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The Effects of Athlete Activism on League Credibility, Event Legacy, and Event Involvement: A Crisis Communication Perspective

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Running head: #TakeAKnee, league credibility, and event legacy

Abstract

The #TakeAKnee movement initiated by Colin Kaepernick and the measures taken by the National Football League (NFL) to handle the situation received mixed reactions from the public. We developed and tested a structural model using survey data collected from 698 residents of a Super Bowl host city. Our results indicated a positive relationship between attitudes toward the movement and attitudes toward the league's responses, which in turn influenced league credibility. However, after taking the indirect effect into account, attitudes toward the movement had a direct negative relationship with league credibility. Additionally, people who viewed the NFL as a credible organization tended to perceive the Super Bowl as relevant to them and as impactful for the host city. Therefore, sports organizations should develop consistent, comprehensive communication strategies that enable them to maximize a positive synergy between their approach to crisis communication and their approach to other types of communication.

Keywords: free riding, mega-event, situational crisis communication theory, structural equation modeling

The Effects of Athlete Activism on League Credibility, Event Legacy, and Event Involvement: A Crisis Communication Perspective

In August 2016, Colin Kaepernick, then the San Francisco 49ers quarterback, remained seated on the bench and then knelt during the pregame playing of the national anthem. When asked the reason for his actions, Kaepernick stated, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color" (Coaston, 2018, para. 7). His teammates and other National Football League (NFL) players then joined Kaepernick in kneeling during the national anthem, while the movement also spread to other professional, college, and high school teams (Sandritter, 2017). Although some people praised Kaepernick's action, the movement also received backlash from the public (Schmidt et al., 2019). Those who criticized Kaepernick labeled him anti-American and anti-military and argued that he was being disrespectful to the U.S. military and the nation, even though he repeatedly stressed the kneeling had nothing to do with the military (Schmidt et al., 2019).

Having received extensive public attention, the #TakeAKnee movement has become a platform for politicians to express their political beliefs and ideologies (Rugg, 2020). On September 22, 2017, Donald Trump held a political rally in Alabama where he accused protesting NFL players of insulting the nation and said that NFL owners should fire them (Graham, 2017). Several NFL owners then criticized his comments as "inappropriate, offensive and divisive" (NFL, 2017, para. 10) and argued that NFL players "use their NFL platform to make a positive difference in our society" (para. 10). Other NFL owners expressed displeasure with the movement. For example, Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones said, "If we are disrespecting the flag, then we won't play. Period" (George, 2017, para. 4). On October 17, 2017, NFL owners, players, and league executives held an emergency meeting to discuss how

they should deal with the controversy (Belson & Leibovich, 2018). After the meeting, the NFL and the NFL Players Association released a joint statement stating that they would "work together to promote positive social change and address inequality in our communities" (NFL Communications, 2017, para. 1).

From the NFL's perspective, the controversy over the #TakeAKnee movement caused a reputational crisis that created high uncertainty and threatened the league's brand image (Anderson, 2020). The ways in which the NFL handled the controversy could have influenced the league's credibility, which in turn may determine how effectively the league can communicate with the public (Kelman, 1961; McCracken, 1989). As such, the controversy may have had various direct and indirect effects on the NFL and its communication efforts. To disentangle such effects, we conducted a survey from January to February of 2018, after the NFL took measures to cope with the controversy and right before the league held the Super Bowl LII in Minneapolis on February 4, 2018.

We collected survey responses from the residents of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area and aimed to explore their perceptions about Super Bowl LII in terms of event involvement and legacy, given the emergence of athlete activism. The target population and timing of the survey were ideal for studying the impact of the controversy on the NFL and its communication efforts because the NFL was extensively promoting Super Bowl LII and its positive social outcomes within the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area before and during our data collection. The survey data were then used to test a structural model that depicts the relationships among residents' attitudes toward the #TakeAKnee movement and toward the NFL's handling of the movement as well as their perceptions of the league's credibility and of Super Bowl LII.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Athlete Activism

Kaepernick was not the first athlete to advocate publicly for social justice and equality. Prior to his advocacy, both professional and amateur athletes had called public attention to such social issues as racism, sexism, poverty, and war (Wulf, 2019). Pelak (2005) posited that athletes can serve as "agents of social change" (p. 59) who raise awareness of certain social issues, generate public discourse on the issues, and produce meaningful social change.

However, the public does not always regard athlete activism positively. For example, on November 30, 2014, five St. Louis Rams players displayed a "hands-up" gesture during the pre-game introduction. This action was a salute to protesters in Ferguson, Missouri, against police brutality and racial injustice. Soon after the game, some people criticized the actions of the Rams players and called for boycotting the Rams, quickly establishing a "Boycott the St. Louis Rams" Facebook page and the Twitter hashtag #BoycottRams. Sanderson et al. (2016) analyzed those Facebook comments and tweets and concluded that individuals who criticized the Rams players believed athletes should not bring political issues into the field and law enforcement authorities should not be questioned. From the perspective of those individuals, the actions of the Ram players violated their core values and thus deserved criticism.

Similarly, the #TakeAKnee movement has triggered some negative consumer reactions. For example, Brown and Sheridan (2020) analyzed NFL television ratings from 2014 to 2018 and found that they significantly declined during the 2016–17 season after the protest began and during the 2017–18 season after Donald Trump publicly criticized protesting NFL players. Some people also expressed anger and frustration toward the protest on social media using the hashtag #boycottNFL (Yoo et al., 2018). A recent national online poll ($N = 956$) showed that most

American sports fans watch sports to escape from reality and do not want to hear about political opinions or social issues when they turn to sports (Wakefield, 2020). This poll also revealed that NFL fans had an especially unfavorable attitude regarding hearing about political issues while watching sports compared to other major league fans (Wakefield, 2020). Most NFL fans are White and male (Gough, 2020), and the largest age group is 50–64 years (Sports Market Analytics, n.d.). Some of the demographic characteristics may influence how NFL fans interpret athlete activism (Intravia et al., 2020).

Research on #TakeAKnee Movement

The #TakeAKnee movement has attracted considerable scholarly attention in the fields of sport management and communication (e.g., Boykoff & Carrington, 2020; Chaplin & de Oca, 2019; Coombs et al., 2020; Lee & Cunningham, 2019; Park et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2019; Watanabe & Cunningham, 2020). For example, Boykoff and Carrington (2020) analyzed newspaper coverage of the #TakeAKnee movement and identified the key frame themes employed by mainstream newspapers such as the "patriot frame" and the "traitor frame." The authors also found that the mainstream printed media generally viewed the movement favorably but shifted focus and framing after several significant events (e.g., Kaepernick leaving the 49ers, Donald Trump's speech).

Several researchers have focused on how the #TakeAKnee movement affected consumer outcomes (Anderson, 2020; Watanabe & Cunningham, 2020). Anderson (2020) examined the relationships between consumers' personal characteristics (e.g., national identification, patriotism) and their evaluations of the NFL's crisis responsibility and reputation. Anderson showed that consumers' evaluation of the NFL's reputation was influenced by the ways in which the league handled the controversy over the #TakeAKnee movement. Watanabe and

Cunningham (2020) tested economic models focusing on the correlation between consumers' explicit and implicit racial prejudice and attendance at NFL games at the time of the #TakeAKnee movement. The authors found that the movement's impact on game attendance was moderated by consumers' implicit racial prejudice. They also revealed that the main and interaction effects were quite small. Thus, to better explain how the #TakeAKnee movement influenced consumer behavior, researchers should examine both its direct and indirect effects through psychological factors.

We aimed to advance this line of research by demonstrating how the NFL's handling of the controversy over the #TakeAKnee movement has influenced the league's credibility and subsequent consumer outcomes. Establishing credibility among consumers helps sports organizations create a loyal customer base that can contribute to the organizations' bottom line (Walker & Kent, 2013). This benefit of organizational credibility accords with capitalistic and neoliberal goals (e.g., superior market competition, pursuit of self-interest, maximization of profits; Boas & Gans-Morese, 2009; Kasser et al., 2007) for professional sport organizations such as the NFL. Our examination of credibility as an outcome of the NFL's response to the #TakeAKnee movement can offer a rationale for why organizations should be mindful of the ways in which they handle similar future controversies.

NFL's Handling of the Controversy

When the #TakeAKnee movement began in August 2016, the NFL did not make any major policy change or require players to stand for the national anthem. Instead, the league released public statements and held meetings with stakeholders. When politicians and media criticized the NFL's responses, the league released counterstatements arguing that the league was making a positive impact on society. However, almost 2 years after the protest began, the NFL

took two major actions (Rugg, 2020). On May 22, 2018, the NFL announced the launch of the "Inspire Change" campaign, in which the NFL invests $89 million over 7 years to promote social justice and equality. The very next day, the NFL announced a new national anthem policy that requires all players and personnel on the sidelines to stand for the national anthem while allowing players who do not want to stand to remain in the locker room. Rugg (2020) analyzed these two major actions and argued that "the launch of the campaign served to neutralize the broad political confrontation of Kaepernick and others' message by diluting it across a campaign steeped in the rhetoric of unification and positive outcomes" (p. 9).

Researchers (e.g., Anderson, 2020; Rugg, 2020) have offered unique insights into the NFL's handling of the protest by focusing on major actions such as the announcement of the new national anthem policy and the launch of a new social justice initiative. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to the league's initial communication efforts before those major actions. The crisis communication literature has suggested that an organization's initial response is critical in setting the tone for the coverage and discussion of a controversy (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). We filled this gap by analyzing survey data collected in January and February of 2018 after the NFL held meetings and released public statements but before it announced any major policy changes.

Analyzing the NFL's Initial Responses

The controversy over the #TakeAKnee movement caused a reputational crisis; thus, the ways in which the NFL handled the situation can be analyzed from a crisis communication perspective (Anderson, 2020). According to situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), stakeholders attribute a certain level of responsibility for a crisis to an organization, which determines the impact of the crisis on the organization's reputation and the effectiveness of the

organization's crisis response strategy (Coombs, 2006, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Specifically, individuals classify a crisis into one of three crisis clusters: (a) a victim cluster, in which the public views an organization as a victim of the crisis (e.g., a natural disaster) and attributes little responsibility to the organization; (b) an accidental cluster, where the public thinks an organization accidentally triggered a crisis (e.g., a technical-error accident) and thus attributes to it a minimal amount of responsibility; and (c) a preventable cluster, where the public attributes significant responsibility for a crisis to an organization by assuming that the organization intentionally placed people at risk, violated laws or regulations, or took inappropriate actions (e.g., human-error accidents).

SCCT proposes four response strategies (Coombs, 2014). Denial strategies, such as attacking the accuser and scapegoating, aim to prove the organization is not responsible for the crisis. Diminishment strategies, such as excusing and justification, attempt to minimize the organization's crisis responsibility or lessen the perceived severity of the crisis. Rebuilding strategies seek to improve public perceptions about the organization by offering apologies or compensation. Bolstering strategies, such as reminding and ingratiation, aim to strengthen the positive image of the organization by reminding the stakeholders of its previous accomplishments or praising the stakeholders (Coombs, 2014; Holladay, 2010). SCCT posits that organizations should employ progressively more accommodative strategies as crisis responsibility increases, and a mismatch between crisis responsibility and response strategy could negatively influence stakeholders' affect and behaviors (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

As an initial response to the #TakeAKnee movement, the NFL employed diminishment strategies and released public statements in which the league justified the movement's necessity and importance. For example, on September 23, 2017, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell stated,

"The NFL and our players are at our best when we help create a sense of unity in our country and our culture" (NFL, 2017, para. 2). The NFL also used bolstering strategies, emphasizing the league's past accomplishments and praising NFL players for making a positive social impact. For example, Goodell continued, "There is no better example than the amazing response from our clubs and players to the terrible natural disasters we've experienced over the last month" (para. 2).

People interpreted those NFL messages differently depending on their stance toward the #TakeAKnee movement. Some expressed positive attitudes toward the movement because of its potential positive impact on social equality. From their perspective, the NFL was not (entirely) responsible for the controversy. Rather, people who opposed the movement created the controversy, classifying the crisis into either a victim or accidental cluster. In such a situation, diminishment strategies tend to be effective in inducing positive responses from the public (Coombs, 2007). Thus, we expect that people who had positive attitudes toward the movement would evaluate the league's initial responses positively. In contrast, people whose attitudes toward the movement were negative expressed frustration toward the NFL because they believed that the league was responsible for controlling the players' actions. For them, the NFL was fully responsible for the controversy, and the crisis was preventable. Thus, they may have attributed greater responsibility for the controversy to the NFL and evaluated the league's initial responses negatively. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Attitudes toward the #TakeAKnee movement have a positive relationship with attitudes toward the league's handling of the movement.

League Credibility

Crisis communication researchers have shown that an organization's crisis communication influences its credibility (Kim & Park, 2017; van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015). For example, Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2005) demonstrated that people attribute greater credibility to organizations involved in crises when they learn about the crises from the organization rather than from a third party, suggesting the importance of proactive crisis communication. Van Zoonen and van der Meer (2015) found that organizational crisis communication through social media influences the organization's credibility, which in turn determines its reputation.

Based on this empirical evidence, we included league credibility as an outcome of people's attitude toward the NFL's handling of the controversy. League credibility refers to the extent to which people perceive the league to be competent, trustable, and believable (Soesilo et al., 2020). In the fields of marketing and communication, researchers have shown that a company's credibility helps decrease consumer skepticism toward the company (Musgrove et al., 2018) and perceived risk in purchasing the company's product (Soesilo et al., 2020). In addition, corporate credibility positively influences consumers' attitude toward the advertisement, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intentions (Chen et al., 2019; Goldsmith et al., 2000; Lafferty & Goldsmith, 1999).

Sport management scholars have applied this concept to the sports context and suggested that the credibility of a sports organization is crucial for maintaining its authority and legitimacy (Inoue & Kent, 2012; Schafraad & Verhoeven, 2019). Kim et al. (2014) examined the credibility of the National Hockey League (NHL) during the lockout and found that the NHL's pro-social behaviors (e.g., donation to youth sports) helped the league maintain its credibility during the reputational crisis. In the current research context, the NFL released public statements,

emphasizing the contribution of the league and players in promoting a sense of unity and social equality. We propose that people who evaluated such communication of the NFL positively would view the league as more credible than those who evaluated the league's responses negatively. Thus, we developed the following hypothesis:

H2. Attitudes toward the league's handling of the #TakeAKnee movement have a positive relationship with league credibility.

Free Riding

The aforementioned hypotheses may appear to suggest that people who supported the #TakeAKnee movement perceived the NFL to be credible, and those who opposed the movement viewed the league as not credible. However, how people viewed the controversy and the league's responses could have been more complicated. As described, the NFL released several public statements after the movement began, and those messages were framed as if the league were working closely with players to promote social justice and equality. However, some people expressed skepticism about the NFL's commitment to the cause, speculating that the league was only trying to associate with the movement's positive aspects without bearing the brunt of criticism (Belson & Leibovich, 2018). Those people argued that the NFL should have supported Kaepernick and other protesting players more actively (Belson & Leibovich, 2018). For example, Eric Reid, a former teammate of Kaepernick, said, "Nobody stepped up and said we support Colin's right to do this. We all let him become Public Enemy No. 1 in this country" (Belson & Leibovich, 2018, para. 21).

The NFL's behavior depicted here is called "free riding," which refers to benefiting from the actions of others without sharing the cost (Delmas & Keller, 2005). Free riding often occurs when organizations participate in altruistic or philanthropic activities because they can gain a

positive reputation by simply being part of the activities (Levine & Kam, 2017). Previous researchers have shown that if people think an organization is a free rider, this perception hurts the organization's credibility (Berrone et al., 2017; Delmas & Keller, 2005).When people identify a free rider, they scrutinize how it has been involved in the cause (Berrone et al., 2017; Levine & Kam, 2017). In the case of the NFL, the league has been known for its strong connection to patriotism, which the league had developed through rituals such as military jet flyovers and the playing of the national anthem (Coombs et al., 2020). Therefore, people whose attitudes toward the #TakeAKnee movement were positive but who did not evaluate the league's handling favorably may have felt that the NFL was free riding during the movement and judged the league as a less credible organization.

Based on this understanding, we hypothesized that people's favorable attitudes toward the movement positively influence the NFL's credibility only through their positive attitudes toward the league's handling of the movement. Otherwise, we expected attitudes toward the movement to have a direct negative influence on the league's credibility. More formally:

H3. Attitudes toward the league's handling of the #TakeAKnee movement mediate the positive effect of attitudes toward the movement on league credibility.

H4. After the positive mediating effect is taken into account, attitudes toward the #TakeAKnee movement have a direct negative relationship with league credibility.

Outcomes of League Credibility

The Super Bowl is considered the most important product for the NFL because of the economic and cultural significance the event has in the league's primary market, the United States (Mandelbaum, 2018). The current research is thus an attempt to understand how the NFL's credibility—which would be influenced by its handling of the #TakeAKnee movement, as

hypothesized above—may affect people's perceptions of the Super Bowl. Specifically, we examined the perceptions of host community residents, who are a sporting event's key stakeholders instrumental in the success of the event's hosting and operations (Chalip, 2006; Chen et al., 2018). Given this focus, we assessed the relationship between league credibility and two event-related variables: event involvement and perceived event legacy.

Event Involvement

The first outcome examined is event involvement, defined as the extent to which people perceive a sport event as relevant to them (Hill & Green, 2000). Highly involved residents play a vital role in promoting a positive atmosphere in the host community through their participation in ancillary events and activities held in conjunction with the sport event (Chalip, 2006). Consequently, promoting the involvement of residents constitutes a central goal for sports event organizers (Chen et al., 2018). To date, little is known about how an event organizer's credibility may help promote residents' involvement in the event. Yet evidence suggests that an organization's credibility determines consumers' responses toward its products (Goldsmith et al., 2000; Lafferty & Goldsmith, 1999; Walker & Kent, 2013). For example, organizational credibility has been shown to have a positive influence both on consumers' attitudes toward a brand and on their intentions to purchase the brand's products (Goldsmith et al., 2000; Lafferty & Goldsmith, 1999). Within the context of sports, Walker and Kent (2013) found that past attendees of PGA Tour events reported higher levels of customer loyalty toward the PGA Tour as their perceptions of the organization's credibility increased. We drew from this prior knowledge to predict that the NFL's credibility is positively associated with residents' involvement with the Super Bowl. Our next hypothesis is as follows:

H5. League credibility has a positive relationship with event involvement.

Perceived Event Legacy

The second outcome examined was the perceived event legacy, which refers to residents' perceptions of how a sport event generates lasting impacts on the well-being of the host community (Shipway et al., 2020). Although some scholars have conceptualized legacy as entailing both positive and negative impacts (Karadakis & Kaplanidou, 2012; Preuss, 2007), we focused on positive impacts because previous findings indicated that event organizers tend to emphasize the positive aspects of events when communicating the legacy of their event to residents (Orr & Inoue, 2020). This is applicable to Super Bowl LII, the focal Super Bowl event examined in this study, because its local organizing committee established the Legacy Fund before hosting the event and used the whole year leading up to game day to implement and promote over 50 charitable activities across the host region (Allen, 2018).

From an organizational communication perspective, the NFL and the local organizing committee are viewed as a source of communication informing residents about how event-related charitable activities benefit local communities and leave a positive legacy (Inoue & Kent, 2014). In this regard, the source credibility literature suggests that a message source (in our case, the NFL and organizing committee) receives serious consideration from the audience (e.g., residents) if they perceive the source as highly credible; in turn, this credibility increases its persuasiveness (Kelman, 1961; McCracken, 1989). Kelman's (1961, 2006) theory of social influence provides theoretical insights into this role of source credibility in persuasion. According to the theory, the credibility of a message source determines the extent to which people (as receivers of the message) think that attitudes or values underlying its message are in congruence with their attitudes/values. The more credible the source appears, the more likely people are to perceive greater degrees of congruence. In turn, the elevated perceptions of

congruence or the state of internalization facilitate the acceptance of the message among receivers (Kelman, 1961, 2006). Moreover, based on the notion of the halo effect (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), individuals' general evaluation of a message source influences their evaluations of the source's specific attributes, including its credibility (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Within corporate contexts, for example, a company that provides quality products for consumers or effectively manages a crisis is seen as more credible and hence more persuasive in its communication when compared with companies with low-quality products or ineffective crisis management (Inoue & Kent, 2014 Kim & Park, 2017).

In line with the above theoretical logic, MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) demonstrated that consumers tended to trust claims made in an advertisement if they rated the advertiser as credible. Inoue and Kent (2012) showed that the credibility of professional sports teams positively influenced the extent to which consumers engaged in prosocial actions promoted by the teams' socially responsible initiatives. Based on these findings, and drawing upon the theory of social influence (Kelman, 1961, 2006) and the halo effect (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), we expected that residents would be more likely to perceive the NFL as a credible message source if they found the NFL's handling of the #TakeAKnee movement favorable. In turn, the resultant high credibility of the NFL would lead residents to accept its claim that the Super Bowl's charitable activities could bring positive benefits to the host community, thus increasing residents' perceptions of event legacy. We, therefore, hypothesize the following:

H6. League credibility has a positive relationship with perceived event legacy.

Methods

Design, Participants, and Procedure

We conducted this study as part of a larger research project designed to investigate local residents' perceptions of the NFL and Super Bowl LII, which took place in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on February 4, 2018. We recruited study participants through online consumer panels maintained by Qualtrics based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) residents of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area who were 18 years or older and (b) residents who knew that Minneapolis was the host city for Super Bowl LII. We sent an invitational email containing a link to a web-based survey to potential participants 2 weeks before the day of Super Bowl LII, and the survey was open for 9 days. We closed the survey after collecting 750 responses from eligible participants who met both inclusion criteria.

Measures

To measure participants' attitudes toward (a) the #TakeAKnee movement and (b) the league's handling of the movement, we adopted three 7-point semantic differential scale items from MacKenzie and Lutz (1989). We measured league credibility using Becker-Olsen et al.'s (2006) three-item scale of organizational credibility. Regarding the dependent variables, we used Woisetschläger and Michaelis's (2012) three-item scale of event involvement to measure participants' degree of involvement with Super Bowl LII. Meanwhile, to measure the perceived event legacy of Super Bowl LII, we developed a five-item scale designed to capture residents' perceptions of the extent to which the event promoted the health and well-being of local communities. This operationalized definition of perceived event legacy was developed to align with the intended legacy of Super Bowl LII as actively promoted by its organizing committee (Allen, 2018). Before administering the web-based survey, we confirmed the content validity of this new scale by following similar procedures, as adopted by Tian et al. (2001), in which a panel of five doctoral students rated how well each item represented the definition of the construct

before providing suggestions for improvement. The panel judged all five items included in the final version of the scale as clearly representative, and we incorporated any suggestions provided during the review process (see Table 1 for descriptions of all survey items).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Data Analysis

We first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model. We assessed the overall fit of the model with the χ^2/df ratio, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). We also examined factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and inter-construct correlations to assess the scales' validity and reliability (Kline, 2015). After assessing the measurement model, we developed a structural model by specifying relationships based on our hypotheses. We evaluated the overall model fit based on the same model fit indices we used for the CFA. We also examined the statistical significance of each path coefficient to test the hypotheses. The maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors was employed to address the potential violation of multivariate normality (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012).

Results

Sample Characteristics

A total of 750 people completed the questionnaire without missing data. Of them, we excluded responses from 52 individuals who indicated they were not aware of the #TakeAKnee movement, leaving 698 valid cases. The sample was equally divided by gender (50.1% female). The average age of the participants was 42.80 years (SD = 16.47). Most of the participants were White (80.9%), followed by African American (8.2%), Asian (4.2%), Hispanic (2.7%), Native

American (0.9%), Pacific Islander (0.1%), and other (1.9%). Regarding educational background, 2.4% did not graduate from a high school, 18.8% had finished high school, 26.1% had completed some college, 11.0% had earned a 2-year college degree, 31.5% had a 4-year degree, and 10.1% had completed a graduate degree.

A majority of NFL fans in the United States is White (approximately 75%) and male (approximately 58%; Gough, 2020), and the largest age group is 50–64 years (28%) followed by 35–49 years (23.8%; Sports Market Analytics, n.d.). Additionally, the current study's sample characteristics largely mirrored the demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, age, ethnicity, and education) of the population of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area as reported in the census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Therefore, we concluded that our sample was adequately representative of the study population (NFL fans residing in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The CFA results indicated an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.97$, RMSEA = .037, CFI = .987, SRMR = .027; Kline, 2015). As Table 2 indicates, the loading of every measurement scale item was statistically significant and greater than .50. The CR values ranged from .903 to .971. The AVE values ranged from .757 to .917. Thus, we concluded that convergent validity was established. To examine discriminant validity, we examined correlations among measured variables (see Table 3). Correlations between variables ranged from –.019 to .739. In addition, we found every shared variance to be smaller than the AVE values. Therefore, we concluded that discriminant validity was also established (Kline, 2015).

[Insert Table 2 and 3 about here]

Structural Equation Modeling

The results of structural equation modeling (SEM) indicated a good fit of the model to the data ($\chi^2/df = 1.93$, RMSEA = .036, CFI = .987, SRMR = .029; Kline, 2015). We summarized the path coefficients and their statistical significance as well as R-square values in Figure 1. First, regarding the relationships between attitudes and league credibility, we found a statistically significant relationship (a) between attitude toward the #TakeAKnee movement and attitude toward the league's handling of the movement ($\beta = .471$, $p < .001$, supporting *H1*), and (b) between attitude toward the league's handling of the movement and league credibility ($\beta = .482$, $p < .001$, supporting *H2*). We then examined the mediation roles of attitude toward the league's handling of the movement. The results indicated that attitude toward the league's handling of the movement positively mediated the relationship between attitude toward the movement and league credibility (standardized indirect effect = .227, *SE* = .028, $p < .001$, supporting *H3*). When we included attitude toward the league's handling of the movement as a mediator, attitude toward the movement had a direct negative relationship with league credibility ($\beta = -.251$, $p < .001$, supporting *H4*). Finally, league credibility was positively associated with event involvement ($\beta = .699$, $p < .001$, supporting *H5*) and perceived event legacy ($\beta = .739$, $p < .001$, supporting *H6*).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

The #TakeAKnee movement initiated by Kaepernick has attracted considerable scholarly attention in the fields of sport management and communication (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020; Chaplin & de Oca, 2019; Coombs et al., 2020; Lee & Cunningham, 2019; Park et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2019; Watanabe & Cunningham, 2020). Previous research has offered important

insights into the movement's impact on consumer perceptions and behaviors (Anderson, 2020; Watanabe & Cunningham, 2020). In the present study, we aimed to contribute to this line of research by examining league credibility as a key psychological factor that bridges the gap between the controversy over the #TakeAKnee movement and consumer outcomes. The communication literature suggests that the NFL's handling of the controversy could have influenced league credibility (Kim & Park, 2017; van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015), which in turn, could determine the extent to which the NFL can effectively communicate with the public and achieve its capitalistic and neoliberal goals (e.g., maximization of profits; Inoue & Kent, 2014; Kelman, 1961, 2006; Walker & Kent, 2013). Going beyond the existing findings, the results of the current study revealed unique relational dynamics among attitudes toward the #TakeAKnee movement and the NFL's handling of the movement, league credibility, and subsequent consumer outcomes.

First, we found positive relationships between (a) attitude toward the movement and attitude toward the league's responses, and (b) attitude toward the league's responses and league credibility. From a crisis communication perspective, we suggest that people whose attitudes toward the movement were positive also showed a positive attitude toward the NFL's responses because they attributed to the league little responsibility for the controversy. According to Coombs (2007), diminishment strategies tend to be effective in inducing positive responses from the public in such a situation, and the NFL indeed employed diminishment and bolstering strategies for its initial responses to the protest. Thus, people who had positive attitudes toward the movement evaluated the NFL's initial responses positively. In contrast, people whose attitudes toward the movement were negative blamed the league for the crisis because they believed that the league was responsible for controlling the players' actions. Additionally, people

who positively evaluated the NFL's response tended to view the league as a credible organization (Kim & Park, 2017; van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015).

However, after taking indirect effects into account, attitude toward the movement had a direct negative relationship with league credibility, which can be interpreted as a result of free riding. Free riding often occurs when an organization participates in a seemingly altruistic or philanthropic project to gain positive reputation simply by being part of it (Levine & Kam, 2017). An organization could lose its credibility if people think it is a free rider (Berrone et al., 2017; Delmas & Keller, 2005). In the case of the NFL, the league has been known for its strong connection to patriotism (Coombs et al., 2020), and some owners expressed displeasure with #TakeAKnee movement (George, 2017). Thus, when people received the NFL's messages stating that the league was actively working with its players to promote social equality and justice, some of them may have speculated that the league was free riding and letting protesting players bear the brunt of criticism (Belson & Leibovich, 2018), resulting in decreased credibility for the organization.

Finally, we found that league credibility had positive associations with two consumer outcomes: event involvement and perceived event legacy. The result implies that league credibility, which was influenced by how the NFL handled the #TakeAKnee movement, could affect the effectiveness of the league's later communication efforts. This is consistent with the credibility literature, which suggests that people are more likely to accept messages from highly credible organizations than from less credible organizations (Kelman, 1961, 2006). In fact, league credibility demonstrated strong associations with event involvement (β = .699) and perceived event legacy (β = .739). Based on the theoretical background and empirical findings, we argue that league credibility plays a critical role in explaining the connection between

consumer perceptions about the NFL's handling of the controversy and their later acceptance of the league's promotional messages.

These findings offer unique theoretical implications for sport communication literature. The concept of credibility has been applied mostly to individuals (e.g., celebrities, athletes) rather than to an organization (Chen et al., 2019; Soesilo et al., 2020). In particular, to date, only a handful of studies focused on the credibility of sports leagues (Kim et al., 2014). This is becoming a critical limitation of the literature, as more athletes participate in social and political movements and the public pays close attention to how sports leagues handle the situation. The current study contributes to the development of the literature by explaining how people interpret a sports league's responses to athlete activism and how their evaluations influence the league's credibility.

Another unique strength of the current study is the timing and sample of our survey. Previous researchers (e.g., Anderson, 2020; Rugg, 2020) focused on major actions that the NFL took (e.g., the new national anthem policy, the launch of a new social justice initiative), but they paid little attention to the league's initial communication efforts (e.g., press release, stakeholder meetings) prior to those major actions. We measured people's evaluations of the NFL's initial responses by conducting a survey in January and February of 2018. We found that people who positively evaluated the NFL's initial responses tended to view the league as more credible than those who negatively evaluated the league's responses, implying the importance of the initial responses to the controversy. This finding supports the idea that an initial response to a crisis sets the tone for the discussion of the crisis and determines how the public views the organization afterward (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). From this perspective, although the NFL announced major policy changes in May 2018, the ways people interpreted these policy changes

may have been influenced by how they evaluated the league's initial responses to the protest. As such, the current study offers new perspectives on the public reactions to the NFL's handling of the #TakeAKnee movement.

Finally, our results confirming the positive relationship between league credibility and perceived event legacy contribute new knowledge to the literature on sport event legacy (Preuss, 2007; Thomson et al., 2019). Although substantial empirical efforts have been devoted to assessing residents' perceptions of legacy outcomes of major sport events (e.g., Karadakis & Kaplanidou, 2012; Shipway et al., 2020), we know less about what contributes to such perceptions (Thomson et al., 2019). Chalip (2006, 2018) advanced the model of sport event leverage to shift focus to determinants of sport event legacy, and an increasing number of studies have empirically supported the effects of event-related attributes (e.g., celebratory atmosphere, social camaraderie) drawn from this model on perceived event legacy and impact (Inoue & Havard, 2014; Schlegel et al., 2017). However, given its focus on strategies concerning event planning and design, the event leverage model offers limited insight into the roles that residents' appraisal of an organization that develops, implements, and communicates leveraging strategies, may play in influencing community perceptions of legacy outcomes. In the current study, we have addressed this gap in knowledge by applying a theoretical perspective from the source credibility literature (Inoue & Kent, 2014; Kelman, 1961; McCracken, 1989). Specifically, the results demonstrate that when a crisis occurs, organizers and right holders of a major sport event (as a central message source of event-related communication) must earn credibility through their effective crisis responses to make residents believe that the event and associated leveraging activities will leave a positive legacy in the community.

Practical Implications

When sports leagues organize major events like the Super Bowl, one of their important tasks is to develop favorable relationships with local residents (Chen et al., 2018). For Super Bowl LII, the NFL conducted extensive promotions targeting residents of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. For example, the Minnesota Super Bowl Host Committee established the Legacy Fund and provided financial support for more than 50 community projects across the state (Allen, 2018). This campaign offered the NFL an ideal platform to advocate for the event's positive impact in the local community. As Michael Howard, communications director for the Minnesota Super Bowl Host Committee, said, "Hosting the Super Bowl in Minnesota is our opportunity for our state to shine on the world's largest stage. However, it's also a chance to leave a legacy that will remain after the game is played" (Allen, 2018, para. 3).

To make such public relations efforts effective, sports leagues and other event organizers must be perceived as credible by their target audiences (Kelman, 1961; McCracken, 1989). The present study's results imply that the NFL's handling of the #TakeAKnee movement played an important role in maintaining the organization's credibility and communication effectiveness. In other words, the league's crisis communication may have determined the effectiveness of its event promotions even though these two types of communication had different purposes and probably had different people in charge. Based on the results, we suggest that sports organizations should develop consistent, comprehensive communication strategies with which they can maximize a positive synergy between their strategies for crisis communication and their strategies for other types of communication rather than having a separate strategy for each type.

As the initial responses to the protest, the NFL mainly employed the diminishment and bolstering strategies, which was effective to induce positive responses from those who had positive attitudes toward the movement. However, some people seem to have speculated that the

NFL was free riding, which has damaged league credibility. Although the NFL argued that the league was working closely with players to promote social justice and equality, some people found a significant discrepancy between what protesting players were sacrificing and what the league was risking. To avoid such consumer criticisms, the NFL should have shown a greater commitment to the issue. From this perspective, the launch of the "Inspire Change" campaign was a proper solution. However, the campaign was announced almost 2 years after the protest began, and the league's initial responses had already set the tone for the discussion of the controversy. To induce better public responses to the social justice initiative, the NFL should have demonstrated its commitment to social justice and equality in the early stages. For example, having the league's executive visiting and speaking with the victims of police brutality would have shown greater commitment to the issue than releasing public statements or holding stakeholder meetings.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Some limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, we focused on a specific population (i.e., the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area residents). This approach enabled us to target a relevant study context (i.e., host community of the Super Bowl) as well as to obtain data from individuals who were representative of the population. However, because it may limit the generalizability of our results to populations outside this region, researchers should test the proposed relationships in other contexts.

Additionally, although we examined people's overall evaluations of the NFL's response, we did not examine the effectiveness of specific message content. The NFL owners and executives released various public statements through a variety of communication platforms such

as press conferences, press releases, and social media. To advance our understanding of crisis communication, researchers should explore how the public reacted to each of these statements.

Finally, to examine the effectiveness the NFL's communication efforts, we measured consumer perceptions regarding the Super Bowl and its legacy. However, the Super Bowl has unique cultural and symbolic meanings in American society, so people's perceptions about the event may have been influenced by other individual and cultural factors. Therefore, future researchers may explore other dependent variables of league credibility such as attitude toward the advertisement and purchase intentions (Chen et al., 2019; Goldsmith et al., 2000; Lafferty & Goldsmith, 1999).

Conclusion

The current study examined the NFL's handling of the #TakeAKnee movement from a crisis communication perspective. The SEM results revealed unique relational dynamics among attitudes toward the #TakeAKnee movement, attitudes toward the NFL's handling of the movement, and league credibility, which can be interpreted based on SCCT and the concept of free riding. Additionally, the results demonstrated how the movement and the NFL's responses have influenced subsequent communication effectiveness. As such, the current research offers unique theoretical perspectives in crisis communication research and new insights for sports leagues and other event organizers to develop effective communication strategies.

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Table 1

Measurement Items

Variable	Item
Attitude toward Movement	The recent protests by NFL players are (PA1) Bad (1) – Good (7) (PA2) Unpleasant (1) – Pleasant (7) (PA3) Unfavorable (1) – Favorable (7)
Attitude toward League's Handling	The NFL's handling of its players' protests is (LA1) Bad (1) – Good (7) (LA2) Unpleasant (1) – Pleasant (7) (LA3) Unfavorable (1) –Favorable (7)
League Credibility	(LC1) The NFL is an organization I can trust. (LC2) The NFL has a strong value system. (LC3) The NFL is an organization I believe in.
Event Involvement	(EI1) I am very interested in Super Bowl LII. (EI2) I plan to follow broadcasts of Super Bowl LII. (EI3) Super Bowl LII is a great event for me.
Perceived Event Legacy	(EL1) I believe that Super Bowl LII is committed to improving the health and wellness of Minnesotan children. (EL2) Super Bowl LII promotes a healthy lifestyle among children in Minnesota. (EL3) Super Bowl LII contributes to making Minnesota a more physically active community. (EL4) I believe that Super Bowl LII is committed to using its profits to support initiatives that promote the health and wellness of Minnesotans. (EL5) Health promotion campaigns sponsored by Super Bowl LII are effective for improving the health and wellness of Minnesotans.

Note. Unless noted otherwise, items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Variable	*M*	*SD*	λ	CR	AVE
Attitude toward Movement				.971	.917
MA1	3.92	2.32	.969		
MA2	3.57	2.16	.937		
MA3	3.78	2.31	.966		
Attitude toward League's Handling				.961	.891
LA1	3.30	1.78	.936		
LA2	3.18	1.68	.940		
LA3	3.23	1.78	.955		
League Credibility				.927	.808
LC1	3.80	1.74	.918		
LC2	3.87	1.76	.889		
LC3	3.84	1.78	.890		
Event Involvement				.903	.757
EI1	4.48	1.84	.909		
EI2	4.93	1.83	.807		
EI3	4.12	1.86	.890		
Perceived Event Legacy				.942	.766
EL1	4.32	1.48	.905		
EL2	4.50	1.48	.873		
EL3	4.57	1.45	.856		
EL4	4.26	1.50	.858		
EL5	4.47	1.41	.882		

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; λ = standardized factor loading; CR = composite reliability coefficient; AVE = average variance extracted.

Table 3

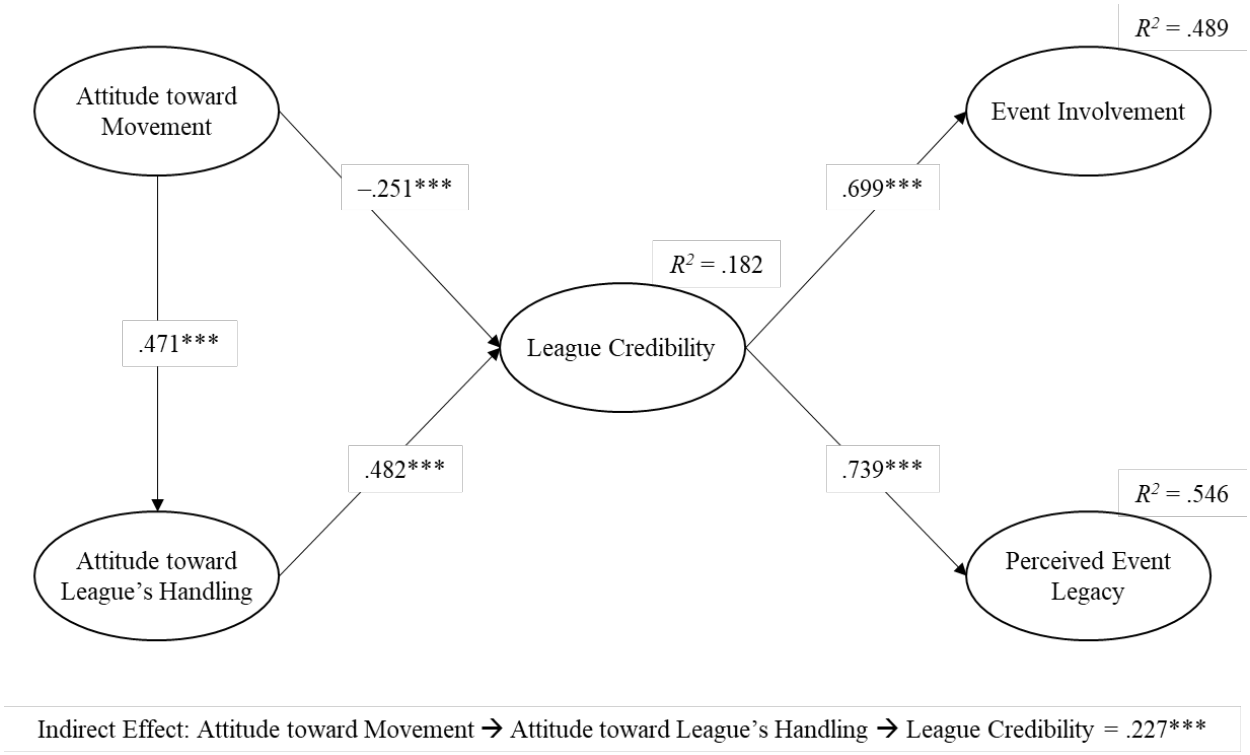
Correlation Matrix

	Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Attitude toward Movement	.917	.222	.001	.002	.003
2.	Attitude toward League's Handling	.471	.891	.134	.054	.070
3.	League Credibility	−.019	.366	.808	.490	.546
4.	Event Involvement	−.040	.232	.700	.757	.433
5.	Perceived Event Legacy	−.051	.264	.739	.658	.766

Note. The diagonal shows average variance extracted values of each construct. Correlations are under the diagonal, and squared correlations are above the diagonal.

Figure 1

The Results of Structural Equation Modeling



Note. Path coefficients are all standardized.
***$p < .001$