

The Effect of NFL protests for TV Viewership

by

Austin Phillips

A Senior Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

by

Austin Phillips

Greenville, NC

May, 2018

Approved by:

Dr. John Howard III

Department of Fine Arts and Communication

Abstract

Two things have significantly impacted the National Football League (NFL) in the last year: First, there was a decrease of viewership of around 9.7% in the last Nielsen ratings of 2017 (Rovell, 2018). Second, the protests during the national anthem started by former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, ultimately involved over 180 players in the 2017 season (Breech, 2017). There has been much speculation regarding why viewership has been down and many discussions regarding the impact of player protests. The purpose of this research is to see the effect of NFL player national anthem protest on TV viewership of NFL games. This protest, of course, has a short history and limited research has been conducted on it. In order to better understand the role of the protests this project first reviews the actions of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf in the NBA. The NBA's restriction of his protest. And the viewer responses to the protest. This background is used to inform the discussion on player protests and guide the construction of a Qualtrics survey to learn about viewer attitudes regarding the NFL, Colin Kaepernick, and the ongoing protests during the anthem.

Through the self-report responses I was able to develop a preliminary assessment of how viewer's opinions and viewing behaviors have changed. From a email link that brought responders to a online survey that was powered by Qualtrics. The results showed the impact of race and political affiliation on how people view the protest. The results also showed that people opinion's of protest did not always affect their viewership of the NFL.

Introduction

In the 1995-96 NBA season, player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf sat in his locker room during the National Anthem. Abdul-Rauf (born Chris Jackson) was protesting the American flag due to it being a symbol of oppression. The protest went unnoticed and unreported for a bit of time until a reporter caught on to the protest. Once the protest was recognized, the NBA took action on Abdul-Rauf. The NBA suspended Abdul-Rauf for one game due to NBA rules stating players have to stand for the National Anthem. In order to not break the league rules but still be able to do his protest, Abdul-Rauf was allowed to pray while standing for the anthem. The protest came with instant public backlash and Abdul-Rauf was criticized for his protest. Abdul-Rauf's playing time started to go down and he was eventually he was traded at the end of the season. Abdul-Rauf played a couple more seasons with more limited playing time and eventually played professionally overseas. His protest faded away into the background, and protest during the National Anthem stopped. That was until the protest of Colin Kaepernick during the 2016 NFL preseason.

Colin Kaepernick is a six-year NFL veteran quarterback that played in the Super Bowl in 2012 with the San Francisco 49ers. In the 2016 preseason Kaepernick sat during the National Anthem for the first two games without anyone noticing. After an unrelated tweet caught his silent protest, Kaepernick was questioned about why he was sitting. Kaepernick responded that he was not going to stand for a flag that oppressed the rights of minorities. Like the protest of Abdul-Rauf, the general public widely debated the protest of Kaepernick. However in this protest, some other players joined in the protest with Colin Kaepernick. While Kaepernick is not in the NFL in 2017, which some attribute this to his protests, NFL protest live on. In week 3 of the NFL season around 180 players protested the National Anthem. These protest have caused a

public out roar and debate on the issue. During the same time as the protest, NFL viewership has gone down. The question is whether these player protests have affected NFL viewership in any way.

Rationale

That is why the project that I am studying and researching is the effect of NFL Player national anthem protest on TV viewership of NFL games. I want to see how people are reacting to these protest and if it affects people viewership on the NFL. I will use a survey and interpret quantitative and qualitative data to gather my results. I will do this in the wake of the increase of NFL player protest during the 2017 season. Due to the high average viewership of an NFL game (16.5 million average views per game) player protest have been a fixture in the news for the past few months. The TV networks are paying billions of dollars for rights of NFL games, and this decline in viewership will be a future turnoff for the networks. With the widely conflicting views on the protest, that is why the question how these protest will effect how people view the NFL has been asked. Would these protest effect how many people view the game? That is what this project is trying to figure out and could show how protests like this have value on the American society. If there is a decline in viewership should the NFL move towards the NBA with a ban on NFL protest. Viewers and consumers are what help run the NFL and viewership is a big part of that. I aim in this project to look at this subject to reveal insight on the issue.

Literature Review

Introduction

In this literature review for my project on NFL Protest and how it affects TV viewership, I want to focus on four things. The first main area the literature review will be on is the effect of the national anthem protest by Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf on the NBA. The second area will be the current trend of cable television and how all TV viewership is being affected. The third area will be on the initial protest by Colin Kaepernick that started this conversation. The last area will be on the change of NFL viewership over the last few years.

Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf

A player that draws comparisons to Colin Kaepernick because of his treatment after protest is Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf. Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, formerly Chris Jackson, was an NBA basketball player from 1990-1998 with a brief stint in the 2000-01 season (Basketball-Reference, n.d.). Abdul-Rauf is most known for the controversy surrounding his national anthem protest in 1995 and 1996. According to Zareena Grewal (2007) Abdul-Rauf stayed in the locker room during national anthem protest without objection until fans called in on the issue. This led to an interview with Abdul-Rauf, which led to an intervention by the NBA. Abdul-Rauf was then allowed to pray during the anthem, as long as it was on the court. This protest was met with backlash by fans, which helped oust him out of the league (Curtis, 2010). According to Curtis (2010), "Three Denver disc jockeys responded by blasting a recording of the anthem inside a local mosque". Because of this backlash by fans, the NBA was put into a precarious position. After Abdul-Rauf's contract ran out that season, no other team in the NBA picked him up. In an

article with the Undeclared (Washington, 2016) Abdul Rauf commented, “It’s kind of like a setup. You know, trying to set you up to fail and so when they get rid of you, they can blame it on that as opposed to, it was really because he took these positions. They don’t want these type of examples to spread, so they’ve got to make an example of individuals like this.” In a comparison with Colin Kaepernick in the Undeclared article by Jesse Washington Abdul-Rauf says, “It’s a process of just trying to weed you out. This is what I feel is going to happen to [Kaepernick], they begin to try to put you in vulnerable positions”(2016). Due to the protest of Abdul-Rauf, the NBA made sure that everyone would be present and standing. In the NBA official rulebook under the Player/Team Conduct and Dress section (NBA, 2016) it states, “Players, coaches, and trainers are to stand and line up in a dignified posture along the sidelines or on the foul line during the playing of the National Anthem”. Overall, the situation with Colin Kaepernick is very similar to the one of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf in the way they were both shunned out of their respective leagues. The NBA reacted with enforcing their rule on standing during the national anthem. The NFL does not have such a rule in their rulebook. That is the main difference I have found in the literature between Colin Kaepernick and Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf.

The Decline of Cable Television

Cable television has been on the decline in America and could be one of the explanations for lower ratings for NFL football. According to the magazine *Marketing News* (2017), 1.1 million people got rid of cable in the year 2015. While streaming services have been more popular during this time, cable has remained going downhill. One of the most popular extra cables channels is ESPN. ESPN is now the channel that covers the ever-popular Monday Night

Football. However as *Multichannel News* (2017) suggest, ESPN has lost 12 million subscribers since 2011. It seems as if the main reason for the decline is the rise of streaming services, such as Netflix. This rise of video-on-demand services according to Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey (2016) has caused a major transformation of how TV is viewed. This video-on-demand services has been one of the main of the decline of cable services for television. Video-on-demand services are growing and many more services are going to be available in the future. Now with the streaming service Hulu, you can stream live sports channel on Hulu. You just but the channel you want, and you receive those channels on your Hulu account. In an article in “The Daily Dot” (2017) John-Michael Bond writes, “Hulu with Live TV provides a great middle ground for people transitioning into cord-cutting”. This opportunity to watch your favorite cable channels on streaming services allows cord cutting to be a possibility without having to pay for cable television. As a result all major networks are seeing the consequences of cord cutting. According to Frank Pallotta of CNN (2017) there was an eight percent drop in primetime viewership for the four major networks of television. Overall, the numbers and statistics show the decline of cable television in the last few years.

Protests of Colin Kaepernick

The protests of Colin Kaepernick started in the 2016 NFL preseason when he sat for the National Anthem. Although unnoticed at the time, his silent protest was eventually highlighted (Sandritter, 2016). Kaepernick started kneeling instead of sitting after a meeting with a veteran that recommended he kneeled. The protest, which is focused on minority rights, has been met with mixed reviews from the league and the general public. While the protest is solely based on ethics and not legal matters, this issue is still widely debated. As the publication of Kane and

Tiell (2017) points out, Kaepernick's protests did not break either the San Francisco 49ers or NFL's current rules. This is why the current issue of Kaepernick being ousted by the League is so big today. But because of peoples mixed values, Kaepernick was met with much opposition over his protest. In a poll by USA Today (Yomtov, 2016), it was found that Colin Kaepernick was the most disliked player in the NFL. The poll stated, "Revealed that Kaepernick was "disliked a lot" by 29% of those polled, more than any other player." This is different then when the poll was conducted in 2014, when that number was 6%. While it has been an unpopular move in the general public, many other players have joined Kaepernick in his protest. In response to President Trump's comments on the protest, according to John Breech (2017) around 180 players protested in week 3 of the 2017 NFL season. It will be interesting to see where the result of Kaepernick's protest go, and how the NFL will react to them. Last week, the NFL promised almost 100 million dollars for athlete's causes. With no rules on the issue like the NBA, the NFL is trying to figure out how to deal with the protest Colin Kaepernick started. The position the NFL is in now doesn't allow for them to ban kneeling or sitting for the anthem. This is why Roger Goodell, the commissioner of the NFL, sent out a memo encouraging all players to stand for the National Anthem (Wells, 2017). The protest of one player has been a huge deal for the whole nation in this last year and will be interesting to see in the near future.

Conclusion

In the end, these sections will contribute to my ultimate goal of the project. To see how the NFL protest are affecting TV viewership. From this literature review, the reader will see the reactions and statistics that take precedent in a similar situation to the one I am researching. The reader sees alternate solutions that could affect viewership in the NFL. Also the reader sees how

the world reacted when the man who started the protest first protest. There is no question these protest made an effect on TV viewership. The question is in what way the protest made an impact. With this literature review, we are providing a framework to get there.

Methodology

In order to collect my data, I used a survey with closed-ended and open-ended questions. I used a convenience sample by putting a survey out through an online source that people can take themselves. The voluntary survey took 15 minutes or less, and let people provide their input on the situation I am asking about. An email was sent to Communication classrooms at East Carolina University and 84 responses were recorded.

The survey included closed-ended and open-ended questions, and was delivered on a Qualtrics survey. I collected the data from the closed-ended questions and stored them in Qualtrics. These closed-ended questions focused on demographic information such as gender, race and political affiliation and put it together with the views of protests by the responders. I will use descriptive statistics to show the sample results for the survey. I will find from the descriptive statistics how people view each issue and try to translate it to the general population. From these descriptive statistics, I will be able to use them for my inferential statistics. With the inferential statistics I will be able to answer some of the questions on what caused the change of TV viewership for the NFL. I will be able to test what changed viewership from the results of the descriptive statistics and infer them to the general population.

From the open-ended questions, I combined the responses with the data from the closed-ended questions to see themes from the people taking the survey. Instead of just getting just basic pre-selected responses, we get to see what went through their minds in their decisions. We get to see how people behaviors changed from Colin Kaepernick's protest and how it affected TV viewership in the NFL. These open-ended questions allow us to see the how and why of what they believe. When analyzing this with how they responded to the rest of the questions, real trends will be brought out of the data. Overall, the combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions allowed seeing the results of what we are trying to find, which is how Colin Kaepernick's protest affected TV viewership.

Results and Discussion

The survey ended up having 84 respondents of the survey with 65% being female (n=55) and 32% being male (n=27). The majority of the responders were in the age range of 18-25 due to the survey being sent to East Carolina University classes. The respondents were a diverse group with 74% of respondents being white (n=68) and 13% of respondents being black (n=12). 40% of the respondents were Republican (n=34), 26% were Democrat (n=22) and 26% were Independent (n=22). Parents political affiliation was also taken finding that 55% of the respondents parents being Republican (n=47), 24% being Democrat (n=20) and 11% being Independent (n=9). Religion was also found in the results however an overwhelming majority of the respondents were Christian as 94% responded this (n=79).

There were three main themes that showed up during the results of the survey. First were the political affiliation of the respondent and their support of the protest. When the respondent

was a Democrat, they were in support of the protest 68% of the respondents (n=13), and not in support 21% of the respondents (n=4). When the respondent was a Republican, they were in support of the protest 9% of the respondents (n=3), and not in support of the protest 69% of the respondents (n=22). Independents were in support 50% of the time (n=9) and not in support 22% of the time (n=4). From this sample I found when a person was a Democrat, they were more likely to in support of the protest, while in contrast Republicans were more likely not in support of the protest. It is interesting to see how political beliefs are staying consistent with the support or lack of support of the NFL protests.

The second main theme I noticed in the survey was how race and support of the protest related to one another. When the respondent's race was black, the respondent supported the protest 73% of the time (n=8), and did not support the protest 9% of the time (n=1). When the respondent's race was white, the respondent supported the protest 28% of the time (n=17), and did not support the protest 50% of the time (n=30). For respondents that were white, 9 of the respondents had neither support or did not support the protest. From this sample from the survey it was obvious that race related with support for the protest. For respondents that were black they were more likely to support the protests, while respondents that were white they were more likely not to support the protests. Being that Colin Kaepernick is a black male protesting for minority's rights, I wonder if on a larger scale if this explains how race affects the support of the NFL protests.

The third main theme to me was one I was not expecting to find in my studies. As known from earlier in the paper, Colin Kaepernick was the first NFL to protest during the national anthem. There were many players that followed and led to the situation we were in today.

Before the survey I thought people would know Kaepernick due to both his football and protests. I thought people aware of the protest would know of the man that started the protest in the first place. What the results found is that many more people were aware of the NFL protests than aware of Colin Kaepernick. Also most of the people who knew Colin Kaepernick knew him as a football player as well. 95% of the respondents (n=71) were aware of the NFL protest that are taking place, while only 68% of the respondents (n=52) knew who Colin Kaepernick was. 94% of the respondents (n=16) who said they did not know Colin Kaepernick were still aware of the NFL protest. This shows how people are not necessarily associating the NFL protest with Kaepernick like during the beginning of his protests.

The main thing this study was finding was the effect of NFL protests on TV viewership, but the results yielded not much effect on TV viewership. 66% of respondents of this question recorded that they watched the same amount of football in the last year (n=48). 11% of the respondents recorded they watched more NFL football in the last year (n=8). 18% of the respondents recorded they watched less of NFL in the last year (n=13). Of the respondents that responded they watched less of NFL in the last year, only 2 respondents said due to the protest. The main responses were due to player safety and the leadership of the NFL. The responses of watching more NFL football were all due to reasons unrelated to protests and more related to fantasy football. I was surprised by these results and expected more of an impact of NFL protest of NFL viewership. This leads me to believe that other reasons such as player safety, and adjustment to online streaming is more of the reason for the decline in NFL viewership.

I wanted to highlight some of the open-ended responses that happened during the survey. I could tell how divided people were on both Colin Kaepernick and on the protest. There were

some very emotional passionate responses on both, but also some surprising responses as well. As I said earlier many of the responses on how respondents knew Colin Kaepernick from being a quarterback and not from the protest. I thought when surveying the general public more people would know him as the guy who started the NFL protest. While the opinion was split on how people viewed Kaepernick in either a negative or positive way, there were some very emotionally charged responses on him such as “he hates America”. At the same time the majority of the people in support of Kaepernick gave such responses as “I think that he is courageous, stands up for what he believes in, does not cower in the face of controversy and a host of other reasons. His actions have shown that he is a man of tremendous character and integrity”. There was a wide range of opinions on Kaepernick that were interesting to look through. On the issue of the protest, there was a wide range of responses given. There were many responses on the idea that the players are paid to play football not protest. Also responses based on how the protest was not in respect of the US Military. In support of the protest, there were responses on the idea of free speech and on the idea the NFL players are using their platform for the greater good. I enjoyed being able to see these responses and how they viewed things that influences their opinions.

Conclusion

In the end, the NFL protests have widely divided the respondents of this survey and I believe the general public as well. As conflicting as the protest are from this survey it is not what is causing the loss of TV viewership for the NFL. It seems that there are other factors, including quality of games, player safety, and cord cutting, are what may be causing the loss of TV viewership. With only 84 respondents to this survey, this survey obviously it not completely

representative of the general public. In the future I hope a larger scale project can be done to look more into this issue. This issue is still very conflicted and is divided on demographics such as race and political affiliation. With future research I want to see how these demographics fuel the opinions toward NFL protest. In the end, the purpose of the research was to see how these protest had an effect on TV viewership. What we found from this sample was that there was not much effect from the protest on TV viewership and there are other factors effected viewership.

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