

SORRY, NOT SORRY: IMAGE REPARATION ATTEMPTS IN THE NFL

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Major Subject: Communication

West Texas A&M University

Canyon, Texas

May 2015

This research was funded in part by a generous Killgore Research Grant
awarded by the West Texas A&M University Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of current trends in image reparation strategies used by the National Football League (NFL) in an effort to restore goodwill with its stakeholders following perceived transgressions. The 2014/2015 NFL season is discussed and analyzed using the lens of Image Reparation Theory. This research also set out to discover whether or not the NFL's image repair strategies were rhetorically successful. Findings include the application of three general strategies; corrective action, evasion of responsibility, and reduce offensiveness; and the five sub-strategies of defeasibility, minimization, differentiation, attack the accuser, and bolstering. The implications of this research concludes that in sports image repair, use of the contradictory strategies of corrective action with defeasibility, or corrective action used with differentiation or minimization, is not universally effective. Bolstering likely is the key strategy to apply as it is consistently successful across stakeholders. The importance of strategic and proactive organizational communication cannot be overstated, consistency in player discipline is desperately needed in the NFL, and finally, dissociation of players who have engaged in an extreme transgression is suggested.

Keywords: *National Football League, image reparation theory, image reparation strategies, apologetic rhetoric, sports apologia, antapologia*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my thesis committee chair, Dr. Enyonam Osei-Hwere for her patience during this project. Dr. O., thank you especially for your gracious replies to my many, many requests for supporting materials from you to support grant proposals and conference submittals. Your gentle guidance was exactly what I needed to stumble my way through this project. Our shared research interests made for great conversations and your barrage of compliments kept my chin up high enough to complete this project even when I did not think I could ever complete the work.

I also wish to thank my thesis committee member, Dr. Kristina Drumheller. Dr. D., you gave me a second chance at just the time in my life when I needed it most. Your consistent honesty, even when editing, is what I hold of most value. Your guidance, cheers, and your constant support as I attempted to navigate a pathway to my dream will remain cherished always. Thank you for always being the one person I can count on to challenge me to become better. My unwavering respect for you remains.

Finally, to round out my perfect thesis committee trifecta, I wish to thank the wonderfully funny and brilliant Dr. Sarah Vartabedian. Thank you, Dr. V., for taking your personal time to mentor me and support me in pursuit of my dream. Thanks for caring for our Mario and Luigi in such an amazingly gracious manner as I roamed across the country instead of carrying out my duties. Your brilliant mind is an invaluable commodity to all of us lucky enough to be immersed in academia near you. Thank you.

I also would like to recognize all of my graduate school colleagues who are also studying in this wonderfully-supportive communication department at WTAMU. I am certainly standing in tall grass and I am better for having known each and every one of you. Also, I would like to offer a big, loud resounding thank you to Trudy Hanson and Butler Cain. You both are amazingly generous and loving souls. I have cherished my time with you both. Thank you for your cheers and support.

Finally, I wish to thank Mike Haynes, my mentor, for his belief in my abilities and his aid in propelling me forward. I would have never made it to this place in my life without his initial support in my attempts to become an educated individual. People can usually reach back to that one person who made the most positive impact on their life. Mike, you are that person for me and I am eternally grateful. Thank you.

Of course, this thesis is dedicated to my wonderful husband, David; and our children, Jordan, Brooklyn, and Haven; to my mother for her everlasting love and support, and to my beloved Aunt Laura and Uncle Sparky. I love you all deeply.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Rationale.....	6
Chapter Outline.....	8
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	11
About the NFL.....	12
Apologetic Rhetoric.....	15
Sports Apologies and Apologia	20
Image Threat	22
Organizational Crisis	25
Image Reparation Theory	27
III. METHODOLOGY.....	32
Research Questions	31
Methodology.....	32
IV. RHETORICAL ANALYSIS.....	41
Deviant Behaviors Involving Domestic Violence, Child Abuse.....	41
Accusations of Video Suppression.....	54
NFLPA <i>Antapologia</i>	57
Deviant Behaviors Involving Drugs, Alcohol	60

	Deviant Behaviors on the Field.....	62
	Deviant Behaviors in the Workplace.....	66
V.	DISCUSSION	71
	Findings	78
	Future Research	83
	Conclusion	85

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Number of NFL Player Arrest by Year.....	42
2. Personal Conduct Policy Committee, Team Representatives.....	48
3. Player Arrests from December 10, 2014 to February 28, 2015	74

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The National Football League (NFL) in the last 20 years has faced numerous accounts of personnel and player indiscretions that have involved illegal actions such as murder and murder-for-hire, domestic and child abuse, drunk driving, gun-related offenses, and widespread drug use. The league, as an organization, continues to explore ways in which it might address and eliminate these types of controversies from harming the image of the organization. The deviant behaviors carried out by NFL personnel, and the league's response to these behaviors, continue to grow in controversy and have received increasingly significant public outcry from professional football fans and the general public as a whole. American media outlets have covered extensively the discrepancies of the players and personnel, and offered regular scrutiny of the league's reactivity. This research examines the publicized communicative discourse as it pertains to the 2014/2015 NFL season.

The NFL is prominent in American sports culture. Since its inception in 1920, the NFL has consistently drawn large crowds to competitive football games hosted by the league throughout the United States and recently in England. Although dialogue continues among football fans and sports commentators year-round, the NFL garners the most attention during the months of August through February, when football games are

played. It is also during these months that American football is vastly consumed on America's mass media channels of television, radio, and the Internet. The NFL's preseason, regular season, and play-offs all culminate into the annual season-ending and final game, popularly known as the Super Bowl. During the 2014/2015 season, the Super Bowl was watched by a record 114.4 million viewers – more than any television program in U.S. history (“Most-watched,” 2015). The week of the regular season game played on Thursday, September 4, 2014, boasted an astonishing 26.9 million viewers for the season opener between the Seattle Seahawks and the Green Bay Packers (“NFL opener,” 2014; “Thursday night,” 2014).

Beginning with the season-opener through the end of the Super Bowl, the NFL's 2014/2015 season was overshadowed by controversy. The season began on a scandalous note that spurred heightened negative publicity for the NFL as an organization. That negativity dominated American news headlines all season. The headlines included domestic violence, child abuse, substance abuse, and player health and safety, as well as legitimate and fair game-playing standards. With all the controversy the league faced over the course of the season and postseason, the NFL still boasted significantly higher ratings and profits from sponsorships, partnerships, and advertising. Taking all of this into account, it is easy to infer that the fanship of the sport of professional football, coupled with the financial implications of the NFL in America, puts the league in a powerful position where it possesses a vast and invasive reach on American culture and society.

The NFL is a powerful organization with significant financial influence in the world of professional sports. The league's primary source of income comes from

sponsorships and endorsements from consumer companies, which continue to increase with each new NFL season. In 2013, the NFL received a record \$1.07 billion in corporate sponsorships (“NFL sponsorship,” 2014). The NFL controls many multi-year, million-dollar and billion-dollar deals with American companies, including Coca-Cola North America, Pepsi USA, which also makes Gatorade, and Anheuser-Busch. Anheuser-Busch signed a 6-year, \$1.2 billion deal to become the official beer of the NFL. In an effort to highlight its latest line of tablets, Microsoft signed a 5-year, \$400 million deal in support of the league (Crupi, 2011).

The NFL’s season-culminating event, the Super Bowl, was the most watched television event in 2014 and 2015 (“FOX Sports,” 2014; “Most-watched,” 2015) creating the ideal environment for the league to command lucrative sponsorship agreements from companies looking to reach such large audiences. Television commercials during the Super Bowl as a result cost more than any other advertising spot at any time during all other programs or events on national television. A 30-second spot during the Super Bowl costs companies an average of \$4.5 million (Erb, 2015). Additionally, the Super Bowl brings the NFL an average of \$60.3 million in ticket sales, with the host city gaining around \$600 million in new revenue (Erb, 2015). All of this speaks to the power and influence of the National Football League, and its influence on the culture, economy, and the American society as a whole.

Furthermore, the NFL demonstrates a higher-than-average deviant behavioral crime prevalence among American athletes (Benedict & Yeager, 1998). Between the 1996 and 1997 seasons, the league reportedly recorded a 1-in-5 rate, or 20%, tendency for crime (Benedict & Yeager, 1998). The NFL created its first conduct policy for off-

the-field behaviors for NFL players in 1997 (“NFL record & fact,” 2013). This new policy named the “Violent Crime Policy,” created by the NFL commissioner at the time, Paul Tagliabue, was in response to the surge in arrests and violent crimes by active and former NFL players, coaches, and teams. The purpose of the Violent Crime Policy was to supplement what was lacking in the NFL’s Collective Bargaining Agreement and individual contracts put in place to govern players and teams.

Denard Walker, who was drafted in 1997 and played as a cornerback for the Tennessee Oilers, was the first to be disciplined under Tagliabue’s new policy (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2014). Walker was arrested during the off-season in 1999 for threatening, punching, and attempting to strangle the mother of his son. Although the incident occurred in July 1999, the incident was not reported publically until January 2000 when the Tennessee team played in the play-offs and ultimately went on to compete in that season’s Super Bowl (“Walker probation,” 2000). News reports stated that Walker’s coach was aware of the arrest at the time it originally occurred (Murray-Garrigan, 2000), but no NFL-mandated punishment was handed down until September 2000, which was the next season (“Titan,” 2000).

Other events around the inception of the Violent Crime Policy garnered unsavory coverage concerning off-the-field deviance. In 1994, Andre Rison and his girlfriend at the time, Lisa “One Eye” Lopes, were intoxicated at Rison’s home and engaged in a domestic dispute which turned physical leading to Lopes burning down the wide receiver’s house (Barrabi, 2014). Warren Moon in 1994 was accused of sexual assault by a former Vikings cheerleader (Barrabi, 2014). Moon later married and in 1995 was arrested for domestic violence. Felicia Moon, his wife, testified that it was her anger that

stirred the situation. Moon was acquitted of the charges (“Testimony begins,” 1996). Eight days later, star running back, O.J. Simpson, led police on the notorious Ford Bronco car chase (Barrabi, 2014). A highly-publicized murder trial followed after O.J. was charged with the murder of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend, Ronald Goldman. O.J. was acquitted of the murder. In 2007, he was arrested in Las Vegas, Nevada, and sentenced to 33 years for armed robbery, kidnapping and other charges. In 1996, defensive tackle Dan Wilkinson pleaded no contest to a domestic violence charge when he hit his pregnant girlfriend. Jim Brown, a former running back, served several months in jail in 1999 after he vandalized his wife’s car during a domestic dispute. Brown refused to participate in counseling and community service for the domestic violence charge, but after serving the time in jail, he was able to plead a deal for a lesser charge of misdemeanor vandalism. These are a few examples of the incidents that occurred between 1994 and 2000, which is three years before and three years after the new policy was written. Studies show that the lack of crime regulation in professional sports correlated with consistently high crime rates among professional athletes, NFL players included (Berry & Smith, 2000).

The NFL remains a hotbed for deviant and unlawful behavior on and off the field. These behaviors splinter beyond domestic violence and include acts of child abuse, sexual assault, drug abuse, driving under the influence, and other miscellaneous unlawful acts, as well as actionable misconduct on the field, including punching and stomping on opponents. Such behavior is highlighted further by American media coverage and leads to public communicative discourse becoming charged; a continuum that has occurred for decades and continues on the same repetitive path.

Society expects an appropriate apology when a professional athlete's actions threaten the fanship that propels the athlete's success. Any deviant behavior that garners unsavory publicity becomes an image threat to not only the player, but also the player's team and to the league. This image threat requires an apology in order to repair the damage caused. If an appropriate response is not offered by the player, team, or league, a communicative crisis can occur as professional football fans, the American media, and the general public push back with an outcry for remediation. This creates a crisis situation that must then be addressed.

This study aims to investigate the rhetorical responsive process as it pertains to the current trends in public apologies and image reparation attempts by the NFL throughout the 2014/2015 season during which many players, other personnel, and the league all have been accused of perceived transgressions. These matters oftentimes become a threat to the image of the league as an organizational whole. A rhetorical analysis of the image threats the NFL faced, and the selected NFL statements the league issued, are explored using William Benoit's Image Reparation Theory to assess the league's crisis communication readiness, especially as it pertains to the disciplinary strategies for NFL personnel whose problematic off-the-field actions and deviant behaviors threaten the image of the organization.

RATIONALE

Image Reparation Theory is rooted in apologetic rhetoric and emphasizes the strategies that an organization or individual might apply in an effort to defend or redeem itself or to remediate any threat of image that might occur as a result of a transgression. A complete analysis of recent NFL player and personnel transgressions over the course of

the 2014/2015 season were categorized and analyzed to explore the effectiveness of the strategies applied by the league in an effort toward image reparation.

This thesis is important for the public communicative discourse and resultant debates from the publicized negatively-perceived actions of sports professionals. The continued fanship and financial support the NFL receives from endorsements and professional football fans makes this topic important to explore such destructive behaviors and their impact on the popularity of the sport and society as a whole. Discourse on popular culture events is common, but when mixed with such societal disparities as domestic violence, for example, the discourse intensifies. Domestic violence is a recurring theme in the NFL. In fact, at least 50 cases of domestic violence have occurred involving NFL players just since 2006, and this represents reported arrests only (Schrotenboer, 2014). Assault charges, drug charges, and driving under the influence also are common NFL player deviant behaviors (Schrotenboer, 2014).

In view of the fact that the NFL is consistently infiltrated with deviant and unlawful behaviors (Schrotenboer, 2014), the study of image reparation attempts is important in understanding the social construct in today's sports culture. An appropriate apology is expected by stakeholders, fans, and the general public when a sports figure's actions are serious enough to threaten the image of the player, his team, or the league as a whole organization. Application of the correct image reparation strategy coupled with the accused transgression is not often correctly carried out and followed through by the NFL. Add to that the multilayered organization of the NFL as a trade association to 32 member teams; with each team having an individual owner, management, coaching staff, and so

on. The enforcement of policies and discipline can become muddled amongst so many layers.

Crisis management professionals, and sports public and media relations communicators could benefit from such research because this research could help in figuring out how best to shape apologetic rhetoric for effective image reparation. This investigation also can aid organizational communicators by identifying best practices in responding to image threats. Also, the NFL might benefit in learning ways in which it might dispel the perpetuating blame and finger-pointing that the league continued to receive throughout the 2014/2015 season and beyond.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: Which image reparation strategies have been applied in the 2014/2015 season by the NFL?

RQ2: Are the NFL image reparation strategies rhetorically effective in repairing the image of the NFL after the perceived transgression by a player?

The research questions are answered via the examination of gathered NFL-released press releases and statements during the 2014/2015 season. The time period studied was February 1, 2014, to February 28, 2015. Each release was rhetorically analyzed and the strategies were categorized using image reparation theory (Benoit, 2015). The successfulness of strategies was then weighed against the existence of any stakeholder response of *antapologia* (Stein, 2008).

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter one has discussed why this research project is timely and warranted. Professional sports is a widely viewed and highly digested staple in American culture.

The NFL has historically been accused of being too lenient in player disciplinary action for behaviors carried out off the field, and still decades later, the same image threats continue to occur. This chapter therefore explains the imperativeness for organizational sports communicators to apply the appropriate image repair strategies in times of image threat and crisis.

Chapter two is a review of the literature and past works that cumulatively have informed this work. The history of apologetic rhetoric is discussed because it is the root to image reparation theory. The history of the NFL also is included in this section, as is a review on organizational communication, crisis communication, and past studies on sports *apologia*. An important explanation of the synecdochic tie between a popular athlete and his sport also is discussed.

Chapter three explains in detail the methods by which this research has been carried out. The rhetorical analysis of the 52 NFL releases were both intrinsically and extrinsically examined via the lens of generic criticism, or more specifically, apologetic rhetoric. This chapter explains how this research was shaped by the examination of the entirety of the apologetic rhetoric encircling each incidence by the examination of the *kategoria* (Ryan, 1982), *apologia* (Ware & Linkugel, 1973), and *antapologia* (Stein, 2008) that told each story. Then, the chapter explains the five general strategies and the 12 sub-strategies of image repair that the NFL's response were categorized by what was rhetorically deciphered apparent in the releases.

Chapter four identifies and analyzes the trends in apologetic rhetoric and image reparation practices in the NFL for the 2014/2015 season that were identified via the collection of the NFL's statements and press and media releases, and then were analyzed

and categorized using Benoit's (2015) image reparation theory. The strategies applied, once identified, were analyzed in this chapter for effectiveness by stakeholder groups as suggested by the presence of *antapologia*.

In the concluding chapter of this work, the strategies and effectiveness of those strategies are discussed in great detail and suggestions were made on how the NFL might better handle image threats in the future. Chapter five also includes suggestions for future research on the many topics discussed in this work.

This thesis project contributes to the body of research on the topics of organizational communication, crisis communication, sports communication, and image reparation. Also, this project helps to gauge whether the existence of *antapologia* is a good indicator of image repair strategy success with stakeholder groups, and informs what perpetuating image threats the NFL faces. Finally, suggestions for successful sports *apologia* attempts are offered.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review explores the history and current events within and throughout the NFL, define and examine apologetic rhetoric, *kategoria*, *apologia*, sports *apologia*, *antapologia*, threats to image, crisis communication, and image reparation. The NFL, as a trade organization with 32 member teams, has a unique challenge in maintaining a positive image. Each of the 32 teams employ hundreds of employees. Each team is its own business entity, complete with an ownership structure, senior management employees, a coaching staff, the players, and medical and supportive staff. Regardless of who engages in some form of public transgression, the NFL as the overarching organization, inevitably could face some consequence for that action, image-wise. The initial accusation occurs and when such a threat to the organization's image does occur, an appropriate apology or other actionable response is expected by its stakeholders. If the apology, *apologia*, or other form of rhetorical remediation is not deemed sufficient or appropriate to the public, the pushback comes in the form of *antapologia*, which is a re-accusation that strengthens the original argument and weakens the offered apology or *apologia*. When such public image crisis occurs, it is best to apply the appropriate strategies to repair the organization's image. This chapter discusses these

issues in detail concerning its application to sports and organizational image repair, and more specifically, the NFL.

About the NFL

In 1902, the National Football League was formed with three teams; two from Philadelphia and one from Pittsburg (“NFL record & fact,” 2013). The league later dissolved when Ohio’s football presence expanded, which led to the formation of the American Professional Football Conference in 1920 and consisted of four Ohio teams. Within months the conference grew to include teams from four states and led to a name change to the American Professional Football Association (APFA). The following year a president and a secretary-treasurer were named and the two formally established a league constitution and by-laws. By the end of the year, the APFA grew to 22 teams. On June 24, 1922, the name of the APFA was changed to the National Football League (NFL).

When the APFA first formed in 1920, 800 fans watched the first game; however by 1924, the NFL had become such a popular pastime in America that the Thanksgiving game that year boasted a crowd of 36,000 in Chicago, and by December, had grown to 73,000 and 75,000 in New York and Los Angeles, respectively (“NFL record & fact,” 2013). There have been eight commissioners, also called “presidents” in the earlier years, of the NFL since its inception in 1920. The eight commissioners are:

- Jim Thorpe (1920)
- Joe Carr (1921-39)
- Carl Storck (1939-41)
- Elmer Layden (1941-46)
- Bert Bell (1946-59)

- Pete Rozelle (1960-89)
- Paul Tagliabue (1989-2006)
- Roger Goodell (2006-present)

The commissioner oversees all operations of the NFL and holds the governing authority over the organization. The NFL is a tax-exempt entity classified as a 501(c)(6) trade association with 32 member teams. Each team is an individually-owned, for-profit entity (with the exception of the Green Bay Packers, which is citizen-owned). The teams pay annual membership dues to the NFL, which runs off of an annual budget of more than \$326 million, according to the organization's 2012 fiscal year Form 990. Roger Goodell, as the current NFL Commissioner is the highest paid officer in the league with an annual compensation of \$44 million. Of the 1,858 reported NFL employees, the six highest compensated employees below the commissioner receive annual salaries ranging from \$1.64 million to \$6.19 million.

Salary has been a longstanding source of contention throughout the NFL. As a result of salary and other concerns, the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) was established in 1956. In 1977, the NFLPA and the NFL management council created and agreed upon a collective bargaining agreement (CBA). The CBA was ratified to protect the respective interests of players and the league. Before the CBA, much unrest had occurred with college drafts, player strikes, unfair compensation, pension payouts, and a plethora of other matters. This CBA also "reaffirmed the NFL Commissioner's disciplinary authority" ("NFL record & fact," 2013, p. 362). The CBA was updated and/or extended in 1982, 1993, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2006, 2007, 2011, and 2012. The NFL Foundation was established in 2012 as a result of the 2012 agreement.

In 1997, the league's 10,000th regular season game was played and came with the NFL's first version of a conduct policy, titled the Violent Crime Policy. In 1996 and 1997, 109 players were formally charged with a crime, equivalent to 1 in 5 NFL players (Benedict & Yaeger, 1998). The policy was later renamed the Personal Conduct Policy and updated in 2007, shortly after Goodell assumed the Commissioner position. In 2006, there was a sharp increase in arrests (Schrotenboer, 2015). The *USA Today* database reported a total of 783 arrests, charges, or citations involving NFL players between January 1, 2000 and March 1, 2015. In 2014, there were nine arrests for physically aggressive behavior and six additional arrests for physically aggressive acts against a child, spouse or family member.

During the 2014/2015 season, Brent Schrotenboer, a *USA Today* sports reporter, compiled a database of arrests and conducted extensive research and reports on the NFL and its players in response to the multitude of reports about the organization's crises with deviant behavior. The four most common charges, according to the *USA Today* arrest database, were DUI, drug use or possession, assault, and domestic violence (Schrotenboer, 2015). Schrotenboer's articles and database lists 50 cases of domestic violence involving NFL players that occurred since Goodell took the Commissioner's office in 2006. Of those, 16 received no suspension, 14 were suspended for one game, and 15 received "grandstand justice" and were suspended for long periods of time or dropped completely from playing in the league (Schrotenboer, 2014, para. 5). Schrotenboer argues that those dropped from the league were not "high status" players and were simply "grandstanded" as an act of social justice on behalf of Goodell and the NFL (Schrotenboer, 2014, para. 5).

The legal woes following a domestic violence incidence isn't typically all that woeful for NFL players. Of the aforementioned 50 cases, 43 court records were located (Schrotenboer, 2014). In 18 of those legal cases, a resolution was reached through the use of diversion programs. In these cases the alleged assaulter agrees to counseling or other related programs in exchange for dropped charges upon completion of the program. In 12 cases the charges were dropped because the victim chose to no longer cooperate with prosecutors. Three were acquitted and one died. Only nine of the domestic violence cases received judgments of no contest or guilty pleas and accompanying convictions (Schrotenboer, 2014).

Apologetic Rhetoric

Apologetic discourse has deep roots within the rhetorical tradition. Rhetoricians like Aristotle, Kenneth Burke, and Walter Fisher, have all offered great insight into the elements that are required for effective persuasion. Aristotle argued that ethos, logos, and pathos all are imperative elements of persuasion (Kennedy, 2007). Burke took Aristotle's work and expounded upon it in his Dramatism Theory, where he states that identification is paramount in the persuasion of an audience. Burke also identified a guilt-redemption cycle that best helps to explain the motive behind apologetic discourse and the accompanying strategies most widely applied. Burke noted that language is the "dancing of an attitude" (Burke, 1941) and if we dissect any situation through the view of his dramatism theory, it would offer a literal statement about human motivation. Dramatism theory is based upon rhetorical and religious connotations, and as such holds key explanations and insight into the importance of identification and how identification plays into persuasion.

Fisher's (1970) earlier work expounds upon Burke's concepts within dramatism theory. Fisher (1984), too, notes that rhetorical communication is accomplished through identity, especially in relation to one's self, and as such, there exists four rhetorical situations that divulge motives: affirmation (birthing an image), reaffirmation (revitalizing the image), purification (correcting an image), and subversion (undermining an image). Fisher relates subversion to a "devil theory" of persuasion which ties satanic attributes and intentions to a person, idea, or institution (Fisher, 1970). Fisher's work is similar to that of Burke's because both theorists offer an interesting explanation and applicable insight toward public rhetoric, and especially apologetic rhetoric. Expounding upon the "devil theory," Burke wrote, "Men who can unite on nothing else can unite on the basis of a foe shared by all" (Burke, 1941, p. 239). This is important to note because when a public figure performs an act that is viewed as negative, cognitive dissonance might set in and identification becomes weakened between that person and his or her audience. As Benoit (1995) explained, "Because blame occurs and face is important" (p. 5) apologetic rhetoric is a vital response when such instances occur. This relates back to this study of the 2014/2015 NFL season because an onslaught of blame has occurred and it is important for the NFL to "save face," or defend its character, by appropriately applying the apologetic strategies that help in the defense and maintenance of the organization's image.

An apology is, in and of itself, a form of rhetoric (Sullivan, 1998). It is portrayed as a dyadic interaction between the person who is perceived to be the offender, and the person or the audience offended (Tavuchis, 1991). Apologetic discourse makes up a "distinct form of public address" (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 273) and if perceived as

sincere by the audience, forgiveness shall prevail (Benoit & Wells, 1996). Burke explained that it is the motivation behind the apologetic act that breathes life into its effectiveness because it is the guilt the person purges that becomes the motivational root to all rhetorical and apologetic discourse. Burke defined guilt as any negative feeling a person might experience, so the purging of guilt undoubtedly sets the guilt-redemption cycle in motion. There are two combinations the rhetorician is most likely to attempt to defend one's character or seek redemption for an accused wrongdoing and the two combinations are victimage-blame and mortification-confess. Victimage and blame encompass scapegoat techniques and mortification involves confession and begging for forgiveness (Burke, 1970). Identification of these two combinations in a situation of apologetic discourse may help to decipher between an apology and an act of *apologia*.

Apologia is a speech act of rhetorical self-defense (Kruse, 1981; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). It is a direct response to an accusation that threatens a person's character, and is defined by Ware and Linkugel (1973) as a distinct form of public address. *Apologia* is not an apology (Hearit, 1994), although it may actually contain an apology. In the early stages of *apologia* study, Rosenfield (1968) examined how *apologia* is typically formed within a speech. The medium most widely used at that time was radio. Rosenfield found that structural set-up of apologetic speech sets followed a distinct pattern. The pattern, or common attributes, included a brief, intense controversy; attacks against the opponent; a concentration of data in the middle third of the speech; and a recycling of arguments from recent speeches (Rosenfield, 1968).

Ware and Linkugel (1973), in their seminal work on *apologia*, identified four key aspects of *apologia* identified as "the postures" of rhetorical self-defense. The postures

include the tactics of denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Ware and Linkugel note that *apologia* is made up of four sets of combinations of two factors each. The combinations include the Absolutive set, which is the use of denial and differentiation; the Vindicative set, which applies denial and transcendence; the Explanative set, which contains bolstering and differentiation; and finally, the Justificative set, which includes bolstering and transcendence. The first two sets, the Absolutive and the Vindicative, are identifiable as “reformatory attempts” and the second two, Explanative and Justificative, are the “transformative attempts.” Ware and Linkugel state, “The four subgenres represent those postures which Western culture, customs, and institutions seem to dictate as being most acceptable in dismissing charges against a rhetor’s character” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 282). In its early forms, other researchers also substantiated *apologia* to be based upon dissociation, scapegoating, and blame (Sullivan, 1998), and *apologia* was referenced as a defensive discourse (Daddario & Wigley, 2006).

Threats against character can become a serious determinant of a person’s or organization’s future success. Reaching back to Fisher’s “devil theory” and Burke’s dramatism theory, Benoit and Wells (1996) explain that an attack, charge, or accusation has two defining elements: a negatively perceived act and an attribution of responsibility for the act to the agent. Every instance of such character threat should be carefully considered in direct relation to the specific accusation in order to design the most effective rhetorical self-defense response (Ryan, 1982). This “*kategoria*,” which is an accusation or charge of wrongdoing, is the speech of accusation and *apologia* is the

responsive speech of defense (Ryan, 1982); it is the apologetic discourse that responds to the attack on character (Kruse, 1977).

Apologia continues to be important in rhetorical self-defense, even for sports figures, because it is important to defend one's character during perceived transgressions in order to maintain one's image (Nelson, 1984). Benoit (2015) states that a persuasive attack creates a negative attitude about the person or organization being accused of the wrongdoing or perceived transgression (p. 10). Reputation is important, influential, and should be defended (pp. 18-19). It is important for the audiences to be persuaded with the rhetorical response that is offered in response to an image threat, but differing audiences have differing attitudes and are persuaded differently (Benoit, 2015). If a rhetorician applies inconsistent or contradictory responses to image threats, not only will they be unsuccessful in image repair, the ineffective response also can strengthen the original argument and create even more negative or accusatory discourse.

Such a continuation of the *kategoria/apologia* speech set has been highlighted in recent research that adds a third discourse. This additional discourse is termed *antapologia* and is defined as the response to an ineffective apology or act of *apologia*. *Antapologia* is carried out by both the public and by the media (Husslebee & Stein, 2012) and has two functions – it strengthens the original attack, or *kategoria*, where it weakens the *apologia* (Stein, 2008; Stein, Larson, & Grady, 2007; Turman, Stein, & Barton, 2008; Stein, Turman, & Barton, 2013). The antapologist can strengthen the original attack by pointing out any discrepancies in the *apologia*, thus refining the original attack using those discrepancies. The antapologist might also weaken the *apologia* by pointing out inconsistencies in speech and action to prove the act untrue or that the apologist did not

take adequate responsibility. Additionally, the motive behind the *apologia*, the *apologia* mirroring past instances of *apologia*, or the character flaws of the apologist, also work to strengthen the antapologic response whilst weakening the act of *apologia* in question. Instances of *antapologia* in response to the NFL's apologetic instances, or sports *apologia* can help inform the level of successfulness of the image repair strategies that were applied in response to the original accusations of a perceived transgression, or *kategoria*.

Sports Apologies and Apologia

Many cases of sports *apologia* have been identified (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Blaney, Lippert, & Smith, 2013; Glantz, 2013; Husselbee & Stein, 2012; Kruse, 1981; Meyer, 2008; Meyer & Cutbirth, 2013; Stein, Turman, & Barton, 2013; Turman, Stein, & Barton, 2008). Kruse (1981) declared that sports figures employ the same strategies as other political and social actors. She also noted the "survival motive," or self-defense, that apologetic rhetoric applies to instances of image threat (Kruse, 1981). Meyer (2008) conducted a contextual analysis of statements given by New York Jets quarterback Michael Vick when he faced dog-fighting charges. As a result of his investigation, Meyer suggested expansion of the study of *apologia* to include sports apologies. Blaney, Lippert, and Smith (2013) compiled a book with accounts of sports *apologia* and the image reparation strategies each of the athletes involved had used. As prior research tells us, mortification, as described in Benoit's Image Reparation Theory (2015) is the most effective apologetic response strategy in restoring image (Benoit & Drew, 1997). Twork and Blaney (2013) found that mortification and corrective action is actually a more

effective combination of image repair strategies to apply than mortification alone in image reparation success for athletes, specifically.

Although public response could be shaped by how the media covers an incident, a player or team's preexisting image could also be an influencing factor on how the public assesses the incident and receives the apology (Lee, Bang, & Lee, 2013), but research reveals there are other deciding factors. This could be because people identify so closely with a favorite sports team or player. In fact, this identification can be so intense that the person experiences feelings of ego-enhancement when the favored team or player performs well (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Sometimes, unlawful behaviors or other sources of scandal can bring fans closer to a player or team that they favor, instead of causing divisiveness, because it creates an in-group bias and the connection actually becomes strengthened because the fan feels more defensive in honoring his/her favorite team and players (Dietz-Uhler, End, Demakakos, Dickirson, & Grantz, 2002). However, it has been noted that when a player from a fan's favorite team reportedly breaks the law, whether on or off the field, a fan holds tightly to that in-group bias to the team only when the team demonstrates strong leadership by denouncing the player's negative action (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009). This "black sheep effect" appears to be what makes sports apologies such an important strategy in maintaining image when image threat occurs (Dietz-Uhler, End, Demakakos, Dickirson, & Grantz, 2002; Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009).

Generous amounts of media reports exist on sports apologies showcasing the apologetic rhetoric mentioned above. The transgression, or *kategoria*, is reported. Then, the need for the apology and the apology itself, if one exists, is reported; after which

media then, through framing, hold a powerful impact on audience perceptions relative to certain events (Fink, Borland, & Fields, 2011; Troester & Johns, 2013, Husselbee & Stein, 2012). Troester and Johns (2013) argue that the 21st Century's 24/7 news media cycle played a considerably offensive role in the image threat of Olympian swimmer, Michael Phelps. The media played and replayed in 2009 a video-recording of Phelps smoking marijuana. In Troester and Johns' analysis of the rhetorical events encircling the Phelps image threat, the authors apply Burke's "Rhetoric of Rebirth" and Benoit's Image Reparation Theory by identifying the appropriateness of the strategy of mortification that Phelps applied in response. The authors also discussed the implications and inappropriateness of other strategies that could have been attempted by Phelps, such as denial and evading responsibility. Neither of those strategies would have been effective because of the transgression being publically and visually aired.

Image Threat

The discussions above cover many examples on how individual sports apologies play out but what effect do these transgressions have on the accused player's team or governing league? The way in which a sports organization and an individual athlete within the organization might share a synecdochic identity is an important topic to discuss within this current research project. When an athlete achieves such a heightened identity that the public or the sport's stakeholders identify the sport and the athlete as synonymous, synecdoche when discussing the two as interchangeable occurs.

Synecdoche is a literary or orated way of identifying a part that represents a whole, or a whole that represents a part. In sports, this can occur with high-achieving athletes. For example, the image threat that cyclist Lance Armstrong brought to himself, his nonprofit

organization the Livestrong Foundation; the sport of Cycling, and to the Tour de France (which Armstrong had won seven times), is an important example of synecdoche, as well as of sports *apologia* and its many splintering effects. Armstrong was accused of “doping,” which is the unlawful use of steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs. At first, Armstrong denied such allegations but after a barrage of investigations, including the U.S. Department of Justice, his denial tactic was no longer effective. Benoit (2015) explained that Armstrong then applied the image reparation strategies of mortification, defeasibility, more denial, and differentiation, but that an antapologic response by Travis Tygart, who is the chief of the US Anti-Doping Agency, coupled with his initial denial attempts, is what negated the effectiveness of his image repair attempts (Benoit, 2015, p. 84-85).

The Armstrong incidence is an important image reparation and rhetorical apologetic study because it is an example of how a single athlete can affect the entirety of the league or sport in which he or she performs. In 2009, the *New York Times* published a question and answer interview with the head of the USA Cycling organization, Steve Johnson, and asked him how Armstrong had, up to that time, affected the sport (“Armstrong’s impact,” 2009).

Lance has provided the opportunity for almost a prospective chronological study of the impact of an identifiable hero or icon on a sport like cycling. While Lance was at the top of the sport, our annual growth rates were, in terms of membership numbers, around 5 percent. When Lance retired three years ago, our growth did drop down to about 3 percent for a couple of years. Now Lance is back and our growth rates are back to 4.5 percent or close to 5. He definitely has an impact. Our membership numbers have more than doubled since 2002. Our number of races have gone up dramatically. Our number of clubs, all the things that you associate with growth of a sport, all those indicators are trending upward. (Zinser, 2009, para 7)

As the doping allegations unfolded so did Armstrong's credibility, and sponsors began pulling money ("Nissan to pull," 2012), the sport of cycling felt the effects and was even threatened to be banished from the Olympics ("Pound says," 2013). Armstrong's name was dropped from his foundation, renamed from "Armstrong Foundation" to the "Livestrong Foundation," and several lawsuits began to form ("The Sunday," 2012). His actions splintered way beyond his own image and reverberated throughout the cycling community for several years afterward.

Husselbee and Stein (2012) identified the ways in which journalistic *antapologia* effectively challenged the *apologia* offered by Tiger Woods when his marital infidelity was brought to light in 2010. The journalists highlighted in detail Woods' apology by identifying his character flaws by highlighting the many excuses and explanations he used during the image threat (Husselbee & Stein, 2012). Woods' image threat was of significance because he had become the face of a sport that had up until that point been such an individualistic sport that the sport of golf had never before been identifiable by just one person. Woods was a golf great like no others before him, and his superstar abilities in the sport made him into a "superman" of the sport (Barbie, 2012, p. 3). He boosted the popularity of the Professional Golfers Association (PGA) with his greatness and commanded the most lucrative deals in the sport at that time. Television ratings and network contracts reached epic proportions for the PGA and rested near \$1 billion in 2008 (Barbie, 2012, p. 4). The prize money for PGA events more than quadrupled as Woods' superstardom and his winning at those events became synonymous (Searcy, 2012). Tiger Woods was golf and golf was Tiger Woods. When these types of partnerships occur, public identity can become as one. When an athlete who holds high

profile in his or her sport is found guilty of a serious moral transgression, the image of the athlete's sports league also becomes threatened. Therefore, the impact that player indiscretions have on their respective team sport organization's image can be grave. This type of synecdochic marriage of identity is the very aspect of player/team image threats that this research investigates.

Organizational Crisis

A common trigger for image threat occurs when a crisis situation happens that involves a person related to an organization, as demonstrated with the above examples. Threats to image from one person's transgression can come in many forms, and the image threat can cause a crisis situation for not only the individual but also for the organization with which that individual can be identifiable. This can endanger an organization's image and legitimacy to both internal and external stakeholders (Massey, 2001). A stakeholder is defined as any associated person or group who effects or is effected by the organization's actions. Stakeholders include the media, government, employees, local community, suppliers, competitors, special interest groups, stockholders, consumers, and unions (Coombs, 2006b). For the NFL, stakeholders include the past and present players and staff of the 32 individual teams that make-up the NFL, the NFL organization and all of its conglomerate businesses, NFL and NFL team fans, and the NFL teams, and NFL players' business partners, sponsors, advertisers, and partnered mass media outlets. Stakeholders of the NFL also include the cities in which each NFL teams exists, and the residents, government, community, and media outlets of each of those cities.

Organizational crises occur regularly. They are usually a negative event that occurs suddenly and often without warning (Coombs, 2004). There are nine common types of organizational crises that exist, they include crisis in public perception, a sudden market shift, product failure, sudden necessary change in top management, cash crisis, industrial relations crisis (*i.e.* employee strikes), hostile takeover, adverse international event, and regulation or deregulation of the company or industry (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998). A broadened interpretation of the above perceivable transgressions can be transferred to any number of other more or less specific acts.

A crisis not only unearths existing ethical discrepancies in a person or in an organization, but the crisis could itself also create ethical considerations. According to Coombs (2007), the first act in any crisis should be to first plan and implement mediation of any physical or psychological threats that could occur for the public and the organization's stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). It is only after those threats have been addressed should the organization's communicators begin to respond to the crisis to repair reputation. Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is an evidence-based system for matching crisis response to the crisis situation to best preserve the organization's reputation (Coombs, 1995; 2006; 2007). SCCT is based upon attribution theory, which is a theory that explains that people make judgments and place blame when unexpected events occur, and especially when negative outcomes are the result of those unexpected events (Coombs, 1995). Coombs identifies 10 "crisis frames" that require an organization's remediated reply. The frames include a natural disaster, rumor, product tampering, workplace violence, challenges, technical error product recall, technical-error accident, human-error product recall, human-error accident, and/or an

organizational misdeed (Coombs, 1995, p.457; see also Coombs, 2007). SCCT is a widely applicable tool in crisis research, but for the purposes of dissecting the NFL, SCCT's 10 crises frames do not efficiently depict the crisis situations the organization currently or regularly faces.

Much from Coombs still can be applied in terms of shaping how to view the current discretions of today's NFL. As Coombs defines, any applied crisis response strategies should focus on three main objectives, "to shape attributions, change perceptions, and reduce negative affect of the perceived or accused transgressions" (Coombs, 2007, p.171). Coombs also notes five crisis response strategies, which are quite similar to Benoit's 14 image repair strategies. Coombs' five strategies are nonexistence, distance, ingratiation, mortification, and suffering (Coombs, 1995). Organizational apologies have become commonplace and are sometimes referenced as ritualistic in nature (Coombs, 2013). To become effective in organizational crisis management, an organization must first keep in mind the many stakeholders and audiences, and each of their respective perceptions (Coombs, 1995). Oftentimes, a knee-jerk apologetic reaction can be more damaging than beneficial and careful thought should be put into deciphering an appropriate image reparation strategy.

Image Reparation Theory

William Benoit developed his Image Restoration Theory in 1995 to originally apply to apologetic discourse within the political and organizational realms.

"Restoration" was Benoit's first term for his theory but he has since replaced "restoration" with reparation. He explains that just as a broken vase is of little value and may never again hold water like it used to (i.e., not ever completely *restored*), with some

work the vase can be pieced back together, or *repaired* (Benoit, 2015). This analogy that Benoit offers parallels an image that has been threatened due to a perceived transgression and is in need of some measure of social remediation in order to repair it. Thus the term image reparation shall hereunto replace the past usage of image restoration when discussing Benoit's theory.

Reparation of image is applied to five overarching contexts: the corporate and political contexts as originally mentioned, and the contexts of sports/entertainment, international, and third party. All five contexts have much overlap within and throughout the theory of image reparation, and for the purposes of the present study, the use of the corporate context and the sports/entertainment context are both applied. The arbitrary values, or blurred lines, between organizational (the NFL is a trade organization) and sports/entertainment (the NFL is a trade organization of sports teams that entertain the American public) contexts are both obvious and applicable contexts to use in the examination of image reparation implored by the NFL.

As aforementioned, the reparation of image becomes the goal after a perceived transgression, but the ways in which an individual or organization achieves such a goal can vary widely. Benoit explains five general strategies and 12 sub-strategies that are applied in response to image threat. These strategies are broken down into the five main categories of denial, evade responsibility, reduce offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. The first three of those general strategies are broken down further. Benoit breaks down denial into two types of denial. The two types of denial include simple denial and shift blame. To evade responsibility includes such tactics as provocation, defeasibility, claiming the transgression was an accident, and finally, good intentions.

The third major category that Benoit breaks down into further applicable sub-strategies is the reduce offensiveness category. This category includes bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and finally, compensation.

The chart that Benoit (2015) offers on page 28 of his book offers a clear definition of the actual application of each of the strategies that can be used for image reparation. Each of the image reparation strategies are rooted in apologetic rhetoric. Five of these strategies are generally applied in instances of *apologia* (Benoit, 1995; Benoit & Drew, 1997; Burke, 1970; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Application of the appropriate response strategies is critical in restoring image (Benoit, 1995), but the strategies must not be contradictory of each other (Nelson, 1984). The strategies of mortification and corrective action, when used in conjunction with apology, are effective in even bolstering image following a crisis (Benoit & Brinson, 1994). This strategy set consists of the more appropriate and effective forms of image reparation when facing serious transgressions (Benoit & Drew, 1997). What is most important throughout the body of research knowledge above, and to this present study, is to unite theory with practice to help the practitioner (Roberts, 2006), because such work can “build a useable bridge between rhetorical theory and public relations practice” (Smudde, 2004, p. 421).

NFL quarterback Michael Vick offers an example of such unification of theory and practice, and is a good example of how and when to apply appropriate strategies in a rhetorical situation to save face and repair one’s image. In Vick’s dogfighting case, Smith (2013) discusses three rhetorical phases identified in Vick’s responses. The application of Benoit’s image repair theory left the author to deduce that Vick had applied the strategies of denial, defeasibility, shifting blame, and corrective action in phase one; phase two

included denial and bolstering; and in phase three, Vick applied mortification, along with bolstering and corrective action. The author concluded that the appropriate rhetorical response when caught in a criminal activity is immediate mortification. “He/she should take full responsibility for their actions and apologize unconditionally” (Smith, 2013, p. 166).

Vick, after his sentencing and jail time of 21 months, returned to the NFL. In the 2014 season, he played on the New York Jets team. Vick is not the only player to be reinstated after sentencing and serving a prison term. Plaxico Burress in 2011 was released from jail after serving time for shooting himself in a nightclub in New York and signed a \$3 million, one year contract with the New York Jets (Glantz, 2013). Another example is that of Ben Roethlisberger, Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback, who was accused of several instances of sexual assault in 2008 and again in 2010, yet in 2014 he remains a star quarterback in the NFL.

The identification of current trends in apologetic discourse and sports apologies is an imperative first step in deciphering what strategies, and any accompanying tactics, are most effective in today’s sports-related apologetic rhetoric for both preserving and repairing image following an accused transgression. Moving a step beyond the personal transgressions, however, it is important to look holistically at how the transgressional effects reach beyond the individual. The investigation of how the individual transgressions affect the team image and in the case of the NFL, the entire league’s image, deserves further study. Therefore, this research project poses the following two questions:

RQ1: Which image reparation strategies have been applied in the 2014/2015 season by the NFL?

RQ2: Are the NFL image reparation strategies rhetorically effective in repairing the image of the NFL after the perceived transgression by a player?

The current body of knowledge on apologetic rhetoric, sports *apologia*, and image reparation strategies, can all be used to inform best practices during times of image threat of an individual athlete and how that threat turns into an organizational crises for the athlete's team or governing league. The application of Benoit's image repair theory can help identify which strategies are being applied by the NFL in the wake of player transgressions and whether or not the strategies applied during the 2014/2015 season were an appropriate response.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

All National Football League (NFL) press and media releases were gathered, rhetorically analyzed, and then categorized by the theory of image reparation. The NFL statements collected pertained to any incidences of an NFL-related perceived transgression, personnel misconduct, unlawful behavior, or any other image-related crisis involving a player, coach, coordinator, owner, or administrator employed or otherwise professionally associated with the NFL throughout the duration of the off-season leading up to the 2014/2015 season, including the entirety of the 2014/2015 season, the play-off season, and the Super Bowl. An investigation into each event that the NFL chose to release a statement concerning was researched via media reports to document the totality of the incident and to better understand the NFL's response to the incident. The NFL statements regarding the crisis events were analyzed and categorized using Benoit's Image Reparation strategies (Benoit, 2015).

The rhetorical analysis consisted of three parts which included an intrinsic analysis of the text included in each NFL statement; the extrinsic rhetorical analysis of the media-reported incidents that occurred both historically and culturally to move the NFL to release a statement; and finally, the NFL's statements were analyzed using the generic criticism theoretical lens for analysis of the organization's rhetorical self-defense.

More specifically, image reparation theory was used to identify (a) the accusation; (b) the response; and (c) the audience receiving the message or the intended audience. Each NFL-issued release was reviewed for categorization within the rooted apologetic rhetoric as shaped by image reparation theory. Generic criticism is the more-focused and appropriate rhetorical lens for this particular piece that investigates the rhetorical self-defense of the NFL throughout the 2014/2015 season because apologetic rhetoric, sports *apologia*, and image reparation are the facets of research sought in this project.

The medium that is used throughout the rhetorical process is language. This “allows the rhetorician to label and relabel, structure and restructure his [sic] own reality and that of the audience to induce changes in thought, attitude, and action” (Campbell, 1972, p 11). Such language, as is explained in the rhetorical apologetic cycle, applies a “variety of responses from different audiences” which may lead to “confrontation and polarization” (Campbell, 1972, p 11). Therefore, “rhetoric arises out of conflict” (Campbell, 1972, p. 9), and as such, this examination attempts to rhetorically “encompass the situation” (Campbell, 1972, p. 19) via the analysis of the *kategoria*, or accusation that stems from the initial perceived transgression, the statement offered by the NFL (*i.e.* the *apologia*), and the *antapologia*, or response to the apology; paired with the categorization of the NFL’s image repair strategy attempts.

All NFL press and media releases were gathered directly from the communication and media relations departments of the NFL via NFL.com website. Two NFL microsites were used specifically for gathering the data. The two microsites were NFLCommunications.com and NFLMedia.com. NFLMedia.com required account set-up for access to media releases. NFLCommunications.com was available by simply linking

through the NFL.com website. All press releases, media releases, statements, infographic, publications, and announcements (hereunto mentioned as “release”) were saved electronically. The releases that had an available PDF download were downloaded and saved in the original PDF format. All other releases were copied and pasted into a single Word document. The date, title, and all text was recorded for each release added to the Word document. The Word document is 62 pages long. The number of PDF releases saved were 36.

Of all of the releases that were gathered, several could be eliminated due to the incomparability to the overarching topics of *apologia* and image reparation strategies being researched in this current study. Therefore, any release that strictly focused on the statistics of football players and games, the scheduling of NFL games, announcements concerning the availability of games to be watched via online sources (*e.g.*, NFL.com, etc.), the deciphering of opponents to be played in an upcoming season, new NFL products, NFL product placement, NFL Films announcements, and finally, new online NFL apps or other unrelated online or mobile resource announcements (*e.g.*, the NFL Now app) were eliminated from this study. Therefore, the total number of releases issued by the NFL from February 1, 2014 through February 28, 2015, that were rhetorically analyzed and categorized in this study were 52.

One other data source from the NFL statements were gathered and used in the rhetorical analysis and image reparation categorizations. The source was all Roger Goodell press conference transcripts for the 2014/2015 season. A total of five press conference transcripts were gathered and analyzed. The latest transcript covered the press conference held on December 10, 2014, which was an interview with NFL Commissioner

Roger Goodell and Executive Vice President Jeff Pash during the “League Meeting Press Conference” that occurred in response to the updated Personal Conduct Policy released on that day. One transcript included Goodell’s announcement on September 19, 2014, concerning player misconduct. Two other transcripts were from press conferences with Goodell during the NFL Annual Meeting held in March. The two press conferences were held on March 24, 2014, and on March 26, 2014. The final transcript is from the 2014 Hall of Fame event held in Canton, Ohio, on August 1, 2014. Each of these press conference transcripts were gathered from the NFLCommunications.com microsite by clicking on the link “From the Commissioner.” The transcripts of the press conferences were copied and pasted into a Word document, verbatim. The complete Word document is eight pages in length.

In total, of all of the 2014/2015 documents that included press releases, infographics, transcripts, press conferences, and an annual report, 52 were identified as pertinent and usable for this study. The releases all were first initially identified by a generalization of the topic of each release so that each release could be separated into folders by which Benoit image reparation general strategy the release’s overarching topic and headline would best match. The outlier was a folder titled, “Personnel” which were releases only stating newly-hired NFL personnel or new NFL positions that were created and filled. All the rest of the overarching topics of the releases fit into just two of Benoit’s image reparation general strategies. Those two general strategies were reduce offensiveness and corrective action. So, of the 52 releases gathered from the time period of February 1, 2014 to February 28, 2015, the initial identification and sorting were categorized as personnel topics (3), corrective action general strategy (34), and reduce

offensiveness general strategy (15). It is important to note that the reduce offensiveness general strategy contains releases that can then be categorized under its more specific sub-strategies, which include bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, and compensation.

The language used by the NFL organization to repair image following a perceived transgression is the specific artifact analyzed and categorized by which image repair strategy or sub-strategy it best fits. Benoit offers five general strategies and 12 sub-strategies by which the language analysis is guided. The image reparation strategies of denial, evade responsibility, reduce offensiveness, mortification, and corrective action are explained in more detail below.

Denial, is the denying that the accused person carried out the transgression for which they are blamed. Benoit (2015) likens this strategy to an alibi in a court proceeding. The accused denies having ever carried out the behavior by claiming instead to have been elsewhere and therefore not capable of carrying out the wrongdoing. In image repair this type of denial is referenced as simple denial; the accused simply denies having carried out the transgression. When the accused chooses to deny responsibility, blame also might be shifted to someone or something else. Shifting the blame, as a “variant” denial strategy, provides for the audience a target for the blame, therefore deflecting the blame away from the person who was originally accused (Benoit, 2015, p. 22).

If the accused chooses not to deny, they can find ways to otherwise evade responsibility. There are four ways in which a rhetor might evade responsibility; provocation, defeasibility, claim the incident was an accident, or explain the good

intentions behind the act. Provocation is one way in which one might evade responsibility for a wrongdoing, by claiming that the accused was provoked by the wrongful act of someone else and the accused action was in response to that other wrongful act.

Defeasibility is another way one might claim the accused should not be held fully responsible. Defeasibility claims a lack of volition or that not enough information existed and that is why the act occurred. In other words, defeasibility does not deny the act but it claims instead that the accused should not be held responsible for the act because the act arguably can be dispelled by some other happening outside of the control of the accused. An accident, the third sub-strategy under evade responsibility, can be claimed to deflect blame. Again, the accused does not deny the transgression occurred or even that the accused may be to blame, but the accused explains that it was merely an accident and again, the accused should not be fully responsible. Finally, good intentions can be explained to evade responsibility by offering claims that no malice was ever intended and that the accused only meant well in the carried out actions.

Reduce offense is the third general strategy. The accused might attempt to reduce the offensiveness of his transgression by moving the audience focus toward more positive views. A good analogy is that of filling a bucket. If it is half full of bad water, the more good water you pour into it, the less repulsive the water becomes. Bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation all are sub-strategies used to reduce offensiveness. To bolster is to increase the audience's feelings of goodwill. The accused might reminisce or induce new memories of all the wonderful ways in which good things have been done for others, driven of course by the accused's good values. Although bolstering does not erase the ill feelings about the

wrongdoing, this strategy attempts to fill that bucket with positive thoughts until it effectively flushes away the bad thoughts. Minimization can help to reduce offensiveness if applied correctly. To minimize a situation, the accused may claim the topic to be less important than originally perceived. Some semantical arguments can win over your audience, if carried out carefully because by redefining the key terms of an argument, the accused might reduce the offensiveness of the original accusation by differentiating between what is being accused and offering a less accusatory way of stating that accusation. In other words, if a person is accused of telling a lie, that person could simply argue it just wasn't the whole truth. Transcendence is a fourth sub-strategy to reduce offensiveness. This is a justification of one's behavior, or more specifically, a claim that justifies that the behavior really was intended for the greater good. Benoit (2015) applies the analogy of a police officer planting evidence on a chronic perpetrator of drug dealing in a neighborhood (p. 25). The police officer may have carried out the unethical act of planting the evidence but getting the drug dealer off the streets will save countless lives as a result, the police officer could claim. By transcending the argument into this higher intention, the accused reduces the offensiveness of the transgression and, Benoit adds, this sub-strategy actually can help to repair the accused's image at the same time. The accused can fight back by accusing his accuser. Attacking the attacker of all the wrongdoings that the accuser is guilty of, and include the very thing that the attacker said of the accused, too. Really, the effort behind the attack the accuser strategy is to reduce the accuser's legitimacy in the argument. If the accused can put into question the accuser's credibility, the accusations might weaken and then shift attention from the accused to the accuser which might aid in image repair. The final sub-strategy within the

reduce offensiveness general strategy is that of compensation. Compensation literally functions as a bribe (Benoit, 2015, p. 25). If the victim is offered and accepts some form of compensation, in the form of either goods, services, or an agreeable monetary amount, then the ill feelings toward the accused will fade, thus reducing the offensiveness of the original transgression. Image repair then begins to occur as a result because the person feels rightfully compensated for whatever previously went wrong. Each of these sub-strategies do not deny that the accused carried out the transgression, but they do help to reduce the blame and finger-pointing that can transpire as a result of the transgression, and help to rebuild goodwill while doing so.

The next general strategy is corrective action. This is a strategy applied to ensure whatever went wrong, never goes wrong again; at least not without a remediation plan now in place. For example, if a company is accused of selling a faulty product, the appropriate strategy would be to stop selling the product and correct the faultiness of the product before putting it back out on the market. An actionable remediation such as a redesign of the product or even a cease of selling the product altogether might best achieve the image repair necessary for the company to be trusted by the public with its other products in the future.

Finally, the strategy of mortification can be applied. This is a distinct form of apology by the accused for the wrongdoing. This can be an effective strategy of image repair because the accused shows mortification for the behavior, and more importantly, mortified of the effect that behavior has had on others. Be warned, however, that mortification is a sincere apology, which also can be perceived as an admission of guilt,

particularly in western-centric countries. This can thus strengthen the original accusation and increase image threat if not perceived to be carried out correctly.

One last basic guideline that Benoit (2015) offers about all of the above strategies is to never be contradictory when applying them. For example, the accused should not deny that the transgression was committed and then later apply the transcendence strategy in an explanation of why what was done was for the greater good. Such contradictory actions could discredit the accused and image repair might then become even more difficult to attain.

Benoit's five general strategies and 12 sub-strategies are the components that make up the theory of image reparation. As mentioned, this rhetorical analysis of the 52 NFL-released statements over the course of the 2014/2015 season that were gathered and analyzed also are categorized using this theory. In the next section, each organizational image threat and corresponding releases are topically analyzed, and the categorization by general strategy and sub-strategy are discussed at length.

CHAPTER IV

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

This study rhetorically analyzes, both intrinsically and extrinsically, the NFL statements over the entirety of the 2014/2015 season. The statements are from the time period of February 1, 2014, through February 28, 2015, in order to offer ample time following the February 1, 2015, Super Bowl XLIX, which ended the 2014/2015 season. In this section, each organizational crisis event that the NFL navigated over the course of the season are discussed. The release or releases tied to each image threat were intrinsically analyzed to identify the language being used in the topical releases. This stage then flows naturally into the categorization stage of the applied image reparation strategies which also is shaped by the extrinsic storytelling surrounding each organizational crisis, which then helps to decipher the effectiveness of the strategies for the NFL's various audiences and stakeholder groups.

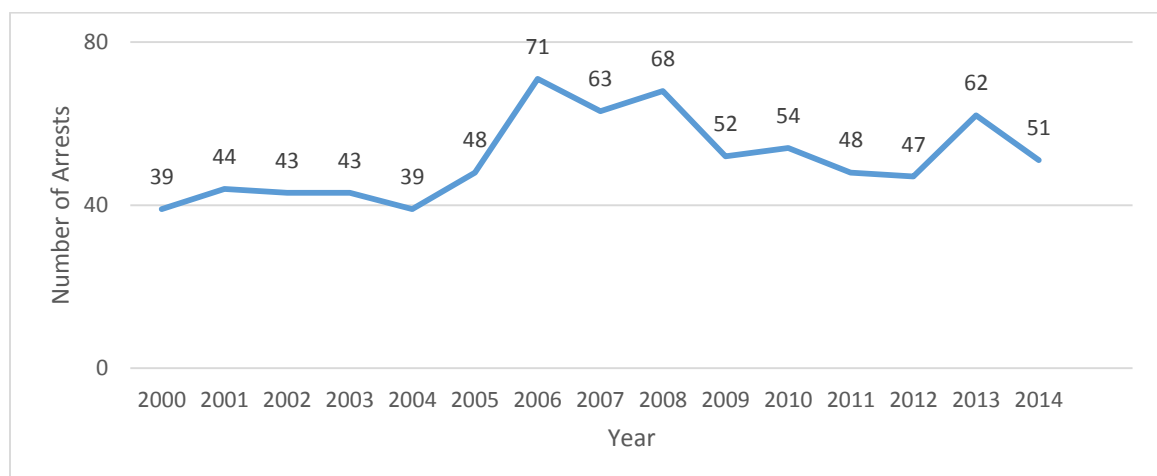
Deviant Behaviors Involving Domestic Violence, Child Abuse

Domestic violence groups, governmental oversight, and other advocates against such physically aggressive acts had challenged the NFL to institute harsher discipline for players who are physically abusive off the field. Domestic violence advocates called out the NFL organization with demands that the NFL do something to address the prevalence of such physically aggressive acts as domestic violence and child abuse. During the

2014/2015 season, a highly noted and cited hashtag campaign spread all over social media outlets such as Twitter for weeks where women, and others, shared their individual stories about #WhyIStayed or #WhyILeft. The pressure was on the NFL as an organization to make a stand for all “particularly vulnerable groups” and to stop this type of behavior from repeatedly occurring. Even the government got involved. The additional outcry from U.S. Senator John Thune (R-South Dakota), ranking member and incoming chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, successfully leaned on the league, as well as other major sports leagues, to develop a more sufficient policy to address the domestic violence prevalence among professional athletes (Patel, 2014; “Senators Praise Conduct,” 2014; “Statement of Troy,” 2014; Strong, 2014).

In total, 51 NFL players were arrested in 2014, and 11 more in 2015; period ending February 28, 2015. In 2014, six players were arrested for domestic violence or child abuse, and seven other players were arrested for some other physically aggressive charge of assault or battery. The following figure shows the number of NFL player arrests by year.

Figure 1. Number of NFL Player Arrests by Year (Schrotenboer, 2015).



Five domestic violence incidents involving NFL players occurred throughout the 2014/2015 season. On August 30, 2014, Ray McDonald, a defensive end with the San Francisco 49ers, was arrested for physical violence against his pregnant fiancée at a party at their shared residence (Schrotenboer, 2015). The arresting officer on the scene moonlighted as a security guard for the 49ers (Aleaziz & Sernoffsky, 2014). Prosecutors dropped the case in November 2014 due to “insufficient information” to appropriately charge McDonald, even though the reports noted the visible bruises on McDonald’s pregnant fiancée (Aleaziz & Sernoffsky, 2014). The NFL took no disciplinary action, such as the policy’s stated minimum six-game suspension, pertaining to McDonald throughout the duration of the time that passed between the arrest and the case being dropped, nor any thereafter, even though the incident occurred involving “a particularly vulnerable person, such as a pregnant woman” which would account for additional suspensions, fines, or other discipline.

Then, on September 4, 2014, Quincy Enunwa, a wide receiver on the practice squad for the New York Jets, was arrested and charged with “simple assault” after an incident with his girlfriend at a hotel in Florida. She dropped the charges in exchange for a court order for him to be nowhere near her for 90 days. Because all charges against Enunwa were dropped, neither his team nor the NFL disciplined him for the incident (Slater, 2014).

The third case of domestic violence occurred on September 17, 2014, when Jonathon Dwyer, an Arizona Cardinals running back, was arrested for aggravated assault when he head-butted his wife and broke her nose in front of their 18-month-old son. He pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct and was sentenced to perform community service

and serve 18 months of probation. The team deactivated him for the remainder of the season, which actually could be legitimized by the updated policy that states, “where the act is committed in the presence of a child” and can result in a longer suspension than the six games. By the end of February, 2015, Dwyer was listed as a free agent.

Greg Hardy, a defensive end for the Carolina Panthers, was arrested on May 13, 2014, when a woman reported that he had assaulted and threatened her (Schrotenboer, 2015). Hardy played the first game of the 2014 season, but he was then put on the exempt list beginning September 17, reportedly until the domestic violence case gets resolved. Being on the Commissioner’s exempt list allows him to still receive his \$13.1 million salary but he cannot play or practice with his team. No actual six-game suspension happened for Hardy. Hardy instead remained on the NFL exempt list throughout the season. His ex-girlfriend, who he reportedly struck and threatened, made a deal with prosecutors in exchange for a payout from Hardy and an order that he stay away from her. Charges were dropped against Hardy on February 9, 2015. Hardy was reinstated with the NFL once the case was settled and charges were dropped.

An even more controversial incident of domestic violence over the course of the 2014/2015 season occurred, which was the actual spurring incident for the updated PCP. This was the case of Ray Rice, a running back who played for the Baltimore Ravens. Rice reportedly punched his then-fiancé, Janay Palmer, in the face, knocking her unconscious, and then dragging her out of an elevator at an Atlantic City casino (“Ray Rice elevator,” 2014). When the incident was first reported in February 2014, Rice was ordered to partake in the diversion program offered by the NFL, fined, and he received a two-game suspension that was slated for the first two games of the regular season in

September 2014. He also publically apologized for his actions. Months later in early September, during the first week of the 2014/2015 regular season and just days before the first game of which Rice was to be suspended from play, video footage of the actual act of Rice punching his now wife, Janay Rice, in the face, knocking her unconscious, and dragging her out of the elevator was released publicly by *TMZ* (“Ray Rice elevator,” 2014).

The video enraged the public. Although the act and details of Rice punching Janay was already known, actually seeing the brutality of the event on video footage, and seeing Janay lie on floor of the elevator unconscious, brought on a whole new level of attention to the matter. In response to the outrage, Goodell announced Rice would be suspended indefinitely and the Ravens dropped Rice from the team. No circumstances had changed in the case, except for the release of the actual video footage. Goodell set Rice’s prior suspension of two games under the existing 2007 version of the PCP, and originally, he had defended his actions of charging Rice with a two-game suspension and was quoted by *Time Magazine* on August 1, 2014, stating that he stands by the decision (Worland, 2014).

The one child abuse incident that occurred during the 2014/2015 season involved Adrian Peterson, a Minnesota Vikings running back. He was indicted on September 11, 2014, for child abuse after repeatedly striking his 4-year-old son with a tree branch. He pleaded no contest to a lesser charge of misdemeanor reckless assault and was fined \$4,000 and required to complete 80 hours of community service (Schrotenboer, 2015). Peterson was suspended by the NFL for the rest of the 2014/2015 season, without pay, under the rules of the newly-updated PCP (“Adrian Peterson suspended,” 2014). The

release announcing the season-long suspension noted that Peterson originally was suspended for the recommended six games, but that “aggravating circumstances would warrant higher levels of discipline” (“Adrian Peterson suspended,” 2014, para. 4), meaning that in this case the abuse that occurred involving a “particularly vulnerable person such as a child,” the new PCP rule was upheld.

The NFL was being pressured to address the domestic violence and child abuse matters amongst its players. Advocates claimed that the NFL was too lenient on those who carry out such acts and that harsher penalties should be instituted.

Corrective action. The NFL applied corrective action by updating and re-releasing the Personal Conduct Policy. The domestic violence groups, governmental oversight, and other advocates against such physically aggressive acts had challenged the NFL to institute harsher discipline for players who are physically abusive off the field. The specific increase in the policy for discipline for domestic violence was a direct response to those accusations and the discursive push-back the NFL received in response to the five domestic violence incidents and the one child abuse case of the 2014/2015 season. The NFL released the newly-updated Personal Conduct Policy (PCP), which was officially announced by Commissioner Roger Goodell on December 10, 2014, at a league meeting held in Dallas, Texas. The newly updated PCP included few changes from the PCP Goodell released in 2007, which was a reformation of the original 1997 Violent Crime Policy. The latest updated PCP is eight pages in length and the changes that are apparent in the latest PCP is an increase in the punishment guidelines for a domestic violence charge from a two-game suspension to a six-game suspension.

The PCP also included the following statements,

In order to uphold our high standards, when violations of this Personal Conduct Policy do occur, appropriate disciplinary action must follow. With regard to violations of the Personal Conduct Policy that involve assault, battery, domestic violence, dating violence, child abuse and other forms of family violence, or sexual assault involving physical force or committed against someone incapable of giving consent, a first offense will subject the offender to a baseline suspension without pay of six games, with consideration given to any aggravating or mitigating factors. The presence of possible aggravating factors may warrant a longer suspension. Possible aggravating factors include, but are not limited to, a prior violation of the Personal Conduct Policy, similar misconduct before joining the NFL, violence involving a weapon, choking, repeated striking, or when an act is committed against a particularly vulnerable person, such as a child, a pregnant woman, or an elderly person, or where the act is committed in the presence of a child. A second offense will result in permanent banishment from the NFL. (“Personal conduct policy,” 2014, p. 6).

The language used above was deliberative. The parts of the PCP used above are an overuse of the key words that have brought on the organization’s image threat, which is a lack of disciplinary actions for NFL-related persons who carry out deviant behaviors.

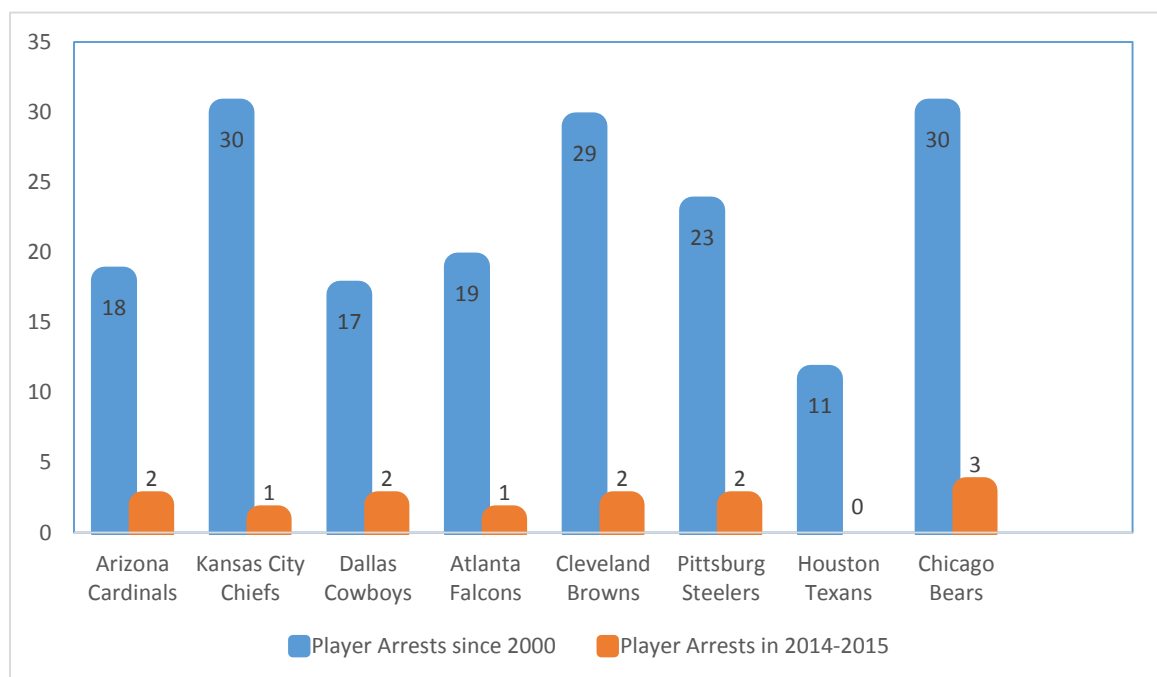
The league, on NFLCommunications.com, posted a packaged group of releases concerning the PCP on December 10, 2014. Within the releases was a piece announcing that Goodell also named a “Conduct Committee,” which is made up of NFL team owners, to oversee the continued efforts of the new PCP. The release noted that “nine representatives of NFL ownership” make up the inaugural committee membership (“NFL conduct committee,” 2014). Another press release included in that package released that same day announced that the players “unanimously endorsed” the PCP, and that is the release that goes on to actually name the PCP committee members (“Players unanimously,” 2014).

The PCP committee members include seven male team owners and two female non-owners. It is interesting to note how the writers of the release handled the mention of the two females on the committee. First, this is a clear attempt of bolstering as the league

hails that two females are involved in the decision-making process regarding the conduct of players. Two extremes happen in the descriptions of the women, however. They minimize Mrs. Haslam’s ownership of the team by insinuating that her tie to the team is solely through her marriage to the rightful owner, her husband. On the other end of the spectrum, the writers suggest that they value women in important leadership roles because Charlotte Jones Anderson serves as the chair of the NFL Foundation and is the executive vice president of the Dallas Cowboys.

Furthermore, the Commissioner’s chosen committee are not free of players who have been arrested for past deviant behaviors. In fact, all of the teams have had many prior player arrests since 2000, all but one of the representative teams have had at least one player arrested in the 2014/2015 season, and one player from the PCP Committee chairman’s team was arrested for domestic violence during the 2014/2015 season. The figure below shows the specifics.

Figure 2. Personal Conduct Policy Committee, Team Representatives (2014)



Defeasibility. The PCP also is littered in defeasibility. The league states that it will await the legal proceedings surrounding the deviant behavior to be settled before taking a definitive stance on discipline. “If you are convicted of a crime or subject to a disposition of a criminal proceeding (as defined in this Policy), you are subject to discipline,” (“Personal Conduct,” 2014, p. 2). In the Rice case, Goodell did not announce the two-game suspension until after the court accepted Rice’s plea to participate in a diversion program to expunge the act from his record after one year. Such defeasibility in the policy offers the NFL numerous excuses and possibility for delays when being pressured to carry out discipline for these acts.

The PCP features loose, noncommittal language concerning the specifics of discipline. For example, the following excerpt shows that there is no definitive approach that the NFL currently intends to take on discipline. “Depending on the nature of the violation and the record of the employee, discipline may be a fine, a suspension for a fixed or an indefinite period of time, a requirement of community service, a combination of the three, or banishment from the league,” (“Personal Conduct,” 2014, p. 6). Such loosely defined language will enable the league to make excuses case-by-case in its disciplinary actions, which is exactly what happened in the Hardy case. That particular incident was a blatant evasion of responsibility on the part of the NFL by the application of such defeasibility, because this “clause,” which was also highlighted in an infographic of supportive materials within the PCP package of releases (PCP Infographic,” 2014), shows just how little identification the league holds with the underbelly of domestic violence and the appropriate levels of punishment such deviant behaviors should stir. Such defeasibility of consequences by case still excuses the behavior and allows the

player to continue as the star of the game even though it is known that, in the particular case of Hardy, that he did in fact physically assault his ex-girlfriend.

Minimization. Minimization also was applied by the NFL in the development of the updated PCP. Some cases of domestic violence were minimized in comparison to others over the course of the season, and the NFL arguably continued to minimize the discipline of the lesser-publicized cases from others that were more publicized. Hardy, Enunwa, and McDonald are all good examples of this strategy. These three cases were publicized but not to the extent that the Rice and Peterson cases were publicized. The lack of discipline was then placed on the loose verbiage of the PCP, which states that the league can await the final law proceedings before carrying out a definitive punishment.

In cases in which a violation relating to a crime of violence is suspected but further investigation is required, the Commissioner may determine to place a player on leave with pay to permit the league to conduct an investigation. Based on the results of this investigation, the player or employee may be returned to duty, be placed on leave with pay for a longer period, or be subject to discipline. (“PCP infographic,” 2014, p. 5)

In the three cases noted above, all three players were exonerated legally from their respective domestic violence incidence because the victim in each of those cases declined to testify or press charges.

Bolstering. The PCP, and the accompanying package of releases, also offered ample opportunity to bolster, which is a sub-strategy of the reduce offensiveness general strategy. The NFL bolstered that governmental leaders applauded the effort of the updated PCP (“Senators praise,” 2014). The package of releases included many other aspects of bolstering. One release focused on the “benefits” offered to NFL-related personnel who violate the PCP (“NFL teams unanimously,” 2014). This positive spin on the punishment for bad behavior specifically states that it is a “privilege” to be a part of

the NFL because even when you get in trouble, the PCP now increases education, and expands services to all NFL employees as well as to the victims, children, and families of NFL employees. Finally, the release again mentions that all NFL teams “unanimously” support the newly updated policy. Another release that was issued in conjunction with the PCP also featured the bolstering sub-strategy in announcing that the organization collaborated with many of the special interest groups that initiated the image threat (“NFL consults with experts,” 2014). This particular release is a list of experts and organizations that the NFL consulted with in updating its PCP from a two-game suspension to a six-game suspension for domestic violence. Most of the entities listed are domestic violence and sexual assault nonprofit organizations. The inclusion of the NFLPA, the National Football Players Fathers Association (NFPFA) and the Professional Football Players Mother Association (PFPMA) also are within the long list of experts and organizations, but the release has an added separate, more prominent listing for the NFL Wives Organization.

The league’s bolstering efforts surrounding this policy also highlighted the inclusion of the NFL’s updated “Missions and Values.” The “Mission and Values” release included six subheadings that highlight the NFL’s statements on its “mission,” “leadership responsibility and role,” “respect,” “integrity,” “responsibility to team,” and “resiliency” (“Mission,” 2014). These many ideographs, which are abstract collective words or a set of words to symbolize meaning accepted by a particular socialized group (McGee, 1980), is an attempt to symbolically address the domestic violence crisis the organization faces. The language used reminds those associated with the league that these are the very abstract and symbolic attributes that are expected of them.

On the NFL's Form 990, however, which is filed with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service each year for the league's trade association nonprofit status filing, the mission of the NFL reads: "Trade association promoting interests of its 32 member clubs." Another completely different listing of the NFL's "Mission and Values" can be found online on the organization's webpage for careers (accessible at <http://www.nfl.com/careers/values>). The mission and values release included in the PCP materials, has obvious additions to it to fit the focus of the PCP and the image threat it addresses. Statements such as, "To provide our fans, communities and partners the highest quality sports and entertainment in the world, and to do so in a way that is consistent with our values" (para. 1). The addition of "in a way that is consistent with our values" shows that the organization is attempting to rectify the actions of domestic and child abuse by hinting that those things are against the league's "values." Also, the "Integrity" insert reads, "We do the right thing when no one is looking, and even if it's unpopular when they are looking. We demand accountability and we expect fair play." (para. 4). This is an attempt to point out that the deviant behaviors played out on and off the field up to that point of the season are unsanctioned actions and that the league would never knowingly allow such behavior. The examples continue on in this particular release, but the truthfulness of the release and its claims should be questioned because a search of the NFL Communications microsite, the NFL website, and a general Google.com search turned up no other NFL mission statement or mission and values statement or policy.

Another bolstering move was the repetitive announcements of financial support of the major image threats the NFL had faced over the course of the season, which included domestic violence, child abuse, and player health and safety, or to be more specific,

concussions. Each year, the NFL establishes a 501(c)(6) Super Bowl “Host Committee” to act as a partnership hub for the host city and city government, host team, local businesses, media, and other stakeholders (“NFL announces \$2,” 2015). The host committee is charged with a fundraising goal, and the current season’s goal was \$30 million. The NFL Foundation each year donates \$1 million to local nonprofit entities, and the host committee matches the dollar amount to increase the donations. For this year’s donations, the monies were distributed amongst 25 Arizona-based nonprofit programs, all of which are geared toward youth sports, head trauma safety, or domestic violence services. Still another bolstering attempt involved the fundraising around three guitars owned by Katy Perry, the Super Bowl halftime headliner entertainment. The guitars were auctioned to highest bidding fans (“Katy,” 2015), and the money raised was donated to Break the Cycle, a nonprofit organization that works on prevention of dating abuse in young couples.

To summarize, the NFL faced an image threat for the prevalence of domestic violence and child abuse incidences carried out by NFL players. The public and the government accused the NFL of being too lenient in disciplinary action of its players. In response, the NFL updated its PCP to better address domestic violence and child abuse, raising the game suspension from the two games to six games. In so doing, the NFL applied the image reparation strategies of corrective action, defeasibility, minimization, and bolstering. The effectiveness of the strategies built around the PCP in response to the image threat will now be discussed.

Effectiveness. The PCP itself was generally accepted by the outside public for its on-the-surface appearance of corrective action. This image reparation attempt was a

reactive response to address the discursive outrage that the league was facing at that time. The league noticeably updated the specific parts of the policy that necessitated response. Overall, the updated policy was an effective image repair strategy for the outside stakeholders including domestic violence advocates, the professional football fans, the league's partners, sponsors, and advertisers; and even governmental leaders. The PCP also offered defeasibility and minimization aspects to it with its loose language and noncommittal or lack of specifics concerning the boundaries of discipline. Much bolstering also occurred in conjunction with this policy. Had the league applied just corrective action and bolstering, the effectiveness of this image repair effort would have been widely successful for all stakeholders; however, a dispute was caused with internal stakeholders because of the contradictory use and inconsistent disciplinary actions of the corrective action policy that contained within it the contradictory strategy of defeasibility.

Accusations of Video Suppression

More turmoil for the NFL occurred regarding the Ray Rice domestic violence incident when the video of the act surfaced. The public began to question how such a video could exist without the knowledge of the NFL. The NFL was accused of suppressing the video footage.

Corrective Action. Goodell during his press conference opening statement on September 19, 2014, announced that he asked former FBI Director Robert Mueller to conduct an independent investigation into "the questions raised about our process in reviewing Ray Rice's conduct" ("NFL commissioner Roger Goodell," 2014). What Goodell was actually referencing was the Rice elevator video footage.

Denial. Reportedly, Goodell, or someone in the NFL offices, had seen the footage as early in the year as April. Goodell publically denied having ever having seen the video.

Bolstering. The NFL made no other mention of the Mueller investigation until January 8, 2015, when a short statement was released on NFLCommunications.com. The statement offered no conclusion on Mueller’s part and made no mention as to the findings of the investigation. But the statement did offer many areas of bolstering. It reads as follows,

We are grateful to Director Mueller for conducting an extremely thorough and detailed investigation, and we accept his findings and recommendations. I want to express my appreciation to John Mara and Art Rooney for their leadership. Director Mueller made a series of very constructive observations and recommendations regarding our prior investigatory procedures. We have already addressed many of these points in the revisions to the Personal Conduct Policy that were announced last month. I look forward to reviewing these recommendations with the league’s new Conduct Committee chaired by Arizona Cardinals owner Michael Bidwill. While this investigation has now concluded, our focus on the underlying issues and our commitment to positive change remain as strong as ever. We have all learned a great deal in the past months and expect to be judged by how we lead going forward on issues of domestic violence and sexual assault. (“Statement by commissioner,” 2015)

The NFL bolstered in the Mueller report release that the already released PCP addresses the concerns Mueller mentioned in the report. The NFL also bolsters about the newly-established Conduct Committee, and that the league’s “commitment to positive change remain as strong as ever.” The league mentions, “we have all learned a great deal,” and requests to be “judged by how we lead going forward on issues of domestic violence and sexual assault.”

Effectiveness. The Mueller investigation was an attempt at corrective action in response to the accusations that the NFL had previously possessed the Rice video and

attempted to cover it up. This self-initiated investigation was a showing of intent to publically self-correct the league in its perceived acceptance of such abusive behaviors. What the league might not have expected was the truthfulness from Mueller on the poor way in which the NFL handled the Rice investigation. The report, issued by Mueller and his law firm, Wilmer, Cutler, Pickering, Hale, and Dorr, LLP, states there were no findings that the NFL offices had received the video (Mueller, 2015). It does acknowledge that the Ravens had received a detailed report covering what was viewable in the video and the report noted that the Ravens did not offer the detailed information to the league but would have done so if asked. No resolution was offered by the NFL in the unclear release even though the report basically exonerates the NFL from having seen the video, albeit loosely.

Although the corrective action of the investigation was effective in addressing the image threat pertaining to the accusation of the suppression of the video, the investigation brought to light the discrepancies on the NFL's part in its investigation into Rice and the league's lackadaisical approach to discipline at that time. The same week the Mueller report was released, Rice's appeal was settled, in Rice's favor, and before the scheduled court date that was slated for one week after the date that the Mueller report was released.

Overall this was a successful strategy for stakeholders outside of the organization because the Mueller report was publicized by the media and the NFL was reported to have been cleared of the earlier accusations concerning the suppression of the video. It is unclear to what extent the report may have been successful for internal stakeholders, including the NFL organization itself, because the fact that the Rice appeal settled so quickly following the release of the report, coupled with the suggestions from Mueller for

improvement in internal investigations of such matters, leaves that aspect open for determination.

NFLPA *Antapologia*

One stakeholder group that was particularly perturbed by the unlevelled playing ground off the field when it came to NFL player discipline was the NFLPA. The topic had become cause for great debate throughout the 2014/2015 NFL season, especially between the two entities of the NFL and the NFLPA. The most vehement argument between the two was spurred by Peterson's child abuse case and lengthy suspension. The NFLPA argued in its appeal with the NFL that Peterson was only reprimanded by the NFL because of the timing of his incident, which occurred during the throes of when Commissioner Goodell was in America's hot seat over the Ray Rice elevator incident and the rampant publicity over "the NFL's historically lenient treatment of acts of domestic violence" ("NFLPA vs. NFL," 2014, p. 3). The NFLPA argued that Goodell only revised the PCP in response to the public and media outcries, or *antapologia*, encircling the Rice incident because the most substantial update to the PCP was the change from the two-game maximum suspension for first-time offenders of domestic violence to a more harsh punishment of a six-game suspension. The NFLPA claimed that Goodell only updated the PCP and increased the discipline for domestic violence, "in response to a well-publicized domestic violence incident involving Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice," ("NFLPA vs. NFL," 2014).

Peterson was suspended under the new domestic violence rule in the PCP. Then, Goodell also requested that Peterson seek counseling, and only upon the results reported at the end of the therapeutic program, might Peterson be reinstated to play again in the

NFL. The NFLPA felt that Peterson's Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) that was signed on August 4, 2011, should be the determining policy for his discipline and the NFLPA challenged Goodell and the NFL for the lengthy suspension and the order to seek therapy ("NFLPA vs. NFL," 2014). The NFLPA argued that Peterson's incident of corporal punishment of his 4-year-old son in May 2014 preceded the newly-updated PCP. An arbitration of the case was challenged and the NFLPA asked Goodell to step down from leading the proceedings concerning Peterson's punishment. Goodell consented and appointed Harold Henderson, who is a longtime employee of the NFL organization. The NFLPA again requested that Henderson step down from leading the proceedings but Henderson refused. He upheld the original NFL mandated disciplinary actions. Unhappy with Henderson's ruling, the NFLPA pushed for another hearing. Judge David Doty heard the arbitration case and on February 26, 2015, gave the ruling that Henderson had overstepped his authority. Therefore, the Peterson case continues in appellate litigation.

Clearly, not all stakeholders of the PCP corrective action image repair attempt viewed it favorably. Such turmoil between the two governing organizations that are expected to both work toward the greater good for their unified interest only brought on more unfavorable coverage for the NFL. In November 2014, the NFLPA stated that the NFL should work with the NFLPA in reassessing the CBA to include fair and consistent player conduct rules, instead of the "new and arbitrary" PCP ("NFLPA statement," 2014). Instead, the NFL re-released the PCP on December 10, complete with a whole package of materials supporting the PCP. The NFLPA and the NFL engaged in a highly-publicized argument over the policy and how it was applied over the course of the 2014/2015 season. Ultimately, the NFLPA's claims were substantiated by the legal

discourse the association sought because as a result, both Rice and Peterson won their respective appeals for the punishment that was handed down by the NFL.

The NFL only offered one public organizational statement in response to the NFLPA's antapologic image threat ("NFL statement on Adrian," 2014).

Minimization. The first line of the release minimizes Judge Doty's ruling by stating, "Judge Doty's order did not contain any determinations concerning the fairness of the appeals process under the CBA, including the commissioner's longstanding authority to appoint a designee to act as hearing officer."

Attack the accuser. The NFL also attacked Judge Doty's ruling.

"Even so, we believe strongly that Judge Doty's order is incorrect and fundamentally at odds with well-established legal precedent governing the district court's role in reviewing arbitration decisions. As a result, we have filed a notice of appeal to have the ruling reviewed by the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals."

Corrective action. The league ultimately succumbed to the NFLPA's sought-after corrective action of Peterson's reinstatement. "In the interim, Adrian Peterson will be returned to the Commissioner Exempt List pending further proceedings."

The NFLPA effectively carried out an act of apologia by challenging the NFL's apologic act of "grandstand" justice by suspending Peterson under the corrective action PCP that had not yet been released at the time of his transgression of the child abuse for which he had been charged. Moreover, the second part of *antapologia*, that of strengthening the original *kategoria*, also was carried out successfully by the NFLPA. The NFLPA recharged the original image threat of the NFL's lack of consistent player discipline. In response, the NFL was particularly vehement in its response. By applying

the actions of minimization, attacking the accuser, and ultimately reinstating Peterson as the corrective action, the NFL succumbed to the NFLPA's antapologic image threat.

Deviant Behaviors Involving Drugs, Alcohol

Prior to the Peterson battle between the NFL and the NFLPA, the two entities worked together on policy development. On September 19, 2014, the NFL and the NFLPA released a joint press release to announce the newly modified policy for the "wide-ranging series of improvements to their programs on substance abuse" and "revised disciplinary standards for DUIs and marijuana" ("Joint NFL-NFLPA statement," 2014). These measures were necessary because these problems have proliferated the NFL season after season. In 2014, nearly half of all of the arrests of NFL players were related to drugs or alcohol (Schrotenboer, 2014). One of the most publicized NFL arrests this season relating to this topic was when Indianapolis Colts owner, Jim Irsay, pleaded guilty to driving while intoxicated. Irsay was fined \$500,000 and received a six-game suspension from the NFL, immediately following his conviction appearance in court.

Corrective action. This updated policy is an attempt to address the problem of rampant drug and alcohol use in the NFL, but the policy actually does the opposite in many ways. For one, it raises the testing levels and lowers the punishment for testing positive for marijuana. The policy specifically notes that the threshold for a positive drug test for marijuana will be raised from 15 ml to 35 ml, and the punishment for testing positive for marijuana will be reduced from a one-year banishment to either a two-game fine or a 10-game suspension. The disciplinary action for DUI charges, however, are to increase, although not by much. A first DUI offense is a two-game suspension without pay, and a second offense is to result in "at least eight games suspension" with no pay.

The policy also introduces human growth hormone (HGH) testing that was set to begin during the season of study.

Bolstering. Commissioner Goodell boasts, “With these changes, the NFL and NFLPA once again have the finest and most comprehensive set of drug policies in sports.” And the NFLPA’s executive director, DeMaurice Smith, added, “Our collectively bargained drug policies set the standard for testing protocols and fairness in all of sport. We are proud to continue a legacy of protecting the integrity of our game.”

In the highlight bulleted information pertaining to the updated policy, six players are specifically named because their current suspensions will be lessened to be in compliance with this new policy.

Effectiveness. The suspension of Irsay was a successful attempt at image repair with stakeholders because the NFL was being closely scrutinized and stakeholders needed to see that leaders in the league would be reprimanded when necessary. The NFL stated that Irsay’s suspension and fine were for violating the PCP (“Jim Irsay,” 2014), but it is debatable, however, that Irsay should have been punished by the guidelines of the NFL’s drug policy, which specifically states DUI-related discipline, instead of the PCP. The updated PCP was not yet released when Irsay’s September 2, 2014, plea deal was finalized. Neither was the updated drug policy, but the older version also specifically stated DUIs, whereas the PCP does not. Also, the players mentioned above were retroactively freed from their past suspensions according to the new policy, and furthermore, the new policy actually lowers much of disciplinary actions for drugs and alcohol. The effectiveness of this policy is still unclear as no mention of any player suspension or fines have since been announced.

Deviant Behaviors on the Field

Player health and safety continues to be a big concern throughout the NFL, and the 2014/2015 season was no exception. There had been much talk about concussions and their long-lasting effects on NFL players, as well as a number of other prominent injuries that occur. Added to those concerns this season were the unsportsmanlike, physically aggressive, conduct that was carried out by players against other players on the field.

Over the course of the season, three players, Brandon Meriweather, Dominic Raiola, and Ndamukong Suh, were each suspended for player safety concerns for two games (“Brandon,” 2014), one game (“Dominic,” 2014), and one game (“Ndamukong,” 2014; “One-game,” 2014), respectively. Suh appealed his suspension and it was “lowered” to a \$70,000 fine instead of the one-game suspension (“One-game,” 2014). For Meriweather and Suh, this season’s misconduct suspension was for the sixth charge of such an offense for each player. Suh garnered much media attention for his misconduct when he purposefully stepped on the leg of Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rogers, twice, while Rogers laid on the ground following a play.

As mentioned before, a record 114.4 million viewers watched the 2014/2015 season’s Super Bowl. Viewership reportedly peaked at 120.8 million viewers during the fourth quarter (“Most-watched ever,” 2015), likely because in the 2014/2015 season’s Super Bowl, tempers flared when the Seattle Seahawks lost their lead in the last quarter of the game due to a poor offensive play that resulted in a turnover on the 1-yard line and a flipped lead going to the Seahawks opponent, the New England Patriots. In the last seconds of the game a fistfight broke out amongst the teams when the Patriots kneeled the ball to indicate the end of the game and the 28-24 win for the Patriots. The officials

ejected Seahawk Bruce Irvin, who started the brawl. Later, media outlets reported that Irvin and three other players were fined for their role in the fistfight – Seattle’s Michael Bennett, and the Patriots’ Rob Gronkowski and Michael Hoomanawanui (Aden-Buie, 2015).

Corrective action. The NFL released a “re-emphasized” Sportsmanship Policy (“Sportsmanship,” 2014). The Sportsmanship Policy reads that the “Competition Committee recommends an emphasis of the existing rule for Unsportsmanlike Conduct, rather than a rule change proposal” because the current policy offers “more than sufficient authority” for the commissioner to “impose discipline” for “abusive, unsportsmanlike, and disrespectful conduct towards opponents, coaches, officials, or fans” (“Sportsmanship,” 2014, p. 29). Section 3, Article 1, of the policy addresses unsportsmanlike conduct by listing eight prohibited acts, the first of which includes that of punching or kicking an opponent.

Bolstering. The NFL released an annual report that focused solely on player health and safety. The staff who provided the content for the annual report publication chose Suh as one of three players for a pull-out quote in the “2014 Player Health and Safety Annual Report” (“2014 health & safety,” 2014). On page 27, under the headline, “Players speak out on why the new rules are good for the game,” Suh is quoted as saying the following,

I think the most important thing is that the league is protecting all players and making sure of the players’ safety...And that’s what it really comes down to, player safety. (“2014 health & safety,” 2014, para. 1).

The annual report was released on October 3, 2014. The Suh incident with Rogers occurred on Thanksgiving Day in November 2014. Still, Suh had five previous player

safety transgressions before the Rogers incident occurred, so it is unclear as to why the NFL communication department staff would use Suh as a spokesperson for “player health and safety” in the published annual report, unless the communicators were attempting to bolster some form of rehabilitation of past aggression on Suh’s part, though that is not specifically stated. Either way, the use of Suh in such a manner in the annual report was a poor strategy that was ineffective in promoting any form of positive publicity due to his continued unsafe behaviors carried out on the field.

The re-emphasized Sportsmanship policy also included the following statement,

The Competition Committee believes that the NFL continues to have an obligation to set a standard for sportsmanship because we are the most visible and influential sports entity. Any conduct which adversely affects or reflects on the NFL, or which results in the erosion of public confidence in the honest and orderly conduct of our games, or the integrity or good character of our participants, will not be tolerated. Children watch NFL games and emulate the behavior of our players in their own athletic competitions and in other aspects of their lives. (“Sportsmanship,” 2014, p. 29)

This pathos-laden plea to behave is placed in an organizational policy. The statement is littered with rhetoric about how the NFL is so upstanding that this sport alone has an “obligation” to set a standard for high quality sportsmanship. The NFL is so “visible” and “influential” that it reigns supreme and so should your behavior, players. Then, there is the pathos, or emotional appeal, of mentioning the children and how they ultimately will emulate these great football players’ behaviors, so don’t let them down by doing things that erode the upstanding integrity of all that is the NFL.

The “re-emphasized” Sportsmanship policy is clearly a bolstering technique because one, why would the NFL publicize such a “re-emphasized” policy to begin with, and two, why would the NFL add such statements to an organizational policy? This is purely propaganda aimed to bolster the NFL in the public eye, and was only done so as a

reactivity to the crisis the organization faced as a result of continued player misconduct both on and off the field.

Effectiveness. The NFL made no reference on NFLCommunications.com of the issued fines for the Super Bowl brawl, but the issuance of fines was covered by the media. An earlier press release found on NFLCommunications.com included the 2014 fine schedule. The release that the fine schedule was included in was an announcement concerning a new appeals officer, Derrick Brooks, who was jointly appointed by the NFL and the NFLPA (“NFL, NFLPA name,” 2014). In the 2014 fine schedule, a first offense of “fighting,” which is what perceivably occurred at the end of the Super Bowl, holds a minimum fine of \$27,562 for a first offense and \$55,125 for a second offense. The fine schedule also mentions “unnecessarily entering fight area, active involvement” for a fine of \$5,512, and \$11,025 for a second offense; and “unnecessarily entering fight area, no active involvement” for a fine of \$2,756 or \$8,268 for a second offense. Another area of the fine schedule mentions the “striking, kicking, or kneeing of an opponent” for a fine of \$8,268 for the first offense and \$16,537 for the second offense. Irvin was fined \$10,000, and Bennett, Gronkowski, and Hoomanawanui were each fined \$8,268. It is unclear where the \$10,000 fine is stated or how the NFL came to the fine amount decisions, as no release about the discipline exists on the NFLCommunications.com repository.

This incident is important to note for several reasons. First, the more competitive and brutal the game becomes, the more people tune in to view the game. This sport, that is so violent in nature, could arguably feed into blurred lines in the expected behaviors of players off the field. Another important facet of this particular incidence is that the NFL, with all it had faced over the course of the season on the topic of player discipline, could

have used these reported fines as an effective bolstering strategy to promote that league is now more serious about player discipline, but it failed to do so.

The NFL updated, emphasized, and re-released several organizational policies over the course of the 2014/2015 season. The strategies of corrective action and bolstering were used in conjunction with these policies. Mostly, for outside stakeholders, the policies appeared to offer the corrective action sought in player discipline, but again the disciplinary actions were not uniform. The “re-emphasized” Sportsmanship policy, however, leaned more toward that of a bolstering attempt than a corrective action attempt. It was mostly unsuccessful, but only because the NFL did not uphold the policy consistently, still. When Suh was charged for his sixth transgression of unsportsmanlike conduct, for example, he was able to appeal his suspension and have it lowered to only a fine. This recharged the debate of just how serious the league really is in disciplining deviant behaviors. The Sportsmanship policy was not effective internally, as demonstrated by Suh, and externally, the league still faced the accusation that players are demonstrating unsportsmanlike conduct on the field, as demonstrated by the Super Bowl brawl, due to the lack of consistency in player discipline.

Deviant Behavior in the Workplace

The Miami Dolphins harassment and bullying case was another hot topic image threat during the time period studied. The remnants of workplace misconduct from the season prior was still swirling and had remained unsettled. This particularly highlighted misconduct case involved several players from the Miami Dolphins team who repeatedly bullied their colleagues over sexual orientation and race. An investigation was launched and the report from that investigation notes that there was indeed locker room harassment

of three team members of the Miami Dolphins by three other team members of the Miami Dolphins (Soto, Kittredge, & Broda, 2014). The report concluded,

The assistant trainer repeatedly was the object of racial slurs and other racially derogatory language; that the other offensive lineman was subjected to homophobic name-calling and improper physical touching; and that Martin was taunted on a persistent basis with sexually explicit remarks about his sister and his mother, and at times ridiculed with racial insults and other offensive comments. (Soto, Kittredge, & Broda, 2014, p. 1)

Goodell was asked during differing press conferences over the course of the 2014/2015 if the players who were found to have carried out the harassment would receive any disciplinary action.

Corrective action. As mentioned, an investigation had been launched to decipher between the many allegations concerning the misconduct that had been carried out in the Dolphins locker room. The Ted Wells report was finally released in February, 2015. The investigation is a corrective attempt to disassemble such behaviors from occurring in the locker rooms around the NFL. It also could arguably be an attempt to raise awareness among players and other NFL personnel that the league knows this behavior is occurring and the league now expects this type of behavior to cease.

Also, the NFL's Excellence in Workplace Conduct program was initiated the season prior. The Excellence in Workplace Conduct program was originally published on April 22, 2013, and then updated during the 2014/2015 season to include sexual orientation ("The NFL's ongoing," 2014).

Defeasibility. Goodell offered noncommittal holding statements that noted, "bottom line is everything is proceeding" and "it's a broad issue," ("NFL commissioner," 2014, Mar. 26).

Differentiation. Goodell also stated that the Dolphins locker room situation is a “medical issue” and that those involved are being evaluated by medical professionals and the medical professionals will be the ones to determine “whether any treatment is necessary, but that is a medical decision,” (“NFL commissioner,” 2014, Mar. 24). This response of such differentiation where he claims that the bullying, and the effects of bullying, are a “medical” issue is an attempt to close-off information to the public, and evade the question on whether or not those who were implicated in carrying out the bullying would be officially punished.

Bolstering. Goodell then bolsters in a third press conference that Richie Incognito has been “very responsive” and that he has “gone through the program” (“NFL commissioner Roger,” 2014). Incognito had garnered much negative attention in past seasons, but this season no major negative coverage has occurred concerning him, so Goodell’s bolstering is likely warranted.

Effectiveness. Workplace misconduct, harassment, bullying, and sexual orientation are big issues that hold great importance in organizational communication. The fact that this particular image threat hails from the prior season, is telling of the fact that the NFL organization is struggling in image repair. The handling of the Miami Dolphins incident was not positively effective because Goodell applied the defeasibility and differentiation strategies to reduce offensiveness and evade responsibility of the workplace misconduct image threat. His use of the term “medical issue” to detract from denying or answering hard questions did not help to repair image on the matter but instead made his attempt to not answer definitively even more transparent. The public did not really receive much closure on this topic either. On February 14, 2015, the NFL

released a brief statement concerning the Ted Wells Report that states little more than, “After we have had an opportunity to review the report, we will have further comment as appropriate,” (“NFL statement on report,” 2015, para. 1). The use of corrective action, defeasibility, differentiation, and bolstering, only worked to further confuse the situation. No real solution has yet occurred and stakeholders are still left bewildered at this particular situation, more than a year later. The effectiveness of image repair related to the Dolphins workplace misconduct is questionable. The corrective action of the investigation goes a long way, but the other contradictory strategies confuse the matter. So much time has now distanced the situation that the time frame paired with the corrective action likely will prove sufficient across stakeholders, barring no more such instances are publicized in the near future.

To summarize this chapter, the NFL faced several image threats over the course of the 2014/2015 season. The image threats included domestic violence, child abuse, and the updated Personal Conduct Policy in response to the accompanying image threat concerning player discipline. Drug and alcohol charges remained a threat, as did unsportsmanlike conduct on the field, and finally, workplace misconduct. The corrective action image reparation strategies that were applied by the NFL during the 2014/2015 season included the reissuance of numerous policies, player suspensions, and player fines. The evasion of responsibility strategies that were applied included defeasibility concerning matters tied to the new policies and answers offered in workplace misconduct and bullying cases. The reduce offensiveness image reparation strategies included minimization and differentiation which were included in the policies and in player

discipline; attack the accuser in response to *antapologia*; and bolstering, which was found in all of the above over-arching topics. Most, but not all, image repair strategies were successful for outside stakeholders, but in the case of the PCP, internal stakeholders were angered by the corrective action strategies that were not uniform with past policies and procedures, nor collaborated upon. In the next section, all of the strategies and their respective effectiveness in image reparation are discussed in further detail.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This research set out to discover which image repair strategies were applied by the NFL during the 2014/2015 season, and whether those strategies were successful in repairing the NFL's image. The NFL was been accused of being too lenient on its players and not upholding its policies appropriately nor fairly. This season, three organizational policies pertaining to player discipline were updated, re-released, or re-emphasized. The NFL this season has received negative publicity over owner- and player-involved legal discrepancies involving drugs and alcohol and an abundance of unsportsmanlike conduct by players both on and off the field. The biggest image threat to the organization during the 2014/2015 season was the continued proliferation of player deviant behaviors, especially those involving domestic and child abuse. The NFL's structure as a trade association, both complicates and buffers the situation for the NFL. This division between the actual transgressor (the football players who committed the wrongful act) and its governing league (the NFL) offers the league many useful strategies for image repair. The synecdochic effect that players, teams, and owners associated with the NFL have on the NFL organization are worthy of investigation, however, and the antapologic responses to the NFL's *apologia* may be a telling sign of such synecdoche.

The NFL is consistently reactive in its organizational communication efforts. The NFL's reactivity has long been evident as historical instances have proven. For example, the Violent Crime Policy developed in 1997 was updated to become the Personal Conduct Policy in 2007, and the newly-updated Personal Conduct Policy of 2014. Each exhibit reactivity to those time periods in NFL history that are littered in heightened transgressions. This season's PCP was issued as a direct response to the Rice incident. The Hardy situation, as it played out, the NFL again displayed that timing is everything when it comes to corrective action. Hardy certainly fell victim to the timing of the release of the Ray Rice elevator video footage that showed Rice's earlier transgression ("Ray Rice elevator," 2014). Also, the day prior to Hardy being put on the exempt list, the Adrian Peterson saga unfolded (Newton, 2014). With Hardy's case still fresh at that time, Goodell had to take some sort of action and follow through with the rhetorical strategies he had touted up to that point. Still, Hardy's punishment was not carried out as defined by the PCP because charges were dropped, and Rice and Peterson, being such blown out antapologic instances of discursive public communication, actually were punished to an extreme beyond what the PCP stated was appropriate. These inconsistencies harm the legitimacy of the corrective action attempted.

Furthermore, the PCP clearly reads, "Initial decisions regarding discipline will be made by a disciplinary officer, a member of the league office staff who will be a highly-qualified individual with a criminal justice background" ("Personal conduct policy," 2014, p. 5), but Goodell did not await such a process when he suspended Rice and the Peterson. In so doing, his actions allowed for the players to appeal their respective suspensions. Both won their appeals, and both have since been reinstated to play, though

neither are expected to play with the same team they were on before all the ado. Rice was reinstated to the NFL (Fredericks, 2014) and awarded half of his salary, or \$1.588 million, from the 2014/2015 season in a wrongful termination case he won against the Baltimore Ravens (Verderame, 2015). He was also offered a \$1 million contract from ProDraftLeague.com (“TMZ: Ray,” 2015). Mark Tadros, CEO of the fantasy football league website, is quoted as saying, “Mr. Rice has shown deep remorse for his act of domestic violence and I feel he deserves a second chance,” (para. 3). Peterson’s case has a similar outcome thus far. Also, there were other NFL players who were suspended or put on the exempt list for domestic violence this season, and although the policy clearly states that “aggravating circumstances” enhance discipline, the players who assaulted a pregnant women, a child, or carried out the assault in front of a child, either remained active, put on the exempt list, was reinstated, or returned to the NFL’s free agency list, and none were suspended for the PCP-recommended six games.

The NFL’s policy ineffectiveness reaches beyond the PCP. The joint NFL-NFLPA drug policy also has affected little change. Despite all of the attempts by the NFL to curb the deviant behaviors of its players, 13 additional arrests occurred after the updated policies were released, emphasized or re-released. Even since the re-release of the PCP in December 2014, as the below figure shows, over half of the 13 arrests involved drugs or driving under the influence (DUI), and domestic violence has continued to occur. The most recent incidents mentioned include the following players and reasons for arrest.

Figure 3. Player Arrests from December 10, 2014 to February 28, 2015

DATE OF ARREST	NAME OF PLAYER	NFL TEAM	REASONS FOR ARREST
02/16/15	Nate Allen	(PHI) Eagles	Indecent exposure
02/05/15	Ahmed Bradshaw	(IND) Colts	Drugs
02/04/15	Joseph Randle	(DAL) Cowboys	Drugs
02/03/15	D’Qwell Jackson	(IND) Colts	Assault
02/03/15	Letroy Guion	(GB) Packers	Drugs, gun
02/02/15	Terrence Cody	(BAL) Ravens	Animal cruelty, drugs
01/23/15	Andrew Jackson	(IND) Colts	DUI
01/14/15	Josh McNary	(IND) Colts	Domestic violence, rape
01/09/15	Chris Johnson	(NYJ) Jets	Gun
01/07/15	Tim Jennings	(CHI) Bears	DUI
01/05/15	Junior Galette	(NO) Saints	Domestic violence
12/29/14	Jabari Price	(MIN) Vikings	DUI
12/29/14	Jermaine Cunningham	(NYJ) Jets	Gun, privacy invasion

The NFL, with its updated and reemphasized policies, is positioned to act much more proactively moving forward, which would be recommended to achieve some measure of image reparation due to this season’s barrage of bad publicity, but little historical evidence points to the likelihood of such proactivity occurring. Benoit, in his numerous accounts of corporate image reparation strategies, offered one concluding thought on corporate strategy and that is the fact that corporations can do so much more than simply “announce or promise corrective action” (Benoit, 2015, p. 61). In the PCP one line specifically notes that a second offense will result in separation from the league. Dissociation is the very action that this research found to be lacking in the NFL’s image repair attempts.

Benoit also notes that sometimes strategies are just not at all sufficient for the harm that had been caused, and the attempted remediation simply comes too late to seem sincere. The NFL’s lack of dissociation is a good example of that exact thought. In fact,

dissociation is likely the single-most debilitating factor in negating the NFL's image reparation and apologetic attempts. Aside from whether or not the individual is initially punished or fined, the lackadaisical approach the NFL holds in allowing the player to return to the NFL, and continue as star talent, is ultimately what harms the image of the organization the most. This facet delegitimizes the NFL's efforts. The players can carry out inexcusable acts and then are allowed to return to play and carry on in popularity as if nothing had occurred.

For example, mentioned earlier is the case of Ray Lewis. Lewis and two of his friends allegedly stabbed to death two individuals after a Super Bowl party in Atlanta. Lewis made a deal with prosecutors that he be freed of all charges in exchange for his testimony. Lewis then was allowed to return to the NFL and reportedly will be awarded top honors as a NFL Hall of Fame inductee in the near future (Bloom, 2013). Another exemplar of the lack of dissociation is that of Peterson, who was charged with the physical assault of his 4-year-old son and stirred mountains of controversy for his team, the NFL, and the NFLPA. The dust had not yet settled in his case and accompanying appeals, yet the Goodell-appointed PCP committee chairman, Michael Bidwill, owner of the Arizona Cardinals, is actively recruiting Peterson from the Vikings to play on the Cardinals team – alongside the Art Rooney Outstanding Sportsmanship Award winner, Larry Fitzgerald. Much ado is being reported on this possible move, including several interviews with Fitzgerald, but it is only being reported as a positive move on the part of the Cardinals to acquire a player of such caliber and talent on the field. These instances of glorifying the villain are the very aspects that negate the work the NFL attempts to carry out in an effort to repair its organizational image. As long as the NFL, and the NFL's fan

and stakeholders, allow such behaviors to be overlooked, players will be allowed to return to play and to stardom, and the same problems will continue to perpetuate.

Unfortunately, this is dangerous play, too. The NFL is dancing with death as it allows the courts to decide the fate of abusers before acting on its own with game suspensions and other punishments. In several domestic violence cases, such as those discussed herein with Hardy, Enunwa, and McDonald, the NFL has a policy it can lean on to hold back on any specific disciplinary action until the legalities are settled. “In cases also being investigated by law enforcement, the NFL will avoid any interference and may await the outcome of law enforcement proceedings before completing the NFL investigation,” (“PCP Infographic,” 2014). As such, many instances ended with the wives and girlfriends who had fallen victim to violent acts ceasing to cooperate with prosecutors or deciding to not press charges at all. Mueller pointed out in his report on the Rice elevator video investigation that, “Discipline should be imposed on the basis of the specific nature of the player’s conduct, not solely or necessarily on the disposition of a criminal case” (Mueller, 2014, p. 8). Mueller makes a good point here because players like Hardy can pay-off their victims and continue to play professional football. Hardy was picked up by the Dallas Cowboys right after the 2014/2015 season ended. The Cowboys, a representative team for the newly-established PCP Committee, offered Hardy a one-year, \$11.3 million contract dripping with additional incentives (“Cowboys sign,” 2015). The antapologic response was appropriately vehement by one Dallas television news sportscaster (“Dallas sports,” 2015). WFAA sportscaster, Dale Hansen, said in his newscast the following statement directed to Cowboys owner, Jerry Jones,

Is there no line you won't cross? Is there no crime you won't accept? Is there no behavior you will not tolerate? ...and now you can beat a woman and play with a star on your helmet. ("Dallas sports," 2015, :43-1:10, [video])

As long as the NFL policy exists that allows players to pay-off victims to avoid legal repercussions, and therefore avoid NFL disciplinary action, victims will be pressured all the more to not speak out, press charges, or seek help. This could potentially be disastrous for all involved, including the NFL organization and its image.

This study loosely applied the relatively new theory of *antapologia* (Stein, 2008). Two aspects relating to *antapologia* relate directly to the image repair strategies applied by the NFL over the course of the season studied. One aspect is the journalistic *antapologia* caused by the application of contradictory strategies used to address the same image threat. The example that best fits this is that of Hardy's domestic violence incidence and his later signing with the Dallas Cowboys. In this particular instance, Hardy was not suspended as the PCP corrective action details. Instead, due to the differentiation of his case versus the more publicized cases of Rice and Peterson, he was only put on the exempt list. Hardy also comingled in the defeasibility strategy because he cut a deal with his victim in exchange for dropping the charges and therefore was released of any disciplinary action from the NFL. As such, when the Cowboys picked him up, the Dallas sports newscaster applied the journalistic *antapologia* directed at Jerry Jones, the owner of the team.

The other aspect relating to *antapologia* was the successful act of *antapologia* that the NFLPA carried out in response to the PCP corrective action and Peterson's "grandstand" justice the NFL applied in an attempt to repair its image and bolster the newly updated policy. The *antapologia* was successful in weakening the apology offered

by the NFL and strengthening the original image threat that the NFL is too lenient when it comes to player discipline. In so doing, the NFL responded in a particularly vehement manner by attacking the appellate judge that presided over Peterson's case. This aspect deserves further discussion in the expansion of the theory of *antapologia* because the NFLPA's *antapologia* was effective in propelling further the NFL organization's image threat, and because the *antapologia* garnered a particularly vehement response that the NFL did not use otherwise of the course of the season.

Findings

The statements and analysis above show that the NFL organization offered a buffet of image repair strategies. The strategies included the denial, corrective action, evasion of responsibility, and reduce offensiveness general strategies. The sub-strategies within Benoit's image reparation typology that were found to be used were defeasibility, minimization, differentiation, attack the accuser, and bolstering.

The denial strategy was effectively substantiated as a truthful claim. The NFL denied having received the Ray Rice video prior to it being publicized in September, 2014. The Mueller report exonerated the NFL from having suppressed the Ray Rice video, which was the image threat to which the denial strategy was applied, and the only instance that denial was applied. As such, the denial tactic will not be further discussed in this section.

The corrective action general strategy was the most aptly applied image repair strategy. The corrective actions that the NFL used to attempt to repair image involved updating several policies; the PCP, the drug policy, and the re-emphasized sportsmanship policy. Other acts of corrective action included the suspensions of several players and one

team owner, as well as a self-imposed internal investigations (the Mueller investigation, for example). Mostly, the stakeholders outside of the NFL organization were satisfied with the updated policies even though discipline still remains splintered. Internal stakeholders, such as NFL players and the NFLPA, however, were not appeased by the unfair and unbalanced reactivity that has come from the corrective actions related to the policies. The PCP alone created much turmoil and friction between the NFL and the NFLPA.

The evasion of responsibility general strategy of image repair was applied in the form of defeasibility. Defeasibility was applied concerning the PCP and player discipline. Some players who were blatantly guilty of domestic violence were not disciplined to the specific rules stated in the PCP because the league awaited the finalization of their legal cases. At least two such cases ended in agreements with the victim to drop charges. The other incidence of defeasibility pertains to the Miami Dolphins workplace misconduct and bullying investigation and discipline. Goodell would not answer as to whether the involved players would be disciplined. He instead stated the matter was a “broad issue.” The defeasibility applied in the PCP cases were not effective in image repair with outside stakeholders and likely brings more turmoil to the organization as more of the players implicated this season in domestic violence cases are picked up by teams. More specifically, the antapologic response to Hardy’s recruitment to the Dallas Cowboys team will be replicated as others sign with new teams, too.

The reduce offensiveness general strategy was demonstrated by the use of minimization, differentiation, attack the accuser, and bolstering. The minimization strategy was applied in the upholding of the PCP. The league minimized some cases of

domestic violence from others, and even minimized the discipline of the lesser-publicized cases from others more publicized. Like the defeasibility strategy discussed above, this likely will not be a long term effective strategy because as the player deviant problems continue to perpetuate, stakeholders will become increasingly angry. Of course this parallels the application of the differentiation strategy, too. Differentiation was applied to the PCP when the cases were differentiated in severity and punishment. Differentiation also was applied to the Miami Dolphins case when Goodell differentiated between the bullying incident and a “medical issue.”

The one instance where the NFL attacked its accuser was in response to a judge’s ruling concerning a player’s appeal for a suspension. The NFL used this attack as a responsive strategy to the NFLPA’s *antapologia*. This was a particularly uncharacteristic and vehement response, and the only instance of this strategy being applied. This is worthy of further investigation as the charged response to the NFLPA’s *antapologia* may indicate that the successful application of *antapologia* may incite more aggressive image reparation strategies.

Bolstering, which was the most plentiful sub-strategy applied, is a common theme on organizational communication, public relations, and sports communication, so the use of this strategy was expected in great instance in this study. The bolstering attempts included personnel changes, sponsorship and advertising deals, and record-breaking viewership, to name a few. The PCP packaged releases that touts the many services offered to NFL personnel who violate the PCP, and the many donations offered to the entities who serve the overarching social disparities for which the NFL was under fire for this season such as domestic violence, child abuse, and head trauma nonprofits.

The effectiveness of the attempts to reduce offensiveness varied due to approach. The intrinsic analysis of the releases in this categorization found that the sub-strategy used most by the NFL was bolstering; which was applied in varying levels within an array of pretty much every topic. Most of the bolstering strategies matched the problematic topics the NFL embattled this season. For example, several financial donations were given to concussion research and prevention, youth programs, and domestic violence nonprofit entities. Additional bolstering was noticed in the inclusion of, and enhanced mentioning of, particular domestic violence entities and female-specific groups. The bolstering attempts also included personnel changes, sponsorship and advertising deals, and record-breaking viewership. As such, these attempts must have achieved success in image repair with outside stakeholders, and especially professional football fans or the league would not be able to continue the bolstering of such things unless the organization was still receiving strong support.

It was however noticeable that the NFL lacked in seizing appropriate opportunities to bolster the organization's image while promoting its initiatives. For example, the NFL partnered with two domestic violence coalitions for the "No More" campaign. The "No More" campaign is a series of public service announcements (PSAs) that ran during NFL broadcasts, even the Super Bowl, to raise awareness for domestic violence and appeared to take a stand against the act by saying, "No More." The commercials showed famous, star football players attempting to evoke emotion by saying no words at all. For all the efforts the NFL put into these PSAs, not one press or media release was included in the NFL's repository of releases. Another instance of an overlooked bolstering effort is that of the story encircling Devon Still, a defensive tackle

with the Cincinnati Bengals, and his young daughter who has battled abdominal cancer this season (Lupkin & McGuire, 2015). The Bengals had cut Still from the team, and soon after, Still's daughter was diagnosed. The Bengals reinstated Still, putting him on the practice squad so that Still could have the health insurance and resources to appropriately pay for the healthcare his daughter needed. The Bengals have since reinstated Still to the active roster. Again, no release on this heartfelt story exists in the NFL's repository. Such missed opportunities are not beneficial to the organization's image.

As discussed when explaining the essence of bolstering, the act of filling a bucket with good things in order to dilute the bad is the very point made above about the "No More" campaign and the Still story. Moreover, the lack of bolstering on the player discipline fines from the Super Bowl is another example of not fully taking advantage of the image repair opportunities available to the NFL.

Mortification is the most effective apologetic response strategy in restoring image (Benoit, 1995; Benoit & Drew, 1997), and mortification coupled with corrective action are the most successful strategies for athletes (Twork & Blaney, 2013). Mortification was not applied by the league. This is perhaps due to the league's perceived division between the actual transgressor (the football players who committed the wrongful act) and its governing league (the NFL), albeit the public and the organization's stakeholders could view them one in the same, or synecdochic. While corrective action was attempted, it was done so reactively and inconsistently. Therefore, best practices, as stated by prior research, was not found to have been applied by the NFL during the 2014/2015 season.

Therefore, the NFL offered corrective action, evasion of responsibility, and reduction of offensiveness strategies. Most were successful in repairing image for some stakeholders and a few were unsuccessful in repairing image, especially with internal stakeholders. Those that proved unsuccessful are identifiable to the application of contradictory strategies. For example, the application of corrective action with defeasibility, or corrective action with differentiation. These strategies, by their very nature, are contradictory of each other, therefore the ineffectiveness of such a combination in an organizational policy is to be expected. The application of such contradiction in the discipline of NFL personnel were unsuccessful and even further fueled the original image threat, as demonstrated by the NFLPA's *antapologia*. The bolstering attempts that were applied across each of the image threats appear successful in moving toward image reparation across the organization's stakeholders.

Future Research

Many areas of future research are evident. The current season could be weighed against past seasons to deduce how common or recurrent the current season's image threats are for the NFL organization. Other possibilities of future research include an in-depth examination of the antapologic responses to the NFL's image repair strategies, which were plentiful; or the triangulation of each image threat also could be holistically framed by the apologetic rhetorical aspects of *kategoria*, *apologia*, and *antapologia*, as reported by media, which could further examine which *kategoria* should be responded to in which manner (an apology or *apologia*) to best reduce or repel the antapologic response. A longitudinal study also could be conducted to trace the current season's effectiveness in the future of the NFL organization's image. Also, the sea of data

gathered in the *USA Today* NFL arrest database also could be used in countless quantitative statistical analyses to determine the commonality of each type of offense, or perhaps identify which NFL teams have the highest prevalence of specific deviant behaviors.

Another interesting undertaking would be an examination of the synecdochic effect of player and team and league in the NFL. In the literature review of this thesis, Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong are offered as examples to convey this thought of athlete and sport as synecdochic. Over the course of this thesis research, it has become a curious aspect as to how exactly an NFL player's deviant behavior might have such an effect on the league. Is it the image threat that makes an average player have such a synecdochic effect on the league? Not every football player is recognizable as the "face" of football like Woods is of golf and Armstrong for cycling, yet when a player is charged with a crime the NFL is likely to face an image threat as a result. It is for this reason that an investigation into the type of player familiarity versus the resultant image threat for the league that such an investigation would be an interesting undertaking. This very aspect also could be researched in other sports leagues such as Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association.

The NFL endured an onslaught of image threats over the course of the 2014/2015 season. The organization applied the image repair strategies of corrective action, defeasibility, bolstering, minimization, attack the accuser, and differentiation. Some strategies were effective for certain stakeholder groups yet ineffective for other stakeholder groups. Mostly, it is the organization's inconsistency in disciplinary action that originally threatened the image of the organization and still continued to threaten the

image of the organization after the 2014/2015 season concluded. In the next section, the implications of this research is discussed and concluded.

Conclusion

This thesis project set out to identify which image repair strategies the NFL implemented during the 2014/2015 season, and whether those strategies were rhetorically effective. The analysis of all NFL-issued releases gathered from NFLCommunications.com, the organization's official communication department's website for publishing NFL releases, during the time period of February 1, 2014 through February 28, 2014, found that the NFL applied the three general strategies of corrective action, evasion of responsibility, and reduce offensiveness. The sub-strategies included defeasibility, bolstering, minimization, attack the accuser, and differentiation. The corrective action strategy mostly applied to policy-making attempts by the league. This strategy was effective for external stakeholders but created divisiveness for internal stakeholders. The defeasibility, differentiation, and minimization likely will continue to backfire as these strategies also are tied to the corrective action but appear to actually negate the corrective action. The antapologic response that already has occurred in response to the defeasibility, minimization, and differentiation likely will continue. Benoit (2015) warned against use of contradictory strategies and this case depicts that as true. The bolstering attempts are effective, pretty much across all topics, and effective to the outside stakeholders to which they are geared.

It is important to note that the denial strategy and the mortification strategy was not used by the NFL in its organizational communicative releases. This likely is due to the differentiation between the actual aggressor who carried out the act and the league as

a governing body. The league, in its responses, takes on the authoritative role, therefore differentiating itself from the transgressor and the transgression. What the NFL is not taking into consideration, is the fact that public could hold a synecdochic view of player and league. As such, a natural blame or image threat befalls the NFL organization, and that coupled with the NFL's authoritative stance comingles for a higher image threat for the NFL. It is good that the NFL does not apply the denial strategy but more effective image repair might occur if some mortification had been applied.

The NFL can more effectively address crises situations by taking a stand early on and sticking to that decision. Decisive leadership is necessary for an organization, especially one that faces such an array of image threats as the NFL. Had Goodell continued to stand by his initial two-game suspension with the Rice incident, even though the video release created such a public uproar, the organization and its corrective action efforts that followed would have appeared much more sincere, effective, and legitimate. The fact that Rice appealed and won, as did Peterson, also proved the NFL's reactivity to be ineffective. Moreover, that kneejerk reactivity also extended the crisis timeframe to the additional reporting of events, such as the January report of Rice's appeal. Therefore, the incident carried out throughout the entirety of the season. Perhaps if the NFL had remained consistent from the beginning, the discourse around the incident likely would have calmed much sooner. The reactiveness to *antapologia* is what harmed the NFL's image repair efforts most, and what stirred the one instance of the attack the accuser sub-strategy. Benoit states that regardless of an organization's efforts, image repair strategies can easily be undermined by other sources that disseminate countering messages (Benoit, 2015).

Perhaps the most important piece of this NFL image reparation puzzle is the fact that fans are so forgiving. The public talks a lot about the behaviors of players, but that generally is as far as it goes. Fans do not generally take a stand or initiate meaningful action against the deviant behaviors of football players. Instead, they tune-in at higher than ever rates. This is a common social concern in any study of organizational crisis because the public, unless individually and directly affected by the crisis situation, simply does not get involved enough to take a real stand against such behaviors, and those who do take a stand make up only a small percentage of the public. The only way to affect change in situations such as recurrent NFL player deviant behaviors would be for society and especially professional football fans to demand that the NFL take longstanding action every time that these transgressions occur. Such a stand would include boycotting the organization's events or products, for example. This type of action is unlikely, however, and part of the perpetuating problem.

The implications of this research support Benoit's prior findings of the negative effects of contradictory strategies. Also, for sports, bolstering likely is the key to image repair as it is consistently successful with stakeholders. Findings also help to conclude the importance of strategic and proactive organizational communication, especially when tackling a controversial topic. Also, consistency in player discipline is desperately needed in the NFL and until this aspect of the governing league is initiated, the league is likely to continue to endure image threats. Finally, dissociation is suggested for players who have engaged in an extreme transgression.

In conclusion, a deeper investigation of the NFL's image reparation attempts were found to be little more than reactive propaganda, and mostly public and media relations

jargon distributed solely to deactivate the *antapologic* response from the American media. The on-the-surface perceivable strategies of corrective action are actually reactively-penned policies that the league shows little intention of upholding, and actually shape and reshape to its own benefit. In so doing, the corrective action strategies become an evasion of responsibility, which completely negates its original intention. As long as American society allows these deviant behaviors to continue among the star players that make up the National Football League, little will change because there will be little need for change.

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