

African American Students' Perceptions Toward Nfl Kneeling And Trump's Reaction: Racial Justice V. Patriotism

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ABSTRACT

Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand for the national anthem starting from the NFL preseason game in August 2016 as a way of peaceful protest for "racial justice" and subsequent reactions of President Trump through his comments and tweets suggesting that such a protest is un-American and un-patriotic spurred much controversy, leading to a national debate among all segments of population and splitting them deeply along racial and political lines. Many polls conducted on this issue revealed strong support for both sides; i.e., for Kaepernick's cause of protest, and for Trump's reaction. This article's primary objective was to examine how a sample of African American college students (as part of the millennial generation) view the NFL controversy. The study found that most of the young African American students have knowledge of the NFL anthem controversy; and, that a majority of them consider themselves NFL fans; agree with Kaepernick's cause for kneeling protests, agree with the way NFL teams and owners showed unity before the Sunday games by locking arms and kneeling. Conversely, they do not support firing of those who refuse to stand during the anthem; and, strongly denounce Trump's controversial 'SOB' comment at an Alabama rally. Overall, these young adults tend to be more moderate in their view on the kneeling controversy than those in the general population.

Keywords: NFL Controversy; Kaepernick; NFL kneeling; racial justice; patriotism; National anthem controversy; African American students; Alabama rally

INTRODUCTION AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

President Trump's rhetoric of patriotism did not start with the NFL kneeling controversy. In fact, it started soon after his inauguration, when he signed a proclamation for a National Day of Patriotism. Even during his inaugural address, he said, "When you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice" (Rothman 2017). If that is true, many wondered, why there is so much partisanship in U.S. Congress, so much turnover among the White House staff, so much GOP effort to cover up for Trump, so much skepticism about the 2016 election and Mueller's investigation into Russia's interference in it, and so much anti-media sentiment on the part of President Trump and his staff (see for example, Blake 2017; Dionne 2017; Nelson 2017). Much of America hasn't forgotten Trump's criticism of the Mexican-American judge, a Gold Star family, a former Miss Universe, and Pope Francis either (Kurtz 2017). In the midst of all this is the NFL kneeling controversy, where

some echo on the president's "resentment toward wealthy 'SOB' athletes who they view as disrespecting the flag," while many others "endorse the idea of peaceful protest, who support players taking a stand against racial injustice, and who don't like the president slamming black athletes" (Kurtz 2017). And yet, some remain unsure of deciding whom they should agree with, primarily because Trump dodged a reporter's question at a recent news conference: "What about police-involved shooting as it relates to the NFL, that is what the players are saying is the crux of why they're taking a knee, sir—the police-involved shooting issue?" Instead of addressing the police brutality, Trump simply repeated his talking-points: "It is very disrespectful to our country when they take a knee during our national anthem, number one. Number two—the people of our country are very angry at the NFL.

All you have to do is look at their ratings and look at their stadiums. You see empty seats

where you never saw them before. A lot of people are very angry about it. It is highly disrespectful. They shouldn't do it." (Rupar 2017). This article's primary objective is to examine how a sample of African American college students (as part of the millennial generation) view the NFL controversy.

THE NFL KNEELING MOVEMENT: ITS BEGINNING, MOMENTUM, AND CONTROVERSY

Colin Kaepernick, the San Francisco 49ers quarterback, began his protest during the NFL preseason game in August 2016 by refusing to stand for the national anthem. At first, he went unnoticed. Even though he apparently sat during the national anthem in the first two games, his actions caught the public eye only after he sat again during the anthem before the 3rd preseason game on August 26, 2016. Kaepernick explained his actions in an exclusive NFL Media interview after this game: "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" (Wyche 2016). His team, the 49ers also thought that Kaepernick was merely exercising his rights and issued the following statement (Wyche 2016, para 4):

The national anthem is and always will be a special part of the pre-game ceremony. It is an opportunity to honor our country and reflect on the great liberties we are afforded as its citizens. In respecting such American principles as freedom of religion and freedom of expression, we recognize the right of an individual to choose and participate, or not, in our celebration of the national anthem.

Kaepernick admittedly didn't share his plan or method of protesting with anyone, including his own teammates: "This is not something that I am going to run by anybody.... I am not looking for approval. I have to stand up for people that are oppressed.

... If they take football away, my endorsements from me, I know that I stood up for what is right" (Payne 2016). Thus, he knew the potential costs of protesting, but was determined to move forward to "bring awareness and make people realize what's going on in this country" (Clements 2016). He solidified his stance by saying: "When there is a significant change, and

I feel like the flag represents what it's supposed to represent and this country is representing people the way it's supposed to, I'll stand" (Clements 2016). In other words, he would continue to sit during the national anthem until then.

Kneeling Began

On Thursday night (September 1, 2016), during the 49ers' final preseason game, Kaepernick and his teammate Eric Reid took a knee, as opposed to the earlier form of sitting, during "The Star-Spangled Banner." The shift from "sitting" to "kneeling" was to show respect to the U.S. military people while simultaneously protesting during the national anthem. Eric Reid explained his support to Kaepernick: "Things have happened in Louisiana and the injustices that are happening could have happened to one of my family members. ... It touched close to home and I just wanted to show my support to him and let him know that he is not the only person who feels that way that he feels. There are a lot of people out there that feel that way" (Witz 2016).

The Momentum

In the following weeks, the movement received widespread support from all public segments. Some U.S. military members began showing their support via the social media hashtag #VeteransForKaepernick by posting such statements as "Don't use my service—or that of any veteran—to justify the silencing of black Americans;" "Sitting or standing, exercise your rights!" "... because I didn't volunteer to defend a country where police brutality is swept under the rug," and the like (Dator 2016). Several athletes across the nation showed their support to Kaepernick by taking a knee, locking their arms, or raising a fist during the anthem. The movement grew beyond NFL Sundays to college-football Saturdays and to Friday-night high school games, and "even trickled down into pee-wee ranks, where a youth team in Texas decided they, too, needed to take a stand by kneeling" (Gregory 2016:38). Gregory (2016:38) observed that: "By the third week of the NFL season, the protests had been echoed on volleyball courts in West Virginia, football fields in Nebraska and at a baseball stadium in Oakland, Calif., where a school band knelt during its performance of the anthem before the A's played the Houston Astros." Some accounts showed that within two months since Kaepernick started the movement, over 49

NFL players from 13 NFL teams; 14 WNBA players from three teams; and, 52 high schools, 43 colleges, one middle school, and two youth leagues in 35 states across the country joined the movement by kneeling, sitting, or raising a fist during the national anthem on game day. Three teams linked arms or held hands “as a sign of unity amidst the racial discord” (Gibbs and Khan 2016).

By the mid-September 2016, the movement was taken to the international stage when the U.S. soccer midfielder, Megan Rapinoe, knelt for the anthem before a match against Thailand. She wrote her reasons in *The Players Tribune*: “There is no perfect way to protest. I know that nothing I do will take away the pain of those families. But I feel in my heart it is right to continue to kneel during the national anthem, and I will do whatever I can to be part of the solution” (Rapinoe 2016). This became what many referred to as *The Kaepernick Effect*.

President Obama defended Kaepernick's right to protest, but urged “both sides” to listen (Hille, 2016: para 5):

Well, as I've said before, I believe that us honoring our flag and our anthem is part of what binds us together as a nation. But I also always try to remind folks that part of what makes this country special is that we respect people's rights to have a different opinion. ... The test of our fidelity to our Constitution, to freedom of speech, to our Bill of Rights, is not when it's easy, but when it's hard. We fight sometimes so that people can do things that we disagree with. ... As long as they're doing it within the law, then we can voice our opinion objecting to it but it's also their right.

The Controversy

The controversy of the anthem protest was spurred by president Trump's actions. On September 22, 2017, during his stop at a rally in Huntsville, Alabama, to support his chosen Republican Primary Senator candidate Luther Strange, Trump asked his supporters (primarily White working-class evangelists and NRA members from red states): “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!’” Subsequently, he tweeted on September 24, 2017: “If NFL fans refuse to go to games until players stop disrespecting our Flag & Country, you will see change take place

fast. Fire or suspend!” (Davis 2017). On the next day, he tweeted again: “So proud of NASCAR and its supporters and fans. They won't put up with disrespecting our Country or our Flag – they said it loud and clear!” (Scarry 2017). Enraged by these and other similar actions, the American public disapproved them in larger numbers than they did the protests themselves. For example, a Huffington Post survey found that 48% said that it is inappropriate for an NFL player to kneel during the national anthem; that 8% suggested that players should find a different way to protest during games; that 76% felt that they should only protest in private life; and, that 13% did not think that players should protest at any time. On the other hand, 54% disapproved of Trump's response, of whom 42% strongly disapproved; and, only one-third approved. Corrine McConaughy, a political scientist at George Washington University found from her study that: (1) when shown a peaceful protest, white conservatives especially disapproved if black men were the protesters; (2) this resentment is fueled by stereotypes of black men as uniquely violent, which of course fits with football player imagery; and, (3) the narrative of black men as violent is also an important factor in opposition to Black Lives Matter. Therefore, she concluded that Trump has good reasons to believe the attack on black NFL players protesting is a perfect fodder for this base (McConaughy 2017). Her findings are similar to those of the Elon University Poll, wherein 94% percent of blacks compared to only 51% whites; and, 67% of females compared to only 57% of males in a North Carolina sample disagreed with Trump that NFL players who kneel during the national anthem should be fired (Husser 2017:10).

Anthony Weems, a doctoral student in Sport Management at Texas A&M University also concluded that the “language of white racism today is often masked by claims to patriotism,” by juxtaposing Trump's actions with those in other contexts (Weems 2017, para 17):

...when US President Trump referred to neo-Nazis marching in the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia as “very fine people” and black NFL athletes as unpatriotic “sons of a bitches,” NFL players were explicitly put in a position where they had to decide between standing for justice and supporting white supremacy. ... The real patriots in this scenario are those that have (and continue to) courageously use their social platforms to bring critical issues to the forefront

in the quest to make liberty, justice, and democracy a reality for all. Real patriots stand alongside one another and against systemic forms of oppression such as police brutality. Real patriots #TakeTheKnee.

The above description of a patriot is not far from that of Samuel Johnson (1774:21)—*A patriot is always ready to countenance the just claims, and animate the reasonable hopes of the people; he reminds them, frequently of their rights, and stimulates them to resent encroachments, and to multiply securities. ... He who promises to endeavor, what he knows his endeavors unable to effect, means only to delude his followers by an empty clamor or ineffectual zeal.*

Furthermore, some suggested that patriotism should move beyond playing the national anthem before sports games: "...if fans are going to react so strongly to someone kneeling during it, as if that somehow signals a blow to America itself, it is time to re-evaluate how patriotic the gesture really is" (Gregory 2016:18).

In summary, kneeling during the anthem before games has been controversial since Kaepernick started it as a protest against racial injustice, but Donald Trump intensified the flames of controversy with his unpopular "sons of bitches" remarks and tweets calling fans to boycott games, and casting a doubt on players' patriotism. Peter W. Marty, the publisher of *Christian Century* and senior pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa, wrote (Marty 2017: para 3):

Trump framed the issue as one of respect for the America flag. Deploying what might be a new low of decency in presidential discourse, he referred to any athlete kneeling during the anthem as a "son of a bitch" who should be fired. ...Even more puzzling are the president words implying that patriotism belongs to those who associate the American flag primarily with the military. The military doesn't own the American flag, even if military sacrifice has contributed to its symbolic value. ...Together as a nation, we give it meaning through the many ways we uphold the Constitution. Some of those ways even take the form of constitutionally protected protests. The devotion that makes for patriotism ought to be focused less on an inanimate piece of cloth called a flag and more on the hearts and passions of all kinds of men and women who contribute to the value behind that symbolic cloth.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 241 undergraduate students enrolled at a Middle Georgia HBCU during the Fall semester of 2017 participated voluntarily in the study. A structured questionnaire was utilized to collect data on respondents': (1) six background characteristics (age, gender, major, fulltime/part-time status, housing, and race/ethnicity); and, (2) knowledge and attitudes toward the NFL kneeling controversy via responses to eleven specific questions, of which the first seven are the same as those of the national survey conducted by AYT (Ask Your Target Market), an online market research firm, in September 2017; i.e. around the same time of the present study. We reasoned that selecting similar questions to a national survey that was conducted within the same timeframe of our study would enable us to compare the opinions of our minority millennials with those in the general population. The latter four questions (8-11) are on how they react to the statements by Kaepernick and president Trump; and, whether they view the controversy is about patriotism or racial justice. The Chronbach alpha coefficient of reliability of these opinions is 0.861.

FINDINGS

Respondents' Profile

Of the 241 student participants in this study, 97 percent were Black/African Americans, 83.8 percent were in the age group of traditional students (18-24 years) and the remaining 16.2 percent were in a non-traditional age group (25 years or older). Their average age is about 22.68 years with a standard deviation of 6.569 years. Female participants constituted 61 percent of the study sample.

Over one-half of the sample reported majoring in either psychology (32.4%) or Criminal Justice (25.3%). Others declared majors in social work (12%), media & visual arts (9.1%), agriculture/veterinary science (6.2%), humanities (history, language, or liberal arts, 4.1%) or physical/natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, or computer science, 10.8%). If a student listed two majors, we considered him/her in only the first listed major, to avoid duplication. Slightly over 49 percent of the respondents lived in on-campus housing and the remaining lived off-campus; and, female students made up a relatively higher portion of on-campus living (52.4%) compared to their male counterparts (44.7%).

Knowledge of the NFL Kneeling Controversy

Nearly 94 percent (n=226) of the study participants were reportedly aware of the controversy surrounding NFL players' kneeling during the pre-game national anthem as a form of political protest—an identical proportion (93.2%) were in AYTM's general population survey. The level of awareness was slightly higher among male respondents (95.7%) than among their female counterparts (92.5%). These gender differentials, though not significant, may partly be due to their differential exposure to professional football games. When asked “how often do you watch professional football games

on television or in person?” eighteen respondents (7.5%) responded “I never watch professional football.” The likelihood of never watching professional football is higher among female students (8.8%) than among their male counterparts (5.3%). On the contrary, nearly 66 percent of males compared to less than 27 percent of females reportedly ‘never miss a game,’ or ‘watch more than half of the games during the season.’ These gender differentials are statistically significant (Chi-square=37.710, df=4, p=.000). Additionally, the patterns of watching professional football among the millennials in the study are similar to those in the general population (Table 1).

Table1. How often do you watch professional football games on TV or in person?

Response category	Gender		Total	
	Male (n=94)	Female (n=147)	Present Study (n=241)	AYTM (n=1,500)
I never miss a game	16(17.0%)	7(4.8%)	23(9.5%)	202(13.4%)
I watch more than half of the games during the season	46(48.9%)	32(21.8%)	78(32.4%)	369(24.6%)
I watch fewer than half of the games during the season	15(16.0%)	50(34.0%)	65(27.0%)	335(22.3%)
I rarely watch professional football	12(12.8%)	45(30.6%)	57(23.7%)	319(21.2%)
I never watch professional football	5(5.3%)	13(8.8%)	18(7.5%)	275(18.3%)

Attitudes toward NFL Players and Their Protest

Nearly two-thirds of the student respondents (66.4%) considered themselves to be fans of the NFL. Consistent with their game watching patterns, males were higher among these fans (80.9%) than females (57.1%) and these gender differentials are significant (Chi-square=15.195, df=2, p=.001). However, most agreed strongly

(82.6%) or somewhat (12.0%) with Kaepernick's statement to NFL media: “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color;” that is, as the cause of his protest. This view was similar among both male and female respondents (Table 2).

Table2. In August 2016, Colin Kaepernick told NFL Media, “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color.” Do you agree with him?

Response category	Gender		Total
	Male(n=94)	Female(n=147)	PresentStudy(n=241)
Strongly Agree	76(80.9%)	123(83.7%)	199(82.6%)
Somewhat Agree	14(14.9%)	15(10.2%)	29(12.0%)
Somewhat Disagree	4(4.3%)	8(5.4%)	12(5.0%)
Strongly Disagree	0(0.0%)	1(0.7%)	1(0.4%)

The level of support expressed by these minority students, most of whom fall into the millennial generation, to NFL kneeling is much higher than what was found in national surveys among the general population. For example, 52 percent of those polled by CBS, 51 percent by ESPN, and 55 percent by Fox, said they disapprove the players' protesting by kneeling during the national anthem as it is inappropriate. However, in a USA/Suffolk poll, 51 percent said that the protests are appropriate; that is, when the question was specifically framed with the protest as a stand against racial injustice (see for more description on these surveys, York 2017).

Moreover, nearly eight out of every ten student respondents, males as well as females, agreed that NFL employees should be allowed to make political statements. This approval rate is twice to that of a general population survey conducted by AYTM around the same time (Table 3).

The support/approval gap between the population under this study and that of national surveys toward the NFL kneeling during the anthem could be traced to three sources: reverence to sports, racial identity, and victim identity. First, Americans, in general, value sports, which has helped the national leagues

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generate revenue in billions of dollars. Many young male students, especially African Americans, develop aspirations since childhood

to become professional athletes, and view the league players, many of whom are also African American (80%), as their chosen heroes.

Table3. Do you think paid NFL employees should be allowed to make political statements of any kind during the games?

Response category	Gender		Total	
	Male(n=94)	Female(n=147)	PresentStudy(n=241)	AYTM(n=1,500)
Yes	77(81.9%)	110(74.8%)	187(77.6%)	587(39.1%)
No	7(7.4%)	16(10.9%)	23(9.5%)	637(42.0%)
Not Sure	10(10.6%)	21(14.3%)	31(12.9%)	282(18.8%)

They watch the games regularly, keep track of their winning scores and awards, and develop admiration to their success. Second, as Michel Bennett said, the national leagues, such as NFL, are built on middle America, most of which is predominantly white, while the league players are predominantly African-American (Kapadia 2017). Minority students in this study tend to relate themselves to the league, while the general population relates to white middle class values. Third, victim identity encompasses all barriers stemming from within and outside their

communities. Bennett said, "... the issue that he's [Kaepernick] dealing with is what we're all dealing with. We all come from the inner city or we've been a part of communities where we have been judged because of the color of our skin, or who we look like or if a woman—the

same for any issue to deal with. We've all been dealing with it with someone in our family" (Kapadia 2017). Thus, these predominantly African American student participants in this study could quickly relate to Kaepernick's cause for racial injustice against police brutality toward innocent American Americans, and to kneeling as a method of peaceful protest, which they supported strongly. Furthermore, they drew parallels between this movement and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Attitudes Toward President Trump and His Actions

An overwhelming majority of the students (95.4%), males and females alike, did not see themselves to be supporters of president Trump, as opposed to 57.1 percent in the general population (Table 4).

Table4. Do you consider yourself a supporter of President Trump overall?

Response category	Gender		Total	
	Male(n=94)	Female(n=147)	Present Study(n=241)	AYTM(n=1,500)
Yes	3(3.2%)	2(1.4%)	5(2.1%)	457(30.4%)
No	88(93.6%)	142(96.6%)	230(95.4%)	857(57.1%)
Not Sure	3(3.2%)	3(2.0%)	6(2.5%)	186(12.4%)

Only 37 out of the 241 student respondents (15.4%) reported they agree strongly (3.3%) or somewhat (12.0%) with president Trump; i.e., that NFL players should stand for the anthem during the games or be fired, which is considerably lower than that found in the general population (47.2%). However, Table 5

shows that the percentage of those who tend to 'strongly disagree' with Trump is higher in the general population (39.4%) than among our student respondents (18.3%). Thus, the student respondents appear to be more moderate and less divided in supporting the players' rights than does that of the general population.

Table5. President Trump said NFL players should stand during the national anthem or be fired. Do you agree?

Response category	Gender		Total	
	Male(n=94)	Female(n=147)	Present Study(n=241)	AYTM(n=1,500)
Strongly Agree	5(5.3%)	3(2.0%)	8(3.3%)	447(29.8%)
Somewhat Agree	14(14.9%)	15(10.2%)	29(12.0%)	261(17.4%)
Somewhat Disagree	62(66.0%)	98(66.7%)	160(66.4%)	201(13.4%)
Strongly Disagree	13(13.8%)	31(21.1%)	44(18.3%)	591(39.4%)

Seton Hall University also found in its survey of 845 adults that only 16 percent said that wouldn't support the players' right to protest, and that they should be ordered to stand for the

anthem, or be dropped from the team should they refuse to stand; 49 percent said that they support the players' right to protest, but believe they should stand for the anthem, and find a

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different way to express their political opinions; and, the remaining 35 percent said that they support the players' right to protest, and not standing for the anthem is an acceptable way to protest (Roberts 2017). Similarly, in the Cato Institute's survey conducted in August 2017 among 2,000 adults, 61 percent (55% of white, 88% of African American, and 60% of Latino respondents) reported that an NFL player should not be fired from the team should they refuse to stand for the national anthem before football games to make a political statement (Cato

Institute 2017). Most of the student respondents (94.2%) either strongly agreed (82.2%) or somewhat agreed (12.0%) with the unity expressed by some NFL teams and owners, in protest to Trump's statement, by locking their arms or kneeling during the national anthem before the Sunday's game. This approval rate is also higher than that found in the general population survey (58.2%), of which 38.4 percent reportedly strongly agree and 19.8 percent somewhat agree with the demonstrated unity (Table 6).

Table6. *In protest to Trump's statement, some NFL teams & owners locked arms and knelt during the national anthem before Sunday's games to show unity. Do you agree with them?*

Response category	Gender		Total	
	Male(n=94)	Female(n=147)	Present Study (n=241)	AYTM(n=1,500)
Strongly Agree	76(80.9%)	122(83.0%)	198(82.2%)	576(38.4%)
Somewhat Agree	10(10.6%)	19(12.9%)	29(12.0%)	298(19.8%)
Somewhat Disagree	8(8.5%)	5(3.4%)	13(5.4%)	198(13.2%)
Strongly Disagree	0(0.0%)	1(0.7%)	1(0.4%)	428(28.5%)

Nearly 89 percent of the students strongly (21.6%) or somewhat (67.2%) disagreed with Trump's tweet that the NFL should "set a rule that you can't kneel" during the national anthem. However, in the general population survey, 14.2 percent somewhat disagreed, but 43 percent strongly disagreed with the Trump tweet

about setting a rule against the players' kneeling—which also indicates the moderate reaction on the part of the young African Americans to Trump's tweet, though they express an overall disapproval to the rule that prevents players from kneeling (Table 7).

Table7. *In response to the NFL protest, Trump tweeted that the NFL should "set a rule that you can't kneel" during the national anthem. Do you agree?*

Response category	Gender		Total	
	Male(n=94)	Female(n=147)	Present Study (n=241)	AYTM(n=1,500)
Strongly Agree	7(7.4%)	4(2.7%)	11(4.6%)	419(27.9%)
Somewhat Agree	7(7.4%)	9(6.1%)	16(6.6%)	222(14.8%)
Somewhat Disagree	67(71.3%)	95(64.6%)	162(67.2%)	214(14.2%)
Strongly Disagree	13(13.8%)	39(26.5%)	52(21.6%)	645(43.0%)

On the whole, the Quinnipiac poll found that 69 percent of voters are fed up with Trump's Twitter tactics and urge him to "give up his Twitter account which he used ... to castigate professional athletes ... as well as his political opponents" (Berke 2017). President Obama also cautioned those in leadership roles against the use of social media. He said: "One of the dangers of the internet is people can have entirely different realities. They can be just cocooned in information that reinforces their current biases" (Katz 2017). Furthermore, they despised Trump's infamous "sons of bitches" remarks at the Alabama rally; whites called them inappropriate by 2-1, while blacks overwhelmingly held this view. They echoed same sentiment as that of former NFL Commissioner, Paul Tagliabue; that is, "to single out any particular group of players and

call them SOB's is insulting and disgraceful" (Stapleton 2017). A USA Today/Suffolk University poll of 1,000 registered voters found that a third of Republicans as well as nine out of 10 Democrats reject Trump's remarks, tweets, and calls for action against player protestors. A 19-year old college student from Manhattan Beach, California was among those surveyed, and said that: "They certainly have the right to express whatever they want. It doesn't call for violence; it doesn't call for pain; it doesn't call for any dramatic act. Free speech is an innately American thing." Some questioned Trump's priorities; that is, as the president of the nation. For example, a 21-year old student from Dallas suburb of Lancaster said: "I think he [Trump] needs to focus on the people who are dying in Puerto Rico and the Virgin island. His priorities are messed up right now because, yes, you

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know, he can feel how passionate he wants to feel about the flag — he's the president, whatever — but right now he needs to send aid to people who need help" (Page & Fair 2017).

Similarly, 93.8 percent of the student participants in the present study reported very unfavorably to Trump's "SOB" comment; and, another three percent opted to respond somewhat unfavorably (Table 8). The following anecdotal responses are illustrative of their reactions. A 24-year old African American female, majoring in Infant & Childhood Development wrote:

I would tell him the way you're speaking isn't a way a president should conduct himself. We have bigger problems in the world to focus on.

A 27-year old African American female, majoring in Veterinary Tech wrote:

People should not be fired for expressing their views or opinions. Many organizations know the federal anti-retaliation policy. President is not only violating anti-retaliation policy but also anti-harassment policy by creating hostile workplace environment to these NFL players. He could have delivered his message in a better way.

A 22-year old African American male, majoring in History wrote:

This is the typical stereotype of what a white racist thought of blacks throughout the American History—black woman is a bitch and black man is son of a bitch. So, I would probably be a childlike to politely let him know that it takes an SOB to know another SOB. I'm sure there are many waiting for the day to come that the 45th president to hear the same words about his job, "you're fired!"

Table 8. Speaking at a rally in Alabama on Friday (Sept. 22, 2017) night, President Trump asked, "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! He's fired! He's fired!'" How would you respond to it?

Response category	Gender		Total
	Male(n=94)	Female(n=147)	Present Study n=241)
Very favorably to Trump	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
Somewhat favorably to Trump	1(1.1%)	1(0.7%)	2(0.8%)
Somewhat unfavorably to Trump	5(5.3%)	2(1.4%)	7(2.9%)
Very unfavorably to Trump	85(90.4%)	141(95.9%)	226(93.8%)
Not Sure	3(3.2%)	3(2.0)	6(2.5%)

In fact, Trump's comments and actions confused the public regarding what the NFL protest is all about. In a HuffPost/YouGov survey, 48 percent said it is about police brutality, while 40 percent opined it is about Trump, who called on NFL owners to fire any "son of a bitch" for kneeling during the anthem. Despite Trump-like critics' repeated characterization of players' demonstrations as 'unpatriotic affronts to the U.S. military and the American flag,' the poll found that only 12 percent tend to buy that argument (Waldron 2017). Likewise, only 9.1

percent of the student respondents in the present study thought that the controversy is about patriotism, while nearly one-third (63.5%) viewed it is about the racial injustice in America. Females tended to view the protest as a fight for racial justice more frequently (68.7%) than their male counterparts (55.3%). Over a quarter of the respondents (27.4%) were unsure. To them, other forms of protest like rising fists and locking arms are more appropriate than kneeling (Table 9).

Table 9. Do you think that the existing controversy is about patriotism or racial injustice?

Response category	Gender		Total
	Male(n=94)	Female(n=147)	Present Study(n=241)
Patriotism	8(8.5%)	14 (9.5%)	22(9.1%)
Racial Injustice	52(55.3%)	101(68.7%)	153(63.5%)
Not Sure	34(36.2%)	32(21.8)	66(27.4%)

The following statement is illustrative of those who thought that the controversy is about patriotism:

The flag stands for our country and every citizen, regardless of color. Players and coaches

take a salary from the NATIONAL football league and should be willing to support the rules and regulations. There are problems in our nation, no doubt. But, like a family, you should show support regardless or else you become a part of the problem.

On the other hand, those who said it is about racial justice explained thusly:

It is about racial justice because if you think far enough what does the flag stands for. If it stands for freedom, liberty, and human rights, I definitely do not see that here in the United States. On top of that, we have a President that has no respect for the minorities. If you are not blue-eyed or come from a wealthy family then you are completely beneath him. These people are kneeling because why stand and "pledge our allegiance" to a country that does not see all its people as equal? We can cover up the real meaning by saying it is patriotic to stand for the national anthem, but one should think, is it morally right to stand behind something that does not truly represent every race/ethnicity equally. Kaepernick and other players said that it is not about the flag, it is about the racial injustice and police brutality, over and over, but Trump and his cronies refused to listen, and called him an SOB. Imagine if a black man calls Trump or his crony same thing, they become hysterical.

Finally, those who were not sure what the existing controversy is about eschewed:

Not sure, specifically what it is about. I am confused with feelings on both sides. One side believes that kneeling is disrespecting veterans and the other side believes that not everyone has same rights and freedoms. If kneeling is the problem, let the players protest in other forms like what some others did: raising fists, locking arms, wearing T-shirts, or holding signs.

CONCLUSION

The present study found that most of the young African American students under study have knowledge of the NFL anthem controversy; and, that a majority of them consider themselves NFL fans; agree with Kaepernick's cause for kneeling protests, agree with the way some NFL teams and owners showed unity before the Sunday games by locking arms and kneeling; and think that NFL employees should be allowed to make political statements of any kind during the games. Conversely, they do not see themselves as supporters of President Trump or his call on NFL owners to set a rule against players' kneeling; or to fire those who refuse to stand during the anthem. They strongly denounce Trump's controversial 'SOB' comment at an Alabama rally; see more often that the existing controversy is centered on NFL

kneeling; and, that kneeling is more about racial justice than it is about patriotism. These young adults tend to be more moderate in their view on the kneeling controversy than those in the general population. Though small in number (about 10%), there is a third category of respondents in the present study as well as in the national survey, whose answer to many questions is "Not Sure." These appear to be caught within a muddled and conflicted societal cultural conflict uneased by the failure of the NFL team's owners to offer any agreed upon protest methods, or to the racial rantings of Donald Trump. The 32 white billionaire NFL owners get their kicks and a whole lot of money from the 80% of their players, who are African American. Recent studies have pointed out that African American football players in high schools, colleges, and in the NFL have been exploited by these white administrators and rich NFL owners who have used (sometimes abused) them in their desires to produce winning football teams. Many players have been neglected academically and hurt physically with all sorts of physical injuries including concussions and other head and body injuries; as well as psychological injury that has led to the violent actions (e.g., domestic violence) off the football field. Some of these injuries occur while playing, and some show up later in life (see for example, Murty, Roebuck and McCamey 2014; Murty and Roebuck 2015). The simple fact is that the human body is not constructed to withstand the violent game of football. A recent study published in the *Journal of American Medical Association* has found from an examination of the brains of 111 deceased NFL players that 110 (or 99%) had degenerative brain disease, called Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy or CTE (Mez et al., 2017; Gregory 2017). Then there is the NFL kneeling controversy. Michael Heath, an ordained minister and licensed psychotherapist, summarized how Trump ignited the NFL controversy: "Trump starts with denial. ...He then creates an emotionally provocative distraction... Crudely calling players SOBs...Next, he changes the subject.... Finally, Trump makes faux appeals to patriotism and distorts the truth by making false equivalencies. ... It isn't clear whether Trump himself is a racist or that he simply realizes that playing to racial fears and anger is a winning strategy for him" (Heath 2017). In a study of 299 students (77.6% white, 13.9% African American, 6.1% Hispanic, and 2.4% other) attending a large

Midwestern university in September 2017, Intravia, Piquero and Piquero (2017) found that Black respondents are significantly: (1) more likely to agree that kneeling down to protest is an appropriate gesture; and, (2) less likely to agree that the NFL team owners should punish players who protest, than non-Black respondents.

Specifically, 90 percent of black respondents, compared to only 38 percent of non-Black respondents, agreed or strongly agreed with NFL kneeling during the anthem to protest, suggesting a clear racial schism of America today. Proponents of the NFL players' kneeling or other forms of protest (locking arms, raising fists, etc.) during the anthem maintain that they are not about the anthem, the flag or the military; and they are only about racial injustice and police brutality (Putterman 2017). To them, they are a matter of their First Amendment rights. But for opponents, inspired by president Trump, they are a form of disrespect for the national anthem, the flag, and to the soldiers—all a matter of patriotism. Proponents then offer a counterargument that such a characterization and demonization of their noble cause itself is a form of oppressing their voice, which further substantiates their reason for protesting. Whatever the arguments for all sides of the controversy might be, unless the protesters' message is heeded and acted upon to safeguard innocent lives, similar protests are likely to repeat in the future.

To make things worse, the recently passed Trump's tax cut may impinge heavily on the lives of African Americans and their families, compared to other ethnic groups. Ganesh Sitaraman (2017:3) pointed out:

The number one threat to American constitutional government today is the collapse of the middle class. Not the rise of presidential power. Not the growing national security state. Not the gridlock in Washington. Not the polarization of the two political parties. ... It is much harder to have a functional constitutional republic without a strong middle class.

The Tax Policy Center forecasted that by 2027, 90 percent of the benefits will accrue to the richest 20 percent of Americans. It drastically cuts the corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 20 percent; and, according to an April 2018 Congressional Budget Office report, it is over the next ten years, forcing reductions in safety-net programs such as social security. All of this

means that the already unconscionable gulf between rich and poor in the U.S. will grow even wider. Gary Cohn, Trump's economic advisor until recently, told CNBC that "the most excited group out there are big CEOs, about our tax plan" (Cole 2018: 25). Undoubtedly, middle class members are decreasing; and, millennials and African Americans will pick up on the foregoing if they haven't already.

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