Image repair using social identity leadership: An exploratory analysis of the National

Football League's response to the national anthem protests

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**Abstract**

Events such as player protests can create image crises that require sport organizations to engage in political issues. In this manuscript, we blend image repair theory with the social identity approach to leadership to advance knowledge about how sport organizations communicate in response to crises. Applying a discursive social psychology framework to analyze 21 NFL communications and interview statements, we explored how the NFL's rhetoric evolved in response to the 2016-2020 national anthem and Black Lives Matter protests. The NFL augmented its traditionally militarized patriot identity as the crisis progressed, to address the social change issues raised by protestors. We show that sport organizations use rhetoric to mobilize support for their version of events to manage threats to organizational image. Accordingly, we provide theoretical and managerial implications arguing that apolitical identities are increasingly untenable in sport.

Keywords: Social Identity, Leadership, Organizational Communication.

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Many sport organizations including the IOC, NFL, and PGA Tour claim to promote social and political values (e.g., equality, free speech, democracy); however, paradoxically, they do so from an overtly 'apolitical' position (i.e., claiming to be unbiased towards all political opinions; Campbell, 2019; International Olympic Committee, 2020; Mushnick, 2018). This reflects an organizational belief that political issues can divide fans, sponsors, and event hosts thus undermining revenue generation (Maurice, 2016; McDonnell, 2019; Næss, 2019). Yet, as Thorson and Serazio (2018) argue, American sports and politics are symbiotically related. Consequently, when athletes express political views and protest social issues, sport organizations that claim to be apolitical are cast into political debates.

In 2016, Colin Kaepernick sat and then knelt during the Star-Spangled Banner (anthem from hereon) in objection to the oppression and police brutality experienced by black people and other minority groups in America (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020). His initial protest spurred other NFL players to kneel and continued, to varying degrees, from 2016 to 2020. The protests drew criticism from the Trump Government (Graham, 2017), and raised concern among some NFL sponsors, but by 2019 had largely stopped. Then, in May 2020, the killing of George Floyd sparked protests and riots across America. The riots brought the issue of police brutality against black and minority groups back to the forefront of social and political commentary and, problematically for the NFL, organizations across America were pressured to express a political position on the issue.

The anthem protests were interpreted favorably or unfavorably based on socio-demographic (e.g., age and race), nationalist (e.g., perceptions of American values), and party-political differences (Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019; Intravia et al., 2018; Murty et al., 2018; Smith, 2019; Stratmoen et al., 2019). Clearly, for the NFL, an organization with an

identity that aimed "to connect with the popular mood, not promote any political agenda" (Oriard, 2010, p. 23), the socio-political nature of the anthem protests created an image crisis (i.e., how the organization was *perceived* by stakeholders was under threat). The NFL's longstanding pro-military (Rugg, 2016), patriotic (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020) and apolitical (Oriard, 2010) identity content was insufficient to address the crisis. As a result, the NFL was forced to enter highly politicized debates. According to Benoit's (1997) image repair theory (IRT), image crises are social constructions and only exist when an organization is held responsible for an action that is perceived to be offensive. Following the protests, the NFL was held responsible because it sanctioned the fixture and pre-game anthem, which provided a stage for the protest to occur. The perceived offensiveness stemmed from the NFL's position in relation to the issues raised, thus drawing the organization into broader debates about equality, social change, and race.

Types of image repair strategies and their relative effectiveness have been studied regularly (Arendt et al., 2017; Hambrick, 2018). However, this work lacks insight into how organizations respond to address the broader social, psychological, and contextual issues created by crises. In this paper, to address this lacuna, we draw from theorizing about social identity leadership (Haslam et al., 2020), with a particular focus on leader rhetoric (Reicher & Hopkin, 1996a; 2001). This theoretical perspective provides a framework to make sense of how leaders present and reinterpret events to achieve support for their goals in social context. As we will go on to demonstrate, leaders can attempt to redefine an image crisis by communicating a vision that seeks to reinterpret the focal event[s] to reduce offensiveness and/or responsibility in target audiences. Such apologia rhetoric can be understood as an organization redefining its identity to match the values of stakeholders (Ma, 2020). Accordingly, we argue that social identity leadership can be applied to study organizational image repair strategies. The purpose of the present study is to *analyze how the NFL*

*rhetorically [re]constructed its identity in response to the national anthem and subsequent*

*2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests.* In doing so, we contribute an innovative theoretical

lens for academics and practitioners to analyze organizational rhetoric and image repair.

## Study Background

The problematic relations between American Football, militarism, patriotism, and

nationalism are well documented (e.g., Butterworth, 2012; Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020).

Explaining why the protests created a crisis for the NFL, Anderson (2020) argued that they

were construed as players displaying a lack of love for America and the U.S. flag. This

conflicted with the NFL's longstanding incorporation of military values into branding and

marketing (King, 2008; Rugg, 2016, 2020). However, judgements of the protests were not

uniform. Montez de Oca and Suh (2020) demonstrated that reactions were polarized between

what they termed *patriarchal* and *constructive* patriots. The former was linked with deference

to authority and undertones of white supremacy, whilst the latter supported Kaepernick and

included people that acknowledged social inequalities in America that needed to be

addressed. Kaepernick wanted to focus on social injustice; yet his supporters' efforts to

defend the protests focused the conversation on patriotism (Martin & McHendry Jr, 2016).

Following the initial protests, the NFL experienced decreased viewing figures and

attendances in the 2016 (Rovell, 2017, January 5) and 2017 (Rovell, 2018, January 4) seasons

with the anthem protests reported as the primary reason for fans loss of interest (Evans, 2016,

October 11; Richardson, 2018, February 6). Researchers have shown that attitudes to

nationalism, patriotism, and racial equality heavily influenced how the protests were

perceived (Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019; Smith, 2019; Schmidt et al., 2019; Stratmoen et

al., 2019). One poll suggested that 76% of participants who identified as politically liberal

approved of the NFL's response, compared to only 16% of participants who identified as

politically conservative, and 3% of participants who identified as politically moderate (CBS,

2017, September 28). The protests also highlighted complex racial dynamics for the NFL to manage as 70% of players are black (Lawrence, 2019). Moreover, black adults were more likely to view the protests positively and punishments negatively (Intravia et al., 2018; Murty et al., 2018)

By the 2018 season, the protests were no longer headline news as the NFL had taken control of the narrative because:

> Once the liberal emphasis on conversation and patriotic unity was appropriated by NFL marketing, it shifted focus away from state violence, it diffracted the social change goals of the movement into a variety of diverse initiatives, and it promoted NFL products to a liberal-left market (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020, p. 17).

Supporting this assertion, analysis of the NFL's 2019 official social change partnership 'Inspire Change' highlighted that the campaign's apolitical nature and focus on unification nullified the original message of Kaepernick's protests (Rugg, 2020). Our work develops previous research (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020; Rugg, 2020) by exploring the rhetoric the NFL used to [re]define its identity in relation to the protests. Specifically, we focus on the NFL's use of rhetoric to mobilize support for their reinterpretation of the protests and do not comment on the effectiveness of the NFL's identity rhetoric.

## Literature Review and Theoretical framework

Organizational image is the external, macro-level accumulation of perceptions within, and across, different stakeholder groups[1] (e.g., NFL (and its franchises) employees, fans, sponsors, broadcasters, players, and public; Benoit, 2020). IRT (Benoit, 1997) frames how organizations use communications to manage stakeholder perceptions during crises. From this perspective, an organization faces an image crisis when it is held responsible for an

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[1] For clarity, we distinguish identity as the constellation of values an organization presents that it wishes stakeholders to characterize it by (e.g., apolitical, socially conscious, sustainable), whereas organizational image is the sum of perceptions within, and across, external stakeholder groups (Benoit, 1997).

action that is perceived to be offensive by a stakeholder[s]. Resulting from this perspective, crisis responses should be targeted to the concerns of specific groups in which organizational image has been damaged (Page, 2019).

Benoit (1997) theorized five broad communicative responses used by organizations to alter stakeholder perceptions of offensiveness and/or responsibility when facing a crisis progressing from (i) complete denial to (ii) evasion of responsibility to (iii) reducing perceived event offensiveness to (iv) corrective action to (v) full acceptance. The inclusion of an action's perceived offensiveness differentiates IRT from other crisis communications models (Page, 2019) as stakeholders may perceive the same action in different ways. For example, if a sport clothing brand's supply chain was shown to involve harmful labor practices, human rights organizations may find this action more offensive than consumers. Equally, the brand may avoid a crisis if they are not deemed responsible, and if a stakeholder, such as a human rights organization, is not considered to possess significant influence, the brand may dismiss responding to the problem.

Additional communication types have since been identified in the sport literature including stonewalling (i.e., highlighting trivial matters; Frederick et al., 2014), victimization (Sanderson, 2008), exposing abusive critics (Schmittel & Hull, 2015), rallying stakeholders to move past the transgression (Frederick & Pegoraro, 2018), retrospective regret (Hambrick et al., 2015), and diverting responsibility to higher levels of leadership (Bruce & Tini, 2008). Consistent with Benoit's original work, these new strategies all aim to reduce organizational responsibility, or the perceived offensiveness of an action.

The efficacy of different image repair strategies is hard to gauge as their utility varies between crisis scenarios, and at what stage they are used (Hambrick, 2018). For example, when used as the first response, mortification is an effective image repair tool (Meng & Pan, 2013). Yet, when an organization apologizes after initially denying responsibility it is

ineffective (Bruce & Tini, 2008). Furthermore, there are fewer studies that analyze how sporting organizations have engaged in image repair using Benoit's (1997) categorization (e.g., Bruce & Tini, 2008; Compton & Compton, 2015; Frederick & Pegoraro, 2018; Onwumechili & Bedeau, 2017; Pfahl & Bates, 2008). Compton and Compton (2015) provide the only analysis of the NFL's image repair strategies from Benoit's (1997) perspective, finding that the organization's open letters in response to the concussion crisis used corrective action and types of offense reducing communications (e.g., transcendence and bolstering). Compton and Compton (2015) did not comment about the impact of these image repair strategies on stakeholder perceptions; however, they noted that the NFL was "careful to characterize any changes as ones that will not diminish fans' enjoyment" (p. 274). Nevertheless, how organizations [re]define and communicate their organizational identity when facing an image crisis is under researched. Our theoretical framework, the social identity approach to leadership, provides an explanation for how organizations and their representatives (e.g., Chief Executive Officer, players, coaches) might use rhetoric to respond to crises.

**Social identity approach to leadership**

The social identity approach to leadership combines social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization (Turner et al., 1987) theories to explain the relationship between social context and leader influence. Despite a huge volume of work exploring organization identification in mainstream management (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989), there is a paucity of research exploring how organizational identities emerge, are led, and impact constituents in sport management (Inoue et al., 2021; Swanson & Kent, 2015). Wegner et al. (2021) found that new volunteers formed organizational identities that were equivalent to long-term contributors in a five-month period. In a recent conceptual advance, Inoue et al. (2021) discussed how organizational leaders can adapt identities during crises to address

areas of community need and contribute to participant well-being and recovery for people that do and do not identify with organizations. Broadly, however, we know little about how sport organizations use rhetoric to [re]define diverse, disparate stakeholder understandings of their identity from whom they seek to gain support following crises.

The social identity approach to leadership focuses on influence in relation to group dynamics. Specifically, it is premised on *leaders* seeking to create shared understandings amongst people that identify with a group or whom leaders hope to influence by extolling a vision of the group moving forward that is attractive to people that do or do not identify with a group (Haslam et al., 2020). To make sense of how rhetoric, social identity, and image repair connect, it is initially important to explain how individuals come to understand themselves in collective terms (i.e., We and Us) and how this influences cognition and behavior. Turner et al. (1987) argued that individuals self-categorize with groups, teams, and organizations via a process of self-stereotyping. By self-stereotyping, individuals become psychologically interchangeable with other group members on a shared characteristic[s] (e.g., NFL fan). It is the sense of sharing a common value[s] that creates a perception of shared identity with others. When salient, shared social identity invokes a transition in self-perception from 'I' and 'Me', to what an event or context means for 'We' and 'Us' (Oakes et al., 1991; Turner et al, 1994).

When a shared social identity is rendered salient in context (e.g., racial or political identity through a player protesting during the national anthem), the norms and values shared by members become an important heuristic for behavior, thought, and action (Hogg & Reid, 2006). The stereotyped understandings of what makes in-group members similar in a specific situation is cognitively represented as the in-group prototype (Turner et al., 1987). Hogg and Reid (2006) explain that the in-group prototype is a "fuzzy set" (p. 10) of attributes shared by group members that accentuates similarity between in-group members and distinctiveness in

relation to other groups. To accentuate distinctiveness, group members use language that characterizes the attributes of their category in relation to others (Livingston et al., 2009).

What group members share in context (i.e., represented as the in-group prototype) is, however, fluid, and responsive to social and contextual change (e.g., interventions by the U.S. President; Turner et al., 1994). Therefore, a person might identify with the broad category of 'Americans', until conversation moves into the domain of politics and renders a specific political-partisan identity salient. While the person does not forgo their American identity, partisan affiliation offers a more useful identity to make sense of the political conversation and creates division within the broad 'American' group. Consequently, to repair image during a crisis that invokes socio-political dimensions, leaders need to be acutely aware of the social identities and values that are salient (Turner et al., 1994) for the intended audience (see Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a).

**Leaders as identity entrepreneurs**. Leadership, viewed from the social identity perspective, is an active process that seeks to accentuate similarities between people in social context (Reicher et al., 2005). Such active approaches to leadership involve attempting to mobilize people that do and do not identify with a group to support leader objectives (Inoue et al., 2021; Steffens & Haslam, 2013). A major feature of this strand of social identity leadership theorizing concerns rhetoric, and the language leaders use to communicate what they are trying to achieve (e.g., support for the NFL). Such acts of identity entrepreneurship can occur in speech (e.g., Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a, 1996b) and media communications (e.g., Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2004). Reicher and Hopkins (1996a, 2001) drew from political rhetoric (see Condor et al., 2013) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) to explain how leaders (or 'speakers') use rhetoric to appeal to large, diverse social groups in order to mobilize support for the speaker's objectives (e.g., buying a ticket to watch an NFL match or continuing to sponsor the competition; Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012; Elcheroth &

Reicher, 2014; Klein & Licata, 2003). This work has subsequently been incorporated within the social identity approach to leadership as a feature of theorizing about identity entrepreneurship.

Identity leadership and entrepreneurship can occur in small, clearly defined groups (e.g., Haslam et al., 2020). However, in contrast, research conducted in politics indicates how identity leadership rhetoric can be used to influence large disparate groups of people that do and do not share a common identity with the leader (Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a; Steffens & Haslam, 2013). In such instances, political leaders have been shown to focus rhetoric on issues (e.g., workers' rights) that are broad enough to mobilize sufficient support to win elections (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a). To successfully redefine social reality (e.g., perceptions of player protests) in large groups, leaders need to have a nuanced understanding of the identities and values that are implicated in a particular situation or context (Reicher et al., 2005). From this basis, leaders can use rhetoric to connect with and promote values that are contextually relevant and important to stakeholders with the intention of mobilizing support for their version of events (e.g., Klein & Licata, 2003; Steffens & Haslam, 2013). Existing research on the rhetoric used to change social reality in large groups suggests that leaders use three related rhetorical strategies: [re]defining in-group boundaries (i.e., target), exemplifying shared features of the category (i.e., source), and communicating a compelling vision for the group (i.e., content: see Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a; Haslam et al., 2020).

Firstly, leaders need to be clear about the intended audience for their rhetoric. That is, who the speaker intends to include in category boundaries and, ultimately, influence (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a; Reicher et al., 2005). Reicher and Hopkins (1996a, 1996b) demonstrate how leaders can rhetorically construct different versions of the same group (i.e., Great Britain) that include and exclude people based on the leader's political persuasion. Defining

who a group is for acts as the initial step in the entrepreneurial process of mobilizing support

from large groups of people (Haslam et al., 2020; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a). Reicher et al.,

(2020) discuss how Nelson Mandela used rhetoric to redefine the 1995 Springbok Rugby

team as an inclusive symbol of South African identity. The Springboks were historically

defined as a symbol of an exclusive 'white' South African identity, which Mandela

reconstructed into a Rainbow Nation by articulating new *category boundaries,* that sought to

include previously excluded Black South Africans.

Secondly, to achieve social influence *through* groups (Turner, 2005), speakers *seek to*

*position* themselves as exemplars of the in-group prototype they seek to advance (Haslam et

al., 2020)[2]. In lay terms, successful leaders position themselves as ideal representatives of

what makes members of a group similar (De Cremer et al., 2010). This is a critical feature of

identity leadership as researchers have found prototypical leaders are able to mobilize greater

levels of support towards their goals (e.g., Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012; Hogg, 2001;

Platow et al., 2015; Reicher et al., 2018; Steffens et al., 2016). As the social context changes,

however, so does the in-group prototype (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Therefore, leaders need to be

acutely aware of contextual shifts and resistance to group goals so that their rhetoric

accentuates their representativeness of group characteristics that are meaningful to the

intended audience.

Thirdly, identity leaders use rhetoric to set out a future vision for their group (Reicher

et al., 2005). In short, identity content sets out what the speaker is mobilizing people towards

(Steffens & Haslam, 2013). For example, Augoustinos and De Garis (2012) examined how

Barack Obama adopted language about the American Dream in his rhetoric leading up to the

2008 election. Through this 'trope', Obama sought to mobilize Americans to support his, and

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[2] This does not imply that the leader *is* prototypical in the eyes of stakeholders. Rather, that the speaker uses
rhetoric to *try* and demonstrate their credentials as an exemplar of what makes group members similar.

the Democratic party's goal to win the Election. To do so, he articulated a future vision for Americans based on justice, equality, and freedom (i.e., what group members were mobilized towards) that he positioned himself as representative of through his rhetoric (i.e., as prototypical leader). Of course, many American voters were not persuaded by Obama's identity leadership; however, his arguments about the nation's identity were sufficiently compelling to mobilize a large enough group to vote for him to win the Election (Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012).

**Identity leadership as a form of Image Repair During Crises**

Use of the social identity approach to leadership in political and social psychology demonstrates that leaders can create and define social categories with the purpose of mobilizing different groups of people to support a leader's objectives and goals (e.g., voting in an election). This line of reasoning and analysis can be applied to the image repair strategies of sport organizations and their leaders who may use, intentionally or not, identity leadership to placate and address specific concerns which arise from crises. Benoit (1997) postulates that an organization suffers an image crisis when it is held responsible for an event or action that is perceived as offensive. The social identity approach to leadership complements and extends IRT by explaining how leaders behave entrepreneurially to deliver rhetoric that reimagines and reinterprets the features of a crisis that are socially and psychologically salient for stakeholders. In political crises, like the anthem protests, we argue that sport organizations may work to redefine an event's offensiveness and organizational responsibility by deploying active identity leadership which includes articulating (i) who the identity is for, (ii) the proposed prototypicality of the leader[s], and (iii) the support for their own interpretation of the event in question.

## Method

Aligned with the social identity approach to leadership we draw from discursive social psychology (DSP) to make sense of the rhetoric used by the NFL throughout the anthem protests (Litton & Potter, 1985). DSP draws from discourse and rhetoric analysis to provide an analytical framework to understand social issues (Potter, 1998). We do not claim to be analyzing what the NFL was *trying* to do in response to the crisis, or why. Our purpose is to reveal the NFL's rhetoric 'in action' as the NFL [re]constructed identity content and in-group boundaries in relation to the unfolding crisis. As Reicher and Hopkin's (1996a) show in their analysis of opposing political parties discussing the same worker's strike, the aim of DSP is not to determine who was correct, but to uncover how events are contextualized in relation to prior events (e.g., terrorism versus campaigning) and presented with calls to action (e.g., condemnation or support) to mobilize stakeholders in context (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2014). In this study, the focus is on how the NFL used language to define categories to repair their image during and after the anthem protests.

### Data

Twenty-one press releases and transcripts of interviews containing communications by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell about the National Anthem protests were accessed from the NFL communications website (https://nflcommunications.com) and NFL news website (https://www.nfl.com/) to form a textual corpus. The communications were disseminated by the NFL between July 2016 and December 2020. As NFL Commissioner, Goodell was the speaker responsible for communicating identity arguments about the league's interpretation of the protests and vision for the league. The use of press releases, interview transcripts, and political speeches is considered typical based on previous research that has analyzed how individuals (e.g., politicians) use language to create social categories

(e.g., Klein & Licata, 2003; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a). The NFL's owned and operated

websites provided an excellent resource to access the organization's communications in

relation to the anthem protests. Searches were conducted on the official NFL website and

NFL communications website using the terms 'National Anthem', 'National Anthem protest',

'Colin Kaepernick', 'protest' and 'Black Lives Matter' to retrieve any communications from

the NFL or League Commissioner Roger Goodell (Goodell from here on) that included

discussions about the anthem protests and/or BLM movement.

**Analysis**

In DSP, primacy is given to naturally occurring sequences of discourse and social

interaction (Parker, 2012). Therefore, rather than breaking ordered textual data into themes

(e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006), DSP theorists place emphasis on the construction of speech in

relation to social context. For this reason, the order of statements and language is important to

the way in which text is interpreted. Sequential analysis and presentation ensure that the

framing of messages in a speech remain connected to the full content of what was said

(Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a). For example, a sentence alone may be read as an endorsement

of a protest, yet in the context of a full speech or text, may have been a veiled criticism.

We explored how the NFL rhetorically constructed its identity in response to the

Anthem protests and BLM as the social context of the protests changed over time. Grouping

data into themes across all years of observations would have detached the NFL's statements

from the social and contextual situations to which it responded (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992;

Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a). Guided by DSP, we coded the data iteratively and inductively in

the sequence Goodell made the statements (i.e., from 2016 – 2020) to identify (i) category

arguments, (ii) features of in and out-groups described, (iii) how arguments were presented

and achieved (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a), and (iv) what the NFL mobilized stakeholders to

achieve (Haslam et al., 2020). Providing a clear definition of the group Goodell intended to

communicate with is complicated because, as identity leadership researchers have argued (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a), his rhetoric likely focused on appealing to as many Americans (and non-Americans with an interest in the league) as possible. In this instance, we can speculate that Goodell was *trying* to lead a group consisting of NFL (and its franchises) employees, players, fans, sponsors, media partners, and the public following the protests. Ultimately, only the NFL and Goodell can 'know' the intended audiences that were targeted with the rhetoric we have analyzed.

In many instances, category arguments are implicit in leader rhetoric (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a). For example, when Goodell stated: "I think it's important to have respect for our country", rather than interpreting this as his personal attitude, DSP theorists argue it is as an interactional discursive feature that attaches values to a social category[ies] (i.e., Americans; Gibson, 2009). Likewise, to express certain attitudes (e.g., valuing the military) and behaviors (e.g., standing during the anthem) as 'respectful of our country', Goodell implicitly positioned countervailing attitudes (e.g., devaluing the military) and behaviors (e.g., sitting during the anthem) as disrespectful.

The NFL statements were coded by both researchers in three rounds of coding. First, Authors 1 and 2 coded the data independently and met to discuss the findings. Second, we restructured the data from discrete statements in an NVIVO project to a sequential set of statements in a shared Microsoft Word document for the second round of coding that focused on the ordering of comments. Author 2 initially coded the round two data prior to Author 1 reviewing the analysis. Third, we identified nine features of category arguments, which the NFL used to articulate their identity in relation to two major categories: patriotism and activism (see Table 1). Our analysis focuses on the two main category arguments that emerged from our interpretations of the NFL's response to the anthem protests: (i) patriotism and (ii) activism for social change. These category arguments were repeated in Goodell's

rhetoric and identity leadership work because the protest created questions about the NFL's

patriotism for patriarchal patriots, and their commitment to social change (i.e., through

activism) for constructive patriots. This is consistent with previous research that has

identified how Kaepernick's protest struck at these two identity issues for the NFL (e.g.,

Montez de Oca & Suh, 2019). Our analysis is not a commentary on the effectiveness of the

NFL's identity leadership in changing how different stakeholders viewed the protests. Rather,

we follow Reicher and Hopkin's (1996a) precedent by seeking firstly "to demonstrate

presence" (p. 356) of identity leadership in Goodell's rhetoric as the crisis unfolded.

## Findings and Discussion

### 2016: Response to first protest

In 2016, Kaepernick's sat and then knelt during the pre-match national anthem in

protest against police brutality toward black Americans. This challenged the NFL's

longstanding patriotic, militaristic, and apolitical identity (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020;

Oriard, 2010; Rugg, 2016). In the opinion of certain stakeholders, the NFL was responsible

for permitting unpatriotic protests. To other stakeholders, the NFL was perceived as not

supporting the issues Kaepernick raised. Both viewpoints led to negative appraisals of the

NFL's image. Consequently, the NFL used rhetoric to [re]define its identity (Reicher &

Hopkins, 1996a) in the context of the protests to mobilize support from stakeholders. The

arguments expressed by the NFL are characteristic of political leader rhetoric as the NFL

sought to align its identity with broad values that were salient in the social context (i.e.,

patriotism and activism).

-------------- Insert Table 1 about here -----------------

Goodell made a single statement about the protest after Kaepernick first knelt (NFL,

7th September, 2016). In this statement, he initially *bolstered* (Benoit, 1997) the NFL's

identity and "offset the negative feelings connected with the wrongful act" (p. 180):

Well my personal thoughts are I support our players when they want to see change in

society, and we don't live in a perfect society. We live in an imperfect society. On the

other hand, we believe very strongly in patriotism in the NFL. I personally believe

very strongly in that. I think it's important to have respect for our country, for our

flag, for the people who make our country better; for law enforcement, and for our

military who are out fighting for our freedoms and our ideals. These are all important

things for us, and that moment is a very important moment. (NFL, 7th September,

2016)

Goodell responded to the Anthem protest by reasserting the NFL's established in-group

position as America's game (Butterworth, 2012), defining key attributes of the league's

identity (Livingstone et al., 2009) such as valuing patriotism and law enforcement. He then

positioned himself as a prototypical representation ("I personally believe") of this category

content (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a) expressing his own 'patriotism' by stating how

important law enforcement, militarism, and freedom were to him. This content was

supplemented with his (i.e., The NFL's) beliefs about the importance of respecting 'our

country', 'our flag', and 'people who make our country better'. Through defining category

boundaries and content based on the NFL's traditionally patriotic values, Goodell's rhetoric

positioned himself as an ideal source (Haslam et al., 2020) to represent the league during the

crisis.

In the next part of his statement, Goodell discussed Kaepernick's activism in relation

to the NFL's identity, *shifting blame* (Benoit, 1997) for the crisis to the player:

So, I don't necessarily agree with what he is doing. We encourage our players to be

respectful in that time [during the anthem] and I like to think of it as a moment where

we can unite as a country. And that's what we need more, and that's what I think

football does - it unites our country. So I would like to see us focusing on our

similarities and trying to bring people together. Players have a platform, and it's his

right to do that. We encourage them to be respectful and it's important for them to do

that (NFL, 7th September, 2016)

A main feature of category construction concerns the version of events communicated by

leaders (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a). Faced with the issue that some stakeholders perceived

the NFL to be unpatriotic, Goodell portrayed Kaepernick as an *isolated actor* that did not

represent the version of events he sought to communicate. Kaepernick was referred to in

individual terms (i.e., "he is doing" and "his right to do that"), whilst collective pronouns

(i.e., "our") were used to describe players that aligned with the content Goodell

communicated in his rhetoric. Specifically, that 'our' players behave respectfully during the

anthem in contrast to an out-group that was 'disrespectful' (i.e., Kaepernick). In emphasizing

in-group normative attitudes and behaviors in the opening to his 2016 statement, Goodell

then placed Kaepernick and those that agreed with the protest outside group boundaries (cf.

Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a).

In the next part of his statement, having appealed to patriarchal patriots (Montez de

Oca & Suh, 2020), Goodell focused on category arguments about social change, which

included rhetoric more aligned with the values of constructive patriots (Montez de Oca &

Suh, 2020). This is typical of efforts to mobilize large and complex audiences by

communicating a vision for the group that that is appealing to different factions or subgroups

(Haslam et al., 2020):

I think it's important if they see things they want to change in society, and clearly, we

have things that can get better in society, and we should get better. But we have to

choose respectful ways of doing that so that we can achieve the outcomes we

ultimately want and do it with the values and ideals that make our country great (NFL,

7th September, 2016).

Goodell switched category arguments in which he *transcended* (Benoit, 1997) the protest and acknowledged the importance of the social issues that Kaepernick [he] protested. However, he maintained that protests during the anthem were incongruent with the NFL's existing identity because they were not *respectful* of the flag. His language presented 'acceptable' forms of activism that would reduce the offensiveness of the protests and place them "in a more favorable context" (Benoit, 1997, p. 181) for patriarchal patriots (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020). Goodell's apparent acceptance demonstrated what Martin and McHendry Jr (2016) termed the supporter-critic stance where the vision for the NFL recognized the right to protest but did not offer an acceptable way of doing so. In Goodell's 2016 statement he expressed category arguments that reflected the NFL's traditional 'American' values with an initial acknowledgement that the social issues [that '*they' or 'he'*] protested were important. In doing so, he extended group boundaries to constructive patriots, albeit in a limited capacity. However, in 2016 Goodell did not offer clarity about how 'things we want to change in society' might be addressed. Rather, he focused on mobilizing support for the league's traditional values of patriotism as demonstrated through the flag, anthem, and military.

**2017: Evolved position and unavoidable politicization**

There was clear flexibility in the category arguments (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2014) presented in 2017 that demonstrated a temporal dimension to the rhetoric Goodell expressed (Klein & Licata, 2003). The first communication on August 15th 2017 continued the category arguments put forth in 2016 to *bolster* the NFL's traditional identity (Oriard, 2010). In this statement, Kaepernick was not mentioned. Instead, Goodell focused on other players:

> Well, I think it's one of those things where I think we have to understand that there
> are people with different viewpoints. It's something that I think everybody wants. The
> national anthem is a special moment to me. It's a point of pride. That is a really

important moment…. But we also have to understand that people do have rights and

we want to respect those (NFL, 15th August, 2017).

In this passage, Goodell first reasserted his prototypicality stating how important the anthem

was 'to him'. He then included rhetoric about the importance of 'respecting' the rights of

players with different viewpoints. Rather than scapegoating or discussing Kaepernick in

2017, Goodell's rhetoric focused on players that exemplified forms of activism that aligned

with the vision Goodell communicated for the NFL and people that supported it (Reicher &

Hopkins, 1996a). This identity content addressed criticism that NFL players were *unpatriotic*

in a new way, by presenting players as prototypical (e.g., Hogg & Reid, 2006) exemplars of

the NFL's reworked attempts to mobilize stakeholders towards their interpretation of the

protests.

But I was with the Jets a few weeks ago and one of the players was there in the fan

forum actually and we were talking about this and they were asked the same question.

And they said you know, there's a time and a place. (NFL, 15th August, 2017)

In this part of the statement, Goodell used a player as the source (Haslam et al., 2020) to

define 'appropriate' activism. A main feature of the flexibility (cf. Elcheroth & Reicher,

2014) the NFL displayed in their rhetoric in 2017 was shifting from presenting Kaepernick as

a lone and disrespectful actor to focusing on how 'patriotic' NFL players engaged in

activism:

The responsibility of doing it at the right time and in the right way. And what we see

is a lot of players going into the community and really taking the platform they have

and being active and creating dialogue and *actually making really positive change*.

And that's what I think is so important. Protest to progress is what I call it…. And

we've seen our players lead that. We saw that in Denver with Brandon Marshall. We

saw it with Doug Baldwin in Seattle. They went out and did some really great things

in the community to affect change in a positive way. That's what we want to see our

players do and I think that's a positive thing (NFL, 15th August, 2017)

Critically, Goodell used the terms *positive* and *actual* to bolster an emerging form of

'patriotic activism' that was conducted by players *in their communities* away from the

national anthem or game days. In doing so, he reinterpreted the issue Kaepernick protested to

fit with the NFL's reworked version of patriotic identity (cf. Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a) in a

way that reduced the offensiveness of the protests to both patriarchal and constructive patriots

(Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020). This argument was achieved by presenting the out-group's

'ineffective protests' (i.e., what *they* did 'wrong') in contrast to the 'effective' work of

'patriotic' American NFL players. Goodell labelled this '*protest to progress*', which

displayed a temporality (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2014) to the league's identity content and in-

group boundaries.

To establish which social issues were important to stakeholders, Goodell introduced

the concept of dialogue in his rhetoric. This language presented the NFL as keen to learn

from 'patriotic' players about issues that were important in their communities. Then, he

presented prototypical players as examples (cf. Hogg & Reid, 2006) of activism that accorded

with the version of American patriotism the NFL were mobilizing (i.e., 'what we want to see

our players do'). In doing so, Goodell expressed the importance of players standing during

the anthem, alongside the importance of activism, combining issues of interest to patriarchal

and constructive patriots (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020).

On the 23rd of September 2017, incumbent U.S. President Donald Trump stated that

any player that protested during the anthem should be fired (Graham, 2017). Trump's

intervention led to more protests, with a record 204 players kneeling on September 24th

compared to six players in the previous round (MacDonald, 2017). This threatened the NFL

as it rendered political affiliation salient to make sense of Trump's intervention and the

NFL's actions (if it was not already for stakeholders; cf. Turner et al., 1994). Polarization complicates image repair strategies as messages targeted at one audience can be interpreted differently by another.

Until this point in the crisis, the NFL's rhetoric and image repair showed little deviation from their traditional stance on patriotism (Butterworth, 2012); however, Trump's comments provided a new, divisive, competing category argument for 'patriotism' that fitted into his leadership narrative (Reicher et al., 2018) to which the NFL had to respond. This aligned with prior studies that demonstrate how group representations in rhetoric change in response to environmental shifts (Klein & Licata, 2003). To manage stakeholder polarization, the NFL defined a more inclusive identity (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a) that related to the values of stakeholders (see Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020) with different political identities; rather than reiterating their traditional stance on patriotism, which had been co-opted by the Trump administration into an exclusionary identity (Reicher et al., 2018).

Goodell responded to Trump's intervention by developing earlier rhetoric about players' work in 'our communities'. He also supported this message by broadening the scope of *dialogue* to include 'community leaders and law enforcement' alongside the NFL and its players to support the new and old identity content conveyed. The following part of the statement explained the new value the NFL placed on learning about issues in 'our communities'

> What we've had is unprecedented dialogue over the last year with our players, our owners, with community leaders and law enforcement.... What we plan to do is have a very in-depth discussion with the players and owners next week to make sure we truly understand the issues and also understand the approach we want to take together with the players to address these issues in our communities (NFL, 11th October, 2017).

The change was distinct from the use of "different viewpoints" earlier in 2017, because it included community leaders (i.e., focused on social change) and law enforcement (i.e., valued by patriarchal patriots) as sources collaborating to make a difference in American communities. In previous rhetoric, Goodell had referred generically to change in 'our country' and 'society'; whilst the work of players was conducted in 'the communities'. The use of the nebulous term 'our communities' was significant because it allowed Goodell to abstract (cf. Turner et al., 1987) social change and activism to a level at which any American could relate (Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012). This is an example of selecting issues that are broadly appealing to the intended audience (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a). Goodell used existing features of the NFL's version of American patriotism that some stakeholders identified with; however, his rhetoric included new category arguments about social progress because of changes in the social context (Klein & Licata, 2003):

> The agenda will be a continuation of how to make progress on the important social issues that players have vocalized. Everyone who is part of our NFL community has a tremendous respect for our country, our flag, our anthem and our military (this point was restated on the 18th of October in a subsequent statement), and we are coming together to deal with these issues in a civil and constructive way (NFL, 11th October, 2017).

Goodell's rhetoric developed to define the category boundaries (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a) he mobilized noting that that *all* intended in-group members respected the country, flag, anthem, and military. He positioned disrespect of the anthem (i.e., protest) as uncivil, unconstructive, and incongruent with the values of the NFL and communicated reworked identity content that sought to mobilize stakeholders towards making '*actual*', *'civil',* '*positive*', and *'constructive'* change privately, in 'our communities'. This rhetoric deployed arguments that presented a version of events that reduced the offensiveness of the protests

(Benoit, 1997) to patriarchal patriots (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020) by presenting the anthem as a 'uniting space' for 'patriotic' Americans. However, developing on rhetoric disseminated in 2016, social change and issues in 'our communities' were a consistent aspect of NFL rhetoric in 2017 onwards that sought to reduce polarization and appeal to constructive patriots (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2020). The NFL communicated activism as an important organizational value; however, in Goodell's speech, it was defined as an activity delivered outside of game day rituals and focused on improving 'our communities' in support of organizational goals (cf. Haslam et al., 2020).

On October 18th, Goodell gave another press conference about the NFL's national anthem policy (see NFL Communications, 18th October 2017) after further criticism from Trump (Pedersen, 18th October, 2017). This constituted Goodell's largest discussion of the protests, which covered, for example, the proposed national anthem policy, the NFL's patriotic values, and the political division between stakeholders. His statement largely reinforced and extended category arguments presented in previous statements. Additionally, the NFL's image repair drew upon *minimization* to diminish the scale of the problem (Benoit, 1997):

> We also have to focus on the fact that we have six or seven players that are involved with the protest at this point and what we try to do is deal with the underlying issue and understand what it is they are protesting and what we can do to address that (NFL Communications, 18th October, 2017).

Through minimization, the NFL construed the small number of athletes still protesting ('six or seven') as a minority out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). He also discussed the minority of players protesting using the othering language he applied to Kaepernick in 2016 (i.e., what 'they' are protesting). At this stage in the crisis, protestors were acting incongruently with the vision of activism that Goodell had described – on behalf of the NFL, which valued social

change, but only when it occurred away from NFL stadia. In the next part of the statement,

Goodell focused on the issues raised by protestors; framing them as inclusive issues that were

relevant to *all* Americans:

> They are talking about changes that will make our communities better, where there is
>
> bipartisan support for across our nation. It is need-focused. They are talking about
>
> what we can do to support them to effectuate that legislative change. That is very
>
> positive. They are talking about equality issues – making sure we are doing
>
> everything we possibly can to give people an opportunity, whether it is education or
>
> economic, and what we can do to effectuate that. We believe that, with the players,
>
> we can help them and support them. Those are our issues – national issues, American
>
> issues – that are all important (NFL Communications, 18th October, 2017).

Goodell's rhetoric was the clearest attempt by the NFL to address the politicization and

polarization created by the anthem protests by articulating more inclusive identity content. He

developed the language 'our communities', by discussing equality as an issue that had

'bipartisan support' because it was an American issue (cf. Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012).

Goodell consistently referred to protesting players as 'they' and 'them', defining them as part

of an out-group. In doing so, he distanced the protestors work from the NFL's reworked

identity content (Haslam et al., 2020). However, in the last three lines of this passage, he

argued that 'with the players' the NFL could achieve its vision for achieving social change in

'our communities' and addressing issues that were of importance to all Americans. This

rhetoric positioned the protestors as inhibitors of the NFL's vision to make 'positive' and

'actual' change in American communities.

To reinforce the new identity, Goodell again described the activism of prototypical

players (cf. Hogg & Reid, 2006):

We also spent a great deal of time with our owners alone today discussing our efforts

with our players. There is a great deal of support for the efforts that our players have

identified. They not only support but recognize that these are important issues for our

communities. They are American issues and certain things that we want as clubs and

as the league that we want to support and be a part of and help lead with our players. I

think those are the key issues (NFL Communications, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 2017).

By providing examples of activism that accorded with the NFL's vision, these players

provided a source of credibility for the identity content Goodell articulated (Haslam et al.,

2020). Lastly, he confirmed the NFL's overall objective of remaining apolitical by stating,

"We are trying to stay out of politics. We are not looking to get into politics. What we are

looking to do is continue to keep people focused on football" (NFL Communications, 18th

October, 2017). It is worth noting that despite the magnitude of the protests in 2017, the NFL

and Goodell did not discuss them frequently.

**2018 Attempted formalization of category position**

Like 2016, the NFL issued a single major communication about the anthem protests in

2018. Having articulated a vision for how 'activism should be enacted' to preserve features of

the NFL's position in relation to American patriotism, the next major event in the protests

relating to the NFL's image repair and identity leadership was corrective action (Benoit,

1997) via the announcement of an updated National Anthem policy in May 2018. The policy

moved beyond prior rhetoric seeking to legislate that players should stand for the anthem or

remain in the changing room (i.e., the NFL and players). Goodell outlined this proposal by

articulating 'deviant' behavior that did not accord with in-group values. The NFL stated that

the club represented by a protesting player would be fined. Announcing the policy, Goodell

stated:

The policy adopted today was approved in concert with the NFL's ongoing

commitment to local communities and our country — one that is extraordinary in its

scope, resources, and alignment with our players. We are dedicated to continuing our

collaboration with players to advance the goals of justice and fairness in all corners of

our society. (NFL, 23rd May, 2018)

Goodell's rhetoric referred to social change and fairness as features of the NFL's identity

(i.e., 'we are dedicated'), that he described as part of the league's 'commitment' to 'local

communities', 'our country', and 'appropriate' ways to achieve social change. Goodell went

on to bolster (Benoit, 1997) this version of the NFL's patriotism stating: "It was unfortunate

that on-field protests created a false perception among many that thousands of NFL players

were unpatriotic. This is not and was never the case". Building on his rhetoric in 2017,

Goodell sought to mobilize support for the NFL's goals (cf. Haslam et al., 2020) by

construing social issues that should be addressed aside from gameday and in collaboration

with the league. However, this was coupled with rhetoric that sought to justify giving leaders

control over activism that was discordant with the identity content Goodell articulated.

In response to the NFL's announcement, which sought to legislate against the anthem

protests, the NFL Players Association changed the context (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2014), by

challenging the policy. They argued that it contradicted previous promises by the NFL and

infringed on player rights (NFL Players Association, 23rd May, 2018; NFL Players

Association, 10th July, 2018). Following the filing of a grievance, discussions between the

NFL and the NFL Players Association continued but the new policy was not updated. This

contextual shift (cf. Turner et al., 1994) directly challenged the NFL's rhetoric around the

new legislation and the power of the NFL Players Association rendered the attempt to

legislate against 'inappropriate' methods of activism broadly ineffective.

**2020 We, the National Football League, admit we were wrong.**

The NFL did not discuss the national anthem protests in 2019 and settled collusion grievances filed by Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid. The NFL social change initiatives agreed with players and owners operated off the field to placate protesters, and only a couple of athletes continued to kneel during the anthem. In May 2020, following the murder of George Floyd by his arresting police officers, the issue of police brutality against black and minority American communities became a national issue. In response, the NFL highlighted the social change initiatives it had developed since 2017 as part of its identity, but the organization's image amongst stakeholders was diminished as the NFL was widely criticized for its lackluster response (Kaye, 30th May, 2020). Most damning, a group of top players released a video in which they demanded that the NFL addressed the problem of racism in America. In response, Goodell released a video apology (see NBC, 6th June, 2020 for full transcript, omitted here due to space limitations). The apology maintained certain features of previous identity content. In Goodell's opening line, "It has been a difficult time in our country, in particular, black people in our country" he referred to 'our country' twice, using language that defined an inclusive in-group defined by shared nationality and locality rather than political affiliation (Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012). Goodell mirrored earlier rhetoric by using language that positioned him (despite previous statements) as prototypical of the identity content he communicated (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a). He used rhetorical flexibility (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2014) now adopting protest as a viable form of activism: "I personally protest with you and want to be a part of the much-needed change in this country". He expanded on identity content communicated in 2016 and 2017 by overtly acknowledging the need to act against racism: "And the protests around the country are emblematic of the centuries of silence, inequality, and oppression of black players, coaches, fans, and staff". This was the first occasion on which the NFL had acknowledged systematic issues faced by

black and minority communities in America (the issue Kaepernick protested) and represented

a further revision of identity content to repair the negative image held by stakeholders.

From an image repair perspective, Goodell displayed mortification (Benoit, 1997) for

the NFL's previous stance on racism and encouraged protest (a form of activism he had

actively tried to suppress since 2016). By apologizing, the NFL indicated that previous values

were not acceptable and redefined group boundaries to include people previously offended by

their actions, irrespective of whether this was genuine or part of a 'political project' (see

Klein & Licata, 2003). However, the NFL showed no contrition about their national anthem

policy, or treatment of Kaepernick and other protestors. In 2020, NFL players continued to

kneel during the national anthem and Goodell indicated that it is unlikely a player will ever

be disciplined for doing so (Haislop, 20th September, 2020).

The difference in the language Goodell used to [re]define the NFL's identity to repair

its image in response to Kaepernick's original protests in 2016 was stark. The NFL

transitioned from bolstering their traditionally militaristic identity content rooted in the flag,

military, and law enforcement in 2016 to displaying mortification and ostensibly new, more

inclusive identity content that was 'supportive' of protesters in 2020. Evidently, it is possible

for sports organizations and their leaders to construct and reconstruct identity content and

group boundaries (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a) in response to the image crisis. Furthermore,

as social issues developed and the context changed (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2014), we observed

how Goodell's rhetorical arguments redefined a vision for the league to encompass a broader

group of stakeholders (regardless of political persuasion) to self-categorize with the NFL to

reduce the offensiveness of the crisis.

## Conclusion

**Theoretical implications**

Our first theoretical contribution stems from combining IRT (Benoit, 1997) with the social identity approach to leadership (Haslam et al., 2020). Image crises exist because an organization is perceived to be responsible for an action that caused offense to a group of stakeholders. Moreover, IRT provides a set of tools which organizations can use to respond when implicated in a crisis. However, in this manuscript, we have demonstrated that these responses alone are insufficient to explain the political rhetoric that the NFL used in response to the anthem protests. Rather than seeking only to bolster, transcend, minimize, blame shift, or deny, the NFL's rhetoric (consciously or not) redefined the league's identity in relation to a quickly changing social and political landscape (cf. Elceroth & Reicher, 2014; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996a). To do this, the league communicated a vision of American identity (cf. Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012) that espoused the importance of patriotism (e.g., the flag, anthem, military) and social activism (e.g., making change in American communities) to address issues attributed to patriarchal and constructive patriots during the crisis (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2019). Therefore, the NFL redefined its category content, boundaries, and sources to deliver rhetoric that engaged with political divides in its stakeholder base and provided an important contribution to extant IRT research.

Our contribution also addresses a shortcoming in previous IRT theorizing that has found somewhat inconsistent outcomes associated with different crisis responses (Hambrick, 2018). Here, we show that despite responding by bolstering its traditional identity, the NFL was flexible (Elceroth & Reicher, 2014) and responsive to the crisis over time. In this sense, the NFL's rhetoric started by reinforcing traditional in-group features before the social context invoked a need to address the concerns of stakeholders focused on social justice. This

builds on recent work that discusses the fluidity of social identities in sport management (Delia, 2020; Doyle et al., 2017).

Our second theoretical contribution is to highlight the benefits of considering how organizations use identity leadership to mobilize their intended audiences towards their goals. To date, in sport management, there is scant information about how sport organizations can use language and rhetoric to present social and psychological groups in terms that appeal to stakeholders in context. Our use of the social identity approach to leadership makes a valuable contribution to existing theory and reinvigorates the way in which sport managers might think about, for example, how to respond to crises, develop markets, or gain support for new policies. The next step will be to identify, to what extent social identity leadership *actually* changes how stakeholders view an issue and identify with an organization.

**Managerial implications**

Sport organizations exist in a political world. Increasingly, athletes and players are empowered to speak about the social and political issues that are meaningful to them in public settings, such as when competing, being awarded prizes, or via huge audiences on social and broadcast media. For example, during the Tokyo Olympic Games 2020 [2021], and Euro 2020 [2021] the International Olympic Committee and Union of European Football Associations, respectively, responded to issues around human rights and LGBTQ+ inclusion. Therefore, as others have opined (e.g., Thorson & Serazio, 2018), an apolitical position seems an increasingly untenable one for sport organizations to take. It is also a dangerous standpoint, because where organizational values on key social issues are unclear internally (e.g., racism, homophobia, social justice), leaders will be poorly equipped to respond when they arise through abrupt changes in the social context. The lesson for all sport organizations from the NFL's experience is that apolitical neutrality in a digital landscape characterized by greater awareness of social issues is unsustainable.

**Limitations and future research**

Although the analysis was appropriate to the aims of the article, it is important to

recognize that the study was limited in several ways. First, we have only focused on

messages from the NFL and Goodell not how they were perceived by audiences (i.e.,

effectiveness). To address this issue, future research might use experimental designs to

explore reactions to different forms of leader rhetoric. Online sentiment and network analysis

would also be well suited to measuring how identity leadership and rhetoric are perceived by

stakeholders. Second, our analysis focused on text, yet the statements we analyzed were often

delivered with other verbal and visual content. In this study we did not analyze this content,

which is a limitation. In future work, researchers might analyze the visual environment and

body language a leader used (e.g., such as a leader stood in front of a national flag to

demonstrate their patriotism), to supplement the analysis we have presented in this paper.

Last, our findings are naturally limited to the NFL context. The concepts introduced in this

article can be transferred to other sports organizations and issues. For example, future

research could compare how different organizations have used rhetoric to respond to specific

image crises.

**Closing comments**

In closing, we wish to make clear that social identity leadership as a tool to implement

image repair is not intended to detract from nor dismiss the political issues being discussed.

As sport management scholars, we need to remain open-eyed to the potentially cynical use of

these tools to achieve market objectives under the guise of social change. Social identity

leadership provides a framework through which leaders can seek to mobilize diverse groups

under a shared identity. In doing so, sport organizations have scope to communicate

compelling identity content to large groups of people that may or may not be designed to

achieve the social change contained in language. It remains to be seen whether the NFL will

follow through with the identity content it advanced and attempt to address the systemic

social issues and violence against black and minority communities in America that

Kaepernick originally protested. Or, on the other hand, whether the rhetoric used was purely

a marketing tool (Rugg, 2020) dictated by issues of relevance in American society and

politics at the time.

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