Protecting Professional Football: The Introduction of Cultural Ingrainment as a Component in Crisis Communications Model

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Abstract

This research analyzes the crisis communications tactics employed by the National Football League at key points during the concussion crisis in relation to strategies recommended by models based on image restoration theory and situational crisis communications theory. The discrepancies between the NFL's tactics and recommended situational tactics, viewed considering the financial and market increases for the league over the duration of the crisis, show the need for an additional component in accepted crisis communications models. *Cultural ingrainment* is posited as a component to be added to present models as a mitigating factor of organizational harm in cases of strong attribution of organizational responsibility. This addition of *cultural ingrainment* provides an explanation for the possibility of so-called 'invincible brands.'

Keywords: crisis communications, situational crisis communication theory, image restoration theory, *cultural ingrainment*, invincible brands

Introduction

The National Football League (NFL) has been in a near constant state of crisis (both self-inflicted and from situations out of its control) for the past several years demonstrating the need for public relations professionals to be more expert in handling such issues. The most recent crisis, of course, is the COVID-19 pandemic. As examples, the Denver Broncos had four quarterbacks in quarantine and had no choice but to play a wide receiver at quarterback who had cleared NFL protocols to play a game against the New Orleans Saints. Other issues affecting the NFL have been the Black Lives Matter movement and stretching back to even before Colin Kaepernick took a knee while with the San Francisco 49ers, deflategate with the New England Patriots and so on and so forth.

The NFL is the highest revenue-grossing sports league in the world, expanding into foreign markets and gaining ever-increasing revenue and market saturation (Ejiochi, 2014). The organization rakes in large amounts of money by filling stadiums with ticketholders, selling merchandise, negotiating massive television deals, and through other lucrative endorsements. Its teams are so economically important to the communities that ownership groups often receive large portions of public funding for the stadiums in which games are played. Professional football is the most popular sport in America (Rovell, 2014). However, the reputation of the NFL has been threatened because of its involvement in several recent scandals and the extensive coverage of these scandals by American news media.

Opinion leaders and members of the American public have observed that many of the values displayed by the actions of the NFL differ from ideal behavior. They have observed numerous recent public relations crises related to player misbehavior, unethical behavior by teams and coaches, and self-interested actions by the league in its prioritization of discipline and player-safety measures. In 2019, Bell, Applequist and Dotson-Pierson even observed that the news media framed scientific research differently when covering the NFL. One area of focus for these authors was concussions. This particular study examines the concussion crisis and asks: "Do the failed crisis communication responses demonstrated by the NFL during the concussion crisis, in light of their organizational success, point toward the need for inclusion of a new component of *cultural ingrainment* within accepted crisis communications models?"

In order to answer this primary research question, this case study examined the NFL's concussion crisis within the context of appropriate response strategies according to established models of image restoration and situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). This study introduces the addition of a *cultural ingrainment* component into existing crisis communications models as a component that explains the success of the NFL despite discrepancies between the league's tactics and recommended strategies. The term *cultural ingrainment* describes the degree to which a brand has become embedded in the culture of its society or the success of a brand in terms of cultural branding.

This case study of the NFL's crisis communications efforts contributes to current research by introducing the need for research in *cultural ingrainment* as it may lead to the phenomenon of the invincible brand. Invincible brand describes the result of an organization with a high level of *cultural ingrainment* and the ability to maintain its strong position. An invincible brand is one in which poor organizational reputation and high attributions of responsibility result in positive financial consequences because of the high level of *cultural ingrainment* of the organization.

Finally, this study shows that crisis communications research is incomplete where it pertains to certain cases of culturally ingrained brands necessitating the potential for inclusion of a *cultural ingrainment* component as a mitigating factor for organizational harm in cases of high attributions of responsibility.

The scope of this study covers nine key responses occurring within the duration of the NFL's concussion crisis from 2002-15, each event individually chosen because it represented an important thematic shift toward a new strategy within the crisis communications responses by the NFL. The nine key events of the concussion controversy (and their accompanying media coverage) covered by this study follow:

1. The MTBI committee's publication of research in *Neurosurgery* journal following the initial discovery of CTE in the case of Mike Webster
2. The publication of research about the dangers of sub-concussive hits
3. The 2009 Congressional hearing on the impact of head injuries on NFL players
4. Research funding leading to acknowledgment of effects
5. Rule changes to the gameplay and policies of the NFL
6. Suicides of players and former players and the special investigative reports about the suppression of research by the NFL (*League of Denial* and its accompanying PBS *Frontline* special
7. The lawsuit filed by retired NFL players and the ongoing process of settlement
8. Early player retirements
9. The launch of the NFL Evolution online health resource and focus on youth football in response to declining youth football participation

These nine individual parts of the controversy presented significant threats to the NFL and prompted the organization into crisis response decisions. Although football has long been considered dangerous, public attribution of responsibility toward the NFL did not create organizational crisis until the early 2000s. Public reactions to these attributions of responsibility and the responses of the NFL to these attributions comprise the focus of this study.

But first, concussions in football should be defined. Concussions are brain injuries that occasionally occur during normal gameplay in the sport of football. The Mayo Clinic offers a definition of concussion that explains potential effects, causes, and the reason why they can remain undiagnosed, leading to complicated situations and decisions for NFL players and teams:

A concussion is a traumatic brain injury that alters the way your brain functions. Effects are usually temporary but can include headaches and problems with concentration, memory, balance, and coordination. Although concussions usually are caused by a blow to the head, they can also occur when the head and upper body are violently shaken. These injuries can cause a loss of consciousness, but most concussions do not. Because of this, some people have concussions and don't realize it ("Concussion," 2015, para. 1).

Literature Review

Image Restoration Theory

Image restoration was introduced by Benoit (1995) and comprises a list of five general restoration strategies that an organization can use to explain its behavior and to restore its image

in the situation where an organization is accused of bad or objectionable behavior and there is potential for damage to an organization's reputation. Threats to an image contain two inherent components: blame (responsibility) and offensiveness. Image repair strategies are designed to address and minimize these two components (Benoit, 1997).

Under Benoit's Image Restoration Theory, an attack has two components: 1) the accused is held responsible for an action, and 2) the act is considered offensive. No unfavorable impression is formed unless the company is believed to be responsible for the act (Benoit, 1997). Responsibility is assigned to the company for acts performed, ordered, encouraged, or allowed to occur. A salient audience must be thought to disapprove of the act (Coombs, 2006a). Public perception contributes to public attribution of responsibility. If the audience thinks the firm is at fault, the firm's image is at risk. If the act was not offensive, this can be an important part of the defense. Multiple audiences, with a variety of perceptions, must be addressed (Coombs, 2006a).

Once the crisis occurs, the identification of the salient audience is very important. A key part of persuasion is tailoring one's message to the audience and that is where Coombs' Situational Crisis Theory plays a role (Coombs, 2006a).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) research provides a set of guidelines to help crisis managers protect an organization's reputation from the effects of a crisis. SCCT is based on the need to reduce and combat the effects of the results of attribution theory, which states that in a crisis, stakeholders search for an entity in which to attribute blame (Coombs, 2007b). Each crisis type generates certain attributions of crisis responsibility – the level which a stakeholder believes the organization is responsible for the crisis event (Coombs, 2006a).

An important aspect of the model is that negative reputation effects and negative affect in stakeholders impact behavioral intentions among stakeholders. As the organization's reputation becomes more negative, stakeholders are less likely to report behavioral intentions that support the organization, such as the use of products or services. As the feelings of negative affect among stakeholders increase, stakeholders are less likely to report behavioral intentions that are supportive of the organization and more likely to spread negative word-of-mouth communication to others about the organization. Behavioral intentions are impacted by the connection to crisis responsibility shared both by reputation as well as by affective emotions (Coombs, 2007a).

The primary SCCT crisis response strategies fall into the following three groups: 1) denial, 2) diminish, and 3) rebuild (Coombs, 2006b; Coombs, 2007a). The denial group is made up of three tactics that attempt to limit reputational damage and attribution of crisis responsibility by shifting blame for the crisis away from the company and attempting to persuade stakeholders that the organization bears no blame or responsibility. The first tactic is to attack the accuser where the crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization and attempts to shift the blame onto the accuser. In a denial tactic, the crisis manager denies the very existence of a crisis. Finally, the scapegoat tactic is evident when the crisis manager blames a person or group outside of the organization for the crisis, shifting responsibility attribution away from the organization and onto another entity (Coombs, 2007a).

The diminishment crisis response strategies are employed when the organization has been attributed responsibility for a crisis but wishes to dampen the attributions of harmful intent. This crisis response group is broken up into three sub-groups: 1) excuse, 2) justification, and 3) ingratiation. When an excuse strategy is employed, the crisis manager minimizes organizational

responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis. Justification is where a crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis (Coombs, 2007a). Lastly, an organization that uses ingratiation reminds stakeholders of past good works by the organization (Coombs, 2006a).

The final crisis response strategy group is rebuilding. This strategy typically involves a full apology where the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and requests forgiveness from its stakeholders. The organization then takes corrective action (Coombs, 2006a). A crisis manager may offer compensation in the form of money or other gifts to victims to rectify the situation and show that the organization values any potential victims of their actions or circumstances (Coombs, 2007a).

A key assumption of the SCCT holds that organizational communication affects people's perceptions in a crisis. This is a key position shared with image restoration theory (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007a). The three objectives of crisis response strategies are as follows: 1) to shape stakeholders' attributions of the crisis, 2) to change perceptions of the organization in crisis, and 3) to reduce the negative affect and emotions in response to the crisis (Coombs, 1995; Coombs, 2007a). Crisis managers typically pursue any combination of these goals in crafting their intended responses to frame their current crises as a crisis type. Coombs (2007a) posits that the frames used in media reports are the frames that most stakeholders experience and adopt. In the current internet age, it is common for frames to be posted to media sites as crisis managers, bloggers, critics, and victims all have forums where their voices and opinions are broadcast. In 2018, Coombs also made the connection between individual sports transgressions and organizational response strategies and in 2020 Brown et. al., showed a relationship among perceived crisis responsibility, organization reputation, and behavioral intentions as applicable in sports. All of which leads to the branding discussion below.

Branding

Coombs made the case for SCCT to examine sports transgressions by addressing them from what is known as athlete reputational crises (ARC) that is defined as "an event caused by (un)intentional and on off -field athlete behaviors that threaten to disrupt an athlete's reputation" (p. 435) (Sato et. al. (2015). Coombs made the connection to teams and organizations suggesting that ARCs create a spillover effect on teams – their organizational or brand reputation (Brown, Adamson, & Park (2020). Further then, on brands, they are the symbols and names owned by a company that communicate corporate identity to customers. Brands are an intangible corporate asset and exact value can be difficult to quantify. However, successful brand building typically results in significant asset growth and stock returns. The key tasks of brand-building are to create visibility, build associations and create differentiation, and to develop deep customer relationships (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Ries and Ries (1998) held that "the power of a brand lies in its ability to influence purchasing behavior" (p. 5-6).

Brands affect how stakeholders think, feel, and act and are a key determining factor in the success of marketing actions. Cleeren et al. (2013) examined 60 brand crises and found that organizations and brands in crisis were able to minimize reputational harm through increased expenditures in cases where it was not required that the organization acknowledge blame. Previous brand-building benefited the organizations in crisis. The concept of invincible branding because of cultural ingrainment is an extrapolation of these principles; strong brand-building increases the efficacy of marketing and public relations actions and may result in brands that are

capable of surviving and thriving despite crisis. Strong branding may provide additional leeway in crisis action for public relations practitioners. Branding research and practical application uses four key paradigms: 1) viral branding, 2) emotional branding, 3) mind-share branding, and 4) cultural branding (Holt, 2004). The fourth paradigm, cultural branding, provides the most relevant framework for study of the creation and building of brands within the context of this research.

Cultural Branding

Holt (2004) defined cultural branding as "the set of axioms and strategic principles that guide the building of brands into cultural icons" (p.17). Identity brands or iconic brands are those which have become embedded in the culture of a society. Most of the world's most successful cultural brands were not built through formal cultural brand-building strategies. Iconicity occurs when the person, organization, or thing is widely regarded as the most compelling symbol of a set of ideas or values that a society deems important (Holt, 2004). Icons have extraordinary value because they carry a heavy symbolic load for their most enthusiastic consumers. Introducing the cultural branding paradigm, Holt (2004) suggested that the goal of cultural branding is to use marketing communications to align a brand with the right identity myth in a credible way. Holt also suggested that a brand's strength is dependent on how well it encapsulates an identity myth and how strongly stakeholders identify with that identity myth.

The cultural branding paradigm differentiates between symbolic and substantive products. A symbolic product exists to enhance the sense of self-regard while substantive products exist to perform utilitarian tasks and improve personal welfare. Most products combine some level of both symbolic and substantive products (Hogg & Mitchell, 1996). Products from identity brands are valued as a means of self-expression. Holt (2004) defined brands as "a psychological phenomenon which stems from the perceptions of individual consumers" (p. 5) and stated that for iconic brands, "customers value some products as much for what they symbolize as for what they do" (p. 3), using identity brands Coke, Budweiser, Nike, and Jack Daniel's as examples of brands whose customers chiefly value the stories and meanings behind the brand over the brand's substantive value.

Brand meaning is a result of collective interpretations by multiple stakeholders over numerous historical moments (Hatch & Rubin, 2006). At times, the actions of brand managers can come into conflict with the values perceived by the stakeholders of a brand (Holt, 2002).The products to which cultural branding often applies are often referred to as lifestyle, image, badge, or ego-expressive products and competitors "cannot easily replicate the brand's myth embedded in these products" (Holt, 2004, p. 5). Mass media communications, with television advertising being the most common medium, has contributed to the building of most iconic brands (Holt, 2004).

Invincible Brands

Little previous academic research has been conducted to explore invincible branding from a perspective of crisis communication. In the professional realm, Agnes in 2018 built a five-step Crisis Ready Model that included: Audit of an organization's mindset and culture, understand variables and impacts of a crisis, identify scenarios and stakeholders, design action plans and communication strategies, and implement to develop the skills and implement the program to be crisis ready. She termed being crisis ready as building an invincible brand that is ingrained in the culture of an organization that will weather any crisis or storm.

The research in this study will analyze the actions of the NFL and their responses to the concussion crisis as a preliminary study of the phenomenon of the invincible brand. As many of the NFL's responses were mismatched with prescribed responses under accepted models, the financial success of the NFL suggests the potential presence a level of invincible branding.

Throughout the duration of the NFL concussion case, the NFL has faced questions and criticism from medical experts, popular sports media pundits, former players and their representatives, and government figures for their handling of the case. The NFL has had to use image restoration and crisis communications tactics to preserve their reputation and status and to protect their financial interests.

Research Questions

Within the context of previous research on crisis communications, this study is designed to answer the primary research question: 'Do the failed crisis communication responses demonstrated by the NFL during the concussion crisis, considering their organizational success, point toward the need for inclusion of a new component of *cultural ingrainment* within accepted crisis communications models?' To answer this question, this study will answer the following sub-research questions:

RQ1: What tactics and crisis response strategies listed or described as possible responses from image restoration theory and situational crisis communication theory were demonstrated by NFL team and/or league public relations or executive management figures during the concussion case?

RQ2: Has a high level of *cultural ingrainment* contributed toward turning the NFL into an invincible brand capable of thriving despite crisis communication failures and reputational harm?

Method

This study takes a single embedded case study approach to analyzing the tactics and decisions of the National Football League in its handling of the concussion controversy. By using a case study approach, the authors are able understand the crisis within its broader context and to test the propositions of SCCT against a real-world phenomenon (Yin, 2018). According to Yin (2018), a case study as is defined as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not clearly evident" (p. 15), and in which multiple sources of evidence are used. Stacks (2002) defined a case study as an in-depth study "of particular people, organizations, events, or even processes" that provides a "richly detailed and complete understanding of the case under study" (p. 71). This research focused on a particular phenomenon (i.e, the concussion crisis) within a real-life context (i.e., the NFL's response to this concussion controversy) using a multi-method approach to analyzing the public relations tactics employed by the NFL toward the concussion and head trauma crisis.

Sources of Data and Evidence

This research chiefly uses documentation, archival records, and interview data (Yin 2018) to triangulate and control for bias for accurate findings. The primary method of study used is the analysis of official statements and press releases from the NFL, its executives, the NFL Players Association, players, and medical experts and figures in the concussion research field. The research questions driving this case study examined the public relations efforts of the NFL.

Thus, a significant source of information is collected from both the explicit and implied messages drawn from official statements and releases. These messages were shared through a variety of platforms, including official websites and though mainstream media coverage. Documentation and archived information come from several media outlets, including releases from the NFL's official website, medical journals, and other news outlets and organizations. The specific units of analysis were the individual press releases, official statements, and articles published on mainstream media websites and in medical journals, including *Neurosurgery*. The NFL and its MTBI (Mild Traumatic Brain Injury) Committee published a series of articles in this journal, making it a useful resource for this study.

Interview information and insight into the perceptions of stakeholders and the public is drawn from the news coverage of these releases and the events of the controversy. These pieces of news coverage include quotes, recounting of events, interpretation and analysis, and opinion pieces, each of these providing secondary sources of interview information shedding light on the atmosphere and background of the studied events by showing the media and public perceptions of the NFL's actions.

At the beginning of the 2012 NFL season, the NFL launched an enhanced resource website, www.NFLEvolution.com (now called the NFL Health Playbook), to provide information about the various ways the league addresses player health and safety issues. The site was designed for interactivity and information about the partnerships, programs, and initiatives supported by the NFL to protect the health of players ("NFLEvolution.com launches with a focus," 2012). It also contained resources designed for young athletes and youth sports leagues. This archived information provides a valuable source for this study.

Analysis of Data

This data was analyzed systematically, using principles of triangulation, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and reflexivity to preserve the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings and synthesize trustworthy conclusions as described by Lincoln & Guba (1985).

To operationalize the tactics and crisis response strategies, this study gathers information from the various sources into a collection and analyzes this database using the data analysis computer software NVivo. This software codes for emergent nodes and themes to be analyzed to determine meaning. Findings, insights, and their implications are then discussed within the context of appropriate application to previously established crisis communications models and theories and the accepted standards of ethics within the field of public relations.

Results

The two research questions stated earlier in this study guided the interpretation of the results of this study, and ultimately determined the NFL's choice to use strategies that did not match its crisis and did not adequately fill its ethical responsibilities. This section examines the current state of the NFL, showing that the NFL's success suggests a missing explanatory component in present crisis communications models. To sensibly present the information, the information was organized both chronologically and according to the different aspects of SCCT.

Tactics and Response Strategies Employed by the NFL

The first research question asks which tactics and crisis response strategies were demonstrated by the NFL and their representatives during this case. Several themes emerged during analysis of the source material of this case, many reflecting chronological shifts in tactics at various points during the controversy. Specifically, the NFL was engaged in each of the three crisis response strategies discussed earlier – denial, diminishment, and rebuilding. With diminishment, the league relied on ingratiation strategy while it followed corrective action and corrective strategies in rebuilding. Each of these findings will be discussed below.

Denial

Early in course of the crisis, the primary emergent theme was denial. Denial was manifested in the publication of research in the neurosurgery articles and in challenges to contemporary research critical to the NFL as the league contended that head injuries sustained during normal play did not lead to debilitating injuries such as CTE. Attacking accusers, a denial tactic, was another theme that emerged strongly in the research. One example of this tactic includes the discrediting of CTE discoverer Bennet Omalu. This situation occurred on several occasions, including one instance where an NFL team official accused Omalu of using "fallacious reasoning" in his research (Coates, 2013). This research came in the form of a paper published by Omalu and his colleagues in *Neurosurgery* titled, "Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy in a National Football League Player." It was the first to suggest that CTE was present in more than just boxers and could be tied to other contact sports, including football. This bombshell discovery has subsequently been covered in numerous books and inspired a 2015 movie, *Concussion,* starring actor Will Smith. The increased attention on the NFL led the league and its officials to initially deny and discredit the research (Laliberte, 2018). They also countered the research with their own medical research published in *Neurosurgery*.

Diminishment

Themes relating to diminishment tactics, excuse, and justification, are largely absent from the data observed by this study, aside from brief comments about well-compensated players. Some of these comments came right after San Francisco 49er rookie Chris Borland's unexpected retirement in 2015. Considered one of the league's top rookies, Borland decided to retire because he had concerns about the long-term effects of repetitive head trauma. The NFL's response to Borland's announcement contained comments pointing out that players know that football is a dangerous game and are well paid for their participation in it. Critics, however, countered these tactics by pointing out that the NFL was not criticized for featuring a dangerous game but instead for covering and actively working to prevent the release of information about additional risks such as long-term head injury.

Ingratiation

The theme of ingratiation was ubiquitous in the responses of the NFL throughout the duration of the crisis. Early responses, such as the *Neurosurgery* articles, combined ingratiation with strong tactics of denial with later responses adopting stronger focus on ingratiation tactics, occasionally adding instances of corrective action, as described by image restoration theory. Pellman's claim that "the NFL's approach to funding scientific research on the problem is a model for the approach needed by other sports leagues when medical issues of player health and safety emerge" (Pellman, 2003, p. 798) showed a tactic of turning criticism toward positive views of the league's actions. The *Neurosurgery* articles offered opportunities for the NFL to

publicize its funding for research on player injuries as it attempted to create the perception of commitment to player safety. Descriptions and analysis of helmet testing in one of the neurosurgery articles also constituted ingratiation tactics as the NFL publicized its interest and progress in creating helmets that comply with updated standards.

Ingratiation was also present in the NFL's response to Chris Borland's retirement. A brief statement wished Borland well in his decision and then the remaining press release focused on claims of increased progress in player safety and publicized rule changes, equipment changes, and medical protocols. The NFL's large donations toward scientific research were also highly publicized. Likewise, the NFL Evolution website and the NFL's new programs for youth football leagues and players illustrate examples of reactions displaying themes of both ingratiation and corrective action. Statements by NFL representatives, press releases, and other public relations communications regarding youth football programs are focused largely on the contribution of the NFL toward these programs. The NFL Evolution website (and its successor, the NFL Health Playbook) constituted the very epitome of an ingratiation campaign as it represented a compilation of articles on the NFL's efforts to create a safe environment for players at all levels.

Corrective action

In one of the subgroups within the rebuilding strategy, the NFL used corrective action that included statements and publications surrounding new helmets and equipment, rule changes, policy and protocol changes, and additional youth football programs. Each of these actions were accompanied by communications that contained ingratiating rhetoric and demonstrated a spoken commitment by the NFL toward correcting whatever problems were present in the game, although the NFL still denied culpability in most of these problems. These communications attempted to turn conversation from assignment of blame toward present and future solutions for health issues.

Compensation

Finally, the settlement of the lawsuit brought against the NFL by former players forced the NFL into compensation, another rebuilding strategy described by the SCCT. However, the settlement allowed the NFL to continue denying responsibility for concussion injuries and avoid the rebuilding strategy of issuing a full apology (or an apology of any kind) by merely paying the money and instituting programs of corrective action without assuming liability. Mortification tactics of apology, as described by image restoration theory, were absent from the observed data.

Perceptions of Transparency

Analysis of NFL crisis communications also revealed a theme of attempting to create an image of transparency by appealing to 'independent' authorities who often have ties to the NFL suggesting they may have an interest in maintaining the position of the NFL. The physicians who made up the MTBI committee publishing in a scientific journal, the use of independent arbitrators in the later Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson cases, and the use of an independent investigator in the Ray Rice case are examples of how the NFL has attempted to position its actions as increasing transparency when in reality, it is actually just using these commissions to support its position. While some sportswriters see this trend and write about it, these actions never seem to ignite much controversy and largely serve the purpose of limiting criticism.

***Cultural Ingrainment* and the NFL as an Invincible Brand**

The second research question attempted to determine if the NFL's high level of *cultural ingrainment* has contributed to turning the NFL into an invincible brand capable of thriving

despite crisis communication failures and reputational harm. To determine the effectiveness of and interpret meaning from the previously described data, the following sections analyzed the cultural advantages enjoyed by the NFL and its current financial state and share of the sports entertainment market.

Cultural advantages for the NFL

For many fans, the NFL is a profit-obsessed corporate entity with a callous lack of concern for the human beings who take the big hits (Dawidoff, 2013, para. 2). However, the thriving state of the NFL contradicts the strong attributions of responsibility piled upon the NFL by many stakeholders and by a large section of American popular opinion.

Jay Mariotti wrote about the deep cultural roots of professional football and the fact that football fans seem drawn more than ever before toward viewership of the sport:

> By midcentury, perhaps, maybe football dies. Maybe it will carry on without tackling and equipment, like flag football…. Maybe all the concussion lawsuits will wipe out the NFL. Maybe Borland and others in his footsteps will have a seminal effect. But for now, too many Americans are immersed in too many Sundays, Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays to slow down the corporate hubris-and-greed train (Mariotti, 2015, para. 8-9).

The NFL is drawing more than just male fans to the sport. In 2020, nearly half (47%) of the league's fans were women, according to Commissioner Goodell. (Graham & Young, 2020). The league's cultural presence can also be found in other areas, including youth football programs, and in their involvement in social issues, including Black Lives Matter, social justice, and breast cancer awareness.

Current state of the NFL

If television ratings are used as the chief criteria, one could argue that the NFL has never been healthier. Despite weathering the Ray Rice, Adrian Peterson, and Greg Hardy domestic violence scandals in the fall of 2014, viewers continue to tune in to NFL games at record rates, drawing large amounts of advertising and sponsorship revenues for the league and its teams.

Under television rights extension agreements running through the 2022 season with FOX, NBC, CBS, ESPN, DirectTV, Westwood One radio, the NFL makes nearly $7 billion annually in media rights money before a single ticket, concession, or jersey is sold (Badenhausen, 2011). In 2014, NFL games were attended by 17.36 million spectators ("NFL total attendance," 2015) at an average per game non-premium single ticket price of $84.43. The average premium ticket for a 2014 NFL game was $252.06 and concession prices also continue to rise (Greenberg, 2014).

Largely because of the lucrative media rights revenues, NFL teams are the most valuable professional sports franchises in North America with the average NFL team worth $1.43 billion, reported in the annual Forbes franchise valuations released in August 2014. The Dallas Cowboys top the list as the league's most valuable team, valued at $3.2 billion, and are also the most valuable professional sports team across all sports in North America ("NFL team values: The business of football," 2014).

Recent conference championship games resulted in big ratings for the CBS and FOX networks who held the broadcast rights for the games. Just over 42 million viewers watched on FOX as the Philadelphia Eagles beat the Minnesota Vikings 38-7 in the NFC championship. Earlier in the day, 44.1 million viewers watched the New England Patriots squeak by the

Jacksonville Jaguars, 24-20, in what became the most-watched game and highest-rated television program since the Super Bowl in 2017 (Pallotta, 2018). Amanda Lotz, an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan, explained the tendency for sports viewership ratings to weather crisis to Richard Deitsch of Sports Illustrated:

> We might think of people as NFL fans, but they are really fans of a team, not the League. There may be discontent with the actions of the league or the actions of a player, but it is a difficult move to deny "fanship" of a team as a result. We are Chiefs or Steelers fans, not NFL fans. The dynamics between team and individual sports is also a consideration. Though we may have fondness for particular players, that's not what draws us in the case of the NFL either. It isn't domestic violence that is being broadcast on Sundays. Even though women and men may feel strongly that the acts were criminal and that the league was wrong to cover them up, it is difficult for that to override what might be a lifetime of fan behavior and one often linked closely to identity of place and family. As for women in particular, I wonder how many of those are individual women viewers. If other members of the household are watching and that is a family ritual, that too makes behavior difficult (Deitsch, 2014, para. 12-13).

In 2014, the NFL totaled a sum of $11.2 billion in "all revenues" and projects revenue of more than $12 billion for 2015. In 2010, Commissioner Roger Goodell challenged the owners at a league meeting to achieve a long-term increase in league revenue to $25 billion by 2027. At a pre-Super Bowl press conference in 2015, Goodell spoke about this revenue goal: "I don't know whether we'll get there, but we're working towards that goal. It's something that we think is practical" (Kaplan, 2015, para. 19).

However, sports economist Andrew Zimbalist spoke with USA Today Sports, cautioning that the increasing fan ship and viewership revenues may not be immune to rules changes to the game that may result from the concussion crisis:

> To the extent the NFL tries to pass new rules to reduce the force of hitting or the kind of hits you can make, I think it hurts the game, and there are signs that parents no longer want their children playing this game. I don't mean to predict doom for the NFL. I don't think there is doom, but the notion that they're going to get to $25 billion seems to be excessively optimistic. I would not bet on that figure (Schrotenboer, 2015, para. 44).

Commissioner Goodell acknowledged personal adversity through the concussion crisis and the domestic violence issues of 2014 in his annual state-of-the-league address before the Super Bowl on January 30, 2015. Despite Goodell's adversity, he was compensated in 2013 with his yearly figure of $44 million. Goodell also stated that he had no intention of resigning his position (Belson, 2015). As of 2015, the NFL has hurdles to climb, but continues to sit squarely atop the professional sports world with revenues and franchise values steadily increasing.

Rule Changes

In an effort to improve player safety in the league, the NFL made several recent rule changes. Alongside many of these rule changes, the NFL made statements emphasizing and

publicizing its health and safety efforts, framing the changes in a way that represented the NFL as a pro-active organization.

In August 2010, prior to the start of the NFL season, the league released a report about new rules instituted for the upcoming season designed to cut down head and neck injuries in the game. There were several new player-safety rules mandated: 1) Players were prohibited from using their helmets to strike a player in a defenseless posture in the head or neck; 2) receivers were also given longer to establish a position where they could defend themselves before a hit to the head became legal; 3) if a player lost his helmet, the play must be whistled dead immediately; 4) defensive players could no longer line up directly across from the snapper on field goal and extra-point attempts; and 5) more strict return-to-play guidelines for concussed players, including consultation with an independent neurologist ("New NFL rules designed to limit," 2010). NFL referee Walt Anderson spoke highly of the NFL, Roger Goodell, and the recent actions saying that the NFL has taken a proactive stance doing what it can to protect the players' safety ("New NFL rules designed to limit," 2010, para. 4).

In January 2014, the NFL released data that showed that the number of concussions in the NFL dropped 13% from 2012 to 2013. This data was framed as being a result of the NFL's efforts to better protect players. In the same release, information collected from team doctors revealed a 23% decrease in the number of concussions caused by helmet-to-helmet contact ("NFL: 13 percent fewer concussions," 2014).

Youth football participation and the NFL Evolution Website

An important component of the NFL's crisis communication response was the challenge of assuaging the fears of parents and youth league volunteers in relation to the health of young football players, the generation who will eventually develop into the future players of the NFL. The NFL's response to questions about threats to youth players has been marked by a great attention toward utilizing crisis communication strategies to prevent causing the large increase in crisis severity and attribution of responsibility.

One key component of the NFL's reaction to youth player-safety concerns was its development of the NFL Evolution section of its website, a page dedicated toward policies designed to improve the safety of the game at all levels ("NFLEvolution.com launches with a focus," 2012). A snapshot of the articles taken on January 8, 2015, showed several examples that illustrate crisis communication strategies used by the NFL to paint the organization as pro-actively promoting safety. The NFL Evolution website evolved during the summer of 2015 as it was renamed the 'NFL Health Playbook' site, retaining its former purpose of providing news, information, and announcement regarding the safety of football at all levels.

Conclusion

The data analysis in this study identified examples of NFL public relations statements, campaigns, and actions from NVivo themes that fit into established theoretical models of recommended crisis communications in order to apply them to practice.

From an early point in the controversy, the NFL used strategies of denial in an attempt to minimize attributions of blame and to minimize public perceptions that there was a significant long-term problem with concussions. As the case progressed, these previous tactics of denial made it very difficult for the NFL to institute transparent policies without a full admission of

guilt. Instead, the NFL moved toward policies that often-utilized tactics of ingratiation and corrective action, with representatives attempting to portray the NFL as a leader in player safety.

The NFL also allegedly strayed into territory not recommended by established crisis communications models by attempting to hide research, discredit critics, and suppress information by exploiting relationships. As accusations of these tactics became known, the use of these tactics negatively affected attributions of responsibility toward the NFL among many important stakeholders and the public.

Cultural Ingrainment Explains the Resulting Circumstances

The *cultural ingrainment* component explains the success of the NFL without undermining the key remaining assumptions of Image Restoration Theory and the SCCT. In both contexts, cultural ingrainment acts as a mitigating factor to the harm faced by an organization in crisis. *Cultural ingrainment* lessens the component of threat to an organization described by image restoration and affects the component of behavioral intentions in the SCCT model. In either case, the NFL's resulting success is no longer an anomaly when analyzed within the context of models which include the component of *cultural ingrainment*. The concept of invincible branding, or the idea that a brand possesses a degree of immunity to the negative effects of a crisis when it enjoys a high level of *cultural ingrainment*, is a corollary to the addition of the *cultural ingrainment* component.

Ultimately, the results of these misguided tactics and actions deviated from model-predicted results as the NFL only strengthened its market share, prompting the need to discover what component might be missing from established crisis communications models that might explain this deviation. This research presents the component of *cultural ingrainment* as a factor that explains these results.

In the revised SCCT model, the *cultural ingrainment* component mitigates harmful effects of crisis history and prior relationship reputation in determining organizational reputation and ultimate behavioral intentions. This model suggests how the behavioral intentions of some of the NFL stakeholders remain supportive of the brand despite nearly ubiquitous attributions of blame and perceptions of offensive action. The NFL's entrenched market share and strong financial position despite use of mismatched tactics and strategies as recommended by image restoration and situational crisis communication models, particularly denial and attempts at ingratiation for the situation in which stakeholders tended toward strong attributions of responsibility to the organization, lead to the concluding recommendation in this analysis of research that the commonly accepted crisis communications models add an additional component of *cultural ingrainment*. As displayed in the case of the NFL in the concussion controversy, a culturally ingrained organization may have a heightened ability to weather increased attributions of responsibility. Although the predominant tone of most news analysis regarding the case contributes to the attribution of additional responsibility to the NFL for careless attitudes toward player safety, the NFL's place in American cultural has allowed it to maintain its share in the sports market and its strong financial position. The authors recommend that crisis communications models include an additional component of *cultural ingrainment*. This component fits into the model as a mitigating factor to the perceived severity of an event, thus allowing additional leeway in choosing strategies that further lessen attributions of responsibility and the perceived severity of the event. Strategies that might typically only be used in situations where responsibility attribution was low, and the risk of increased severity might be

low might be used in more severe situations by culturally ingrained organizations with less risk of organizational damage resulting from alienation of their publics resulting from a mismatched reaction.

The possible existence of 'invincible brands' is a key extrapolation of the consequences of the existence of a *cultural ingrainment* component as a factor in determining the attribution of responsibility by a public. If the NFL is sufficiently ingrained into American culture to survive and thrive despite using crisis communication tactics typically used in low responsibility attribution situations, the case deserves consideration into the possibility that the NFL may have the qualities of an invincible brand, a brand or organization that can risk situations of high perceived severity and high attributions of responsibility because its publics will continue to support the brand or organization. This research shows that although the NFL may have taken actions that represent mismatched responses to their situational responsibility attribution, the NFL has maintained and increased their strong market and financial status. The findings of this case serve to undermine expected results in relation to image restoration and situational crisis communications models unless they are amended to include another component that mitigates the effects of increased perceived severity or attribution of responsibility, a component such as *cultural ingrainment*.

Recommended Strategies of *Ingrainment* for Practitioners

1. Use *cultural ingrainment* in attribution of blame and shape perceptions of offensive action because NFL stakeholders will remain supportive.

2. Know that your organization can weather increased attribution of responsibility if it is culturally ingrained (the severity of the act will be mitigated by *cultural ingrainment*).

3. Use the additional leeway from the above to choose strategies that further lessen attribution and the severity of the event.

4. Use the given situation to leverage the brand, if not already, to a possible invincible brand.

Reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification are strategies used to minimize the offensiveness of acts that have already been attributed as responsibility to the organization.

Bolstering strategies stress good traits of a company and their response to the event. These strategies are the equivalent of ingratiation tactics ascribed to the SCCT. Where the salient audience assigns the blame to the organization and assigns a high degree of offensiveness to the event, resulting in reputational damage to the organization, a strategy of mortification is recommended. Mortification typically involves an apology and full acknowledgement of responsibility followed by a request for forgiveness. In later stages of the concussion crisis, the NFL used bolstering strategies, attacked their accusers, and was forced into compensation (this was somewhat forced by the lawsuit settlement and the decision was framed as an opportunity for them to compensate the players).

The NFL, although in a position where the salient audience assigned blame to them and viewed their offenses as egregious and unethical, chose to continue to use tactics of denial, strategies designed to reduce offensiveness, and instances of corrective action (publicized in such a way as to suggest more of a bolstering tactic than true compensation) rather than pursue mortification strategies. Although a situation with this degree of blame and offensiveness

matched mortification tactics, the NFL pursued different tactics yet still achieved organizational and monetary success.

Application of Research Findings

The findings of this study may inform an examination of additional crisis communication cases. Cases in which large amounts of responsibility are attributed to an organization may be explained by examining the potential presence of *cultural ingrainment*. Major professional sports leagues and organizations operate under similar cultural circumstances and may display attributes of invincible brands. As with fans of the NFL, followers of various sporting leagues and teams throughout the world often recognize negative actions or policies but remain strong fans. Because of this, the threshold for attributions of responsibility to create negative effects in interest and financial decisions for sporting organizations is often much greater.

Further expansion of research on the addition of a *cultural ingrainment* component to crisis communications models is important to the field of crisis communications because an organization with a greater *cultural ingrainment* measure might make different tactical decisions knowing that the consequences of increased attributions of responsibility would not cause the same harm to an organization that it might to an organization with a lesser measure of *cultural ingrainment*.

Limitations

The limitations to this research were largely from informational availability and the inherent qualities of the qualitative case study research method. Because the NFL's public relations efforts are not transparent, clear statements about the motives and plans of the NFL in the actions of the described events are not available and must be interpreted through an informed process of analysis. Many of the descriptions of the NFL's crisis communications tactics come because of these interpretations.

While every effort was made to examine the case in such detail to account for alternative explanations that could negatively affect transferability, the NFL exhibits many unique circumstances and a unique position within its market. Additional research should be pursued to overcome any limitations to the transferability of this research. The findings from qualitative research can be difficult to transfer to other situations where the situational attributes are often different. Thus, the effects of a *cultural ingrainment* component should be studied as they may apply to other brands that may exhibit similar qualities of 'invincible brands.

Future Studies

The authors recommend future studies into crisis communications in other situations where the organization in crisis is deeply ingrained in the culture of its society. This research should search for the existence of other so-called "invincible brands." Additional research should also explore the structure of invincible brands to discover if organizations made up of many sub-brands have an increased ability to become an invincible brand because of the ability of their sub-brands to culturally-ingrain the brand among fans.

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