

**Crisis Communication in Professional Football: An Exploratory Study of the NFL's
Concussion Crisis**

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Abstract

This study analyzes the crisis response strategies used by the National Football League in its external communications to address the concussion crisis spanning 2015 to 2020. The analysis focused on describing the crisis communication strategies, tactics and buffers used by the League. To do so, this research first used Coomb's situational crisis communication theory to analyze crisis response strategies. It then used the buffering effect to analyze buffers. This was accomplished by conducting a deductive thematic analysis of 25 publications published by the NFL on *nflcommunications.com*. The results indicate that the NFL focused on the primary crisis strategies of rebuilding and diminishing, employing tactics such as organizational change and shared responsibility. The NFL also used the bolstering strategies of reminder and ingratiation. The NFL leveraged three buffers in its communications: corporate social responsibility reputation, prior relationship reputation and sports fan communities. The results show an interrelation between situational crisis communication theory and the concept of buffers.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	4
The National Football League and the Concussion Crisis.....	4
Research Objectives.....	5
Theoretical and Methodological Approach	6
Overview of the Research Paper.....	6
Relevance of the Research.....	7
Chapter 2: Problematization	8
Crisis Communication in Professional Sport.....	8
Sport Crisis Communication Research	11
Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the Buffering Effect.....	13
The National Football League’s Concussion Crisis.....	24
The Concussion Crisis: A Communication Nightmare	26
Research Questions.....	28
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	30
Data Collection	32
Data Analysis.....	33
Limitations	36
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion	37
Research Question 1	38
Research Question 2	52
Chapter 5: Conclusion	59
Overview of the NFL’s Crisis Communication Strategy.....	60
Importance of the Results	61
Limits & Future Research Directions	62
References.....	64
Data References.....	73
Appendices.....	78
Appendix 1: Visual step-by-step model of SCCT	78
Appendix 2: SCCT Flowchart of Sports Organizations	81
Appendix 3: Themes and Sub-themes Defined	82
Appendix 4: Initial Thematic Map.....	84
Appendix 5: Reviewed Thematic Map	85

Chapter 1: Introduction

The National Football League and the Concussion Crisis

The National Football League's concussion crisis is one of the most prominent crises in professional sport. It has received tremendous attention from the media, governmental authorities and the public for more than two decades. Concussions became a salient issue in professional football when a new disease called Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) was discovered in 177 deceased football players from all levels of the sport (Simpson-Wood & Wood, 2018). CTE is a "neurodegenerative disease that occurs in association with repetitive concussions" (Wilbur & Myers, 2016, p. 182). This severe disease can lead to memory loss, dementia, speech impairment, paranoia, aggression, parkinsonism and suicidal thoughts and behaviour (Simpson-Wood & Wood, 2018; LaGree, Wilbur & Cameron, 2019). Unfolding into a complex health crisis, concussions in football became a priority for the National Football League.

The concussion crisis represents a unique case study for the field of crisis communication. The NFL's concussion crisis is distinctive because of its ongoing nature; the National Football League has been facing this organizational crisis for more than twenty years. In addition, this crisis has received so much media attention that, over the years, concussions have become associated with the sport of football and the NFL. Therefore, as long as the game of football will remain as it is, the NFL will have to deal with this issue. The concussion crisis is also atypical because the NFL holds a particular place in the sports industry. Football is an integral part of the American culture. Hence, the NFL became a dominant and powerful player in the sports market. Consequently, the organization benefits from its iconic status, which can influence what crisis communication strategies are used by the organization and how they are perceived by its stakeholders. Moreover, the concussion crisis does not only affect the National

Football League. Concussions can have damaging health consequences for athletes at all levels of any contact sports. Thus, this crisis represents a threat not just for the NFL, but for all organizations overseeing a contact sport.

Organizational crises have the potential to “disrupt an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat” (Coombs, 2007, p. 164). Consequently, sports organizations have to take all crises seriously and manage them strategically to protect their organization (Harker, 2019). Confronted with such a severe crisis, the NFL is not just fighting for its reputation but for the continued acceptance of the League and the sport of football. Accordingly, the League’s communication efforts are of utmost importance to maintain its reputation and credibility, but also to manage its relationships with its key stakeholders such as players, corporate partners and fans as the survival of its business depends on it.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore how the National Football League addressed the concussion crisis in its external communications after 2015, once the League could no longer dispute the existence of this health crisis due to increasing and highly publicized scientific evidence on the impact of concussions in football. More specifically, the first research question aims to identify what crisis response strategies were used by the NFL in its external communications to manage the concussion crisis from 2015 to 2020. The second research question aims to determine if buffers played a role in the crisis response strategies used by the NFL in its external communications to manage the concussion crisis from 2015 to 2020.

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

This study presents a qualitative exploratory research, which utilized a case study method to investigate the National Football League's concussion crisis. The conceptual approach taken in this study is motivated by an overarching concern to explore the NFL's crisis communication efforts throughout this health crisis. This paper is written in the theoretical context of William Timothy Coombs' situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and the buffering effect. Situational crisis communication theory helps decision makers to predict how an organization's stakeholders may react toward a crisis that is threatening an organization's reputation by using a situational approach (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007). The nature of the NFL's concussion crisis (i.e., its duration and its distinctive contextual factors) required a model that adopted such a situational approach. The buffering effect also takes into account the crisis situation. Buffers are modifying factors that impact how stakeholders attribute blame to an organization during a crisis. In other words, buffers are pre-existing conditions on which an organization can capitalize to diminish the impact a crisis can have on corporate reputation (Koerber & Zabara, 2017). This paper follows a deductive approach to thematic analysis and tests the core theoretical concepts of SCCT and the buffering effect against the case of the NFL's concussion crisis to identify what crisis response strategies and buffers were used by the NFL in its external communications.

Overview of the Research Paper

Following the introduction presented in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 provides a thorough review of the sport crisis communication literature. It also provides an overview of the theoretical

framework used and the case under study. The chapter ends with the presentation of the research questions that guided this study.

Chapter 3 highlights the methodological approach that was followed in this study. This section provides a justification for the approach chosen, presents the data collection process and a description of how data analysis was conducted.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the analysis and discusses their implications. More precisely, this section discusses what crisis response strategies and buffers were used by the NFL in its external communications, providing excerpts of the collection of texts studied as supportive evidence.

Chapter 5 summarizes the results of this research and their practical implication for the field of sport crisis communication. This chapter also provides a reflection on this study's limitations and it highlights future directions for this research.

Relevance of the Research

This study contributes to the limited body of scholarly literature on the use of buffers in sport crisis communication. It also builds on the situational crisis communication theory body of literature to enable comparative analyses with other sport crisis communication research and to provide an exploratory study of a real-life organizational crisis in sport as a foundation for future empirical studies on the topic.

The unique nature of the NFL's concussion crisis makes it of utmost interest for academic research in the field of sport crisis communication. As long as contact sports will exist, the crisis is likely to persist and to affect all sports organizations that are overseeing a contact sport. Hence, the case of the concussion crisis will remain of high significance for the field of

sport communication for many years to come. As it pertains to the National Football League, as long as the game will remain in status quo on this issue, the concussion crisis will continue to pose a serious operational and reputational threat for the League.

Chapter 2: Problematization

Crisis Communication in Professional Sport

Severe crises in professional sports are omnipresent. From poor athletic performance to outrageous scandals, sports organizations are always of high interest for the media. As Billings (2018) states, “the stakes and prominence afforded within sport-based situations have never been more amplified” (p.2). Indeed, with revenues worth \$38 billion in 2019 in the United States, the interests at stake in the sports franchises industry are enormous (Ristoff, 2021). Professional sports leagues also keep thriving every year. The revenues of sports franchises in the U.S. are expected to grow five percent annually in the next five years to reach an annual revenue worth \$40.2 billion in 2026, bouncing back from an important revenue loss sports organizations suffered amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Ristoff, 2021, p.14).

This fast-paced industry is constantly put under the spotlight. In fact, “the frequency and severity of controversy, legal issues, and crises heighten” in professional sports as sport-related crises receive tremendous media attention (Ruihley, Pratt & Carpenter, 2016, p.52; Schafraad & Verhoeven, 2019). As many sport scholars have observed, the media attention sports organizations generate is “almost unparalleled” (see Coombs, 2018; Billings, Butterworth and Turman, 2015; Ross Knight et al., 2020, p.229). In times of crisis, media attention directly impacts organizational reputation as it puts pressure on an organization to respond to the crisis

(Coombs, 2018). Therefore, as crises are a threat to organizational relationships and reputation, sports organizations have to take them seriously and manage them strategically to protect their organization (Harker, 2019).

Crises in Sport

Crises are complex and dynamic phenomena (Schafraad & Verhoeven, 2019; Ross Knight et al., 2020). Coombs (2007) defines a crisis as “a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat” (p.164). In sport, crises can include health and safety concerns such as the use of performance enhancing drugs and concussions, the use of violence on and off the field, sexual abuse, cheating, match fixing, bribery, and sport activism (Harker & Saffer, 2018; Harker, 2019; Schafraad & Verhoeven, 2019; Meadows & Meadows III, 2020). Coombs (2012) describes crises by four main characteristics: crises are perceivable, they are unpredictable, they violate “stakeholders’ expectations of how an organization should act”, and they represent a threat to organizational performance (Brown & Billings, 2013, p. 76). Crises threaten an organization’s trustworthiness, legitimacy, its reputation and operations (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Crises can have numerous consequences on organizations. They can cause revenue loss, generate negative press, increase public scrutiny, decrease employee satisfaction and motivation, engender the loss of corporate partners and customers, and overall create reputational damage (Kim & Wan Woo, 2019; Schafraad & Verhoeven, 2019).

Corporate Reputation

Fombrun, Garberg & Sever (2000) define corporate reputation as a “cognitive representation of a company’s actions and results that crystallizes the firm’s ability to deliver valued outcomes to its stakeholders” (p. 87, as cited in Sohn & Lariscy, 2015, p. 238). More simply put, Jonkman et al. (2019) define corporate reputation as the “way in which members of the public, or specific organizational stakeholders, evaluate a firm” (p.273). Organizational reputation is a crucial asset for organizations as it helps to attract customers, recruit and retain employees, sustain a competitive advantage and boost financial performance (Coombs, 2007, p.164). Fombrun and van Riel (2003) identify six key components of corporate reputation. They argue that reputation is assessed by an organization’s “emotional appeal, products/services, vision/leadership, work environment, financial performance and social responsibility” (Fombrun & van Riel, 2003, as cited in Kim & Wan Woo, 2019, p.23). It is therefore stakeholders’ “cumulative assessment” of these factors that forms their perception and evaluation of the firm (Kim & Wan Woo, 2019, p. 23). Consequently, as Coombs and Holladay (2006) argue, corporate reputation is highly influenced by the existing relationship and interactions between the organization and its stakeholders. During a crisis organizations face a reputational threat as a corporate crisis negatively impacts how stakeholders perceive the organization facing the crisis (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015). Coombs (2007) defines reputational threat as “the amount of damage a crisis could inflict on the organization’s reputation if no action is taken” (p. 166). Therefore, as professional sports organizations have a unique and strong connection with their fans, fans being highly engaged in sport, the organization-stakeholders relationship should be protected by sports organizations to limit reputational damage when crises arise (Koerber & Zabara, 2017).

Ultimately the revenues of professional sports leagues and teams depend on sponsorships, advertising, fan attendance, TV rights, merchandising, licensing, and public funding for stadiums

(PwC, 2011; LaGree et al., 2019; Ristoff, 2021). This shows that professional sports organizations rely on an important number of external stakeholders from private companies to governmental authorities to the general public. Consequently, it is crucial for professional sports organizations to communicate clearly and to use the appropriate strategies during a crisis in order to maintain their reputation and credibility, to reassure key stakeholders and to manage their relationships with fans as the survival of their business depends on it.

Sport Crisis Communication Research

The field of crisis communication aims to determine how organizations can effectively communicate in times of crisis to minimize reputational damage (Schafraad & Verhoeven, 2019). Crisis communication is utilized by organizations to strategically respond to a crisis in order to influence stakeholders' perceptions of the crisis and of the organization facing the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Crisis communication is crucial in organizational communication as “no organization is immune from a crisis anywhere in the world even if that organization is vigilant and actively seeks to prevent crises” (Coombs, 2010, p. 17).

The distinctive nature of sport requires crisis communication research to be adapted to the sports industry (Brown-Devlin, 2018). As Coombs (2018) says, “sport is a major global industry, but has some unique contextual factors” (p. 22). Scholars have been researching sports crises for decades. The field of sport crisis communication has examined crisis response of athletes, organizations, sponsors and fans using numerous crisis communication theories (Brown-Devlin, 2018). However, Abeza, O'Reilly and Nadeau (2014) reviewed sport communication research published in academic journals and noted that the field was lacking

“sport-communication-specific theories” (p. 305), thus inviting scholars to keep researching sport communication to develop models and theories tailored to the industry’s specifications.

Harker and Saffer (2018) reviewed sport crisis communication research published in peer-reviewed academic journals from 1990 to 2015 with the objective of identifying which theories were the most often used in sport crisis communication research. Eight prominent theories were identified: image repair theory, framing theory, situational crisis communication theory, critical race theory, critical cultural theory, social identity theory, grounded theory, and feminist theory. The researchers found that image repair theory (IRT), framing theory, and situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) were the central theories in the field of sport crisis communication (Harker & Saffer, 2018). Harker and Saffer (2018) and Billings (2018) argue that SCCT is mostly used to research organizational communication, whereas IRT is mostly used to analyze crises at the individual level. Harker (2019) states that image repair theory is used in self-defence in regard to a crisis and it is structured as a one-way communication model, whereas SCCT offers a more comprehensive model built for practitioners. The SCCT model was developed to manage organizational communications during a crisis, and not simply after reputational damage has been caused (Billings, 2018). Framing theory is used at all levels of analysis as it is a way of understanding how a crisis is framed, and thus to anticipate how a crisis will be perceived by the public and different stakeholders (Karimipour & Hull, 2017).

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is often considered as “the primary theoretical framework” in crisis communication research and it is also a widely used theoretical approach in sport communication studies (Ross Knight et al., 2020, p. 226). Situational crisis communication theory has been empirically tested in the field of crisis communication (Coomb

& Holladay, 1996; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Ma & Zhan, 2016; Schafraad and Verhoeven, 2019; Lim & Brown-Devlin, 2021), and used in numerous sport communication studies (Brown, Brown & Billings, 2015; Richards et al., 2017; DiSanza et al., 2018; Brown-Devlin, 2018; Coombs, 2018). A major strength of the SCCT model is its practical application (Ross Knight et al., 2020). It is an evidence-based model, which serves to “provide proscriptive guidance to crisis managers” (DiSanza et al., 2018, p. 56).

This paper builds on the situational crisis communication theory body of literature to enable comparative analyses with other sport crisis communication research and to provide an exploratory study of a real-life organizational crisis in sport as a foundation for future empirical studies on the topic. Even though some scholars have pointed to some limitations of SCCT when studying paracrises and social media environments (Lim & Brown-Devlin, 2021), this theory has a central role in sport crisis communication research and it has proven to be a reliable framework for crisis communication research focusing on organizational communication (Harker & Saffer, 2018; Schafraad & Verhoeven, 2019).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the Buffering Effect

Overview of Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational crisis communication theory helps decision makers to predict how the organization’s stakeholders may react toward a crisis that is threatening the organization’s reputation by using a situational approach (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007). It assists managers in selecting the appropriate crisis response strategies for the crisis situation at hand in order to protect the organization’s reputation (Coombs, 2007). For Coombs (2007), “crisis response strategies are used to repair the reputation, to reduce negative affect and to prevent

negative behavioral intentions” (p.170). The overarching objective of the framework is to assure the protection of the organization’s reputational assets (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Crisis Situation and Reputational Threat. When facing a crisis, an organization should assess the crisis situation and the reputational threat it poses before taking any actions in order to select the most appropriate crisis response strategies for the crisis at hand (Coombs, 2007). To do so, SCCT stipulates that an organization should determine the crisis type and assess the severity of the crisis. This will help the crisis communication manager to assess the level of responsibility stakeholders will attribute to the organization (Richards et al., 2017). Crisis severity is evaluated based on how much impact (e.g., financial, environmental, human) the crisis had on stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Richards et al., 2017). Of course, when a crisis arises, an organization must first protect all stakeholders from any possible harm before planning their communication efforts to protect the organization’s reputation (Coombs, 2007).

Situational crisis communication theory proposes three broad crisis types: victim, accidental and preventable (Coombs, 2007; Richards et al., 2017). Coombs and Holladay (2002) conceptualize crisis types as “the frame that publics use to interpret the event” (p. 167). A victim crisis type is characterized by low attribution of crisis responsibility to the organization as it is perceived to be a victim of the crisis just as much as its stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). In a crisis deemed accidental, stakeholders can attribute blame to the organization, but the attribution of crisis responsibility remains minimal. Accidental crises are perceived to be unintentional and over which an organization had no control (Coombs, 2007). Facing a preventable crisis, an organization is perceived as being responsible as it had control over the events that caused the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

A key tenet of the theory is that an organization's crisis communication efforts will influence stakeholders' perception of the crisis, and therefore how they will attribute blame for the crisis (Richards et al., 2017). The more crisis responsibility is attributed to the organization, the more damage the crisis will cause to the organization's reputation as stakeholders will tend to feel more negative emotions such as anger toward the brand. Consequently, the more stakeholders hold negative affect toward the organization, the less likely they are to engage with it (Coombs, 2007). In other words, organizational reputation is positively correlated with behavioural intentions (e.g., purchase intentions and organizational support) (Richards et al., 2017). Hence, the protection of reputational assets is crucial for an organization's wellbeing and it should be a priority in crisis communication planning.

Modifying Factors. Coombs (2007) also suggests analyzing modifiers such as crisis history and prior relational reputation. These modifying factors impact how stakeholders attribute blame to an organization. Consequently, modifiers affect organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007). *Crisis history* refers to the crises an organization has faced in the past. *Prior reputation* refers to the relationship, good or bad, the organization has maintained with its stakeholders, how they have been treating them (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Coombs and Holladay (2002) referred to these modifying factors as an organization's performance history. Modifiers can "alter attributions generated by the crisis type" (Richards et al., 2017, p. 616). In fact, stakeholders evaluate an organization's performance history to assess the level of organizational crisis responsibility. A negative evaluation of performance history will lead stakeholders to attribute greater blame to an organization for a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). However, when favourable, performance history can act as a buffer. For example, a

favourable prior reputation can act as a buffer during crisis management as it reduces “reputational capital lost” (Coombs, 2007, p.165).

Crisis Response Strategies. Once an assessment of the crisis situation is conducted, the crisis communication manager can start planning their organization’s crisis response strategies according to the reputational threat they are facing. Crisis response strategies represent how the organization communicates during a crisis, “what management says and does” (Coombs, 2007, p.170). For successful and effective crisis communication management, SCCT states that an organization has to match crisis response strategies to the crisis situation and reputational threat they are facing (Richards et al., 2017). More specifically, the strategies should be matched to the level of crisis responsibility that is attributed to the organization by stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Crisis response strategies are used to diminish stakeholders’ negative affect toward the organization and to minimize reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). SCCT establishes three primary crisis response strategies: to deny, to diminish and to rebuild. The model also proposes specific tactics for each of these crisis response strategies. Strategies are the overarching orientations of an organization’s communication efforts, whereas tactics are more concrete actions put forward in an organization’s day-to-day communication initiatives (Holm, 2006). Tactics can be seen as sub-strategies that support the overarching communication strategies in order to reach an organization’s overall communication objectives (Coombs, 1995). An organization utilizes the *deny strategy* when they affirm they are not involved in a crisis or when they deny the existence of a crisis. Coombs (2007) suggests three tactics that can be used when adopting the deny strategy. The organization can attack the accuser, deny the crisis or use a scapegoat approach by blaming someone outside the organization. An organization utilizes a *diminish strategy* when they are trying to downplay their implication in a crisis. For this strategy,

two tactics can be used. The organization can present excuses for a crisis by minimizing organizational involvement or by demonstrating their lack of control over the events. They can also opt for a justification approach by showing that the consequences caused by a crisis are minimal and unharmed (Coombs, 2007). An organization utilizing a *rebuild strategy* accepts responsibility for a crisis and they take actions to help stakeholders that were affected by that crisis. Consequently, they can compensate the victims and offer an apology for the organization's responsibility in a crisis (Coombs, 2007). A fourth strategy is a *no-response strategy*. Coombs (2007) states that this crisis response strategy should be avoided as an organization implementing this strategy automatically loses control over crisis communication management, allowing other parties to frame the crisis. Organizational silence can also create negative affect amongst stakeholders (Schafraad & Verhoeven, 2019). However, this practice is still used by some organizations, so it is worth noting.

Secondary strategies can be used when choosing any of the three primary approaches. Secondary crisis response strategies are bolstering strategies used in conjunction with the primary strategies to boost the communication efforts and increase the protection of an organization's reputation. They should not be used as standalone strategies as they "offer minimal opportunity to develop reputational assets" (Coombs, 2007, p.172). Coombs (2007) suggests three bolstering strategies: reminder, ingratiation and victimage. Using a *reminder strategy*, the organization reminds stakeholders of all the good the organization has done and continues to do. An *ingratiation strategy* entails to praise stakeholders by acknowledging the impacts a crisis had on them. A *victimage strategy* is used to remind stakeholders that the organization is also a victim of an ongoing crisis (Coombs, 2007).

These strategies are built on a continuum from defensive to accommodating crisis response strategies. A defensive strategy focuses on the organization, whereas an accommodative strategy focuses on stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). As Coombs and Holladay (2006) state, “as the reputational threat increases, crisis managers must use strategies that are more accommodative” (p. 134). Therefore, to maximize the effectiveness of the strategy, an organization should follow the crisis response strategy continuum according to the perceived level of crisis responsibility (e.g., a high level of blame attribution requires more accommodative strategies) (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Richards et al., 2017).

Situational crisis communication theory was devised for practitioners, providing crisis communication managers with a model to guide their organizational communication efforts during crises. Ross Knight et al. (2020) reviewed the application of SCCT in sport crisis communication and they proposed a visual step-by-step model and a decisional flowchart of the theory, adapting it to a prescriptive model for sport communication practitioners (see appendix 1 for the step-by-step visual and appendix 2 for the decisional flowchart).

Buffering Effect

Coombs introduced the notion of buffers, what he also referred to as “modifying factors”, in his theory of situational crisis communication (Coombs, 2007). However, more research has been conducted to deepen the understanding of buffers and their role in crisis communication. Buffers constitute pre-existing conditions on which an organization can capitalize to diminish the impact of a crisis on corporate reputation (Koerber & Zabara, 2017). Buffers influence stakeholders’ opinion of an organization’s crisis responses, prompting them to view a crisis less negatively and to be more accepting of the organization’s responses to a crisis (Lim & Brown-

Devlin, 2021). According to Coombs (2007), the less buffers an organization possesses, the more stakeholders will tend to attribute blame to the organization for a given crisis. For Sohn and Lariscy (2015), the buffering effect can be explained through cognitive dissonance theory. Stakeholders will be motivated to maintain their existing beliefs about an organization and to reduce cognitive dissonance when confronted with information contradicting their views of the organization. Consequently, referring to the concept of confirmatory bias, stakeholders will tend to ignore contradictory information and tend to pay attention to news that confirm their existing beliefs and expectations of an organization.

Crisis History and Prior Relationship Reputation. As detailed earlier, Coombs identifies two main buffers: crisis history and prior relationship reputation. *Crisis history* refers to the crises an organization has faced in the past. The absence of a crisis history will favour an organization during a crisis as it will reduce blame attribution, thus minimizing reputational damage (Koerber & Zabara, 2017). *Prior relationship reputation* refers to the relationship an organization has been maintaining with its stakeholders, how they have been treating them (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). For Coombs and Holladay (2006), positive organization-stakeholders “interactions build favorable reputations while unpleasant interactions lead to unfavorable reputations” (p.124). Consequently, an organization with a highly favourable prior reputation “suffers less and rebounds more quickly after a crisis” (Coombs & Holladay, 2006, p.124). Coombs and Holladay (2006) also found that a negative prior reputation will cause more reputational damage to an organization than a positive or neutral reputation. In the same vein, Jonkman et al. (2019) also found evidence that an organization’s positive prior reputation can act as a buffer during a crisis to limit reputational damage.

Corporate Social Responsibility Reputation. A contributing factor in the development of a positive corporate reputation is corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives also referred to as corporate social responsibility reputation (Kim & Lee, 2015; Kim & Woo Wan, 2018).

Corporate social responsibility is “an approach to business that embodies transparency and ethical behavior, respect for stakeholder groups and a commitment to add economic, social and environmental value” (Sustainability, 2004, p.4, as cited in Kim & Wan Woo, 2018, p. 23). CSR reputation also includes stakeholders’ evaluation of organizational performance and CSR activities in the “areas of citizenship, governance and workplace” (Kim and Wan Woo, 2018, p. 24).

CSR activities can act as a “critical source of strategic communications”, as CSR initiatives contribute to enhancing an organization’s brand image (Kim & Lee, 2015, p. 278). Kim and Lee (2015) and Kim and Wan Woo (2018) found empirical evidence that CSR activities can have a buffering effect and act as a shield protecting corporate reputation during a crisis. Therefore, corporate social responsibility is an integral part of corporate reputation (Kim & Wan Woo, 2018). CSR reputation can yield a buffering effect when an organization proactively engages in CSR activities. The buffering effect occurs due to an organization’s history of ethical conduct and community involvement (Kim & Wan Woo, 2018). However, engaging in CSR activities solely as a crisis response strategy risks to create negative reactions as stakeholders will perceive the organization’s initiatives as self-serving and opportunistic (Kim & Lee, 2015).

Boomerang Effect. Sohn and Lariscy (2015) note that some factors such as prior reputation and CSR initiatives can also have a *boomerang effect* on an organization depending on stakeholders’ perceptions and expectations. A boomerang effect means that a buffering factor could also “backfire and inflict even more severe damage” to an organization in times of crisis

(Sohn & Lariscy, 2015, p. 238). The reasoning behind the boomerang effect can be explained through expectancy violations (EV) theory. According to EV theory, stakeholders will hold higher expectations of an organization that has a positive prior reputation and multiple CSR initiatives, and will therefore hold them to higher standards. Consequently, an organization that has a positive prior reputation and a favourable CSR reputation could be judged more severely during a crisis because it violated stakeholders' higher expectations of the organization (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015; Kim & Lee, 2015). The boomerang effect occurs more often when organizations are facing morality issues, whereas the buffering effect comes more into play when organizations are facing performance issues (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015).

Sport-specific Buffers. According to Coombs (2018), the sports industry “has some unique contextual factors that seem to affect the selection and effectiveness of crisis response strategies” (p. 22). Therefore, Koerber & Zabara (2017) propose two other buffers that are more distinct to sport crisis communication: sports fan communities and political economy. Sports fan communities refer to how fans identify with an organization, engage and develop a bond with it. Political economy refers to existing monopolies in professional sport (Koerber & Zabara, 2017).

Sports Fan Communities. Professional sports organizations create two “communicative bonds”, meaning fans have not only a relationship with the organization but also with other fans (Koerber & Zabara, 2017, p. 197). Fans develop a bond with professional sports organizations and fellow supporters due to what Koerber and Zabara (2017) call communal spectatorship. As sport brings people together and represents a shared live experience, fans tend to become personally and emotionally involved leading them to be more engaged and committed to the brand (Koerber & Zabara, 2017).

Fan identification is also a key component of sports fan communities. Fan identification can be explained through social identity theory as a sports team becomes “part of the fan’s identity” (Coombs, 2018, p.18). Professional sports organizations’ high public exposure enables fans to connect with each other, allowing them to build meaningful ties in the sports community. This directly influences one’s identity and sense of belonging, and it strengthens their loyalty toward their beloved sports teams (Koerber & Zabara, 2017; Harker, 2019; Lim & Brown-Devlin, 2021). Harker (2019) defines this connectedness and identification to sport as a “continuum from the psychology of self at the individual level to the sociological shared identity with other fans at the group or social level” (p.175). Lin and Brown-Devlin (2021) suggest that brand fans can act as buffers when used as a “credible crisis communication source” (p.2) due to their strong identification with the sports organization. In addition, stakeholders who hold “emotional or proximal perceived connections” with an organization will tend to perceive crises involving the entity less negatively, and they are more likely to support the organization (Harker, 2019, p.174; Koerber & Zabara, 2017). The buffer of brand communities has also been empirically supported by the studies of Harker (2019), Ma (2020) and Lim and Brown-Devlin (2021).

Professional sports organizations recognize this power of sports fan communities. They invest a lot of time and money in developing unique communities for their teams, connecting and uniting fans, what Koerber and Zabara (2017) call nation-building. As each fan engages differently with an organization, some being more involved than others, this buffer does not have the same impact on an organization’s entire fan base. However, as Ristoff (2021) says about sports organizations, “demand from [their] most passionate fans is relatively inelastic” (p.26).

Political Economy. It is firmly established in the literature that professional sports leagues profit from an unregulated monopoly status in North America. Professional sports leagues being the highest level of “professional competition” in their “respective sport”, fans’ only alternatives are lower-level leagues (Grow, 2015, p.575). Thus, when a fan’s preferred team faces a crisis, fans have limited options if they wish to keep following their favourite sport; this is accentuated by geographical restrictions and broadcasting agreements. Teams within the same league are usually geographically far away from each other as sports leagues have been restricting team expansions, thus creating an “artificial shortage of teams” (Grow, 2015, p.576). Consequently, fans choosing to support a team outside of their home city will have a difficult time to attend games and to build a sense of community with fellow supporters (Koerber & Zabara, 2017). Game broadcasts are also highly controlled by sports leagues as they usually sign nation-wide broadcasting agreements for the entire league. Consequently, fans are sometimes unable to watch their preferred team on TV due to geographic “anticompetitive blackout rules imposed by the leagues” through their broadcasting deals (i.e., either the broadcasts are unavailable, or games are broadcasted across a multitude of channels making subscription fees expensive) (Grow, 2015, p.577). This monopoly-like status favours professional sports leagues in North America as they “hold a dominant market position that buffers them against the consequences of a crisis” (Koerber & Zabara, 2017, p.198).

Koerber and Zabara (2017) explain the concept of buffers as factors that come “between an organization and its stakeholders in times of crises – a mediator of sorts” (p.194), complexifying the crisis communication process. Therefore, when applying situational crisis communication theory, it is crucial to also analyze the buffers that are influencing the crisis situation and stakeholders’ perceptions in order to select the most appropriate crisis response strategies

(Koerber & Zabara, 2017; Harker, 2019). An organization should not generate buffers as a crisis response when crises arise. Buffers should be planned and developed in advance to prevent crises and reputational damage (Koerber & Zabara, 2017).

The National Football League's Concussion Crisis

The National Football League's concussion crisis is one of the most prominent crises in professional sport. It has received tremendous attention from the media, governmental authorities and the public for more than two decades (Ellenbogen, Berger & Batjer, 2010). The concussion crisis is an ongoing and dynamic crisis that has been unfolding and evolving since 1994 (LaGree, Wilbur & Cameron, 2019). It started in the mid-90s when the League noticed that some players were retiring prematurely due to what they referred to as "postconcussion syndrome" (Simpson-Wood & Wood, 2018, p.28). Consequently, the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Committee was created in 1994 to study that trend. However, concussions became a salient issue in professional football when a pathologist discovered a new disease, Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, in 2002 during the autopsy of NFL Hall of Famer Mike Webster.

Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) is defined as a "progressive neurodegenerative disease that occurs in association with repetitive concussions" (Wilbur & Myers, 2016, p.182). CTE is a severe disease that can lead to memory loss, dementia, speech impairment, paranoia, aggression, parkinsonism and suicidal thoughts and behaviour (Simpson-Wood & Wood, 2018; LaGree, Wilbur & Cameron, 2019). Even though CTE is not restricted to professional football as it has been diagnosed in former athletes who practiced other contact sports and soldiers (Wilbur & Myers, 2016), the disease became associated with football after 177 deceased players from all levels of the sport were found to have suffered from this neurodegenerative disease as of 2017 (Simpson-Wood & Wood, 2018, p.29). Out of all deceased professional football players who

were examined, 99% of them were found to have suffered from CTE (Simpson-Wood & Wood, 2018, p.30). The first research discussing this medical discovery was published in 2005 by the pathologist who discovered the disease (Simpson-Wood & Wood, 2018).

Unfolding into a complex public health issue, the concussion crisis attracted governmental attention in 2009 when the United States Congress held a special hearing on the concussion crisis in football during which scientific, medical experts and NFL officials testified on the relation between football and brain injuries (Simpson-Wood & Wood, 2018).

After numerous studies relating the concussion crisis and the consequences of CTE for football had been published and reported by the media, more than 4,500 retired NFL players decided to sue the League in 2011 for long-term bodily injuries and mental health problems caused by repeated concussions they had suffered while playing professional football (Wilbur & Myers, 2016; LaGree et al., 2019). The NFL settled the class-action lawsuit in 2013 for \$765 million (Mirer & Mederson, 2017). After further legal procedures, the lawsuit was ultimately settled in 2015 for approximately \$1 billion without any admission of wrongdoing from the NFL (Benson, 2017; Simpson-Wood & Wood, 2018).

During that time, ESPN journalists published a book titled *League of Denial* in 2013, and PBS produced it as a documentary (Karimipour & Hull, 2017). These portrayed how numerous scientific and medical experts discovered the new disease, CTE, in deceased professional players. They also recounted how the NFL denied the concussion problems and was accused to dispute, even conceal, scientific evidence about brain injuries since 1994 (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013; Mirer & Mederson, 2017). In 2015, the book was the inspiration of a Hollywood film titled *Concussion*, which reached a wider audience making the issue of concussions in contact sports part of the mainstream conversation in football (Mirer & Mederson, 2017; LaGree

et al., 2019). According to Wilbur and Myers (2016), the release of the movie *Concussion* was a “crisis tipping point in a serious long-term conflict” (p.181).

The Concussion Crisis: A Communication Nightmare

The NFL holds a unique place in the sports market. Football is often considered as America’s pastime and an integral part of the American culture (Karimipour & Hull, 2017). In the United States, football is “the most popular spectator sport” (Ristoff, 2021, p.17). The Super Bowl, the NFL yearly end-of-season tournament, has even become the “most watched event in the United States” (Ristoff, 2021, p.17). However, the League is still not immune to organizational crises.

The NFL has faced numerous highly publicized crises throughout its existence from domestic violence scandals to racial issues such as the National Anthem protests (LaGree, Wilbur & Cameron, 2019; Harker, 2019). Harker (2019) investigated four main NFL crises: domestic assaults, National Anthem protests, concussions and cheating scandals, and found that NFL stakeholders blamed athletes most for the crises, followed by the League. Teams were less often blamed (Harker, 2019). Somehow, the League has been surviving them all. However, the concussion crisis is a severe crisis that had and continues to have negative outcomes on the NFL, the sport of football, and other contact sports. This crisis poses various potential consequences for the League, such as financial losses due to a decrease in fan attendance, sponsorships and broadcasting deals. With the objective of reaching annual revenues worth \$25 billion by 2027 (Belzer, 2016), the National Football League depends on these revenue streams. In 2021, the NFL signed a new 11-year broadcasting agreement worth \$110 billion with media giants CBS,

NBC, FOX, ESPN and Amazon (Ristoff, 2021, p.12), which underscores the power and dominance of the League in the sports industry but also its dependence on its corporate partners.

The deterioration of players' health and safety is also a big issue. Professional football players are leaving the sport early due to their health. Navarro and colleagues (2017) found that players who suffered from concussions had shorter careers and were released by their team earlier than non-concussed players. Some promising players also left the sport early as they feared for their long-term health (Mিরer & Mederson, 2017).

A decrease in the number of children playing organized football is also a serious threat to the National Football League (Mিরer & Mederson, 2017; LaGree et al., 2019). In recent years, high school football participation has been declining (Mিরer & Mederson, 2017). As Mিরer and Mederson (2017) say, “[d]ocumentaries like *League of Denial* and the decline of football participation suggest that media messages about the danger of the sport are reaching the public at large” (p.39). This is an important issue for the NFL as a decline in youth participation impedes the development and recruitment of the next generation of players. It also hinders the recruitment of fans. A child practicing football gets all the family involved (Mিরer & Mederson, 2017). Also, when one practices a sport, they tend to be more interested to follow that sport at the professional level (Ristoff, 2021). As reported in the *New York Times*, professional leagues “need vibrant youth leagues to ensure . . . a stream of talented players and grow the devoted fan base” (Belson, 2015, as cited in Benson, 2017, p.308).

Throughout the years, the League took numerous courses of action to respond to the concussion crisis. Benson (2017) classifies the League's CSR initiatives through the concussion crisis into three categories: harm reduction, public relations and philanthropy. Amongst other initiatives, the NFL adopted new rules to reduce head injuries and increase game safety, they

reviewed the League's concussion protocol, they funded research on concussion, they invested in research and development to create safer equipment and they increased their prevention efforts regarding head trauma at all levels of the game (Benson, 2017; Mirer & Mederson, 2017; LaGree, Wilbur & Cameron, 2019). Even though the NFL participates in many diverse CSR activities, their authenticity has often been questioned (Benson, 2017).

Confronted with the concussion crisis, the NFL is not just fighting for its reputation but for the perennity of the League and the sport of football. Consequently, the League's communication efforts are of utmost importance to maintain its reputation and credibility, but also to manage its relationships with its key stakeholders such as players, corporate partners and fans as the survival of its business depends on it.

Research Questions

The unique nature of the NFL's concussion crisis makes it of utmost interest for academic research in the field of sport crisis communication. With increasing and irrefutable scientific evidence of CTE in contact sports, the case of the concussion crisis will remain of high significance for the field of sport communication for many years to come. As long as contact sports will exist, the crisis is likely to persist and to affect all sports organizations that are overseeing a contact sport. As it pertains to the National Football League, as long as the game will remain as it is, the concussion crisis will continue to pose a serious operational and reputational threat for the League.

Much research has been conducted on the concussion crisis and crises in the NFL in the field of sport crisis communication, some mobilizing Coombs' situational crisis communication theory (Richards et al., 2017; Harker, 2019). However, most focused on fans' responses and the

consequences on organizational reputation (Wilbur & Myers, 2016; Karimipour & Hull, 2017; Mirer & Mederson, 2017; Schafraad & Verhoeven, 2019; Harker, 2019). Fewer studies have researched communication strategies used by the League, especially how the NFL might have leveraged different types of buffers in their communications when facing a crisis (Richards et al., 2017; Koerber & Zabara, 2017). As Benson (2017) states about the concussion crisis, “academic inquiry into the National Football League’s (NFL) strategies for containing critique and shaping public discourse remains limited” (p.307). In 2017, Koerber and Zabara published their study on the impact of buffers in organized sports stating that the notion of buffers has been understudied so far in sport crisis communication research even though the buffering effect has been researched for many years in the general field of crisis communication (Kim & Lee, 2015; Sohn & Lariscy, 2015; Kim & Wan Woo, 2018; Jonkman et al., 2019; Lim & Brown-Devlin, 2021). One of this study’s primary objectives is to determine if the National Football League leveraged existing buffers to diminish the impact of the concussion crisis on the League’s reputation and operations. To do so, one must first analyze what crisis communications strategies were mobilized by the League.

In the early years of the crisis, the League denied the concussion crisis as it was explicitly demonstrated in the PBS documentary and the book *League of Denial* (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). However, with increasing and highly publicized scientific evidence on the impact of concussions in football, the League ultimately had to recognize the issue and face it as it could not dispute the crisis anymore. Therefore, the objective of this research is to determine what communication strategies the League decided to implement to handle the concussion crisis in the past five years, from 2015-2020.

This leads to the following two research questions:

RQ1: What crisis response strategies were used by the National Football League in their external communications to manage the concussion crisis from 2015 to 2020?

RQ2: Did buffers play a role in the crisis response strategies used by the National Football League in their external communications to manage the concussion crisis from 2015 to 2020?

Chapter 3: Methodology

This qualitative exploratory research utilized a case study method to investigate the National Football League's concussion crisis, with a particular focus on how the NFL managed the crisis through its external communications between 2015 and 2020. More specifically, this study is an exploration of the crisis response strategies used by the NFL to address fans and media concerns about the deleterious effects of concussions in professional football.

Exploration in the social sciences can be understood as “a broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking designed to maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to description and understanding of an area of social or psychological life” (Vogt, 1999, p.105, as cited in Stebbins, 2001, p.3). In other words, exploration is undertaken to create a rich description of a distinct phenomenon and to produce generalizations about the group or process under study (Stebbins, 2001; Lowes & Awde, 2015). As Reiter (2013) explains it, exploratory research “refers to the very domain of what can be detected, described, and explained” (p.11).

As noted above, a case study method was chosen to conduct this research. A case study is “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (Stake, 1995, p.xi). Case studies can be used to “describe an intervention and the real-life context in which it occurs” (Yin, 2009, p.20). This method is often used to increase the understanding of a particular event and to provide a detailed description of

the situation under study (MacNealy, 1997, p.183). Case studies are a method of choice when a researcher has no control over the studied contemporary event (Yin, 2009, p.2). Case studies are frequently used in risk and crisis research as they can be used in numerous instances to contribute to the knowledge of individual, organizational, social, and related phenomena (Yin, 2009, p.4). Case studies are used in risk and crisis research to provide insight into the specific courses of action that are taken by an entity during a crisis. They can also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of theoretical frameworks by testing them against real-life crises (Walton & Williams, 2011, p.111). Numerous researchers also argue for the use of case studies in organizational communication research as it enables to connect academia and praxis by providing practitioners with more “strategic input into business decisions” (Stacks & Michaelson, 2010, p.52).

The conceptual approach taken for this study is motivated by an overarching concern to explore the NFL’s crisis communication efforts during the concussion crisis. As little is known about how the League changed its crisis communication strategies since it was recognized to have denied the concussion crisis for decades, a qualitative-explorative case study was chosen for this research endeavour. As Stebbins (2001) explains it, “researchers explore when they have little or no scientific knowledge about the group, process, activity, or situation they want to examine” (p.5). For this study, no attempt was made to empirically assess or measure the effectiveness of the strategies used by the NFL. Rather, the study’s objective is to explore and describe the strategies and buffers that were used by the League since 2015 to address the concussion crisis. This is a very important distinction.

Data Collection

As the objective of this research is to determine how the NFL communicated about concussions and the associated health and safety issues in its external communications, all documentary evidence was directly retrieved from the NFL's communications website (www.nflcommunications.com) from July 2021 to August 2021. All documents included in the data set were published by the NFL between 2015 and 2020. News articles interviewing or citing League officials were excluded from this study to avoid the subjectivity of a third party in the reporting and framing of the NFL's responses. Social media were also excluded from this study as the NFL mainly uses social media for status updates on teams and players, and to post pictures and videos of game highlights (Wallace-McRee & Lee, 2016). This is also supported by Wilbur & Myers (2016) who point to the NFL's "no comment policy" on social media.

The search intended to retrieve documents that covered the issue of concussions between the 2015 season and the 2020 season. Consequently, data were retrieved by typing the keyword *concussion* in the built-in search box located on the homepage of the NFL's communications website. This resulted in 228 results. Once an entry is processed through the search box, the website enables users to consult the publications corresponding to the search for each individual season. The keyword *concussion* yielded 7 results for the 2015 season, 15 for 2016, 22 for 2017, 7 for 2018, 62 for 2019, and 104 for 2020.

The publications were then selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique used when a researcher deliberately chooses to include pieces of data due their specific characteristics (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). Purposive sampling was used in this study to select the publications that would bring the most relevant information to inform the analysis and to answer the two research questions. Therefore, to be

selected, the publications had to (1) be written between 2015 and 2020, and (2) had to explicitly discuss the issue of concussions in the National Football League.

After purposively sampling all publications, a total of 25 documents were retained for analysis. The final data set was composed of 7 transcripts of press conferences, one transcript of a radio interview and 17 press releases (1 publication in 2015, 7 in 2016, 7 in 2017, 1 in 2018, 7 in 2019, 2 in 2020). Over the years, the NFL started publishing weekly injury reports, thereby increasing the number of publications mentioning concussions. However, injury reports were not discussing the issue of concussions in professional football and were therefore excluded from the data set, explaining why the number of sampled publications were similar from 2015 to 2020.

Data Analysis

To explore the crisis strategies used by the NFL, a thematic analysis of the League's external communications was conducted. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research tool used to conduct data analysis. It is used to uncover themes and patterns of meaning across a set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.86). Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79) define thematic analysis as a tool to identify, analyze and report themes within data. In this manner, thematic analysis serves to organize and describe a data set in detail.

In this research, thematic analysis is employed to provide a detailed portrait of a particular group of themes within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.83). In this instance, the group of themes are the crisis response strategies and buffers used by the NFL to discuss the issue of concussions in professional football. With this thematic framework in place, the objective is to provide an in-depth analysis not of the overall data set, but specifically of how the National Football League has approached the concussion crisis in its external communications.

Numerous scholars applying their field of research to sports have also used thematic analysis. Amongst other studies, thematic analysis was used to study team resilience in elite sport (Morgan, Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), to research how the media portrayed the career of world champion boxers (Bonhomme et al., 2020), to determine the relationship between university sports participation and alcohol consumption (Zhou & Heim, 2016), and to assess FIFA's attempt at image repair throughout their corruption crisis (Onwumechili & Bedeau, 2017).

Thematic analysis was chosen for this study due to the flexibility of this research tool. Thematic analysis can be used in a flexible way as it is compatible with various research paradigms and theoretical approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As Reiter (2013) argues, "a pure exploration that starts from scratch is impossible" (p.4). Theory allows to "simplify, isolate, and focus on particular aspects of a reality that, taken as a whole, is far too complex and contingent to be captured and explained" (Reiter, 2013, p.2). Reiter goes on to suggest that the only option we have as researchers is then to "explicate our theoretical framework and take them into consideration" (Reiter, 2013, p.9). In a similar vein, Zhou and Heim (2016) also observe that thematic analysis "allows prior theories and deductive research aims to guide analysis, rather than relying solely on the data collected" (p.584). This study, in its design and execution, follows this approach and tests the core theoretical concepts of situational crisis communication theory and the buffering effect against the case of the National Football League's concussion crisis.

Braun and Clarke (2006) also note that the flexibility of thematic analysis comes from the absence of a specific, constrained methodology when using this analytical tool. However, in the objective of creating a reliable methodological framework when using thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) created a six-step process. They note that qualitative analysis guidelines are not rules, and a researcher has to adopt a flexible approach to methodology in order to remain

coherent with their study's research questions and data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.86).

Researchers using this thematic analysis should therefore (1) familiarize themselves with the data, (2) generate codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review themes, (5) define and name themes and (6) produce a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87). This methodology was followed in this paper.

Step one requires the researchers to familiarize themselves with the data. All documents comprised in the data set were carefully read twice. Through the first reading, all text that was capturing meaningful descriptions of how the League discussed the issue of concussions were highlighted (Zhou & Heim, 2016, p.584). The second reading was intertwined with step two of Braun and Clarke's process, which requires to generate codes.

Braun and Clarke (2006) define coding as identifying features of the data that appears interesting to the researcher (p.88), while Boyatzis (1998) defines codes as "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (p.63). The goal of generating codes is to provide "rich descriptions of the data in an organized and meaningful way" (Onwumechili & Bedeau, 2017, p.416). Through the second reading of the data set, relevant excerpts were summarized in short phrases, representing codes. The relevancy of the excerpts was determined in accordance with the research objectives. In other words, the information was deemed relevant if it could contribute to answering the study's two research questions.

Step three to five require searching for themes through the coded data, reviewing and defining them. "A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). This study identified themes differently as a deductive theoretical

approach to thematic analysis was used. Consequently, the analysis was driven by the core theoretical concepts of situational crisis communication theory and the buffering effect. The themes were determined based on the body of literature on SCCT and the buffering effect, which was thoroughly explored in Chapter 2 of this study (see appendix 3 for the definition of each theme and sub-theme). A miscellaneous category was also added to account for any incongruous piece of evidence that would not fit in the pre-determined themes as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Zhou & Heim (2016). The analysis then started by creating a thematic map of the pre-determined themes and sub-themes. The initial thematic map can be found in appendix 4. The codes generated throughout the analysis of the documentation were then analyzed and classified in the pre-determined thematic map. After a thorough analysis and classification of the coded data, the initial thematic map was reviewed to represent the core themes, sub-themes and any other identified concepts from the data set. The final thematic map can be found in appendix 5.

Limitations

This study was conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the obtention of a Master of Arts in Organizational Communication. Consequently, some specific guidelines had to be respected.

This paper is not a critical assessment of the NFL's crisis response strategies. Rather, this study aimed to determine what crisis response strategies were used and to explore what the League was doing in terms of crisis communication. Further research is required to assess the effectiveness of their strategies and their ethical implications, which have been of much debate (Benson, 2017). For the purpose of this study, only the organization's *responses* are considered,

thus omitting fans and stakeholders' responses and their perception of the crisis. This reiterates the limited scope of this paper as it does not assess the success level of the crisis response strategies employed by the NFL. This is due to time constraints to conduct fan interviews and the difficulty to conduct stakeholder interviews (i.e., not easily reachable and available).

It is also important to note that not all crisis responses will follow a theory as crises are complex phenomena. Therefore, there are multiple factors that were not explored in this study but that organizations have to face and take into account such as legal obligations, player and sponsor contracts, League protocols, governmental influence and availability of resources (Ross Knight et al., 2020).

Finally, this study looks only at the NFL's concussion crisis from 2015 to 2020 and is based on a small dataset as this paper used an exploratory research design. Therefore, the application is limited and not representative of all sport crises. Further empirical research on past crises in professional sport is required to conduct comparative analyses and to determine common practices in sport crisis communication.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the results of the analysis and discusses their implications. More specifically, this section presents the crisis response strategies and the buffers that were identified in the NFL's external communications to manage the concussion crisis between 2015 and 2020 through a deductive thematic analysis. In total, the analysis included 25 documents retrieved from nflcommunications.com: 7 transcripts of press conferences, one transcript of a radio interview and 17 press releases. This section also provides excerpts from the collection of texts studied as supportive evidence of the presented analysis.

Research Question 1

The first research question aimed to identify what crisis response strategies were used by the National Football League in its external communications to manage the concussion crisis from 2015 to 2020.

RQ1: What crisis response strategies were used by the National Football League in its external communications to manage the concussion crisis from 2015 to 2020?

The theoretical framework of situational crisis communication theory guided the thematic analysis for the first research question, leading to the identification of two overarching themes: (1) rebuilding and (2) diminishing, and six sub-themes: (a) compensation, (b) organizational change, (c) shared responsibility, (d) attack the accuser, (e) reminder and (f) ingratiation. A thematic map is presented in appendix 5.

Themes and sub-themes described the crisis response strategies and tactics respectively that were used by the NFL in its communications to respond to the concussion crisis, as portrayed on nflcommunications.com. The following section presents the results of this analysis, providing excerpts from the collection of texts studied as supportive evidence.

The League primarily used a rebuilding strategy as a primary response strategy, with the tactics of compensation and organizational change. As described in detail in Chapter 2, an organization utilizing a rebuild strategy takes actions to help stakeholders that were affected by the crisis. The NFL also adopted a form of diminish strategy by sharing crisis responsibility with various stakeholders. As described in detail in Chapter 2, an organization utilizes a diminish strategy when they are trying to downplay their implication in a crisis. On two occasions, the League used an “attack the accuser” tactic, however without any intent to implement a deny strategy or to deny the crisis as an empirical fact.

Finally, the League used two secondary crisis response strategies: reminder and ingratiation. Most of the identified crisis response strategies were deductively determined in accordance with situational crisis communication theory, whereas two tactics (i.e., organizational change and shared responsibility) were inductively identified throughout the analysis.

Even though a deductive approach to thematic analysis was used, these two emerging sub-themes (i.e., organizational change and shared responsibility) were not left ignored. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explain it, “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question” (p.82). Every piece of evidence relevant to the study’s objective of identifying the NFL’s communication strategies had to be accounted for even if it did not fit with the initial thematic map, which was pre-determined according to the theoretical framework of SCCT.

It is important to remember that this research is following a specific theoretical framework in its analysis. However, it is unlikely that the National Football League followed the same theoretical framework to plan its crisis communications. Consequently, as a researcher, it is crucial to remain open-minded when conducting exploratory research in order to capture all information relevant to the research objectives.

Rebuilding

The primary crisis response strategy used by the NFL is a rebuild strategy. The League is taking actions to help stakeholders that were and are affected by the crisis, in this case players, and try to remedy to the situation. Even though the League is taking actions to remedy to the concussion crisis, it does not seem to accept responsibility for it. However, the NFL recognizes

the importance and gravity of concussions in sports and the League is pledging to make the game of football in particular safer:

The NFL has the unique opportunity to be a leader in health and safety and as we make advances they will be shared with our players, the broader sports community, the medical world and the public at large. (NFL Communications, 2017d, p.1)

The NFL's overall crisis communication strategy is focused on the topic of player health and safety. In 2016, the League organized its health and safety initiatives under four pillars, which it communicated in a press release. The four pillars are to protect players, to advance technology, to conduct medical research and to share progress and acquired knowledge (NFL Communications, 2016b). The NFL's rebuilding strategy from the concussion crisis also seems to be based on these four pillars as they constitute the core subject matter of the League's external communications.

In its publications, the NFL is communicating all its initiatives to reduce concussions in football to the fans and the media in an effort to prove that the League is taking serious actions to protect and help players. The NFL implemented a concussion reduction plan in 2018, which aims to educate player and team staff about concussions, to revise game rules and to design better performing helmets. The League also heavily finances research by putting "the dollars where the scientific community can best use them" in order to take major decisions out of medical considerations (NFL Communications, 2020a, p.14). As the NFL announced in 2016:

The new, long-term commitment builds on progress the NFL—working with all 32 clubs and the NFL Players Association—has made in recent years to improve health and safety.

The NFL has made 42 rule changes since 2002 to protect players, improve practice

methods, better educated players and personnel on concussions, and strengthen our medical protocols. (NFL Communications, 2016b, p.2)

To promote its concussion reduction efforts, the League puts forward two initiatives in its communications: the *Engineering Roadmap* and the *Play Smart. Play Safe* programs. These programs were created before the implementation of the concussion reduction plan, but they are still put forward in the communications regarding the injury reduction plan. These programs aim to propel innovation in protective gear design and to finance independent scientific and medical research, all to reduce concussions in football. In September 2016, NFL Commissioner Goodell announced the launch of Play Smart. Play Safe., a League-wide health and safety initiative designed with the stated intent to “drive progress in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of head injuries, enhance medical protocols and procedures, and further improve the way the game is taught and played at all levels”:

Of the \$100 million Play Smart. Play Safe. commitment, the League pledged \$60 million to the Engineering Roadmap—an effort to improve the understanding of the biomechanics of head injuries in professional football and to create incentives for small businesses, entrepreneurs, innovators and helmet manufacturers to develop new protective equipment—with \$40 million of the total funding commitment allocated for medical research, primarily dedicated to neuroscience. (NFL Communications, 2017d, p.1)

This excerpt showcases that the NFL is taking serious actions to reduce concussions in football through major investments the League is making to support scientific and medical research focusing on head injuries in sport in an effort to improve the game, to make it safer and to protect players.

The NFL utilized two main rebuilding tactics: compensation and organizational change. As explored in more detail below, compensation was a pre-determined sub-theme in accordance with situational crisis communication theory, whereas organizational change was inductively identified over the course of data analysis.

Compensation. Employing a rebuilding strategy, the NFL decided to implement a compensation tactic to show that the League cares about its players and that it is helping them throughout this crisis. Therefore, the League communicates how it is compensating players that were, are and will be affected by the concussion crisis. One way the NFL is compensating players is by providing them state-of-the-art medical care:

With our partners at the NFLPA, we work to ensure players receive unparalleled medical care and that our policies and protocols are informed by the most up-to-date scientific and medical consensus. (NFL Communications, 2017f, p.1)

The other way the NFL is compensating players is by offering financial compensations, which the League was obliged to provide after a legal settlement:

[W]e provide a host of benefit programs which, together with the proposed settlement of our players' concussion litigation, will ensure that our retired players are properly cared for in the future. Contact sports will never be concussion-free, but we are dedicated to caring for our players, not just throughout long careers but over the course of long lives. (NFL Communications, 2016e, p.2)

The League is cognizant that concussions will most likely always remain part of the sport. Therefore, it is using a compensation tactic to help players that are affected by concussions

as, regardless of all the efforts it is putting forward to decrease concussions in professional football, the NFL knows that players will continue to suffer from them.

This tactic was not used often throughout the League's communications. This tactic was mostly used in conjunction with the secondary crisis response strategy of reminding stakeholders of what all the League has been doing to help players that are affected by concussions.

Organizational Change. As noted above, organizational change is not part of situational crisis communication theory. However, it is an integral part of the NFL's rebuilding strategy and was thus identified as a sub-theme. Rebuilding means to take actions to help stakeholders that are affected by the crisis. The League emphasizes that organizational change is crucial to remedy to the concussion crisis. The NFL is using the communication tactic of organizational change to showcase that the League is moving forward by changing its approach toward concussions and taking concrete actions to improve the health and safety of its players as illustrated by the following excerpts:

[W]e still have more to do. We're not finished. We're going to continue to make progress here. Our eyes are forward trying to make sure that we continue to make this game safer and evolve the game in a way that we're all going to be proud. (NFL Communications, 2015, p.3)

The NFL has been a leader on health and safety in many ways, and we've made some real strides in recent years," Commissioner Goodell wrote in an open letter to fans. "But when it comes to addressing head injuries in our game, I'm not satisfied, and neither are the

owners of the NFL's 32 clubs. We can and will do better. (NFL Communications, 2016b, p.1)

The NFL states repeatedly in its communications that it wishes to be the initiator of transformational change in football. The NFL is working on changing the culture of the organization, which it already sees changing, in regard to concussions in football, especially how players and team staff deal with them. This change is planned to be achieved through the League's efforts to educate players and staff about the serious nature of concussion injuries, and by its intent to enforce new rules to protect the head and to ban inadequate protective equipment and training techniques. The following excerpts show that the League is confident that its organizational culture will keep evolving along these lines over the years to come:

[T]here has to be a huge change in culture that's occurred in the past three years. They [the players] really are much more aware of and interested in their safety than they ever were. (NFL Communications, 2017a, p.5)

They [head coaches] wanted more, they wanted to show the data to their players, they wanted to show it to their coaching staffs. So, I think it is a testament to the culture change of how the rule changes and the techniques and the teaching of football is now being driven out of this data and out of the medical considerations. That is true at every level – coaching, general managers, ownership, league administration, Competition Committee. (NFL Communications, 2019b, p.11)

The NFL is also rebuilding by changing how the organization approaches the concussion crisis. As the League repeatedly states in its communications, it desires to become a leader in health and safety in sport. Consequently, it is promoting how its decision-making is now to be

driven by medical and scientific research as well as by the use of cutting-edge technology. For example, here is what the League had to say about a new partnership with Amazon, which enables the NFL to use advanced technology to get more insight into the game of football:

The partnership aims to leverage AWS's artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) services to provide a deeper and more profound understanding of the game than ever before, making transformational change possible in football, other sports, and potentially other industries...The NFL is committed to reimagining the future of football," said NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell. "When we apply next-generation technology to advance player health and safety, everyone wins – from players to clubs to fans. (NFL Communications, 2019g, p.1)

The communication tactic of organizational change fits with the primary crisis strategy of rebuilding as the League is taking concrete actions to help players affected by the concussion crisis by implementing organizational changes. In the context of a health crisis such as concussions in sports, organizational change is crucial as the League has to make concrete changes in its operations to reduce concussions in professional football to a minimum.

Diminish

Sharing Responsibility. As noted, the NFL is using a rebuilding strategy as it is fully cognizant of the proactive role it has to play in the crisis, and its main strategy is to share all the work it does to remedy to the concussion crisis in football. However, as concussions will most likely always remain a part of contact sports, the League seems to be initiating a diminish strategy to prepare for the long-term management of this crisis.

Usually, an organization uses a diminish strategy to downplay its implication in a crisis. Even though the League is involved in finding solutions to the concussion problem in football, the NFL seems to be trying to diminish its implication by referring to scientific and medical experts. SCCT suggests two tactics when using a diminish strategy: present excuses or use a justification approach. In this case, even though it is using a diminish strategy, the NFL decided to use neither of these tactics. The League's crisis response tactic is to share responsibility. As noted, this tactic is not part of situational crisis communication theory, but it was identified as being an important part of the NFL's crisis communication strategy.

One way the League is using a shared responsibility tactic is by reminding stakeholders that ongoing scientific and medical research takes time, and the NFL has to wait for experts to study the matter of concussions and for technological advancements to catch up with their needs in protective gear. Jeff Miller, Executive Vice President of NFL Health and Safety Innovation in 2019, mentioned this complexity on multiple occasions:

[T]hat is a multiyear effort, we aren't going to see dramatic changes in any one moment, there is a lot of work that needs to be done there and it is going to take time. (NFL Communications, 2019a, p.4)

I think personally I'm very proud of the integrity of the work that goes on there. The negative is it takes time, right. Science doesn't evolve overnight and so we don't necessarily know all the answers to all the questions that people want answers to. (NFL Communications, 2020a, p.14)

The NFL is sharing responsibility by focusing on independent scientific and medical research. It is also sharing responsibility with the players, the NFLPA and team staff. It is

important to make clear that the NFL is not using a scapegoat approach as it is not blaming these parties for the concussion crisis in any way. However, the NFL involves these parties in the concussion conversation and decision-making, and it highlights their implications in its communications to share crisis responsibility:

[W]e have been really the beneficiaries of the advice of a lot of really smart, capable scientists, clinicians, and academics...So the role have they advised us that the NFL can play has been one of funding research. And so what we have done, and I think we've been very consistent in talking about this, is that the league has put tens of millions of dollars against a lot of the hard questions that the scientific community wrestles with around head injury. (NFL Communications, 2020a, p.14)

Commissioner Goodell also spoke about this shared responsibility during a 2017 press conference:

We want to make sure that the proper medical care is given to every player. The responsibility is a shared responsibility, for our teams, our medical professionals, the players themselves. We put in a lot of safeguards that I think are incredibly important in changing the culture. That's what we've done. There is still more work to be done. We'll continue to do that...We'll continue to work with the NFLPA and see what we can do to improve the protocols. (NFL Communications, 2017c, p.2)

The tactic can be interpreted as follows: the League recognizes its implication in the concussion crisis, but ultimately it makes evident that the NFL is relying on scientific and medical research and on experts' recommendations to solve the concussion crisis or at least to improve the current situation. Consequently, the League frequently refers to the role scientific and medical experts play in the NFL with communications like the following:

[T]he NFL Head, Neck and Spine Committee..., a board of independent and NFL-affiliated physicians and scientists, including advisors for the NFL Players Association (NFLPA). The committee brings together some of the foremost experts in brain and spinal trauma to advise the league on neuroscience, concussion and other health and safety issues...the NFL Head, Neck and Spine Committee will continue to advise the NFL on medical policies, procedures and protocols, in addition to identifying and recommending medical research that impacts the health and safety of NFL players. (NFL Communications, 2018, p.1)

The NFL wishes to diminish public's negative affect toward the League by sharing the blame with independent scientific and medical experts in the eventuality that its efforts would not bring the expected results of decreasing to a minimum concussions in professional football.

Attack the accuser

In its response to the emerging concussion crisis, the National Football League used the tactic of attacking the accuser, which belongs to the deny strategy. In no circumstances did the League deny the existence of this crisis in its communications between 2015 and 2020. This crisis response tactic was only used in two statements issued by the League, which both discussed the same issue. In these statements, the NFL used an attack the accuser tactic to refute the *New York Times*' interpretation of the concussion crisis and its perception of the NFL's involvement in it. Thus, the League decided to attack the newspaper for speculation and false reporting. The NFL is denying the facts presented in a 2016 *Times*' article, which compared the National Football League to the Big Tobacco industry and questioned the League's integrity and ethical conduct throughout the concussion crisis. The *Times*' journalists state that their

investigation “found that the N.F.L.’s concussion research was far more flawed than previously known” (Schwarz, Bogdanich, & Williams, 2016). The article adds:

“On at least two occasions in the 1970s and 1980s, the N.F.L. hired a company whose client list included the Tobacco Institute to study player injuries...The N.F.L.’s ties to tobacco are reflected in other ways. When Congress was considering legislation that dealt with when a team owner could relocate a franchise, Joe Browne, a league official sought lobbying advice from a representative of the Tobacco Institute.” (Schwarz, Bogdanich, & Williams, 2016)

In its statements of rebuttal, the NFL is thus refuting that article by providing its own facts about the concussion crisis and by accusing the *New York Times* of conducting sensationalized reporting:

And we will not sit on the sidelines in the face of irresponsible reporting on these important issues ... Since being contacted about the story, the NFL provided the reporters with detailed factual evidence (running nearly 50 pages), substantively rebutting the issues raised by the paper’s reporters. That information—the facts as opposed to the reporters’ predetermined narrative—unequivocally refuted every accusation levied against the NFL and provided detailed, substantive responses to the reporters’ questions. Because the Times chose to publish despite the facts, we present them here. (NFL Communications, 2016f, p.1)

As noted, even though the NFL is employing an attack the accuser tactic, it does not intend to use the primary crisis response strategy of denying the crisis nor the League’s involvement in it. This communication tactic does not reflect the organization’s overall crisis communication strategy. It was only used as a response to a very specific situation where the NFL felt under attack and chose to respond to the newspaper’s accusations.

Secondary Crisis Response Strategies

Reminder. A reminder strategy is used to remind stakeholders of all the good the organization has done in the past and continues to do. This is the most often used bolstering strategy by the League in its communications.

The NFL keeps reminding stakeholders of all the hard work the League has been doing to make the game safer. The reminder strategy is used through the constant repetition of the League's initiatives in health and safety, such as rules changes, innovative design of new protective gear and financial investment in scientific and medical research. Following are some prime examples of how the League reminds the public of all the work it does to make the game of football safer:

[T]he 32 clubs, their owners and the commissioner maintain that player health and safety is a number one priority for the National Football League. (NFL Communications, 2017a, p.2)

Safety has been at the forefront and our number one priority, and that of our players, and over the last 10 to 15 years in particular, I think we've had over 50 rule changes to make our game safer. We've made changes in equipment, particularly with the helmet. (NFL Communications, 2019c, p.1)

We're not done, but rules changes, the data-infused efforts that we've talked about endlessly ..., equipment changes, the effects of those rules changes, how practices are run, and all those sorts of things. So there's a lot more to do, but I think those two tenets

are key: put the dollars where the scientific community can best use them, and don't wait on the results. Keep changing and evolving our game to make it better for the players who play it and the players who are going to. (NFL Communications, 2020a, p.14)

By emphasizing its numerous health and safety efforts, the League's goal seems to be to remind fans and the media that its priority is making the game of football safer to protect players.

The NFL also continues reminding fans and the media of all the initiatives the League has done and continues to do in its communities to help all levels of the sport and to advance medical research outside of football:

We have committed tens of millions of dollars to fund independent research, made 42 changes to our rulebook since 2002 to make the game safer, and have advanced concussion awareness and safer tackling at all levels of the sport. (NFL Communications, 2016e, p.2)

For the NFL, it goes beyond professional football, and the League reminds its stakeholders of all the good it does to contribute to the betterment of youth football and the advancement of medical research regarding head trauma.

Ingratiation. The NFL uses an ingratiation strategy by acknowledging that the concussion crisis greatly impacted the players. In its external communications the League acknowledges that the burden of concussions falls on its players. As Dr. Allen Sills, NFL Chief Medical Officer in 2018, admitted during a media conference, "we know that the burden on players is substantial" (NFL Communications, 2019a, p.4). However, the League keeps reminding the public that player health and safety is a priority, and they are investing, changing rules and working hard to help players and improve their safety. As Jeff Miller, Executive Vice

President of NFL Health and Safety Innovation, notes: “when it comes to the health and safety of our players, there is no finish line (NFL Communications, 2019a, p.2). Phrases like this were frequently deployed in the NFL’s communications. For example, Commissioner Goodell said during a 2015 interview: “we still have more to do. We’re not finished. We’re going to continue to make progress here...to make sure that we continue to make this game safer” (NFL Communications, 2015, p.3).

The League is also trying to show its dedication toward its players and its goodwill in putting all necessary efforts to assure their health and safety, what Commissioner Goodell reminded the public during the same 2015 radio interview mentioned above:

You know that we’ve made 39 rule changes over the last 10 years to make our game safer. They’ve had a dramatic impact on the game. We’re seeing a reduction in concussions of 35 percent. We’re seeing the rules protect the players from unnecessary injuries and that’s important. We’ve also focused on equipment and making sure that we’ve done everything possible to inspect the equipment. (NFL Communications, 2015, p.3)

Simply put, the League acknowledges that the concussion crisis has tremendous consequences on the players, but they also make sure to remind its community of all the work it does to help them.

Research Question 2

The second research question aimed to determine if buffers played a role in the crisis response strategies used by the National Football League in its external communications to manage the concussion crisis from 2015 to 2020.

RQ2: Did buffers play a role in the crisis response strategies used by the National Football League in their external communications to manage the concussion crisis from 2015 to 2020?

Buffers constitute pre-existing conditions on which an organization can capitalize to diminish the impact of a crisis on corporate reputation (Koerber & Zabara, 2017). Buffers influence stakeholders' opinion of an organization's crisis responses, prompting them to view a crisis less negatively and to be more accepting of an organization's responses to a crisis (Lim & Brown-Devlin, 2021). It is important to note that there are no ways to determine the pre-existing nature of the identified buffers based on the collection of texts studied in this research. Assessing the buffering effect would require reaching out to NFL stakeholders to understand their perceptions of their relationship with the League, the NFL's corporate social responsibility initiatives, the NFL's organizational performance, etc. Therefore, buffers in this study were identified according to what factors the League seemed to be leveraging in its external communications to diminish public negative affect toward the League. One thing that is evident from the data set is that the NFL is leveraging some buffers to limit organizational reputational damage.

The theoretical framework of the buffering effect and the notion of buffers guided the thematic analysis for the second research question, leading to the identification of three overarching themes: (1) corporate social responsibility reputation, (2) prior relationship reputation and (3) sports fan communities. A thematic map is presented in appendix 5.

Themes described the buffers that were used by the NFL in its communications to respond to the concussion crisis, as portrayed on nflcommunications.com. The following section

presents the results of this analysis, providing excerpts from the collection of texts studied as supportive evidence.

Corporate Social Responsibility Reputation

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) reputation is at the core of the NFL's rebuilding strategy. Corporate social responsibility is “an approach to business that embodies transparency and ethical behavior, respect for stakeholder groups and a commitment to add economic, social and environmental value” (Sustainability, 2004, p.4, as cited in Kim & Wan Woo, 2018, p.23). The League is trying to capitalize on its CSR initiatives by putting them forward in its external communications. The NFL keeps investing in CSR efforts to promote the organization's community involvement and ethical conduct, and to show that its involvement in reducing concussions and improving sport safety goes beyond professional football. The NFL focuses its CSR initiatives on two fronts: knowledge sharing and investment in youth football, both of which the League puts forward in its external communications.

The NFL shares the findings of the research it finances to help other sport organizations and stakeholder interests who could benefit from it, namely, other levels of play, other sports and companies manufacturing sport equipment. Its objective is to raise awareness about concussions in the general public not just for the benefit of the NFL, as shown in the following excerpts:

Following discussions with experts around the country on the most pressing scientific research needs and the most promising studies, and in keeping with the commitment to devote the full \$30 million to research that will advance neuroscience, the League has made commitments to... government-funded projects... with proven track records of achievement that affect public health... Through this commitment, the League hopes to

advance the understanding of concussion and other brain injuries, especially among athletes and veterans. (NFL Communications, 2017e, p.1)

We will continue to seek solutions to ensure our entire football family and all those who love to play the game are provided with the best information, tools and support to protect their health and well-being. (NFL Communications, 2017d, p.1)

As noted, the League's CSR initiatives also target youth football. The NFL wants to improve the way football is taught and it wishes to increase game safety at all levels of the sport. The League does so through education and outreach programs, which are at the forefront of its communications:

Rules changes and enforcement is part of it, but it is also education and culture and how we teach the game, how we practice, and how we teach the techniques associated with blocking and tackling. That is ultimately going to make the difference. And that is what is so exciting about a lot of this work is – this isn't just applicable to the NFL and NFL players, right? This is safety for football overall and how we teach the game from youth all the way through the professional level. (NFL Communications, 2019b, p.9)

The National Football League proactively engages in corporate social responsibility efforts by committing to add economic and social value in its communities. The buffer of CSR reputation is intertwined with the reminder strategy used by the NFL as the League constantly reminds its community of all the good work it does for them and for the game of football. Again, the League's CSR reputation cannot be assessed as this would require stakeholders' evaluation of the NFL's initiatives. However, the NFL is without any doubt trying to leverage CSR initiatives in its communications.

Prior Relationship Reputation

Prior reputation refers to the relationship an organization has been maintaining with its stakeholders, how it has been treating them. As noted earlier in Chapter 3, it is not the intent of this research to empirically assess how the NFL has been treating its stakeholders nor describe the relationship it has been maintaining with them based on the League's external communications. However, in the studied collection of texts, the NFL is putting a lot of emphasis on its collaborative work with various stakeholders, mainly players.

The National Football League repeatedly praises players and the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) for their collaborative work throughout the crisis and it recognizes how important their involvement is in solving the concussion crisis. Commissioner Goodell mentioned in a 2017 press conference that the “number-one thing that [he] took away from the conversations with players is the incredible commitment they have to the game and the integrity of the game” (NFL Communications, 2017c, p.1). The League also publicly recognized the players' implication in a press release discussing the enforcement of a new concussion protocol, stating that the enforcement of that policy was “one of many collaborations between the NFL and NFLPA to improve player health and safety” (NFL Communications, 2016g, p.1). The League also states that “most everything [they] do with health and safety is done collaboratively with the Player's Association” (NFL Communications, 2019a, p.1). The League keeps referring to players and the NFLPA as partners. The NFL affirms in its communications that it continues to have “a very strong partnership with the NFL Players Association” (NFL Communications, 2017a, p.1).

The data show that the NFL also recognizes how important stakeholders such as team staff, scientific and medical experts are for the organization's continued success. For the NFL,

stakeholder relationships with the League are crucial to create the needed change within the organization to manage the concussion crisis:

We are also grateful because that is the hard work of a lot of people. Certainly, foremost our players and coaching staffs and all of the teams that have embraced these changes and have rallied behind that goal. But then also the work from our team physicians, medical staffs, the NFL Player's Association, our engineers; this is an effort on behalf of a whole lot of people. (NFL Communications, 2019a, p.2)

Using the buffer of prior relationship reputation emerges from the data to be a multi-purpose strategic choice for the NFL as it is closely tied to the secondary crisis response strategy of ingratiation and the communication tactic of sharing responsibility. The NFL praises stakeholders to portray an image that the League truly cares about its stakeholders, which can influence how the public perceive the organization. As noted, organization-stakeholders relationship is also used to share crisis responsibility to remind the public that multiple parties are involved in this crisis and to remind the NFL community of all the work the League does to help them.

Sports Fan Communities

A sport organization is using the buffer of sports fan communities when it is leveraging the relationship it holds with its fans and capitalizing on their identification with the sport brand. The League does seem to be engaging fans in some initiatives that were put in place to manage the crisis. For example, the League used its fan community to conduct crowdsourcing initiatives, which intended to redesigned football plays that would increase game safety:

We are unaware of any sports leagues that have actually gone to the fans and crowdsources the play to try and improve it. So, we like the novelty of it but more importantly we like the results. (NFL Communications, 2019a, p.4)

The latter citation was one of the scarce excerpts that mentioned fans. The NFL usually does not engage fans in its communications when it is addressing the concussion crisis. However, as shown in the following quote by Commissioner Goodell, the League believes in the power of fans and the NFL community:

The National Football League is community, and I mentioned that earlier. We believe that nothing brings a community together better than an NFL team or an NFL event, like we're seeing here today. We can make a difference in communities, and we can do that in particular by sharing what's authentic to the NFL, and one of those is well-being. (NFL Communications, 2019c, p.7)

Therefore, it is surprising that the organization has not been leveraging more its fans or its relationship with them in its external communications.

The League is without any doubt benefiting from the buffer of political economy through the crises it faces due to its iconic status in the U.S. and its dominant place in the sports industry. The buffer of political economy, even though it is not leveraged by the League in its communications, might contribute to the fact that the League does not engage much with fans when it comes to health issues in football. In addition, the League might want to shield fans from this tough reality, which has a direct impact on how fans perceive the sport of football and the National Football League. Also, the documents were retrieved from nflcommunications.com, the press releases were predominantly intended for the media as fans are more likely to get their news and information through social media and the League's newsletter. This might also explain

why the League did not address fans more in external communications such as press conferences and official statements.

Overall, the NFL focuses on an accommodative crisis communication strategy to respond to the concussion crisis. The NFL is proactively communicating its numerous initiatives in health and safety to its external public to show that the League is taking serious actions to remedy to the severe health crisis the organization is facing, even though it is also trying to share crisis responsibility with various stakeholders such as scientific and medical experts.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The concussion crisis has tremendous negative outcomes on the NFL, the sport of football, and other contact sports. This crisis poses serious threats to the League, such as potential financial losses due to a decrease in fan attendance, sponsorships and broadcasting deals. The deterioration of players' health and safety is also a big issue. Some professional football players are deciding to leave the sport early to protect their health (Navarro et al., 2017; Mirer & Mederson, 2017). A decrease in the number of children playing organized football also poses a serious threat to the NFL as the League needs youth participation to ensure player recruitment and grow the fan base (Belson, 2015).

Confronted with these significant repercussions, the NFL addressed the issue of concussions in professional football directly in its external communications from 2015 to 2020 in order to protect its reputation and credibility.

Overview of the NFL's Crisis Communication Strategy

In its strategic communications the National Football League heavily focused on its stakeholders. The League developed its crisis communication plan around the primary crisis strategy of rebuilding. An organization utilizes a rebuild strategy when it takes actions to help stakeholders that were affected by a crisis. The NFL recognizes the gravity of concussions in football and pledges to make the game safer, putting forward countless initiatives to remedy to the concussion crisis. The League also implemented a diminish strategy. An organization utilizes a diminish strategy when it is trying to downplay its implication in a crisis. The League does so by referring to scientific and medical experts in the eventuality that its efforts would not bring the expected results of decreasing to a minimum concussions in professional football. The rebuild strategy was found to be at the forefront of the NFL's communication efforts, whereas the diminish strategy was more discretely implemented to, as one could hypothesize, prepare for the long-term management of the crisis.

Even though these approaches were thoroughly developed and well defined in the literature, put against a real-life crisis, other communication tactics emerged. The two central tactics used by the League were organizational change and shared responsibility. As previously explained, these tactics are not delineated in Coombs' situational crisis communication theory. The fact that an organization used these tactics does not imply that they are effective. Further empirical work is required to assess the validity and effectiveness of these communication tactics. However, these tactics were employed by the League in the implementation of their two broader crisis response strategies: rebuild and diminish, which represent two of the three crisis response strategies recommended by SCCT.

The NFL also made use of two secondary crisis response strategies identified by SCCT. The League used the bolstering strategies of reminder and ingratiation to remind its stakeholders of all the good the organization does in its communities and for its players, on top of all the initiatives they put forward to remedy to the concussion crisis.

The analysis also shows that buffers were part of the NFL's overall communication strategy, often being used with various crisis response strategies. Corporate social responsibility initiatives were predominant in the League's communication efforts. The NFL keeps investing in CSR efforts to promote the organization's community involvement and ethical conduct, and to show that its involvement in reducing concussions and improving sport safety goes beyond professional football. The NFL also leveraged its relationship with stakeholders by putting a lot of emphasis on its collaborative work with various stakeholders. Even though done more scarcely, the League did occasionally mobilize its fan communities. Overall, it can be said that the NFL adopted an accommodative crisis communication strategy to respond to the concussion crisis.

Importance of the Results

This study highlights a discrepancy between the theoretical ground of situational crisis communication theory and the application of crisis response strategies in a real-life organizational crisis. In comparison to the prescribed model of SCCT, the League used more than one primary crisis communication strategy in its communications and used crisis communication tactics that were not delineated by the model. To understand the difference between the prescription of the theory and the actual practice of crisis communication, it is important to acknowledge the purpose of situational crisis communication theory. The intent of

SCCT is to guide crisis managers through their crisis communication efforts when their organization faces a crisis. To do so, the model proposes useful, empirically tested crisis response strategies (Coombs, 1995). However, as the founder of SCCT states: “a researcher cannot hope to craft the one, perfect list of crisis response strategies” (Coombs, 2007, p.170). In addition, the ongoing nature of the crisis contributes to explain the discrepancy between theory and praxis. The model of SCCT does not take into consideration crises spanning two decades. Organizational crises are usually more short-lived as organizations do not normally survive a 20-year organizational crisis. To the best of my knowledge, no crisis communication model explores the particular occurrence of long-term crises nor how crisis response strategies should be developed and adapted in relation to the evolution of a crisis throughout the years. It is also crucial to remember that this research followed a specific theoretical framework in its analysis. However, it does not mean that the National Football League followed the same theoretical framework to craft its strategic communication plan.

This research also implemented the notion of buffers, which is highly understudied in the field of sport crisis communication. The results showed an interrelation between situational crisis communication theory and the concept of buffers. In the NFL’s communications, buffers were often used in conjunction with primary and secondary crisis response strategies. Further research is needed to determine if these are common practices in sport crisis communication and to evaluate their effectiveness.

Limits & Future Research Directions

This study aimed to explore the NFL’s crisis communication strategies throughout the concussion crisis. This research did not offer a critical assessment of the League’s crisis

communication efforts. In addition, this paper only focused on the sport organization's responses. Consequently, further research is required to assess the effectiveness of the NFL's crisis communication strategies, which were identified in this study. To assess the success level of the strategies employed by the League, a complete analysis of the situational context and an evaluation of fans and stakeholders' responses and their perception of the concussion crisis have to be conducted.

Moreover, this study was based on a small dataset as this paper used an exploratory research design. Therefore, the application is limited and not representative of all sport crises. Further empirical research on sport crises is required to compare the results of this research and to assess the validity and effectiveness of the two identified tactics (i.e., organizational change and shared responsibility) that did not correspond to the established theory of situational crisis communication.

It is critical for the field of sport crisis communication to pursue these potential research endeavours as with irrefutable evidence of CTE in all levels of contact sports, the health crisis of concussions in sport will remain of high significance for the field. As long as contact sports exist, the concussion crisis is likely to persist and to pose a serious operational and reputational threat for all sports organizations that are overseeing a contact sport.

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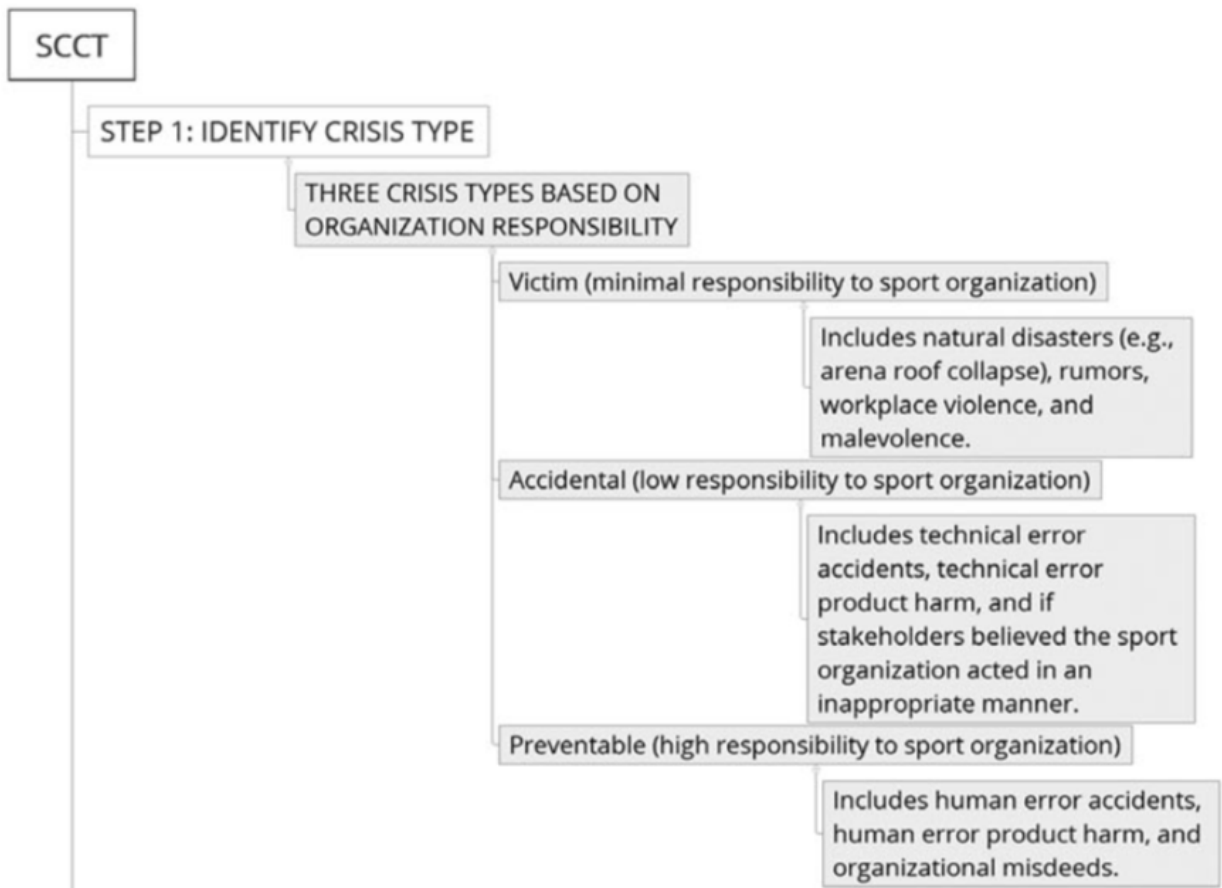
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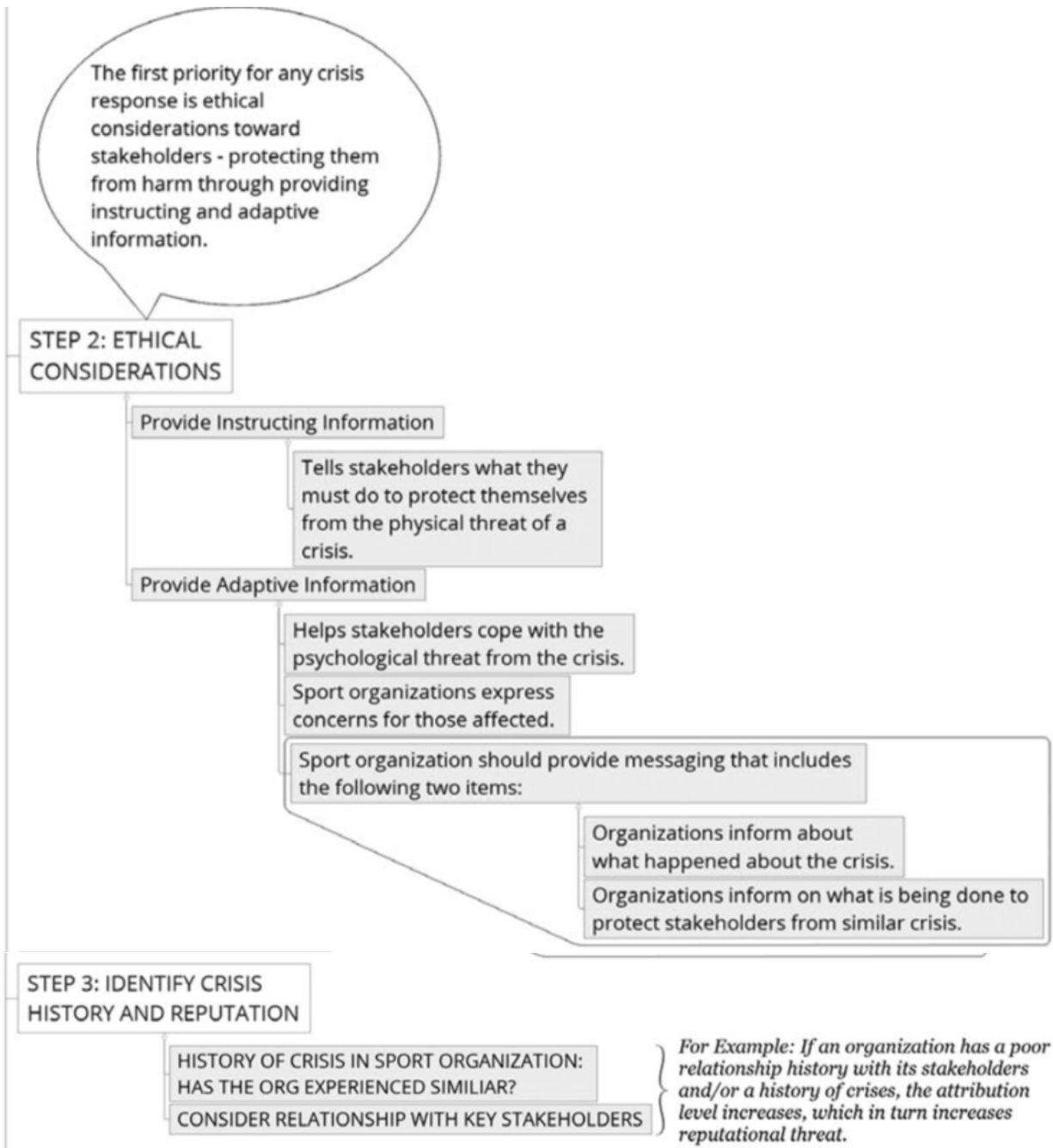
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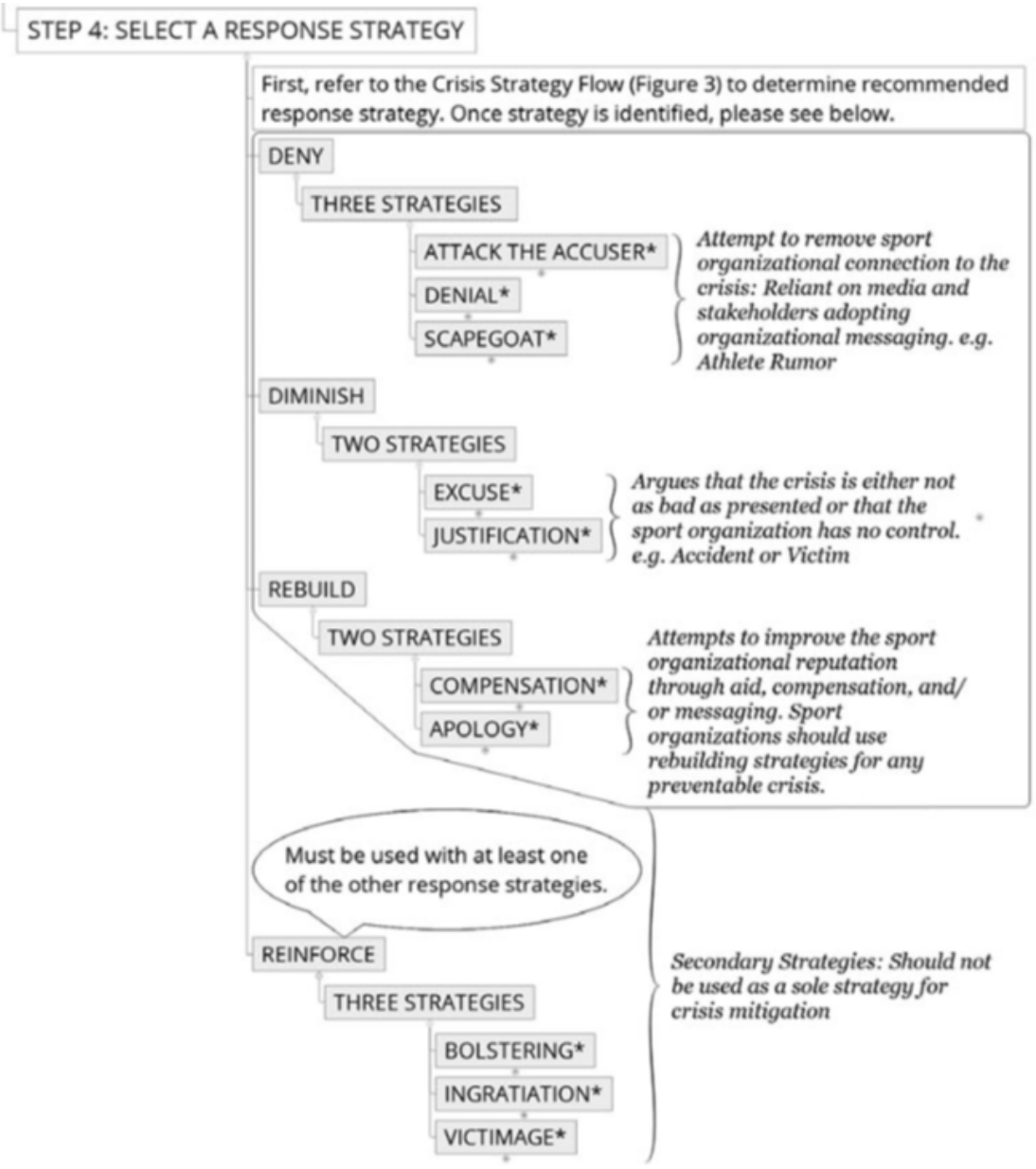
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Visual step-by-step model of SCCT







(Ross Knight et al., 2019)

Appendix 2: SCCT Flowchart of Sports Organizations

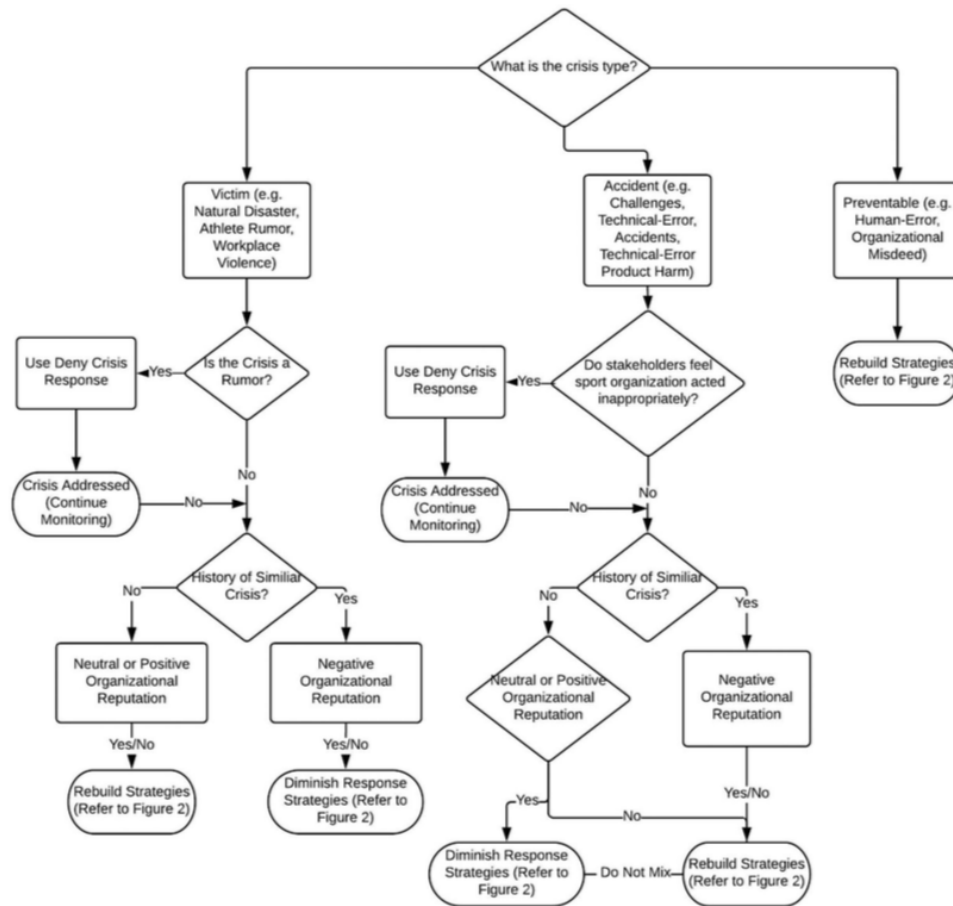


Figure 3. A guide to determining appropriate response strategy.

(Ross Knight et al., 2019)

Appendix 3: Themes and Sub-themes Defined

Research Question 1

Primary crisis response strategies	Crisis response strategies represent how an organization communicates during a crisis, what management says and does.
Deny	An organization utilizes a deny strategy when it affirms it is not involved in a crisis or when it denies the existence of a crisis.
<i><u>Attack the accuser</u></i>	An organization attacks the person or entity that is attacking or blaming the organization for a crisis.
<i><u>Deny the crisis</u></i>	An organization denies the existence of a crisis.
<i><u>Scapegoat approach</u></i>	An organization blames someone outside its organization for a crisis.
Diminish	An organization utilizes a diminish strategy when it is trying to downplay its implication in a crisis.
<i><u>Present excuses</u></i>	An organization presents excuses for a crisis by minimizing organizational involvement or by demonstrating its lack of control over events.
<i><u>Justification approach</u></i>	An organization opts for a justification approach to show that the consequences caused by a crisis are minimal and unharmed.
Rebuild	An organization utilizes a rebuild strategy when it accepts responsibility for a crisis, and it takes actions to help stakeholders that were affected by a crisis.
<i><u>Compensation</u></i>	An organization compensates the victims that were affected by a crisis.
<i><u>Apologia</u></i>	An organization offers an apology for its responsibility in a crisis.
Secondary crisis response strategies	Secondary crisis response strategies are bolstering strategies used in conjunction with the primary strategies to boost the communication efforts.
Reminder	An organization uses a reminder strategy to remind stakeholders of all the good the organization has done and continues to do.
Ingratiation	An organization using an ingratiation strategy praises stakeholders by acknowledging the impacts a crisis had on them.

Victimage An organization uses a victimage strategy to remind stakeholders that the organization is also a victim of an ongoing crisis.

Miscellaneous Other identified patterns that do not fit in the pre-determined themes that were established in accordance with the theoretical framework of situational crisis communication theory.

(Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007)

Research Question 2

Buffers Buffers represent pre-existing conditions on which an organization can capitalize to diminish the impact of a crisis on corporate reputation.

Crisis history Crisis history refers to the crises an organization has faced in the past.

Prior relationship reputation Prior reputation refers to the relationship an organization has been maintaining with its stakeholders, how it has been treating them.

Corporate social responsibility reputation Corporate social responsibility reputation refers to an organization's history of ethical conduct and community involvement.

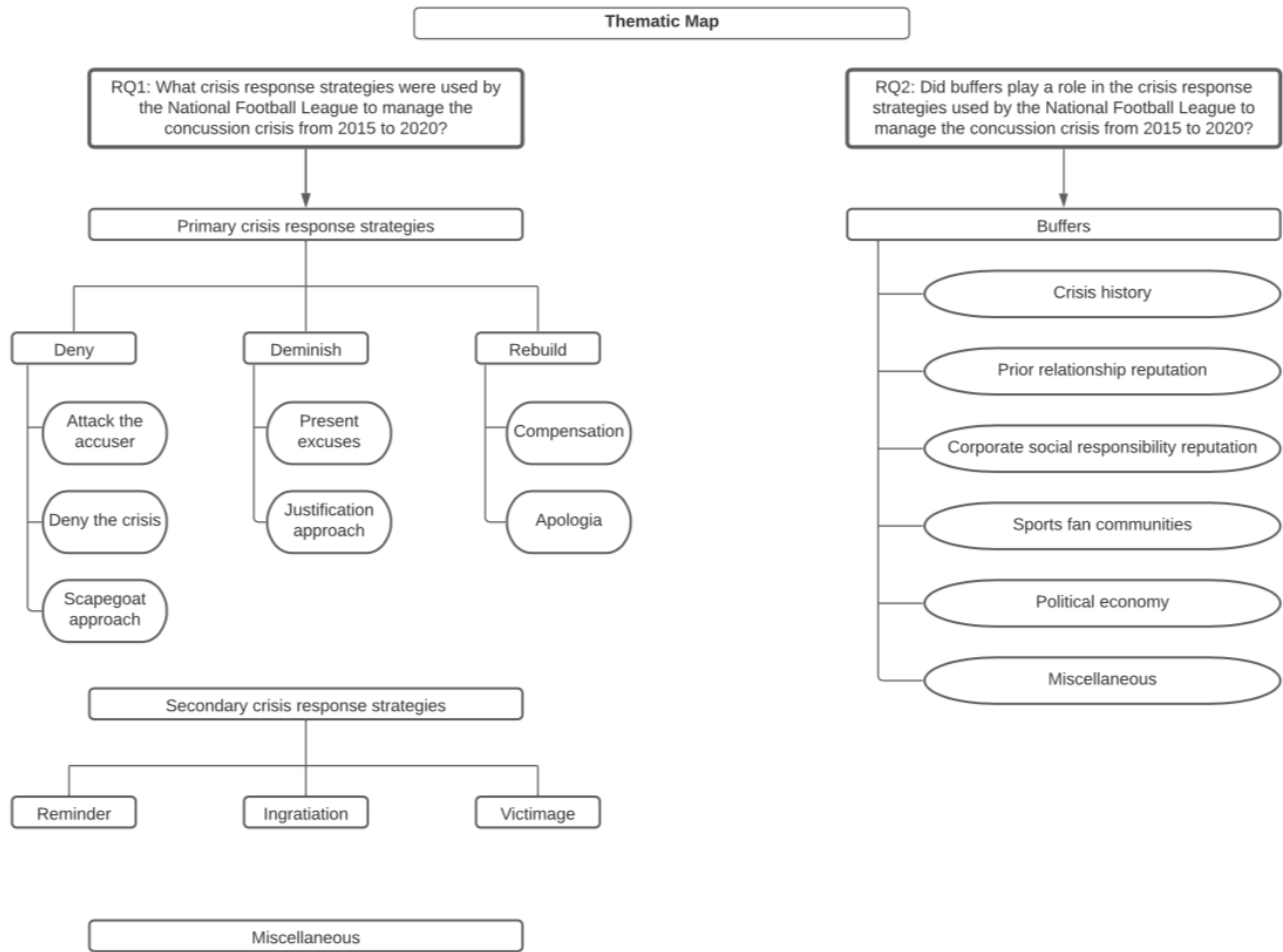
Sports fan communities A sport organization is leveraging the relationship it holds with its fans and capitalizing on their identification with the sport brand.

Political economy A sport organization is leveraging its monopoly-like status in professional sport.

Miscellaneous Other identified patterns that do not fit in the pre-determined themes that were established in accordance with the theoretical concepts of the buffering effect.

(Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Coombs, 2007; Kim & Lee, 2015; Grow, 2015; Koerber & Zabara, 2017; Kim & Woo Wan, 2018)

Appendix 4: Initial Thematic Map



Appendix 5: Reviewed Thematic Map

