

NFL Crisis Communication Evaluation

Professional sports organizations operate in one of the most visible and emotionally charged communication ecosystems and environments in modern media. Arguably there is no other sports league in the four major North American sports that represents this more than the NFL. There is never truly an offseason for NFL athletes, coaches, and executives as every move they make is open to public perception. Sports leagues and their PR teams must develop strong crisis communication strategies to help get ahead of potential back lash. In the NFL specifically issues such as player misconduct, gambling violations, allegations of domestic violence or substance abuse frequently unfold in real time thanks too social media and other digital platforms such as YouTube videos, podcasts and TV shows. Unlike traditional companies, sports teams represent more than a singular product or service. These sports leagues and teams function as cultural institutions and assist in the identity creation for their respective fan bases. Because fandom often involves deep psychological attachment and social identity crisis communication in pro sports carries heightened stakes so the awareness must be high so PR teams can quickly address crisis in a timely fashion. (Coombs & Holladay, 2014)

Social media platforms such as twitter (X) and Instagram have fundamentally altered the speed tone and public scrutiny in how these organizations respond too crisis and other unforeseen circumstances. Teams are expected to respond in a manner that is quick transparent and ethical however they must also simultaneously consider legal liability, brand management, as well specific regulations form the league they participate in. This balance causes tension between legal protection and repair of brand and reputation. This makes crisis communication strategy especially in the sports industry. This paper examines NFL crisis communication strategies through two theories. The situational crisis communication theory SCCT for short and image repair theory. Both theories in different ways explore how social media intensifies stakeholder evaluation and proposes a future experiment to test how different response strategies influence fan perceptions of characteristics like response sincerity, responsibility, acceptance, and public trust. By integrating theory with the unique emotional environment of professional sports this paper will demonstrate how strategic communication decisions make sure to shape long term reputational outcomes.

The first theory I'm going to touch on is situational crisis communication theory. This theory was developed in 2007 by Timothy Coombs and remains one of the most influential frameworks in crisis communication research (Coombs, 2007.) SCCT argues that the effectiveness of crisis response depends on the stakeholders' attributions of responsibility. The central assumption is that depending on the nature of the crisis the stakeholders assign varying degrees of blames and strategically align their responses accordingly. (Coombs, 2007) This theory identifies three primary clusters of crises. Victim crisis in where the organization is perceived as a victim, accidental crisis where the organizations actions were

unintentional but contributed to certain situations, and preventable crisis where the organization is seen as responsible due to negligence misconduct or systemic organizational failure. In preventable crisis stakeholders attribute higher responsibility to the organization. According to SCCT organizations facing high responsibility crisis should adopt strategies that accommodate to the organizations needs such as apologies corrective action or full acceptance of responsibility. Organizations must avoid defensive strategies in these cases as it will only make the situation worse and exacerbate reputational damage.

In the NFL many controversies fall into the preventable cluster. When fans perceive inadequate oversight or cultural failures. For example, if a player repeatedly violates conduct policies stakeholders may question whether team leadership fosters a sense of accountability. Even when misconduct is technically attributed to one or a few individuals' fans may attribute partial responsibility to the organizations internal culture and management practices. Research supports SCCT's argument that alignment between organizational strategy and pr response alignment matters. (Coombs & Holladay, 2014) When organizations under high responsibility use denial or minimization strategies stakeholders often react negatively giving off the impression that the apology is insincere or evasive. In context of the sport industry where public visibility is high and fan bases are vocal mismatched strategies may intensify potential backlash.

A strong real-world example of this can be seen in the NFL's handling of the Ray rice domestic violence incident. Initially the league issued a relatively mild punishment and limited public explanation. However, once video footage surfaced on social media the public backlash intensified rapidly. Stakeholders perceived this situation as preventable and attributed higher responsibility not only to the player but also to the leagues disciplinary process. According to SCCT this placed the crisis firmly in the preventable cluster requiring a response rooted in full accountability and corrective action. The NFL's delayed and evolving response demonstrated how misalignment between perceived responsibility and communication strategy can damage creditability and trust amongst fans.

Another theory that differs slightly from SCCT in crisis communication is a theory devolved by William Benoit in 1997 entitled image repair. (Benoit, 1997) While SCCT focuses on stakeholder attributions and strategic alignment, Beniots image repair theory provides a more generic understating of message content by categorizing pr crisis communication responses into five categories. These includes denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, identifying corrective actions, and mortification. In sports the most common of the five strategies is mortification. Mortification involves admitting wrongdoing and requesting forgiveness paired with identifying corrective actions. Research suggests that mortification is particularly effective when accepting responsibility using transparency and accountability. (Benoit, 1997)

A relevant example of image repair theory in action occurred during the NFLs investigation of the Washington Commander's organizational misconduct. As details about the workplace misconduct and

culture emerged the organization attempted to use element of corrective action and limited mortification by acknowledging issues while also restricting the organizational leadership. However, many stakeholders viewed the response as incomplete due to a lack of full transparency. Image repairs framework suggests that mortification is most effective when it is clear, direct, and paired with meaningful corrective action. In this case there was a perceived gap between words and actions which weakened the effectiveness of the response and prolonged reputational damage.

However, professional sports organizations often navigate legal risk when crafting public relations statements. Organizations, legal counsel may advise vague language that avoids direct admission of wrongdoing while this approach may reduce liability, but it also can undermine trust with fans who often value authenticity. Especially in today's era of social media, fans are especially sensitive to tone and whether the organization seems sincere in their public statement. Responses must be carefully worded as they may be interpreted as more performative rather than genuine. Message framing is crucial in shaping perception of fans and stakeholders. Social media platforms amplify crisis visibility and stakeholder participation. A 2011 study found that medium choice influences stakeholder reactions and more interactive platforms can change perceptions on transparency. (Schultz et al., 2011) Another study done in 2014 further argues that digital crisis communication intensifies emotional responses and forces organizations to account for audience sentiment in real time. (Coombs & Holladay, 2014)

In professional sports fan communities are often highly engaged and networked. Immediately after statements are posted they are often quoted, criticized or supported by fans, journalists and influencers. Unlike the traditional press releases that pass through media filters public statements issued via social media are often evaluated and interpreted directly by stakeholders. As we've discussed sports fandom is closely tied to one's social identity. Fans often define themselves through the teams they affiliate with and when a team experiences some sort of scandal it can create an identity crisis or dissonance for supporters. Therefore, this adds another layer of crisis communication in sports as organizational responses not only affect the brand of the team but also affecting the fans as a piece of their personal identity is under scrutiny.

This concept can be further understood through the idea of social identity theory which suggests that individuals derived part of their self-concepts from group affiliations such as sports teams. When a crisis occurs fans may experience cognitive dissonance between their loyalty to the team and the negative behavior being exposed. As a result, crisis communication strategies must not only repair the organizations image but also help fans reconcile their identity with the situation. (Frederick et al., 2012) This is why tone, empathy and acknowledgment of stakeholder emotions are critical components of effective crisis responses in the sports industry.

Now that we laid the theoretical foundations if I was conducting a study the following research question would guide my analysis. How do NFL crisis response strategies on social media influence fan

perceptions of organizational responsibility, sincerity, and trust? Based on that research question you can shape your hypothesis in three different ways. Mortifications strategies will produce higher perceived sincerity than minimization or deflection. Mortification will result in higher levels of organizational trust. defensive strategies such as minimizations and deflection will increase negative evaluation when responsibility from the organization is perceived as high.

To test these ideas participants would be self-identified NFL fans recruited online. Each participant would be randomly assigned to read a short crisis scenario involving an NFL along with a different type of response from that team. For example, an apology versus a defensive response. After reading the scenario the participants would rate the responses based on trustworthiness sincerity and responsibility acceptance. This set up allows researchers to clearly see how different communication strategies affect fan perceptions in a controlled but realistic setting.

The results of this study would importantly form both research and real-world applications. Additionally, this research could provide insight into how different demographic groups within a fanbase respond to crisis communications. For example, younger fans who are more active on platforms like X (twitter) and Instagram may place a higher value on immediacy and authenticity while older audiences however may prioritize formal statements and traditional media coverage. Understanding these differences would allow NFL organizations to tailor their communications across strategies more effectively. Ensuring that their messaging resonates with diverse stakeholder groups. From a research perspective it would help expand upon existing crisis communication theories by applying them specifically to sports and social media from a real-world practical standpoint. The findings of this potential study could help NFL teams better understand how to respond to crisis in a way that maintains fan trust while still considering legal and organizational concerns.

Overall social media has completely changed how crisis communication works in the NFL Teams no longer have full control over the message and must be respond quickly in an environment where fans actively shape the conversation through there engagement. Using the theories we discussed in this paper like SCCT, and image repair theory helps explain which strategies are most affective. (Coombs, 2007; Benoit, 1997) But the emotional connections fans have with their teams add another layer of complicity. In the end successful crisis communication in sports requires honesty strategy and an understanding of how much fans care. Teams that can balance these factors will be better positioned to protect their reputation and maintain a strong relationship with their fan base.

Work cited

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