

Marketing the Sacrifice: A Roiled Audience Overwhelms the Gates

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In analyzing 90,000 Tweets associated with Nike's selection of controversial NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick for its 2018 marketing campaign, this study found the audience largely diverged from the company's primary message. By deploying the emerging theory of the "drowning effect" as a

subcategory of overall gatekeeping, researchers found the audience used five rhetorical tactics to discuss seven primary themes.

Keywords: Twitter, drowning effect, gatekeeping

After Nike's launch of its Colin Kaepernick campaign, which featured an advertisement praising the former NFL quarterback for sacrificing his career for a higher purpose, the audience on Twitter used the occasion to begin a series of conversations on widely divergent themes. Social media has disrupted widely accepted gatekeeping theories, which argued message producers (White, 1950) – while heavily influenced by many factors (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991) – were primarily responsible for audience reaction by picking sources and topics. Social media platforms, such as Twitter, have allowed a traditionally far more passive audience to take a much bigger role in the shaping of meaning, even to the point of drowning out the producer's original message (Lee et al., 2020; Erzikova & Simpson, 2018; Gandy & Erzikova, 2017).

Nike has long been touted as an advertising and marketing leader (Kim, 2020). The world's No. 1 athletic apparel manufacturer (Statista, 2020) pushed the boundaries further in 2018 when it named Kaepernick as its spokesman and lead image for the 30th anniversary of its "Just Do It" campaign. At the time, Kaepernick was embroiled in a fight

with the National Football League, alleging team owners had conspired to keep him from the field after he enticed other players to kneel during the playing of the national anthem. Kaepernick said the kneeling was to protest the police killings of African-Americans. Nike's move sparked wide praise and condemnation on social media, but eventually resulted in both increased sales and a rising stock price (Abad-Santos, 2018).

This study sought to further the existing literature on audience behavior in the digital space by examining more than 90,000 Twitter posts in the aftermath of Nike winning the Creative Arts Emmy for its 2019 Kaepernick television advertisement (Papenfuss, 2019). This study was designed to further test the drowning effect theory by exploring how the audience used the Emmy announcement. As social media matures, it is important for social science, industry and society to better understand how information and dialogue are shared in a digital ecosystem where message producers and audience are often indistinguishable. White (1950) envisioned a relatively one-way form of mass communication, with professionals opening and closing gates of information. Shoemaker & Reese (1991) added much needed nuance to this idea, which they built on in an essay where they sought to bring together various theories to better confront a digital communication world (Shoemaker & Reese, 2016). The drowning effect reaches toward a further understanding, where the dynamic between audience and producer is not a hierarchy but an often-dysfunctional partnership of equals where the message producer is less a gatekeeper and more of the official holding the starting gun in a rhetorical demolition derby.

Nike's Campaign

The Nike ad featuring Kaepernick won the Creative Arts Emmy in 2019, pushing the marketing barriers yet again by not implying Kaepernick was a social justice hero but directly stating he had sacrificed at least a portion of his lucrative career for the higher purpose of bringing attention to police brutality (Waymer & Logan, 2021). Nike has held a decades-long leadership position in marketing and advertising innovation, relying heavily on athlete endorsements and product placement, such as working deals with high-profile college teams to wear the iconic swoosh on their shoes and uniforms. When the company signed Kaepernick, he was in the middle of a lawsuit alleging NFL team owners colluded to bar him from the field. Kaepernick, a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, kneeled

during the national anthem as a form of protest against social injustice and police brutality on September 1, 2016 (Kane & Tiell, 2017). He opted out of his contract and became a free agent on March 3, 2017.

Nike launched the campaign in the midst of not only a political environment ruffled by deep political divisions exposed in the 2016 presidential campaign but also a legacy media landscape disrupted by digital forces. Audiences for traditional newspapers and television have shrunk dramatically in the past decade, while more and more viewers turn to social media and digital platforms for news and information (Pew Research Center, 2018). Marketing and advertising dollars have followed the audience. For instance, presidential candidates spent more than \$1 billion on social media advertising, though local television remains the single-largest beneficiary of political ad dollars (Adgate, 2020).

Shortly after Nike launched its Just Do It anniversary campaign, Edelman (2018) released a study that underscored the importance of Nike's decision to speak out against racism and police brutality. The study revealed that nearly two-thirds of consumers believed that a brand should take a stand on a political or a social issue. In fact, people worldwide trusted corporations more than government to solve problems. A brand's activism can influence purchasing and a desire to advocate for the brand, itself, the study found.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concepts of brand activism, gatekeeping and the drowning effect within the digitized ecosystem of social media form the foundations of this study. Social media are inherently different than traditional mass communication platforms, such as broadcasting and newspapers, which are fundamentally thought of as one-way communication channels. By offering sometimes-mediated comment sections, websites serve as an intermediate step between the legacy media and the torrent of social media platforms. Social media, as individual platforms, contain fewer content restrictions and far fewer of the curating conventions, norms, and procedures seen in the legacy media, such as professional editors and content producers. Social media platforms such as a Twitter can be seen as the gate to the sluice, not the keeper.

Social media users can be an important driver of opinion formation and persuasion. For instance, some users read the climate of opinion before expressing and even establishing their own perception. Previous studies have suggested that crisis-related posts on social media impact public perception of the crisis (Stephens & Malone, 2009). Hong and Cameron (2018) state that user-generated content can mitigate perception toward a crisis. They further claim that, even when the news content is favorable toward a company in a time of crisis, online comments can change readers' perception of who is responsible. Online comments can be persuasive because of public trust in user-generated comments, which can be seen as more credible than media reports since the comments are seen as impartial (Shoemaker, Johnson, Seo, & Wang, 2010). Liu and Shi (2018) posit that social influence is embedded in online comments, and they have a powerful impact on individuals in guiding how they evaluate news content. Their research suggests that some people's attitudinal judgment follows the dominant voice even though those voices are often anonymous strangers.

Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping, defined as the control of information passing through a gate or filter (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), is judgment or decision making about what information should be gathered, evaluated, and shared. With the proliferation of the internet and other new technologies, scholars have re-examined the concept of gatekeeping as White (1950) first articulated it by studying the news selections of a single copydesk chief at a suburban newspaper. An updated concept of gatekeeping includes three components: sources of information (experts, witnesses), the mass media, and, most recently, the audience that creates digital pass-along readership (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The revised model reflects the complexity of the contemporary gatekeeping process in which the information flow is not one-way, top-down but rather "flows back and forth among the channels" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 128).

The participatory nature of the internet provides online users with the ability to become secondary gatekeepers by disseminating information from message creators (Singer, 2014) to other audience members. In other words, both creator and readers are active actors in the process. This change in the process of news production and distribution has led to the idea that gatekeeping has been transformed into gatewatching

(Bruns, 2008). Online readers gatewatch platforms, gather and share reports, thus, publicizing news instead of publishing it. Shoemaker and Reese (2016) nodded to the idea of gatewatching as well as brand activism when they articulated their more nuanced approach to gatekeeping by suggesting social media, as part of a digital universe, had not replaced the theory of a powerful message creator. Rather, they argue, the dynamic seen by many scholars should be looked at through the lens of a “hierarchy of influences” operating via a series of “social practices and institutional arrangements” (p. 390).

Historically, marketing and the closely related field of public relations, sought to position products and clients in a broad, positive light, eschewing contentious social and political issues or, at most, nodding to feel-good associations. For instance, Coke’s (in)famous campaign suggesting no problem is bigger than people simply sharing a soft drink was subtle support for the key demographic of young anti-war protestors and counter-culture participants. Nike has been a pioneer in dropping the subtlety by taking what the company perceives as the profitable side of social movements. Hill (2020) took note of this rising trend in examining a case out of North Carolina. She concluded brand activism, while clearly working for some companies, also can carry unseen risks through fragmenting messages and audience. Sobande (2020) took a more critical approach, arguing that tying marketing to societal change “flattened” movements by suggesting that what caused needed reforms were individual awareness and buying products rather than structural realignment.

Drowning Effect

The drowning effect, though not cited by Hill (2020), can be seen as one of those risks. Online readers often diverge from the main topic of a specific message rather than focusing on the argumentative or factual claims of the original post (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011). This has been widely studied within the context of news. When a news topic triggers other issues than the central message of the story, commenters might depart from the news topic. A study of 2012 presidential candidate Herman Cain’s social media strategies before and during a sexual harassment scandal involving him, for instance, found that posts written by the general Twitter community were much more popular than Cain’s personal tweets (Gandy & Erzikova, 2017). During the crisis, Twitter users disregarded Cain’s messages and instead carried on conversations among each other.

Gandy and Erzikova (2017) called this phenomenon a drowning effect, described as an actor's message being "drowned out" by growing public discourse outside the original message.

Erzikova and Simpson (2018) further sought evidence for the drowning effect in examining online readers' comments about Anthony Weiner's sexting scandal and found that readers mainly used the online comment sections as a prompt to launch judgments about the issues and personalities swirling around the subjects of the stories, rather than to respond or react to the news presented to them. In addition, many of the commenters preferred to respond to each other rather than the news outlet or the journalist who authored the story (2018, p. 6). For the purpose of this study, a "drowning effect" is defined as a process of the audience departing from the original topic of the discussion, or individuals' inclination to create their own narratives and divine their own meaning through participation (Lee et al., 2020) in the conversation associated with a news story. This, in effect, "drowns out" the intent of the original creator and the gatekeepers (Erzikova & Simpson, 2018).

The tendency of news consumers to introduce new topics (Ziegele & Quiring, 2013) is seen in the idea of comment gatekeeping, which is part of audience gatekeeping defined as the process in which news consumers "pass along already available news items and comment on them" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 113). Mays (2020) studied YouTube comments attached to CNN and Fox News videos on 2017 legislative efforts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act and found the prevalence of a drowning effect on both forums: 69% of comments to CNN stories and 71% of comments to Fox News stories were not relevant to topics addressed by the news stories. Further, a study that looked at comments to most viewed CNN and Fox News YouTube videos pertaining to the opioid epidemic revealed that a drowning effect varied significantly among the videos, ranging from 10% to 75% of comments (Bacon, Ivanitskaya, & Erzikova, 2020).

Analysis of YouTube comments to news about a political sex scandal demonstrated that the majority of comments discussed irrelevant themes, regardless of the political nature of the platform – liberal (CNN) or conservative (Fox News) (Erzikova & McLean, 2020). However, at both forums, commenters' attempts to drown the initial message led to decreased popularity of their posts (measured by a number of likes). Further, some

scholars have suggested that the comments are in danger of reducing the “news to a topic rather than a nuanced discussion of matters important to society” (Lee et al., 2020, p. 12).

Overall, existing studies have demonstrated the complexity of a drowning effect. On one hand, the effect was regarded as positive in the sense that it helps foster participatory journalism (Erzikova & Mclean, 2020; Erzikova & Simpson, 2018). On the other hand, the drowning effect has raised such concerns as obstructing public deliberation of important societal issues by shifting attention to less- or non-important subjects (Lee et al., 2020).

Based on the above, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1a: If a drowning effect could be detected, what approaches, or tactics, did the Tweeters use?

RQ1b: Through what themes did the drowning effect manifest?

METHODS

Twitter was chosen for this study because it is one of the most influential and highly used social media platforms in the world, with an estimated 192 million daily unique visitors (Tankovska, 2021). Data for this study were collected via the Twitter API using the search term “kaepernick+nike” and filtering between dates 9/4/18 and 11/1/18. This resulted in of 92,028 tweets. Of these tweets, 42,048 (46%) tweets were retweeted at least once and generated 82.19 million retweets. The mean number of retweets per tweet was 1,955.

Operational definition

For the purpose of this study, a “drowning effect” is defined as a process through which themes divergent from the main topic of a news story gain prominence on a social media forum. A drowning effect manifests in the audience’s inclination to create their own narratives and divine their own meaning through participating in the conversation associated with a news story, in effect “drowning out” the intent of the original creator and the gatekeepers (Erzikova & Simpson, 2018).

Data Analysis

This study was guided by the strategy of Craft, Vos and Wolfgang (2016) and employed an inductive, iterative approach. Once collected into a digital file, the Tweets were independently analyzed by three researchers. At the first stage of data analysis,

researchers independently read and re-read collected tweets to identify recurring themes. To avoid cognitive bias, one of the researchers performed blind data analysis: She was not informed about the purpose of the study, theoretical framework or research question. She was given a general instruction to identify themes and was debriefed after completing the task. A third researcher analyzed the Tweets with an eye on argumentative tactics (Ali & Ganapati, 2019) used in the posts.

After that the researchers met to discuss and compare preliminary notes. A few common topics were detected. The second stage of data analysis included independent reading and re-reading of the texts to refine and collapse the emerged themes. A group discussion focused on the themes, their divergence from the Twitter premise, and a potential “drowning” effect. Consistent with the constant comparative method (Charmaz 2006), the researchers met to discuss sampled posts to discuss notes and compare, clarify, and categorize potential, emergent themes.

Tactics were explored using categories developed by Ali & Ganapati (2019) in their explication of argumentative tactics through a series of rhetorical devices. In their study, Ali & Ganapati (2019, p. 10) made a distinction between tactic and technique. For instance, they examined content to identify the tactic of a “first mover advantage,” which they operationalized as the technique of offering the “initial framing” of subject. This study borrowed this distinction and sought to place the Tweets in overall categories of tactics, which then lead to the development of themes.

FINDINGS

In regards to RQ1a – what tactics could be detected in drowning out the message – this study found that Tweeters used five primary tactics. These were “belittling dissenters;” “take it down a rabbit hole;” “loaded language;” “triggering the bomb;” and “taking the moral high ground.” In regards to RQ1b – what themes could be found as a way to operationalize the tactics –this study found seven primary themes: Nike as a brand; Nike as oppressor through its labor practices; Nike as hypocrite; Nike as a partisan political player; Kaepernick as a civil rights leader; relationship to self, and support of institutions.

Many Tweeters used the tactic of “belittling dissenters” to engage in the theme of Nike as a brand to divert from the central message of the advertisement. They shared facts and opinions about various aspects of the company that did not have a direct relevance to the ad. For example, Tweeters discussed Nike’s branding strategies. One person tweeted, “Nike became Nike bc it was built on the idea of rebellion. This is the same company that dealt w/ the NBA banning Jordans. They made Jordan the face of the company @ a time when black men were considered to be a huge risk as pitch men. #justdoit #nike.” Another social media user echoed: “@Nike has in the past used controversial figures to push its campaigns and the use of controversial player Kaepernick7 who knelt down during the US national anthem as a protest against the brutal killing of black men by the police is no different.”

By examining the past actions of Nike to evaluate the brand they set the stage for discourse to be controlled by the conceptualizations of Nike as a brand. The attention of the audience is directed away from the message to the company sending the message. The use of history to dismiss criticism is the Tweeters saying those criticizing Nike have invalid claims because they do not know the brand’s history.

Tweeters also brought up the issue of unfair labor practices. Even though Nike spurred a national conversation on such important issues as police brutality and racism, the brand was not immune to criticism: “I love that @Kaepernick7 has been given a platform to speak further on the disproportionate killing of black men, but I still won't be buying @Nike until they treat their workers like human beings.”

The user here used the tactic of “take it down the rabbit hole” (Ali & Ganapati, 2019, p. 15) to bring the audience to another issue. This progress leaves argumentative progress on the issues raised by the advertisement unsolved. In this case, the Tweeter is not refusing to answer the challenge posed by Nike, but rather attempts to change the subject. Another tweeter posted, “My opinion on the Kaepernick/Nike thing is complicated. Obviously Kaepernick's message getting validated by a major corporation deeply involved in the NFL is good, but at the same time Nike is a major corporation that utilizes non-union sweatshop labor.”

Another theme that used the tactic of “take it down the rabbit hole” was establishing a relationship to themselves or their personal situations. The users see

politics coming into the space of their lives. In response, they are bringing their lives into politics. Rather than engage in the rhetorical context of the advertisement, Tweeters brought the contexts from home. For example, users mentioned the split reactions they experienced in real life and on social media platforms because of the ad: “All my family members are posting all kinds of conservative shXt regarding the Colin Kaepernick Nike ad. I mean I love my family, but I wish they understood why players kneel.” Another person tweeted, “Let the unfollowers begin #kaepernick #nike #justdoit URL.” In addition, some Tweeters were frustrated with the volume of attention the ad received on social media: “Most of my posts are about music and my Dj content, so they don’t get noticed on social media because I’m not talking about Kavanaugh, Trump, Kaepernick, Nike or whatever else people disagree about. Nonetheless, I’m... URL.”

The sincerity of Nike’s messaging was called into focus through these criticisms. Even the users who appreciated the attempted message – support of social dissent through Kaepernick’s hiring as spokesman – did not trust the messenger. In addition, some Tweeters dismissed Nike’s and other brands’ CSR efforts as having a hidden agenda of profit-making: “Good news! Nike ended police shootings of black men! Dominos is fixing all our potholes! Lyft is improving voter turnout! All hail our new philosopher kings! Companies are not moral. They exist only for profit & will exploit any ideology/cause to get it.” Another, equally sarcastic tweet, said, “#ColinKaepernick #NIKE ‘Even if it means sacrificing everything’... including corporate integrity (Nike) for profit. #NFL interest on decline - and rightfully so. My thoughts might interest you... URL.” Another tweeter offered, “@darrenrovell If Nike found it profitable to show commercials of men beating women, they'd 'Do It'.. If they thought depicting rape and torture would make them more money, you'd see ads depicting it.. So that's why they linked to parasite Kaepernick.”

This series of tweets shows how Tweeters engaged again with belittling dissenters as well as following a rabbit hole (Ali & Ganapati, 2019). Nike is framed as hypocritical, attempting to promote social justice while at the same time oppressing its workers. The focus of these criticisms is far removed the desired messaged of the advertisement. The duality of political factions shows that this is not entirely done to be dismissive of calls for racial justice. While many Tweeters suggested Nike hired Kaepernick in bad faith, they at

the same time tended to agree with the surface message, a desire true humanist practices and conceptualizations about race.

Nike as a brand theme included tweets that revealed mistrust. The hashtag “hypocrisy,” for instance, was used when Tweeters mentioned Nike’s political spending: “Dear Kaepernick, ‘Nike has given \$424,000 to the GOP compared to \$122,000 to Democrats.’ Where do your loyalties lie? #Yahoo #Hypocrisy” Another person tweeted, “No egg. Actually, a lot of those #Nike profits will go to fund #Republican candidates. Corporate going to corporate. URL.”

The use of “hypocrisy” parallels to “loaded language” (Ali & Ganapati, 2019, p. 20) Tweeters prime emotions surrounding the issue rather than targeting the emotions within the issue. Nike is called into perspective as untrustworthy. In one sense, not only does this distract from Kaepernick’s criticism of the US policing system but associates him with unfavorable impressions. The implication is that if one argument is duplicitous, the others might be as well.

Another theme that emerged as a means of drowning the initial message was partisanship and used the tactic of “trigger the bomb” (Ali & Ganapati, 2019, p. 21). Some Tweeters believed the ad was a political move that served only to further divide Democrats and Republicans. Tweeters used the release of the ad as an opportunity to attack each other, some invoking Republican Donald Trump. A presumably pro-Republican posted, “@realDonaldTrump How is Nike stock going up? URL I think the Democrats are manipulate and moving money from one area to Nike. For example, Penthouse International Stock (PHSL) is porn and should be going up..For military areas, should go up. Moving money.” A presumably pro-Democrat wrote, “@KQEDForum all this outrage over the kaepernick/Nike ad just shows that conservatives and trump supporters are more outraged by a commercial than they are about school shootings, opioid overdoses, climate change, & corruption.”

In these examples, charged emotions from the larger political atmosphere invade the rhetorical space of Twitter. Even broader criticism against Kaepernick is lost in the political personalities and other political issues. The Democrat Tweeter, for instance, does not make reference to police brutality in criticizing Trump supporters. Nike’s ad campaign only serves to ignite for their inflammatory rhetoric.

Many Tweeters used a theme of comparing Kaepernick to past civil rights leaders. Some names that came up frequently were Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King and Muhammad Ali: “Kaepernick only took a knee, Rosa Parks only sat on a bus, Jesse Owens only raised his fist, and Muhammad Ali only refused to be drafted... #perspective #Kaepernick #nike” Another person tweeted, “Kaepernick would one day be compared favorably to Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Rosa Parks, praising him as one of the key fruits of our labor.”

Here, Tweeters took the “moral high ground” (Ali & Ganapati, 2019, p. 18). In drawing from cultural, civil rights legends, they position their arguments and thereby Kaepernick’s, as the only option. The positions are framed so that if you stand against them you stand against historical icons. This undercuts the arguments that may be used to oppose them before they are levied. Yet, the context of both Nike’s ad and Kaepernick’s message is drowned out in favor of a larger context.

Another theme using the tactic of “moral high ground” was support of institutions, in particular, law enforcement. For example, one tweeter posted, “If you buy Nike Shoes you are supporting Colin Kaepernick & NIKE'S hatred for law enforcement while Chicago's Murder rate is astronomical !” Another wrote, “@TMZ How disgusting that Jenifer Lewis/CNN would defend Kaepernick/Nike/anti-Police/anti-Law Enforcement; and foment racial division in America! 99.9 percent of Law Enforcement is honest and protects America! Highlight that!” Others equated police with the military: “Disrespecting our troops and police will NOT be tolerated I'm done with Nike.” Wrote another, “Remember, Kaepernick hates the police, compares them to pigs. By promoting Kaepernick, Nike by proxy is promoting the murder of police, this is so sick and divisive. I will NEVER buy Nike again as long as I live and I have kids who play sports. Lots of other options. URL.”

Some Tweeters turned the message from Nike around to take the high ground of sacrifice from Kaepernick and to install others in his place. For instance, one Tweeter wrote, “RT @dr_palazzolo: Pat Tillman. Hero. Fallen Warrior. He really did make the ultimate sacrifice by giving it ALL unlike the the pretenders.” Another Tweeted, “@Kaepernick7 Pat Tillman sacrificed everything...you've sacrificed nothing.” Pat Tillman was an NFL player that joined the US armed forces after the 9/11 attacks and was killed

in combat (NPR, 2009). The focus of the message was again rabbit holed (Ali & Ganapati, 2019).

DISCUSSION

This study analyzed more than 90,000 tweets associated with the 2018 Nike ad focusing on former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick. Analysis revealed a well-manifested drowning effect, or social media users' tendency to depart from the original message by introducing new discussion topics. The ad featuring a close-up of Kaepernick's face with the caption, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything," demonstrated Nike's support of Kaepernick's kneeling campaign and signified the brand's purported stand against racism and police brutality in the U.S.

While Nike's straightforward message was an invitation to discuss the topic of racial inequality, many Tweeters introduced their own topics of discussion, with varying degrees of relevance to the main message. For many social media users, the ad triggered the need to share their opinions about Nike as a brand. Tweeters acknowledged the consistency in such a strategy of partnering with well-known controversial figures and praised Nike for a desire to perpetuate a socially desirable goal. But as some scholars have pointed out (Hill, 2020), the risk in such marketing campaigns is that the association the audience makes between the messenger and message may not be all positive. The drowning effect allows us to see this dynamic, the ungated digital audience bringing in less desirable attributes of the company's media presence. In this case, Tweeters sent the company a harsh reminder to get its own house in order (e.g., by addressing unfair labor practices). As trust implications for brands, the consistency in advertising and marketing strategies is not enough; the consistency in adherence to a moral character is vital, meaning the audience will take into account a brand's total image and use the tools at its disposal, such as Twitter, to point out hypocrisy between words and action.

The analysis of tweets also showed that the ad activated politically opposing sides on Twitter. While pro-Democrat Tweeters enthusiastically supported Nike's attempt to spur a national conversation about systemic racism, pro-Republicans vigorously opposed the discussion itself as groundless. Angry attacks indicated a deep political polarization, bias and a lack of tolerance toward a different viewpoint, and the attacks were commonly

uncivil. However, as Papacharissi (2004) argued, “Sanitized and controlled conversation does not fully capture the conditioned illogic of human thought” (p. 266). Related to the partisanship theme, another theme was well-manifested in Tweeters’ reactions to the 2018 Nike’s ad – support of institutions. While Kaepernick’s kneeling campaign aimed to draw public attention to the cases of police brutality toward African-Americans, some Tweeters generalized his protest and accused Kaepernick of denigrating the institution of law enforcement. Tweets prompted by the generalization intended to safeguard an overall image of the police, with some bringing in military. This conversation – that any protest of law enforcement is an attack on the institution – is widely seen in the larger culture. It is unlikely Nike did not see foresee this being part of the debate when it picked Kaepernick.

Another prominent theme – self-reflection – could be explained by a desire to publicly share the consequences of the perception of being somehow personally involved in the Kaepernick issue. Many Tweeters mentioned cancel culture (Mishan, 2020) or severing online or offline relationships. Importantly, Tweeters mentioned themselves being already cancelled or they anticipated being cancelled by others, and did not say they cancelled anyone who held antagonistic views. Their tweets were a sort of written selfies or a way to leave a digital footprint, letting the community know what price the tweeter paid for staying true to their values. This seems important especially for those individuals, who believed that Twitter provides them with an opportunity to talk to like-minded individuals, rarely found in the offline reality.

Overall, this study confirmed the drowning effect as an important consideration for understanding the concept of gatekeeping within a digitized communication ecosystem. Further, this study lent support to ideas found in brand activism, particularly the more nuanced understanding marketing campaigns must employ in a world of social media where tactics and themes emerge in unexpected ways.

Limitations and future research

The study has some limitations that merit future research. First, the study did not consider a possible robotic interference and a future research endeavor should attempt to identify and exclude posts generated by bots. Second, analysis did not take into location of Tweeters. Future research should explore a possible link between location (a Democratic or Republican state) and tweets. Given the increasing gap between political parties, it is

important to study how a political orientation influences a desire to further the main topic or drown it out by introducing a different one. Limitations notwithstanding, this study helps better understand the power social media users wield over direction of social media conversations.

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