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## **War of words : can protest repression manifest organizational stigma?**

Raymond Jenkins

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## ABSTRACT

### WAR OF WORDS: CAN PROTEST REPRESSION MANIFEST ORGANIZATIONAL STIGMA?

Raymond Jenkins, M.A.  
Department of Sociology  
Northern Illinois University, 2018  
Dr. Simon Weffer, Director

Throughout the history of the United States, protest has provoked both social thought and backlash. Protests regarding civil rights and equality can create situations of great discomfort and varying forms of repression—but can protest manifest a stigmatizing response from audiences? This thesis analyzes content regarding the protest actions of players in the National Football League and the resultant consequences placed upon players. Viewed through the lens of organizational stigma, enhanced by the uniqueness of these protests, we come to the conclusion that the criteria for stigma are met. These findings acknowledge the uniqueness of the protest movement that allows for such findings to manifest, such as the identities of all protesters within this particular movement being known and easily discovered.

The overall impact of the consequences faced both by players and the National Football League as a whole meet criteria for organizational stigma by touching on responses by audiences and stakeholders as noted in previous literature, as well as organizational responses to audience and stakeholder reactions to discrediting events. While stigma is a convergence of several factors, reactions to collective player action have presented an interesting opportunity to study the formation of organizational stigma.

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WAR OF WORDS: CAN PROTEST REPRESSION MANIFEST ORGANIZATIONAL  
STIGMA?

BY

RAYMOND JENKINS, M.A.  
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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Thesis Director:  
Dr. Simon Weffer

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## INTRODUCTION

Protesting has been seen as an important force for political and social change in the United States. Protest groups and events have also been the target of repression by various forms and forces of control regardless of the manner in which the protesting has occurred (Earl 2003; Earl, Soule, and McCarthy 2003). Given these two facts, the importance and consequence of protest can be rather grave; however, can the act of protest turn into a stigmatizing event for those involved? Can protest create such a backlash from powerful groups that those who participate suffer from stigma in their lives? These are questions that the present study seeks to answer.

To answer these questions, the current study explores theories of individual and organizational stigma using data from news outlets regarding National Football League (NFL) player protests during the national anthem during the 2016 and 2017 football seasons. Using this data, I examined how player protest actions, consequences, and opposition to protests coalesce into potential for stigma to manifest.

The United States has a history of various repression tactics used to downplay protest (Earl 2003) and the use of coded language to try to discredit those involved in protest—such as “inmates running the prison” comments by an NFL team owner regarding protests by players (M. Carter 2017). While protest can create a backlash, it is important to understand and be clear in the fact that backlash and repression do not equate to stigma in and of themselves. In light of recent events regarding protest, certain consequences have been placed upon protest groups that might meet qualifications of stigmatization. The events that the present study focuses on are NFL player protests against police brutality and unequal treatment of blacks by police officers. These protests are unique in the fact that they have received intense attention and backlash from those

in power—including governmental officials and team owners (Choi 2017; Jenkins 2017; Santhanam 2017; Terranova 2018).

Examining these events is important because it can allow us to study the mechanisms under which stigma can possibly develop on an organizational level. While individual stigma is generally generated by inherent traits (e.g. mental illness) or earned traits (e.g. being labeled a “felon” or “criminal”), organizational stigma relies on actions precipitated by the organization in question. Studies of organizational stigma generally examine ideas of what are called “discrediting events” (Hudson 2008; Reuber and Fischer 2010; Sutton and Callahan 1987). Discrediting events are events that reflect negatively on the organization. These events prompt certain responses from both the audience (or stakeholders) of the organization and the organization, itself (Sutton and Callahan 1987). Most literature on organizational stigma speak of event and core stigma, both of which address different negative reflections on the organization stigmatized; while this type of stigma is usually applied to businesses and studied under the purview of economics and management strategies, the NFL protest events have displayed how this sort of stigmatization can possibly apply outside of the economic arena and can potentially be used to study the development of stigma as it can be applied to social movements and those who participate in them.

By examining the phenomenon of NFL protest and its consequences we can see how stigma can potentially apply to social movements and the consequences placed upon those who participate in such movements.

### **NFL Protests**

In 2016, Colin Kaepernick began his protest. Unlike its current known incarnation and the #TakeAKnee, Kaepernick began his protests by sitting down during the national anthem; it



wasn't until Kaepernick spoke with Army veteran Nate Boyer that kneeling began (Willingham 2017). It was speaking with Boyer about how to respectfully protest during the anthem that Colin Kaepernick began to kneel. When asked about his decision to kneel and why he did so, he responded plainly (Willingham 2017; Wyche 2016):

I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color... To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.

The statement was broadened and clarified in November of 2016: "I've been very clear from the beginning that I'm against systematic oppression. Police violence is just one of the symptoms of that oppression. For me, that is something that needs to be addressed, but it is not the whole issue" (Mulin 2016). These statements resonated with the NFL's populace—at the time of the protests, out of the entire NFL, 70% of players were black (Lapchick, Malveaux, Davison, and Grant 2016), sparking additional kneeling players and, until September 2017, all kneeling or protesting players were black (Willingham 2017). Due to this, the racial component of the NFL protest effort cannot be ignored. Like Civil Rights protests, the NFL protests were immediately seen as racially charged and like other protests against inequality, due to their subject matter, were not immune to resistance and repression efforts.

Starting with Colin Kaepernick in 2016, the intensity and presence of NFL protests grew quickly (Breech 2016). The protests have taken many forms, from kneeling during the anthem or raising a fist to remaining in the tunnel before the game or sitting during the anthem (Stites 2017). Media was quick to report on the phenomenon, reporting and confirming with the 49ers that Colin Kaepernick sat during the national anthem on August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016 (Biderman 2016). While Kaepernick's protests were stated to be about oppression, the subject grew into more than

oppression of minorities and more about inequality—inequality in police use of force, inequality in education, inequality in punishment for crime, inequality in healthcare (Abdul-Jabbar 2018). This opinion even began to be echoed by team owners, such as Raiders owner Mark Davis, who stated, “Not only do we have to tell people something is wrong, we have to come up with answers. That’s the challenge in front of us as Americans and human beings” (NBC 2017), when asked why he changed his stance from asking players not to protest in uniform to allowing them to protest in uniform.

Despite, or because of, their message against inequality and oppression of minorities, the NFL protests were not without their detractors. In some examples of response to the protests some teams have indicated a refusal to hire any protesters (Breech 2018), suggestions have been made that they should be fired for protesting (CBS 2017), fans burning jerseys and players being uninvited to be guests at events (Seraaj and Zdanowicz 2017), fan boycotts (Hirschfeld Davis 2017; Jaeger 2017; Wenzel 2017), and even fans calling for firing of protesting players (Rohan 2017). Opposition to protests have been widespread and varied—from musicians (Anapol 2017) to politicians (Choi 2017). The main form of opposition has been stated to be about disrespect of the American flag. In the words of U.S. Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, “I, for one, am not a fan of rich, spoiled athletes disrespecting the flag...” (Choi 2017) and President Donald Trump tweeted: “The American public is fed up with the disrespect the NFL is paying to our Country, our Flag, and our National Anthem. Weak and out of control!”<sup>1</sup> These objections to protests continued throughout the course of the last two seasons.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Trump’s Twitter page, accessed May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>

Political power was aligned against the protesters, from President Trump calling for kneeling players to be fired (Jenkins 2017; Ramsay 2017) to state representatives threatening to remove tax breaks from NFL teams (Elliot 2017). This application of political pressure was also met by advertising companies threatening to stop purchasing ad time if the NFL continued to cover protests (Taylor and Green 2017) and entire companies removing ads and sponsorship from the NFL (Prestigiacomo 2017; Taylor and Green 2017).

While the NFL is no stranger to protests and threats to boycott due to other concerns such as domestic violence (Kroichick 2014) and sexual assault (Wang 2017), the NFL protests are unique in that they are a collective action by players as opposed to individual actions perpetuated by lone players in violation of criminal law. While identities of law-breaking players are reported to the public during news coverage, most protesters outside of the NFL who act as part of a collective do not have their identities generally revealed to the public. What is unique in the NFL protest situation is that, unlike organizations such as Black Lives Matter, all participants' identities are known to the public, which allows for direct response to participants as they are not protected by anonymity.

Due to the identities of player-protesters being known and reported (Kay 2017), direct threats can be made to players' status, social standing, and economic opportunities. Such threats to these opportunities and status can hold a risk of turning into stigma for being part of the protest group.

### **NFL Protests VS. Other NFL Controversy**

While the backlash against the NFL and players for protesting is intense, it is not the only social issue that has caused concern in the NFL. Domestic violence and sexual assault issues within the league prompted threats of boycott and sponsorship loss as well (Yan 2014).

However, these issues of violence and crime were created on individual levels, whereas player protests are a collective effort among those who participate. Additionally, backlash against those players who are accused of domestic violence or rape can be argued to be not as severe as the consequences suffered by those who have actively protested.

While serious offenses, domestic assault violations were met with suspensions and only after public backlash did the NFL change its policy—increasing suspension time to six games (Macur 2016). Specific players lost sponsorships due to their actions (Stone 2014), but only one player remained unemployed due to his status as an initiator of domestic violence, argued to be only because the instance was recorded and was particularly severe (Bonesteel 2017). Ironically, Brandon Marshall was charged with domestic assault (NBC 2014), but no announcement of loss of sponsors could be located. Another player, also named Brandon Marshall, was involved in player protest and for his acts in NFL protesting he lost two sponsorships that could be confirmed (Gibson 2016; Harriot 2017).

Other serious crime, such as rape, is not a barrier to employment in the NFL. Players under accusation or arrest for rape continue to be drafted to teams on a regular basis; while their income potential may be impacted by their accusations and resultant late round draft picks, they are still hired and signed by teams (S. Carter 2017).

Sponsor backlash for the league is also not as robust. Only Proctor and Gamble reacted to the league's instances of domestic violence by withdrawing from a charitable event with them (Isidore 2014). However, this was the only instance of their withdrawal, while Papa Johns pulled from NFL sponsorship entirely (McCarthy 2017).

While individual actions on the behalf of players such as criminal activities may provoke negative responses from audiences and stakeholders of the NFL, protests are seen as a collective action by players.

### **Stigma**

Stigma was defined by Erving Goffman (1963) as a trait of the bearer that is discrediting or damaging to his or her image so powerfully that it turns the bearer from a whole and regular person into someone who is tainted or lesser than his or her peers. It was further expounded upon by Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998), who state that stigma devalues a person in a particular social context, that this trait, attribute, or characteristic makes a person seem as less than a person. Both definitions explain that stigma is seen as a taint or mark that something in the person itself reduces that person's value. What is important to note here is that, in Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998), the use of these terms implies that the undesirable trait is something inherent in the individual, not applied from external forces. This distinction would suggest that stigma cannot be the result of non-normative behavior or participation in behavior that is viewed as maladaptive but is only able to be applied due to an inherent trait or characteristic of the individual. Link and Phelan (2001) make the argument that stigma can also be an applied label. This type of application relates to culturally created categories that can lead to stigma. In the case of the present study, this culturally created category is "unpatriotic." The use of the category in this instance suggests that this application of stigma is socially constructed and used to effectively create an "us versus them" or "in-group versus other" separation between protesters and their audiences and stakeholders.

Link and Phelan (2001) make an important contribution on the conceptualization of stigma, stating that it requires interrelated components to come together, converging into stigma.

They discuss stigma not as a single event but as an intersection of related perception, enforcement, and power dynamic that combines into the social impact of stigma.

In this conceptualization, there are roughly four steps, as follows: 1) differences are noticed between people; 2) dominant cultural beliefs connect the different individuals with undesirable traits; 3) labeled individuals are removed from the “normal” or “untainted” category to help separate it into a dichotomy of “us versus them”; 4) individuals labeled as tainted experience loss of standing or status and discrimination that can lead to unequal outcomes (Link and Phelan 2001). Table 1 lists these steps in an example of stigma for being a convicted felon. In this case, the power to enforce the stigma is applied by legal means that allow for discrimination against those who hold the stigma of being a felon (e.g. lack of ability to vote, legally, own a firearm, etc.).

Table 1. Checklist of Stigma Criteria and Convicted Felon Characteristics

Requirement	Manifestation in Felony Label
Criteria 1: Differences Noticed	Individual arrested—creates distinction
Criteria 2: Connection to Undesirable Traits	Felon label attached to lawbreaker and deviant implications
Criteria 3: Establishment of Us vs. Them	Felon label creates distinction on applications and other categories of life
Criteria 4: Unequal Outcomes	Felons unable to vote, own firearms, have difficulty getting employment or housing
Power Behind Stigma	Structural factors such as legal and other institutional regulations

To elaborate on Link and Phelan’s (2001) four steps, I will break down each into its component parts. In step one, differences are noticed between individuals. While these differences may be physical, they may also be the differences in belonging to a group or not belonging to a group, for example, those who have mental illness and those who do not. In this

case, the two categories are distinctly separated: either you are in one group or you are in the other. In the case of the present study, differences noted are protesting during the national anthem or not protesting during the national anthem.

In step two, a dominant cultural belief grants a negative connotation to belonging to one category over the other. Link and Phelan (2001:369) discuss this in terms of linking a label with a stereotype: "...with the label linking a person to a set of undesirable characteristics that form that stereotype." As an example, one could link the label of "mental illness" with the stereotype of being dangerous or unstable. This linkage creates a tie between the label, or trait, with the undesirable stereotype. This step is crucial in creating the circumstances of step three: removing of individuals from the "normal" or "untainted" category and placing them in a separate category of a tainted "other." This occurs when the stereotype and label are recognized and creates a division between untainted and tainted individuals. This division solidifies the categories and differences noted in step one and form two distinct sides: us versus them. Untainted individuals view the tainted individuals as other and undesirable, separating them from the category of "normal." Tainted individuals tend to be viewed as the thing they are labeled—people who protest become "protesters" instead of people who participate in protest. They lose the designation of being an individual and have their identity, as viewed externally, intertwined with the act or trait that has led to their being considered tainted.

Step four denotes loss of status, standing, and discrimination. It is during this step that consequences for being separated from the normal and being stigmatized start to manifest. Here, we see unequal outcomes being imposed on those with tainted identities. These unequal outcomes can be in regard to income and employment, a devaluation of their being, or impact on other social outcomes such as trust or inclusion. Link and Phelan (2001) state that labeling and

being linked to undesirable traits creates a rationale to devalue an individual, separating them from “normal” people, resulting in excluding them. These impacts place stigmatized groups at a disadvantage.

What is also important is that stigmatization involves the use of power. This requires “access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination” (Link and Phelan 2001:367). It is this addition of power that ultimately forms and enforces stigmatization, as they state, “...we apply the term stigma when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separate, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold” (Link and Phelan 2001:367). It requires power to make such labels adhere and allow stigmatization to occur. This is not to say that the stigmatized have no power. In fact, Link and Phelan (2001) state that the amount of stigma that people suffer from is determined by the power relation and disparity between the stigmatized and the stigmatizer. This implies that even in entire stigmatized groups (such as the mentally ill, or those with specific diseases), stigma may be experienced unequally among individuals dependent upon the power differences between them and those who are applying the stigma to them.

Additionally, though stigma has most often been applied to individual characteristics such as specific mental illness or other traits, stigmatization is a larger phenomenon. It is a fundamentally social occurrence that is rooted in social relationships, shaped by dominant culture and social structure (Pescosolido and Martin 2015). Relationships in this context are between the dominant culture or social structure and the labeled individual wherein the tainted identity, or being “other,” has strained and changed the dynamic of the relationship between the



individual and larger society. However, these theories of stigma have been applied to large groups or even entire categories of individuals such as the mentally ill or those with HIV or AIDS (Link and Phelan 2001; Pescosolido and Martin 2015). While such stigma can be powerful and can vary on an individual level (e.g. stigma regarding mental illness can be more or less intense depending on the illness), it is still applied to such groups to powerful degrees.

### **Structural Stigma and Discrimination**

Stigma can also be applied to individuals from structural or institutional levels. In these cases, broad, structural discrimination can be used to create rules or guidelines to disenfranchise or impact stigmatized individuals (Corrigan, Markowitz, and Watson 2004). While stigma occurs on an individual basis, there are also macro-level applications of stigma that can impact labeled individuals in similar ways to create unequal outcomes when compared to those not considered stigmatized. These structural levels involve the creation of rules, regulations, practices, or guidelines that restrict opportunities for the stigmatized (Corrigan, Markowitz, and Watson 2004). Many times, this is studied under the umbrella of discrimination.

Discrimination and stigma are treated and studied differently, despite the long-lasting impact of discrimination; discrimination studies focus attention on those who initiate exclusion and rejection, rather than those who are excluded or rejected, whereas stigma research focuses on the individuals and the effects upon them (Sayce 1998). As an example, discrimination against those suffering under the stigma of mental illness may be in terms of laws used to restrict opportunities, media coverage that furthers the impact of stigma or that portrays those with the label in a negative light, or other effects that can reduce opportunities that are created on a macro level.

This type of structural and institutional enforcement of stigma is important to the present study because it has been observed that institutional changes have been proposed to create barriers to performing the act that has been the defining characteristic of NFL protest participants (kneeling or protesting during the anthem) by proposing rules to penalize teams who have players who actively protest (Breer 2018; Martin 2018), removal of legal and financial benefits by state governments (Elliot 2017), and hiring decisions (Boren 2017; Schwartz 2017).

### **Organizational Stigma**

Organizational stigma results from norm violations that suggest there is some degree of dysfunction in the systems of an organization that reflects on the organization as a whole (Pozner 2008). These norm-violations are often in the form of either what is referred to as core stigma or event stigma (Hudson 2008). Core stigma involves the core values or mission of an organization; event stigma is based primarily on the idea of discrediting events or events that have damaged the perception or tainted the value of the organization in the eyes of its stakeholders (Hudson 2008).

There are important differences between core and event stigma. Hudson (2008) defines core stigma as a lasting taint due to the core values of an organization being viewed as fundamentally flawed or tainted. This leads to a long-lasting stigma because the core values or mission of an organization are considered fundamentally undesirable or corrupted. In contrast, event-based stigma is based primarily upon episodic events that have occurred regarding the organization in question (Hudson 2008). Event-based stigma is also considered to have less longevity than core stigma. Core stigma implies that the essence of an organization is fundamentally flawed in some way, such as core values, customers, routines, or other organizational attributes (Hudson 2008). Event stigma is primarily episodic, with episodes being

short lived. An example of event stigma would be an organization caught in a scandal of insider trading or a bankruptcy, as discussed by Sutton and Callahan (1987), who refer to stigma due to events as “discrediting events.” In fact, many instances of organizational stigma revolve around conduct or events that are perpetrated by the organization that create stakeholder or audience backlash (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, and Belsito 2009).

Literature on organizational stigma makes the distinction that the largest difference between individual-level and organizational-level stigma is that getting stigmatized is an active process in organizational cases (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, and Belsito 2009)—stigmatized organizations have somehow, at some point, actively taken the steps that have led to their being labeled and triggering the process of stigmatization, whereas individual stigma is usually more passive in nature (Roulet 2015). Organizational stigma operates under the assumption that the actions of the organization have revealed a deep-seated flaw in the organization that devalues it to its stakeholders (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, and Belsito 2009; Hudson 2008; Roulet 2015; Sutton and Callahan 1987).

Groups who collectively share stigma are not always recognized as stigmatized by all groups or at all times, but they still suffer a negative perception or social taint that creates a recognized difference (Vergne 2012). This difference can result in various responses to the stigmatized group by its audience or stakeholders. These responses were operationalized by Sutton and Callahan (1987) as: 1) Disengagement with the stigmatized. This disengagement is, effectively, rejection of the tainted and a reduction in contact or dealings with the stigmatized organization. 2) Reduction in the quality of participation (strained relations with the audience/stakeholders) with the stigmatized. This reduction in quality is a partial withdrawal from a relationship with the tainted. This may be due to binding contracts preventing a complete

disengagement. 3) Bargaining for a more favorable exchange relationship with the stigmatized. In this way, the stigmatized are treated as being devalued, or worth less than those who are not tainted. 4) Denigration via rumor of the stigmatized. This manifests most often by stakeholders or audience members devaluing the organization via rumors. 5) Denigration via confrontation with the stigmatized. This often manifests as the tainted organization being confronted regarding its faults or flaws, most often those which led to the tainted status.

These categories of responses are used on behalf of those who have stigmatized or labeled the organization after negative or discrediting events. This impacts the relationships between the organization and its audience and can create pressure within the organization to address these concerns within the organization and between managers of the organization and its stakeholders (Scott and Lane 2000). Ultimately, this stigma can reduce resources (both social and economic) for those within the labeled organization and can lead to managers within the organization to focus negative attention on those who have caused the stigmatizing event(s) (Hudson and Okhuysen 2014; Pozner 2008; Reuber and Fischer 2010; Sutton and Callahan 1987).

Organizational stigma, however, does not occur until a critical mass of the organization's audience accepts the accusations of deviance. An initial exposure to such discrediting behavior is not often enough to warrant a proclamation of stigma; it requires more public accusations and, as stated previously, power granted to those making the accusations of stigmatizing behavior (Carberry and King 2012, Link and Phelan 2001).

### **Reputation Repair and Stigma Avoidance Tactics**

Organizations that suffer from stigma have several options to either repair or reduce the severity of tainted identity that has been attached to the organization (Reuber and Fischer 2010;

Scott and Lane 2000; Sutton and Callahan 1987). While scholars differ on the exact methods available to each organization, there is overlap in several strategies operationalized by researchers that are utilized by various organizations when confronted with event or core stigma.

Scott and Lane (2000) observed that managing stigma as an organization can force a change in organizational protocol to endure reduction in stigmatizing events or behavior on behalf of the organization. Reuber and Fischer (2010) echo this line of response reasoning, stating that there are several common repair options or tactics to help increase resistance to stigma or to recover from negative events perpetrated by the organization. These responses are also listed in similar fashion by Sutton and Callahan (1987). They generally involve trying to normalize the practices or explain them in ways to help deflect the impact of the discrediting event.

Reuber and Fischer (2010) listed strategies to reduce or repair stigma as follows: 1) providing accounts that normalize practices to stakeholders and the media, 2) acknowledging the practices and informing the stakeholders and audience that steps have been taken to insure the practices will not occur again, 3) removing the practices from the core activities of the organization, 4) deflecting responsibilities for the event to specific parts of the organization, and 5) highlighting the positive aspects of the organization in an effort to provide resistance to stigma.

Sutton and Callahan (1987) operationalize several response strategies as follows: 1) concealing strategies that hide the discrediting event from revelation to organizational audiences and stakeholders, 2) defining strategies that reframe the stigmatizing event so that it is less impactful upon the organization; 3) Denying responsibility as a strategy that acknowledges something has occurred but denies responsibility for its occurrence on behalf of the organization.

This strategy frequently relies on the idea of “factors out of the organization’s control” that effectively provoke the discrediting event, 4) accepting responsibility is a tactic that allows an organization to admit the occurrence of a discrediting event but allows for it to indicate that measures have been taken to address the underlying cause of the event to prevent reoccurrence. 5) Withdrawal from audience and stakeholders that know of the event, as a strategy, sees the retreat of the organization from their audience and stakeholders. Ideally, this strategy allows management of an organization time to develop further strategies to manage the concerns of audience and stakeholders.

Overlap in these two sets of management strategies occurs with Rueber and Fischer’s (2010) acknowledgement—mirrored in Sutton and Callahan’s (1987) similar strategy to admit that the event occurred and indicating that actions have been taken to prevent re-occurrence. Normalization of the event and defining the event also mirror one another as practices as they both seek to reframe the narrative of the event in ways that eliminate or reduce stigma around it. These two sets of strategies work with one another to attempt to remove or reduce stigma from discrediting events.

### **Present Study**

The present study takes all of the information discussed above and applies it to the NFL protest phenomenon. While the power of individual stigma (and how it can drastically impact those who suffer from it) has been studied in sociology, the idea of organizational stigma is primarily one that is used in economics and business, as evidenced by the journals in which articles on organizational stigma are found. However, given the reaction and responses to social situations such as the NFL protests, we can see that negative responses can come upon entire groups with social consequences. In this, the NFL protests are a unique source of information to

study as not only are the protests covered as a whole and generalized to be together as a unit (e.g. protests are labeled as “NFL protests” and not per individual team or player), but individual players have been singled out and each protester’s identity is public to the organization’s audience and stakeholders. This last detail is important in regard to displaying some of the consequences of stigmatization.

Vergne (2012:1030) states, “Stigmatization shows its most consequential effects when it translates into public attacks on particular individuals in the stigmatized group.” This statement is at the core of the NFL protest situation; those potentially stigmatizing players involved would not view players as unfairly stigmatized, but justly admonished. Likewise, several players have been singled out over the course of protests and publicly mocked, humiliated, and threatened for their participation (Anapol 2017; Schwartz 2017; Zirin 2017).

The present study examines the relationships between the NFL organization and its stakeholders and audience, the organizational response to the protest, and the responses from fellow players during the protests as they occurred. To this end, one research question has been formulated for testing.

The research question is simply stated and at the core of the issue is the NFL being stigmatized as an organization by its stakeholders for the players who protested over the 2016 and 2017 seasons? This question is at the very heart of the present study. While organizational stigma literature can suggest that the NFL has seen stigma due to the reactions of the public and of its own organization members, has the negative attention and backlash truly constituted stigma? It is this backlash and labeling of the NFL players that potentially constitutes organizational stigma and is the focus of this research question.

The second research question, while independent of the first, is still connected: Is solidarity a genuine response of an organization under negative attention? While many within the NFL did not participate in the protests players initiated, other players and even upper management displayed support for their players' right to protest and their causes. While this support varied from locking of arms to simply placing a hand on the shoulder of those who were protesting, it varied under important outside influences. These negative statements of power from persons of political sway and importance observably increased support for protestors. The hypothesis of the study states that solidarity is a valid and observable response to outside stigma or implied consequence to an organization.



## METHODS

The present study collects data via sports and news websites such as ESPN.com and others to be used for content analysis. Table 2 displays websites used to verify counts of player protesters and protest supporters as well as websites used for content analysis regarding consequences and opinions of those who participate in protest. Each column displays the primary website and then a count of how many specific articles from each were gathered for analysis.

To examine the protests for the 2016-2017 NFL seasons, ESPN was examined weekly. For each week of the seasons, ESPN reported on all protesters and noted those who gave support to protesters in a series of web pages, each dedicated to one of the weeks over the course of the season. These reports provided a baseline for protester and supporter numbers, which were verified through other sites (as listed on Table 2) when numbers were unclear or not specifically stated. This analysis includes reporting of protester counts, reactions to protest from both the NFL's audience and stakeholders, support of protest (or lack thereof), and political and owner reactions to the protests.

The NFL's audience is operationalized as fans of the NFL—such as those who watch games on television, attend them, or otherwise participate in observing NFL games and events. The NFL's stakeholders are operationalized as sponsors of players, the NFL, and companies who purchase airtime to advertise during NFL games.

Protesting is operationalized as anytime a player, before or after the national anthem, participates in the following: sits on a bench, kneels, raises a fist into the air, remains in the locker room (when stated to be done in protest), or remains in the tunnel (when stated to be done

Table 2. Websites Used for Data Collection

Player Protest and Support Counts	Content Analysis
CBS Sports: 1	ABC13.com: 1
ESPN: 32	Business Insider: 2
LA Times: 1	CBS News: 2
SB Nation: 4	CBS Sports: 2
Sports Illustrated: 4	Chicago Tribune: 2
Time: 1	CNBC: 1
USA Today: 2	CNN: 10
	Daily Dolphin Blog: 1
	Daily Wire: 1
	Denver Post: 1
	ESPN: 2
	Fivethirtyeight.com: 1
	Forbes: 1
	Fox News: 2
	The Guardian: 1
	The Hill: 1
	Huffington Post: 2
	LA Times: 1
	The Nation.com: 1
	NBC News: 3
	NBC Sports: 2
	NFL.com: 1
	NPR.org: 1
	NY Post: 2
	NY Times: 3
	PBS.org: 1
	Rasmussen Reports: 1
	The Root: 1
	SB Nation: 1
	SF Gate: 1
	Splinter News: 1
	Sports Business Daily: 1
	Sports Illustrated: 5
	Sporting News: 1
	Sports Media Watch: 1
	Texas Tribune: 1
	Time: 1
	USA Today: 2
	Vogue: 1
	Washington Post: 1

in protest). Signs of support are operationalized as anytime a player, during the protest actions of another player, does any of the following: places an arm around the protesting player, locks arms with a protesting player, places a hand on another player, or wears any items that are dedicated to statements of unity with protesters.

To clarify coding issues in cases of reports that do not give an exact number of protesters, “All Players” was counted as 46 players, “most” was counted as one more than half of all players, so 24. This allows quantification of verbally vague figures that occurs in some reports.

To examine consequences applied to players and the NFL organization, websites listed in Table 2 were consulted and articles were examined for specific instances of consequences applied to the NFL and its players due to protests. Any consequences not specifically stated or linked to the protest activity were not considered as being linked to the protest activity. Data was examined for both support for protesters and consequences applied to them due to their protest activities.

## ANALYSIS

To examine the research question, the impact of political pressure and consequence resulting from the protests (as stated to be direct results of the protest via content analysis) was examined and compared to other cases of organizational stigma and responses to determine if responses to NFL protest and the consequences thereof meet requirements to be called stigma. This analysis compares exhibited consequences placed upon players by their actions in protesting to see if they meet the criteria for stigma as stated by Link and Phelan (2001). Additionally, content analysis sought to examine if the responses to the protests fall within the categories that Sutton and Callahan (1987) established as audience responses to a discrediting, or stigmatizing, event and if the organizational responses fall within categories of organizational responses as defined in said research as stigma responses.

Analysis for the second research question examines the numbers of protesters before and after political commentary regarding the NFL protests. Most importantly, the number of protester supporters after each set of comments by individuals with power (political, governmental, or financial over players, such as owners for the latter) were counted to help examine the hypothesis of support in response to repression attempts. The numbers of protesters and supporters over the weeks of each season were collected and analyzed from ESPN.com (as seen in Table 2). Because the timing of President Trump's political comments directly attacking the right of the protesters, there is an unequal number of weeks in the 2017 season before and after. Due to this, the six weeks prior to President Trump's comments are counted and the six weeks immediately after. This adjustment was made to allow for a *t* test to compare means of a before and after effect

President Trump's comments on the players' solidarity movement with one another. A paired  $t$  test was used to examine if the numbers of supporters were significantly different before and after governmental officials suggested official action against players for protesting.

## RESULTS

The primary checklist for the interrelated factors that converge into stigma was drawn from Link and Phelan (2001) and their work on conceptualizing stigma. News accounts of each factor were analyzed and compared to the stated factors that are required for stigma to manifest. In Table 3, we see the checklist for stigma compared to manifestations of these criteria in the NFL protests and coverage.

Table 3. Checklist of Stigma Criteria and NFL Protest Characteristics

Requirement	Manifestation in NFL	Occurrences
Criteria 1: Differences Noticed	Protest activities by players broadcast and reported	3
Criteria 2: Connection to Undesirable Traits	Protesters declared unpatriotic, disrespectful to flag and country	26
Criteria 3: Establishment of Us vs Them	Division of Patriotic audience and stakeholders versus Unpatriotic players	33
Criteria 4: Unequal Outcomes	Economic penalties in terms of sponsor loss, hiring difficulties, boycotts, endorsement loss	27
Power Behind Stigma	Political figures, advertisers	15

In regard to the first criterion for stigma to manifest, differences noticed between people, the sitting of Colin Kaepernick was noticed and reported on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016; this action was questioned, and in response his team at the time, the 49ers, issued a statement in support of the player’s right to not stand during the anthem: “The national anthem is and always will be a special part of the pre-game ceremony... we recognize the right of an individual to choose and participate, or not, in our celebration of the national anthem” (Willingham 2017; Wyche 2016).

In this statement, we see the acknowledgement by the 49ers that this was not a normal behavior and was noted as different from other players by the media. The NFL itself even responded, stating that “players are encouraged but not required to stand during the playing of the national anthem” (Wyche 2016). These statements and the reporting of Kaepernick’s sitting during the anthem solidly meet the criteria of a noticed difference as stated by Link and Phelan (2001).

The second criterion that dominant cultural beliefs connect the individuals with undesirable traits (Link and Phelan 2001), is noticed in the labeling of protests as what can be called “unpatriotic,” or disrespectful to the flag (Choi 2017; Santhanam 2017). President Trump was reported as saying that players should not be “...allowed to disrespect our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the anthem” (Santhanam 2017). Support for protesters varies greatly (Casteel 2017), leaving the question: are protests truly being seen as unpatriotic or a negative, tainted act?

In one poll, when respondents had it explained that players were protesting racial inequality, support was divided evenly, with 48% stating that kneeling to protest was respectful and 46% stating it was disrespectful (Casteel 2017). However, at the same time, a CNN poll stated that 49% thought that players were being disrespectful and only 43% stated that they believed players were in the right (Agiesta 2017). The results, however, were vastly different along political lines. Those who identified as Republican disagreed 87% of the time, while those who identified as Democrat agreed with the protests 72% of the time (Agiesta 2017).

Despite public opinion polls, however, it became clear that political professionals weighing in on the protest began to impact public opinion (Lieser 2018). In an article by Casteel (2017), it was stated that reactions to and opinions about protests depended greatly on what

people believed the protests meant. In particular, in a CBS poll of over 1,300 respondents, "...40 percent said players were trying to disrespect the flag, while 33 percent said the goal was to disrespect the military," prompting the comment, "...polls that don't mention why NFL players are protesting and just tell respondents that players are kneeling during the national anthem... tend to find that there are more people who disapprove of the protests than approve" (Casteel 2017).

When we take political opinion into consideration, we have statements from owners affirming that political commentary has reframed the narrative of the protests and changed it dramatically, as stated by team owner, Stephen Ross (Lieser 2018):

...when that message changed, and everybody was interpreting it as the reason [protesting the flag], then I was against kneeling... I like Donald [Trump]. I don't support everything he says. Overall, I think he was trying to make a point, and his message became what kneeling was all about. From that standpoint, that is the way the public is interpreting it. So, I think that's really incumbent upon us to adopt that. That's how, I think, the country is now interpreting the kneeling issue.

This statement by the owner of the Miami Dolphins is important because it displays how the owners of the NFL teams were interpreting audience understanding of the protests after the commentary of President Trump. Two weeks after this statement, Ross called for players to stop kneeling. His position on this was clarified by the following statement: "[Trump] has changed that whole paradigm of what protest is. I think it's incumbent upon the players today because of how the public is looking at it, is to stand and salute the flag" (Lieser 2018).

To highlight Ross's words and to clarify the President's statements and how the protest narrative was changed, I looked to statements that President Trump made at a rally in Huntsville, Alabama in May of 2017 (Jenkins 2017):



Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out. He's fired. He's fired!' You know, some owner is going to do that. He's going to say, 'That guy disrespects our flag, he's fired.' And that owner, they don't know it. They don't know it. They'll be the most popular person, for a week. They'll be the most popular person in this country... But you know what's hurting the game more than that? When people like yourselves turn on the television and you see those people taking the knee when they are playing our great national anthem. The only thing you could do better is if you see it, even if it's just one player, leave the stadium, I guarantee things will stop. Things will stop. Just pick up and leave. Pick up and leave. Not the same game anymore, anyway.

These statements by the President were supported by other politicians commenting on the protests in similar fashion. Even when commenting that protest is a right, politicians often reinforced the idea that protests were disrespecting the flag, as with Senator Pat Toomey: "They have every right to protest as they see fit. But I think it's totally inappropriate. What they ought to do is show their respect for the people who have helped secure the country that they have... they out to be standing" (Belvedere 2017). These statements were echoed by Senator Tim Scott in a CNBC interview: "Every man, woman, child in this country should stand for the national anthem. That should go without question," but he did go on to say that why the players were protesting should be considered (Belvedere 2017). Senator Ted Cruz also echoed these sentiments, calling athletes who participate in them "spoiled" and that they are "disrespecting the flag" (Choi 2017).

Furthermore, President Trump's statements go so far as to suggest that players who do not wish to stand during the anthem may not be welcome in the country; in an interview he stated, "You have to stand proudly for the National Anthem or you shouldn't be playing. You shouldn't be there. Maybe you shouldn't be in the country" (Stracqualursi 2018). Additionally, even the CNN poll that displayed a relatively even split between support of protest and disagreement with protest noted that after the comments by President Trump over the course of

the protests, almost 24% plan on boycotting NFL games, broadcasts, or merchandise (Agiesta 2017).

Utilizing owner statements about President Trump's narrative of the protests being about disrespecting the flag and the country, and support from politicians to reinforce this view, we can support the idea that a dominant cultural belief connected the protesting players with the undesirable trait of being unpatriotic and disrespectful.

The third criterion placed by Link and Phelan (2001) is that the labeled individuals are removed from the category of "normal" individuals and are separated to create an "us versus them" dynamic. In this, the present study examined statements of how NFL players were being perceived in news reports.

Players were referred to in derogatory terms such as "million-dollar snowflakes" (*Sports Illustrated* 2017), "son of a bitch" (Jenkins 2017), and even "spoiled athletes" (Choi 2017). While these labels and name-calling are harsh, they do not truly create separate distinctions between the NFL players and their audience or stakeholders. The true division is centered on President Trump's comments about NFL players being disrespectful, suggesting they shouldn't be in the United States and that they should be fired (Jenkins 2017; Stracqualursi 2018). These comments, as acknowledged by NFL team owners such as Steve Ross, have made the protests unpatriotic (Lieser 2018). This creates a division between unpatriotic NFL players and their patriotic audience. A sharp divide was made by the changing of the protest narrative, one that made protesters decidedly unpatriotic by protesting the flag, armed forces, and country. This divide became the dominating narrative of the protests (Lieser 2018). Furthermore, President Trump's comments increase this divide and separation of NFL players into an undesirable category by highlighting individuals who stand for the national anthem "Patriotic Americans,"

implying that those who do not are unpatriotic and disrespectful (Klein 2018). By this rift being created, President Trump and other politicians effectively created the “us versus them” environment that Link and Phelan (2001) require in their conceptualization of stigma.

After the first three criteria are met, the fourth remains as consequences of applied stigma. This fourth requirement is that individuals who are labeled as tainted, or in this case, “unpatriotic” like the protesters, suffer some loss of standing, status, or other unequal outcome expectations due to the label applied to them (Link and Phelan 2001). To examine this criterion, interviews with NFL players, sponsors, and owners were analyzed as well as comments by fans, business owners, advertisers, and NFL owners.

While there are many potential areas on which to focus, I focused on consequences that impact the NFL overall, not just the players. These consequences include boycotts, advertisement revenue reduction, and sponsor issues for the league as a whole.

The effectiveness of calls to boycott watching or attending NFL games has been contested (Tures 2017). In an article on the Huffington Post, John Tures (2017) argues that boycott calls have not impacted the bottom line of viewership. To state this, Tures (2017) examined some of the Nielsen ratings for certain weeks of the boycott call and came to the conclusion that the boycott had not impacted ratings significantly. This conclusion has been widely disputed, as Michael McCarthy (2017), writing for the [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com), commented that ratings had dropped significantly. This is backed by Mike Ozanian (2016) of [forbes.com](http://forbes.com) stating that millions of television viewers have ceased watching NFL broadcasts because of the protests.

Turning to polls on boycotts, Rasmussen Reports (2017) state that “among those who follow the NFL at least once a week, roughly 30% say they are less likely to do so now because

of the increasing number of player protests... while 50% state that protests have no impact on their viewing decisions.” Max Jaeger for the New York Post (2017) stated that “...of those watching fewer games, 52% said it was because they disagreed with the protests.” Additionally, general ratings for the 2017 season out of 149 televised games reported on, only 42 games saw an increase in ratings, three had the same ratings as the year before, and 104 had lower ratings than the year prior, with streaming media following the same trend (Sports Media Watch 2017). So, while Tures’s (2017) argument states that boycotts did not affect viewing habits, raw data from Sports Media Watch (2017) suggests otherwise.

There have been other reports on DirecTV customers demanding refunds for their Sunday Ticket NFL packages due to player protests and fans burning their seasons tickets (Tuttle 2017). Numerous restaurants and other businesses have explicitly stated that they will no longer be airing NFL games at their establishments directly due to protests by players (Parlapiano 2017) and *Sports Illustrated* (2017) published a series of statements by long-time NFL fans who stated their intent to never watch NFL games until the protests ceased.

In addition, and related to boycotts, the other impact on NFL income comes from advertisers and sponsors. After the protests, the NFL lost a major sponsor—not just to a single player or group of players, but to the entire league. Papa John’s founder, John Schnatter, announced that due to NFL protests, upon which he blamed slumping sales of his company, he and his company would end their partnership with the NFL (Disis 2018). While Papa John’s was the only main sponsor to disconnect from the NFL, overall advertisement revenue for those stations that broadcast the games was also considered to be threatened. *Forbes* reported, “...Wall Street analysts have been trimming their earnings forecasts for CBS and Fox due to lower NFL ratings. In September, the Hollywood Reporter reported Jefferies analyst John Janedis figures

CBS, ESPN, Fox, and NBC will generate about \$2.5 billion in NFL advertising revenue this season, but a 10% shortfall could translate to a \$200 million cut in earnings. Investors are worried” (Ozanian 2016). In a statement by Linda Yaccarino, the chairman of advertising sales at NBCUniversal, it was said that marketers “... have said ‘we will not be part of the NFL if you continue covering’ the protests” (Taylor and Green 2017).

Atlanta Falcons owner, Arthur Blank, has stated that, regarding the potential economic impact of the protests, “Certainly, feelings have been expressed and felt” (Kaplan 2017), suggesting that owners have discussed the possibilities of various economic drawbacks of the player protests. This was echoed by 49ers owner, Jed York, in his statement, “You certainly have sponsors that have raised issues for certain teams. Even though it is contractually obligated, you have to work with those people...” (Kaplan 2017). York’s statement is important because the comment of “contractually obligated” suggests that if sponsors were not contractually bound to work with the NFL there might have been more instances of sponsors leaving the league.

In regard to individual business owners ceasing advertisements during NFL games, at least one such owner, Allen Jones, who owns Check Into Cash and Hardwick Clothes, released a statement regarding the protests and his business advertising options: “Our companies will not condone unpatriotic behavior! For the 29 states we operate in, this isn’t much to them, but it’s a lot to us. The Tombras Group is our ad agency in Knoxville and our national media buyer for both TV and radio [for Check Into Cash] and don’t look for Hardwick on the NFL either” (Prestigiacomio 2017).

Research also suggested that there were other potential economic consequences for the NFL protests upon the teams of the league. State Representative Kenny Havard commented that the Saints may have their tax breaks as a team threatened at the Superdome, his reasoning being,

“We’re paying the Saints a lot of money to entertain us, not get off in the weeds of political discourse. Now, they can do that, but do it on their own time” (Elliot 2017).

Additionally, recent actions have been taken in 2018 to penalize teams that have players that protest directly—with owners voting to open the possibility of fining NFL teams who have players who do not stand for the national anthem (Martin 2018) and had, previous to that decision, talked of the possibility of giving a team with kneeling players a 15-yard penalty during games (Breer 2018). While the requirement to stand during the anthem is not without precedent—the NBA made a regulation requiring players stand during the anthem after an Islamic player, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, would not stand for the anthem (Hodges 1996; Waldron 2016)—it was still a controversial decision (Ortiz 2018).

With the above consequences for the league as a whole, players, as individuals, were also vulnerable to various status changes and unequal outcomes in the vein of loss of sponsorships, loss of employment opportunities, and even received threats of violence.

Two players lost sponsorships directly due to their involvement with the NFL protests. Denver Broncos player Von Miller lost a sponsorship with a Denver car dealership after it had made statements of “reevaluating” its relationship with him due to his protest participation and Brandon Marshall lost two sponsorships—one from Centurylink and one from Air Academy Federal Credit Union—as a direct result of his participation in the NFL protests (Harriot 2017). Both companies for Marshall released statements directly attributing his protest history with their decision to part ways. Centurylink stated (Harriot 2017):

While we acknowledge Brandon’s right, we also believe that whatever issues we face, we also occasionally must stand together and show our allegiance to our common bond as a nation. In our view, the national anthem is one of those moments. For this reason, while we wish Brandon the best this season, we are politely terminating our agreement with him.

Air Academy Federal Credit Union issued the following statement (Harriot 2017):

Although we have enjoyed Brandon Marshall as our spokesperson over the past five months, Air Academy Federal Credit Union (AAFCU) has ended our partnership. AAFCU is a membership-based organization who has proudly served the military community for over 60 years. While we respect Brandon's right of expression, his actions are not a representation of our organization and membership. We wish Brandon well on his future endeavors. (Signed Glenn Strebe, President/CEO)

In addition to players losing sponsorship and endorsement deals, two players who have been very active in the protests since the beginning have taken suit against the NFL for not being hired, claiming that it is due to their participation in the NFL protests that they are being denied employment—Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid (Johnson 2017; Martin 2018; Schwab 2018; Schwartz 2017; Wiggins 2018). Former NFL player Shannon Sharpe was reported as stating: "...I do believe that there are certain teams that no matter what his [Colin Kaepernick's] resume would read, they don't want him on their team for the stance that he's taken" (Schwartz 2017). Another 49ers player, Richard Sherman stated concern regarding Eric Reid (Schwab 2018):

He [Reid] has made enough plays to be signed with a team and to make his money... I would think he's top-five, top-10 safeties in this league so he deserves to be paid accordingly. So, there is concern there because you'd think a player of his caliber and his quality would be picked up by now.

While Reid's status is new for the 2018 season, Colin Kaepernick's status has received more traction from both owners and player-led coalitions in talks with owners about the anthem protests; Kaepernick's unemployed status was discussed, but owner conversation shifted to the damage protests had been doing to their business (Breer 2018).

In addition to Kaepernick and Reid, it has been reported that the Houston Texans' agents had been advised to not hire any players who participated in anthem protests (Gaydos 2018; Terranova 2018). While this report was denied, it still gained media attention.

Through all of these examples of economic and employment difficulties foisted upon protesters and the NFL as a whole, the fourth requirement of unequal outcomes due to the label applied to the protesters and the NFL can be argued to be met. While not all consequences touch all players, such as sponsorship loss, it still has occurred, and public backlash has influenced NFL ownership to take direct steps to try to cease the protest participation in their teams. As illustrated in Table 3, the reaction to NFL protests meets the criteria put forth by Link and Phelan (2001).

While Link and Phelan's (2001) criteria for meeting stigma appear to have been met, the criteria for organizational stigma are not all entirely addressed by the above examples. In terms of organizational stigma, the taint or mark that manifests must be due to an active process or action by the organization (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, and Belsito 2009). In the case of the NFL, the active process is the player participation in anthem protests across the teams of the league. The active process resulted in players being labeled as unpatriotic and against the flag and country it represents.

The anthem protests, by organizational stigma literature, represent a series of event episodes that can be categorized by Sutton and Callahan (1987) as discrediting events, or events that have led to a negative perception of the organization. As we can see in Table 4, there are five general audience or stakeholder responses that can be expected to be witnessed to varying degrees in cases of a tainted organizational image or organizational stigma. Audience and



stakeholder responses were analyzed to see if they fall into the categories described by Sutton and Callahan (1987).

Table 4. Audience and Stakeholder Response to Stigmatizing Events

Audience/Stakeholder Response	Manifestation in NFL Audiences and Stakeholders	Occurrences
Response 1: Disengagement	Sponsors leave players and NFL, boycotts	25
Response 2: Reduction in Quality of Participation	Sponsors relationships stated to be strained, yet contractually obligated	11
Response 3: Exchange Relationship Bargaining	Sponsors threaten to leave if concessions not met; boycotts contingent on concessions regarding protests	3
Response 4: Denigration via Rumor	Rumor begins that protests are against the flag and disrespectful to the country	18
Response 5: Denigration via Confrontation	Direct calls for firing of players by political figures, threats to cease tax incentives	19

For the first response, disengagement with the stigmatized, we observe that audiences and even sponsors disengaged with the NFL on varying levels. This disengagement is observed as businesses refusing to air NFL games at their establishments (Parlapiano 2017; Tuttle 2017), sponsors leaving NFL players (Gibson 2016; Harriot 2017), sponsors leaving the NFL (Prestigiacomio 2017; Taylor and Green 2017), and audience members stating intent to stop watching the games (*Sports Illustrated* 2017). These instances effectively illustrate a disengagement of audience and stakeholders from the stigmatized.

The second response is a reduction in the quality of participation with the stigmatized. As examples of this observed, we see partial withdrawal from relations—this particular response is noted in the words of owners as, “You certainly have sponsors that have raised issues for certain teams. Even though it is contractually obligated, you have to work with those people...” (Kaplan

2017). In this case, we see that the relationship is clearly strained between the stigmatized and its stakeholders.

Response three involves stakeholders bargaining for a more favorable exchange relationship. In this, the stigmatized are viewed as being devalued and conditions can be placed upon dealings with the organization. In the case of the NFL, we see the comments that marketers are threatening to cease advertisement with stations that broadcast NFL games if protest coverage continues (Taylor and Green 2017).

The fourth response to discrediting events is denigration via rumor. This particular response category is especially important to the NFL protests in that it effectively re-framed the narrative of what the protests were about to the general public (Lieser 2018). This was due to comments such as President Trump's comments calling for the firing of players who protest due to disrespect to the flag and country (Jenkins 2017), Senator Cruz's statements that the protests are disrespecting the flag (Choi 2017), and fan commentary that the protests are dishonoring the sacrifices of service members, with statements such as, "No matter what the team was doing, First Amendment or not, the flag and the anthem are for honoring the fallen and those who serve. Simple as that. I will never watch an NFL game again..." (*Sports Illustrated* 2017).

Close to the fourth response category is the fifth: denigration via confrontation. In this response category, audience and stakeholders respond with direct conflict to the stigmatized. President Trump calling for the firing of players who protest (Jenkins 2017) is an example of this as is State Representative Kenny Havard calling for removal of tax breaks to the Saints for protest participation (Elliot 2017) and fans calling directly for boycott due to player protests (Fedschun 2017).

These circumstances and audience and stakeholder responses forced owners to take steps to address the concerns regarding protests and to take steps to eliminate protests and their impact on the organization. Table 5 illustrates several responses and their manifestations (if any) in the NFL protests. We see this evidenced in owner talks about consequences on teams for participating in protests (Breer 2018) and finally in the declaration that players must stand during the anthem or have their team receive a fine for their protest behavior (Ortiz 2018). This forced response falls in line with Scott and Lane's (2000) observation regarding protocol changes being made by organizational management to manage stigmatizing events and downplay their impact.

Table 5. Organizational Strategies to Reduce and Repair Stigma Effects

Organizational Response	Manifestation in NFL Protests	Occurrences
Response 1: Normalizing/Explaining Event	NFL and teams issue statement that standing not required during Anthem; statements that expression is a right	7
Response 2: Acknowledge and Restrict events	NFL proposes 15 yard penalty for protest; NFL Passes requirement for standing during anthem	7
Response 3: Shift Responsibility to other level of organization	NFL shifts blame to players by passing requirements to stand during anthem and financial penalties for team if a player protests	7
Response 4: Deny Responsibility	Owners place responsibility on backs of players	7
Response 5: Concealing the event(s)	Not particularly seen in the NFL due to events being broadcast and reported	0
Response 6: Withdrawal	Not seen in the NFL, as the organization did not withdraw from audiences or stakeholders willingly	0

Attempts to normalize the practices or explain them in such a way to help deflect the impact of the discrediting event are also common strategies to deflect or reduce stigma (Reuber and Fischer 2010; Sutton and Callahan 1987). This type of strategy was utilized by NFL owners

and the league in statements saying that players were exercising their rights to express themselves and that they respected players' rights to do so (Wyche 2016) as well as players attempting to re-acknowledge the purpose of protests to fans in order to explain that they were not protesting the flag, but racial inequalities in the country (Mulin 2016; Willingham 2017).

Another strategy to reduce and recover from stigma is to acknowledge the practices that prompted the event and take steps to reverse or prevent the events from happening again. This is most effectively illustrated by the release of a statement by the team owners that they were proposing penalties for protesting during the anthem (Breer 2018) and then finally when deciding that players would be required to stand during the anthem or have their teams face fines (Ortiz 2018). This attempt to find a way to recover from the protests was plainly stated during the owners and players meeting in New York by Houston Texans owner Bob McNair: "You fellas need to ask your compadres, fellas, stop that other business [protesting], let's go out and do something that really produces positive results, and we'll help you" (Belson and Leibovich 2018).

Reuber and Fischer (2010) also acknowledge the likelihood that management of an organization would place the burden of responsibility onto individual members of the organization. While this was not often observed in the case of the NFL protests to date, the potential fines for protesting during the anthem would fall into this category, allowing the NFL to escape blame as a whole and place the burden of the negative event on the players who participate in protest. Additionally, we can view owner statements that players have a right to protest and express themselves as implying that the protest actions are due to players and not the views and goals of the organization as a whole, thereby transferring blame and guilt to the players of the organization and away from owners.

Another series of responses to manage stigma are withdrawal from audiences that view the organization as stigmatized and concealment (Sutton and Callahan 1987) of the stigmatizing events by the organization. While stigmatization or stigmatized identities can be sometimes concealed depending on circumstances (Quinn and Earnshaw 2013), the NFL falls into a unique case as previously stated as all identities of protesters are publicly reported. This disallows the NFL to participate in either withdrawal from its target audience (as the audience and stakeholders are all those to whom games are broadcast and who advertise during games) and eliminates the possibility of concealing the discrediting event (protest). Since all identities are revealed, it is virtually impossible for the concealment strategy to be employed by the NFL or its players, explaining why we do not see evidence of either of these management strategies manifesting in the NFL.

In both cases of organizational and individual stigma, Link and Phelan's (2010) requirement that power be placed behind the adhesion of labels and stigma is incredibly important. While not all cases of organizational stigma continue indefinitely (due to repair options and tactics available to organizations [Reuber and Fischer 2010; Sutton and Callahan 1987]), power is still required for labels to adhere. In the case of NFL protests, power comes from the political power to change the narrative of protests, the media coverage of said protests, and public statements on the protest, such as fans taking out ads requesting boycott and reinforcing statements that protest is disrespectful, as one Florida man did with a flown banner of "BE AMERICAN. BOYCOTT THE JAGS AND THE NFL" (Fedschun 2017). The powers arrayed against the NFL as an organization forced the organization to use repair tactics to attempt to reduce the occurrence of discrediting events (anthem protests) and penalize those who participate in them.

Results for the second research question failed to support the solidarity hypothesis. The created  $n$  size of six measures failed to achieve statistical significance. A paired-samples  $t$  test was conducted to compare the number of protest supporters before President Trump's comments and the number after his comments. After analysis, there was no significant difference in the number of protest supporters before ( $M=5.17$ ,  $SD= 2.714$ ) and after ( $M=92.33$ ,  $SD=168.019$ ) the comments by President Trump;  $t(5) = -1.257$ ,  $p = 0.264$ . Figure 1 displays the change in protest participation and protest support participation. While there is a definite spike in activity of supporters during Week 4 of the 2017 season after President Trump's comments, the spike in activity is short lived and support resumes a level relatively similar to pre-comments.

To gain a more inclusive look at the data over the 2016-2017 seasons as it relates to the overall pattern of protest and support, an independent-samples  $t$  test was run to examine the effects over time of the statements of Trump calling for direct firing of protesting players. After analysis, there was significant difference in the number of protesters after Trump's statements ( $M=77.47$   $SD=101.356$ ) than before ( $M=13.00$   $SD=8.307$ );  $t(40) = 3.318$ ,  $p=.002$ . This increase in protest averages can be seen in Figure 1 and attains statistical significance.

While protester increase was significantly tied to before and after Trump statements, protest support was not. As seen in the paired-samples  $t$  test, Trump's commentary failed to achieve significant impact over the time of the two seasons. The same test was performed for the number of protest supporters before Trump for 2016 and 2017 ( $M=1.15$   $SD=2.492$ ) and after Trump's statements in 2017 ( $M=39.73$   $SD=109.818$ ). These results failed to achieve statistical significance;  $t(40)=1.843$ ,  $p=.073$ . While these results approach toward significance, they do not actually achieve significance within the time measured.

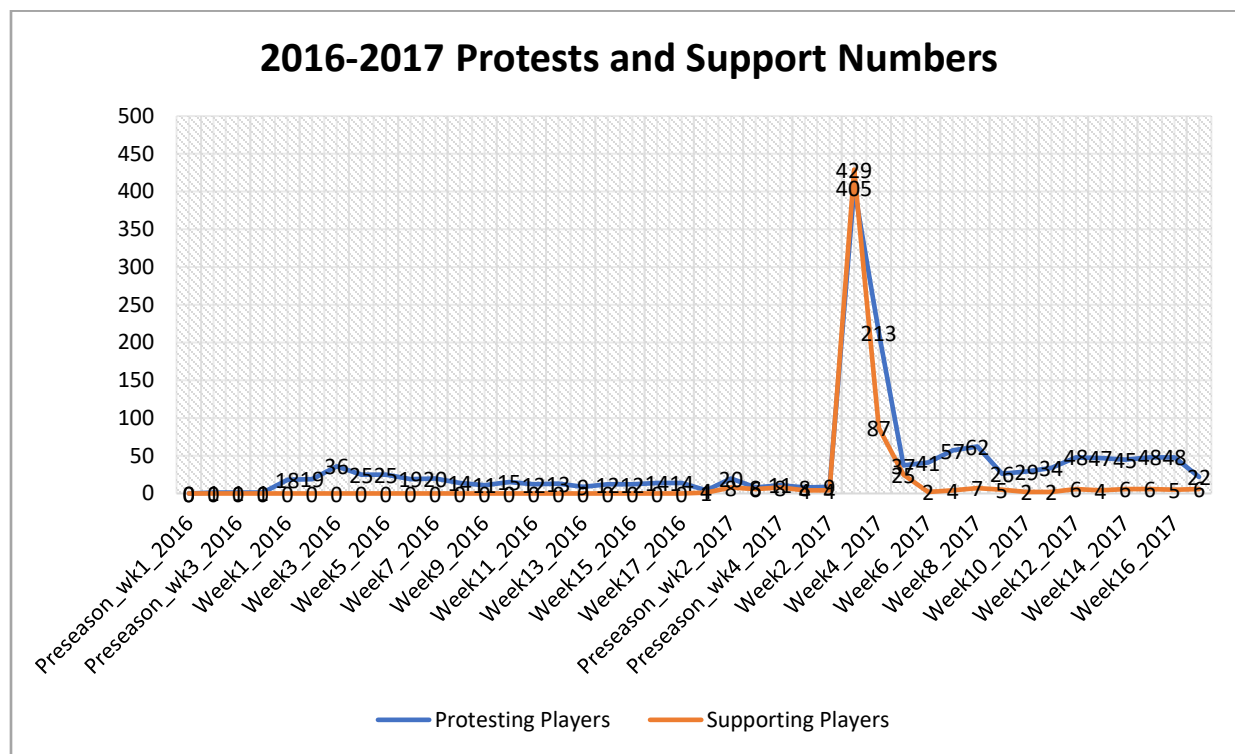


Figure 1. 2016-2017 Protest and Support

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the phenomena of NFL protests, reactions to protests, and consequences applied to players who participated in protests as well as the NFL organization in order to determine if protests made the NFL a stigmatized organization. While some general findings are debated in media (such as television boycott effectiveness), the NFL suffered from stigma in regard to the impact the protests had on economic and social status factors. Moreover, players were punished for participating in protests more severely than the organization at large, manifesting as stigma for their protest acts.

Protest provokes feelings of uncomfortableness in audiences that witness it—but this is the point of protest: to acknowledge a variable that requires change, and that acknowledgement can be uncomfortable to some. Protests disrupt everyday life and insert the viewpoint of protesters into the narrative of the day. In the case of NFL protests, they began quietly, with Colin Kaepernick sitting during the national anthem in 2016 during the preseason. By the end of the first week of the regular season, he was joined by over a dozen more players, including Eric Reid.

Repression of protest, especially protest revolving around racial injustices, can be expected to trigger strong responses, most often by police if protesters are predominantly African-American (Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong 2011). In the case of the NFL protests, however, we see political and economic backlash primarily—from calls for firing protesters to sponsor loss and advertiser loss. Players suffer from lack of employment opportunity due to their



involvement in protests and have had structural mechanisms put into place to punish protest activities.

As Link and Phelan (2001) illustrated in their work, it takes a convergence of various factors to manifest stigma. That convergence has occurred in the NFL against protesters in the league and is reinforced by powerful opponents to the protest rising from owners to the president of the United States and other government officials. As Sutton and Callahan (1987) suggested in their work, we find specific types of responses from the audience and stakeholders of the tainted organization. Additionally, reputation repair tactics and strategies of tainted organizations (Reuber and Fischer 2010; Sutton and Callahan 1987) have been performed on various levels by the NFL and players who have protested. Due to support of these criteria, responses, and repair strategies, the NFL player protests meet the requisites to be considered stigmatizing events.

The uniqueness of the NFL protester identities being public knowledge can be argued to be a contributing factor to achieving stigma status. The knowledge of protester identities creates an important difference between the NFL protests and other social movement protests. By knowing the identities of protesters, consequences can be applied to specific protesters in attempts to repress protest activity (i.e. Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid remaining unsigned as players due to their protest activities), which could leave protesters with tainted identity going forward outside of NFL circles.

The differences between reaction to instances of violence and assault perpetrated by NFL players and protest activities are significant. This difference is also one of economic consequences for the league. Collective protest action by players and their labeling as unpatriotic and disrespectful to the flag for their protest resulted in a far larger audience and stakeholder backlash than individual actions of violence or assault leading to stigma and rejection. The social

ramifications and implications of protest provoking harsher response than violence and sexual assault speaks to the history of protest repression—most particularly when discussing racial inequalities. In this, revelation of protester identities and collective action by players could be seen as constituting a potential threat to the dominant cultural paradigm, thereby resulting in stigma.

The solidarity hypothesis was not found to be supported by the analyses performed. While data was available to suggest that immediately after the attack on protesters by President Trump there was a vast spike in support for protests, the increased support was not sustained over the period of time and the large numerical increase in support remained an outlier in the overall analysis of protest support. Within three weeks, support numbers returned to levels similar to those before the attacking commentary was made.

While an independent-samples  $t$  test was also performed to examine the longer timeline of protests and support, protest support impact remained non-significant. While it came close to achieving significance, these findings can suggest that, on a longer timeline, these statements and others like them may push player support into the realm of statistical significance.

This finding suggests that while, in this case, support for the organization from within does increase and display some solidarity in the face of outside attack, this solidarity is not maintained to a level that achieves statistical significance. Future direction for research may examine those organizations under outside stress and its support and solidarity internally over long periods of repeated attack or instances of negative attention.

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