prominent Athletes

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Brandon Boatwright
May 2020
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Megan, the love of my life. Your constant support and encouragement are what instilled in me the confidence to do this in the first place and what kept me going throughout the entire process. No matter how hard I try, I will never have words that are suitable enough to thank you for all that you’ve done, sacrificed, and persevered through in order for me to achieve this dream. You are my motivation, my source of strength and inspiration. The chapters of this project also mark the beginning of an exciting new one in our lives together, and there’s no one in the world that I would rather do this life with. I love you more.
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I have always looked forward to writing this section of my dissertation the most, and now that I find myself in this position, I’m reminded of an exercise Fred Rogers would often use to mark special occasions in life. It goes like this:

*I’d like to give you all an invisible gift. A gift of a silent minute to think about those who have helped you become who you are today. Some of them may be here right now. Some may be far away. Some, like my astronomy professor, may even be in heaven. But wherever they are, if they’ve loved you, and encouraged you, and wanted what was best in life for you, they’re right inside yourself. And I feel that you deserve quiet time, on this special occasion, to devote some thought to them. So, let’s just take a minute, in honor of those that have cared about us all along the way. One silent minute...*

I would like to use this as my silent minute to reflect on those of you that have supported me along the way these past three years. And, truly, what a gift you all have been.

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I can’t possibly thank everyone in this “silent minute” because I’m fairly certain the Graduate School would frown upon the acknowledgements section being longer than the actual dissertation. But I hope that everyone I named, and those that I think of often, can find meaning in the ending to Mr. Rogers’ exercise:

Whomever you’ve been thinking about, imagine how happy they must be, that during your silent times, you remember how important they are to you. It’s not the honors and the prizes, and the fancy outsides of life which ultimately nourish our souls. It’s the knowing that we can be trusted. That we never have to fear the truth. That the bedrock of our lives, from which we make our choices, is very good stuff.
ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the role of online opinion leaders in the context of Twitter conversations around controversial social issues, specifically anthem protests by Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe. Drawing from extant and emerging scholarship in public relations, network theory, social psychology, and opinion leadership, this study analyzes the online conversation around anthem protests in two phases: (1) social network analysis to identify influential figures in the conversation and identify the topical communities in which they operate, and (2) in-depth interviews with opinion leaders to explore the various ways they use Twitter to voice their perspective on the issue and how their moral foundations guide their participation in the conversation. Results offer insight into the types of accounts that comprise opinion leaders in the context of controversial subjects, demonstrate how topical clusters form, and establish a contextualized approach for exploring online opinion leaders’ use of social media and how their intuitive ethics shape their views on controversial issues. Theoretical as well as practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: online opinion leadership, social networks, network paradigm, public relations
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Anthem Protests by Prominent Athletes

On August 26, 2016, Colin Kaepernick, then-quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, refused to stand during the national anthem of an NFL preseason game against the Green Bay Packers. After the game, Kaepernick outlined his rationale for the protest to NFL Media: “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way” (Wyche, 2016, para. 3). Despite backlash over what many perceived to be anti-American or anti-military sentiment (Peter, 2016), condemnation by current and former NFL players (Tennery, 2016), being labeled as a traitor by an NFL executive (Mandell, 2016), and death threats (Boren, 2016), Kaepernick continued to kneel during the national anthem throughout the 2016 season. Kaepernick’s actions violated the NFL’s Game Operations Manual which, at the time, specifically stated that “all players must be on the sideline for the National Anthem. During the National Anthem, players on the field and bench area should stand at attention, face the flag, hold helmets in their left hand, and refrain from talking…Failure to be on the field by the start of the National Anthem may result in discipline” (McCann, 2018, para. 12). Although Kaepernick did not retain a roster spot with an NFL team in the 2017 season, other players in the league continued what he started throughout the year.

On September 4, 2016, less than a month after Kaepernick’s initial protest, Megan Rapinoe, a soccer player for the Seattle Reign of the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) and co-captain of the U.S. Women’s National Team (USWNT), took a knee in solidarity with Kaepernick during an NWSL game. Rapinoe met similar resistance as a result of her actions. The
media labeled her as anti-American (Hays, 2016), and the owner of another NWSL franchise, the Washington Spirit, barred Rapinoe from protesting during the national anthem by ensuring it was played before she took the field (Mandell, 2016). In an article posted on the Players’ Tribune, Rapinoe addressed those who thought her actions were unpatriotic:

I can understand if you think that I’m disrespecting the flag by kneeling, but it is because of my utmost respect for the flag and the promise it represented that I have chosen to demonstrate in this way...because I believe it is my responsibility, just as it is yours, to ensure that freedom is afforded to anyone in this country. (Rapinoe, 2016, para. 5).

Rapinoe continued her anthem protests in spite of ongoing opposition. During the 2019 Women’s World Cup, as a co-captain of the USWNT, Rapinoe again refused to participate the national anthem with her teammates prior to the start of each game. Instead, she stared ahead, with her hands at her side, lips not moving (Weisholtz, 2019).

Smith, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer (2019) contend that both Kaepernick and Rapinoe “were labeled anti-American, anti-military, and anti-nationalist for kneeling during the national anthem before their respective games. However, their message had little to do with nationalism and nothing to do with the U.S. military” (p. 654). Rather, Kaepernick attributed his protest to the broader Black Lives Matter movement that emerged in response to a growing number of incidents involving police brutality and racial discrimination in the United States. Rapinoe’s protest served as a nod to Kaepernick, but also as a reflection of her own experience of coming out as a lesbian and living as a gay woman in the United States: “The more I’ve been able to learn about gay rights and equal pay and gender equity and racial inequality, the more it all intersects,” Rapinoe said in an interview with the The Guardian (Pentz, 2017).
That Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protests were widely debated can at least in part be attributed to the pervasiveness of nationalistic displays in sport. Whiteside (2018) suggested that displays of nationalism in the NFL in particular are so ubiquitous that they have become normalized to the extent that they are hardly noticed. Clarke and Clarke (1982) examined the formation of nationalistic discourses in the context of sport and media, and argued that they primarily serve two functions: (1) nationalism separates ‘us’ from the ‘other’ and (2) it unifies ‘us’ around the common values that bind us together. This assertion is significant because, as Klein (1989) contended, the use of sport as a vehicle for the homogenization of group values decreases the likelihood that any challenges to the established order might arise.

Consequently, any deviation away from the established norm (i.e., something that might be viewed as unpatriotic or anti-American), would constitute a threat to the status quo. But scholars have noted that sport often reflect societal inequalities such as racism, sexism, economic stratification, and other forms of oppression. Galily (2019), for one, suggested that sport serves as a venue where these inequalities are often (re)affirmed and/or ignored. It stands to reason, then, that Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protests that drew attention to these inequalities reflected a deviation from the normative, nationalistic fervor that surrounds professional athletics in the United States.

Such deviations also have the potential to affect an individual’s sense of identity, as sport serve as a platform for the construction and maintenance of one’s personal and social identity (c.f., Hundley & Billings, 2010). Drawing from the work of Tajfel and Turner (1979) on social identity theory, Rees, Haslam, Coffee, and Lavallee (2015) suggested that sports fans often differentiate themselves between in-groups and out-groups based around the adherence to group norms and values. Conflict between in-groups and out-groups can manifest in ways that pose
reputational threats to organizations (c.f., Rowley, 1997). For instance, Westhoff and Saint Louis (2019) applied social identity theory to explore the motivational factors behind some individuals’ decision to boycott the NFL in opposition anthem protests, while others intended to boycott the NFL out of support for the protests. These divisions create what Reinhard (2018) describes as fractured fandoms, or “the tensions within and among fans and fan collectives that cause gaps or fractures that may result in antagonistic and hostile behaviors” (p. 14). Competing ideologies between stakeholder groups compels organizations like the NFL to identify and address multiple sets of stakeholder expectations.

Social networking sites like Twitter allow users to create public spaces where these competing ideologies and, consequently, stakeholder expectations, are created, debated, and spread to shape narratives around particular social issues, especially within the context of sports (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016). This was especially true in the context of anthem protests by prominent athletes like Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe. According to Pew Research, prominent terms and hashtags on Twitter related to the protests (i.e., #takeaknee, knee, kneel, Kaepernick, etc.), were commonly used to promote the broader Black Lives Matter movement through online social activism (Anderson, Toor, Rainie, & Smith, 2018). Conversely, #boycottNFL and #boycottNFLsponsors became top trending hashtags on Twitter at the start of the 2016 NFL season (Laird, 2016) by those who were offended by Kaepernick’s anthem protest.

The discursive environment around the anthem protests began to take shape on Twitter through highly active, influential users on the platform that played a critical role in the formation of stakeholder ideologies and expectations. Influential users on Twitter facilitated the spread of information among their various networks to (re)affirm their values, attitudes, and beliefs about the anthem protests with their respective following. This reflects what Gruzd and Wellman
(2014) consider to be “networked influence.” They suggest that influence is networked in two ways: (1) by occurring in social networks and (2) by propagating through online communication networks. Operating under this assumption, it is likely that the online discussions around anthem protests by prominent athletes were shaped by influential users online. Online opinion leaders crafted narratives that were spread within and between networks which ultimately shaped perceptions around the protests, the NFL and its sponsors, and the social issues underlying it all.

The purpose of this study is to identify those opinion leaders and develop a deeper understanding of their motivations to participate in online discussions around controversial social/political issues and explore the uses and gratifications they derive from Twitter as a medium to share their opinions. Drawing from extant literature in public relations, network theory, and social psychology, this study seeks to shed new light on the concept of online opinion leaders and explores how they operate within polarized climates.

**Justification for the Dissertation**

Scholars in public relations have increasingly called for the field to lead in the theoretical development of network ecologies (Yang & Taylor, 2015). According to Yang and Taylor, public relations scholarship has been rightly criticized for being too organization-centric. In other words, the field focuses too much attention on the managerial function of public relations within organizations rather than on the function of publics (i.e., stakeholder groups) that interact with them. Zhou (2019) advocated for a new approach to bring publics back to the forefront of public relations research by suggesting that researchers focus on the entire network ecology beyond simply exploring organization-public relationships (OPRs). Instead, Zhou argued that researchers should explore OPRs in addition to public-public relationships and interorganizational
relationships. In this way, the relationships between publics, interorganizational relationships, and OPRs are all significant in the study of the network ecology.

This is especially true with regard to what Saffer (2019) calls multi-stakeholder issue networks, wherein issues relevant to both organizations and publics take precedence. This position makes the ontological assumption that publics and organizations are not stakeholders to one another, but rather both are stakeholders to issues that bind them together. Such is the case with the issue of anthem protests. Organizations like the NFL and its sponsors (e.g., Budweiser, Verizon, Pepsi, etc.) are stakeholders to the issue of athletes protesting during the national anthem. Similarly, fans and non-fans alike interact with one another in addition to the aforementioned organizations to create an entire network ecology around one particular issue.

The current study adopts the network paradigm within public relations by exploring the role of online opinion leaders in discussions around controversial issues.

Highly active, well-connected online users have the capacity to create and reinforce narratives around topics within their networks. Pew Research found that much of the content posted by Americans on Twitter reflects a small number of authors; “the 10 percent of users who are most active are responsible for 80 percent of all tweets created by U.S. users” (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019, para. 4). These findings lend support to the notion that active Twitter users become influential by virtue of their participation in online conversations around specific topics.

The idea that individual users can act as information brokers is not new in communication research. Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (1955) seminal work, *Personal Influence*, found that political propaganda presented by the media during an election cycle was often mediated by personal influence. As messages were disseminated by the mass media, those messages then served to “activate [individuals] with latent predispositions based on social category
membership; reinforce those whose decisions were already firmly anchored by the constraints of those category memberships; and even sway a few to move from one side to the other” (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995, p. 90). In other words, individual consumers reacted to messages and shared their interpretations, opinions, and attitudes about those messages within their networks. This function of personal influence formed the foundation of the two-step flow which posits that opinion leaders mediate the transmission of information.

Contemporary scholars have extended the two-step flow hypothesis and the role of opinion leadership to social media influencers (SMIs). Nisbet and Kotcher (2009), for example, contend that the significance of opinion leaders relies not on formal power or prestige, but instead on their ability to serve as the connective communication tissue that alert their peers to what matters among political events, social issues, and consumer choices. Tomaszeski (2006), like Katz and Lazarsfeld before him, suggested that opinion leaders are more information savvy and more aware of the latest developments, and consequently more willing to consume and share content within their networks. The expansion of Web 2.0 resulted in consumers communicating about and consuming information in a participatory way, rather than simply playing the role of passive recipients of messages (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). At the same time, users of social media platforms like Twitter are shaped by their own sets of morals and standards that motivate them to participate in conversations like those around anthem protests. Moreover, people develop their own uses for Twitter in order to share their ideas and consequently derive various gratifications for doing so.

In summary, this study explores the network ecology of Twitter conversations around anthem protests by Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe. By adopting the network paradigm in
public relations, the current study will provide useful insight in exploring the role online opinion leaders play within the full network ecology.

**Structure of the Dissertation**

The scope of this project must be carefully outlined in order to properly conceptualize relevant concepts and theories underpinning the research. The second chapter of this manuscript will serve as a comprehensive literature review that will draw from prior research in multiple disciplines to articulate the significance of the network approach in public relations research, the evolution of the concept of online opinion leadership, uses and gratifications within the context of social media, and moral foundations theory as it pertains to the individual’s evaluation of controversial social and political issues.

The third chapter will outline two methodological approaches applied to this study. Twitter data were harvested over three time periods to extract content relevant to the anthem protests from both Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe. Social network analysis was then used to identify opinion leaders embedded in these networks and the topical communities that emerged in each network. Once opinion leaders and topical communities were identified, in-depth interviews with opinion leaders were conducted to develop a deeper understanding of how they used Twitter in the context of the conversation, and better understand the how an opinion leader’s moral foundations might have influenced their desire to participate in the online discussion around anthem protests.

The fourth chapter outlines the results of the study. Results are presented using the same two-phase framework described in Chapter 3. Results from the social network analysis of harvested Twitter data revealed top influential accounts in each timeframe in addition to the largest topical communities within each network. Theoretical thematic analysis of the in-depth
interviews resulted in the identification of themes associated with how opinion leaders use Twitter to participate in online discussions around controversial issues, and how a user’s moral foundations shaped their participation in the discussion.

Finally, the fifth chapter offers a discussion of the findings and positions this study within the context of extant literature in public relations, opinion leadership, and social media. Specifically, this study contributes to the growing network paradigm in public relations scholarship and broadens the scope how social media influence can be studied within this context. Limitations and directions for future research are discussed.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study seeks to explore how social media opinion leaders shaped the online conversations around anthem protests by Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe. The purpose of the following literature review is threefold in that it seeks to (1) position the present study within the emerging network paradigm and, specifically, the concept of networked activism in public relations research, and (2) trace the conceptual development of social media influencers and online opinion leaders in order to (3) develop a contextualized approach to study influencers and online opinion leadership that both informs the identification of opinion leaders and provides a framework to analyze their gratifications sought from participating in online conversations around controversial social issues, as well as their motivation for participating in the first place. This detailed review of literature highlights the gaps in extant research in these areas and lends further support for the purpose and scope of this dissertation. This chapter concludes with the project’s proposed research questions.

The Network Paradigm, Publics, Stakeholders, and Activism in Public Relations Research

Van Dijk (2012) referred to the 21st century as “the age of networks” (p. 2). According to Castells (2004), globalization, connected communication infrastructures, and the prominence of global networks are pillars of our contemporary networked society, the implications of which are wide-reaching, and especially salient to public relations research. Organizations, publics/stakeholder groups, and individuals are embedded in social networks. Every day, for example, organizations must balance relationships ranging from dyadic relationships with stakeholders to entire populations of other organizations (i.e., a network ecology).
Over the last two decades, public relations researchers have sought to explore public relations primarily from a management perspective that focuses on how organizations could more efficiently manage relationships with publics (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, 1997; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Their contributions have steadily advanced the field, albeit from what some consider to be a narrow scope.

Through the managerial approach to public relations research, scholars frequently privileged the study of organizations over the study of publics and stakeholders in their own right. Valentini, Kruckeberg, and Starck (2012) suggested that public relations literature is heavily oriented to consider publics as “segments of society who have common interests and concerns about an organization and/or who may be affected in a like manner by the organization, and importantly, whose opinions, attitudes, and acts may impact the organization” (p. 874, emphasis added). In other words, public relations research under the managerial approach begins and ends with the organization. This suggests a very narrow, top-down approach to the study of public relations where, ultimately, any examination of publics or stakeholders still centers around the organization.

More recently, however, some public relations scholars have criticized the field for being too organization-centric (e.g., Heath, 2013; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Taylor & Kent, 2014), while others have worked to advance a network paradigm (Yang & Taylor, 2015; O’Connor & Shumate, 2018; Yang & Saffer, 2019) in an effort to develop a more macro view of organizations within a larger community system. By broadening the scope of public relations research to consider more than just the managerial implications of public relations, scholars might “shift the emphasis away from economic returns – which has never been a fundamental definition of public relations – to a relational and humanistic focus that sees people as
Inherently valuable and redirects our attention to the relationship-building aspect of public relations” (Kent & Taylor, 2015, p. 63).

In essence, the network paradigm picks up where the organization-centric approach stops — the dyadic relationship — and rather examines “systems of dyadic interactions, capturing the influence of multiple and interdependent relationships on organizations” (Rowley, 1997, p. 894). Zhou (2019), for example, argued that public relations scholars should recognize the importance of what he termed “public-public” relationships — the relationships within and between publics — in order to examine how different publics “can have influences on each other, and their interactions might affect interorganizational relationships, organization-public relationships, and the ecology as a whole” (p. 11).

Toth (2010) suggested new theories in public relations have emerged to provide a much-needed focus on the discursive meaning created by organizations and publics. Consequently, the emergence of the network paradigm in public relations invites researchers to explore the relational patterns among social actors such as organizations, publics/stakeholder groups, and individuals that may help scholars “to better contribute to the larger discussions about the constitutive nature of communication and organizing in society” (Yang & Taylor, 2015, p. 92).

Before further tracing the development of the network paradigm in public relations research, it is important to first explore and distinguish between two critical elements that comprise the network ecology which scholars embracing the network paradigm suggest have been largely overlooked on account of the field’s organization-centric focus: publics and stakeholders.
Publics and Stakeholders

Drawing a distinction between a public and a stakeholder has proven to be a difficult undertaking in public relations research as “often the terms are used synonymously” (Grunig & Repper, 1992, p. 125). Originally, the term “public” can be traced back to Dewey’s (1927) definition as a group of people who face, recognize, and try to solve a certain social problem in a state. Grunig’s (1997) work on the situational theory of publics formalized Dewey’s classical concept of publics by providing a means for identifying and measuring publics and their opinions. This laid the groundwork for scholars in the field to explore organization-public relationships (OPRs) (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

Alternatively, the term “stakeholder” emerged from management literature (c.f., Freeman, 1984) and was originally conceptualized as any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization’s objectives. Both terms seem to converge in public relations scholarship. Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, and Sriramesh (2007) reviewed the use of the term “publics” in public relations literature and found that the word was used interchangeably with other concepts like “audiences,” “segments,” “communities,” and — most of all — “stakeholders.”

In order to differentiate between the two terms for the purpose of this dissertation, I adopt Zhou’s (2019) distinction that a “stakeholder” refers to a single individual and a “public” refers a collection of individuals that represent a connected group. This distinction will provide the framework for how I will refer to individual opinion leaders (as stakeholders) and collections of individuals experiencing common problems (as publics). Drawing a distinction between individual opinion leaders and collectives of individuals is an important step in further explicating the network paradigm in public relations because networks can be expansive.
Network Theory and the Network Paradigm in Public Relations

The complex architecture of networks has engaged scholars from a wide range of disciplines including mathematics, engineering, and the sciences. Borgatti and Halgin (2011) offered one widely applied, interdisciplinary conceptualization of a network as “a set of actors or nodes along with a set of ties of a specified type that link them” (p. 1169). Yang and Saffer (2019) build on that definition by asserting:

The crux of networks are nodes that are both social actors like individuals, groups, organizations, etc. as well as nonsocial actors like websites, texts, artifacts, etc. Nodes can be connected socially through the communication, exchange, interaction and the like, or by their association, co-occurrence, or affiliation with other nodes. (p. 2)

The primary function of network theory is to examine the relational systems in which actors dwell and explore how the nature of those relationships affect behavior (Rowley, 1997). MacKay (2016) posits that network theory in the social sciences is principally concerned with the social implications of network position. In other words, where an actor (or node) appears within the network can help explain the function that actor plays within the overall network.

Rowley (1997) was among the first to apply network theory to organizations and stakeholder influences. He suggested that in order to understand how organizations respond to and engage with various stakeholders and publics, scholars must consider the multiple and independent interactions that exist simultaneously within networks. To study these networks, the social network perspective examines patterns of relations, monitors the flow of resources and information, and reveals how social structural factors constrain or facilitate the activities of networked actors (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).
Granovetter’s (1973; 1985) work on the strength of weak ties lends theoretical support for the social network perspective. Granovetter argued that social relationships can be classified as strong ties or weak ties. The stronger the tie between two actors, the more likely the two share similar social worlds. Alternatively, weak ties that bridge vastly different people are most likely to be potential sources of novel ideas and information. Granovetter’s argument for the strength of weak ties is found in Burt’s (1992) structural hole theory which explains that structural holes often exist among disparate groups within a network and can provide opportunities because they deliver unique advantages to actors who can bridge these gaps. The purpose of this study is to identify the actors that bridge these structural holes and further explore their methods and motivations for participating in online conversations around anthem protests by prominent athletes.

In public relations and other strategic communication subfields, the network paradigm offers a lens through which to explore how connections among organizations, stakeholders, publics, messages, and issues extend beyond their immediate environments. The network paradigm in public relations is ontologically grounded in Botan and Taylor’s (2004) cocreational approach which describes the nature of public relations as the negotiation of relationships and meaning among communicators. By extension, Heath (2013) maintains that the cocreational approach rests on the assertion that communicators of various types use communication to engage in discourses that influence relationships and the shared meaning among communicators. Yang and Saffer (2019) summarize the contribution of the cocreational approach to the emerging network paradigm concisely:

This shifts the ontological boundaries of public relations away from being a corporation’s communication function to a communication function used by various types of
interconnected communicators like organizations, activist groups, and publics.

Subsequently, by casting public relations practice in this broader view, the space for public relations is no longer bound to *an* organization, *the* media, and *a* public…Public relations efforts have implications beyond organizations’ goals and objectives; public relations activities affect individual publics, groups and organizations, and even communities and societies, as well as the issues that bring these entities together. (p. 4-5, emphasis in original)

This study contributes to the development of the network paradigm in public relations research by answering Yang and Saffer’s (2019) call for future research to “examine how digital networks of activists form online and how such networks interact with other social actors… [and] the connection between polarizing ideas and discourses” (p. 6). Activism public relations research represents a growing area in the field and warrants further exploration here to lend additional theoretical support for this project.

**Networked Activism in Public Relations**

Activism refers to the effort to promote, hinder, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental change (Smith & Ferguson, 2010). Coombs and Holladay (2012) identified three goals activists often strive to achieve through their actions: (1) to either elicit or resist change on the part of the target organization, (2) to seek public policy or regulatory changes that would affect changes in public behavior, or (3) to change social norms. Public relations scholars have recently begun to explore the function of activists, social movement organizations, and civil societies in shaping discourses around prominent issues that affect organizations, publics, and stakeholders (Uysal & Yang, 2013; Ciszek, 2015; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Wolf, 2018). But the concept of activism is not new to the study of public relations.
From the beginning, the concept of a “public” in public relations research has been rooted in activism. Grunig’s (1997) situational theory of publics describes how disconnected systems of individuals experiencing common problems can evolve into organized and powerful activist groups. Grunig argued that “Organizations need public relations because their behaviors create problems that create publics, which may evolve into activist groups that create issues and threaten the autonomy of organizations” (p. 9). Using Curtin and Gaither’s (2004) cultural-economic model (CEM), which calls for a shift away from the notion of public relations practice as a tool of commerce toward a framework that broadens the scope of public relations to include social, cultural, and political contexts, Ciszek (2015) demonstrated how the CEM provides an alternative way to conceptualize activism and public relations. The model comprises five key “moments” — production, consumption, identity, representation, and regulation — that converge to create a shared cultural space in which meaning is created, shaped, modified, and recreated (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 38). Table 1 (adapted from Ciszek, 2015) outlines the descriptions for each of these moments. Ciszek argued that the CEM provides a new framework “to examine the dynamic interplay of activism as a form of public relations itself” (p. 453).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moment</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Production</td>
<td>Planning, design, process, resources, technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption</td>
<td>Interpretations of meaning; modifications to constructed meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Social understandings held by individuals, groups, networks, and cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representation</td>
<td>Symbolic and discursive communication about objects, experiences,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and ways of knowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation</td>
<td>Culturally and socially sanctioned practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Consequently, the network paradigm seems well-equipped to explore “how interactions taking place in social networks change or reinforce certain ideologies, claims, or values, and how activists or powerful social actors respond to such changes” (Yang & Saffer, 2019, p. 6). This is especially true with regard to what Saffer (2019) defined as “multi-stakeholder issue networks” wherein issues relevant to both organizations and publics (including activist publics) take precedence. In other words, publics and organizations are not beholden to one another as in the organization-centric approach, but rather both are beholden to issues that bind them together.

Scholars (e.g., Saffer, 2018; Uysal & Yang, 2013; Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright, 2019; You & Hon, 2019) have begun to evaluate the role digital platforms play in opening up a new frontier for activists to promote social change. Veil, Reno, Freihaut, and Oldham (2015) explored how online activists worked to enact policy change at Kraft foods after exposing that the company used certain dyes in their macaroni and cheese products that have been linked to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Notably, their findings suggest that traditional activist strategies have been adapted for online use and that online activists often work together to promote common interests. These results point to the growing argument in public relations literature that “activists, civil society organizations, and social movement organizations are often skillful practitioners of public relations strategies and tactics” (Yang & Saffer, 2019, p. 6).

The implication underlying this argument is that individual activists are just as much a part of the network ecology in public relations scholarship as organizations, media, and other publics. Moreover, it points to the potential for individual users who are well-positioned in the network to shape and form narratives around salient topics and issues. You and Hon (2019), for example, found that people’s perceptions about the importance of certain issues (e.g., veterans’ welfare in their study) has powerful effects motivating their intentions to participate in online
collective actions. In the context of the current study, the issue of anthem protests by prominent athletes binds together prominent organizations like the National Football League (NFL), United States Women’s Soccer Team (USWST), their sponsors, media outlets, and – of particular significance to this study – online activist opinion leaders.

Positioning this study within the network paradigm and the concept of networked activism in public relations, it stands to reason that activist opinion leaders and influencers in the online discussion constitute part of the multi-stakeholder issue network around anthem protests by prominent athletes. This review now turns its attention toward the conceptual development of social media influencers and online opinion leaders.

**Conceptualizing Online Opinion Leadership and Social Media Influencers**

This section of the literature review chapter explores the evolution of online opinion leaders and social media influencers. Both terms have been used in extant literature to describe similar phenomena that, I will argue, reflect a variety of contextual factors that make it difficult to narrow in on a singular definition. Nevertheless, I propose a defining difference between social media influencers and online opinion leaders that can be used to explore the two concepts independently.

First, in order to trace the conceptual development of opinion leadership and influence, I explore the two-step flow hypothesis first attributed to Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) and how it has been used to frame the function of online opinion leaders and social media influencers in the digital landscape. Second, I identify the similarities and differences between online opinion leaders and social media influencers among the prior research on the concepts, outlining the various definitions, theories, and methods used to study them. Third, I offer a contextualized definition of online opinion leaders for the purpose of this dissertation by borrowing from
theories in mass communication and social psychology. Specifically, I seek to expand our understanding of online opinion leadership by positioning the concept within the context of Uses and Gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) and Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, 2012; Graham et al., 2013).

**The Two-Step Flow of Communication Hypothesis**

Prior to the 1940s, early communication scholars exploring the function of the media in society considered the public as passive recipients of media messages. This led to the emergence of the “magic bullet effect” and the “hypodermic needle model” which Miller (2005) described as “views that see the mass media as capable of shaping public opinion and swaying behavior in whatever direction is preferred by the communicators. The media are seen to work as a magic bullet or hypodermic needle, shooting the desires of the source directly into the thoughts, attitudes, and subsequent behaviors of the receivers” (p. 249). But research on the indirect effects of the media by several notable communication scholars during the 1940s emerged to challenge the conventional wisdom of the time.

Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944), surveyed residents of Erie County, Ohio during the 1940 presidential election cycle and found that people received a great deal of their information and influence in political decision-making from other people, not the mass media. Thus, the heavy involvement of people in political discussions led the researchers to explore the notion that ideas often flow *from* radio and print to the opinion leaders and *from them* to the less active sections of the population. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet’s initial findings in *The People’s Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* laid the foundation for Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (1955) two-step flow of communication hypothesis. Katz and Lazarsfeld argued that their findings “make quite explicit that the traditional image of the
mass persuasion process must make room for ‘people’ as intervening factors between the stimuli of the media and resultant opinions, decisions, and actions” (p. 32).

Katz’ (1957) update on the hypothesis outlined three distinct sets of findings that led to the development of the two-step hypothesis of communication from prior research on the phenomenon: (1) the impact of personal influence manifests as political pressure by everyday groups such as family and friends, (2) the flow of personal influence (i.e., the transmission of influence) can be found on every level of society, and (3) opinion leaders are far more exposed to mass communication (e.g., radio, television, and newspapers) than the rest of the population. These findings upended the hypodermic needle and magic bullet models of mass communication and media effects in the early 20th century. Klapper (1958) argued that the media now appeared to have less power than first assumed, and that no case could be made for simple cause-effect relationships between mediated messages and a person’s beliefs, attitudes, or behavior. Rather, opinion leaders mediate the flow of information.

Consequently, it was imperative for these early theorists to begin to identify who opinion leaders were. Katz (1957) further elaborated on three defining characteristics of opinion leaders:

1. The personification of certain values (who one is);
2. Competence (what one knows); and
3. Strategic social location (who one knows)

According to Katz, these qualities are also dependent on the subject matter of the topic at hand. Opinion leaders may be more influential among particular spheres in which they are more interested in a specific topic. They then exercise their power to influence others through the personification of values, demonstrated competence in the topic area, and their strategic social location among their interpersonal relationships. Katz argued that the opinion leader’s
interpersonal relations influence decision-making in two ways: “In addition to service as networks of communication, interpersonal relations are also sources of pressure to conform to the group’s way of thinking and acting, as well as sources of social support” (p. 77, emphasis added). Ultimately, Katz and others (e.g., Myers & Robertson, 1972; Roch, 2005) considered opinion leadership as not necessarily a personality trait that someone either does or does not have, but rather argued that opinion leaders are influential at certain times with respect to certain criteria.

The two-step flow of communication hypothesis has yielded hundreds of studies on opinion leadership since the 1950s. Contemporary scholars have extended and further clarified the two-step model and the role of opinions leaders. Nisbet and Kotcher (2009), for example, indicated that the significance of opinion leaders relies not on formal power or prestige, but instead on their ability to serve as the connective communication tissue that alerts their peers to what matters among political events, social issues, and consumer choices. Tomaszeski (2006) suggested that opinion leaders are more information savvy and more aware of the latest developments, and thus more willing to consume and share content within their networks.

In a recent special section in the International Journal of Communication, Katz (2015) reflected on the evolution of this research tradition:

…our concepts have moved – rightly or wrongly – from the idea of a lonely and indecisive crowd ready to be devoured by powerful controllers of the media (Fromm, 1941), to decision-making individuals juggling competing influences from media and social circles, to a system of interrelated sources of influence, enfranchisement that requires more cosmopolitan leadership, to an even newer world that affords new opportunities for both interpersonal and mass communication, asking for nonstop
participation both in local sharing and in global networks. In these not-so-many years, with the move from newspaper, to radio, to television, to social media, our world has become, paradoxically, both bigger and smaller – more global and more local – making it even more complex and creating the need for ever more access to diverse types of information, influence, and support and, probably, to ever more specialized interpreters and influentials. (p. 1027)

Indeed, recent technological innovations like Web 2.0 and the emergence of social media platforms have substantiated the prominent role that opinion leaders play in the digital environment. The growth of social media platforms has both expanded and complicated the function of opinion leadership. But despite technological advances that have resulted in a more highly connected world, the original two-step flow of communication hypothesis remains highly relevant in today’s discursive landscape that is increasingly shaped by digital platforms and their users. This is consistent with what Jenkins and Carpentier (2013) define as ‘participatory culture’ in which consumers are no longer passively actors in consumer culture, but also act as contributors or producers (i.e., prosumers).

Advancements in digital technology and social media platforms have underscored the importance of opinion leaders. By providing a more efficient means to connect with others and present oneself as an expert in a particular area, social media platforms have led scholars to explore the concept of networked influence (Gruzd & Wellman, 2014; Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015). In a special issue on the subject in American Behavioral Scientist, Gruzd and Wellman (2014) argued that social influence has given way to networked influence. They suggested that “influence is no longer one person being influenced by mass communication or one person influencing another one-to-one. Rather [networked influence] shows the impact of network size,
strong ties, mutual awareness… socially similar (homophilous) network members, clusters of ties, bridges across clusters, and how people navigate among clusters in their complex networks” (p. 1256). Xu, Sang, Blasiola, and Park (2014) further explained that digital technologies have changed the dynamics of influence and opinion leadership as “ordinary Internet users can produce and broadcast to mass audiences. In some instances, their content becomes a desirable alternative to mass media content and even influences mass media agendas” (p. 1280).

The concept of the networked opinion leader, or “influencer,” has attracted both scholars and practitioners in strategic communication fields (Borchers, 2019), but the focus has mainly centered around the economic utility to brands and organizations by leveraging the popularity of social media influencers. Lorenz (2019) explained that the word influencer is inherently tied to business and monetizing, especially through branded content. As brands continue to abandon traditional advertising techniques, efforts are increasingly focused on attaining influencers to endorse products among their followers and beyond. De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) emphasized the ‘commercial potential’ of influencer partnerships to leverage the power of word-of-mouth and market products indirectly allowing marketers a means to bypass traditional advertising. Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017) found that the concept of self-branding with hopes of becoming a social media influencer is akin to the ‘commodification of the self’ in order to achieve commercial viability in the attention economy.

This has prompted further studies around consumer perceptions of influencer credibility and purchase intention (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019), effects of the number of followers an influencer has on brand attitude (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), how brands communicate to and build relationships with consumers through digital influencers (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019), and how influencers generate referrals in social networks (Roelens,
Baecke & Benoit, 2016), among others. The underlying theme that appears to bind current research on social media influencers is their economic potential to drive profit through word-of-mouth marketing. Scholarly efforts to this point appear oriented toward maximizing an influencer’s economic utility to its brand/organizational partner and vice versa.

The emphasis on the business and monetization of influence, however, creates an interesting point of departure which, I argue, differentiates social media influencers from online opinion leaders. I contend that the current focus on social media influencers from what I consider to be a ‘commodity paradigm’ constitutes a rather monolithic view of online influence that ultimately cheapens its significance to strategic communication subfields, especially public relations. Consequently, I propose using the term “social media influencers” in a commodification context where individual users leverage their notoriety to partner with commercial entities to connect with specific groups of target audiences. Alternatively, I contend that the term online opinion leadership can be applied to influential users in a digital environment whose focus is non-commercial, but rather ideological. In the context of the current study, I will argue that online opinion leaders played a critical role as activists shaping the discursive environment around the anthem protests by Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe.

In the next section of this chapter, I take up the challenging task of exploring the various definitions applied to social media influencers and online opinion leaders in extant literature on the subject, outline the various theories used to develop each concept, and explore the assorted methods used to identify them.

A Brief Meta-Analysis of Social Media Influencers and Online Opinion Leadership

There is some debate in the emerging literature on social media influencers and online opinion leadership regarding the defining characteristics of each term. This is, in large part, a
reflection of the broad range of intellectual traditions and fields of study which seek to explore
the concepts. This section of the literature review offers a brief meta-analysis of social media
influencers and online opinion leadership that explores (1) the similarities and differences in how
each term has been defined in the academic literature, (2) the theoretical frameworks that have
been applied to develop these various definitions, and (3) the methods that are commonly used to
identify social media influencers and online opinion leaders.

Definitions of Social Media Influencers and Online Opinion Leadership

To begin, it is important to outline the various definitions scholars have developed to
explain social media influencers and online opinion leadership; I will first trace the development
of the latter before moving to the former.

The concept of opinion leadership originates with the two-step flow hypothesis described
at length above. Based on Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (1955) initial findings, opinion leaders were
characterized as people with a large circle of contacts and social skills who frequently consumed
mass media and were interested in a specific domain. Myers and Robertson (1972) broadened the
scope of the original definition to identify specific dimensions of opinion leadership. They found
that qualities such as knowledge about a topic, discussion about it, and the amount of interest in
it strongly related to opinion leadership in those who self-identified as opinion leaders. Results
from their study also showed that opinion leaders were moderately more likely to be innovative
than non-opinion leaders.

In the early research on opinion leadership, the process of influencing peers and directing
their attention to certain topics and views typically occurred in face-to-face environments. With
the emergence of the internet and social network platforms, scholars began to question the
salience of personal influence and opinion leadership as users could customize their information
consumption habits, effectively returning to the “one-step flow” (Bennett & Manheim, 2006). Others (e.g., Winter & Newbaum, 2016) have argued that social media effectively reproduces interpersonal relationships on the Web, which “has made it more likely that personal influence still plays an important role in the diffusion of news and political opinions” (p. 2). Xu et al. (2014) explored the role of opinion leaders in a Twitter network around the 2012 Wisconsin gubernatorial election recall and found that the traditional opinion leadership framework still held significance in online communication. As a result of findings like these, defining ‘online opinion leadership’ as distinct from traditional opinion leadership has proven challenging.

Attempts to define opinion leadership in an online environment often entirely leave out any mention of the digital platforms on which it occurs. Lyons and Henderson (2005), for example, define opinion leadership in a computer-mediated environment quite simply as informal influence over how other consumers seek, purchase, and use products. Others (e.g., Valente & Pumpuang, 2007; Huffaker, 2010; Segev, Villar, & Fiske, 2012) have developed similar definitions where the ‘online’ element of opinion leadership is often assumed. Plowman, Wakefield, and Winchel (2015) offer one of the few definitions included here that contains any reference to the digital environment, suggesting that online opinion leaders “include online influencers and thought leaders who are often also early adopters or activists” (p. 276). Table 2 offers a summary of the various definitions of opinion leadership in an online setting.

The other term commonly used to describe this phenomenon in academic literature is the social media influencer. The concept of the social media influencers has gained wide notoriety given its increasingly prominent role in popular culture. Colloquially, social media influencers are often conflated with the term influencer marketing.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Online) Opinion Leaders:</td>
<td>• Informally influence how other consumers seek, purchase, and use products (Lyons &amp; Henderson, 2005).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Are people who influence the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of others (Valente &amp; Pumpuang, 2007).</td>
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<td>• Trigger feedback, spark conversations within the community, or even shape the way that other members of a group talk about a topic (Huffaker, 2010).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Are brokers that receive information from the media or marketers and subsequently diffuse this information to other individuals or consumers (Segev, Villar, &amp; Fiske, 2012)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Those consumers who generate a higher proportion of WOM in a given category (Shi &amp; Wojnicki, 2014)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Reflect the ability to influence information flow (i.e., contributing information and leading others to disseminate information) (Xu, Sang, Blasiola, &amp; Park, 2014)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Include online influencers and thought leaders who often are also early adopters or activists (Plowman, Wakefield, &amp; Winchel, 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Brokers who can diffuse information between groups therefore having much potential in contributing to create social capital (Rim, Lee, Yoo, in press)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Influencers (SMIs):</td>
<td>• Are individuals who hold influence over potential buyers of a brand or product to aid in the marketing activities of the brand. (Brown &amp; Hayes, 2008)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Are new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media. (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, &amp; Freberg, 2011)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Are a type of microcelebrity who document their lives in exchange for compensation. (Abidin, 2014).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Are opinion leaders in digital social media who communicate to an unknown mass audience (Gräve, 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Are online celebrities who exhibit their personal lives to many followers via social media. (Chae, 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is a person who, through personal branding, builds and maintains relationships with multiple followers on social media, and has the ability to inform, entertain, and potentially influence followers’ thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. (Dhanesh &amp; Duthler, 2019)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hootsuite (2019) defines influencer marketing as a form of collaboration between a business and an influential person to promote something (e.g., a product, service, or campaign). Hubspot (2019) suggests that social media influencers are top content creators, specialized in their respective niches, that have the potential to help businesses improve brand awareness, increase traffic, and drive a brand’s message to its target audience. From an industrial perspective, the practice of influencer marketing has proven beneficial to organizations and consumers alike. According to MediaKix (2019), 89 percent of marketers surveyed said their return on investment from influencer marketing is comparable or better than other marketing channels. Kirkpatrick (2016) found that 82 percent of consumers surveyed said they were highly likely to follow a micro-influencer recommendation on a product or service. Consequently, social media influencers also represent a burgeoning area of scholarly attention and academic inquiry. Social media influencers have been explored from various disciplines but receive the most attention in advertising and marketing where the primarily focus on them has stemmed from their function as brand intermediaries.

Attempts at defining social media influencers have yielded mixed results, often reflective of the academic disciplines in which they were developed. For instance, in marketing and advertising contexts, the emphasis on the commodification of influencers is readily apparent. Brown and Hayes (2008) identified social media influencers as individuals who hold influence over potential buyers of a brand or product to aid in the marketing activities of a brand. Similarly, Abidin (2014) defined social media influencers as a type of microcelebrity who document their lives in exchange for compensation. The focus on the monetization of social media influencers in these fields is evident through such definitions.
Although relatively few studies on social media influencers have been conducted within the public relations literature, some of the more widely cited definitions for the term have emerged from scholars in the field. Most notably, Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and Freberg’s (2011) definition of social media influencers as “a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (p. 90) has been cited more than 400 times. Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) expanded the definition of a social media influencer to be “a person who, through personal branding, builds and maintains relationships with multiple followers on social media, and has the ability to inform, entertain, and potential influence followers’ thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors” (p. 3).

Other definitions of social media influencers are more generic, but interestingly make reference to opinion leadership (e.g., Gräve, 2017). A summary of the various definitions applied to social media influencers can also be found in Table 2. Notably, many of the definitions for one term often include references to the other (i.e., social media influencers are often labeled as opinion leaders, and opinion leaders are frequently identified by their influence). It is also important to note that this is not an exhaustive list of definitions for either term, but rather — to my knowledge — these definitions represent some of the most common applications of the terms in extant literature. Each definition of social media influencer or online opinion leader has been informed by several theoretical strands which are identified in the following section.

**Theoretical Applications**

Our conceptual understanding of online opinion leaders and social media influencers is grounded in several distinct, yet complementary, theoretical traditions. A thorough review of extant literature revealed four primary theories offering lenses through which to explore online opinion leaders and social media influencers: (1) the Two-Step Flow of Communication
Hypothesis, (2) Electronic Word-of-Mouth, (3) Network Theory, and (4) Parasocial Interaction. Applications of each will be described sequentially. Table 3 provides a sample of articles that have been published using these theories as their guiding framework.

First, the two-step flow of communication hypothesis represents the most commonly used theoretical framework through which to study social media influencers and online opinion leaders. Since a more comprehensive review of the theory was offered earlier in this chapter, a simple summary is that the two-step flow hypothesis describes the phenomenon of ideas that often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders, and from them to less active sections of the population (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). In the more than 70 years since the first edition of The People's Choice (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944), the two-step flow hypothesis has informed hundreds of studies exploring online opinion leadership and social media influencers.

Zhao, Zhan, and Liu (2018), for example, used the two-step flow hypothesis to propose a new framework that theorizes different dimensions of social media influence based on publics’ communicative behaviors during crisis events. Lamirán-Palomares, Baviera, and Baviera-Puig (2019) identified influential Twitter users during sporting events by examining three dimensions of Twitter users: popularity, activity, and authority. Each of these dimensions relates to Katz’ (1955) defining characteristics of opinion leaders: (1) the personification of values is reflected through a user’s activity on the platform, (2) competence relates to a user’s authority credibility to participate in conversation on a particular topic, and (3) strategic social location refers to a user’s popularity within the network.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory/Concept</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Examples of Application to SMIs and Opinion Leaders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two-Step Flow Hypothesis</td>
<td>Used to describe the phenomenon of ideas that often flow <em>from</em> radio and print to the opinion leaders and <em>from them</em> to the less active sections of the population (see Katz &amp; Lazarsfeld, 1955).</td>
<td>Segev, Villar, and Fiske (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Park (2013)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Choi (2015)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Xu, Sang, Blasiola, and Park (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Schäfer and Taddicken (2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Riddell, Brown, Kovic, and Jauregui (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Winter and Newubaum (2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Zhao, Zhan, and Liu (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lamirán-Palomares, Baviera, and Baviera-Puig (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)</td>
<td>Refers to any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, that is made available to people via the Internet (see Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, &amp; Gremler, 2004).</td>
<td>Steffes and Burges (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yang, Mai, and Ben-Ur (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kim, Sung, and Kang (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>De Veirman, Caubergeh, and Hudders (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Schwemmer &amp; Ziewiecki (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dhanesh and Duthler (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lou and Yuan (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network Theory</td>
<td>Social network theories focus on relational ties among social entities and on the patterns and implications of these relationships (see Wasserman &amp; Faust, 1994).</td>
<td>Himelboim, Golan, Moon, and Suto (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gruzd and Wellman (2014)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dubois and Gaffney (2014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recuero, Zago, and Soares (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Daniel, Crawford Jackson, and Westerman (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Shan, Chen, and Lin (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Himelboim and Golan (2019)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sokolova and Kefi (2019)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Second, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) constitutes a theoretical framework that emerged in the marketing and advertising literature which refers to any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, that is made available to the public via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Although similar to the traditional form of word-of-mouth marketing, Lee and Youn (2009) argued that eWOM has several unique characteristics including that it often occurs between people who have little or no prior relationship with one another and can be anonymous. That anonymity allows consumers to more comfortably share their honest opinions without having to reveal their identity. Importantly, as a result, an increasing volume of eWOM leads to a greater likelihood that consumers will find other consumers with product expertise on eWOM platforms. Kim, Sung, and Kang (2014) investigated how consumers’ relationships with brands directly influence their engagement with brand messages on Twitter. Their results found that those who retweeted brand messages outscored those that did not on variables like brand identification, brand trust, community commitment, and community membership intention.

Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018) underscored the role of eWOM on social media sites as “potential platforms for spreading advertising messages through other consumers rather than through traditional marketing campaigns…As people trust other consumers more than commercial messages by companies.” (p. 3). eWOM research is most popular in marketing and advertising literature, where the emphasis on the monetization of influence is prominent.

Third, network theory offers a unique lens through which to explore the role influencers play in spreading information. Social network theories focus on relational ties among social entities and on the patterns and implications of these relationships (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). “On social networking sites, users form networks by articulating a list of others users with whom
they share a connection” (Himelboim, Golan, Moon, & Suto, 2014, p. 363). As previously discussed, applying network theory in public relations research appears to be a natural form of understanding and evaluating relationships and relationship-building (Yang & Taylor, 2015) which is central to the study of public relations. Social media influencers and opinion leaders play a prominent role in the development of relationships on digital platforms. Saffer, Taylor, and Yang (2013) found that, “in the context of computer-mediated social movements, the diverse weak ties may bring in the benefit of divers social resources and information flow that contribute to the generation of social capital” (p. 26). Thus, social media influencers may closely reflect “bridges” that span what Burt (1992, 2001) called “structural holes.” Consequently, the social network perspective is key to mapping and identifying social media influencers in public relations research (Himelboim et al., 2014).

Finally, several scholars have explored social media influencers and online opinion leaders through the parasocial interaction framework. Parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956) reflects a kind of psychological relationship experienced by an audience in their mediated encounters. Himelboim and Golan (2019) suggested that, in the context of social media, “parasocial relationships provide influencers with unique social capital that leads to audience trust” (p. 2). Daniel, Crawford Jackson, and Westerman (2018) explored commenters’ parasocial interaction with YouTube influencers in the vaping community and found evidence of relational satisfaction between members of this group. They suggest that social media influencers can form parasocial relationships, and “if those relationships stay positive, the bonds become stronger, a trust will grow, and audience members will want to buy more products based on parasocial relationships and word-of-mouth advertising” (p. 107).
Again, by no means is this an exhaustive list of the theoretical foundations for research on social media influencers and online opinion leadership. Nevertheless, they do provide a pivotal starting point for understanding the various ways in which these concepts have been applied across disciplines, but especially in areas like marketing, advertising, and public relations. Consideration of the theoretical foundations also warrants an overview of the various methods scholars have used to identify social media influencers and online opinion leaders. These are discussed in the following section.

**Methods Used to Identify Social Media Influencers and Online Opinion Leaders**

Beyond defining and conceptualizing social media influencers and online opinion leaders, one of the more pressing challenges to studying them is adopting appropriate methods to identify them. This section briefly summarizes the development of methods used to detect opinion leaders and social media influencers.

As research on opinion leadership began to materialize in the 1950s, scholars relied heavily on self-reports and sociometric techniques to identify influential people. Individuals, for example, self-reported through surveys that they were influential by virtue of their own perception of how frequently their friends, family, and associates came to them for advice. Alternatively, sociometric techniques were used to obtain testimony from individuals that were influenced by influential people (see Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Rogers & Cartano, 1962, Corey, 1971). Further efforts to identify influential people included the opinion leadership scale (see King & Summers, 1970; Noelle-Newman, 1985; Childers, 1986; Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1994; Goldsmith & de Witt, 2003) that gauges the direction of influence on a specific product, and the personality strength (PS) scale (Weimann, 1991) which evaluates self-perceived levels of
personal influence. Dubois and Gaffney (2014) considered the survey approach to identify influential people to be the most labor-intensive, yet most common method.

The advent the Internet and social media platforms has resulted in the use of more sophisticated computational methods to identify online influencers in complex environments using big data analytics. Social network analysis (SNA) “is a specific application of graph theory in which individuals and other social actors, such as groups, organizations and the like are represented by the points and their social relations are represented by lines” (Carrington & Scott, 2014). SNA uses two kinds of tools from mathematics to represent information about patterns of ties among social actors: matrices and graphs. Relationships (matrices) are plotted in the form of a sociogram (graph) using individual nodes to represent social actors and lines (also referred to as edges) to represent relationships between them.

Himelboim and Golan (2019) suggested that “applying a social networks approach to social media activity allows researchers to capture content virality and identify key social media influencers that affect the conversation about and brand and reach key groups of consumers” (p. 4). SNA has been used to analyze and represent social network structures in addition to understanding information dissemination across social networks but is only just beginning to be adopted as a method to identify social media influencers and online opinion leaders (del Fresno García, Daly, & Sánchez-Cabezudo, 2016).

Drawing from the concept of network embeddedness (Granovetter, 1982), network analysts often describe an actor’s position within the network as an indicator of potential constraints and opportunities imposed upon the actor. Hanneman and Riddle (2014) succinctly explained how the actor’s structural position, commonly referred to as “centrality,” carries unique implications for the role of the actor within the network:
Actors that face fewer constraints, and have more opportunities than others, are in favorable structural positions. Having a favored position means that an actor may extract better bargains in exchanges, have greater influence, and may be a focus for deference and attention from those in less favored positions. The most widely used approach to understanding the structural sources of individuals’ advantage and disadvantage relative to their neighbors is that of “centrality.” The core idea is very simple: actors who are more “central” to social structures are more likely to be influential or powerful. (p. ##, emphasis added)

In terms of social media influence and online opinion leadership, when a given actor within a network is positioned in such a way that they could be heard or observed by others also in that network, that actor is likely to be influential (e.g., Subbian & Melvill, 2011). Because actors can occupy unique positions within a network, different measures of centrality describe the different forms of constraints and opportunities associated with them. The various measures of centrality identify very different kinds of influencers (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014). Peng et al. (2018) offered a helpful summary of the four primary measures that have been proposed in extant literature to identify social media influencers and online opinion leaders, including: (1) degree centrality, (2) closeness centrality, (3) betweenness centrality, and (4) Eigenvector centrality. A summary of each measure and their implications for social influence research can be found in Table 4.

Scholars studying social media influencers and online opinion leadership continue to develop methods to identify these types of users in various ways. Part of the challenge to creating a uniform method for identification is the constantly changing digital landscape, and the fact that influence manifests in different ways on different platforms. Scholars must, for instance, determine what metrics (e.g., interactions, retweets, followers, etc.) will factor into their analysis.
Table 4
Variations of Centrality Measures in Social Network Analysis (adapted from Peng et al., 2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centrality Measure</th>
<th>Definition &amp; Origin</th>
<th>Characteristics Relative to SMIs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Degree Centrality  | Defined by counting the number of edges that a node possesses. For directed networks, we usually use two metrics for degree centrality: in-degree, which is a count of the number of edges directed to the node, and out-degree which is the number of edges that the node directs to others (see Freeman, 1979; Borgatti, 2005). | *In-degree*: The number of times an account is mentioned; in this sense, it can be considered a measure of popularity.  
*Out-degree*: A measure of attention that an account directs toward others; the number of times an account mentions other accounts. |
| Closeness Centrality| Defined as the average distance from one node to the other nodes in the network. (see Borgatti, 2005; Freeman, 2005). | Can be treated as a metric of efficiency of each node in terms of spreading information in the network. |
| Betweenness Centrality | Measures the times a node acts as a bridge along the shortest path of two other nodes. (see Borgatti, 2005; Frantz, Cataldo & Carley, 2009). | Under the assumption that item transfer (i.e., information) follows the shortest path, a node with high betweenness centrality represents its importance in facilitating information dissemination in a network. |
| Eigenvector Centrality | Measures a node’s importance while giving consideration to the importance of its neighbors within the network. (see Rabade et al., 2014; Frantz et al., 2009). | Relative scores are assigned to all nodes in a network based on an assumption that connections to high-scoring nodes contribute more to the score of the node than connections to low-scoring nodes. |
A more comprehensive rationale behind the criteria used for identification in this study will be provided in Chapter 3.

To this point in the literature review, I have traced the development of the network paradigm in public relations research and provided an overview of the conceptual background behind opinion leadership and social media influencers. Drawing from this framework, I now turn my attention toward developing a contextualized approach to studying social media influencers and online opinion leaders in the online conversation around anthem protests by Kaepernick and Rapinoe. To do so, I will seek to explore the methods and motivations behind users’ participation in the conversation. The last section in this chapter grounds the analysis of these influential users through two theoretical approaches that have not been used before to explore social media influencers or online opinion leaders: uses and gratifications theory and moral foundations theory.

**Developing a Contextualized Approach**

The first two sections of this chapter have laid the groundwork for the contextualized approach I will use to evaluate the role online opinion leaders played in the discursive environment around anthem protests by Kaepernick and Rapinoe. First, the network paradigm in public relations research assumes that all social actors (i.e., organizations, publics, and individual stakeholders) have the capacity to shape discursive environments around issues that are salient to the greater network ecology of which they are a part. Second, drawing from the two-step flow of communication hypothesis, individual opinion leaders *can* and *do* shape the flow of ideas, information, beliefs, and values within the network. This is especially true within the context of social media, where technological advancements have leveled the playing field.
In an effort to further advance the study of online opinion leaders and how they operate within a network, this study applies two theoretical approaches — Uses and Gratifications Theory and Moral Foundations Theory — that extend our current understanding of the way opinion leaders use social networking sites to satisfy intrinsic needs and what motivates them to participate in online conversations around controversial topics.

**Uses and Gratifications Theory**

The first approach draws from uses and gratifications (U&G) theory, which is well-established in mass communication and media effects literature. Despite its prominence, few attempts have been made to directly connect U&G with online opinion leadership in any substantive manner.

The basic premise of U&G theory is that individuals actively seek out media that satisfy their needs which, ultimately, leads to gratification. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1976) summarized the main findings from early work on U&G by outlining a list of functions individuals typically derived from media consumption which included the tendencies “to match one’s wits against others, to get information or advice for daily living, to provide a framework for one’s day, to prepare oneself culturally for the demands of upward mobility, or to be reassured about the dignity and usefulness of one’s role” (p. 509). Scholars have made numerous attempts to organize these functions by developing typologies of audience gratifications derived from media consumption (see Ruggiero, 2000). For example, McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) proposed a set of gratifications for media use such as *diversion* (i.e., escape from routines and everyday problems), *personal relationships* (i.e., the social utility of information in conversation), *personal identity* (i.e., value reinforcement or reassurance; self-understanding), and *surveillance* (i.e., information about factors which might affect the user).
In an attempt to account for the wide range of typologies of gratifications that had been proposed, Katz, Haas, and Gurevitch (1973) argued that mass communication is primarily used by individuals in order to connect themselves with different kinds of people (e.g., family, friends, communities, nations, etc.) to satisfy a variety of needs arising from social roles and psychological dispositions. In other words, their central argument stemmed from the idea that the entire range of individual gratifications derived from media use can be attributed to a person’s intrinsic desire to be connected. If one were to adopt this perspective, as I do, it is plausible that an individual’s need for connection might also be relevant to their potential to function as an opinion leader. Indeed, as Katz et al. (1973) found, “non-media sources [i.e., friends, family, etc.] were deemed more gratifying than the mass media” (p. 180). These findings are in line with the two-step flow of communication hypothesis discussed at length above. As the two-step flow posits, opinion leaders occupy a strategic social location among their networks through the various social connections they have established. A U&G framework, then, becomes a useful tool to explore how and why opinion leaders use the media that they do in order to influence others with whom they are connected.

U&G research emerged largely through the study of legacy media — print, radio, and television — in the 1940s and 1950s. With the advent of Web 2.0 at the turn of the century and the development of various interactive digital platforms, scholars have had to grapple with and further refine the U&G approach to account for new technologies that have altered how users derive gratification from their use. Drawing from some of the earlier frameworks of U&G, Whiting and Williams (2013) developed a U&G approach to study social media by identifying ten themes that demonstrate the various gratifications associated with an individual’s use of social networking sites: (1) social interaction, (2) information seeking, (3) pass time, (4)
entertainment, (5) relaxation, (6) expression of opinions, (7) communicatory utility, (8) convenience utility, (9) information sharing, and (10) surveillance/knowledge about others. Chen (2011) found that Twitter users, specifically, gratify their need to connect with others through a sense of informal comradery (i.e., weak ties) afforded by the social network. Her findings support the idea that Twitter “is not just a virtual noise of people talking at each other…but that it is a medium that people actively seek out to gratify a need to connect with others” (p. 760).

Assuming that social connection is relevant to opinion leadership, these findings point to the salience of well-connected individuals who actively use Twitter to participate in and contribute to the development of online conversations. Park (2013), for example, found that opinion leadership on Twitter “successfully predicted individual opinion leaders’ engagement in political discussion and political participation” (p. 1646). This is especially relevant in the context of the current study.

Furthermore, under a U&G approach, users choose to participate or select media messages using social and psychological factors as a guide or filter (Rubin, 2009). In addition to their social role as an opinion leader, influential users’ selection of media and content is considerably influenced by their psychological predisposition (Katz et al., 1973). Consequently, it is important to not only consider the gratifications online opinion leaders seek to obtain from Twitter use, but also explore the moral foundations opinion leaders possess to further explain their motivation for participation in online conversation around controversial subjects like anthem protests.

Moral Foundations Theory

The second approach used to develop a contextualized understanding of online opinion leaders draws from social psychology. Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) was developed by a
group of social and cultural psychologists to understand why morality varies across cultures, yet still shows many similarities and recurrent themes. MFT therefore provides a lens through which to examine the motivations behind why opinion leaders participate in conversations around controversial subjects in the first place.

Graham et al. (2013) outlined five moral foundations that guide individual ethics in the form of continuums that occur between: (1) care/harm, (2) fairness/cheating, (3) loyalty/betrayal, (4) authority/subversion, and (5) sanctity/degradation. Haidt (2012) added a sixth to the inventory, liberty/oppression.

In the interest of brevity, Table 5 offers a concise overview of these moral foundations in terms of the adaptive challenges humans faced in the development of these intuitive ethics, their original triggers, characteristic emotions, and relevant virtues. Haidt (2012) applied these moral foundations to the opposing ends of the American political spectrum: liberal and conservative. For example, he argued that liberals tend to place greater emphasis on the Care and Fairness foundations than conservatives, and conservatives tend to place higher importance on Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity than liberals. Ultimately, Haidt “showed how the two ends of the political spectrum rely upon each foundation in different ways, or to different degrees” (p. 179). This is an important distinction to make in the context of the current study, as the divide between those who supported anthem protests online and those that opposed them primarily stemmed from ideological differences.

Several attempts at applying MFT to social media analytics have already been made. Kaur and Sasahara (2016) applied MFT using natural language processing and latent semantic analysis to quantify moral foundations from various topics on Twitter conversations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundation</th>
<th>Adaptive Challenge</th>
<th>Original Triggers</th>
<th>Characteristic Emotions</th>
<th>Relevant Virtues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care/Harm</td>
<td>Protect and care for children</td>
<td>Suffering, distress, or neediness expressed by one’s child</td>
<td>Compassion for victims; anger at perpetrator</td>
<td>Caring, kindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness/Cheating</td>
<td>Reap benefits of two-way partnerships</td>
<td>Cheating, cooperation, deception</td>
<td>Anger, gratitude, guilt</td>
<td>Fairness, justice, trustworthiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty/Betrayal</td>
<td>Form cohesive coalitions</td>
<td>Threat or challenge to the group</td>
<td>Group pride, rage at traitors</td>
<td>Loyalty, patriotism, self-sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority/Subversion</td>
<td>Forge beneficial relationships within hierarchies</td>
<td>Signs of high and low rank</td>
<td>Respect, fear</td>
<td>Obedience, deference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanctity/Degradation</td>
<td>Avoid communicable diseases</td>
<td>Waste products, diseased people</td>
<td>Disgust</td>
<td>Temperance, chastity, piety, cleanliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberty/Oppression</td>
<td>Living in small groups with individuals who would, if given the chance, dominate, bully, and constrain others</td>
<td>Signs of attempted domination</td>
<td>“Righteous” anger</td>
<td>Social justice, hatred of oppression</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dehghani et al. (2016) explored how shared moral values encourage people to connect through online communities through the concept of moral homophily. I contend that MFT can provide a useful framework for understanding the motivations behind why highly influential opinion leaders on Twitter are compelled to participate in the online conversation around anthem protests by prominent athletes. There is adequate support in the U&G literature to suggest that these psychological motivations could influence the gratifications users seek when choosing specific media. I believe that by identifying these motivations, we might come to better understand how online opinion leaders function in online discursive environments around controversial issues that constitute broad network ecologies.

**Summary and Research Questions**

In summary, this chapter outlines the various theoretical and conceptual foundations for this dissertation. The network paradigm in public relations research rejects an organization-centric approach, and instead considers every element within the network ecology around topics and issues of significance. Thus, opinion leaders and influencers play a critical role in the development of ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that spread throughout the network. What this research aims to achieve is to develop a contextualized approach for how activist online opinion leaders use social networks (i.e., Twitter), in order to obtain their desired gratifications that ultimately align with their moral foundations. To that end, I advance four research questions grounded in the extant literature discussed above.

In order to examine their role in the network ecology, it is important to first be able to identify who the online opinion leaders are in the conversation around anthem protests by prominent athletes, thus:
RQ1: Who are the online opinion leaders in the Twitter discussion around Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe?

In the network paradigm, individual actors do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, they are part of an entire ecological network wherein issues relevant to both organizations and publics (including activist publics) take precedence, thus:

RQ2: What are the topical communities in which opinion leaders participate?

Like any other media consumer, opinion leaders use various media platforms to seek gratification of intrinsic needs, thus:

RQ3: How do opinion leaders use Twitter to satisfy gratifications they seek from their participation in the online conversation around anthem protests?

Finally, opinion leaders’ positions on certain subjects are often shaped by psychological foundations. It is important to explore these foundations in order to better understand how these foundations motivate opinion leaders to participate in conversations around controversial subjects, thus:

RQ4: What moral foundations motivate opinion leaders to participate in the online conversation around anthem protests?
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions posed in the previous chapter, this project employs two distinct, yet complementary, methodological approaches: (1) social network analysis to identify the online opinion leaders and the structural characteristics of the interaction network around anthem protests on Twitter, and (2) in-depth interviews to explore how opinion leaders utilized the platform and their motivations underlying their participation in the online conversation. Separate data collection and data analysis procedures are required for both of these approaches, each carrying with them their own set of ontological and epistemological assumptions. These will be summarized in the following sections.

Phase One: Social Network Analysis

Network analysts see the world as a collection of various interconnected pieces. “Those studying social networks see relationships as the building blocks of the social world, each set of relationships combining to create emergent patterns of connections among people, groups, and things” (Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith, 2011, p. 32). Social network analysis (SNA) is the mapping and measuring of relationships and flows (i.e., edges) between people, groups, organizations, and other connected entities (i.e., nodes). Del Fresno Garcia, Daly, and Sánchez-Cabezudo (2016) identified four defining characteristics of SNA: (1) it adopts a structural intuition of social relations; (2) it gathers and analyzes relational data systematically; (3) it draws on mathematical models that are foundational to the analysis, and (4) it creates and shares visualizations of relationships and interaction patterns which allow the generation of significant structural insights and their communication to others.
As Yuan (2013) explained, “analytically, network analysis provides a robust empirical approach to social structures as network ties. It turns a merely metaphorical understanding of social embeddedness into a precise tool for investigating patterned relationships among actors in social networks” (p. 667). The concept of social embeddedness describes what Katz (1957) referred to as an opinion leader’s strategic social location. Kadushin (2012) reiterated the importance of an influencer’s embedded location within a network, “because to be an opinion leader one has to be well connected to potential followers” (p. 145). Thus, SNA offers an efficient framework for identifying well-connected, structurally embedded opinion leaders among online networks.

This is an increasingly important quality when it comes to studying the role of activists in public relations research. For example, Rim, Lee, and Yoo (in press), analyzed the network structures that emerged around boycotting and advocating for Starbucks and Budweiser when these two brands responded to Donald Trump’s immigration ban executive order in 2017. Their findings lend support for how social network analysis can be utilized to explore the ways publics mobilize and establish relationships in social media when firms and organizations are involved in hot-button issues. Yang and Saffer (2019) argued that “the changing media ecology requires public relations practitioners and scholars to embrace innovative approaches [like social network analysis] to study digital media based strategic communication efforts” (p. 6).

This study seeks to identify influential users within the Twitter conversation around anthem protests by prominent athletes. SNA provides the most suitable method to identify online opinion leaders as it “substitutes other anecdotal approaches (i.e., number of friends, followers, likes, etc.) with more useful outcomes” (del Fresno Garcia, Daly, & Sánchez-Cabezudo, 2016, p. 28).
Data Collection and Cleaning

Data for the analysis were collected using Salesforce Social Studio technology to harvest publicly available tweets which contained specific keywords and phrases across three different timeframes. First, data were collected for the 2016 NFL season beginning on August 26, 2016 (when Kaepernick first refused to stand during a preseason game) until February 6, 2017 (the Monday following Super Bowl LI). Data were collected every Thursday through Monday of each week during the season in order to capture content that was generated around every game in the season. A total of 326,924 tweets were collected that contained topic-specific hashtags including: #ColinKaepernick, #Kaepernick, #BoycottNFL, #IStandForTheFlag, #IStandForTheAnthem, #TakeAKnee, #TakeTheKnee, and #ImWithKap.

Second, the same search terms were used to harvest tweets during the 2017 season beginning on August 10, 2017 (the beginning of the preseason schedule) through February 5, 2018 (the Monday following Super Bowl LII). Again, data were collected every Thursday through Monday of each week in the season in order to capture posts during every game in the season. A total of 1,443,661 tweets were collected during the 2017 season.

Third, tweets were harvested during the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup which began on June 7, 2019. Posts were collected until July 17, 2019 which marked one week after the USWNT World Cup victory celebration in New York City. Data were pulled from each day of the tournament. Rather than using the same keywords as those centered around Kaepernick and the NFL, separate keywords were chosen which included #MeganRapinoe, #Rapinoe, and @mpinoe. A total of 633,611 tweets were harvested over this timeframe.

In order to identify the influencers within each dataset, I chose to analyze interactions on Twitter, specifically in the form of direct mentions between users. According to Himelboim
Golan (2019), the practice of mentioning users on Twitter using the @ symbol serves two main purposes: “First, it associated a post with another user (e.g., an individual, an organization, a brand), serving as metadata for the tweet. Second, it serves as a secondary route of content distribution. When a tweet mentions a given user, that tweet will appear on the recipient’s Notifications tab and Home timeline view if the author of the tweet follows the sender” (p. 5). Conceptualizing mentions on Twitter as interactions in a social network captures the importance of users connecting with one another to spread information, ideas, and opinions.

Once the data for each timeframe were collected, they were organized into three separate spreadsheets – one for each timeframe: the 2016 NFL season, the 2017 NFL season, and the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup. Two columns were created within each spreadsheet. The first column identified the source of the tweet (i.e., the author/user) and the second identified the target(s) of the corresponding tweet (i.e., the usernames mentioned in the tweet). This format reflects the interactions (i.e., mentions) between sources and targets within the network and is referred to as an “edges table.” Each of the three edges tables were imported separately into Gephi, an open-source social network analysis program, to conduct analysis on each timeframe. Gephi has been used in many studies examining social networks using Twitter data, specifically (e.g., Bruns, 2012; Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010; Larsson & Moe, 2014; Hagen, Keller, Neely, & DePaula, 2018).

There are, however, potential sources of data reliability and validity issues associated with studying interaction networks on Twitter that need to be addressed in order to ensure that the users identified are indeed opinion leaders in the conversation. Given that this analysis relies on Twitter content, one of the main threats to the study’s validity is accurate data collection and cleaning. It is important to make sure that the data collected through Social Studio specifically
refers to the actual conversation around NFL anthem protests. This was accomplished by harvesting tweets specifically mentioning relevant hashtags and phrases that indicate topical relevance.

In order for that data to be formatted properly for social network analysis using Gephi, it also needed to be cleaned and organized from its raw form into edges tables. In data mining such as this, there are potential errors that can occur due to differences in document or website formatting. These errors can lead to the over or under-representation of actors, attributes, etc. in the data analysis process. In order to avoid erroneously analyzing relationships between nodes that were an artifact of formatting errors, I cleaned the data using another open-source software package called OpenRefine (openrefine.org) which facilitates a data cleaning process that effectively formats the data into edges tables. An example of this data cleaning process can be found in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Example of data cleaning procedure using OpenRefine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw Twitter Data</th>
<th>Original Tweet from @CALIICODER3: Watch #TrashMouth @mPinoe embarrassing herself I guess she thinks she looks cute acting trashy &amp; #Tacky just like @AOC If she hates the @POTUS &amp; #US so damn much get off the DAMN team! You don’t represent #America you represent trash #WednesdayWisdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Data Cleaning Using OpenRefine: | 1. Extract direct mentions from original tweet  
2. Remove @ symbol and account for case sensitivity  
3. Identify appropriate source with appropriate target  
4. Create edges table |
| Cleaned Edges Table: |  |
| Resulting Edges Table: | Source | Target |
| caliicoder3 | mpinoe |
| caliicoder3 | aoc |
| caliicoder3 | potus |
Data Analysis Procedures

SNA is an umbrella term for a range of different techniques used to explore the form and function of networks. Social scientists, along with physicists, computer scientists, and mathematicians, have created an array of theories and algorithms for calculating measurements of social networks and the people or things that populate them. “These quantitative network metrics allow analysts to systematically dissect the social world, creating a basis on which to compare networks, track changes in a network over time, and determine the relative position of individuals and clusters within a network” (Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith, 2011, p. 39). Two of these metrics are most relevant to address the first two research questions posed in this study.

Betweenness Centrality. To address RQ1, SNA will be used to identify influential users in the online discussions around anthem protests through an individual user’s node-level betweenness centrality value. Online opinion leadership rests on the ability to influence information flow (Xu et al., 2014). Betweenness centrality was introduced by Freeman (1977) and is based on how significant a node (user) is in terms of linking other nodes (users) and indicates how often a given node lies on the shortest path between pairs of nodes. Betweenness centrality “measures the extent to which a vertex lies on the shortest paths between pairs of other vertices” (Unnithan, Kannan, & Jathavedan, 2014, p. 1), and thus the ability to influence the spread of information across networks.

In short, the concept of betweenness reflects what some consider to be the function of an information broker (Hansen et al., 2010) through which news, information, perceptions, rumors or falsehoods circulate on the principal paths of a social network. Zhang and Li (2014) argued in support of using betweenness centrality as a measure to identify influential users in social networks by suggesting that “since information flows the fastest via the shortest path, a node’s
betweenness represents its importance in facilitating information dissemination in a network” (p. 5).

Moreover, since betweenness centrality indicates a node’s potential to function as a broker, it stands to reason that it might also be conceptually linked with bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) through weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). You and Hon (2019) suggested that “individuals can attain bridging social capital through more diverse and broader weak-tie networks, in attempts to look for novel information or new resources, or to broaden social horizons” (p. 2). Per Burt (2005), less constrained individuals acting as brokers within a network can be a very effective opinion leaders based on their potential to bring in new ideas from the periphery. Indeed, Hansen et al. (2011) explained that actors with high betweenness values means that a lot of nonredundant information passes through them. Consequently, since “knowledge is power, being in the right network position can be socially advantageous” (p. 151).

To address RQ2, the modularity of each network will be determined to identify structurally similar groups or clusters that are reflective of the context within which online opinion leaders were operating within the network. According to Rim, Lee, and Yoo (in press), modularity “measures how good the division is, or how separated the different vertex [i.e., node] types are from each other…Networks with high modularity have dense connections between the nodes within modules but sparse connections between nodes in different modules” (p. 5). Kadushin (2012) suggests that structural similar refers to instances when “nodes with similar patterns of relationships with other nodes are grouped together” (p. 50). In SNA, these groups are commonly defined as communities, or “a set of nodes that have a higher likelihood of connecting to each other than to the nodes of other communities” (Perez & Germon, 2016, p. 121).
For the purposes of this study, I consider these communities to be the contextual boundaries within which online opinion leaders operate. Given the definitions for modularity above, it stands to reason that clusters of similar patterns of relationships might reflect the contexts in which online opinion leaders with high betweenness centrality values function. In order to identify the various communities within each network, the Louvain algorithm for community detection (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2018) was calculated in Gephi. Structural similarities between nodes within the five largest communities in each timeframe were evaluated to determine the nature of the community. Sociograms were created in order to provide a visual representation of the interaction networks within each of the three timeframes using the OpenOrd layout in Gephi which is optimized for displaying larger datasets (Martin, Brown, Klavans, & Boyack, 2011).

**Summary of the SNA Approach**

SNA provides a methodological approach to examine the relationships between users in a network. Betweenness centrality can be calculated for each user in the network; those with high betweenness centrality are considered to be more influential by virtue of their ability to control the flow of information in the network. Community detection through modularity yields additional insight into the context where influencers operate within the network. But identifying influential users and their comparable online communities only accomplishes half of what this project seeks to do. In addition to finding out who the online opinion leaders are, I want to explore the ways in which they use Twitter to derive gratification from the platform, and what motivates them to participate in the online conversation around anthem protests. As Hansen et al. (2011) point out, “social network analysis complements methods that focus more narrowly on individuals, adding a critical dimension that captures the connective
tissue of societies and other complex interdependencies” (p. 32). Moreover, del Fresno Garcia et al. (2016) contend that future studies should “mix both social network analysis and more qualitative approaches…not only do we need to identify [social media influencers] and their relations, but also the meanings and insights within each network” (p. 36). This study seeks to address this methodological gap by coupling SNA with in-depth interviews to explore opinion leaders’ use of Twitter and their moral foundations underlying their motivation to participate in online conversations around controversial topics. Thus, it is important to now direct attention to the individuals who comprise these networks.

Phase Two: In-Depth Interviews

Once opinion leaders were identified by their betweenness centrality values, in-depth interviews were conducted with the users that held higher betweenness centrality scores than others within the network. To address RQ3 and RQ4, SMIs were selected for interviews from the each of the three data collection periods – the 2016 and 2017 NFL season, and the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup. This study is an example of an emergent qualitative study (c.f., Childers, Haley, & Jahns, 2011; Morrison, Haley, Sheehan, & Taylor, 2012), whereby the exact number of participants needed for participation is not known prior to the start of data collection. Instead, information redundancy will be used as the criterion to cease interviews (Taylor, 1994).

The Sociocultural Tradition of Qualitative Research

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2019), the sociocultural tradition in qualitative research encompasses a range of epistemological orientations “that are concerned with the relationships between micro-level practices of communication and the macro-level structures that influence their performance” (p. 55). Lindlof and Taylor suggested that even mundane elements like
individuals’ social roles and rituals are, in fact, crucial in social life as they endure across specific events to form stable elements of societies.

This assumption is comparable in nature to the network perspective which Yang and Taylor (2015) suggest “embodies a macro understanding of the many diverse ego [i.e., individual] networks” (p. 92) that comprise the larger public sphere. As such, the sociocultural tradition reflects the most appropriate qualitative framework through which to identify both the uses and gratifications online opinion leaders seek through Twitter, as well as the moral foundations that prompt them to participate in the conversation around controversial topics like the anthem protests.

Among the various theoretical approaches that comprise the sociocultural tradition, structuration theory (ST) offers the most productive lens through which to study online opinion leaders within a network as it accounts for “both social structure and human action in a common framework that could explain individual behavior and the development of effects of social institutions...It also offer[s] an understanding of how different levels of analysis – individual, group, organization, society – relate to one another” (Poole & McPhee, 2005, p. 173). A more detailed review of ST and an explanation of its relevance to the current study is outlined below.

**Structuration Theory**

The individuals identified as opinion leaders through the social network analysis phase of this research are embedded in a larger social system in which many people and organizations concurrently create and debate the meaning of the anthem protests. They represent actors in the network who show particular interest for the continual production and reproduction of meaning through communication on Twitter. Their voices do not exist in a vacuum, but rather hold critical positions within the system as they seek to share their ideas, opinions, and beliefs with those to
whom they are connected. As such, structuration theory appears to be a particularly well-suited epistemological lens through which to examine how their use of Twitter and their moral foundations influenced their perceived role in the system.

Developed by British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1979; 1984), structuration theory’s focus is on understanding human agency and social institutions. According to Giddens (1984), in his seminal work *The Constitution of Society*, studying structuration “means studying the modes in which such systems…are produced and reproduced” (p. 25) as a result of the activities of situated agents. In this study, opinion leaders take on the role of the situated agent through what Gidden’s called reflexive monitoring, or the agent’s ability to continuously monitor the flow of their activities, expect others to do the same, and routinely monitor aspects of their contexts.

In order to explore the roles played by agents, it is important to first understand their position within social institutions as Giddens defined them. Structuration theory hinges on the distinction between systems and structures. West and Turner (2007) offered a concise differentiation between the two terms: “The term *system*, in this sense, refers to the group or organization itself and the behaviors that the group engages in to pursue its goals. The term *structure* refers to the rules and resources members use to create and sustain the system, as well as to guide their behaviors” (p. 280). Put metaphorically, a *system* may be considered in terms of an entire building, whereas its *structure* may refer to the foundation, framework, electrical wiring, plumbing, etc. that serve to create and sustain the building. Such is the case with social institutions. Larger systems (e.g., Twitter conversations around anthem protests) are created and sustained through various structural components (e.g., rules and resources) that guide social action.
Therefore, agents operating within structures are guided by rules and resources that both reflect and create systems of which they are a part. Agents, then, are both constrained and empowered by the rules and resources available to them. Lindlof and Taylor (2019) defined these rules “as principles and routines that guide people’s actions...” and resources as “material and symbolic phenomena that people use to successfully accomplish action” (p. 65). These definitions provide the rationale for RQ3 and RQ4. Resources as material and symbolic phenomena reflect how opinion leaders use Twitter and what gratifications they seek from it. Rules as principles and routines reflect the importance of an opinion leader’s moral foundations which guide their action. Understanding the rules and resources available to opinion leaders (i.e., structures), then, sheds light on the entire network ecology (i.e., the system) around the online conversation around anthem protests. This notion embodies Gidden’s (1979) idea of the duality of structure which refers to the fundamentally recursive nature of social practices.

Structuration theory offers a unique qualitative framework that naturally complements social network analysis as I seek to further explore the relationships between micro-level and macro-level structures associated with online conversations around controversial issues.

**In-Depth Interviews**

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), the qualitative research interview “attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (p. 1). Lindlof and Taylor (2019) suggest that “Interviews are particularly well suited to understanding people’s experience, knowledge, and worldviews” (p. 222), making them a suitable method to explore an opinion leader’s uses of Twitter, their gratifications sought, and the moral foundations underpinning their motivation to participate in the online conversation. Specifically, the
interviews conducted for this dissertation reflect what Rubin and Rubin (2012) consider to be cultural interviews through which “the researcher tries to understand the norms, rules, and values that underlie people’s behavior, their sense of ethics, and/or their traditions” (p. 31).

Interviews constitute a form of qualitative research where there are no universal standards for ensuring quality. Nevertheless, Tracy (2010) presented eight criteria for enhancing quality in qualitative research marked by (1) a worthy topic, (2) rich rigor, (3) sincerity, (4) credibility, (5) resonance, (6) significant contribution, (7) ethics, and (8) meaningful coherence. While each of these criteria are important in their own right, “our human instrument will show its innate humanness by not being able to achieve everything all of the time” (p. 849). Rather, in the interest of brevity, it stands to reason that credibility, contribution, and coherence carry the highest burden of proof in the context of the current study.

First, credibility refers to a study’s trustworthiness and plausibility of the research findings. Tracy identifies multivocality and member reflections as two practices that enhance credibility of qualitative research. Multivocality refers to research that includes “multiple and varied voices in the qualitative report and analysis” (p. 844). Opinion leaders interviewed for this project represent a wide range of perspectives including those from former active-duty military members, high school teachers, sports reporters, and a range of other professions. The researcher interviewed men and women of different ages and races – people of disparate socioeconomic and social status. The benefit of multivocality, in addition to providing an empathic understanding, is that it “provides a space for a variety of opinions” (p. 844) on the subject. Member reflections refer to input during the process of analyzing data and producing the research report. During the interviews, the researcher developed rapport with participants which led to continued conversations on Twitter and through phone conversations throughout the timeline of this
project. This afforded opportunities for participants to engage with me about the study’s findings by offering affirmation and feedback. Member reflections are beneficial in that they “help the research learn whether members find the research comprehensible and meaningful” (p. 844).

Second, Tracy contends that good qualitative research offers a significant and meaningful contribution to the field in terms of its theoretical, heuristic, practical, and methodological significance. The current study offers a clear theoretical contribution as it spans various theoretical orientations to explore a new context of online opinion leadership. It offers heuristic significance by developing new ways for scholars to approach the study of online opinion leaders. It lends practical significance through its evaluation of how people use social platforms like Twitter to engage in conversations around controversial social and political issues. Finally, it offers methodological significance through its two-phase approach using social network analysis to identify specific individuals within a topical network, responding to calls from others (e.g., Smith, Rainie, Himelboim, & Shneiderman, 2014; del Fresno García et al., 2016) to supplement network analysis with qualitative characteristics of exchanges that occur in networks.

Finally, this project reflects Tracy’s conceptualization of meaningful coherence, in that it interconnects the research design, data collection, and analysis with the various theoretical frameworks and situational goals. This study adopts a wide range of theoretical approaches ranging from mass communication, social psychology, and the network paradigm. Despite its conceptual density, the project “hangs well together” (p. 848) as the literature review situates the research findings, the findings attend to the state research questions, and the conclusions and implications draw meaningful connections between the data and the literature. The long interview format was used, with a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix I) which served to guide the conversation by initiating discussion and ensuring that the most important
topics were addressed, all the while giving participants the opportunity comment openly and freely (Taylor, Hoy, & Haley, 1996).

To develop the interview guide, the researcher drew on observations obtained by referring back to the raw data (i.e., individual tweets) from opinion leaders identified through social network analysis in Phase 1. Upon review of the Twitter data and guided by relevant theoretical frameworks, the interview guide was segmented into two parts: (1) a section exploring the opinion leaders’ uses of Twitter and their gratifications sought from its use, and (2) a section exploring the opinion leaders’ moral foundations regarding Kaepernick, Rapinoe, and the anthem protests that reflect their worldviews.

An initial tour question ( Rubin & Rubin, 2012) was crafted to prompt respondents to think about the first time they learned about Colin Kaepernick and/or Megan Rapinoe. Tour questions provide the researcher with an opportunity to have the participant offer “a general orientation” (p. 116) of the topic. The broad tour question was subsequently followed by more focused questions which sought to elicit depth and detail in conversations with participants around their experience engaging in online conversations about anthem protests by Kaepernick and/or Rapinoe. Care was taken to ensure the main questions in the interview protocol aligned with the research questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Designing questions to explore how participants used Twitter and their beliefs toward the anthem protests aligns with Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) definition of the cultural interview, which “often have an exploratory quality, as researchers look for terms, phrases, behaviors, or choices that reflect norms and values” (p. 33). Prompts and probes were used strategically throughout the interview when necessary to encourage participants to elaborate or expand on their responses (McCracken, 1988).
Data Collection

Recruitment was approved by the university’s IRB prior to the interviews being conducted. The Consent Cover Statement and accompanying IRB approval letter can be found in Appendices II and II, respectively. Participants were selected based on their betweenness centrality scores that were calculated through social network analysis in Phase 1. Typically, opinion leaders account for less than five percent of the overall network based on betweenness centrality (Groshek & Tandoc, 2017). Any betweenness centrality score above zero indicates an account that influenced the flow of information within the network. Consequently, opinion leaders were ordered by their betweenness centrality scores, from highest to lowest, for each of the three topical networks. Purposive judgment sampling was then used to identify select individuals that were “best suited to enable researchers to address their research questions” (Maul, 2018, p. 913). Judgment sampling served as an appropriate sampling strategy because the population of potential participants was (1) relatively small and (2) the most desirable characteristic among the participants (i.e., influence) was rare. Moreover, as will be discussed in the Results chapter, many of the accounts that were identified as influential using betweenness centrality were inauthentic Twitter accounts that had either since been suspended by the platform or were identified as bot-like accounts.

Participants were recruited through the use of direct message on Twitter and invited to conduct interviews over the phone or via Skype/Zoom. Participants that replied to the initial inquiry were briefed about the project and provided with the Consent Cover Statement prior to scheduling an interview. In keeping with IRB requirements, subjects’ willingness to participate constituted adequate documentation of consent. Once participants agreed to participate, a mutually agreeable time for an interview was identified.
A total of 18 individuals were interviewed for this project. All 18 participants preferred phone conversations over Zoom/Skype interviews. Interviews varied in length from 29 minutes to 66 minutes. The interviews resulted in 214 pages of interview transcripts. Interviews were transcribed using Rev.com. Table 6 offers a participant profile including the pseudonym used to protect each participant’s confidentiality, the number of Twitter followers each had at the time of interview, and a brief description of the individual based on information gathered from each interview and the participant’s Twitter bio.

**Data Analysis**

Since this study sought to explore opinion leaders’ use of Twitter and their motivations behind participating in the conversation, theoretical thematic analysis was used identify, organize, and offer insight into the patterns of meaning across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Per Braun and Clark (2006), theoretical thematic analysis tends to be guided “by the researcher’s theoretical or analytic interest in the area and is thus more explicitly analyst driven. This top-down form of thematic analysis tends to provide less a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data” (p. 84). Kvale and Brinkman (2009) consider this analytic framework beneficial in that “a theoretical reading of interview texts can draw in new contexts regarding the interview themes and bring for the new dimensions of familiar phenomena” (p. 238).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Number of Twitter Followers</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>39,993</td>
<td>Military veteran; local community activist, writer, and photographer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>1,059</td>
<td>Background in linguistics, local community activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>34,720</td>
<td>Sports journalist with prominent newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianne</td>
<td>13,595</td>
<td>Local community activist, blogger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hank</td>
<td>2,476</td>
<td>Public school teacher, comes from a military family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>Military veteran, local community activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold</td>
<td>1,113</td>
<td>Military veteran, local community activist, leader for national activist group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaitlyn</td>
<td>101,973</td>
<td>Progressive blogger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>6,554</td>
<td>Military veteran, works for veterans’ advocacy group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>1,611</td>
<td>Works in higher education, stand-up comedian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>12,790</td>
<td>Military veteran, progressive activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>5,744</td>
<td>Local community activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>13,512</td>
<td>Author, local community activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>5,975</td>
<td>Marketing professional, community activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>1,306</td>
<td>Sports fan, self-identified as ‘news junkie’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonya</td>
<td>587</td>
<td>Professional photographer, holds degree in government and politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>Retired insurance claims adjuster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>Works in medical field</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative analysis of the interviews for this study followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006; 2012) six-step guide for doing thematic analysis:

*Step 1: Become Familiar with the Data.*

*Step 2: Generate Initial Codes.*

*Step 3: Search for Themes.*

*Step 4: Review Themes.*

*Step 5: Defining Themes.*

*Step 6: Producing the Report.*

According to Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017), “as qualitative research becomes increasingly recognized and valued it is imperative that it is conducted in a rigorous and methodical manner to yield meaningful and useful results (p. 1). To that end, each step in this process will be expanded upon in the following paragraphs.

First, “to become immersed in the data involves the repeated reading of the data in an active way searching for meanings and patterns” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 5). Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) recommendation, the researcher read through the entire dataset twice before beginning the coding process in order to become familiar with all aspects of the data. The first time reading through the data, I also listened to each interview recording in order to ensure accuracy of the transcription. While progressing through each transcript, the researcher took brief notes to document my reflective thoughts that developed. These notes became useful as the data analysis advanced to the generation of initial codes.

Second, upon familiarizing myself with the data, the researcher began the process of generating initial codes. “Coding allows the researcher to simplify and focus on specific characteristics of the data” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 5) and allows the researcher to move from
unstructured data to identify interesting aspects in the data as they work systematically through the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this step, every line was given full and equal attention. A total of 59 codes were generated using an open coding process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Specifically, the researcher used a combination of deductive (i.e., semantic coding) and inductive (i.e., latent coding) which Braun and Clarke (2012) argue is common in thematic analysis since “it is impossible to be purely inductive, as we always bring something to the data when we analyze it, and we rarely completely ignore the semantic content of the data when we code for a particular theoretical construct” (p. 58, emphasis in original). A list of codes can be found in the overview of the analytic process in Appendix IV.

The third step involved the active process generating or constructing themes among the coded data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). A theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). The researcher reviewed the coded data to identify areas of similarity and overlap between the codes – a process that involved collapsing and clustering codes that seemed to share some unifying feature, “so that they reflect and describe a meaningful pattern in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 63). As the researcher compared codes to identify thematic characteristics and began to explore the relationship between themes to consider how they worked together in telling an overall story about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Themes that were generated during this step are also outlined in Appendix IV and discussed at length in the results chapter.

The fourth step involved further refining the themes that were constructed in the previous step. “This phase involves a recursive process whereby the developing themes are reviewed in relation to the coded data and entire data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 65). Consequently, the
researcher checked the themes that were constructed against the coded and collated extracts of data to explore the extent to which the theme fit in relation to the data. In so doing, interview transcripts were reread once more to assess whether the themes meaningfully captured the entire data set (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Braun & Clarke, 2012). The back-and-forth comparison between themes and coded data was an important step in assuring the quality of the themes that were developed.

The fifth step involved defining and naming themes, and entails “the deep analytic work involved in thematic analysis, the crucial shaping up of analysis into its fine-grained detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 67). The definition of themes should not simply report on extracts from interview transcripts but should interpret and organize them within a larger overarching conceptual framework in relation to the research questions posed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Care was taken to ensure themes had a clear focus, scope and purpose. Themes for this project were named, again, by balancing descriptive (i.e., illustrative) and interpretive (i.e., latent meanings) approaches. Braun and Clarke (2012) suggest that while “naming might seem trivial…A good name for a theme is informative, concise, and catchy” (p. 69).

Finally, the last step was to produce a report on the analysis. The purpose of this final step is to “produce a compelling story about your data based on your analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 69). In order to do so effectively, it is important to reflect upon the research process. Nowell et al. (2017) contend that, during this step, researchers must clearly communicate the “logical processes by which findings were developed in a way that is accessible to a critical reader, so the claims made in relation to the data set are rendered credible and believable” (p. 11). An effective and transparent description of this process provides an audit trail for readers to follow, comparable to Canary’s (2008) study on family co-constructions of identities of ability.
and disability. Audit trails ensure the research process is logical, traceable and clearly documented which enhance Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Moreover, according to Nowell et al. (2017), “researchers can aim to build a valid argument for choosing the themes by referring back to the literature” (p. 11). The results and discussion chapters that follow demonstrate how themes generated from this data both challenge and add to extant literature.

While Braun and Clarke’s (2006; 2012) six-phased method is presented here as a linear process, “it is actually an iterative process that develops over time and involves a constant moving back and forward between phases” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 4). By closely following this suggested framework and adhering to Nowell et al.’s (2017) guidelines for establishing trustworthiness in thematic analysis, the resulting analysis provides useful and meaningful insight responding to the research questions posed for this study. Results of Phase 1 (social network analysis) and Phase 2 (theoretical thematic analysis of in-depth interviews) are reported in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter presents results for the proposed research questions in two phases outlined in Chapter 3. First, results from the social network analysis will address RQ1 and RQ2, identifying the influential accounts in the online conversation around the protests, and explores the various contexts in which they operated. Second, results from in-depth interviews address RQ3 and RQ4. Results explain how opinion leaders used Twitter to participate in the conversation, and illuminate users’ underlying moral foundations and ethical values.

Phase 1 – Social Network Analysis

Identifying Online Opinion Leaders

RQ1 sought to identify the online opinion leaders in the Twitter conversation around Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe. Betweenness centrality values were calculated for each user within each of the three aforementioned timeframes – the 2016 NFL season, the 2017 NFL season, and the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup.

During analysis, it was evident that several accounts with high betweenness centrality values either no longer existed or had been suspended for violating Twitter’s terms of use. It is possible that many of these were potentially fake accounts or automated bots, which Twitter began suspending at a rate of more than 1 million per day (Hatmaker, 2018; Timberg & Dwoskin, 2018) in the wake of the Russian Internet Research Agency’s (IRA) coordinated efforts to spread disinformation during the 2016 election. Indeed, prior research has indicated that IRA bots propelled antagonistic, hyperpartisan politics in the context of the NFL anthem protests (Yan, Pegoraro, & Watanabe, 2019).
Consequently, in addition to identifying the online opinion leaders in each timeframe, it became important to also evaluate the accounts in terms of their bot-like behavioral patterns using an artificial intelligence platform designed to classify suspicious Twitter accounts called BotSentinel. BotSentinel rates accounts using a system that identifies bot accounts from 0% (not a bot) to 100% (high probability of being a bot) by analyzing hundreds of tweets per account based on a machine learning model that can correctly identify bot accounts with 95% accuracy.

**2016 NFL Season.** In all, 4.9% (n=1,252) of the 25,394 users in the network had betweenness centrality scores that were greater than zero. Table 7 identifies the top 50 users in terms of their betweenness centrality scores. Each user’s modularity class, modularity class rank, out-degree, in-degree, and total degree values are also reported.

In order to obtain a more complete picture of the online opinion leaders in this timeframe, the researcher attempted to manually find each of the top 50 users on Twitter. Notably, 20 of the top users were either suspended for violating Twitter’s terms of use, or no longer existed. Of the remaining 30 users that were active on Twitter, 17 were identified by BotSentinel as either being “problematic” or “alarming” users that demonstrated bot-like tendencies. Only 11 were identified by BotSentinel as “normal” or “moderate.” Two accounts had been previously deleted and later rejoined Twitter but have not posted any content since rejoining the platform.

**2017 NFL Season.** Results from the 2017 NFL dataset found that 4.3% (n=1,930) of the 43,874 users in the network had betweenness centrality scores greater than zero. Table 8 identifies the top 50 users in terms of their betweenness centrality values. Each user’s modularity class, modularity class rank, out-degree, in-degree, and total degree values are reported also.

Attempts were made to manually find each of the top 50 users on Twitter. Twenty-two of the top users were either suspended for violating Twitter’s terms of use, or no longer existed.
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## Table 8
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Of the remaining 28 users that were active on Twitter, 20 were identified by BotSentinel as either “problematic” or “alarming” users that demonstrated bot-like tendencies. Only five were identified by BotSentinel as “normal” or “moderate.” Three accounts had been previously deleted and later rejoined Twitter but have not posted since rejoining the platform.

**2019 Women’s World Cup.** During the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup, 4.1% (n=2,210) of the 52,630 users in the network had betweenness centrality scores that were greater than zero. Table 9 identifies the top 50 users in terms of their betweenness centrality scores. Each user’s modularity class, modularity class rank, out-degree, in-degree, and total degree values are reported also.

Again, attempts were made to identify each of the top 50 users on Twitter. Two of the top users were either suspended for violating Twitter’s terms of use, and another two no longer existed. Of the remaining 46 users that were active on Twitter, 18 were identified by BotSentinel as either “problematic” or “alarming” users that demonstrated bot-like tendencies. Twenty-eight users were identified by BotSentinel as “normal” or “moderate.” Of those, seven were verified accounts. One account was made private and was therefore unable to be analyzed for its BotSentinel ranking.

**Summary of Online Opinion Leaders.** In each of the three timeframes, the total number of online opinion leaders identified by betweenness centrality values accounted for less than 5% of the total number of users in each network. This is consistent with other studies using this measure to identify on opinion leaders among Twitter networks (e.g., Groshek & Tandoc, 2017) and reflects a “highly interconnected network with many influential users that were communicating and connecting relatively diverse user groups” (p. 206).
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>seammichael</td>
<td>1510</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Active - Private</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>westseattlelmms</td>
<td>1485</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Active - Normal</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>ra_romero88</td>
<td>1406</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Active - Normal</td>
<td>Normal</td>
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<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>cb618444</td>
<td>1331.5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>177</td>
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<td>Problematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>jauruelection</td>
<td>1290</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>46</td>
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<td>Normal</td>
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<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>abefronam</td>
<td>1286</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>Active - Normal</td>
<td>Normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>braveheart_usa</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Active - Problematic</td>
<td>Problematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>chrisroney0</td>
<td>1190.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Active - Problematic</td>
<td>Problematic</td>
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<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>magwagen</td>
<td>1176</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>Problematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>dgcomedy</td>
<td>1166.5</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Active - Normal</td>
<td>Normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>mikiharrissnv</td>
<td>1155</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Active - Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
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<td>46</td>
<td>juancal31</td>
<td>1141</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>No Longer Exists</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>josh_riker6</td>
<td>1116.83333</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>Normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>meninblazers</td>
<td>1057.66667</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>200</td>
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<td>147</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>Active - Verified</td>
<td>Normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>peterpiper0001</td>
<td>1013.33333</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Active - Alarmin</td>
<td>Alarmin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In other words, conversation was not dominated by just a handful of users, but rather shaped by multiple voices in various and diverse communities within the overall network.

It is worth noting the comparable elements within each of the NFL datasets. Looking at the 2016 and 2017 seasons combined, it is alarming that 42 of the 100 accounts identified as being the most influential had been suspended for violating Twitter’s terms of use or no longer existed. Moreover, 37 accounts were identified as bots and five were deleted and ultimately rejoined the platform without posting any content since 2017. This left only 16 authentic accounts. Conversely, 38 of the top 50 influential accounts during the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup were identified as authentic accounts. Implications for these findings are discussed at length in Chapter 5.

Identifying Topical Communities

RQ2 sought to further explore the overall structure of the network graph in order to identify the composition of various community clusters within each timeframe. To do this, the modularity of each network timeframe was calculated. Per Rim et al. (in press) “the modularity of a graph measures how good the division is, or how separated the different [node] types are from each other” (p. 5) and is a measure often used to detect community structure in networks. Modularity values range from -1 to 1, with values closer to 1 indicating strong community structure (Newman & Girvan, 2004). According to Newman (2006), any modularity value above .4 is generally a good indicator of community structures. The Louvain algorithm was used in Gephi to determine the modularity value for each network, and nodes within each community were manually identified in order to explore the composition of the five largest topical communities within each network.
2016 NFL Season. The modularity value for the 2016 network was .62, and a total of 1,491 communities were identified. Table 10 offers a summary of the top five communities in terms of the percentage of the network they accounted for.

Modularity Class 4 accounted for the highest percentage of the overall network (9.74%) with 2,473 users. Conversation within this community focused largely on the NFL and its leadership (@nfl; @nflcommish; @nflpa). Individual teams were frequently mentioned (@chicagobears; @chiefs; @azcardinals; @colts; @titans). Of note, several parody or fake accounts representing Colin Kaepernick were also included in this conversation (@colinkae; @collinkapernick; @callinkap).

Modularity Class 1096 accounted for 6.81% of the network with 1,729 users. Conversation in this community tended to circulate around individual athletes (@aaronrodgers12; @ezekielelliott; @rsherman_25) and corporate partners with whom they have endorsement deals (@statefarm; @att; @dominos).

Modularity Class 1135 accounted for 6.45% of the network with 1,639 users. Conversation in this community centered on Colin Kaepernick’s verified account (@kaepernick7) and other organizations (@yourrightscamp; @truthout), sports figures (@mpinoe; @e_reid35) and media personalities (@vanjones68; @joyannreid) that were supportive of Kaepernick’s protest.

Modularity Class 225 accounted for 4.83% of the network with 1,226 users. Conversation here tended to gravitate toward official sponsors of the NFL. Notable accounts that were frequently mentioned included: @pepsi, @verizon, @papajohns, @budweiser, @gatorade, @hyundai, @ford, @starbucks, @visa, @campbells, and @gillette among others.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Modularity Class</th>
<th>Percent of Network</th>
<th>Topical Characteristics</th>
<th>Notable Accounts in the Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.74%</td>
<td>NFL and NFL leadership, in addition to individual teams, and fake Kaepernick accounts</td>
<td>@nfl; @nflcommish; @nflpa; @chicagобears; @chiefs; @azcardinals; @colts; @titans; @colinkae; @collinkapernick; @callinkap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1096</td>
<td>6.81%</td>
<td>Sponsors and NFL players endorsing them</td>
<td>@statefarm; @dominos; @att @aaronrodgers12; @ezekielelliott; @rsherman_25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1135</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
<td>Kaepernick, and other prominent organizations or personalities supporting him</td>
<td>@kapernick7; @mpinoe; @yourrightscamp; @truthout; @vanjones68; @joyannreid; @e_reid35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>4.83%</td>
<td>NFL Sponsors</td>
<td>@pepsi; @verizon; @papajohns; @budweiser; @gatorade; @hyundai; @ford; @starbucks; @visa; @campbells; @gillette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1173</td>
<td>3.91%</td>
<td>49ers, Seahawks, and conservative media outlets and personalities</td>
<td>@49ers; @seahawks; @charliekirk11; @marklevinshow; @cr; @dbongino; @donaldjtrumpjr</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Modularity Class 1173 accounted for 3.91% of the network with 992 users. This community primarily centered around the San Francisco 49ers and the Seattle Seahawks and a variety of conservative media outlets (e.g., Conservative Review; @cr), personalities (@marklevinshow; @charliekirk22; @dongino), and government officials (@donaldjtrumpjr).

In all, the 2016 network consisted of 25,394 nodes (users) and 43,569 edges (interactions). Figure 2 provides a sociogram of the entire network, with different colors representing each of the top modularity classes.

**2017 NFL Season.** The modularity value for the 2017 network was .61 and consisted of 1,971 communities. Table 1 offers a summary of the top five communities in terms of the percentage of the network they accounted for.

Modularity Class 1 accounted for 9.91% of the network and included 4,348 users. Conversation in this community centered around prominent political figures. Specifically, most of the conversation involved President Donald Trump (@realdonaldtrump; @potus; @whitehouse) and Vice President Mike Pence (@vp; @secondlady). Two prominent narratives formed around each. First, Trump’s public comments criticizing the anthem protests gained significant momentum (Kurtz, 2017). Second, Pence’s attendance at an Indianapolis Colts game was cut short after the vice president as his wife abruptly left the event after players took a knee during the national anthem (Watkins, 2017). Other members of Trump’s family (@flotus; @donaldjtrumpjr) were also frequently mentioned in this community.

Modularity Class 2 accounted for 9.17% of the overall network, including 4,022 users. Conversation in this community revolved around the NFL and its leadership (@nfl; @nflcommish; @nflprguy), players’ association (@nflpa; @nflplayers) and the Super Bowl
Figure 2. Sociogram of 2016 NFL anthem protest conversation on Twitter
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Modularity Class</th>
<th>Percentage of Network</th>
<th>Topical Characteristics</th>
<th>Notable Accounts in the Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.91%</td>
<td>Government Officials</td>
<td>@realdonaldtrump; @vp; @potus; @gop; @secondlady; @whitehouse; @flotus; @donaldjtrumpjr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.17%</td>
<td>NFL Leadership and Organizations</td>
<td>@nfl; @nflcommish; @nflpa; @nflplayers; @nflprguy; @superbowl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.53%</td>
<td>Progressives, Supporters</td>
<td>@kaepernick7; @shaunking; @gqmagazine; @yourrightscamp; @theroot; @mosesbread72; @michaelskolnik; @nyjusticeleague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7.61%</td>
<td>NFL Sponsors</td>
<td>@anheuserbusch; @ford; @verizon; @usaa; @nike; @mcdonalds; @visa; @gatorade; @fedex; @dannon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>5.11%</td>
<td>NFL Media Outlets &amp; Teams</td>
<td>@nflnetwork; @houstontexas; @packers; @steelers; @nflonfox; @nflongameday; @nfloncbs; @nflmedia; @yahoosports</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(@superbowl). It is worth noting that the topical characteristics of this community represented the largest substructure in the 2016 network.

Modularity Class 6 accounted for 8.53% of the network and included 3,743 users. Colin Kaepernick was prominently featured in this community (@kaepernick7). Moreover, many of his supporters and community activists were frequently mentioned in association with him (@shaunking; @mosesbread72). Community organizations that were supportive of Kaepernick’s protest were discussed here (@yourrightscamp; @nyjusticeleague). GQ Magazine (@gqmagazine; @gq) were also frequently mentioned as the outlet named Kapernick as its Citizen of the Year (Schad, 2017). It is important to note that Kaepernick did not play in the NFL during the 2017 season, yet still accounted for such a large segment of the conversation.

Modularity Class 33 accounted for 7.61% of the conversation in the network and included 3,339 users. Similar to Modularity Class 225 in the 2016 network, this community primarily included references to official NFL sponsors (@anheuserbusch, @ford, @verizon, @usaa, @nike, @mcdonalds, @visa, @gatorade, @fedex, and @dannon among others). It is notable that the 2017 network represented a 2.78% increase in terms of the prominence of mentions of official NFL sponsors over the 2016 network.

Modularity Class 57 accounted for 5.11% of the overall network, consisting of 2,243 users. It primarily centered around the media outlets that aired NFL games (@nflnetwork; @nflonfox; @nfloncbs) and covered the NFL generally (@nflmedia; @yahoosports; @nflongameday). Several franchises were also mentioned in this modularity class (@packers; @steelers, among others).
In all, the 2017 network consisted of 25,394 nodes (users) and 83072 edges (interactions). Figure 3 offers a sociogram of the entire network, with different colors representing the top modularity classes.

**2019 Women’s World Cup.** The modularity value for the 2019 network was .55, and a total of 400 communities were identified. Table 12 offers a summary of the top five communities in terms of the percentage of the network they accounted for.

Modularity Class 56 represents 21.05% of the overall conversation within the network and contains 11,079 users. The most prominent account mentioned in this community was Megan Rapinoe (@mpinoe). Interestingly, conservative media pundits were also frequently mentioned in this conversation as well (e.g., @mollyfprince; @gatewaypundit; @glennbeck; @davidrutz).

Modularity Class 5 accounted for 11.82% of the conversation, consisting of 6,222 users. Most widely discussed among them was President Donald Trump (@realdonaldtrump). Most of these mentions were the result of a very public spat between the president and Rapinoe that primarily occurred over social media. What is unique about this community, however is that both left-leaning and conservative online activists created their own narratives and counternarratives around this event. Progressive accounts (e.g., @dgcomedy; @lisastark351; @tonyposnanski) were critical of the president and supportive of Rapinoe, whereas conservative accounts (e.g., @lubaobarbara; @merwinlee) were critical of Rapinoe’s protest and her stance on visiting the White House if the team were to win the World Cup.

Modularity Class 3 accounted for 10.87% of the network, consisting of 5,719 users. This community focused on mentions of the Women’s National Team (@USWNT) and U.S. Soccer (@ussoccer), in addition to specific players from the USWNT including Alex Morgan.
Figure 3. Sociogram of 2017 NFL anthem protest conversation on Twitter
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Modularity Class</th>
<th>Percentage of Network</th>
<th>Topical Characteristics</th>
<th>Notable Accounts in the Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>21.05%</td>
<td>Megan Rapinoe and conservative media pundits</td>
<td>@mpinoe; @mollyfprince; @gatewaypundit; @glennbeck; @davidrutz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.82%</td>
<td>Donald Trump, conservative media outlets, and online activists</td>
<td>@realdonaldtrump; @tomilahren; @ryanhillmi; @lubaobarbar; @dgcomedy; @lisastark351; @merwinlee; @tonyposnanski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.87%</td>
<td>USWNT, and members of the team</td>
<td>@uswnt; @alexmorgan13; @heatherchilders; @ussoccer; @christenpress; @roselavelle; @carlilloyd; @tobinheath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>4.75%</td>
<td>President of the United States and Franklin Graham, anti-protest accounts</td>
<td>@potus; @franklin_graham; @cb618444; @jali_cat; @nisegrimm93; @conservamomusa; @calideplorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>4.44%</td>
<td>Ali Krieger and Ashlyn Harris; out athletes on USWNT</td>
<td>@alikrieger; @ashlyn_harris; @grantwahl; @ashlynkriegers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(@alexmorgan13), Heather Childers (@heatherchilders), Christin Press (@christinpress), Rose Lavelle (roselavelle), and Tobin Heath (tobinheath) among others.

Modularity Class 98 accounted for 4.75% of the network, consisting of 2,501 users. Most of the conversation in this community revolved around Franklin Graham’s (@franklin_graham) criticism of Megan Rapinoe’s protest, and his affirmation of the president’s (@potus) stance on the subject. A contingent of conservative-leaning accounts circulated the story within this community (e.g., @cb618444; @jali_cat; @nisegrimm93; @conservamomusa; @calideplorable).

Modularity Class 87 accounted for 4.44% of the network, including 2,337 users. The most frequently mentioned users in this network were members of the USWNT Ali Krieger (@alikrieger) and Ashlyn Harris (@ashlyn_harris). Krieger and Harris were engaged to one another at the time of the WWC, and much of the conversation in this community revolved around their relationship and the LGBT community. Sports Illustrated reporter Grant Wahl (@grantwahl) covered them and their relationship throughout the WWC and their subsequent wedding in January 2020. Even parody accounts (e.g., @ashlynkriegers) were created to support their relationship.

Although it is not included in the top five communities within the overall network, Modularity Class 36 is worth mentioning here. It accounts for 2.36% of the conversation (ninth of the 400 overall), and consists of 1,240 users. Colin Kaepernick (@kaepernick7) was the most widely mentioned account in this community, along with his biggest sponsor, Nike (@nike).

In all, the 2019 network consisted of 52,629 nodes (users) and 122,249 edges (interactions). Figure 4 offers a sociogram of the entire network, with different colors representing the top modularity classes.
Figure 4. Sociogram of 2019 Women's World Cup anthem protest conversation on Twitter
Summary of Topical Communities. Modularity partitions the overall network in terms of the commonalities among interactions between users in the network. This allows the researcher to identify various topical areas within each of the three timeframes selected for this study. These topical areas represent the contexts within which online opinion leaders operated. Broader implications for these community substructures are discussed at greater length in Chapter 5.

Phase 2 – In-Depth Interviews

Opinion Leaders’ Use of Twitter During Anthem Protests

RQ3 sought to identify the various uses and gratifications online opinion leaders associate with their use of Twitter in online conversations around anthem protests. Analysis of the in-depth interviews resulted in the identification of four themes that reflect opinion leaders’ use of Twitter: (1) Advancing a counternarrative, (2) serving as a credible source of information, (3) leveraging and leaning on community, and (4) becoming an accidental influencer.

Advancing the Counternarrative. Participants were eager to explain how Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protests were often distorted by the mass media and through hyperpartisan discourse on Twitter. Many described feelings that the primary narrative around the protests was that Kaepernick and Rapinoe were protesting the flag, anti-military, and un-American. Some opinion leaders bought into this narrative as it was being presented. Sean described how he first felt when he originally learned of Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protest, and the process he went through of obtaining a more complete picture of the stories:

When Kaepernick initially began protesting, I was pissed off. But that’s only because I didn’t fully understand what he was protesting. Once I learned that, though, I respected his views and his choice. Same goes for Rapinoe. I didn’t understand why she was
protesting due to the immense popularity of the women’s team. That’s when I learned that she was a lesbian and was trying to ensure protections afforded to the LGBTQ+ community weren’t taken away, as well as standing with Kaepernick on all of the social issues he was advocating for.

Sean explained that his first reaction was emotional. He, like many others, was caught off guard by the protests, but was also compelled to dig deeper to learn of Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s motivations for kneeling during the national anthem. Hank had a similar experience as he came to understand Kaepernick’s rationale behind the protest.

He’s doing that because he wants our country to be better, not that he hates the country, you know? People who speak out, it’s because you care about something. It’s not because you…Like people were saying he should move to another country. No. He wants to make the country better. It’s his way of him trying to do that.

This was the essence of counternarrative that was being promoted by the opinion leaders interviewed for this study. It is important to note that participants were unequivocal in their assessment of how the conversation around Kaepernick and Rapinoe were beginning to unfold. Kim said, “He was totally misrepresented. He wasn’t protesting the anthem – however, because that’s how it was reported, I was pissed.” She went on to explain that her primary use of Twitter during this time “was and always will be to clarify the reason for the protest. To shed light on people of color getting murdered for no reason.”

The principle issue at hand, then, was how Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s message had been twisted to fit the narrative that they were anti-military, disrespectful to veterans and law enforcement, and un-American. Harold explained that this sentiment had gained such traction that it posed a significant challenge for those who were trying to set the record straight: “So, of
course it just began this large, huge conversation about the issue, and the main thing, what was getting lost was the message.”

Brian, a sports reporter for a national media outlet, made clear that he thought the mainstream media framing of the protest was highly problematic, and contributed to the general misinterpretation of Kaepernick’s original purpose. He said:

A lot of it has to do with the mainstream media framing. Even by calling it, which it was popularly called the “anthem” protests, just calling it that, you’ve tilted the scales against Kaepernick. Why are you calling it an anthem protest? Why aren’t you calling it a police accountability protest? Why aren’t you calling it a racial justice protest? You could’ve picked any of those. But when you frame the debate as an anthem protest or frame the debate as against the military – well then Kaepernick’s already lost because you framed the false debate, which he was 100% clear about in his comments. So, you’re willfully misconstruing a debate and feeding these ignorant Trumpers, this misinformation and a false debate. So instead of debating police accountability, police getting away with murder, we’re debating the military feeling. It’s ridiculous. I know I keep saying it’s ridiculous, but it is.

In addition to the media, President Trump was a central figure in this process to many of the opinion leaders interviewed for this dissertation. Several suggested that his 2017 comments calling on NFL owners to “get those sons of bitches off the field” for disrespecting the flag by taking a knee during the national anthem galvanized an already popular narrative among conservative circles that athletes like Kaepernick and Rapinoe were unpatriotic.

Brenda explained that specific conversations on Twitter emerged, in part, as a direct contradiction to this narrative:
So, the #TakeAKnee movement was largely about what Colin’s message was – calling attention to systemic racism and police brutality and injustices against people of color. And so that was on one side of the coin, and that’s mostly what I saw, was substantiation of that. The other argument was about disrespecting the military, disrespecting the flag, disrespecting the anthem, being unpatriotic. And that just seemed to be disingenuous…inaccurate, rooted in disinformation…Something that, unfortunately I believe in the age of Trump, something that this administration and Trump followers are good at is ignoring stated facts.

Hashtags like #TakeAKnee spawned numerous conversations and provided a frame of reference for other supporters to connect with and expand upon. Brian suggested that without social media, and Twitter specifically, other people would not become aware of important storylines that would otherwise fail to gain attention from mainstream media sources. He said:

So, mainstream media has a narrative about all of these veterans against Kaepernick.

Well, it was social media that had the hashtag #VeteransForKaepernick and talking about that. So that can only happen with social media. Without social media, you’re not getting the veterans for Kaepernick to combat the false narrative and twisting and changing of the subject that mainstream media would have done.

The hashtag #VeteransForKaepernick constituted an especially significant discussion that pushed back against the narrative that Kaepernick was disrespectful of veterans. Anti-military sentiment was pervasive in the online discussions around Kaepernick and Rapinoe. Several opinion leaders interviewed were veterans who felt a personal sense of duty to counter that position. One of them, Sandra, also had one of the highest followers count of any of any
participant interviewed. She told the story of an instance where she used Twitter to reframe the context with one of her own family members:

Our whole family’s military, so my family member was like, “I don’t agree with what he’s doing because I feel like it’s a hit against the military.” I sent her the story [through Twitter] of how he decided to kneel before the flag because soldiers kneel before the flag and before a soldier who has passed away. We kneel, and people kneel when someone is injured at any sport. You see people kneel because you’re honoring that person. You’re stopping. Your stopping everything for a moment. “Let’s just stop, take a break; let’s reset.” Everybody kneels to do that. Then in the military, we kneel before the memorial of someone who has passed away. It’s and honor. And once I explained that to her, she goes, “Oh my gosh.” So I actually changed her mind by explaining that to her.

Lee, a 22-year Marine Corp veteran, also defended Kaepernick’s protest. He placed kneeling during the national anthem within the larger context of civil rights activism in the United States. Specifically, Lee said that his primary reason for using Twitter during Kaepernick’s protest was to cast light on the stories of people of color that have been killed by police officers. He hoped that by supporting Kaepernick’s mission, people might realize the same devastating pattern he had noticed:

That’s why we had the Civil Rights March; that’s why you have people marching for rights to get things done. Some people have died for them. My number one focus was pretty much, “Hey, he’s bringing attention to something people are ignoring.” You’ll see them on the news, you’ll see on Twitter: black man, black woman, black child killed by the police. It will get a hashtag, go for about a week or two, and then it would die out. [Kaepernick] was trying to bring more attention to it and I thought it was a good thing.
For others, the online conversation became a catalyst that drove them away from the NFL. They perceived the NFL as being complicit in this narrative development that labeled Kaepernick as un-American, un-patriotic, anti-military, etc., through social media. In some ways, opinion leaders began to believe that the NFL had adopted this stance, too. Chris, a marketing executive in his professional life outside of Twitter, felt that league officials failed to adequately support athletes and that made him skeptical of the organization and its values. He said:

As this whole thing materialized, I walked further and further away from the NFL. I was frustrated. I was upset at owners for a lot of their backroom comments and failure to support their players. Say one thing on one hand, but in the NFL owners’ meetings, the commissioner’s meetings, say another thing. Which is a whole separate issue when, in some cases, 70% of your team is black. You would think like you’d have some interest in and at least putting your ear to the street with issues that didn’t apply to them, but no. I stopped watching completely. I stopped going to games. It’s even worse because one of my best friends used to play for the Raiders for eight years and they knew I was serious…I think the NFL basically gave a middle finger to a lot of fans who are passionate about support for Kaep or the issues he was rallying behind.

Chris went on to explain that he was highly critical of the NFL on Twitter for not doing enough to protect Kaepernick against distortions of his message. Several participants blamed the NFL for manufacturing a false sense of nationalism which fueled the anti-military narrative in the first place. This, they argued, drowned out Kaepernick’s message.

Again, as Brian mentioned, the crux of the matter stemmed from the notion that others were simply missing the point:
I wish that more folks who were up in arms about what Colin Kaepernick is doing would have paid attention to the fact that going from sitting to kneeling was a sign of respect to troops, and veterans, and patriots who have a special appreciation for the flag.

Several participants indicated that much of the disconnect between Kaepernick’s message and the various misperceptions of it was the direct result of disinformation being spread across the discursive landscape on Twitter. Sandra saw this as a pervasive problem, “Here’s the thing: It’s not far right-wing; it’s not far left-wing. It’s everybody. There’s somebody in every part of the entire spectrum who is trying to mislead you at any time.” In their attempts to combat the various misinterpretations of Kaepernick’s motives, opinion leaders began to realize that much of what was feeding these divergent perspectives was social media. Tonya, for one, pointed out that Twitter fueled the debate in different ways:

I mean, social media could be a good tool. Information can spread quickly, which is great. You hear about what people are doing, but the lies can spread quick just as fast. And you have to use critical thinking to decipher what’s real, and not enough people are doing that.

Several participants viewed the speed at which information travels on social media as problematic because no one took the time to evaluate it. Once a certain message was shared, it was readily adopted by those whom agreed with its content or discounted by those that disagreed. There was little room for real debate and dialogue. Martin summed up his views on this, and how it affected his motivation to engage:

Twitter’s not really set up to have any serious conversation. You can have it, but it doesn’t occur often. And people are — I think especially on the right — you don’t know who the bots are. They’re coming flying at you. And so, it’s just…most of the time it’s
really not worth it. Except maybe I’ll try to lay out facts as you know them and hopefully they’re accurate also.

Martin’s use of the word *hopefully* here raises an important question: how were these opinion leaders sure that the information they encountered and shared was, in fact, credible? If, as Sandra suggested earlier, people on any plane of the ideological spectrum are actively misleading, how can one authenticate their content? Brenda considered there to be a clear line between logical and emotional appeals which spurred conversation on either side of the conversation:

There’s a preponderance of disinformation, and so honestly, I see the two sides of this argument mirroring the same architecture. And the architecture is there are facts, and I mean we have statistics; we have statistics on the rise of racist violence. Southern Poverty Law Center has a group called “Hate Watch” and there are statistics…I can’t cite them off the top of my head, but there’s not really a shortage. And the other side plays on sentimentality, fear – there’s quite a lot of invocation of fear of others, xenophobia – and I find that frustrating. It’s a double-edged sword. I think Twitter is a great platform, yes, for democratization of voices, it’s a good platform for facts. We learn news literacy, what are sources. So, I see that on the plus side. On the negative side, it really is pretty easy for disinformation to proliferate.

In order to combat what opinion leaders interviewed for this study considered false information, several explained that they had to be attuned to the conversation constantly. They perceived their role as a moderator of truthful and misleading information. Brian described his experience of feeling motivated to push back against false narratives:

I mean, I was on top of it every day. Probably to my detriment. I should be doing other things, like my job and whatnot, but that’s my own issue. But there’s this feeling that you
had to fight for him. You wanted to show him support, so you felt compelled to show him support – counter the idiotic narratives. I’ve heard every Kaepernick critic argument that could possibly be made. Thousands. To a point where it becomes a study…It’s a constant battle. It never ends. You’d debunk and disprove the first thing a Kaepernick critic says they’ll go on to the second thing. If you debunk and disprove the second thing, they’ll go onto the third and then the 10th…Lie after lie after lie, and then you keep battling them and then they come up with something new.

Users were highly aware of the fact that many of the accounts spreading the false or misleading information were trolls, bots, or fake accounts created solely to sow division. Some even brought them up nonchalantly in conversation, like Lee:

I had a few followers that were suspended because they were fake accounts when Twitter did that sweep last year for fake accounts. They got rid of a lot of fake accounts of people that were following me…Yeah, a lot of fake accounts were made just to spread negativity about Kaep. Just like a lot of fake accounts were made during the presidential election timeframe, things of that nature. I’ve been in groups that speak about stuff, and then all of the sudden people would just disappear out the group.

Lee discussed these accounts as though they were a normal part of the Twitter landscape. He suggested that bots, trolls, and fake accounts did just as much to shape the conversation around Kaepernick as real people did. He described this as an attempt to drive people closer to the margins. Several participants mentioned the idea of echo chambers on Twitter, which closely mirrors the concept of homophily in social network research. Chris, for one, explained that these bots and fake accounts made it difficult to feel as though he had any effect on countering narratives that were circulated with a clear purpose to appeal to one side over another:
It’s a highly controversial topic and all you need to do — the fire’s lit — all you need to do is pour some gas on it and it’s going to go up. It’s crazy, I fear that — and not to be too negative or too much of a pessimist — but like sometimes I wonder if all this disinformation can ever be reeled in. I think the damage is done.

Opinion leaders were quick to respond to narratives that they believe were fueled by false or misleading information, and it is clear that many felt their main use of Twitter in this context was to defend the counternarrative. In order to accomplish this, participants indicated that they had to become credible voices in a cacophony of misinformation.

**Being Credible Sources.** Participants frequently mentioned that they felt a sense of personal responsibility to provide accurate, credible information to their followers about the protests. Many considered the online conversations around the protests to be an outlet for people to engage with one another around topics that are socially and culturally significant because they increased people’s awareness of important issues.

Kaitlyn runs a highly popular Twitter account under an alias that she uses to discuss controversial topics with her followers. She explained how she considered the online conversation around Kaepernick and Rapinoe productive:

I think the online communication about the anthem protests is very important. Two reasons: the people who don’t agree or support Kaepernick are talking online, and pushback is required to get a more balanced reaction. Also, there are some people that don’t think about racial justice on a regular basis, or don’t realize what a problem it is. Online conversations get that awareness out.

But in order for these conversations to be productive, Kaitlyn also pointed to the importance of being perceived by her following as a credible source of information. She mentioned that her
credibility is an important asset in her effort to redirect the narratives around Kaepernick and Rapinoe. In order to establish and maintain that credibility among their followers, several participants noted their intentional efforts to present accurate information over Twitter. Chris explained it like this:

I like to deal with truth, and fact, and empirical data. I want people to have some tangible evidence against a lot of these talking points. So, a lot of times I’m trying to get information in either my friends’ hands or in cases like this where it might be a campaign or a topic based on a hashtag.

It was common for participants to frame their role on Twitter as information distributors, equipping their followers with the right tools to advance the counternarrative around Kaepernick and Rapinoe. Allison said she felt like “the most important thing I can do on Twitter is to retweet things that are communicating something of value, that are communicating a stance that I think people need to hear.”

Brian discussed how his very visible use of Twitter to argue with others calling Kaepernick anti-military, un-American, etc., served to inform those that observed his interactions. He explained:

The great thing about social media is you’re not arguing with the idiot who is contesting your social media. You’re informing the onlookers. So, when an idiot talks to me…you’re also giving the onlookers, or Kaepernick supporters, tools in their arsenal, in their family conversations at home that they’re inevitably going to run into. So, if doing so would equip others with those tools, with those stats, with those arguments, then great. So, I do believe that I certainly made a dent, but no one ever knows how much they made a dent. The important thing is that it needs to be a collective effort.
Like Brian, Sandra was adamant that her Twitter account serve as a source of information to her users. She explained, however, that even though she doesn’t develop many actual relationships with them, she feels a sense of pride and responsibility in her role as a source of information for people:

Now do I ever talk to these people on the phone or in real life? No, I wouldn’t consider them friends, but they do see my page as credible, and at least they see my page as a place for information, you know? I mean I guess that’s why they follow me.

As Sandra began to understand her role in the conversation, she noticed how important it was for her to refrain from any emotionally charged outbursts or from sharing any information that was overly biased:

I honestly didn’t realize the power that my voice had on social media until I’ve gone viral a bunch of times. Like I’ve been interviewed by the BBC type of thing. Once I realized that, I’m like, “Okay I need to chill” and I’m very responsible. I’d tell people, “Look, if I post something that’s not real or it’s really old, or you find that there’s something wrong with it, please tell me. I will take it down immediately and check it out again. I’m not here for the likes; I’m here for the information.” So I made it a point to make sure that my platform is informational instead of more opinionated.

Participants also explained that while it is important for them to serve as credible sources of information in the conversation, it is equally important that they control their emotions so as to avoid being too inflammatory or off-putting.

Martin, for one, suggested that it would be unlikely to convince anyone of his position if he were to let his emotions get the better of him in the conversation: “If you fly back at them and say, ‘you don’t know what you’re talking about, you’re an idiot,’ you’re not influencing. You
might feel better. But you’re not influencing anything.” Chris said that he tries to “tamp down the anger and the frustration” he feels when he engages in the conversation because it ultimately works against what he’s trying to do.

Allison told an especially poignant story of a time she had tried to argue with another person on social media. She explained how she lost her temper during the interaction and that ultimately left her feeling discouraged by her own actions.

I got a lot of blow-back for my tone, which I just was very shocked and ashamed and gutted by. Because I then felt like I had blown this opportunity to really change the conversation or evolve the conversation. And instead I had just stalled it where it was, and made it worse, really. So, I do feel like Twitter has infected my sense of debate and what is reasonable ground rules for debate. And I’m trying to unlearn that. Like, right now I’m trying to roll back that tendency of myself. And I’m like, ‘Wait, remember words have power.’

In such an emotionally charged and controversial debate, participants explained that it is actually quite easy and relatively common for them to fall into these traps. Sandra articulated this feeling well:

I’ve made mistakes along the way and I’ve admitted that to my followers, ‘Look, I’m sorry for that tweet. It was really out of…I was angry, and I was frustrated, but you know what? This is not who I am, so I deleted it.’ I even tell people when I delete something because people hate it when you delete and they’re like ‘Oh, you’ve got something to hide.’ No. I’m going to tell you I deleted this, and this is why; this is not who I am. This is not what I want you to be. This is not who I want you to think I am, and this is not who I want you to be. As a group, as a 40,000-people group, this is what I want us to be, and
my tweet was not that. That particular tweet, I was angry about. That is not who I want us to be as a group.

In order to consider themselves as credible sources of information, participants believed that they needed to offer level-headed commentary in a conversation that was quickly spiraling out of control in order to be perceived by their followers as reliable voices.

Sandra also brought to light an important point in the quote above. She discussed her “group” of 40,000 followers and refers to her agency over shaping the group’s behavior and beliefs by saying “this is not who I want you to be…this is not what I want us to be.” Another theme for how opinion leaders used Twitter in the conversation around anthem protests centers around the idea of community.

**Leveraging and Leaning on Community.** Extant literature on opinion leaders describes them as being embedded in their communities. Participants identified as opinion leaders for this project clearly explained how prominent their sense of community was using Twitter. Emily, for one, explained that Twitter offered people a sense of belonging that they might not otherwise experience through their physical surroundings. She said, “If you don’t have a community and there’s no way to have one in the small place where you live, then I think social media can absolutely be a life-saver.” Sandra mentioned that having other verified accounts following her profile made her feel even more connected: “It’s kind of neat that I have all these credible people follow me. So, it lends credibility to my page, too.”

Some participants, like Kaitlyn, found value in community because it enabled them to further advance her platform:

I have built a following based solely on liberal politics and social reform, therefore my followers were very receptive and supportive when I began speaking about Kaepernick
and his platform…Speaking up about this inspires others to do the same. They may even become confident enough to make comments offline and spread awareness that way. I believe when we express strong, educated opinions online it gives others the space to speak up, too. It multiplies support.

Being part of a like-minded community also empowered opinion leaders to keep participating in the conversation, even in the face of harsh opposition. Dianne explained how her followers responded whenever she was confronted about her message:

Most of what I experienced was very supportive. Every now and again I’d have some strange energy float across my path, and they’ll decide to say something. They’ll get our wrath, and it’s usually a collective wrath. So, we’re very supportive of each other in our views.

Several times during our conversation, Dianne referred to her followers as her “Twitter family,” and I asked her what she meant by that. Her answer further enhances the significance of community to opinion leaders in these contested environments:

Well, you’ve spent a couple of minutes on the phone with me. I am very vulnerable, and transparent, and open, and I share a lot. So the people that connect with me, they know my kids, they’ve seen pictures of my daughter and my son, and clips of their performances and ballet or whatever they have going on, so if I am allowing you into my space and you are allowing me into your space, then you are like family to me. If you came to my house for the first time, I would treat you like family. You are a guest in my home. And so, I see my social media space with the same level of intimacy. I’m very intimate and I’m very engaging. So, if I’m spending time with you and I’m sharing posts
and reading your stuff, we’re exchanging energy, we’re exchanging thoughts, we’re exchanging ideas.

To Dianne, her Twitter use was personal. She felt as though her followers were like family and was compelled to treat them as such. Not only was it important for Dianne to have a space to share her thoughts and ideas, but also to feel as though she were connected with the people she shared them with in such an intimate way. Similarly, Harold believed that he felt closer to people when they agreed with things he said on Twitter.

Those people who agree with what I’m saying, we become more connected. All these people would come to my defense that I didn’t even know. So, that’s how Twitter works. Twitter works where, you can go out there and say the sky is blue, and people who agree with you can connect with you; they join with you and help promote which particular subject you’re advancing. It’s an awesome platform.

Others expressed that responsiveness to their community was important. Sandra explained how she relies on her followers to hold her accountable for what she shares and how she engaged in the conversation:

I leave it up to my followers sometimes to call me out. I have to because information flows so quickly that sometimes I’ll retweet something that looks good and I’m just in a hurry or whatever, and I’ll retweet it…So I constantly tell my followers, “If you have a question about anything I post, please tell me because I don’t want to be the person to steer you wrong.”

Developing a sense of community over Twitter was critical to participants’ participation in the conversation around the anthem protests. As opinion leaders shared their ideas, beliefs, and messages with their followers, they also did so with other opinion leaders. It was surprising when
Chris directly referenced another opinion leader interviewed for this study as a source of his own information:

You follow [Brian]. I thought I saw that. Listen man, he’s the gold standard when it comes to this stuff. Honestly, I’m a big fan of his and I think especially because he understands his platform like as a white man writing about racial issues. I have a lot of respect for him.

Chris’s respect for Brian’s participation in the conversation underscores the value of community in these online discussions. Chris lives on the West Coast, and Brian lives on the East Coast. Even though they are connected through Twitter over their shared beliefs about Kaepernick, Brian likely has no idea of the impact he had on Chris. This is not an uncommon occurrence; influencers are not always aware of their influence. The next section explores how opinion leaders described their “accidental influence” as key figures in the conversation around anthem protests.

**The Intrinsic Satisfaction of being an “Accidental” Influencer.** It is difficult for opinion leaders on Twitter to assess the value of their contributions to a conversation because their followers often do not directly respond to them, and there’s no way of knowing if they even see their posts. Consequently, many participants interviewed for this study were not sure of the effect they had on the conversation around the anthem protests but nevertheless explained that they felt a sense of intrinsic, personal satisfaction when using the platform to convey values that were important to them in light of the context. Brenda, for one, said, “I just try to amplify what I believe in, what is truthful.” Allison indicated that she wasn’t necessarily *trying* to influence anyone, but rather she was using Twitter in order “to educate myself… I don’t want to see myself as a big fish in the Twitter pond.” Instead of actively *trying* direct the conversation,
Allison outlined various ways in which she felt participating in the conversation enriched her own understanding of the issue; all the while, by virtue of sharing content to the extent that she did, she unwittingly became an influential figure in the conversation.

What is unique about Twitter, though, is that users do not have to be “big fish” in order to make an impact, nor do they have to make an impact to feel a sense of satisfaction by participating. By virtue of simply spreading information, participants were actively contributing to others’ understanding of the events. Some did so unconsciously, and others felt that they knew exactly what they were doing. Brian described his role this way:

So, my general view is this: I don’t know how much of an impact I’m having, but I notice it’s not going on because I said nothing. You know what I mean? I can’t tell you if I’m changing the discussion, but I can tell you that if nothing changes it certainly won’t be because of my silence.

To Brian, his overall impact is less important to him than the fact that he is using Twitter as a means to support Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s cause. Anything else, to him, is coincidental. Nevertheless, he, like others interviewed for this study, explained that he felt compelled to be part of the conversation. Although Sandra is more cognizant of her success by virtue of the following she has accumulated, she also believes her role is important: “Because I’ve accidentally fallen into this role, yes, it’s a huge responsibility.”

The feeling of having accidentally fallen into opinion leadership on Twitter is rooted in the idea discussed above – that influence is not easy to assess. Participants explained that because they did not have millions of followers, that their voices could not possibly have carried any weight. Tonya summarized this mentality:
I don’t have a lot of followers. People make fun of me because I only have like 500 people or less following me. I don’t even know what my count is. I’m not here for that. I kind of joined to follow the really smart people and get their perspective. Like I follow former federal prosecutors and stuff to kind of get their analysis. I don’t have a lot of people that follow me, so I don’t know how much of an influence I am. But I just feel like every little bit helps if you just keep putting the facts out there and try not to be a jerk. It’s going to hit somebody and make them think.

William echoed Tonya’s strategy to simply put information out there, and hope for even minimal impact:

You know what? I do what I can do as far as putting it out there. I have a few thousand [followers]. I mean, like I said, it’s a very small stage. It’s not like I have a million followers or something like that, right? But for those people that do follow me, they’re going to hear from me. And a lot of times the stuff that I say gets retweeted or sent along. So, I don’t know how effective it really is in changing people’s lives. But the point is that, put it out there, and if all that ever changes is one person’s life – if one day, one person takes a positive step that they wouldn’t have taken because they saw a tweet that I put out there, then I would say it’s worth it.

The feeling of success over even minimal gains is important to note. Participants in this study openly doubted that they could change the minds of the masses, and to many that was never the point. Rather, for people like Dianne, it was about moving the needle in even the slightest way. She said, “If I can lift women a little higher, if I can continue to highlight issues and causes that are important to me, and if I can share parts of my family, parts of my personal life that brighten someone else’s day then I’m all for it.” Similarly, Harold considered his participation in the
conversation around anthem protests as part of his role as a civil rights leader. He explained, “I always feel like when I see no matter how big or small something is, that for me to at least share what’s going on about it.”

Participants often described the sense of personal satisfaction they feel when they use Twitter to advance causes they believe in. Few openly stated that they purposefully became opinion leaders in the conversation. Instead, their passion for the subject motivated them to participate. Emily’s account of this kind of experience is both humorous, and emblematic of this assertion:

I try to ... I don't know. I try to amplify or retweet things that I think are important. I like people's stuff. If I can't stop myself, I will get into fights. I think I just felt such a personal connection with Megan [Rapinoe] that I was like, "How dare you. Don't you dare talk about her." So, anytime I saw anything, I was like, "I'm going to find you and I'm going to kill you." My girlfriend is six years older than me. She's 41. I'm turning 35 this month. She does not understand it. She just wakes up and sees me fighting with strangers on the Internet and she's like, "You have got to stop. There is nothing ... Nothing good comes out of that." I'll show her something. I'll be like, "Man, I roasted this guy." It's bad, but it is 100% a compulsion at this point.

Emily’s use of Twitter is not unlike others interviewed for this project, but it does effectively summarize the themes identified through analysis of the interviews. Opinion leaders are not always conscious of their influence in a conversation, but they do know that their participation provides them with a deep sense of personal satisfaction. They rely on their community of like-minded people to come to their defense or draw inspiration from them. They are concerned with their own credibility as a source of information in the conversation. And, finally, they actively
work to advance a counternarrative to the popular position that framed Kaepernick and Rapinoe as un-American, unpatriotic, and disrespectful to military and law enforcement.

This section outlined the various uses and gratifications opinion leaders sought from their use of Twitter in the conversation around anthem protests. The next section further explores the underlying motivations behind their participation.

Moral Foundations and Opinion Leadership

RQ4 sought to explore the moral foundations that motivate opinion leaders to participate in the online conversation around anthem protests. If opinion leaders play a key role in the network ecology around issues like protests, it is useful to identify what motivates opinion leaders to participate, and how their moral foundations guide the way they navigate controversial issues. Analysis of the interviews resulted in the identification of three themes that help to explain how opinion leaders’ moral foundations affect their participation in the online conversation: (1) Identity and experience drive participation, (2) perceived ideological division over identity, (3) the pursuit of common ground.

“Most People are Very Complicated:” Identity and Experience Drive Participation.

The most common thread tying each participant interview together was the role an individual’s identity and experience played in participating in the online conversation around Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protest. One of the first questions each participant was asked sought to obtain a sense of what each person felt when they would see protests from either athlete. William’s response to this question stood out:

I was proud. I am black. I’m older now. I’m 51. I have son that is now 18, but at the time he was younger like maybe 14 or something like that. And police brutality in the black community is a real thing. I don’t know anybody that hasn’t been touched by it. And I
thought that I always complain about these guys with a large platform not using that platform to help, to actually make improvements.

Dianne’s response was similar to William’s:

My reaction to Kaepernick’s protest was initially one of empathy. I am a brown woman. I have brown children. My son is 17 years old. He’s 6’3” and 270 pounds. He has been in the 100th percentile since he came out of the womb. So, I have literally been having this conversation with my son about the police since he was about 2 years old. Seriously. He would be in the back seat, in his car seat, and we’d pass a police officer where there was someone being pulled over, and I would give him that brown mom lecture that we all give our boys.

Harold echoed a comparable narrative:

I understood where he was coming from, and I can relate to that as someone who was racially profiled. The first time it happened, I was about 16 or 17 years old. So, I can identify with what Colin Kaepernick was saying. And it didn’t stop, growing up in my life. I could identify with what was going on, and so I decided, “Hey, I’m going to get into this conversation,” and I started tweeting, sharing my opinions with it and letting everyone know that I’m a veteran who stands with Kaepernick.

Chris’s story was similar to the first three offered by William, Dianne, and Harold. But Chris’s account was much more descriptive:

I’ll be 43 in three days, and look man, I didn’t have some inner-city upbringing. I grew up in a fairly affluent suburb of New York City about a half-hour outside. My parents had resources; we weren’t by any means wealthy or anything, but I had cousins I was able to
compare and contrast my life against – cousins with less means, right? Family members and friends in the inner city and it’s like, it is, this shit happened to me.

He went on to describe an experience he had when he was younger of a night out with friends.

Chris was the designated driver that evening, and as he drove through town in a new Lexus SUV, he was confronted by the police:

We turn off this highway. We’re at a stop light and this gold car, unmarked car, Chevy, comes screeching at us. Stops. Two guys hop out of the car, guns pointed – “Get the fuck out of the car, get the fuck out of the car.” They had not identified themselves as police. I sat there with the fight or flight hold in my mind for what seems like an eternity – it was obviously a split-second and then one of the guys pulled his badge. I’m married with two kids now; if I had done something which I viewed as protecting myself I would have been shot dead and it would have been justified as “Oh, well, you know what they were aggressive toward the officers.”

Chris’s account is eerily similar to the kinds of events Kaepernick was protesting. He has no reservations telling me that this is what prompted him to be an active voice in the online conversation around Kaepernick:

I’m passionate about this because I understand it firsthand and what I’m trying to do is effectively communicate what this is like, right? I’ve spent my entire life trying to be an ally to women, to the LGBT community, to disabled folks, the people who don’t have the same privilege I have. And it really, really frustrates me when people refuse to listen and engage and hear the experiences of others that the immediately discredit and always marginalize.
To Chris, William, Harold, and Dianne, that’s exactly what happened when they realized that the emerging narrative about Kaepernick had nothing to do with what he was actually protesting. For them, as people of color, it was just another example of their voices not being heard. Dianne explained it well:

With Kaepernick, I think the people who choose not to see this for what it was – they probably felt as if he should be honored just to be playing for the NFL. He should be honored to be receiving a million-dollar paycheck. He should be some grateful negro dancing on the sidelines and he’s in a position where he should show some gratitude.

Dianne’s assessment of the situation was not unlike those of others that were interviewed. Allison came to this realization as well, and took issue with how the argument was framed:

To accuse someone of being ungrateful implies that they should be grateful for what they’ve been given, which implies that you need to stay in your place, kind of…People want to locate themselves in something, in things that are predictable and known. You know? And these things [patriotism, nationalism, white patriarchy], because they’re so widespread and ubiquitous they have this benefit of having had the primacy in culture for so long, that anything that becomes symbols of actual righteousness, or symbols of correctness. And when those are openly challenged, it’s very, very frightening, I think, to people.

She went on to explain her comments, offering more clarification on her position:

There are certain earmarks of white patriarchy that are symbols that people just accept without examining them as proof of goodwill, good standing, trustworthiness. And I think it’s very much caught up with Christian identity. And that there is a…I guess what
I’m trying to say, yeah, identity. I feel like that people who are reacting negatively to
Kaepernick and Rapinoe…They feel like their identity is threatened.

To Allison, the people whose identities were being “threatened” were the one’s calling
Kaepernick unpatriotic, un-American, and imploring him to leave the country. To her
astonishment, the narrative had been flipped. What about the identities of people of color in the
country? What about the black men, women, and children that lost their lives to police violence?
Instead, Allison saw people who were threatened by the implication of their symbols: a flag, an
anthem that stood for patriotism and love of country. To her, these symbols were being treated
with the same sanctimonious fervor often associated with religious icons.

Allison placed much of the blame on the conservative right for establishing these
narratives and enforcing them with such ferocity. Sean described how political identity affects
people’s perceptions of reality:

You have some people in this country who are so blinded by their party affiliations and
nationalistic intentions, that they don’t see the actual problems our country faces…But
there are also people on the far left that are too “woke” and want to blame all of their own
problems on the same things that these legitimate social problems are dealing with.

Sean and Allison brought the personal attachments that people place on their political ideologies
into sharp focus. Martin explained what happens when people hold too close to their beliefs and
value systems when confronted with an issue that runs counter to them:

When you start making it a hyper patriotism sort of thing where everything is militarized
to a degree, it makes protest even more difficult. You’re against the flag; you’re against
the anthem; you’re against this. And then people shut down and don’t listen to it.
This certainly lends credibility to Brian’s comments presented earlier that the scales were already tilted against Kaepernick just by virtue of having his actions labeled “anthem protests.”

Several participants identified as veterans and explained that they had to defend themselves against attacks accusing them of being disrespectful to the flag that they themselves served under. Many that were supportive of Kaepernick felt that they had to explain their position to those that levied unwarranted affronts against their identity as veterans. Sandra explained that because she was a veteran, many people assumed she opposed Kaepernick and his actions. She said people were surprised when she said she supported him, and that she did not appreciate anyone assuming where she stood politically based on her veteran status:

Like myself: I’m a veteran. I’m a liberal. But I like guns, but I want normal regulations for guns. I shoot guns; I own guns, but I want common sense regulations, you know? I’m not just a straight, down-the-line “this is who I am.” Most people are very complicated. We’re not just one thing.

Lee, a Marine-Corps veteran and a black male, drew from his own personal experience as he explained his support for Kaepernick:

Once they reported it on the NFL Network, that’s when the whole world went crazy in my opinion. I just thought it got blown out of proportion, which could just be the opinion of a 22-year Marine. It didn’t bother me. I was like, “Hey, that’s what we serve for.” … I served on CACO duty, Casualty Assistance Officers Duty, where you go knock on families’ doors and let them know a Marine or solder has gotten killed. When we present the flag at a funeral, we take a knee and give the flag to the loved one. It could be the mother, the husband, the father, the child. That’s the utmost respect we pay to our fallen service members, men and women. We take a knee and present that flag to their family.
He explained that the opposition to Kaepernick was thinly veiled behind a false sense of patriotism among his dissenters:

A lot of those fans are the same people I would see walk by a homeless veteran and won’t give him a penny out of their pocket. That’s why I hate everybody who says “We support the military. We help the military right here in [Lee’s hometown].” I see homeless vets every day. All these fools that claim they love the military and do this and that for the military will walk by a homeless vet who needs food or needs money in their pocket and won’t even think twice about them. I’m like, “Don’t use the military for your benefit when it comes to you trying to get a vote or trying to get some sympathy or some love.”

All these people think that if you stand up, if you got an American flag on your T-shirt, or you got an American flag hat on, you a patriot. Number one, if you’re wearing an American flag on your shirt or hat, you’re in violation of the flag code. If you read the flag manual you would know: Any flag print on a shirt, hat, anything of that nature is a violation of the flag manual. But everybody think they know everything, so that’s why I sit back and laugh at people. “I’m a patriot; I’m going to go put on an American flag dress and stand up with my AR-15, M-16 and take a photo.” No, you not a patriot. You in violation, fool.

He went on to explain how he defended himself on Twitter against those that called him out for his support of Kaepernick as a veteran himself:

Then when people started going toward the “How can you disrespect our military? You don’t care about the military.” I would see some of the most outlandish comments about the whole kneeling thing and things of that nature. I think when people started complaining about kneeling that’s what drew me in, because I was like: “Look, I’ve had
to knock on that door and tell someone that their son got killed on their mother’s birthday.”

Lee’s identity as a veteran and a black male were both challenged as a result of his support over Kaepernick. Another veteran that was interviewed for this study named Tyler, a white male, felt compelled to counter the narrative that just because he was a white veteran, he opposed Kaepernick’s message as well: “I mean, what roots a lot of the conversation is just straight up racism. Racists never admit that they are indeed racist. So, I feel like it’s my responsibility as a bald white guy with tattoos and a beard to show that not all of us are fucking skinheads.” Tyler went on to explain how his interpretation of the flag and the anthem can take on different meanings to different people:

I’m not a spiritual or religious guy, so I don’t have a lot of symbols that mean things to me. I’m not that type of person, I guess. So, those who kind of reflexively want to defend the flag, I can obviously empathize with them. I used to be one of them. The flag while you’re in the military is not just something you salute in the morning and saluted as its being taken down at the end of every day. It’s also used in funeral services. I think that the subconscious effect of seeing the symbol as your reason for getting up in the morning basically, and then it’s the last thing that you associate with your buddy as he’s being put in the ground, if he was killed in combat or died by suicide. It becomes very important. So, on the other side, we as veterans are fighting for the constitution. We swear our oath to the Constitution, not to a piece of cloth that’s colorful, right? The American flag is something that’s evolved throughout our nation’s history. Maybe one day it’s going to have more than 50 states or something, right? But the Constitution, that is supposed to be
a core of everything we are fighting for. And within the constitution we have our First Amendment rights, and that does include…that even burning a flag is freedom of speech.

Even though each participant interviewed for this project was supportive of Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protests, each one of them came to their own understanding of the events based on their own personal identity and the experiences that shaped and formed them into who they are. The next section explores what happened when opinion leaders encountered other users whose identity and experiences did not match their own.

“You’re Being You, and He’s Being Him:” The Divide over Ideological Differences.

Nearly every person interviewed could identify an instance where they were challenged by someone on Twitter about their views regarding the protests. Some handled these instances better than others. Emily, for example, said, “all the negativity, the dissidence, the ego threat was…I just couldn’t deal with it.” People’s ideological differences manifest on the social platform in many ways, but one of the most challenging aspects to many opinion leaders was the vitriolic nature of the interactions with whom they disagreed. Allison described it this way:

I feel like Twitter, yeah, it gives me a lot as far as being able to get a range of perspectives. But on the other hand, yeah, it also feels like there’s a bitterness and divisiveness that seems to be deepening. And I think that is part of the effect of Twitter specifically. And I realized in retrospect that I had internalized this sense of, “This person is there to be called out and torn down for expressing a wrong opinion.”

Tonya had a similar explanation for how the conversation had begun to devolve on Twitter between opposing camps:

This is the thing, and I hate to sound cruel or judgmental, but it’s causing division with everybody. If it was just really smart people, there wouldn’t be as much division because
they’d know what’s crap and they’d dismiss it. But the fact that they’re getting to the
people who are more ignorant and don’t put any research in, they are the ones that are
usually the loudest and making everybody fight. Now there’s like a giant bar brawl
between everybody [on Twitter]. Even the ones that are smart enough to not want to get
involved.

Dianne lamented the fact that people now seem disinterested in seeking common ground
on Twitter. She said, “I mean, we don’t really have a middle ground anymore, and the people
that were for were for, and the people that were against were against; there wasn’t really a
middle ground.” Tonya explained that this tendency for people to be divisive on Twitter is
reflective of people’s aversion to any political ideology that doesn’t align with their own, even if
it’s nominal. She used a story to illustrate her point:

I was talking to my sister-in-law about this. My sister-in-law has a really, really high IQ
and she teaches government and politics. And she says to me, “So many people have
such lazy brains.” She thinks that they believe the first thing they hear on a subject and
the just go with it and stick with it. And I honestly…I think too few people put any
thought into this. I’ll give you an example. I know a woman who cannot stand liberals.
She’s a conservative. She was born in Massachusetts, raised by Democrats. So, I asked
her about 10 questions to see how she’d answer: the death penalty, women’s right to
choose, all of those things. Eight out of 10 questions she answered like a Democrat. I
said, “Congratulations, you’re a Democrat.” And she started pounding her fist and she
yelled at me. “I’m not, I can’t stand Liberals. I’m not blanking Democrat.”

This type of story lends support to how Emily describes having a conversation over the Internet
with someone that opposes her own personal beliefs as inherently difficult:
I don't think anyone who disagrees at the outset of a conversation walks away convinced by the other person’s argument. I spend a lot of time fighting with strangers on the internet, and I feel like twice I've gotten, it felt like, anywhere. I think you go, and you see things that either infuriate you or deeply validate and delight you, and you just share comments or the posts of people that you despise. I think not having the eyes of another human being to look into while you say things at them is so awful and toxic.

Not every interaction that opinion leaders described were necessarily “awful” or “toxic,” but some truly were. William described his experience in this way: “There were people that were venomous in their attacks on me, telling me how stupid and unpatriotic I was. And the N word. I got the full gamut of protest.” Harold, explained how he lost longtime friends over his social media activity during the protests:

I took some backlash. I’m not even going to tell you how many friends that I have lost over just the last couple of years between the NFL and Trump. It’s been very toxic. Man, a friend of mine, somebody who I served with for more than a decade, that I knew for more than a decade, just sent me a text and said, “Hey, I can’t stand how you’re supporting this guy any longer,” and just unfriended me from Facebook and we haven’t talked to each other in like two years now, and he was a pastor! I’m like, “Am I being outrageous? Then, I started talking to other people, and they were just like, “No, you’re just being you, and he was just being him.”

The way Harold phrased the last sentence is noteworthy: *you’re just being you, and he was just being him.* Few discussions over the course of these interviews were more emblematic of the divisive discourse that permeated social media during these timeframes. Lee summarized his experience in a similar fashion:
I got a few nasty DMs. That’s when Twitter changed the DM method where you now have to get approved to see someone’s DM. During that time anybody could send you one. I got called a “fake Marine. You don’t respect the country. You’re not a real Marine.” This and that. Got called the N-word in a few DMs, but I was like, “Okay. You not affecting my life. It’s just a message. I know how to swipe delete.”

Tonya also remembers being confronted over her beliefs:

I do kind of remember a bunch of Conservatives basically calling me stupid. I mean they really didn’t bring much to the conversation that I can remember. I remember walking away and thinking, “My God, they don’t even try to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes on this.” It was just bizarre. And then they’d have one person confirming what the other idiot said.

Sean recalled conversations where others called his patriotism into question, and explained how he responded:

I had people tell me to leave the country if I hate it so much. As I explain to them, I don’t hate our country, I hate the social blindness a lot of folks have because they’d rather watch stupid reality shows and base their opinions off of what the Kardashians or Real Housewives or Glenn Beck think. In my eyes, that makes people into lemmings.

Still, despite the backlash, many of the opinion leaders described how they felt undeterred by the divisive rhetoric they experienced. In particular, Chris offered a rationale that he felt further substantiated his role in the conversation: “I try to continually engage with them and, as I’ve told them before, I’m not going away because I’m the only black voice that you might ever come into contact with.”
Chris’s determination underscores the premise that many of the opinion leaders also sought common ground with their counterparts despite facing vehement opposition. In the end, many believed that, in spite of their differences, advocates and dissenters could work toward resolution and reconciliation.

“The Journey of 1,000 Miles Begins with One Step:” Pursuing Common Ground.

Moral foundations theory assumes that people’s political preferences are comparable to their taste in food. Some people prefer the savory, others sweet. Some align with liberal policies and ideologies, others conservative. Fundamentally, however, both taste and political preference represent different ways of understanding the same things. Consequently, the theory partly accounts not only for what divides us, but also what unites us.

In the context of the current study, Dianne outlined her rationale behind her motivation to seek common ground with others: “I think the majority of people are good. I think the majority of people want to do the right thing, and they want to believe the right thing…and people are becoming more empathetic, even though it may not be their life experience, I think they’re getting it more often than not.” David expanded on this idea further:

I think that the online conversation, when steered correctly, can be a very valuable and useful tool in helping bring people together from opposing viewpoints. I’ve had my fair share of disagreements with folks, but we’ve discussed them as grown adults and, once we talk more, come to the realization that we agree on the end result but have different ways of wanting to get it. I think that if more people were to take that type of approach, rather than immediately dismiss opposing views, our country wouldn’t be as socially fractured as it is currently.
Ideological differences were clearly the dividing line in the conversation around Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protests. But many of the opinion leaders I spoke with claimed that they would not let their differences keep them from seeking mutual understanding. Sandra said:

> There are plenty of people that I disagree with, but everything that they do in their life is to help other people. I will come to the table with them in a heartbeat. My long-term goal is to bring people to the table. People who can talk to each other, not those that want to murder each other. My long-term goal is to bring people to the table.

Tonya went further to acknowledge that she could (and, perhaps, should) make concessions where she can in order to ensure she approaches conversations objectively and with due diligence:

> I think people need to get out of their bubble…I don’t want to live in my bubble. My brother’s very, very conservative. Sometimes I’ll ask him about something, just to check myself. I like to be in the realm of reality. I don’t want to be one of those people who thinks…I mean, I voted for Obama. I didn’t think he was perfect. I didn’t like everything he did. I like to check myself and make sure what my motives are in supporting someone.

Tyler, whose work with a publicly funded veteran’s group resulted in what he called many constructive discussions about the anthem protests, said that the most important characteristic that people should focus on when discussing controversial issues with others boils down to one thing, empathy:

> I am someone who has had the benefit of going to school and studying political science, and that has been an eye-opening experience for me. I have had the benefit of studying political theory from Plato on, and I have, over the last couple of years, have started to come to an appreciation for our rule of law, our customs, the way people that interact
between one another, aren’t accidents. There are people who put a lot of thought into the way that human beings ought to interact, and how the government ought to protect them, and when it is appropriate to use violence to enforce the law. I wish that every American had the opportunity to do that because I think that they’d have more empathy, and more sympathy for people who exist within the United States, but in completely separate cultures.

He admitted that empathy is difficult to achieve over social media, especially in the midst of such rampant disinformation and purposively divisive content. Sandra explained, though, that social platforms like Twitter can be used to share stories that can draw people closer together:

Now don’t get me wrong: social media has done some bad things, some seriously, deep bad things, but it gives real people like myself and real people to tell our side of the story.

“Hey, I’m a 20-year career veteran and who has been to Iraq and been to Egypt and who was there during the civil war in Egypt, and who was in Panama. These are the things that I saw, and I want you to know about them. I’m not going to try to change your mind. I just want you to hear the other side of the story. If you make an informed decision to stay with your side after you hear my story, that’s fine. I’m not going to try to change your mind, but I do want you to hear it.”

Several participants echoed that sentiment, but also made it clear that there are certain things that they are unwilling to compromise on. Kim, for example, said:

Look, life is ugly at times. We aren’t always going to agree, and we aren’t always going to sit back and accept the situations that we view as unfair or discriminatory. Many of us are not wired that way. We’re taught to open our mouths and stand up for the people who need support. Fight for what is right.
Brenda provided a similar explanation:

Never be silent, unless there’s some proof like, “You have to be silent on this.” That that’s helpful somehow, though I’m not sure that it would be. So, that’s it. I think I’d really like to believe that truth, facts, statistics, information – real information – maybe changing some minds of people who are what I call “on the bubble.” If I get one person to change their mind, because I go back to my Daoist roots, like, the journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step. So, it starts with one person. So, I think yeah, one person changing [their mind] is a success.

Perhaps William’s view offers the most substantive argument for seeking common ground, and rather than dilute it with any summary statement to culminate the chapter, I would like to close this chapter with his words:

You know what? I think that there has to be somebody that speaks to that audience as well. I think that I spoke to people who definitely hadn’t had contact with anybody else like me or some people that – I don’t know – Maybe there is a farmer in Iowa somewhere that I spoke with, and he and I disagree, but we learned from each other. And I think that in that way, it was probably positive. I think that we gain more when we meet people who may not share the same views that we share, but each one of us comes away with a better understanding of the other person. That means more than finding a hallelujah section – people that are always like “Oh yeah, oh yeah.” I think that’s important, but I think it’s more important just to understand other people in other cultures better than we do. I think when you can – and it doesn’t happen often – have a conversation with someone that has a different point of view, where you guys can just discuss your differences in a rational way, in a civilized debate, let’s say, I think there is no winner and
there’s no loser, because if you both come away with a better understanding of the other
person, you’re both winners. And I’m not saying that we’re best friends and we talk
every day on Twitter anymore, but we do understand each other better, and even if we
don’t speak again, we still carry that with us as part of our life experience.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes the findings from the previous chapter and explores how they relate to prior research in the field of public relations. Specifically, the first section will address the role of online opinion leaders within the network paradigm of public relations. Second, it will explore the various uses and gratifications opinion leaders derived from their use of Twitter as a tool to convey their perspectives. Finally, it will establish the utility of moral foundations theory to public relations research by outlining the ways in which opinion leaders’ ethical foundations guided their participation in the online conversation around anthem protests. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the project’s theoretical and practical contributions, as well as a discussion of the limitations of the project and directions for future research.

The Role of the Online Opinion Leader in the Network Paradigm of Public Relations

The network paradigm in public relations research challenges the field’s longstanding focus on studying organization-public relationships. Instead, the network approach positions an organization within its broader context by also taking into account the various publics and stakeholders embedded within the organization’s network (Yang & Taylor, 2015; O’Connor & Shumate, 2018; Yang & Saffer, 2019). Social media platforms have proven to be fertile ground for advancing this burgeoning area of research (e.g., Himelboim, Golan, Moon, & Sotu, 2014; Hellsten, Jacobs, & Wonnenberger, 2019) in large part because platforms like Twitter reduce the barriers to entry into conversations, resulting in what Jenkins and Carpentier (2013) defined as participatory culture. In participatory culture, consumers, stakeholders, and publics are no longer merely passive actors in the process of consumer culture but are rather prosumers actively creating and sharing information with others.
By providing a more efficient means to connect with others and present oneself as an expert in a particular area, social media platforms have led scholars to explore the concept of networked influence (Gruzd & Wellman, 2014; Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015). This has resulted in a renewed interest in the role of opinion leaders in digital environments. Online opinion leaders, or “influencers,” have attracted significant attention within both academic and professional circles in strategic communication fields (Borchers, 2019). But until now, the focus has mainly centered around the profitability for organizations that leverage influencers to function as an intermediary in the organization-public relationship (Lorenz, 2019).

While important and worthy of continued inquiry, such a narrow perspective of online opinion leaders ultimately cheapens our understanding of how they might function independently to influence conversation, sway opinions, and motivate behaviors around more than simply products, brands, or experiences. This research responds to Kent and Taylor’s (2016) call to move the field of public relations away from Homo Economicus (i.e., a focus on the managerial function of public relations and profit maximization) and toward Homo Dialogicus (i.e., a focus on the relational aspects of public relations research) by exploring how online opinion leadership organically manifests around issues within networks.

Results from this study provide support for three valuable contributions that set the stage for further research using the network paradigm in public relations research. First, online opinion leaders have the capacity to create and sustain narratives around organizations, brands, issues, and topics. Second, political and social issues are often at the heart of conversations in which online opinion leaders participate. Finally, online opinion leadership has the potential to be manufactured by inauthentic accounts which results in the rapid spread of misinformation and
disinformation. Each contribution is discussed at length in the following sections, along with their implications for public relations research and the network paradigm.

**Capacity to Shape Narratives Through Control Over the Flow of Information**

Results from the network analysis of each of the three time periods offered useful insight into who the online opinion leaders were in this context, and what narratives they advanced within each network. Opinion leaders were identified in each timeframe by calculating the betweenness centrality value for each node in each network. Betweenness centrality values reflect the degree to which a user takes on the role of a broker or liaison in bridging and connecting online communities together; it reflects the kind of measure that encapsulates the notion of bridging social capital (Borgatti, Jones, & Everett, 1998), which Putnam (2000) argued influences the flow of information.

By identifying opinion leaders through their betweenness centrality values, each network analysis generated a list of users organized by the extent to which they influenced the flow of information within the network. In other words, the higher the betweenness centrality value of a node, the more bridging social capital a user possessed to control the flow of information within the network. In each of the three networks (i.e., timeframes) analyzed for this study, the total number of opinion leaders with betweenness centrality values above zero was less than five percent. This means that, despite accounting for such a small percentage of the overall number of users involved in each conversation, the opinion leaders were the ones that primarily controlled the flow of information in the network. As a result, opinion leaders contributed to the development of primary narratives and counternarratives within each network. These findings suggest that betweenness centrality – as an indicator of bridging social capital – may help
explain how narratives, arguments, and debates are informed, altered, and developed through interactions on social media platforms.

Calculating modularity for each network offered insight into the context and content of the narratives that opinion leaders were active in forming. Modularity algorithms identify structurally similar groups or communities of users that reflect topical commonalities. For example, in both the 2016 and 2017 NFL networks, organizational leadership and NFL sponsors were key topics of conversation in some of the largest communities within each timeframe. In 2016, NFL leadership (e.g., NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, the NFL Players Association, and official NFL accounts) accounted for the largest overall percentage of conversation within the network at 9.74%. In 2017, it accounted for 9.17% of the network. NFL sponsors and advertisers were also a central theme in both networks. In 2016, specific athletes were mentioned alongside brands they endorsed (i.e., Aaron Rodgers and State Farm, Richard Sherman and Domino’s), in addition to specific NFL sponsors like Pepsi, Verizon, Papa John’s, Budweiser, Gatorade, Hyundai, Starbucks, Gillette, and Visa, among others. Similarly, in 2017, conversation around NFL sponsors accounted for 7.61% of the conversation.

These findings are relevant because they suggest online opinion leaders may play a central role in transferring accountability regarding an action from one organization to another. This is consistent with what Laufer and Wang (2018) define as crisis contagion or, “being linked to a crisis that is impacting another organization” (p. 173). It is evident from the data that the NFL and its leadership were widely implicated by Twitter users in the conversations around the anthem protests, but it is also critically important to note that what became a crisis event or a reputational threat to the NFL also spilled over to its sponsors.
Opinion Leaders Play a Prominent Role in Discussing Political and Social Issues

Both Kaepernick and Rapinoe publicly stated that their protests were not meant to be taken as anti-American, anti-military, or unpatriotic. Rather, both were clear from the outset that their actions were in response to specific social issues plaguing America such as systemic racism, police brutality, LGBT discrimination, and gender inequality. Nevertheless, many perceived the protests as an affront to the American flag and the national anthem and, thus, the military. As a result, these social issues quickly became political rallying cries on either side of the aisle, especially in the context of a polarizing Presidential election cycle in 2016.

Network analysis of the 2016 data identified modularity classes that reflected highly partisan political conversations. For instance, Kaepernick’s official Twitter handle was commonly associated with other accounts that were supportive of his protests and affiliated with progressive political leanings like Megan Rapinoe (@mpinoe), Van Jones (@vanjones68), Joy Ann Reid (@joyannreid), as well as organizational accounts like Kaepernick’s Your Rights Camp (@yourrightscamp), and Truthout (@truthout), a progressive news outlet dedicated to covering social justice issues. More conservative media outlets and pundits were included in another of the most prominent modularity classes identified in the 2016 data, such as Charlie Kirk (@charliekirk11), Mark Levin (@marklevinshow), Dan Bongino (@dbongino), and Conservative Review (@cr) as well as Donald Trump Jr. (@donaldjtrumpjr).

The partisan divide grew during the 2017 NFL season, when government officials including the president and vice president openly criticized the protests that continued despite Kaepernick no longer playing in the league. In front of a crowd of supporters in Huntsville, Alabama in September, President Trump said, “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right
now’?” (Altman & Gregory, 2017). Then, in October, Vice President Mike Pence left a football game between the Indianapolis Colts and the San Francisco 49ers after some players knelt during the anthem, saying he did not want to “dignify” the demonstration (Watkins, 2017). These partisan demonstrations became important talking points within the network, and the most prominent modularity class that included Twitter accounts for Trump, Pence, the Republican Party, and other Trump Administration officials accounted for 9.91% of the network. Alternatively, a modularity class that included progressive accounts that were supportive of Kaepernick (e.g., Shaun King, @shaunking; Michael Skolnik, @michaelskolnik; Michael Bennett, @mosesbread72) accounted for 8.53% of the conversation.

Similar divides were evident in the conversation around Megan Rapinoe during 2019 Women’s World Cup. Conservative media pundits like Glenn Beck (@glennbeck), Molly Prince (@mollyfprince), David Rutz (@davidrutz), and Jim Hoft (@gatewaypundit) were part of the highest-ranking modularity class which accounted for 21.05% of the network. President Trump, conservative media outlets (Tomi Lahren, @tomilahren; Ryan Hill, @ryanhillmi), and progressive activists (@dgcomedy, @lisastark351, and @tonyposnanski) accounted for the second-highest modularity class. Franklin Graham’s (@franklin_graham) criticism of Rapinoe was propelled by conservative accounts with high betweenness centrality scores in another of the top five modularity classes.

Anthem protests became a widely debated topic on Twitter from the moment Kaepernick first refused to stand during the national anthem before a preseason game in 2016. Importantly, they became the focus of what Saffer (2019) defined as a multi-stakeholder issue network. Saffer suggested that multi-stakeholder issue networks like those that formed around anthem protests are unique in two ways: (1) they conceptualize businesses, civil society, governmental agencies,
and the like as equal actors voluntarily searching for solutions to a shared issue, and (2) they position the issue at the center of a network (as opposed to an organization) which means actors interact in a non-hierarchical fashion. These protests resulted in the formation of issue networks that included organizations like the NFL, its sponsors, government officials, political pundits, media outlets, athletes, and everyday Twitter users, among others.

Heath and Waymer’s (2011) conceptualization of issue communication in political public relations also helps explain how online opinion leaders engage in discussion around controversial social and political issues. They suggested that issue communication “centers on issues as contestable matters of fact, value/evaluation, policy, and identity/identification…Here we might imagine a triangle of interests: Business, government, and stakeholder/activist/public. This dialogue occurs in all of the available channels. It centers on how well each voice recognizes and responds to rhetorical problems” (p. 144). Consequently, the value of this study is that it lends further insight into the important role stakeholders, activists, and publics play within the broader ecology of multi-stakeholder issue networks.

**Manufactured Opinion Leadership, Misinformation, and Mis/disinformation**

Perhaps the most disconcerting finding from this research is that many of the most highly influential accounts identified through network analysis have been either suspended by Twitter for violating its terms of use ([https://help.twitter.com/en/managing-your-account/suspended-twitter-accounts](https://help.twitter.com/en/managing-your-account/suspended-twitter-accounts)) or identified as bots. As concerning as this might be, it is not entirely surprising. Yan, Pegoraro, and Watanabe (2019), for instance, explored how bot accounts linked with Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA) tweeted about the NFL anthem protests in an effort to sow division in American culture and politics.
Results from this study do not confirm that the accounts that were suspended were in any way affiliated with the IRA or any other foreign government or organized entity for that matter. However, per Twitter’s terms of use, the most common reason accounts are suspended is because they are “spammy, or just plain fake” (Twitter, 2020, para. 2). It stands to reason, then, that even a portion of these users were removed from the platform because they were inauthentic, bot-like accounts. This is becoming an increasingly common threat to political discourse on social platforms.

In a special issue in the *International Journal of Communication*, Woolley and Howard (2016) assert that “autonomous programs are used as proxies for political actors hoping to sway public opinion through the spread of propaganda and misinformation” (p. 4883). In the same issue, Murthy and colleagues (2016) explained how bots interact with human users to influence conversational networks on Twitter. Bots are algorithmically driven programs, or scripts, created to undertake tasks online, acting as surrogates for humans. The proliferation of bots on social platforms has been widely documented, but, as Howard, Woolley, and Calo (2018) assert, “the impact of social bots has been difficult to measure” (p. 85). Results from this study suggest that bots operating in the social conversation around anthem protests were strategically situated within the network in order to exert influence within it. Recall that *strategic social location* was one of the primary characteristics of the original conceptualization of opinion leadership (Katz, 1957). That bot accounts have become so advanced to the point of being able to occupy critical social locations within any given network presents unique challenges to scholars, practitioners, and society writ large as it becomes increasingly more difficult to sift through accurate information.
These results lend empirical support for the argument that public relations scholars should broaden the scope of their inquiry into social media influencers and online opinion leaders to include both human and non-human actors in order to more fully evaluate the breadth and veracity of discourse around organizations, governments, and especially around relevant social and political issues. Prior research has shown that the effects nefarious influential accounts can have on public discourse can lead to dire consequences. Broniatowski and colleagues (2018), for example, found that bots and troll accounts would masquerade as legitimate medical professionals in an attempt to undermine vaccination and erode public consensus around its safety. The ubiquitous nature of online discourse around controversial issues creates opportunities for malevolent social actors to take control over the conversations and exert influence over the network.

Hannan (2018), for one, describes the prominent role trolling on social media plays in the ‘post-truth’ era as the birth of a new political language game; “in a discursive space unregulated by shared standards of truth, logic, evidence, and civility…trolling functions as a nuclear option, metaphorically speaking, for discourse that all too often breaks down over political disagreements” (p. 224). It is hard to deny that bots and trolls on social media play a crucial role in the development of narratives and counternarratives, often at the expense of truth and civility. A network approach to this context offers scholars the tools to identify authentic and inauthentic opinion leaders spreading truthful or inaccurate content and assess the extent to which that content had reached a broader audience.

**Understanding Opinion Leaders’ Use of Twitter**

Opinion leaders’ and influencers’ use of Twitter as a tool to convey their thoughts and connect with others is an area of social media scholarship that has been largely untapped to this
point. Uses and gratifications theory offers a helpful framework with which to explore this phenomenon. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973) identified five basic tenets of uses and gratifications in their original conceptualization of the theory: (1) audiences are active, (2) audiences have the ability to choose which media they wish to consume, (3) media compete with each other and other sources for consumption by audiences, (4) individuals are self-sufficient to report the needs and gratifications they seek and obtain, and (5) researchers should put aside their pre-conceived notions about the needs and gratifications people have until individual motives are thoroughly examined. The advent of new communication technologies has resulted in an increased effort to explore how new platforms affect the way people use technology to communicate with one another (Ruggerio, 2000; Rubin, 2009). Results from this study reveal several consistencies with how a uses and gratifications approach has been applied to social media research, and also identifies some unique ways in which online opinion leaders use Twitter to achieve the gratification they seek.

**Commonalities with Prior Research in U&G and Social Media**

Whiting and Williams (2013) identified ten themes that demonstrate the various gratifications associated with an individual’s use of social networking sites: (1) social interaction, (2) information seeking, (3) pass time, (4) entertainment, (5) relaxation, (6) expression of opinions, (7) communicatory utility, (8) convenience utility, (9) information sharing, and (10) surveillance/knowledge about others. Results from this study show that online opinion leaders and influential users use social media seeking many of the same gratifications Whiting and Williams identified.

Perhaps the most prominent of these is the function of information seeking and sharing. Participants interviewed for this study frequently discussed their desire to consume news and
information in order to stay informed about subject matter relevant to their interests. Allison’s assertion that the most important thing she could do on Twitter was “to retweet things that are communicating something of value, that are communicating a stand that I think people need to hear” speaks to this point. Tonya mentioned her desire to stay informed about both sides of the debate in order to formulate her own thoughts, ideas, and opinions on the subject. Brian described the important role of “informing the onlookers” in his various debates with anti-Kaepernick Twitter users. He referred the information he shared as “tools in their arsenal” that they could use in everyday conversations with family, friends, and coworkers.

These findings offer clear reflections of the two-step flow of information hypothesis. Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (1955) seminal work on the topic established the significance of people “as intervening factors between the stimuli of the media and resultant opinions, decisions, and actions” (p. 32). What Allison, Tonya, and Brian have in common is their propensity to serve as an intermediary between mediated ideas and their own networks. These findings are consistent with Tomaszeski’s (2006) argument that opinion leaders are more information savvy and more aware of the latest developments, and thus more willing to consume and share content within their networks. By sharing content and acting as an information distributor, online opinion leaders make significant contributions to the formation of narratives and counternarratives that emerge around prominent issues.

Additionally, participants in this study pointed to their use of Twitter for social interaction with their followers and, to a lesser extent, antagonists that also engaged with their content. Dianne, for example, made reference to her “Twitter family” and her desire to connect with other users in meaningful ways. She explained that she is vulnerable on the platform – intimate and engaging. Chris followed Brian and drew heavily from the information he provided.
Chris even referenced the level of respect he had for Brian, which is solely the result of their connection through Twitter. Whiting and Williams (2013) explain that social interaction on social media platforms affords people opportunities “to connect and keep in touch with family and friends, interact with people they do not regularly see, chat with old acquaintances, and meet new friends” (p. 366). But in the context of serving as opinion leaders, social interaction also reflects the opinion leaders’ ability to serve as the connective communication tissue that alerts their peers to what matters among political events, social issues, and consumer choice (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009).

Finally, participants discussed the utility of Twitter as a platform to share their opinions. Brian mentioned that Twitter gave him (and others) a voice: “I can’t tell you if I’m changing the discussion, but I can tell you that if nothing changes it certainly won’t be because of my silence.” William discussed how important it was for his followers to hear from him. Harold felt a strong desire to “at least share his thoughts” about what’s going on in the conversation around the anthem protests. This role is central to the concept of influence on social media; expressions of opinion by an influencer or opinion leader have the potential to shape audience attitudes through the use of online platforms (Freberg et al., 2014).

**Differences with Regard to Opinion Leadership and Influence**

Beyond the similar themes of information seeking and sharing, social interaction, and expression of opinion, results from this study point to several unique uses and gratifications online opinion leaders obtain through the use of Twitter, specifically.

First, several participants alluded to their role as a fact-checker in online conversations. Most pointed to this as a unique challenge in the digital environment where information spreads, unfiltered, at blinding speed. Tonya illustrated this point clearly in her assertion that
“information can spread quickly, which is great…but lies can spread just as fast. And you have to decipher what’s real, and not enough people are doing that.” Martin attributed much of the misinformation to bots. He and others brought up the topic of bots and troll accounts casually, as though to suggest that they are indeed part of the everyday environment in online conversations around controversial issues. The mere mention of these inauthentic accounts points to the significance of the perceived role opinion leaders take on as credible sources of information.

Sandra mentioned that she believes people follower her because she has a reputation among her followers as being a reliable source of information. Again, this fits within the original characteristics of an opinion leader Katz (1957) developed – a user’s competence reflects their credibility to speak on certain subjects.

Second, participants expressed that they often had to the play the role of moderators in online discussions around the anthem protests. Given that the topic of anthem protests was bitterly divisive, several opinion leaders explained the need to address the vitriolic rhetoric. Allison expressed remorse over her own personal failure to combat arguments that originated from content she shared. Sandra explained that she felt compelled to remove content from her threads that were abusive or overly critical of others. Several users explained that they often reported users to Twitter over hateful speech, racist language, and other abuses of the platform. Despite Twitter’s public commitment to reduce this kind of content, opinion leaders felt the need to filter it out on their own. This points to another of Katz’ (1957) characteristic of opinion leadership: the personification of values. For example, Sandra moderated her platform based on what she wanted her ‘group’ (i.e., followers) to be, ostensibly projecting her own values onto her followers through the moderation process.
Finally, participants indicated that they used Twitter out of a sense of personal responsibility to be involved in the conversation. Once Sandra realized the impact that some of her tweets were having (e.g., going viral or engaging with prominent political figures), she reflected on her “accidental” role and the huge responsibility it brings. Emily explained that her participation became more like “100% compulsion” because of the deep sense of personal connection she felt toward the issue. While this closely mirrors what Whiting and Williams (2013) consider a theme of “communication utility,” it goes beyond simply having something to talk about with friends and points to a greater need to satisfy the feeling personal responsibility to use Twitter to enact the change they seek. This sense of responsibility and compulsion points to opinion leaders’ potential to take on the role of an activist in shaping discourses around prominent issues that affect organizations, publics, and stakeholders (Uysal & Yang, 2013; Ciszek, 2015; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Wolf, 2018).

**Opinion Leaders’ Moral Foundations Shape Discursive Environments**

The online conversation around anthem protests also serves as an example of the deeply polarizing nature of debates around contested social and political issues in contemporary society. Issues become controversial when they pit opposing ideological positions against one another, and ideological positions have been shown to be deeply personal. Indeed, prior research has established a link between personal and political identity (Pye, 1961; Adams, 1985). To many people, if politics are personal, then the personal is political.

Results from this study appear to suggest that an individual’s personal and political identity influence their participation as online opinion leaders in digitally mediated conversations around controversial social or political issues. Extant literature lends support to this claim. Bennett (2012), for example, explored the intersection of political identity and social media and
argued that “the rise of personalized forms of political participation is perhaps the defining change in the political culture of our era” (p. 37). Specifically, the application of moral foundations theory in this dissertation provides a useful approach for exploring the various personal motivational factors underlying opinion leaders’ participation in the online discussion around anthem protests in the first place.

Results from this study illuminate several possible entry points moral foundations theory offers public relations scholars in their ongoing pursuit to further explore the function of opinion leaders involved in issue networks. First, by exploring users’ moral foundations, researchers may be in a better position to understand why individuals participate in online conversations around political and social issues, and how they begin to occupy their social locations within issue networks. Second, understanding the various points of departure in ideological stances offers valuable insight into the ways different stakeholders and publics interact with each other and with organizations embedded in the network. Finally, results from this study indicate that opinion leaders strive to remain open to ideological differences as they manifest online, and often attempt to bridge divides between opposing sides. Each of these areas are discussed below.

**The Ethics of Care, Liberty and Other Moral Foundations**

As discussed in Chapter 2, Haidt (2012) explained that the political left tend to gravitate most strongly toward the ethics of Care and Liberty, the two moral foundations he argued “support ideals of social justice, which emphasize compassion for the poor and a struggle for political quality among the subgroups that comprise society” (p. 211). Alternatively, conservatives tend to place higher importance on Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity. Moral foundations theory also assumes that, to an extent, a person’s moral matrix is determined by both genetic predispositions, in addition to their personal experiences which guide their interpretation
of events (Graham et al., 2013). Each of the participants interviewed for this study were supportive of Kaepernick and/or Rapinoe’s anthem protests, and their responses seemed to indicate that their moral foundations were heavily grounded in the intuitive ethics of Care and Liberty. Perhaps this explains how participants could easily explain the “real” reason behind Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protests.

Moral foundations theory emerged from social psychology and explores how we arrive at our moral attitudes through preprogrammed genetic factors in addition to how life experiences affect our interpretations of issues and debates. Even though it was beyond the scope of this study to determine the neurological factors that might contribute to the development of an individual’s moral matrix, participants’ interview responses highlighted their tendency to lean into the foundations of Care and Liberty, and how their various life experiences contributed to their ideological stances.

Chris’s story of being pulled over by the police offers a clear case in point. His description of the sequence of events – “the tires screeching, car stops, guys hop out, guns pointed” – paints a vivid picture of racial profiling. His personal experience of being held at gunpoint by law enforcement helped him identify with Kaepernick’s protest. He says he’s passionate about the topic because he has experienced it firsthand. As a result, he mentions that he’s spent a lifetime trying to be an ally to women, to the LGBT community, to disabled folks, and “people who don’t have the same privilege I have.” This is emblematic of the ethic of care; Chris was able to clearly articulate the oppression of marginalized groups.

Conversely, Martin pointed to the appeals to patriotism that conservatives tended to use in their argument against the protest. Patriotism heavily linked with the ethics of Loyalty (e.g., nationalism), Authority (e.g., the military and law enforcement), and Sanctity (e.g., the
symbolism invoked through the American flag and national anthem). Martin explained that conservatives turned the debate into one about “hyper patriotism…where everything is militarized to a degree [which] makes protest even more difficult. You’re against the flag, you’re against the anthem; you’re against this. And then people shut down and don’t listen to it.”

These results suggest that identifying a user’s moral foundations offers useful insight into how they might approach controversial issues and may help to better understand why they decide to participate in online conversations around them.

**Echo Chambers and Opposition**

Network scholars have pointed to the prominence of echo chambers and political homophily in online conversations around social, cultural, and political topics (Himelboim, Smith, & Shneiderman, 2013; Colleoni, Rozza, Arvidsson, 2014; Boutyline & Wiler, 2017). The concept of network homophily originates from sociology and implies that likeminded people tend to associate with other likeminded people. Social media platforms like Twitter further facilitate this practice by allowing users to follow topics and conversations that align with their own ideological boundaries. Echo chambers emerge where these likeminded individuals circulate content that further substantiates their own viewpoints, while rejecting opposing ideas.

Bail et al. (2018) found empirical evidence suggesting that exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization rather than generate a sense of shared understanding or constructive conversation. The researchers surveyed a sample of Democrats and Republicans about a range of social policy issues, and randomly assigned respondents to treatment conditions in which they were offered financial incentives to follow a Twitter bot for one month that exposed them to messages from those with opposing political ideologies. When respondents were resurveyed after a month, researchers found that Republicans who followed a
liberal Twitter bot became substantially more conservative posttreatment. Similarly, Democrats that followed a conservative account exhibited slight increases in liberal attitudes. Hwang, Kim, and Huh (2014) studied the effects of uncivil online debate around competing discourses and found that while exposure to uncivil discussion did not affect attitude polarization, it did significantly affect people’s perceptions of polarization among the public.

Participants in this study explained that the polarization around the anthem protests was significant. Allison, Tonya, and Emily lamented the ideological differences that spurred division around the topic. Dianne went so far as to suggest “…we don’t really have a middle ground anymore, and the people that were for were for, and the people that were against were against.” Tonya’s story of her conservative acquaintance that answered questions from a liberal perspective and became infuriated when Tonya explained that her responses aligned with Democratic values offers a poignant example of how Haidt (2012) explains how our moral foundations both bind us together (i.e., homophily and echo chambers) and blind us from seeing another perspective different than our own. Harold described how this affected him personally when he described how many friends he had lost over the last few years “between the NFL and Trump…it’s been very toxic.”

Participants attributed much of this division to ideological differences that appeared to manifest as the result of one’s moral foundations. As much as they demonstrated a clear tendency to align with ethics of Care and Liberty, they were just as likely to rebuke opposing viewpoints that centered around Authority, Sanctity, and Loyalty. Tonya recalled how “a bunch of Conservatives basically [called] me stupid…I remember walking away and thinking: My God, they don’t even try to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes on this.” Her reaction is emblematic of the divide between liberal and conservative manifestations of moral foundations. Since
liberals tend to place a greater emphasis on Care and Liberty, they are able to empathize with social justice initiatives whereas conservatives tend to fall back on loyalty to country, sanctity of the flag, and authority of the military.

These findings lend further support to the idea that political differences are often further entrenched through interaction online with likeminded people and exposure to opposing ideas. However, participants also seemed to express a genuine desire to bridge the ideological divides in order to seek common ground.

Yin, Yang, and Reconciliation

Haidt (2012) drew from the Chinese philosophy of the *yin* and *yang* in his description for how people on different sides of the ideological spectrum can seek ways to disagree more constructively. He wrote: “Yin and yang refer to any pair of contrasting or seemingly opposed forces that are in fact complementary and interdependent. Night and day are not enemies, nor are hot and cold, summer and winter, male and female. We need both, often in a shifting or alternating balance” (p. 343). This study explored the various ways that these competing ideologies frequently manifest through online interactions.

It is clear that social media platforms like Twitter (and others) are frequently cited as hotbeds of divisive rhetoric and political echo chambers. Ultimately, however, these platforms are not unlike everyday life. Indeed, “as with other elements of the everyday and the political, collective and connective action further underlines the importance of treating the online not as a separate and isolating setting, but as part of an extended, hybrid media and political system” (Hightower, 2016, p. 120). The question then becomes what can be done about the growing partisan divide online?
Results from this study suggest that opinion leaders may play an important role in reconciling or, at least, taking the edge off of the ideological differences that are so divisive. David explained this thoughtfully: “I think that the online conversation, when steered correctly, can be a very valuable and useful tool in helping bring people together from opposing viewpoints.” This perspective is akin to Haidt’s (2012) assertion that “[While] we may spend most of our waking hours advancing our own interests, we all have the capacity to transcend self-interest and become simply a part of a whole” (p. 370). Opinion leaders interviewed for this study seem to be more open to opposing ideas. Tonya said she thought people “need to get out of their bubble;” Sandra explained that her long-term goal is “to bring people to the table;” and Dianne indicated that, despite ideological differences, she thought “the majority of people are inherently good.”

The major challenge to reconciliation between competing ideologies that opinion leaders identified was simply getting political opponents to listen to them. Sandra said that she does not try to change minds: “I just want you to hear the other side of the story. If you make an informed decision to stay with your side after you hear my story, that’s fine. I just want you to hear it.” Participants acknowledged that this was not an easy task, but often described how they felt that the end would justify the means. Brenda used the Doaist “journey of 1,000 steps” to describe the often long and arduous process of getting another person to even listen to a different opinion. William offered a poignant account of how he felt if even one person would discuss a controversial issue in a civilized way: “There is no winner and there is no loser, because if you both come away with a better understanding of the other person, you’re both winners.”

The assumption that many seem to hold is that small acts can have cumulative effects. Simply being cordial with others and debating controversial issues a civil way can at least result
in marginal change. In many cases, that is all that some opinion leaders hoped for. Hightower (2016) explained how online participation in political discussions at the individual level can yield productive results, even when it might not appear to do much good:

A single tweet might not change policy; spread widely, as part of a growing groundswell of protest and dissent on social media and on the ground, though, and in combination, these factors might bring about change – and the visibility of positive, transformative views and attitudes, endorsed through social media platforms themselves, may help to combat attacks and trolling. Change might not come – and maybe not in the ways that it is most desired – but to try and bring about change at a policy level and at the level of societal attitudes, actively challenging perceptions and practices can at least spread awareness and support. (p. 158)

Opinion leaders acknowledged that their role is limited, but nevertheless emphasized that they believed in their capacity to have meaningful interactions with users that held competing beliefs.

**Theoretical Implications for Public Relations Research**

Results from the current study offer several areas for theoretical development in public relations research, specifically. First, it extends research in the network paradigm to include the role of opinion leaders as important stakeholders within the overall network ecology. Second, it further cements the significance of social media research in public relations as audiences and publics increasingly use digital platforms to shape opinions, beliefs, and behaviors around social issues. Third, it provides a framework for exploring the ways in which online activists use platforms to advance narratives and counternarratives. Finally, this project advocates for the application of moral foundations theory in public relations scholarship in an effort to further
explore how stakeholders and publics arrive at the perspectives they hold around controversial social issues and organizations involved in them.

**Opinion Leadership and the Network Paradigm**

The network paradigm in public relations looks at the entire network ecology rather than focusing exclusively on organization-public relationships. As Yang and Saffer (2019) contend, “networks may constrain or enable the organization’s objectives and influence the stakeholders’ interpretation of messages. A network theorist would not only take into consideration the organization’s characteristics and performances, but also the relationships different stakeholders have with the organization and each other” (p. 3). This study explored the role opinion leaders played in the online conversation around anthem protests. As active participants in the discussion, opinion leaders on Twitter served a crucial function as information brokers that contributed to the discursive formation of public opinion around the NFL, its sponsors, government officials, athletes, and media outlets involved in the debate. An ecological approach to network research in public relations would be remiss not to consider the role of influential players in the overall environment.

**Social Media, Social Issues, and Public Relations**

Scholars have explored the impact of social media in public relations research for more than a decade (Kent, 2013). Its role in crisis communication (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011; Lin, Spence, Sellnow & Lachlan, 2016; Lachlan, Spence, Lin, Najarian & Del Greco, 2016; Cheng, 2018), corporate social responsibility, (Colleoni, 2013; Lee, Oh, & Kim, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 2016), and organizational-public relationships (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Men & Tsai, 2015; Men & Muralidharan, 2017) have been well-documented in the literature. However, efforts to study its capacity to shape discursive environments around contested issues remain
relatively sparse. Sweetser (2011) called for future research to “examine how citizens use and are impacted by digital political messages on a daily basis. This type of ongoing political discourse is important to public relations practitioners if they are to understand the history and context of issues” (p. 307). As organizations navigate an increasingly politicized landscape and make a deliberate attempt to take a stand on social issues (Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016), evaluating how conversations around these topics manifest through social media will play a critical role in environment scanning, strategic communication, and issues management.

**Uses and Gratifications Approach to Online Opinion Leadership**

Activist stakeholders and publics have long been the object of public relations scholars’ attention (Grunig, 1978; 1989; 2006). The advent of digital technology and social media platforms has resulted in greater emphasis on the role of activists in the online environment (McCosker, 2015; Ciszek, 2016). Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright (2019), for example, explored how social movement organizations leveraged hashtags to propel the #MeToo movement. But few studies have applied a uses and gratifications approach to individual social media users to participate in conversations around controversial subjects to advocate for certain viewpoints. The current study offers a new framework for exploring the ways opinion leaders use platforms to advance narratives and counternarratives around salient topics.

**Moral Foundations Theory and Public Relations**

This dissertation applied moral foundations theory to explore how opinion leaders’ ethical foundations influenced their participation in the conversation around anthem protests. As Trayner (2017) posits, “the nuance and texture of the foundations framework allows us to plot out how an issue plays out depending on a consumer’s or citizen’s multiple perspectives, and when different personas come to the fore” (p. 5). This approach opens new doors for scholars to
study how people’s identity and values hardwire their decisions and actions. Page (2019), for example, extended situational crisis communication theory by developing a scale to measure the level of offensiveness of an action grounded in moral foundations literature. Understanding how stakeholders, opinion leaders, and publics derive meaning from personal values and form moral communities can offer useful insight into how organizations approach strategic decision-making around sensitive topics.

**Practical Implications**

In addition to the theoretical contributions outlined above, the current study also offers several practical implications for the public relations industry. First, companies and organizations are increasingly facing pressure to take a public stance on controversial social issues (Carufel, 2019; Burnett, 2019). A Weber Shandwick (2018) survey of consumers found that 83% of respondents indicated that it is more important now than ever to show support for companies that “do the right thing” by buying from them, and 76% of survey respondents indicated that social media makes political consumerism more effective. Another study by APCO Worldwide (2018) found that “expectations are high for companies to address some of the most salient social, environmental, and political issues of our time” (p. 24).

Companies like Delta Airlines, Wal-Mart, Dick’s Sporting Goods, and others have taken very public stances on the issue of gun control (Dwyer, Domonoske, & Sullivan, 2018). In the wake of more restrictive immigration policies, Chobani yogurt announced it would hire more refugees (CBS News, 2017) and American Airlines announced it would not participate in the Trump administration’s efforts to separate children from their families at the U.S.-Mexico border (Wattles & Marsh, 2018). As organizations continue to face social pressure to advocate for and against controversial issues, it will become increasingly important for public relations
professionals to evaluate every possible means to identify how relevant stakeholders and publics feel about those that are most relevant to them.

Second, companies and organizations would benefit from identifying online opinion leaders around these pressing social issues to obtain a more comprehensive look at how public interest is formed about them. Online opinion leaders are clearly valuable to public relations practitioners in the digital environment; but to this point their utility has primarily centered around their ability to connect with potential consumers. As consumers become more socially conscious, the role of the opinion leader may begin to shift from simply endorsing products to supporting initiatives.

Finally, the prominence of misinformation and disinformation online continues to make practitioners’ jobs more difficult. Bots, trolls, and algorithms plague the digital landscape and threaten to undermine truthful information by amplifying false and misleading content. Indeed, results from this study suggest that many of the most inflammatory messages originated from accounts which – in one way or another – violated Twitter’s terms of service and were subsequently removed from the platform. By identifying opinion leaders in these conversations that control the flow of information within a network, practitioners may be better equipped to address the root cause of the problems and begin to develop strategic responses that counteract the potentially negative effects of inauthentic behavior online. To its credit, Twitter has begun developing tags and labels that identify false or misleading information on its platform (Hutchinson, 2020), but these features are still in their infancy and there is no guarantee that their implementation will stem the flow of bots and inauthentic accounts.
Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is not without limitations, and future research is needed to build upon the foundation laid out by this dissertation. The first limitation is that this project only evaluated data from one social media platform. Although Twitter is a highly popular social media platform for political discussion and engagement, others that were excluded from this study (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, etc.) each reflect unique contexts in which discussion around controversial social issues take place. Future research would do well to explore, for instance, how opinion leaders are identified through other platforms, and how opinion leaders use other platforms to share their beliefs about an issue.

Second, this study reflected a cross-sectional approach to network analysis. The data collected for analysis were aggregated and used to determine the network structure of the conversation at one time as opposed to how the network changed over time. Future research could explore this with greater clarity by conducting a dynamic network analysis which would provide more insight into how the conversation developed over the course of the anthem protests, rather than taking a snapshot of a specified time period.

Third, despite the fact that the structure of the network revealed various relevant topical communities (i.e., modularity classes), it ultimately did not provide any detailed analysis of the content of the conversation within the network. Content analysis, semantic network analysis, and sentiment analysis might all provide useful alternatives to explore the actual messages that were conveyed in the online conversation around anthem protests.

Finally, although numerous attempts were made to interview conservative opinion leaders for this study, this project only contains interviews with users that were supportive of Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s protests. It is possible that attempts to interview conservative
accounts were unsuccessful because many of the top accounts that were anti-protest were either suspended by Twitter for violating its terms of use or identified as bot accounts. Nevertheless, future research should strive to be more inclusive of all viewpoints on the topic.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the online conversation around anthem protests in order to identify the most influential opinion leaders in the conversations, understand how they used Twitter as a tool articulate their stance on the issue, and determine how opinion leaders’ moral foundations factored into their motivation to participate in the online conversation. The significance of the study is fourfold in that it (1) adds to a growing number of studies in public relations research using the network paradigm, (2) it offers new conceptual definitions that distinguish between social media influencers and online opinion leaders, (3) it is among the first of its kind methodologically to combine social network analysis with in-depth interviews, and (4) it offers valuable insight into how researchers and practitioners can identify and further explore the role of online opinion leaders in politically polarized environments. Each contribution is discussed in sequential order.

First, this dissertation adds to a growing number of studies that apply a network approach to public relations research. This dissertation is unique, however, in that it focuses specifically on individual stakeholders within the broader network ecology. As the field of public relations continues to extend beyond the study of organization-public relationships to include relationships between organizations as well as the relationships between publics and stakeholders (Yang & Taylor, 2015; Zhou, 2019), it is important for research like this to continually broaden the horizon for studying what types of relationships constitute the overall network ecology. It is also important for researchers and practitioners to strive to better understand how social platforms are
used by opinion leaders in order to assess the effectiveness of their strategies to engage around issues (Saffer, 2019).

Second, this research proposes new conceptual definitions that distinguish between social media influencers and online opinion leaders and provides a useful framework for how characteristics of each can be explored in the context of public relations scholarship. I define “social media influencers” from a commodification lens where individual users leverage their notoriety to partner with commercial entities to connect with specific segments of target audiences for compensation. Alternatively, I contend that the term online opinion leadership can be applied to influential users in a digital environment whose focus is not commercial, but rather ideological. To date, few studies have explored either social media influencers or online opinion leadership in public relations. This is perhaps owed to the fact that the commodification lens as described above is generally incompatible with the various theoretical strands associated with the field of public relations in general. This idea is embodied through Kent and Taylor’s (2016) metaphor for moving the field of public relations away from Homo Economicus (i.e., a focus on the managerial function of public relations and profit maximization) and toward Homo Dialogicus (i.e., a focus on the relational aspects of public relations research). This argument positions the field of public relations as a unique arena to explore the function of online opinion leadership beyond the commodification paradigm which has become highly prominent in other strategic communication subfields.

Third, this study is among the first of its kind methodologically to pair social network analysis with in-depth interviews. Smith, Rainie, Himelboim, and Shneiderman (2014) argued that “social network analysis can be augmented with on-the-ground interviews with crowd participants, collecting their words and interests” (p. 4). While social network analysis provides a
way to accurately measure the quantity of interactional relationships, it lacks careful explication of the potential qualitative characteristics associated with exchanges between and among actors in a network. Therefore, as del Fresno Garcia, Daly, and Sánchez-Cabezudo (2016) suggest, future studies should “mix both social network analysis and more qualitative approaches…not only do we need to identify SMIs and their relations, but also the meanings and insights within each network” (p. 36). This project offers a springboard to begin filling this methodological gap.

Finally, this project offers useful insight into how researchers and practitioners might identify and further explore the function of opinion leaders in a politically polarized online environment. By combining uses and gratifications theory with moral foundations theory, this project supplies new evidence for how opinion leaders leverage social media platforms to advance their ideological agendas and highlights the important role that individual moral values play in publics’ and stakeholders’ perceptions of controversial social and political issues. Results from this dissertation shed light on how stakeholders, opinion leaders, and publics derive meaning from personal values and form moral communities around contested topics.


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APPENDICES
Appendix 1. Interview Guide.

Introduction and Basic Points:
Good [morning/afternoon/evening], as you may know, my name is Brandon Boatwright, and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Tennessee studying public relations. I am working on my dissertation that focuses on online opinion leadership. Your experiences will help me to understand more about the role opinion leaders play in online conversations around controversial subjects and allow me to share insights with the field.

(Repeat these points if individuals have questions about the consent cover statement they received)

Every opinion is valuable and I only want to know your thoughts and opinions.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You may choose to skip a question or stop the interview at any time and for any reason with no penalty, especially if you feel uncomfortable with the question or subject. Your information will stay secure. I will not share your personal information, including your name, with anyone else. Unless you prefer otherwise, your name will not be linked to the information that you provide during the interview.

This interview is being audio-recorded in case I need to listen to it later to clarify something from the notes. This recording will not be shared with others and will be destroyed at the end of this research.

The interview should take no longer than an hour.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Guide
• Would you please share with me about the first time you heard of Colin Kaepernick/Megan Rapinoe?
• Tell me about how you felt when you first realized Colin Kaepernick/Megan Rapinoe was protesting the national anthem.
• What is your opinion of athlete's using their position as a platform for protest?
• How does your perspective on these protests affect your opinion of the athletes, the NFL /Women's National Soccer Team, and their sponsors?
• Tell me about your experience using Twitter to share your opinions about the anthem protests.
• How do you think the online conversation around anthem protests affect the American social/cultural landscape?
• Do you think that your contributions to the conversation had any effect on how others perceived the events?
Appendix II. Consent Cover Statement.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
School of Advertising and Public Relations, University of Tennessee
“Social Media Influence”

Why You’ve Been Asked to Participate
You have been asked to participate because your public Twitter account actively participated in
online conversations around anthem protests by prominent athletes.

Purpose of Research
You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Brandon Boatwright, a
researcher in the School of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Tennessee,
Knoxville. I want to understand people’s motivations for participating in online conversations
related to prominent athletes and anthem protests.

Specific Procedures to be Used
You will be asked to answer open-ended questions based on your experiences using Twitter to
participate in online conversations around athlete anthem protests. The interview will be
conducted in a conversational style and audio-recorded. You can talk as much or as little as you
want. You can skip questions if you do not wish to answer them.

Duration of Participation
Participation in the survey and interview will last approximately 30 to 45 minutes.
Study records will be retained for at least 3 years.

Risks to the Individual
There are no foreseeable risks greater than those encountered in everyday life involved with
participating in this research.

Benefits to the Individual
I do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help the
researcher to learn more about the concept of social media influence in online conversations
around controversial social issues. I hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit
others in the future.

Confidentiality
Confidentiality is guaranteed to the participant: your real name and Twitter username will not be
used in any reports or articles. The results of this interview and participant information sheet will
be used for analysis and discussion, but your identity will be protected, and you and your
responses will not be identified or linked to you in these analyses in any way. Any quotes will be
attributed to an alias.

If You Agree to be in this Research Study
If you agree in this study, you will be asked to identify a time when you are available for an
interview. You will be sent a written description of the study in advance of the interview in order
to have sufficient time to consider the information and ask questions.

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-19-05477-XM
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 11/22/2019
Appendix II. Consent Cover Statement. (Continued)

Voluntary Nature of Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed. In order to withdraw, contact Brandon Boatwright at the number provided in the ‘Contact Information’ section below. Your decision to participate or withdraw your participation won’t affect your relationships with the researcher at the University of Tennessee.

What Will Happen to my Information After This Study is Over?
I will keep your information to use for future research. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study.

Contact Information
If you have questions at any time about the study or procedures, or you experience any adverse effects as a result of participating in this study, you may contact the lead researcher, Brandon Boatwright, at 865-974-3048, 476 Communications Building, Knoxville, TN 37996. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the University of Tennessee, Office of Research Compliance Officer, at utkirk@utk.edu or 865-974-7697.
Appendix III. IRB Approval.

November 22, 2019

Brandon Boatwright
UTK - College of Communication and Inf - College of Communication and Information

Re: UTK IRB-19-05477-XM

Study Title: Exploring the role of social media influencers in sports and culture: An analysis of the online discursive environment around athlete anthem protests

Dear Brandon Boatwright:

The Human Research Protections Program (HRPP) reviewed your application for the above referenced project and determined that your application is eligible for exempt review under 45 CFR 46.101. Category 2: The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 1111(a)(7). You may use a Consent Cover Statement in lieu of an informed consent interview. The requirement to secure a signed consent form is waived; willingness of the subject to participate will constitute adequate documentation of consent.

Your application has been determined to comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects. This letter constitutes full approval of your application (Version 1.1), SMI Informed Consent Form v 2.0, and Recruitment Messages v 1.0, stamped approved by the IRB on 11/22/2019 for the above referenced study.

In the event that volunteers are to be recruited using solicitation materials, such as brochures, posters, web-based advertisements, etc., these materials must receive prior approval of the IRB.

Any alterations (revisions) in the protocol, consent cover statement, or interview must be promptly submitted to and approved by the UTK Institutional Review Board prior to implementation of these revisions. You have individual responsibility for reporting to the Board in the event of unanticipated or serious adverse events and subject deaths.

Sincerely,

Colleen P. Gilrane, Ph.D.
Chair

Institutional Review Board | Office of Research & Engagement
1534 White Avenue  Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
865-574-7097  865-574-7400 fax  irb.utk.edu

BIG ORANGE. BIG IDEAS.

Raging Cramos of the University of Tennessee System
### Appendix IV. Overview of Analytic Process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes, Examples, and Codes</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ3 Advancing the Counternarrative</strong></td>
<td>“He wants to make the country better. It’s his way of doing that.”</td>
<td>Angered by portrayal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“He was totally misrepresented. He wasn’t protesting the anthem – however, because that’s how it was reported, I was pissed.”</td>
<td>Not anti-military</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“A lot of it has to do with the mainstream media framing.”</td>
<td>Media mislabeling</td>
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<td>“…combat the false narrative and twisting and changing of the subject.”</td>
<td>Misrepresented</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“On the negative side, it really is pretty easy for disinformation to proliferate.”</td>
<td>Not disrespectful</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“So instead of debating police accountability, we’re debating the military feeling. It’s ridiculous; I know I keep saying it’s ridiculous, but it is.”</td>
<td>CK original message lost</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Reframe the story</td>
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<td>People miss the point</td>
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<td>Misinformation</td>
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<td>Bots, trolls</td>
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<td>Distortion</td>
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<td><strong>Being Credible Sources</strong></td>
<td>“I want people to have some tangible evidence against a lot of these talking points.”</td>
<td>Responsibility to truth</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“…you’re also giving the onlookers…tools in their arsenal.”</td>
<td>Communicating value</td>
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<td>“…at least they see my page as a place for accurate information.”</td>
<td>Credibility as an asset</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I got a lot of blow-back for my tone, which I just was very shocked and ashamed and gutted by.”</td>
<td>Distribution accurate info</td>
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<td><strong>Leveraging and Leaning on Community</strong></td>
<td>“If you don’t have a community and there’s no way to have one in the small place where you live, then I think social media can absolutely be a life-saver.”</td>
<td>Sensing of belonging</td>
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<td>“They’ll get our wrath, and it’s usually a collective wrath.”</td>
<td>Building community</td>
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<td>“If I am allowing you into my space, and you are allowing me into your space, then you are like family to me.”</td>
<td>Collective empowerment</td>
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<td>Twitter as family</td>
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<td>Developing connection</td>
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<td>Communal responsiveness</td>
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<td>Community values</td>
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<td><strong>Intrinsic Satisfaction of Being an “Accidental” Influencer</strong></td>
<td>“I don’t know how much of an impact I’m having…but I can tell you that if nothing changes it certainly won’t be because of my silence.”</td>
<td>Personal enrichment</td>
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<td>“I do what I can as far as putting it out there…but for those people that follow me, they’re going to hear from me.”</td>
<td>Advancing personal causes</td>
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<td>“…if I can continue to highlight issues and causes that are important to me…then I’m all for it.”</td>
<td>Success for minimal gains</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Not seeking attention</td>
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<td>Compelled to participate</td>
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<td>Affecting the conversation</td>
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<td>Influential awareness</td>
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### Appendix IV. Overview of Analytic Process. (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes, Examples, and Codes</th>
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<td><strong>RQ4</strong></td>
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</table>
| **Examples** | “I am a brown woman. I have brown children… I have literally been having this conversation with my son about the police since he was about 2 years old.”  
“I’m passionate about this because I understand it firsthand.”  
“I feel like the people who are reactive negatively to Kaepernick and Rapinoe… they feel like their identity is threatened.”  
“Like me – I’m a veteran. I’m not just a straight, down the line ‘this is who I am.’ Most people are very complicated; we’re not just one thing.”  

The Divide over Ideological Differences |
| “…it also feels like there’s a bitterness and divisiveness that seems to be deepening.”  
“Now there’s like a giant bar brawl between everybody [on Twitter].”  
“I spend a lot of time fighting with strangers on the Internet.”  
“There were people that were venomous in their attacks on me – telling me how stupid and unpatriotic I was. And the N word. I got the full gamut of protest.”  
“I’m not even going to tell you how many friends that I have lost over just the last couple of years between the NFL and Trump.” |

Pursuing Common Ground |
| “I’ve had my fair share of disagreements with folks, but we’ve discussed them as grown adults and, once we talk more, come to the realization that we agree on the end result but have different ways of wanting to get it.”  
“My long-term goal is to bring people to the table – people who can talk to each other, not those that want to murder each other.”  
“I think people need to get out of their bubble… I don’t want to live in my bubble.”  
“I think we gain more when we meet people who may not share the same views that we share, but each one of us comes away with a better understanding of the other person.” |

| Codes |
| Experience as a veteran  
Experience with police  
Racial identity  
Passion from experience  
White privilege  
Identity threats  
Identity is complicated  
Need to participate |
| Divisiveness  
Open hostility  
Argument  
Opposition  
Ignorance  
Toxicity  
Hate speech  
Personal loss |
| People are generally good  
Twitter can be productive  
Growth from disagreement  
Bringing people together  
Making concessions  
Empathy  
Civilized debate  
Human connection |
VITA

Brandon Boatwright is a doctoral candidate at the University of Tennessee in the School of Advertising and Public Relations in the College of Communication and Information. Brandon serves as the lead graduate assistant in the Adam Brown Social Media Command Center. His research interests include public relations, opinion leadership, network theory, sports and social media. Prior to pursuing his Ph.D., Brandon was a Lecturer at Clemson University teaching courses in public speaking and social media analytics. He received his Bachelor’s degree in Communication Studies and his Master’s degree in Communication, Technology, and Society from the Clemson University. Upon completion of his doctoral studies, Brandon will continue his career at his alma mater in Clemson University’s Department of Communication as an Assistant Professor in Sports Communication and Director of the Social Media Listening Center.