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## Domestic Violence and the National Football League

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**Master of Arts in Media and Communication Degree  
with a Specialization in Strategic Communication**

Project Approval Form

Candidate Kelsey Rentner has completed all the necessary master project requirements of the School of Media & Communication's Master of Arts program.

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June 26, 2017  
Date

**Domestic Violence and the National Football League**

**Kelsey Rentner**

**A master's project submitted to the faculty of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Media and Communication with a Specialization in Strategic Communication**

**Dr. Claudia Y. Owens, D. M.**

**June 30, 2017**

## **Executive Summary**

The time has come for the National Football League (NFL) to consider creating a new domestic violence crisis communication plan in order to positively restore its reputation among stakeholders. It has been almost three years since domestic violence incidences among players became highly publicized stories, forcing the NFL to take action by implementing a few domestic violence prevention initiatives and questionable policy changes. Since then, the NFL, for the most part, has been silent. This is not an uncommon pattern among organizations who will implement policies and programs following a crisis yet struggle to maintain its commitment in the public's eye. This is because many large organizations do not understand that the most effective way to solve a crisis is before it begins. This involves the development of a crisis communication plan that can be implemented, if needed, and this is where the NFL failed. Instead of being proactive about domestic abuse within its ranks, it became reactive. As a result, the league still has yet to determine the best practices that will help improve upon its perceived reputation among stakeholders.

The purpose of this project is to analyze literature to determine the best practices that the NFL should incorporate into its domestic violence crisis communication plan in order to restore its reputation among stakeholders. Evidence-based research will be used to analyze how the NFL's management team can use effective crisis response strategies such as honesty, transparency, apologia and corporate impression management, along with specific elements of success, to develop an effective long-term domestic violence crisis communication plan. This study will contribute to the field of crisis communication by offering a comprehensive evidence-based plan for organizations facing a domestic violence crisis and seeking to repair its reputation among stakeholders. Specifically, this project will provide the NFL with strategies and elements for success in creating an effective domestic violence crisis communication plan that will repair the league's reputation among stakeholders.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## **Chapter One: Project Topic Proposal**

### **Introduction**

Since 2014, the National Football League (NFL) has faced extreme criticism after the three domestic violence cases among professional football players emerged into the spotlight. At the time, the NFL was under investigation for allegations that it was aware of the infamous video of Baltimore Ravens Running Back Ray Rice hitting his at-the-time fiancé in a casino elevator and did not take immediate action to punish Rice. Although NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell's highly respected position gives him the authority to utilize the laws written out by the NFL in circumstances that violate player conduct both on and off the field, the criticisms of not taking appropriate action to eliminate this behavior among all professional football players led to Goodell handing out a harsher punishment to Rice and forced him to rethink the league's position. Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) released a quote from Goodell on the issue stating, "We allowed our standards to fall below where they should be and lost an important opportunity to emphasize our strong stance on a critical issue and the effective programs we have in place. My disciplinary decision led the public to question our sincerity, our commitment, and whether we understood the toll that domestic violence inflicts on so many families ("Roger Goodell letter to NFL owners," 2014). Other than this statement, there was no initial strategic communication to the public that the NFL was working to eliminate the issue until Goodell's first press conference on the issue in September 2014 (Jarvis, 2016).

The Rice incident and other recent NFL domestic violence cases have shed light on what seems to be a well-hidden problem within the league for years prior to the most recent cases. Fifty domestic violence cases among NFL players have been pursued by law enforcement authorities since September 2006 (Schrotenboer, 2014). There have been numerous other cases

that have been reported and highlighted in the media prior to Goodell's regime in 2006, however these cases simply faded away. The Washington Post states, "Seventy-seven players across 27 of the league's 32 teams have been arrested since 2000 on charges of domestic violence, according to a USA Today NFL arrests database" (Harwell & Halzack, 2014). Though the NFL has taken steps to repair its image among fans, domestic violence cases continue happening within the league. This project will analyze the best crisis communication practices that the NFL should consider to rebuild its reputation and create a positive and sincere image for itself.

### **Statement of Problem**

Since being in the public eye for three domestic violence cases in 2014, the NFL experienced a drastic increase in publicity and has remained in the spotlight ever since. The reoccurring instances of domestic violence within the league has given fans the perception that the league does not understand the severity of the issue (Jarvis, 2016). The NFL has not been effective with repairing its image since its mishandling of the initial public image restoration communication campaign in 2014 (Jarvis, 2016). Seeing that this crisis has sparked extreme controversy, the public is becoming more aware of the violent culture of football, which is causing the public to question the NFL's commitment to eliminating the issue.

The problem is that three years later, the NFL still has not gained back its credibility through effective communication tactics and initiatives. The public does not view the league's progress of regaining credibility as effective because the communication efforts were not expansive or thorough (Brown, 2016). This problem points to an even larger communication issue for the NFL, one of reputation management in a crisis. Instead of being proactive about domestic abuse, the league was reactive in its efforts. Research shows that organizations with a crisis management plan survive a crisis with a more positive image than those without a plan

(Fearn-Banks, 2017). Crisis communication involves “a dialogue between the organization and its public(s) prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence (Fearn-Banks, 2017, p. 2). The NFL did not practice effective crisis management in its handling of domestic violence.

### **Significance of the Problem**

Inaccuracies and inconsistencies are only some of the many reasons why advertisers considered pulling away from their sponsorship (“Case Analysis of the PR Scandal of the NFL,” n.d.). The league has faced criticism from football fans and the media for not taking enough action to prevent the issue immediately after the cases emerged. According to the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics, domestic violence accounted for 21 percent of all violent crimes reported in the National Crime Victimization Survey from 2003-2012 (Truman & Morgan, 2014). This figure illustrates that domestic violence occurs more often than most people realize within the general population. The NFL apparently knew this was going on in its own backyard but failed to act until forced to do so. Other than hosting press conferences and issuing statements to the public on its stance against the issue, the NFL waited five months before implementing its domestic violence and sexual assault prevention campaign, in partnership with NO MORE, at the 2015 Super Bowl. Since the NO MORE commercial debut, the league has taken further steps to eliminate domestic violence by updating its personal conduct policy, providing individual and family support hotlines, and creating mandatory comprehensive education and training programs (“The NFL commitment: Taking action on domestic violence and sexual assault,” 2015).

Although many initiatives have been implemented by the NFL to prevent future domestic violence cases from happening both inside and outside the organization, the damage from the NFL’s initial reaction to the 2014 cases has still left the league with an unwanted reputation

among fans. According to “The NFL Commitment: Taking Action on Domestic Violence And Sexual Assault” (2015), the league conferred with over 150 experts to review the punishments and rules for those in the NFL. The league recently hired two executives who have experience and knowledge of the criminal justice system to pursue newer and stricter punishments in cases involving serious matters such as the previous domestic violence cases. Four others with the same occupational background have also been hired for further assistance and review of the new laws and the code of conduct that is to be greatly enforced. Just as a courtroom not only punishes domestic violence actions, but also assists and serves justice to the victims, the NFL now aids those who are victims of domestic violence. Players who are under investigation for committing such acts are placed on administrative leave until further conclusions are found. If one is found guilty of domestic violence, then a more intense appeal process is in order so that no one gets away with his criminal actions without adhesive reasoning (“The NFL Commitment: Taking Action on Domestic Violence And Sexual Assault,” 2015).

### **Theoretical Background**

To analyze the problem of public image restoration for the NFL, public relations practitioners must understand what practices in crisis management communication are effective for developing a successful anti-domestic violence communication plan for the NFL. Several theoretical approaches can be considered for this project: institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), image restoration theory (Benoit, 1995), Grunig’s Theory of Excellence in Public Relations (Grunig & Grunig, 2000) and situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007b).

Institutional theory posits the idea that one large institution, which is made up of organizations that operate within, establishes a set of rules and guidelines in which each

organization within must follow to reach a common goal (Lammers and Barbour, 2006). In this case, the NFL is considered an institution because it is made up of 32 clubs, otherwise known as teams, that abide by the NFL's established guidelines to accomplish the overall goal of providing entertainment to sports fans through the game of professional football. Benoit's (1995) image restoration theory is a communication concept that describes how and why both people and organizations seek to rebuild a positive reputation or brand image (Smith, 2013). This theory will be used to demonstrate communication elements in which the NFL should consider to rebuild its reputation since the 2014 domestic violence cases. Grunig's Theory of Excellence in Public Relations provides a framework for how public relations departments can help an organization best communicate to its publics as well as how to have effective management within the organization (Grunig & Grunig, 2000). This theory will help the NFL determine a domestic violence crisis communication plan that will demonstrate anti-domestic violence efforts which will position the league into a positive light. Last, the situational crisis communication theory will demonstrate the potential threats in which the NFL may face as it attempts to repair its image.

### **Principles of Crisis Communication**

In addition to these theories, this project will also incorporate principles from crisis communication and crisis management. Pearson and Mitroff (1993) defined an organizational crisis as "an incident or event that poses a threat to the organization's reputation and viability" (p.49). A crisis is also described by Fearn-Banks (2014) as "a major occurrence with a potential negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name" (p. 2). As Fearn-Banks (2014) explained, a crisis could hit large corporations, small businesses, cities, countries and even individuals, and it could occur at

any time and in many different forms, like fire, terrorist attacks, or other events that might damage the image of an organization or interrupt the businesses' normal functions.

Crisis management is “a process of strategic planning for a crisis or negative turning point, a process that removes some of the risk and uncertainty from the negative occurrence and thereby allows the organization to be in greater control of its own destiny” (Fearn-Banks, 2014, p. 2). If principles of effective crisis communication are practiced, then crisis management may bring an organization a more positive reputation than before the crisis occurred (Fearn-Banks, 2014). Since the domestic violence incidents became a major crisis for the NFL, it is important to incorporate principles of crisis communication and crisis management in this project.

### **Research Question**

- A. What does the literature indicate are the best practices and components of a crisis communication plan that can positively influence the reputation of the NFL during a domestic violence crisis?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this project is to analyze the literature and determine the best strategies that lead to the successful development of a reputation management communication plan for a domestic violence crisis within the NFL. This project will use evidence-based literature to explore the extent to which the NFL's current domestic violence campaign has been successful among its fans, as well as determine what effective crisis management communication tactics and practices the NFL should implement to reduce the issue of domestic violence and receive positive feedback from the public during times of crises. On a larger scale, this study could be replicated within organizations which have faced a similar crisis to determine if their image-repair campaigns are viewed as effective by their target audience and key stakeholders.

Institutional theory, image restoration theory, Grunig's Theory of Excellence in Public Relations

and situational crisis communication theory will be the basis of reviewing and analyzing this problem.

### **Summary**

This paper is a systematic literature review designed to understand the best crisis communication practices the NFL can use to successfully develop a reputation management communication plan for a domestic violence crisis. This paper will review articles and research studies written by scholarly experts in the communication and sport fields, as well as external resources from news outlets to elaborate on the public reaction to the NFL's response efforts. It will analyze the literature to develop a theoretical framework, based on the theories, for the NFL to consider in developing a crisis communication plan to repair its image. A conceptual model will demonstrate how evidence-based research coupled with theoretical framework creates a foundation for developing a successful crisis communication plan. The model can be used for other companies that experience a domestic violence issue and are working to rebuild their reputation. The literature will help determine the best practices of crisis management communication and reputation management communication that the NFL should consider for its domestic violence crisis. Finally, it will offer a proposal for a crisis communication plan for the NFL and will include practical implications and recommendations for future research.



## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This systematic literature review has been designed to determine the best practices of crisis management communication. While the NFL has taken action since receiving backlash from the public regarding the way it initially handled the situation, the league has not yet gained back its credibility because its communication efforts were not expansive or thorough (Brown, 2016).

Database searches were conducted using key words to generate literature from scholarly and peer-reviewed articles, as well as theories, that demonstrate communication strategies and tactics in which the NFL should consider to rebuild its image since the 2014 domestic violence cases. The evidence-based literature of this project included articles written by scholarly experts in the communication and sport fields, as well as dissertations and research studies conducted by experts in the communication field. Articles that were not full text or abstracts only were excluded from the literature review. Some external resources from news outlets were used to elaborate on the public reaction to the NFL's response efforts.

This chapter is organized into two sections, including NFL Crisis Management and theoretical frameworks. The NFL Crisis Management section provides a better understanding of the NFL's issue of domestic violence and its factors, as well as crisis communication and how the NFL can strategically develop a crisis communication plan to positively repair its image among stakeholders. The theoretical frameworks section describes several theoretical approaches that can be considered for this project, which include institutional theory, image restoration theory, Grunig's Theory of Excellence in Public Relations and situational crisis communication theory.

### **NFL Crisis Management**

The purpose of this section is to provide background knowledge of the NFL's domestic violence problem. The goal is to provide a better understanding of domestic violence and its factors, as well as crisis communication using previously existing literature from scholarly research articles, studies and expert opinions. Understanding scholarly experts' research as to why domestic violence occurs, as well as the factors that contribute to such behavior, will help determine the best crisis communication strategies the NFL should consider when handling a domestic violence case while trying to repair its reputation. Communication expert Timothy W. Coombs (2007b) posits the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) that depicts the elements in which an organization should include into its crisis communication plan to protect its reputation. Though this is a generalized concept, the NFL should consider using this concept and tailor it to fit into an anti-domestic violence campaign that will help repair the league's damaged reputation.

#### **Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence has been happening in the NFL's own backyard for quite some time. USA Today has kept a database on NFL player arrests since 2000, and as of March 7, 2017, 847 players have been arrested, many for domestic violence (USA Today, 2017). The first domestic violence case was listed in 2000 with the arrest of former Denver Broncos wide receiver Rod Smith (USA Today, 2017). At least 17 players have been arrested multiple times for assault or domestic abuse (Fitzsimmons, 2015).

In 1995, the league made its first attempt to address sexual assault and domestic violence when it developed its first personal conduct policy, based on the case of Dan Wilkinson, a Cincinnati Bengals 325-pound defensive tackle accused of striking his pregnant girlfriend

(Fainaru & Fainaru-Wada, 2016). This incident, however, did not result in a suspension after a 2000 domestic violence conviction (Fainaru & Fainaru-Wada, 2016). Furthermore, Fainaru and Fainaru-Wada's analysis showed that of 48 players found guilty under the league's domestic violence policy between 2000-2014, 15 players were only suspended one game and 27 players received no suspension (2016). To put these figures into perspective, 82 percent of players who had substance abuse and performance-enhancing drug violations during the same period were suspended four or more games (Fainaru & Fainaru-Wada, 2016).

The next attempt to publicly address assault and domestic violence in the NFL happened in 2014 when the league was forced to address the issue. That year, the NFL was criticized for the way it handled three highly publicized domestic violence cases among its players. One incident exploded into a highly publicized and legal case in which the league was under investigation for allegations that it was aware of the infamous video of Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice hitting his then-fiancé in a casino elevator. This led to public outcry because the league did not react quickly by taking immediate action to punish Rice. The initial punishment administered to Rice was a two-game suspension. Sports Illustrated writer Chris Burke pointed out flaws in the penalty imposed by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell. Burke by stating that it is "far worse in the league's eyes to take some Adderall or smoke some marijuana than it is to, say, allegedly knock your fiancé out cold and then drag her unconscious body from a casino elevator" (Burke, 2014).

Arguably the most documented domestic violence case in NFL history is the infamous O.J. Simpson murder trial. At the time, Simpson was accused of killing his former wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend, Ronald Goldman. The case is still talked about today with media providing updates of Simpson's life in prison, although he was convicted of another crime.

Recently, former Cleveland Browns quarterback Johnny Manziel was in the spotlight for domestic violence allegations involving his ex-girlfriend in January 2016. At the time, the former player was also in the news for other allegations of off-field incidents involving drugs and alcohol, which took the light off the domestic violence case where he was indicted by a grand jury in April 2016. The case has since been dismissed. The NFL did not address these allegations or take any further actions to show that it is trying to end this issue within the league. In other words, it seemed that the league looked the other way for this case, which eventually dwindled down and was forgotten. Even more recently, New York Giants kicker Josh Brown was under investigation for domestic abuse and was only suspended for one game, even though he admitted to abusing his wife in his journal entries. Macur (2016) commented on how the NFL has handled this case, stating that the league has not taken any action to punish Brown the way he should be punished and has not taken any action to show its commitment to eliminating the issue, calling for others to take a stance. Annie Apple, mother of Giants cornerback Eli Apple, took a stance on social media, along with Speaker of the New York City Council Melissa Mark-Viverito, who created the domestic violence reduction social media campaign #NotAFan, which has gained support from top athletes and coaches (Macur, 2016).

Though the NFL did attempt to take action by publicly addressing the issue after being forced to do so by fans, as well as developing a Player Conduct Policy, its attempts have not been successful because domestic violence cases continue happening. The expert opinions (Abbey et al., 2001; Abbey et al., 2004; Almeida & Durkin, 1999; Barber, 2015; Barnett, 2001; Black et al., 2010; Brown & Ki, 2013; Coombs, 1998; Coombs, 2004; Coombs, 2007a; Coombs, 2007b; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Cravens et al., 2015; Curry, 1998; Fals-Stewart, 2003; Fearn-Banks, 2014; Finney, 2004; Guth &

Marsh, 2012; Horvath & Brown, 2006; Ingemann-Hanson et al., 2004; Kelley & Michela, 1980; Klostermann & Fals-Stewart, 2006; Pappas, McKenry, & Catlett, 2004; Selvaraj & Joseph, 2014; Sonderlund et al., 2014; Walsh et al., 2015; Warburton, 2006; Wilcox, Cameron, Ault and Agee, 2003; Wong & Boh, 2010) used within this section demonstrate that there is a serious communication issue in which the NFL is facing. The league needs to take effective action to prevent the issue from continuing to happen, which will help it positively rebuild its reputation. Because this continues to be a problem, there is an increased need for communication strategies and tactics, which will be discussed further into this project.

### **Domestic Violence Factors**

According to Almeida and Durkin (1999), “Domestic violence is the patterned and repeated use of coercive and controlling behavior to limit, direct, and shape a partner’s thoughts, feelings and actions” (p. 313). Although men have been victims of domestic abuse, the overwhelming majority of victims are women (Barber, 2015). There are many reasons as to why women stay in an abusive relationship. Barnett (2001) posits the idea that there are both internal and external reasons as to why women do not seek help or get out of an abusive situation. Internal factors consist of beliefs about one’s self and a situation that are constraining, while external factors consist of elements that are embedded into a situation that makes it hard to leave (Cravens et al., 2015). Examples of external factors include children or financial issues.

There are many other factors that contribute to the cause of domestic violence and sexual assault. One is the patriarchal view that the man holds the authority in a relationship and that the woman is viewed as the dependent (Walsh et al., 2015). According to Black et al. (2010), other factors that lead to domestic violence are related to social problems, including homelessness (Bassuk et al., 1997), poverty (Tolman & Raphael, 2000), and elder abuse (Harris, 1996).

Alcohol consumption is another major contributing factor linked to aggressive behavior and domestic violence. Sonderlund et al. (2014, p. 3) posits, “The pervasiveness of alcohol-related violence has been documented in a broad range of studies that have demonstrated links between alcohol consumption and: public violence, sex crimes, and domestic violence” (Finney, 2004; Ingemann-Hanson et al. 2004; Warburton, 2006; Abbey et al. 2001; Abbey, et al. 2004; Horvath & Brown, 2006; Fals-Stewart, 2003; Abuna-Salcedo & Carvalho, 2005; Klostermann & Fals-Stewart, 2006). For athletes, excessive alcohol consumption, which can lead to violent actions, is often caused by the high stress that athletes experience. Similar to the idea that professionals often experience work-related stress no matter the profession or industry, playing football on a professional level is considered an athlete’s job or career, meaning they can also experience the same amount of stress, if not more. Sonderlund et al. (2014) found that being part of a certain social group or having some type of sports identity plus having the perceived norms of that group lead to emphasized aggression when under the influence of alcohol. Sonderlund states, “The importance of social norms and group culture in violence and alcohol consumption in sports participants has also been heavily emphasized in the realm of qualitative inquiry” (Sonderlund et al. 2014, p. 6). This builds on earlier findings by other scholars (Curry, 1998; Pappas, McKenry, & Catlett, 2004). Previous research indicates that the social norms associated with the sports culture sanction “hegemonic masculinity, objectification of women, excessive alcohol use, and on-field and off-field violence” (Sonderlund et al. 2014, p. 6). Due to this desire of hegemonic masculinity, as well as the need to belong, fans who look up to a professional football player who participates in domestic violence behavior may begin to exert a similar behavior. Through extensive research, Aduato (2016) found that football game days produce a higher number of domestic violence arrests compared to other professional sports game days. According to the

author, sports fans tend to identify a bond with their favorite football player and exhibit copy-cat behaviors (Adubato, 2016). Because of this, it is important that the NFL focuses on expanding its efforts so it reaches stakeholders across the country.

Knowing some of the factors that cause a person to act with violent behavior might help the NFL create an effective prevention tactic that will begin to prevent the issue, which will also help the league gain credibility with its communication efforts from the public.

### **Crisis Communication**

Coombs (2007b) describes the steps of situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and highlight what steps an organization should follow in a time of crisis to protect its reputation. Though this is a generalized concept, the NFL should consider using this concept and tailor it to fit into an anti-domestic violence campaign that will help repair the league's damaged reputation.

### **Crisis**

As previously defined, a crisis can be defined as “an incident or event that poses a threat to the organization's reputation and viability” (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993, p.49). A crisis can hit any type of business, city, country or person and can occur at different types or in different forms (Fearn-Banks, 2014). Coombs (2007b) defines a crisis as a negative event that causes key stakeholders to determine crisis responsibility. Coombs (2004) relates SCCT with the Attribution Theory and found that “attributions of crisis responsibility are negatively related to [positive] perceptions of organizational reputation” (p. 271). The crisis for this project is that the NFL has still has not gained back its credibility through effective communication tactics and initiatives since the 2014 domestic violence issues emerged, and it still is handling domestic violence-related issues among professional football players.

### **Crisis Responsibility**

Coombs (1998) defines crisis responsibility as “the degree to which stakeholders blame the organization of the crisis event” (p. 180). The level of crisis responsibility is detrimental to the level of reputational threats and negative outcomes that can affect an organization’s image (Coombs, 2007b). The degree of responsibility in which stakeholders place on an organization is based on three components: whether or not the act was intentional, if the crisis was internal or external, and the stakeholder perceptions of whether or not the organization could have taken preventative steps to avoid the crisis from ever occurring (Brown & Ki, 2013).

When a crisis first occurs, the crisis manager must always make an initial crisis assessment to decide on the strategy or strategies the organization should use to manage the situation before consulting with the crisis management team (Coombs, 2007b). According to Guth and Marsh (2012), a crisis management team is a group of individuals within an organization whom monitor and respond to a crisis. This assessment is based upon the type of crisis that occurs, which is then based on how the crisis is being framed (Coombs, 2007b). Two levels of frames include frames in communication and frames in thought (Druckman, 2001; Coombs, 2007b). Frames in communication involve the way information is presented in a message (Yioutas & Segvic, 2003; Coombs, 2007b), while frames in thought involve the cognitive structures that people use when they process information (Druckman, 2001; Coombs, 2007b). According to Cooper (2002), the framing of a message influences how people define problems, causes, responsibility and solutions (Coombs, 2007b). The type of crisis can be considered a type of frame because it determines how much responsibility is attributed from the stakeholder to the organization (Coombs, 2007b). This type of framing is used by crisis



communication managers to shape the crisis using specific cues and messages sent to the stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

For this project, the communications manager at the NFL is the one who should reassess the strategies the NFL is using to repair its image among fans. Coombs (2007b) states that communication managers are the ones who determine which crisis response strategies will maximize reputational stability once they understand the crisis situation. Though the NFL has made progress, it was initially blamed by football fans, especially females, for their initial reaction to the crisis which was to cover up the Ray Rice incident. According to Jarvis (2016), the NFL took several weeks before communicating to the public through a press conference. The NFL should focus on framing in communication so it can frame its message as a sincere means to eliminate the issue of domestic violence.

### **Organizational Reputation**

According to Shapiro (1983), organizational reputation is associated with the prediction of an organization's future behavior, based on its past behavior (Selvaraj & Joseph, 2014). Organizational reputation is also associated with competence, effectiveness and trustworthiness (Wong & Boh, 2010; Selvaraj & Joseph, 2014).

Wilcox, Cameron, Ault and Agee (2003) suggest that honesty and accommodative strategies (Coombs, 1998) help an organization gain credibility and reduce its responsibility while trying to repair its reputation. Honesty is one of the core values of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), which provide a foundation of standards for public relations professionals to practice and use in the industry (PRSA.org; Wilcox et al., 2003). Coombs (2007b) suggests that the higher level of crisis responsibility that is attributed to an organization, the more likely the stakeholders' perceptions of the organization's reputation will decrease

(Coombs, 2007b). The belief that the messages in which the crisis communication manager uses to shape the organization's reputation can be linked to the image restoration theory and can help identify the crisis response strategies that should be used (Coombs, 2007b).

According to Brown (2016), the public does not view the NFL's progress of regaining its reputation as effective because the efforts were not expansive or thorough. Instead of being proactive about domestic abuse, the league was reactive in its initial efforts. This led football fans to put the blame on the NFL for not enforcing an anti-domestic violence campaign prior to the 2014 cases, which led to a negative reputation for the NFL. The purpose of this section is to provide a basic understanding of how an organization's reputation alters the level of difficulty the organization will face for future crises. The NFL has been handling domestic violence cases since before the O.J. Simpson case, which demonstrates its rocky background with the issue. Though it may be tough to overcome a background such as the NFL's, this project will demonstrate the best strategies in which the NFL should consider to overcome its past and repair its current image.

### **Crisis History and Prior Relational Reputation**

According to Coombs (2007b), crisis history is an organization's track record of similar crises it has endured in the past. The attribution theory posits the idea that having a history of crisis shows that an organization has an ongoing problem that has not yet been addressed or effective toward the target audience (Kelley & Michela, 1980; Martinko et al., 2004; Coombs, 2007b). The idea of crisis history is present for this project because, as previously suggested, the NFL has had numerous cases of domestic violence cases against the league's players and still faces a negative reputation years later because of its lack of effort to reduce the issue.

Prior relational reputation is the way in which an organization treats its stakeholders (Coombs, 2007b). Having a crisis history and a negative prior relational reputation can have both a direct and indirect effect on the reputational threat in which an organization faces because of a crisis, which intensifies the crisis responsibility, or the blame, that the stakeholders put toward an organization (Coombs, 2007b). As previously suggested, the NFL has been handling domestic violence cases for years but did not shed light until the 2014 domestic violence cases emerged. Due to this track record, plus having an unfavorable prior relational reputation because of these mishandled domestic violence cases, the league is only escalating the levels of responsibility to which football fans place on the organization.

### **Crisis Response Strategies**

Crisis response strategies are the answer for an organization facing a crisis. After research and consideration, I found that Coombs' (2007b) crisis situation model best supports this project because it describes Coombs' (2007b) expert opinion of situational crisis communication theory, which provides an evidence-based framework for understanding how to maximize image repair efforts when facing a crisis communication situation. According to Coombs (2007b), "Crisis response strategies are used to repair the reputation, to reduce negative affect and to prevent negative behavioral intentions" (p. 170). As crisis response strategies become more accommodative and start resolving an issue, stakeholders begin to recognize that the organization is taking responsibility for its actions (Coombs & Holladay, 2004, 2005; Coombs, 2007b).

The SCCT provides a structure that helps a communication manager decide which crisis response strategies to use, based on the type of crisis that occurs. Base responses, otherwise known as initial responses, include instructing information such as what happened, how the crisis

will affect the public and what the public should do, as well as adjusting information, which includes the organization's prevention tactics. (Coombs 2007a; Park, 2017). Another type of response is the reputation repair strategy, which includes attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoating, excusing, justification, apology, compensation, reminding, ingratiation and victimization (Coombs, 2007a; Park, 2017). Coombs (2007a) then grouped these repair strategies into four clusters, including denial, diminishment, rebuilding and bolstering. Though there are several other crisis response strategies, these three examples are ample to demonstrating what the NFL should and should not consider if a domestic violence case should arise again in the future.

Due to the NFL's delayed response toward the 2014 domestic violence cases, as well as the lack of quick anti-domestic violence initiatives, the league's reputation was damaged even further. Though the league attempted to repair its image by creating education courses ("The NFL's response to domestic violence and sexual assault," n.d.), hosting a press conference and establishing a partnership with NO MORE, its efforts have not been effective. The league should consider using an immediate base response because it appeases the public's need for information and portrays that it is sincerely concerned for the victims (Coombs, 2007b; Park, 2017).

### **Emotions and Behavioral Intentions**

Emotions are a crucial influence to stakeholder perceptions, as well as crisis responsibility. Coombs (2007b) posits the idea that the more responsibility a stakeholder attributes to an organization, the stronger feelings they have toward this organization. Often, these are feelings of anger, which diminish the feeling of sympathy (Coombs, 2007b). These negative feelings can eventually lead to stakeholders influencing others with their negative opinion, as well as severing of any interactions between the stakeholder and organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). In this case, some of the NFL's female fan base severed ties with

the league, as female viewership declined from the 2013 season to the 2014 season (Clinkscales, 2016). According to Clinkscales' (2016) research, the five professional football television broadcasters reported a 10 percent decrease between 2013 and 2014 among women ages 18-34 and 25-54. Coombs (2007b) posits the idea that the stronger a stakeholders' feelings of negativity are, the less likely they are to support an organization's behavioral intentions. Though reputation and emotions are closely related, this association is mostly due to the shared relationship to crisis responsibility, which can impact behavioral intentions through emotions and reputation (Coombs, 2007b, p. 169).

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Institutional Theory and Sport**

Professional sports institutions have become the backbone and structure for the way a club or organization operates within. Lammers and Barbour (2006) define the term "institution" as "constellations of established practices guided by enduring, formalized, rational beliefs that transcend particular organizations and situations" (p. 357). The NFL can be considered an institution, made up of organizations of teams, within the overall institution of professional sports. Each institution has a set of standards and guidelines in which the organizations have to follow in order to reach a common goal or mission. Although each department has a different mission or goal, they all help define the success of each organization.

Wang, Tseng, & Yen (2014) elaborate on this definition with the idea that decisions made within an organization are not only driven by the mission and goals of the entire organization, but also by organizational concerns, as well as social and cultural factors. "Organizations adhere to various institutional norms or rules to achieve a fit, or to integrate into their environment" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Wang, et al., 2014, p. 374). This means that the overarching

institution implements mandatory rules, guidelines, and initiatives that will help each organization reach the overall mission or goal. Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara (2015) further amplify this definition by describing it as the act of individuals gathering together to act in a complementary way under comparable circumstances by combining similar meaning and motives to these actions.

According to Washington & Patterson (2011), the focus of institutional theory has shifted from issues of stability to institutional change (Dacin, Goodstein, & Scott, 2002), institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), and institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988). Traditionally, institutional theory has examined empirical settings such as education, art museums and city reforms, but has made the transition into the sports industry within recent years (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Institutional theory and the sport industry can now be intertwined to elaborate on unanswered questions related to both the theory and the industry (Washington & Patterson, 2011). In other words, institutional theory can elaborate on unanswered questions within the sport industry, while sport research can be used to elaborate on the institutional theory. O'Brien and Slack (2004) state, "All sport organizations are embedded in organizational fields of some description, and are thus subject to attendant institutional pressures for change" (p. 36).

Washington and Patterson (2011) broke down institutional theory into five elements in which they consider important components of the theory and explained how they relate to the sport industry. The first component is isomorphism, which DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe as an inhibiting process that encourages one group within a population to mirror other groups who face similar conditions. The concept of isomorphism is used to analyze changes in the sport industry by contradicting institutional pressures with explanations to other

organizational changes (Washington & Patterson, 2011). For example, Cunningham and Ashley (2001) used the two explanations of population ecology and strategic choice to determine that there were significant differences in their job activities between institutions if there was institutional pressure. According to Washington and Patterson (2011, p. 7), isomorphism has also been used to explain other relationships, such as the relationship between State Sport Policy and the similarity of goals among sport organizations in Norway (Skille, 2009), as well as the relationship between soccer clubs in the English Premier League and its website content and design (Lamertz, Carney, & Bastien, 2008).

The second element of institutional theory is organizational field, which provides understanding to how, why and which organizations have particular responses to institutional expectations (Greenwood & Meyer, 2008). Parmentier, Fischer, and Reuber (2013) describe an organizational field as a set of organizations that have similar outputs and use similar resources. Organizational fields contribute research to the sport industry by providing scholars the opportunity to study how certain phenomena affect the industry (Washington & Patterson, 2011). For example, Washington and Ventresca (2008) examined the strategies used by the NCAA to become a dominant institution among collegiate athletics.

According to Washington and Patterson's (2011) third element, institutional logics, is made up of five dominant logics that analyze sources of interest, identities and actions. These logics include capitalism, family, bureaucracy, democracy and Christianity (Washington & Patterson, 2011). According to Reay and Hinings (2009), institutional logics "are the basis of taken-for-granted rules guiding behaviour of field-level actors, and they refer to the belief systems and related practices that predominate in an organizational field" (p. 629). Friedland and Alford (1991) argue that logics are part of an institution, so institutions within a specific field or

industry compete against each other to become the dominant institution in which structures the field in a way that gives them an advantage above the rest. These environments are often characterized by many conflicting regulations (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; Allison, 2016). For example, Allison (2016) found that the uncertainty of women's professional soccer is a result of a complicated institutional environment. Though women's professional soccer has the same goals, values and beliefs as men's professional soccer, it is still viewed as inferior and second-class because of the gendered institutional logics and "devaluation of femininities in the professional sports field" (Allison, 2016, p. 258).

The fourth element of institutional theory is institutionalization and legitimacy (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Institutionalization is the "the maintenance, disruption and change of institutions" (Vargo, Wieland, & Akaka, 2015, p. 64; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Meyer and Rowan (1977) define institutionalization as a process by which "social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action" (p.341). Organizations often institutionalize practices and processes because they desire power and authority or legitimacy (Washington & Patterson, 2011). There are few research studies based specifically on both institutional theory and the institutionalization of sports institutions. However, Allison's (2016) research found that gender inequality has become institutionalized within the sport industry based on her findings that women's professional soccer is still viewed as second class compared to men's professional soccer, even though the two sports have the same values with very similar rules and regulations.

Finally, the fifth component of institutional theory is institutional change (Washington & Patterson, 2011). In 1988, the focus of institutional theory shifted from stability and isomorphism to change and agency (Washington & Patterson, 2011). The focus then shifted again, this time to



institutional strategy, change and entrepreneurship (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Lawrence (1999) found that institutional fields and organizations are heavily influenced by two institutional strategies: establishing membership rules and creating standards of practice (Washington & Patterson, 2011).

Institutional entrepreneurs who are involved with institutional strategy also play a significant role. Institutional entrepreneurs are often referred to as creators of institutions (Weik, 2011). In other words, these are the agents who guide and lead the industry because they have the most power. It can be assumed that the NFL is considered an institutional entrepreneur of professional football because it controls the organizations within by creating and maintaining rules and guidelines in which the sport must be played. The NFL also creates the codes of conduct in which all professional football players, coaches and staff members must follow. These rules and codes of conduct are often altered. Not only are these rules and codes of conduct altered to keep the professional football players safe, but it also seems as if they are altered to maintain a certain image to the public. For example, the NFL's Personal Conduct Policy was altered to be stricter on professional football players' off-field conduct after the public outrage that emerged from the NFL's handling of the 2014 domestic violence cases. Perhaps the league might consider continuing to alter the policy by adding drafting and hiring background checks for violent backgrounds or even banning players with domestic violence backgrounds from entering the league period (Armour, 2017).

Armour's (2017) article is included in this project because she sheds light on the problem the NFL is facing. The inclusion of the article supports the problem identified, which is that the NFL has been ineffective with its communication efforts in protecting its reputation during a domestic violence crisis. Armour expands on this idea and argues that there are "No

repercussions that will at least make an owner or GM pretend he cares how someone wearing his uniform and representing his team treats women” (2017). Though the NFL has been prosperous in gaining institutional power and success, it has not been successful in utilizing its power to rebuild its reputation by creating a positive image for itself. Thus, the importance of this paper is to determine best strategies that lead to the successful development of a reputation management communication plan for a domestic violence crisis within the NFL.

### **Image Restoration Theory**

Ulmer (2012) posits the idea that to make a change, we need to develop normative theories on crisis communication that must emphasize open, collaborative communication processes. The author elaborates with the idea that organizations are ineffective with reputation management strategies when they are not honest with information and emphasize their reputation instead of allowing for transparency (Ulmer, 2012). Ulmer’s (2012) ideas lead this project into its next theoretical framework of image restoration theory.

According to Smith (2013), image restoration is based on the presumption that “both people and organizations seek to maintain or rebuild a positive reputation” (p. 145). This theory was developed by two communication concepts which are relevant to this research project, including apologia and sociology (Coombs, 2007b). Apologia is a speech in which the goal is not to apologize, but rather to reaffirm credibility and provide justification for the actions of a person or an organization (Jarvis, 2016; Ware, 2010). According to Hearit and Brown (2004), apologia is considered successful if the person apologizing acknowledges and justifies their association to the offense, as well as convey that they are taking or have taken the necessary steps to fix the issue (Jarvis, 2016).

Organizations use communication strategies to explain behavior and restore image (Benoit, 1995; Botan & Hazleton, 2006). Benoit (1995) identified five image restoration strategies in which the NFL might consider when moving forward with its image repair campaign. These strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of the event, corrective action and mortification. Denial is when an organization claims there is no crisis by either stating it did not perform the act in question or shifting the blame to another actor of the crisis (Coombs, 2006). Coombs (2006) states that evasion of responsibility is when an organization attempts to reduce responsibility for the crisis using provocation, defeasibility, accident and good intentions.

The most complex strategy, reducing offensiveness of the event, is when the organization makes the crisis appear more positive (Coombs, 2006). Coombs states that there are six different techniques in which communication managers use to do so (2006). The first technique is bolstering, which is when an organization reinforces its good traits. Organizations often minimize the level of seriousness, which is the second technique. The third technique is differentiation, which is when an organization compares its crisis to other crises by stating that its crisis is not as bad as other similar cases. When an organization explains that the crisis was not related to achieving a larger goal, it is using the fourth technique, which is transcendence. The fifth technique, attack accuser, demonstrates that an organization may attack the credibility of the accuser to relieve the situation. Finally, the sixth technique is compensation, which is when an organization offers some form of aid to the victims (Coombs, 2006).

Benoit's (1995) fourth image restoration strategy, corrective action, is demonstrated when an organization takes steps to solve the problem and prevent a repetition of the crisis (Coombs, 2006). This is where the NFL did not take enough action because its efforts to

eliminate the issue have not been expansive or thorough, according to Brown (2016). Finally, Benoit's fifth image restoration strategy of mortification is when an organization accepts responsibility and apologizes for its actions (Coombs, 2006). This step has not yet been taken by the NFL as part of its domestic violence reduction campaign efforts.

Jarvis (2016) argues that an external common ground between NFL fans and the NFL needs to be built to repair the league's image. Cheney (1983) provides six approaches to build common ground between internal stakeholders and the organization's identity (Jarvis, 2016). These include, "expressing concern for the individual; highlighting the individual's contribution to the organization; expressing shared values between the individual and the organization; advocating for the company sponsored activities; highlighting praise by outsiders; and, directly quoting employee dedication and affection for the company" (Jarvis, 2016, p. 70). Though the NFL has used some of these approaches to rebuild its image, there are many more strategies and elements it can use to have a successful anti-domestic violence campaign. These strategies and elements will be discussed further in this project.

Marcus and Goodman (1991) developed the accommodative-defensive continuum, which posits the idea that accommodative responses accept responsibility, admit the problem and take action to fix the problem (Coombs, 2006). According to Botan and Hazleton (2006), defensive responses insist there is no problem, mitigating strategies show concern for those who are threatened by the crisis and aggravation strategies aim to protect the organization's image during a crisis. In this case, the NFL responded to the 2014 domestic violence cases by using aggravation strategies such as a partnership with NO MORE, a community of organizations that work together to end domestic violence and sexual assault (NoMore.org, n.d.), and altering the Personal Conduct Policy.

### **Grunig's Theory of Excellence in Public Relations**

The Theory of Excellence provides a framework for how public relations departments can help an organization best communicate to its publics, as well as how to have effective management within the organization (Grunig & Grunig, 2000). Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier (2006) provided specific tenants of excellent public relations, stating it must be managerial, strategic, symmetrical diverse, and ethical.

Four models comprise the Theory of Excellence. The first is the press agent or publicity model where public relations departments assume a propaganda function. This is often achieved by disseminating inaccurate information in favor of an organization to persuade the public. The second is the public-information model where public relations practitioners are mainly concerned about disseminating information to the public. The third is a two-way asymmetrical model in which public relations departments have more functions than the persuasion tactics of press agent and information models. The fourth model is the two-way symmetrical model in which public relations practitioners seek to balance the interests of an organization with its publics (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). This model is research-based and uses communication to manage conflicts and build long-term relationships. The first two models are considered one-way communication models, while the two-way asymmetrical and symmetrical models are two-way communication models (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier (2006) state that the excellent modern public relations departments are more likely to follow the two-way symmetrical. Two-way communication is used to develop an organization's messages in a way that balances the interest of both an organization and its publics. Dozier and Broom (2006) state, "Two-way communication means that the public relations function acts as the eyes and ears of the organization, as well as its

official voice” (p. 154). Grunig & Grunig (1992) also show that the implementation of the two-way symmetrical model makes an organization more effective and is considered the most ethical model in public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). The two-way symmetrical model is seen as the most ethical in public relations (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006).

This theory can be used to demonstrate how the NFL’s initial reaction was an example of one-way communication, whereas two-way communication was needed. Initially, the NFL responded to the crisis using press conferences to inform the public that internal changes were taking place, such as reviewing the Personal Conduct Policy and hiring expert personnel. This was a way to manipulate the public into believing it was taking effective action that would eliminate domestic violence cases within the NFL. It did not allow for the public to respond and give feedback, even though the public’s opinions were made clear via news reports and social media posts. Wallace-McRee & Lee (2016) posit the idea, “The Internet has contributed to the development and use of numerous communication mediums, including fan-centered message boards, blogs, and online fan content featured on many sport teams’ websites” (Wallace-McRee & Lee, 2016, p. 262). The NFL should have immediately used tactics, such as a social media campaign, that would allow for professional football players, as well as the general public, to interact so they could really understand that the NFL’s domestic violence reduction attempts were sincere and not just a way to repair its image after receiving negative backlash from the public.

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

In addition to these theories, this project will also incorporate principles from crisis communication and crisis management. Pearson and Mitroff (1993) defined an organizational crisis as “an incident or event that poses a threat to the organization's reputation and viability”

(p.49). A crisis is also described by Fearn-Banks (2014) as “a major occurrence with a potential negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name” (p. 2). As Fearn-Banks (2014) explained, a crisis could hit large corporations, small businesses, cities, countries and even individuals, and it could occur at any time and in many different forms, like fire, terrorist attacks, or other events that might damage the image of an organization or interrupt the businesses’ normal functions.

Crisis management is “a process of strategic planning for a crisis or negative turning point, a process that removes some of the risk and uncertainty from the negative occurrence and thereby allows the organization to be in greater control of its own destiny” (Fearn-Banks, 2014, p. 2). If principles of effective crisis communication are practiced, then crisis management may bring an organization a more positive reputation than before the crisis occurred (Fearn-Banks, 2014).

Coombs (2004) elaborates on this idea with the concept of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which moves past the post-hoc analysis and focuses more on establishing predictive theories (Sisco, 2012). Through extensive research, Coombs found that “attributions of crisis responsibility are negatively related to [positive] perceptions of organizational reputation” (2004, p. 271). The SCCT demonstrates that the three factors that serve as potential threats to an organization are its responsibility for the crisis, its crisis history and its prior relational reputation (Sisco, 2012). Coombs (2007b) elaborates further, stating that the crisis history and prior reputation can have both a direct and indirect effect on the reputation threat that comes from the crisis (p. 167; Sisco, 2012).

The SCCT also posits that crisis communication managers should base crisis response strategies to match the level of crisis responsibility the organization or person must possess.

These crisis response strategies can be broken up into three categories: deny, diminish and rebuild (Coombs, 2007b). Coombs (2007b) concludes that crisis communication managers should first assess the situation and then choose the appropriate response strategy based on the SCCT factors (Sisco, 2012). Since the domestic violence incidents became a major crisis for the NFL, it is important to incorporate principles of crisis communication and crisis management in this project.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, the NFL is considered a professional sport institution because it controls every aspect that comes with the sport of football, as well as the organizations that operate within. Even with all the power it holds, the league has not been effective with the use of its institutional power to rebuild its reputation and create a positive and sincere image for itself. This leads to an even bigger communication problem for the NFL, one of which is reputation management.

This goal of this chapter was to analyze existing literature to determine the best strategies that will lead to a successful development of a reputation management communication plan for a domestic violence crisis within the NFL. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the image restoration theory provides strategies the NFL should consider to rebuild its image after the domestic violence issues emerged. These strategies should be used immediately after a crisis occurs. However, it is not too late for NFL teams to reinforce further domestic violence crisis communication campaign efforts. Grunig's Theory of Excellence exhibits the importance of effective management using four models, which include the press agent or publicity model, public-information model, two-way asymmetrical model and two-way symmetrical model.



## **Chapter Three: Conceptual Model**

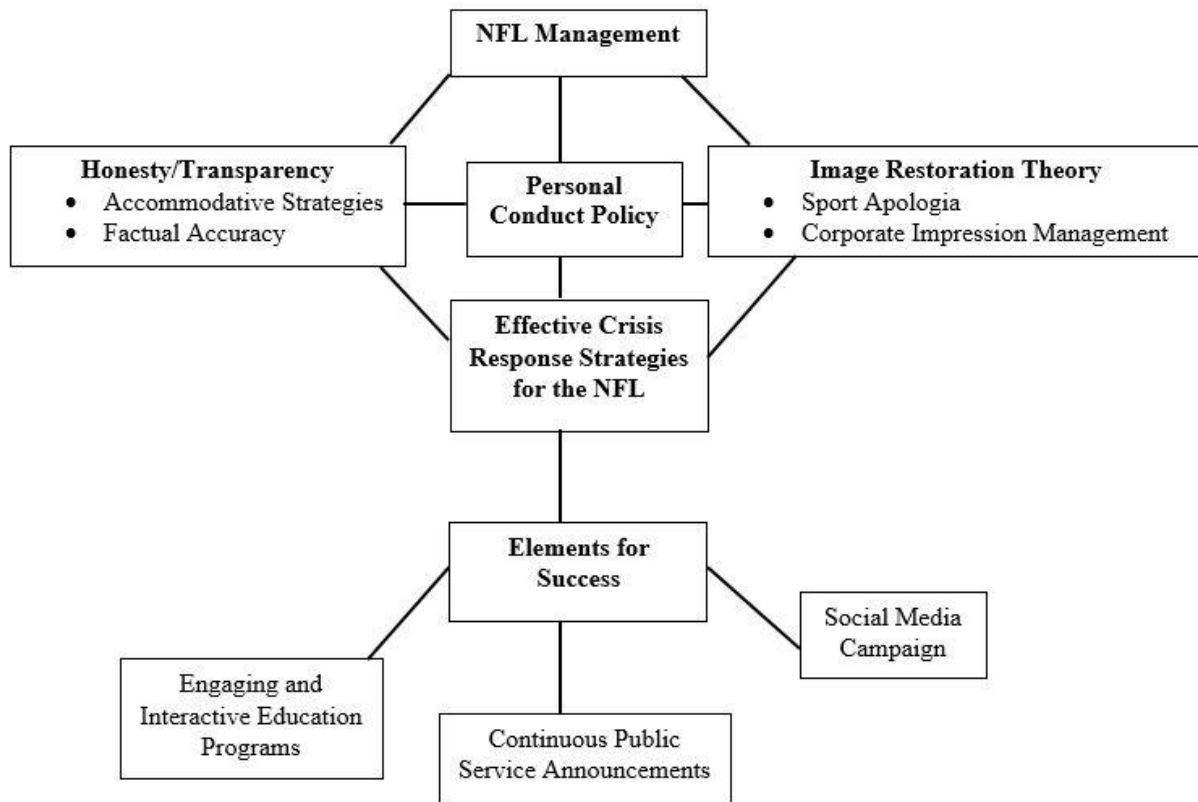
### **Introduction**

Conceptual models provide clarity and guidance for the implementation of a concept or framework (Buyarski et al., 2015). For this project, a conceptual model is used to determine what effective crisis management communication tactics and practices the NFL should implement to receive positive feedback from the public during times of crises. Figure 1.1 depicts effective strategies and elements for success in the development of a reputation management communication plan for a domestic violence crisis within the NFL.

### **Components of Conceptual Model (Figure 1.1)**

The conceptual model illustrated in Figure 1.1 indicates the crisis response strategies and elements that lead to a successful crisis communication plan. A review of Coombs' (2007b) crisis communication literature, along with other literature from research articles and studies (Fox, Corr, Gadd and Sim, 2016; Klimes-Dougan, Wright and Klingbeil, 2016; Ware & Linkugel, 2010), expert opinions (Coombs, 1998; Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2007b; Guth & Marsh, 2012; Hearit & Brown, 2004; Tata & Prasad, 2015; Ucock, 2006; Ulmer, 1997; Wilcox, Cameron, Ault and Agee, 2003; Wallace-McRee & Lee, 2016), dissertations (Jarvis, 2016) and news reports (Clinkscapes, 2016; Macur, 2016) indicate that honesty and the image restoration theory provide useful concepts and theoretical frameworks for creating effective crisis response strategies. These concepts and theories are the beginning components of the conceptual model of this study and contribute to determining what effective crisis management communication tactics and practices the NFL should implement to repair its image so it receives positive feedback from the public during times of crises. The conceptual model also demonstrates resulting components that become elements of success for anti-domestic violence crisis communication plans.

Figure 1.1 Crisis Situation Model for the NFL



**NFL Management**

It is commonly known that a communication plan must always begin with the communication management team. According to Guth and Marsh (2012), a crisis management team is a group of individuals within an organization whom monitor and respond to a crisis.

A typical crisis communication team consists of the CEO or designated crisis manager, whom is “delegated decision-making authority” (Guth & Marsh, 2012). The rest of the team would consist of a legal counsel, public relations counsel, financial counsel, appropriate technical experts and support personnel (Guth & Marsh, 2012). In this case, Commissioner Roger Goodell would serve as the crisis manager who holds authority to make decisions, as well as speak to the public. The legal counsel typically consists of lawyers, while the public relations

counsel typically consists of public relations practitioners who advise how to best communicate with stakeholders, as well as advises the crisis management team on public opinion and potential stakeholder reactions (Guth & Marsh, 2012). Guth and Marsh (2012) state that the financial counsel generally consists of an accountant or financial officer within the company, while the appropriate technical experts vary based on the crisis but are individuals who can assist in the resolution of the crisis. Unique to the NFL would be the team owners who would likely have a seat at the table. Finally, the support personnel may consist of a variety of support services including secretaries, information technology assistants and artists/illustrators (Guth & Marsh, 2012). A collaboration of these NFL personnel, whom would make up the crisis management team, will help create a crisis communication plan which would repair the NFL's reputation.

### **Honesty/Transparency**

Wilcox, Cameron, Ault and Agee (2003) provide advice for how to communicate during a crisis. One of their suggestions is for an organization to be honest to its public and key stakeholders. It is important to make sure an organization is not obscuring any facts or trying to mislead the audience (Wilcox et al., 2003). Honesty is one of the core values of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), which provides a foundation of standards for public relations professionals to practice and use in the public relations industry (PRSA.org; Wilcox et al., 2003).

**Accommodative Strategies.** Though this may seem obvious, various organizations tend to respond to crises in different ways. Coombs (1998) states that crisis communication responses vary because each organization may use a different continuum, which may include attacking the accuser, denial, excuse, justification, ingratiation, corrective action and a full apology, as previously discussed in this project (Wilcox et al., 2003). Coombs (1998) also notes that if the

defensive strategies (attacking the accuser, denial, excuse) are not effective with repairing an organization's reputation, then they may want to consider focusing on the accommodative strategies (ingratiation, corrective action, full apology) (Wilcox, et al., 2003).

Organizations sometimes do not use accommodative strategies because of culture or other constraints (Wilcox et al., 2003). The University of Missouri's Glen T. Cameron says that organizations sometimes do not adopt accommodative strategies because management believes the public is in the wrong, moral neutrality when two publics want the organization to take sides, legal constraints, regulatory constraints, prohibition against an accommodative stance, or because of possible conflict between communication management on what specific strategies to use (Wilcox et al., 2003). Fans have made it very clear that they are not satisfied with the NFL's communication efforts for the domestic violence cases because the communication efforts have not been thorough or expansive (Brown, 2016), which is why the NFL cannot choose to believe they are wrong, based on the amount of criticism it has received. To successfully repair its reputation, the NFL must use accommodative strategies to show its sincerity to preventing domestic violence through strategies that include ingratiation, corrective action and a public apology.

**Honesty.** To reduce domestic violence, the NFL should consider using the accommodative strategies, rather than the defensive strategy it used as its initial response to the crisis. When the 2014 domestic violence cases first emerged in 2014 with the Ray Rice video, the NFL initially used the denial strategy, which led to the decline of the brand's positive image. Accommodative strategies also include honesty, which is what the NFL should have used since the scandal emerged. The NFL initially used denial, followed by overall impression, before "coming clean" and addressing the situation and what action it would take to resolve the issue.

Moving forward, the NFL needs to be honest with every scandal that arises, as well as with its intentions for any image-restoration initiative it implements.

**Transparency.** The term “transparency” coincides with the definition of honesty and can be described as being seen through in terms of an organization’s actions, rather than being hidden (Ucok, 2006). In other words, transparency is when an organization does not hide its actions or important information from its key stakeholders. This is a very important step in a communication plan because it helps an organization gain credibility by not hiding anything from its audience or the media. The NFL’s initial reaction to hide the fact that it was aware of the Ray Rice video showed the NFL was not being transparent, which is what put the league under investigation. However, the league did attempt to demonstrate its transparency by using key words, such as “transparent, effective and accountable” to frame its narrative about the updated Personal Conduct Policy (Jarvis, 2016), which will be discussed further in this chapter. This was a step in the right direction toward rebuilding the NFL’s image and credibility. The NFL should continue being transparent in all its communication efforts to prevent domestic violence, otherwise it will not regain trust from its fans.

### **Personal Conduct Policy**

One of the major criticisms that the NFL faced was centered on Goodell’s inconsistent Personal Conduct Policy implementation (Jarvis, 2016). According to the NFL’s Personal Conduct Policy, “While criminal activity is clearly outside the scope of permissible conduct, and persons who engage in criminal activity will be subject to discipline, the standard of conduct for persons employed in the NFL is considerably higher” (“NFL Personal Conduct Policy,” n.d., p. 1). Before taking disciplinary action, the initial steps include a formal clinical evaluation, which could result in education programs, counseling or treatment programs, as well as a formal

investigation led by law enforcement and legal experts. Disciplinary actions include fines, suspensions, or banishment from the league, as well as the potential for a probation period. “The specifics of the disciplinary response will be based on the nature of the incident, the actual or threatened risk to the participant and others, any prior or additional misconduct (whether or not criminal charges were filed), and other relevant factors,” (“NFL Personal Conduct Policy,” n.d., p. 2). If an NFL player or any personnel are repeat offenders, the commissioner will determine the timing and nature of the discipline, based on several factors including, but not limited to, the severity of the initial charge and later charge, the facts underlying the later charge, the length of time between the initial offense and later charge and the player or employee’s compliance with counseling and other programs” (“NFL Personal Conduct Policy,” n.d., p. 2). The commissioner will then review the matter and make appropriate adjustments before a hearing is scheduled.

Though this policy has been adjusted since the 2014 domestic violence cases with enhanced discipline (Jarvis, 2016), multiple other domestic violence cases have still occurred, showing inconsistencies with the conduct’s implementation. As previously mentioned in this project, other cases have included players such as former Cleveland Browns quarterback Johnny Manziel, Denver Broncos safety Will Parks and Dallas Cowboys running back Ezekiel Elliott, who is currently under investigation. The NFL does not have any rule or policy established that prevents players or staff who have violent records to be hired or drafted into the league. Therefore, it is important that as the NFL develops policies regarding domestic violence, it understands that it must consider the principles of honesty, transparency and theory before developing how it is going to communicate its policies to its stakeholders. To successfully repair its image, the NFL needs to create trust between the league and its stakeholders before it can move forward with a positive reputation.

### **Image Restoration Theory**

The image restoration theory provides the theoretical basis for using apologia and corporate impression management to repair the NFL's image by changing the public's attitudes and opinions so the public views the league as sincere in its actions toward reducing domestic violence. This component of the conceptual model demonstrates why effective apologia and corporate impression management will positively rebrand the NFL from the public's point of view.

**Sport communication apologia.** According to Jarvis (2016) and Ware & Linkugel (2010), apologia is a speech in which the goal is not to apologize, but rather to reaffirm credibility and provide justification for the actions of a person or an organization. Hearit and Brown (2004) posit the idea that apologia is considered successful if the person apologizing acknowledges and justifies his or her association to the offense, as well as convey that he or she is taking or has taken the necessary steps to fix the issue (Jarvis, 2016).

With apologia, organizations use many of the strategies created by Coombs (2006) to fix their image. For example, when an athlete uses the bolstering strategy, they may emphasize their community efforts to show they support the local community and want to make a change because they are speaking to fans who view the sport of football in a favorable way and believe that player conduct off the field is just as important as it is on the field. When describing apologia and how it relates to a corporate organization, Jarvis (2016) states, "scholars can analyze public statements made by professional athletes and commissioners as a form of corporate apologia because there is often a large team of people who work to produce the script and considerations are made for the larger corporation and its reputation beyond just the individual" (p. 11). While the organization may not have any direct responsibility with the

scandal, the organization must often make a public statement to defend the parties involved if the parties are presumed to have any level of involvement (Jarvis, 2016). This is why the NFL should have made a statement as soon as the Ray Rice videos were leaked, rather than trying to deny its knowledge. Previous research indicates that there is no generalized image repair strategy to use during the apology stage because each case is unique and may vary from any other crises. However, when an organization fails to reinforce its support for its own values, it is extremely problematic for its continued success and can make it difficult to adapt to the external pressures and demands (Jarvis, 2016).

**Corporate Impression Management.** The impression management theory attempts to assure that the image of a corporation that is perceived by an audience is accurate (Tata & Prasad, 2015). According to Ulmer (1997), an organization's legitimacy is based on the level of congruence between the values signified by the organization's actions and the accepted norms within the environment (Jarvis, 2016). An organization must justify its intentions, which may be doubted by stakeholders, to overcome a crisis (Jarvis, 2016). For example, one of the steps the NFL took to show its commitment to reducing domestic violence was donating financial contributions to domestic violence organizations, however the league did not clarify how much it would contribute, which caused criticisms from the press and fans. According to Jarvis (2016), this was a strategic move the NFL purposely made so it would receive less criticism because the public would not know exactly how much the league was donating toward this anti-domestic violence effort.

Cheney (1983) provides six approaches to build common ground between internal stakeholders and the organization's identity, which include, "expressing concern for the individual; highlighting the individual's contribution to the organization; expressing shared



values between the individual and the organization; advocating for the company sponsored activities; highlighting praise by outsiders; and, directly quoting employee dedication and affection for the company” (Jarvis, 2016, p. 70).

Jarvis (2016) argues that these six approaches can expand to build external common ground between NFL fans and the NFL. Though the league has used some of Cheney’s approaches to repair its image by creating domestic violence hotlines and partnering with NO MORE, there are many more strategies and elements it can use to have a successful anti-domestic violence campaign, resulting in a repaired image. These strategies will be discussed further in this chapter.

### **Elements for Success Component of Conceptual Model**

The following elements will contribute to a successful anti-domestic violence crisis communication plan the NFL should consider to successfully repair its reputation. Some of these elements are currently part of the NFL’s anti-domestic violence campaign, but have not been effective. A portion of the following elements will expand upon ways the NFL can increase the effectiveness of these initiatives.

#### **Engaging and Interactive Programs**

When the 2014 domestic violence cases emerged, the NFL created a mandatory education program in which all members of the NFL, including players, coaches, staff and league and club personnel were mandated to participate. The program focused specifically on domestic violence, child abuse and sexual assault (“The NFL’s response to domestic violence and sexual assault,” n.d.). The goal of these mandatory education programs was to help attendees understand behaviors associated with domestic violence and sexual assault, as well as warning signs associated with this issue. The programs also focused on bystander intervention tactics so

attendees understood how to intervene in a domestic violence situation if they ever saw signs of abuse (“The NFL's response to domestic violence and sexual assault,” n.d.).

The league relaunched a second round of the mandatory education program in July 2015. Professional football players and personnel were mandated to participate in the program during Training Camp, while club and league personnel participated in fall 2015. According to “The NFL’s response to domestic violence and sexual assault,” the 2015 programs built upon the 2014 programs, adding interactive and thought-provoking educational messages, as well as testimonials from domestic abuse survivors, sexual assault survivors and verbal abuse perpetrators. These sessions also addressed Driving Under the Influence (DUI) using testimonials from current and former NFL players who were involved in DUI situations in order to stress the importance of accountability and responsibility for preventing such tragedy (“The NFL's response to domestic violence and sexual assault,” n.d.).

Though these education programs seemed to be a great start toward rebuilding the league’s tarnished image, the NFL has not continued to mandate these courses. The NFL’s 2016 Social Responsibility Report states more than 6,000 team employees and personnel participated in domestic violence educational programs. This does not state participation of any professional football players, who seemingly are the most common perpetrators, as opposed to NFL league and club staff or personnel. Fox, Corr, Gadd and Sim (2016) found that educational programs for “young people” are effective in changing attitudes toward domestic violence, but that having one-off programs (additional courses or programs) would eventually help change their behaviors toward domestic violence.

Because the NFL has not continued to mandate domestic violence education courses for professional football players and has not pursued any of its initial anti-domestic violence

campaign tactics, it can be assumed that the NFL is not committed to reducing the issue, even though multiple cases continue to occur within the league. Because these cases continue, most recently with the investigation of Ezekiel Elliot, fans have the perception that the league does not care about domestic violence (Macur, 2016) which does not help repair its reputation.

In addition to continuing and maintaining domestic violence educational programs for NFL players, the league may also want to consider creating a domestic violence education program which travels the country and is open for public participation. This way, the league can show its sincere commitment to reducing the issue, not only with its players, but with its fans.

### **Continuous Public Service Announcements**

According to NoMore.org, NO MORE is a community of organizations that works together to end domestic violence and sexual assault. The NFL initially partnered with NO MORE after the 2014 domestic violence cases emerged to create a public service announcement (PSA) which aired during NFL broadcasts throughout the 2014 season, as well as during the 2015 Super Bowl (NoMore.org, n.d.). It was also advertised on a billboard in New York City's Times Square in October 2014. The television commercial PSA used current professional football players to share the message of standing up and speaking out against domestic violence. A spinoff series, "Speechless," showed unscripted outtakes from the original NO MORE PSA shoot. Footage showed raw emotions from the players who participated in the campaign to shed light on how difficult it is to talk about the painful, hidden issue of domestic violence. The goal of the "Speechless" campaign was to reveal the impact the issue has on everyone, highlighting the idea that our society needs to start the conversation to end the issue for good. (NoMore.org, n.d.).

Similar to the domestic violence education programs previously discussed in this chapter, the NFL has not continued creating and airing these NO MORE PSAs. Through extensive research, Klimes-Dougan, Wright and Klingbeil (2016) used simulated television and billboards advertisements to measure the effectiveness of health awareness PSAs. The authors found that billboards were not quite as effective as television PSAs. They also found that billboard PSAs were more effective when they limited the messaging of the advertisement. The NFL should consider expanding its PSA reach to billboards and radio announcements throughout the country. The NFL should also consider using at least one to two NO MORE anti-domestic violence television PSAs during each NFL broadcast every season.

### **Social Media Campaign**

Social media is a common phenomenon that is taking over the way the public receives its news, as well as how the public communicates with friends and family. It is a way to quickly spread a certain message to reach a large audience for them to either become aware or think or act in a certain way (behavioral effect). According to Dart (2009), the Internet provides access to large amounts of media and news coverage through multiple devices that allow consumers to directly interact with content as they choose (Wallace-McRee & Lee, 2016). “The Internet has contributed to the development and use of numerous communication mediums, including fan centered message boards, blogs, and online fan content featured on many sport teams’ website,” (Wallace-McRee & Lee, 2016, p. 262). The authors compared viewership among other sports leagues and found that NFL fans use more social media than any other fans in other sports leagues (Pegoraro, 2010).

As another step toward rebuilding its credibility and image, the NFL should consider creating a social media anti-domestic violence campaign to spread awareness of the issue. With

the NFL being such a large organization, it could reach a larger audience than through television or radio advertisements. Wallace-McRee and Lee (2016) posit the idea that the NFL and its clubs should focus on developing content based on three guidelines. The first guideline states that the content should involve newsworthy topics. Considering the domestic violence issues within the NFL have been a popular topic in the media, it would make sense to post content that shows the NFL is sincerely committed to reducing the issue and spreading awareness. The second guideline states that the content should positively contribute to current brand image and message. Finally, the third guideline states that content should encourage fan interaction. Similar to the goal of the NO MORE campaign, the NFL needs to create an anti-domestic violence social media campaign that creates a conversation of the sensitive issue of domestic violence. Again, posting such content would show the public that the league is sincere with its efforts to end the issue.

### **Summary**

This chapter has applied literature on developing a successful crisis communication plan to create a conceptual model that can be used to repair the NFL's reputation so fans begin to view the league's anti-domestic violence initiatives as sincere. The conceptual model showed the most effective strategies that lead to the successful development of a reputation management communication plan for a domestic violence crisis within the NFL. The league should consider using honesty, along with the image restoration theory, to be effective with its crisis response strategies and should consider using engaging and interactive programs, continuous public service announcements and a social media campaign as elements for success during a time of crisis.

## **Chapter Four: Recommendations and Implications for Practitioners**

### **Introduction**

The evidence-based research analyzed for this study addressed the continuing issue of how the NFL can use a crisis communication plan to positively change its reputation during a crisis. Specifically, this study identifies the communication strategies and elements of success that will positively change the NFL's reputation during alleged domestic violence crisis. The systematic review for this study included analyzing scholarly research studies, expert opinions and news reports. The research question for this study helped identify new and emerging information, as well as any gaps in the literature regarding a crisis communication plan and strategies the NFL should consider in order to repair its reputation. The research question guided the research, which included scholarly research studies (Aduvato, 2016; Wallace-McRee & Lee, 2016), expert opinions (Baker & Sax, 2012; Brown, 2016; Coombs, 2007b; Smith, 2013; Ulmer, 2012), news reports (Armour, 2017; Cohn, 2014) and dissertations (Jarvis, 2016).

This chapter will identify recommendations that provide the NFL with effective strategies and best practices to create a successful crisis communication plan that will repair the NFL's reputation during a domestic violence crisis. Recommendations for the NFL to consider include developing policies related specifically to domestic violence, creating additional education programs for NFL players, staff, personnel and stakeholders, expanding the NFL's public service announcement outreach and creating a social media campaign. Though the NFL has created initiatives aimed to prevent domestic violence, these efforts have not been successful with positively changing its stakeholder perceptions of the league. The crisis communication recommendations in this chapter will assist the NFL in having a better chance of repairing its image and reputation. The evidence-based literature reviewed in Chapter Two supports the

reasoning for why the NFL should consider utilizing the suggested recommendations when creating a crisis communication plan to repair its image.

The challenges associated with the NFL's inability to involve stakeholders, focus on the goal of repairing its reputation, making the commitment to change and suggestions for additional research are also discussed. Chapter Five, the final chapter of this study will discuss any gaps in the literature, suggest future research, identify any unanticipated findings, and will conclude by summarizing the significance of this project to both scholarship and practice. It will make a contribution to the field of crisis communication for any organization facing a domestic violence crisis and looking to repair its reputation.

### **Key Recommendations**

#### **Recommendation One – Develop Policies Regarding Domestic Violence**

**Prohibit the Hiring and Drafting of Players and Staff with Violent Records.** Since the 2014 NFL domestic violence cases emerged, the public has continued seeing reports about professional football players and domestic violence. Though the league has a Player Conduct Policy that attempts to eliminate any criminal or violent activity among professional football players off the field by establishing punishments for such actions, it can be considered assumed that the league is not implementing this policy due to the issues that continue to rise. By implementing the Player Conduct Policy, the NFL holds the power and responsibility to ensure the policy remains up to date and is consistent with the best practices that will prevent certain off-field behaviors (Brown, 2016). One of the benefits of enforcing this policy will reduce reports such as Armour (2017) who writes, the NFL drafted at least a dozen players who have been accused of physical or sexual assaults during the 2017 NFL Draft. Nowhere in the NFL's Player Conduct Policy does it state that there will be repercussions for players who are involved

in such activity. There is also no sort of penalty for a team that drafts or signs a player with a domestic violence background (Armour, 2017).

The NFL should enforce a policy that bans each of the 32 organizations from drafting or signing players with domestic violence backgrounds, as well as players with other criminal backgrounds. Armour (2017) suggested that the punishments should be severe enough that organizations which draft or sign a player with a domestic violence background either lose a draft pick for the next year or have to pay a hefty fine. While these efforts may not eliminate all the issues of domestic violence, it will show the league's commitment to eliminating this issue, which will project a positive light onto the NFL's image. The NFL should communicate this policy to its stakeholders and assure each draft year that it is being followed.

**More Severe Consequences.** The NFL's current Player Conduct Policy mandates a six-game suspension without pay for the first domestic violence offense and a lifetime ban for a second offense (Brown, 2016). However, players can apply for reinstatement after being banned from play for only one year (Brown, 2016). One question that arises is, why should the perpetrators be allowed to ever come back to the NFL? A one-year banishment seems lenient. If the one-year banishment must be included into the punishment, rather than a multi-year or lifetime banishment without the ability to apply for reinstatement, the league should mandate that the perpetrator seek help by taking domestic violence educational classes.

While there may be no way to completely prevent domestic violence, the NFL should show its support and commitment to preventing the issue through consistent enforcement of policy. As previously mentioned, the NFL should create a policy that does not allow perpetrators to apply for reinstatement. One of the criticisms the league faced was the public's disapproval for the way the commissioner initially responded to the 2014 domestic violence cases, which gave



fans the perception that the league did not care about domestic violence because of its leniency and lack of communication efforts.

The league was also criticized for its inconsistent, and at times, mildly severe policy (Jarvis, 2016). After the league updated its policy to what it currently is to date, the NFL continued to reiterate the importance of establishing policies to alleviate the blame placed on the league, as well as reinforce the nature of the NFL's rhetoric (Jarvis, 2016). By stressing the importance of policies, Goodell could purposely position the NFL to resemble the judicial system, which means it has similar expectations as the system (Jarvis, 2016). Similar to the harsh punishments that the judicial system delivers for domestic violence cases, the NFL needs to enforce much harsher punishments for players who engage in domestic violence behavior. By showing its commitment to preventing the issue of domestic violence, it will show the public that it is trying, which would lead to a better public perception of the NFL's image. Again, this could be accomplished by harsher penalties, more consistent administration of penalties, and more consistent communication of policy enforcement with stakeholders.

### **Recommendation Two – Create Additional Engaging and Interactive Education Programs**

**Training Programs for NFL Players, Staff and Personnel.** The NFL established a mandatory education program in which all NFL personnel, players and staff members were required to take to become more aware of the issue of domestic violence, as well as how to respond to the issue. This education program was only reinforced for the 2014 and 2015 seasons (“The NFL's response to domestic violence and sexual assault,” n.d.), which could be part of the reason domestic violence cases still occur.

The NFL should continue to mandate these educational programs for players, staff and personnel. It should be required that all newly-hired members of the NFL participate in multiple

education programs before the start of their first season in the league. In addition, the league should build upon the education programs from the 2014 and 2015 seasons by incorporating engaging and interactive lessons into the courses. Interactive learning, or learning by doing, helps increase the understanding of a certain lesson or topic. These educational programs were originally intended for NFL players, staff, personnel, family and friends to create awareness, as well as prevent domestic violence (Brown, 2016). According to Jones (2014), the specific goal of the education programs is to create basic knowledge about domestic violence, as well as the understanding that players and staff must hold each other accountable to prevent future incidents (Brown, 2016). By incorporating interactivity such as demonstrations and pseudo-events, NFL players, staff and personnel might better understand and grasp the importance of domestic violence awareness. The more understanding and awareness a player has of the issue, the less likely they are to engage in the issue. By demonstrating the NFL's commitment to reducing domestic violence among players, key stakeholders are likely to change their negative attitude and opinion of the NFL's reputation.

Another option is for all players to participate in an online domestic violence abuse training course in which a short quiz is posted at the end of each module, and each player must pass by a certain percent. A certificate of completion and pass would be awarded. This would be followed by an annual online booster course. This type of training is mandated by organizations to meet some of its Title IX, Cleary Act requirements. For example, Bowling Green State University mandates that employees must complete two annual compliance training courses on workplace harassment fundamentals and the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act.

**Training Programs for Stakeholders.** Similar to the education programs that were discussed in the previous section, the NFL should host domestic violence education programs for

its stakeholders. Though the official players' wives club suggested expanding the education program outreach beyond just players, staff and personnel (Brown, 2016), the general public has still not received the opportunity to participate in these courses. Rather than requiring payments from the wages of a player who was in violation of the Player Conduct Policy be given to a domestic violence transitional compensation fund for domestic violence survivors as suggested in Brown's (2016) research, the NFL should put half the player's lost wages toward a nationwide domestic violence education program. The education program could either be one traveling tour, or it could host programs at multiple sites around the country during one period. To increase the financial contribution, the league could also consider budgeting a portion of its annual revenue specifically for a nationwide domestic violence education program. According to Cohn (2014), the NFL could most certainly afford a program like this, given the league's revenue was over \$9 billion in 2013 and will most likely increase to \$25 billion by 2027, according to Commissioner Goodell (Brown, 2016). By creating a domestic violence education awareness program offered to the public, the NFL will show its sincerity toward preventing the issue of domestic violence and alter the current opinions and beliefs from its fans so that it rebuilds its reputation in a positive light.

### **Recommendation Three – Expand the NFL's Public Service Announcement and Philanthropic Support Outreach**

It is important for the NFL to reach out to an extremely large audience to convey its message and can do so by expanding its current public service announcement (PSA) efforts. The NFL has not continued its efforts of carrying out PSAs to convey its message about domestic violence awareness and prevention. Through extensive research, Adubato (2016) found that football game days produce a higher number of domestic violence arrests compared to other

professional sport game days. According to the author, sports fans tend to identify a bond with their favorite football player and exhibit copy-cat behaviors (Adubato, 2016).

Due to a halt in the NO MORE PSA campaign that aired during the 2014 and 2015 seasons, the NFL should re-air the PSA campaign at least once during every NFL television broadcast. Adubato (2016) suggest that PSAs that include a fan's favorite football player speaking out against off-field violence may serve as a way to encourage fans not to participate in such behavior. These efforts could expand to include radio broadcasts and billboards as well. Reaching out to fans through different delivery channels of PSAs will show that the NFL is sincerely trying to prevent the issue of domestic violence. In doing so, fans will likely recognize the NFL's domestic violence prevention attempts, thus perceiving a positive attitude toward the NFL and its reputation.

As part of its initial domestic violence prevention plan, the NFL lent philanthropic support to domestic violence awareness and prevention organizations (Brown, 2016). With a multi-year partnership, the league collaborated with the National Domestic Violence Hotline to create support for domestic violence victims (Brown, 2016). In addition, the NFL donated \$5 million toward the organization with the intention of creating more staffing positions to help assist with the volume of calls (Brown, 2016). Though this effort showed the NFL's commitment to preventing the issue, the league has not continued to support other national and local domestic violence awareness and prevention organizations. By expanding its philanthropic outreach to more domestic violence awareness and prevention organizations, the NFL will continue to show its commitment to preventing the issue, which would help repair its reputation among stakeholders.

**Recommendation Four – Develop Social Media Campaign**

The NFL should create an anti-domestic violence social media campaign as a step to rebuilding its public image. Social media is a quick way to spread messages and awareness, and it is also an easy way for a brand to interact with its audience. Wallace-McRee and Lee (2016) posit the idea that the NFL and its clubs should focus on developing content based on newsworthiness, content that brings a positive contribution to the NFL's current brand image and message and content that creates interactivity. Similar to the suggested PSA campaign, the NFL should create a domestic violence social media campaign that creates a conversation of the sensitive issue of domestic violence.

Based on Wallace-McRee and Lee's (2016) recommendations, the NFL should post status updates, links and photos because they tend to have the highest fan responsiveness. According to the authors, businesses should use the communication tools that create the highest forms of interaction in order to communicate favorable brand attributions (p. 272). Status updates could include facts about domestic violence and statistics on victims and survivors, while the links can direct fans to various domestic violence prevention organization websites where they can learn more information about the issue. Wallace-McRee and Lee (2016) state that directing consumers to an official website may facilitate future consumption behaviors. In this case, it may encourage fans to donate to the cause or may simply provide fans with domestic violence awareness information so they are more informed about the issue. Rather than posting graphic photos, the NFL should post current photos of domestic violence survivors to create a positive, encouraging vibe and to start conversations among fans. According to Wallace-McRee and Lee (2016), "Cultivating communication and interaction within the Facebook format encourages future consumption behaviors," (p. 272).

Wallace-McRee and Lee's (2016) third recommendation is to create content that cultivates interactivity using real-time participation and consumption. By creating an online relationship between the NFL and its fans, the fans will be more likely to interact and engage directly (Wallace-McRee & Lee, 2016). Interactivity may also help the league effectively monitor and manage fan perceptions based on the interaction observed (Wallace-McRee & Lee, 2016) through its social media campaign. The league should monitor interactions among fans to understand how effective its campaign has been and can improve upon it based on the conversations. Wallace-McRee and Lee (2016) also posit the idea that interactivity allows brands to tailor content toward different audiences, such as those attending a game or viewers watching at home. By creating an effective social media strategy campaign that highlights important facts, statistics and topics related to domestic violence, the NFL will demonstrate its commitment to preventing the issue, which will likely positively alter stakeholders' perceptions of the NFL's reputation.

### **Challenges**

The NFL has established a tremendous amount of institutional power; therefore, it has the ability and resources to create and support initiatives that aim to prevent domestic abuse in its profession. The challenge is the NFL's ability to involve stakeholders, focus on the goal of repairing its reputation and make the commitment to change.

Leaders at every level of the organization must act in a strategic way, meaning they must develop and implement a communication plan that creates a positive image for itself. Strategically, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and his crisis management team must decide on the effective steps, possible challenges and a reasonable timeline to achieve a successful campaign that restores the league's image. Coombs (2007b) posits the situational crisis communication

theory (SCCT) that depicts the elements in which an organization should include into its crisis communication plan to protect its reputation. According to Smith (2013), image restoration is based on the presumption that “both people and organizations seek to maintain or rebuild a positive reputation” (p. 145).

Creating a domestic violence crisis communication plan is an opportunity to change the public’s perception of the NFL’s reputation and its commitment to preventing domestic violence. After the NFL’s mishandling of the 2014 domestic violence cases, the league no longer has a positive reputation among most of its stakeholders (Brown, 2016). If the NFL does not change its domestic violence prevention communication efforts, fans will continue to question the league’s sincerity to eradicating domestic violence or they may perceive the league as an institution that does not care about domestic violence at all. Without a long-term commitment by the NFL to communicate its domestic violence policies and messages, fans may view the past efforts as a little more than the NFL putting a Band-Aid on the problem then ripping it off when it thinks the injury has healed. Simply, the NFL must continue to communicate its domestic prevention messages through a variety of channels that will reach all stakeholders.

It is important for the NFL to implement changes that are necessary for creating a positive reputation among its stakeholders, who are the ones that make the league successful. To successfully do so, the league must have a plan or idea for how it will communicate its domestic violence prevention efforts to show the public its sincerity for preventing the issue, which will likely lead to stakeholders positively changing their perceptions of the NFL and its commitment to the issue. Ulmer (2012) states that in order to make a change, we need to develop normative theories on crisis communication that must emphasize open, collaborative communication processes. Ulmer also states, “Moreover, we have seen time and time again that organizations that

are not forthcoming with information, emphasize protecting their image or reputation over open access to information, and sense making is ineffective” (Ulmer, 2012, p. 538).

To successfully repair its reputation, the NFL must emphasize how and why it is taking action to prevent the issue of domestic violence, as well as its transparency while doing so. To support change, the NFL’s stakeholders need to trust that the league is no longer hiding important information from them and that it will make a difference in society. “Challenges effecting culture change are not new. Experts have studied this phenomenon for years, resulting in the development of a variety of progressive multi-stage frameworks for creating and sustaining transformational culture change” (Baker & Sax, 2012, p. 47). The NFL should create a league-wide initiative that focuses on domestic violence and sexual assault.

The review of literature on change (Ulmer, 2012) indicates that challenges may arise when implementing a change, but that we must always emphasize open, collaborative communication processes. Smith (2013) emphasizes that image restoration theory is a key element of repairing a reputation. As the NFL continues to create and implement domestic violence prevention strategies, it will begin to see a positive reputational change among its stakeholders.

### **Summary**

The findings derived from the evidence-based research of this project determined the most effective crisis management communication practices that the NFL should implement to receive positive feedback from the public during times of crisis. The systematic review led to knowledge about how the NFL can adjust the Player Conduct Policy to include a policy specifically related to domestic violence, creating education courses for players and stakeholders, expanding the league’s public service announcement outreach and creating a social media campaign. The systematic review also led to a fair amount of research and writing to answer this



study's research question. The findings of this project were significant and contributed to the researcher's recommendations on best strategies and elements for a successful domestic violence prevention crisis communication plan in which will positively change stakeholder views of the NFL's reputation.

## **Chapter Five: Findings and Analysis**

### **Introduction**

This study analyzed literature pertaining to the best practices in which the NFL should incorporate into its domestic violence crisis communication plan to restore its reputation among stakeholders. The evidence-based research provided knowledge as to how NFL management can use effective crisis response strategies such as honesty, transparency, apologia and corporate impression management, along with specific elements of success, to develop an effective domestic violence crisis communication plan, as reviewed in the recommendations included in Chapter Four.

This chapter is a discussion of any gaps in the literature, unanticipated findings that emerged from the research, limitations and a summary of the project. The literature did not provide enough evidence that links racial dimensions of domestic violence perpetrators whom are part of the NFL to stakeholder perceptions of the league and did not support how the hiring of female legal experts has helped the league repair its reputation. Unanticipated findings that developed from the research show that the league continues to preach its commitment to preventing the issue of domestic violence, but has not actually implemented the necessary steps to do so. Finally, the limitations provided in this chapter conclude that there is little research that links domestic violence with concussions.

### **Gaps in Literature**

When conducting the systematic review for this project, it was noticed the lack of literature on the racial dimensions of domestic violence perpetrators whom are part of the NFL. Luther (2014) contended that the 2014 domestic violence cases involved players who are African American and that two-thirds of African American men make up the players within the league

(Luther, 2014 as cited in Jarvis, 2016). Some of the examples provided in Chapter Two show that there have been domestic violence perpetrators within the NFL whom are Caucasian, however these perpetrators did not receive nearly as much media attention as the 2014 cases. Exploring the different portrayals and language used when discussing Caucasian NFL domestic violence perpetrators versus African American NFL domestic violence perpetrators could identify a problem concerning the different treatment of NFL players of opposite race (Jarvis, 2016).

Although there is an abundance of literature on crisis communication and reputation management, there is limited research and literature on how race plays a role in the fans' perception of the NFL's reputation, specifically regarding the league's domestic violence issue. Luther (2014) states the idea that because football employs so many African American men and is such a popular sport, it creates a skewed racialized perception of violence in society. If race has some effect on the stakeholders' perception of the NFL's reputation, then the league may need to seek different crisis communication strategies than what was proposed in this project to positively change its image. As Luther (2014) states, the conversation about domestic violence is complicated and is much deeper than football and the NFL; it is about how we see and then talk about this violence that continues to reoccur. The additional knowledge about how the NFL can contribute to crisis communication and reputation management will benefit the communication field.

Another gap in the literature is a review of the NFL's use of women experts to advise domestic violence cases among NFL players. As discussed in Chapter Two, the league hired over 150 experts who have experience and knowledge of the criminal justice system to pursue newer and stricter punishments in cases involving serious matters such as the previous domestic

violence cases, however the league has not used these women to its advantage by including the women as part of the league's other prevention initiatives. Four of these experts are women, whose jobs show the NFL's commitment to gender equality (Jarvis, 2016). In addition, these women are all Caucasian females, which caused immediate pushback from African American women (Luther, 2014). Though this was a step in the right direction toward creating a positive image for the league, research did not show that these women were used in other ways to promote the NFL's commitment to preventing domestic violence, which would have been an even bigger step in the right direction for the NFL.

### **Suggested Additional Research**

Questions that can be addressed for future studies could include:

- What is the role of race when it comes to stakeholder perceptions of the NFL's domestic violence communication crisis?
- What are the crisis communication and reputation management practices the NFL should utilize when handling a domestic violence dispute which affects stakeholder perceptions of the league that are based on racial differences?
- What is the relationship among domestic violence, race and the NFL?

### **Unanticipated Findings**

The evidence-based research suggested the best practices in which the NFL should incorporate into its domestic violence crisis communication plan to repair its reputation. One of the best practices mentioned in Chapter Four recommend the NFL prohibit the drafting or hiring of players and staff who have a violent background. However, Armour (2017) reported that at least a dozen players who have been accused of physical or sexual assault were drafted into the NFL at the 2017 Draft in May. This further demonstrates that though the NFL has preached its

commitment to domestic violence prevention communication initiatives, it continues to draft players and hire staff whom have a history of engaging in domestic violence behavior.

### **Limitations**

While there is a substantial body of research on the best practices in which the NFL should consider incorporating into a crisis communication plan, which will restore its reputation, there is limited scholarly research that focuses on the best crisis communication practices to use specifically for a domestic violence crisis. This is unfortunate, given the importance and need of the strategies. Research did discuss the crisis communication practices that the NFL utilized after the 2014 domestic violence cases, however the research counter-argued these tactics by stating that the public still does not positively view the NFL's reputation because its communication efforts have not been expansive or thorough (Brown, 2016).

Another limitation is that there is little research connecting domestic violence with concussions. While concussions and long-term brain injuries are a completely different crisis that the NFL is currently facing, research indicating a connection between the two crises may worsen the league's reputation among stakeholders.

### **Conclusion**

Since being in the public eye for the 2014 domestic violence cases, the NFL experienced a drastic increase in publicity and still has not gained back its credibility through effective communication tactics and initiatives three years later. Though the NFL has attempted to create domestic violence prevention initiatives, it has not been successful with the restoration of its image among stakeholders. According to research from Brown (2016), the public does not view the league's progress of regaining credibility as effective because the communication efforts were not expansive or thorough. Coombs' (2007b) situational crisis communication theory

provides a general guideline of successful crisis communication strategies that any organization should consider when facing a crisis. The NFL must begin to consider Coombs' (2007b) situational crisis communication theory to repair its image because the league's previous communication efforts have not been successful.

This project is significant because it will contribute to the field of crisis communication for any organization facing a domestic violence crisis and seeking to repair its reputation among stakeholders. Specifically, this project provided the NFL with strategies and elements for success in creating an effective domestic violence crisis communication plan that would repair the league's reputation among stakeholders.

Because stakeholders still have a negative perception of the NFL's reputation due to its ineffective domestic violence prevention efforts, it is time that it considers a new crisis communication plan. The evidence is clear that the NFL must do something in order to improve its handling of domestic violence instances. This project reviewed and suggested strategies to include as part of the league's domestic violence crisis communication plan. The next step for the NFL to improve its reputation among fans is to develop domestic violence policies that include more severe consequences, create additional domestic violence education programs that are engaging and interactive, expand its public service announcement and philanthropic support outreach, and develop an effective domestic violence prevention social media campaign. Then the league will show its commitment to preventing the issue, which will lead to a positive reputation among stakeholders.

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