IRT, PAST CRISES, AND TWITTER: AN ANALYSIS OF NFL'S BLM RESPONSE

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BLM   Black Lives Matter

CSR   Corporate Social Responsibility

DEI   Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

DOCA   Database of Variable for Content Analysis

IRT   Image Repair Theory

NFL   National Football League

SCCT   Situational Crisis Communication Theory

SMEB   Social Media Engagement Behavior

SPSS   Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The National Football League (NFL) is no stranger to crisis management. As recently as September 7th, 2022, the NFL was called "America's Best Crisis-Management Company" (Leitch, 2022). Faced with internal job hiring lawsuits, player injuries, domestic abuse allegations, and social justice issues, the NFL maintains its number of viewers per game and an 18-billion-dollar revenue (Leitch, 2022). The following thesis focuses on one of the largest NFL crises, spanning over 4 years and bringing significant media attention to the players and teams in the NFL. In 2016, Colin Kaepernick began his silent protests in the wake of the continued police brutality against Black Americans. Kaepernick was not signed for a team in the following season, and filed a grievance with the NFL, stating they were colluding to keep him out of the league due to his protesting (Donahue, 2020). At the end of May 2020, there were nationwide protests due to another instance of police brutality against George Floyd. At this time, the NFL released four tweets supporting the movement. Due to a history of racism within the NFL, the statements immediately created a public reaction. A single tweet in this series of statements received 22,600 replies and 31,500 quote tweets. The replies range from appreciation for their support of BLM to anger at the NFL for reacting inauthentically, and not holding themselves responsible for the part they have taken in the systemic issues. With the NFL's past in plain view, the NFL enacted a set of strategies that fall within image repair theory (Reid & Lock, 2022). The tweets engage in bolstering, compensation, corrective action, and mortification strategies. By looking into the sentiment in the mass public response, I was able to identify the strategies

associated with positive and negative sentiment, which would be useful for practitioners

to consider when in a crisis with a strong historical tie-in.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Black Lives Matter

"Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can change the world" (Howard Zinn). In 2013 Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created #BlackLivesMatter, this small act was quickly engaged in by millions and is changing cultural norms as we know them. The women's grassroots movement began when Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old black teen was shot by George Zimmerman, who was later acquitted by a Florida jury (McLaughlin, 2016). Their focus is to bring change to racial justice, police brutality, and systematic racism in the United States, eventually spreading across the world (Howard University, 2018). The hashtag took to Twitter in 2014 when Michael Brown was a victim of police brutality. "The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag appeared an average of 58,747 times per day in the roughly three weeks following Brown's death" (Anderson, 2016). Overall, #BlackLivesMatter was mentioned on Twitter over 11 million times from Mid-2013 to March 2016, not including sub hashtags such as #BLM, #SayTheirNames, #Floyd, and many more (Anderson, 2016; McLaughlin, 2016). This movement was present on all social platforms but grew on Twitter specifically; "the ability of Twitter to recontextualize and repurpose information makes it a powerful tool for framing BLM" (Klein et al., 2022). Twitter has the flexible nature to endure a wide variety of responses while still spreading information and providing a current news cycle involving the movement; particularly the coverage of protests in BLM; and also seen in other social justice movements, like Arab Spring (Klein et al, 2022; Brown et al, 2012). The key choice words, Black Lives Matter,

significantly helped the hashtag grow to its relevance, with its easy ability to be linked to other social justice movements involving the Black community (McLaughlin, 2016).

Another act that changed the social landscape and how #BlackLivesMatter captured the world's attention was on May 25th, 2020, when a Black American named George Floyd was murdered by police officer, Derek Chauvin (Taylor, 2021). The murder was videotaped and subsequently posted to various social media sites, including Twitter. Social media erupted with #BlackLivesMatter once again and hundreds of protests began. It was quickly backed by the powerful movement started in 2013 by three innovative black women; Garza, Cullors, and Tometi. This outrage did not spark from out of the blue, but the statistics that were surrounding the video. "Black people are twice as likely as white people to be shot and killed by police officers" (Bunn, 2022), and "white officers dispatched to Black neighbourhoods fired their guns five times as often as Black officers dispatched for similar calls to the same neighbourhoods" (Peeples, 2020). Soon after #BlackLivesMatter, activists called on their communities to raise their voices against police brutality and systemic racism through peaceful protesting, in a variety of ways.

One surge was #BlackOutTuesday on Instagram, users began posting black squares with #BlackLivesMatter to show support for the movement (Wellman, 2022). Although this was an attempt to show allyship, the squares flooded the necessary hashtags where activists looked for information on protests, petitions, and other information about the movement (Wellman, 2022). This allyship was called performative and hurtful to the social justice movement. Even if it showed support, it was misdirected. Instead of amplifying the marginalized voices, they were spoken over. Performative

allyship or activism is defined as when an entity, ranging from an individual to a multi-national corporation, posts or acts in support of a movement, but its internal values and policies do not align (O'Mahoney, 2020). This allyship does not acknowledge personal (or corporate) responsibility and is done to support the organization's goals before justice causes (Kalina, 2020). Performative allyship can be particularly harmful to a social movement, due to it taking space away from activists and other organizations looking to provide true change.

Many organizations within the United States spoke out on police brutality, participating in what some would say was performative allyship, in an effort to not be 'canceled' or called out for not speaking up on such an important issue. Cancel culture is prominent on all social media platforms and is used by the public to reinforce new social norms by using a new form of 'punishment' or social disapproval (Kalina, 2020). "Social disapproval is generated when constituents—diverse and diffuse individuals who observe, evaluate, and potentially interact with a firm—react intuitively and negatively to organizational events they learn about from traditional media, social media, or journalists' social media practices" (Wang et al., 2021). This can be consumers disconnecting from their brand, halting purchasing, unfollowing on social media, and replying with negative sentiment (Cassidy, 2017). This idea is also tied to authenticity, defined as the "uniqueness, originality, and/or genuineness of an object, a person, an organization, or an idea" (Modella, 2010). Around 86 percent of consumers believe authenticity plays a major role when they choose which brands to support, further supporting its importance (Cassidy, 2017).

Research on Black Lives Matter as a movement has been a growing focus in social sciences due to its close relationship with digital activism, political statements, etc... Closely related to this study, Klein et al (2022) took a closer look at Black Lives Matter from a narrative framing perspective on Twitter. Klein et al examined 2 years' worth of tweets about BLM, which totaled around 118 million. Klein's insights focused on the framing of the movement, including the 'Issue Attention Cycle' by Downs (1972). This is explained as "fervent attention is kicked off by a high-profile event, which opens a window for change before being followed by pessimistic counter-reactions and a fade from public view. The ability to bring about lasting change depends on how much can be done during the period of heightened awareness—which in turn depends on how long that period can be maintained" (2022). The study goes on to find Twitter is especially sensitive to rhetorical velocity, which is the speed at which groups of people might promote or repurpose material. This makes Twitter conversations high-paced and often open to many different types of appropriations (Klein et al, 2022). As mentioned above, the Black Lives Matter movement on Twitter varied from systemic racism to a conversation about performative allyship and many more appropriations. Although this is a great opportunity for awareness, it may dilute the movement's true activism.

Digital Activism

Further examining the relationship between social justice movements and social media platforms, researchers have begun developing a dialogue on how to make activism in this environment the most effective. Digital activism can be defined as "social activism meditated through digital technologies to promote social movements" (George & Leidner, 2019). Coombs adds that social media platforms can be "used as a direct route to corporate reputation as it replaces the indirect route through traditional

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gatekeepers" (2017). Some of the more relevant terms coined from digital activism are hashtag activism and slacktivism. Slacktivism relates to the idea of performative activism and that "users are only involved in a movement insofar as participation is easy and convenient compared to traditional or offline activism that requires a much greater time and physical investment" (Zulli, 2020; Gladwell, 2010). This can be seen in the larger discussion surrounding performative activism on social media and Black Lives Matter, particularly the #BlackoutTuesday trend mentioned earlier. In Gladwell's 2010 New Yorker article, he dives into the nuances of social justice movements and social media. In the early days of social media, Gladwell saw something that others didn't; although connections were forming over the platforms they were inherently weak ones. These activists were able to get mass amounts of people to sign-up and join causes because they never asked much of the participants, besides their names and Twitter handle. The issue with this is it "doesn't require that you confront socially entrenched norms and practices. In fact, it's the kind of commitment that will bring only social acknowledgment and praise" and "doesn't involve personal or financial risk" (Gladwell, 2010). This involvement of no high-risk activism brings high participation, but this does not mean any societal change will occur. This major criticism of social justice movements on social media, or digital activism, is an interesting topic that is still being contended in the industry today.

Madison and Klang (2020) dismiss the fallacies brought up around digital activism, claiming "the term slacktivism is used as a method for delegitimizing nascent political participation by attacking the intentions and actions of those involved". This article concentrates on digital activism's positive properties in raising awareness,

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support, and creating a public discussion surrounding the social movement. Even though there are low levels of high-risk activism, even Gladwell admits there is high participation in this type of movement. Zulli (2020) argues the point that the critics of digital activism take up too much of the conversation, pointing out it should be centered around what individual mechanisms on social media can do to improve the current activism environment. Zulli (2020) focuses on how hashtags work within the digital activism space, and how they are critical to the online culture surrounding activism. Zulli examines hashtag activism through a Black Lives Matter lens to see the opportunities, or disruptions it brought to the movement online. Scholars argue that the online presence for #BlackLivesMatter was engaging and magnified the voices of activists leading to high participation in protests, petitions, and funding (Zulli, 2020; Barnard, 2018).

The #BlackLivesMatter is often used interchangeably with the offline Black Lives Matter chapters, which can be detrimental to their public image since any social media user can use the hashtag diluting its power (Yang, 2016; Zulli, 2020). Zulli concludes that "hashtags facilitate activism for those who cannot or do not want to engage offline" while "enabling counterpublics and confer the status of important socio-political movements" but hashtags need to be used correctly (2020). The use of hashtags as an activist does come with limitations. The two largest hashtags are commonly episodic, often too focused on one event to start a movement, and second, they are open to easy opposition in appropriation (Zulli, 2020). Alfano et al. (2022) point out that since 2016 on Twitter, #BlackLivesMatter automatically features a trio of raised black, brown, and white fist emojis, calling back to protests in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1960s

(2022). Emojis and hashtags, often interdependent, allow users to get a clear understanding of the motivations behind statements. A great example of this could be a tweet "Stay Strong", alone its message could be lost but with #BlackLivesMatter and raised fists, users may more clearly understand what the person is referring to. Emojis can imply more than intention with a 2022 study that found strong correlations with certain emojis and political groups (Alfano et al.). "They provide a computationally efficient way of determining community membership" (Alfano et al., 2022). Contrary to previous research, emoji, and hashtag use in a tweet actually decreases the amount of attention given to a tweet but does increase attention from fellow in-group members for future tweets (Alfano et al., 2022). To learn more about digital activism, George & Leidner (2019) attempts to understand the theory and identify trends within the growing world of digital activism. The article goes on to define many strategies used digitally such as; "clicktivism, meta voicing, assertion, political consumerism, digital petitions, botivism, e-funding, data activism, exposure, and hacktivism" (George & Leidner, 2019). As digital activism grows, the terms and literature around the topic continue to expand, providing researchers with the necessary tools to understand and learn about social movements online and the platforms they grow.

Twitter and Sports Loyalty

With over 16 million viewers per season, the NFL's fan base is too large to fit into a single demographic. Although, when working within crisis messaging, it is necessary to prioritize an audience (Benoit, 1997). In 2016, the NFL prioritized shareholders and leaders of team organizations when ignoring Colin Kaepernick's protest to dilute an image attack. Staying out of the political spotlight was best for profits, therefore

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shareholders. The stakeholder prioritization switched when the fans became a driving force for Black Lives Matter; the NFL released a set of tweets tailored to their needs.

A common tool for fan-based communication is Twitter, due to its interactivity and discussion-based features (Swarm, 2018). Through the invention and transition of social media, this has become a new space for fans to interact with other fans, athletes, and leagues. Social media can be defined as "new media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organizations (e.g., teams, and leagues) and individuals (e.g. consumers, athletes, and journalists)" (Filo et al, 2014). In a 2014 study, Park and Dittmore studied the effects of social media consumption concerning fan word-of-mouth intention and attendance intention. They found that social media can be used to raise fans' intention to discuss and attend sports events, making it a crucial role in future sports communication practices. "Social media affords sport brands in relation to communication, relationship development, and promotion" (Filo et al, 2014). Further, it allows teams to strengthen and manage their brand online reaching new audiences outside of their fan base while still engaging with that group, research surrounding sports teams online focuses on the relationship-building element the platforms have been proven to have (Naraine et al, 2019).

While social media's importance has grown within sports, researchers see almost all major sports brands are putting efforts into engaging fanbases online with significant time and resources being put into these projects; it also happens to be one of the most cost-effective mediums (Filo et al, 2014). This opportunity for community online is so important within the sports fanbases, who enjoy showing and discussing their team

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loyalty, which is something leagues are tapping into. In Dwyer's 2011 study, they state that "sport team loyalty is much more complex than traditional consumer loyalty, the opportunities for sport fan consumption are abundant especially via media". Loyalty has even been deeply studied from a psychological perspective, which resulted in the making of "the Psychological Commitment to Team scale" (Dwyer, 2011). The scale measures the resistance to changing fanbases from one individual sports program to another (Dwyer, 2011). This commitment has proven to be a powerful decision-maker in behavioral and consumer choices, with the NFL being known for having the consistently highest commitment rates (Dwyer, 2011; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Kolbe & James, 2000). These key loyalty observations have continued to open doors for the sports industry.

Swarm (2018) points out that Twitter has played a vital role in this interdependent relationship between fans and leagues. "Twitter fosters engagement between a team and its fans, but it also enables fan-to-fan interaction, creating a sense of community within a fan base" (Swarm, 2018). Naraine et al (2019) also emphasize that Twitter is more conducive for interactions fostering discourse between sports entities and consumers, typically better than other platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. Although it's important to note all of these platforms do help facilitate meaningful relationships and are critical for maintaining relationships in their unique ways (Filo et al, 2014; cf. Gronroos, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2010).

Twitter also has an extremely high rate of interactivity when looking at the platform from a professional athlete perspective, showing its value when connecting fan bases to teams (Clavio, 2014; Hambrick et al, 2010). In Pegoraro and Jinnah's 2010 study, they discuss that professional sports ambassadors (leagues, athletes, teams)

have found that social media sites like Twitter are productive spaces to lean into authentic behavior and be transparent with their consumers. "Twitter is the most effective at fostering the direct fan-sport relationship because of its immediacy, intimacy and interactivity." (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012). Although seen as mostly positive, immediacy, intimacy, and interactivity can also cause scandals, and can flame discourse around certain topics that the sports entity may be trying to avoid. "Given the ability for social media to impact brand's negatively, it is critical to understand user engagement and avoid devoting organizational resources towards a detrimental cause" (Naraine et al, 2019). The NFL's reaction to Black Lives Matter is a direct demonstration of how interactivity can backfire for an entity. The public had a negative reaction to statements, which were much more visible on Twitter than on other social platforms, showing their sentiment clearly (Klein et al, 2022).

Sentiment

Social media has grown to be an essential tool of communication in our society today. It is used for casual conversation, sports discussions, and major crises. Research has shown that social media platforms see a 61% increase in usage during a crisis (Azer et al., 2021). Scholars have found that users turn to social media to seek support, cope with the crisis, and share their emotional states (Azer et. al., 2021). Social Media Engagement Behavior (SMEB) is an effective way to look at these responses. SMEB refers to the contribution that users create on social media, through their likes, replies, and interaction with others on the platform (Dolan et al., 2015). The public's SMEB is a direct connection between the public and an organization which should never be ignored.

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Sentiment analysis has been a great measuring tool for social science researchers due to its ability to gauge the public emotional response to media. Beigi et al. (2016) define sentiment analysis as a "multidisciplinary field of study that deals with analyzing people's sentiments, attitudes, emotions and opinions about different entities such as products, services, individuals, companies, organizations, events and topics". Social media and sentiment analysis are commonly intertwined due to their easy approach to measuring attitudes in replies, comments, and overall responses online. Beigi et al. further discuss how sentiment can be used in crisis communication, especially in disaster situations. The analysis can lead communicators to gain better situational awareness quicker, allowing them to understand "the dynamics of the network including users' feelings, panics and concerns as it is used to identify polarity of sentiments expressed by users during disaster events to improve decision making" (Beigi et al., 2016). Other sentiment researchers focus on positive versus negative sentiment. Cooper et al. dive into what negative sentiment reactions mean from an image repair management standpoint, dealing with reputation and management perspectives (2019). In this research, brands with positive reputations and values resulting in users defending the brand when in an image attack, looking to reinforce their beliefs of positive values. Though, the opposite was seen for negative sentiment with users linking their current crisis with previous brand culture and values (Cooper et al., 2019). This interesting research has real image repair theory implications, as the theory not only focuses on recovery but strategies to adopt. As football is so ingrained into the culture of the United States, we see large audiences deeply affected by the

league's actions, leading to strong sentimental responses and a watchful eye from the sports communication industry.

Past History

History focuses on what came before the current crisis, how it shaped public response, corporate strategy, and what they can do to better their reputation, pre-crisis. Before continuing to examine past crises, this study must take a look at situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), as it is embedded in the following conversation. SCCT is a theory-based system that allows practitioners to make a strategy based on theory to preserve as much of the organization's reputation as possible (Coombs, 2004). Coombs says "SCCT suggests that the information about past crises can shape perceptions of the current crisis, the reputational threat presented by the current crisis, and, hence, should guide the optimal communication responses for protecting the organizational reputation" (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2004). This consideration is correct as Eaddy and Jin (2018) found that negative crisis history discussed in media can increase public anger response to the following event; and even if there is positive crisis history, where the organization did everything correctly, they can still experience negative perceptions from the public. This can be caused by the public being less forgiving of the second crisis, as the company may be considered a 'repeat offenders' (Eaddy & Jin, 2018). Although, if the crisis is maintained correctly, with no large media presence, the general public will not be quick to assume there are any prior offenses (Coombs, 2004). In a 2008 article by González-Herrero and Smith, they found that if a corporation shows an open willingness to change, as well as true change in their company culture and strategy; this will be accounted for if another crisis happens, therefore making it a

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significant advantage. This type of systemic change should be an absolute must for organizations that have undergone a crisis, as there is always the possibility of a crisis occurring in the future.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Being a good corporate ally entails creating change in your workplace to reflect your outward-facing values. This can be done by creating a Diversity, Equality, Inclusion (DEI) Team, making donations to notable causes through corporate social responsibility (CSR), having a space where employees can have open discussions, and providing resources to combat issues (Then, 2021). CSR and DEI are of growing importance, especially with women and minority leaders. A McKinsey & Company (2022) paper states that women leaders are 1.5 more times likely than men to leave their current position to join a corporation that has a more outstanding commitment to DEI. CSR can be defined as "the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families, as well as of the local community and society at large" (Moor, 2001). Having a CSR team is crucial to any modern organization, not only in employee retention but reputation-wise. With the progression of CSR and growing public activism comes an added factor of needed authenticity from organizations. This is a new standard that the public is upholding, using their social media presence and power to get organizations to pay attention to social justice issues. Moreno and Kang (2019) emphasize that CSR is beyond just making a statement your corporation is committed to, but to make committed acts to prove that the company participates and addresses social issues internally and externally. The way the corporation communicates CSR's

role in their company is almost as important as the effort they choose to incorporate (Moreno & Kang, 2019).

Harrison and Erlichman look into the NFL's CSR habits in their 2022 article and realized "the role of corporate social responsibility became a critical factor in how the NFL might address fans' criticism". The NFL engages in CSR by having a co-existing non-profit, the NFL Foundation, that "supports the health, safety and wellness of athletes across all levels, including youth football and the communities that support the game" (NFL, 2022). Additionally, the NFL has been donating more than 26 million dollars to military-associated causes since 2011, "these efforts also constitute CSR by giving back to the league's stakeholders and fans through support of military nonprofits, teams' fans, and teams' local communities" (Harrison & Erlichman, 2022). Harrison and Erlichman acknowledge that CSR is most positively received when the organization already has a positive reputation. When it has a negative reputation, it can be seen as performative; this can cause challenges when its reputation can only improve when the public decides its motives are sincere (2022). In Babiak's 2010 look into sports organizations and CSR, they are able to explain exactly what the NFL did in their approach; "many sport organizations turn to community outreach activities to address important social issues, build good-will in their communities, and at the same time, enhance their public image and garner other advantages". Enhancing public image can be seen as a pre-crisis strategy, often implemented within an organization on a day-to-day basis allowing organizations to be in good standing when a crisis occurs. This predates looking into crisis strategies, such as image repair theory.

Image Repair Theory

The basis of IRT begins with the idea of the public image of an organization. Similar to reputation, public image is how certain stakeholders view an organization or person. This can often be synonymous with their values, such as Patagonia and being environmentally friendly. Public image can be based on earned, paid, and shared media the stakeholders notice and interact with. It is the general opinion of one organization. In a crisis, the public image of an organization can often be attacked based on the situation. "A business can be blamed for acts that it performed, ordered, encouraged, facilitated, or permitted to occur (or for acts of omission or poorly performed acts that it appears responsible for)" (Benoit, 1997). The blame would be considered an attack which is explained as an organization being accused of 'responsibility for an action,' and that the action is considered offensive (Benoit, 1997). An important discussion surrounding an attack is that in truth, the organization does not need to be responsible for the act to receive blame. If the public perception is that they are responsible, their image has already been damaged. This perception is key to image repair efforts and a key foundation of IRT. Benoit states in his 1997 discussion "perceptions are more important than reality". The perceptions rest in the audiences' hands, who receive messaging from organizations, media, and many other communication pathways.

Image repair theory is critical to crisis communications because it focuses on goal-directed messaging options (Benoit, 1997). Although created in the 1990s, these messaging options are still valuable in today's communication style due to the focus on intent behind the message, and not how the message is produced. The original theory

has five broad categories that crisis management messages fall under. They are denial,

evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of events, corrective action, and

mortification. Each category has many subcategories, covering all possible responses

to an attack. Persuasive messaging in a response to a crisis can backfire if the wrong

strategies are used (Benoit, 2018). Practitioners should be extremely knowledgeable of

their target audiences before choosing an approach. In the NFL's response to Black

Lives Matter, they used reducing offensiveness of the event, its subcategories

bolstering and compensation, as well as other categories corrective action and

mortification. In this research, these four strategies are emphasized, due to their

relevance to the NFL's statements.

Bolstering is when the organization stresses its good qualities, this can be from

past or current CSR, public image, or actions regarding the attack (Benoit, 1997).

Compensation is when the organization reimburses the victims of the action. An

example of this is when organizations donate to diversity organizations after being

attacked for being anti-LGBTQ+. Corrective action is when the organization creates a

plan to solve the prevention of future or continued problems (Benoit, 1997). This can be

done with new employee rules, regulations, or a change in standard practice.

Mortification is when an organization confesses and admits to wrongdoings while asking

for forgiveness from its audiences (Benoit, 1997).

The other two approaches and their subcategories are not seen in NFL's BLM

response, but in other situations are denial and evasion of responsibility. In 1997

Benoit's article, denial strategy contains simple denial and shifting of the blame. The key

characteristic is that the organization did not complete the act and the attack is

misplaced; followed by shifting to another organization or individual to blame instead (Benoit, 1997). Evasion of responsibility by Benoit (1997) is defined by provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intention strategies. This article (Benoit, 1997) explains provocation as when a firm defends its attack by saying it was only done in response to another's offensive act. Defeasibility refers to the organization simply not knowing the correct information to prevent an offensive act (Benoit, 1997). Accident strategies include that the act was done by accident, therefore it should not be held accountable since there was attempted prevention (Benoit, 1997). Lastly, Benoit (1997) discusses good intentions, as the organization never intended for any offensive act to happen and mean well in all the prior and future events surrounding the attack.

National Football League's History

Benoit (2018) discusses that one of IRT's main goals is to maintain a favorable impression, particularly with key audiences, and practitioners often try a combination of strategies to sustain it. The NFL has been seen using image repair theory in many prior incidents, two of the most famous being in 2007 with Michael Vick and in 2014 with Adrian Peterson. Michael Vick, quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, was charged in 2007 by a federal grand jury for dogfighting, and adjacent crimes (NFL, 2008). According to the official NFL (2008) timeline, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell spoke out immediately against Vicks's actions, quickly meeting with activists when news broke. The NFL took denial and corrective action strategies, by separating the league from Vick and discussing how they can improve player relations with activists. Personally, Vick used corrective action and mortification which allowed him to 'speak from the heart' and admit to his wrongdoing in a humbling apologetic manner (Holdener & Kauffman,

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2014). Despite this hard stance at the beginning of the scandal, the NFL did accept Vick back into the league in 2009 after his 2-year felony charge in prison (Williams, 2022). Vick won the league's 'Comeback Player of the Year' award, the year following his return (Williams, 2022).

In 2014, Peterson was indicted for child abuse due to using a switch to discipline his son in the off-season (Winters, 2015). Peterson used evasion of responsibility in public pleas, claiming he did not know better ways to discipline his child and that he only had good intentions (Winters, 2015). Although these strategies were only mildly effective, Peterson is widely known as one of the best running backs in NFL history and continued to have a long and successful career despite extreme reputational losses (Srivastava, 2022). Both cases are on a lengthy list of image disasters the NFL has endured and managed to successfully conceal. Crisis Communication theories argue that "information about past crises is a significant factor that can affect perceptions of a more recent crisis" (Coombs, 2004). Performance History, aka Crisis History and Relationship History directly impact crisis responsibility and organizational image reputation. The Coombs (2004) article continues that each crisis before the current one can have an intensifying effect on the subject. "The existence of one or more crises may indicate that the current crisis is part of a pattern (stable) rather than an isolated incident (unstable)" (Coombs, 2004). This makes the ongoing buildup of crises at the NFL extremely relevant to what IRT strategy they use. Meanwhile, the morals behind the NFL continue to be a gray area, as the 32 different teams all display different moral standards while the overall organization continues to put shareholders first. In 2016, a

single member of this far-reaching organization was able to make a difference for the entire league.

Colin Kaepernick

One of the most famous offline protests and relevant past crises was by Colin Kaepernick, an NFL quarterback. Kaepernick is most well-known in mainstream media for his successful silent protest during the 2016 San Francisco 49ers season. Kaepernick took a seat during the national anthem to bring attention to racial injustice, as well as police brutality in the United States. This protest created an immense amount of discussion about the respect of the flag, anthem, and Black Lives Matter but ultimately would be deemed successful because of the awareness it spread to his cause. Kaepernick was able to talk to Veterans, and changed to kneel for the anthem, in respect for their efforts but once said "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football," (Wyche, 2020). Kaepernick continued to kneel throughout the season, with an outpouring of support from fellow league players, as well as media and political critics, such as Donald Trump (LeBlanc & Spielmaker, 2020). As the season ended, Kaepernick became a free agent, and no teams picked him up. He stayed a free agent for three years, with allegations of blackballing (LeBlanc & Spielmaker, 2020).

Blackballing is a form of ostracization, and purposeful social exclusion (Merriam Webster, 2023). There is an unwritten rule in the American National Sports Leagues that follows "the message to athletes consistently has been that it is okay to have political opinions—just not where most of America has to be exposed to them" (Coombs et al., 2019). Eventually, in a Tweet posted by the NFL in 2020, Rodger Goodell, the

league's commissioner, apologizes to players for ignoring said protests and encourages teams to pick him up. Due to the NFL's response to Black Lives Matter in 2016, many called the 2020 statements performative; not forgiving their history.

Research and Critiques on Image Repair Theory

Image Repair Theory has been long embedded in crisis communications. With this long-standing inclusion, there are a few critiques to look at. IRT brings two basic assumptions "(1) someone accuses an organization/individual as responsible for an action and (2) that action is offensive" (Liu & Fraustino, 2014). Although both of these pertain to the crisis this study is looking at, it certainly is not the case with all crises. A crisis can be defined as "a time when a difficult or important decision must be made" (Oxford Languages, 2023). A crisis from this point of view could be a new policy decision in turn directly affecting a company, which is not necessarily offensive or a direct attack but needs public repairing for the markets. Another interesting critique is that the "scholarship about image repair efforts tends to be retrospective" (Smudde & Courtright, 2008). They define retrospective as looking back on "past activities that have affected relationships with publics and stakeholders". Scholars are hoping the theory can develop more prospectively, accounting for the rapid changes in technology. Smudde and Couright suggest a more "prospective scholarship provides guidance for looking forward to future activities (in light of present and past activities) to produce opportunities to effect cooperation between any publics/ stakeholders and an organization". In a key concept article on Image Repair Theory, Benoit (2020) states that the theory has recently begun to look beyond a post-crisis response, by focusing on pre-crisis management, such as CSR, etc. Benoit also points out there has been a push

to look at a more audience-focused perspective, noting crises typically affect many audiences. Another area of research that could be developed is how history affects strategies; as this study does.

Summary

IRT and digital activism often find themselves closely linked within social media, and crisis communication environments. There are many crises discussed on social media with powerful audience sentiment, but few reach the scale of the Twitter response to the NFL's Black Lives Matter response. @NFL is a high-profile account with 31.4 million followers, and 4 tweets from @NFL were able to garner 102,180 quote tweets and replies. Due to the sheer size of the reaction, and demonstrative sentiment, the 4 tweets create a great case for investigating the implications of authenticity from the NFL's prior history, the role it plays in public perception, and how IRT stands up in this environment. To examine the replies, I did a content analysis of the responses to @NFL's tweets which used image repair theory strategies. Through a thorough review of the literature surrounding IRT, social media, and past history crises, I set out to find which image repair strategies worked best in an online social justice setting. Identifying how corporations' past histories played a role in this space was also a topic of interest.

Research Questions

This study was designed to take a closer look into the effects social media, past crisis history, and image repair theory have on the broader crisis communication sector through the following questions:

RQ1: Which image repair theory strategy garnered the most positive sentiments in public response?

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RQ2: How often does prior image (reputational) history get brought up in a current image crisis?

CHAPTER 3
METHODS

Procedure and Sampling Strategy

When the Black Lives Matter protests began making waves on social media,

activists rallied for support from all different entities. Corporations began tweeting and

posting on social media without hesitation to provide donations, informative links, and

aid the voices of the movement. After some time had passed from the initial outpouring

of support, audiences began noticing that some coroporations were staying silent. This

is when the spotlight was turned from appreciation to critical. One of the corporations

that felt this spotlight was the NFL. To repond, the NFL tweeted 4 times from May 30th,

2020, 6 PM to June 5th, 2020, 11:59 PM. This time period was chosen due to the

engagement given to the @NFL Twitter, and therefore lack beyond June 5th. The

significant drop in engagement pushed me to minimize the size of the study to four

tweets, as well as the significant IRT strategies shown in the four. These tweets were

part of the NFL's larger public response to the Black Lives Matter movement. From May

30th to June 5th, the NFL Twitter account received 45,586 replies. This averages

around 11,396 replies per tweet. The 4 tweets were categorized by Benoit's 2020 table

of image repair theory strategies as reducing offensiveness of event, its subcategories

bolstering, and compensation, additionally categories corrective action and mortification.

The sample size needed for 5% measurement error, and 95% confidence level with a

population above 45,000 is 381 (Stacks, 2017). Stratified sampling was used to gather

this data as it includes proportionate sampling, which selects sample sizes through

strata to gain equal representation (Riffe et al., 2019). The strata used here are the four

tweets from the NFL account. I added 19 replies to 381 to have 400 for simplicity in our

strata (N = 100). Within the stratified samples, simple random sampling took place by assigning numbers to replies in Excel using =Rand(), with each selection having an equal chance of being chosen, then sorting the column and choosing the top 100 replies for coding (Stacks, 2017). The tweet replies must be in a one-year window surrounding the original tweets due to changing conditions of the Black Lives Matter movement. Any reply after June 5th, 2021, was not included in the study due to relevance.

I used Octoparse (Octoparse, 2022) to scrape the Tweets, which does API web extraction, with a point-and-click interface allowing researchers to select web elements and then extract them to a local file. The original scrape contained the user's Twitter handle, date and time of publishing, engagement in the number of likes and retweets, the tweets text, any hashtags, user mentions, and contained media; Image, Video, GIF, or None (Slavik et al., 2021). During coding, I examined a reply, including which original tweet it is in response to, to find relationships between strategies and variables.

IRT Strategies

As mentioned above, four different IRT strategies were present in the tweets sent by the NFL's account from May 30th, 2020, 6PM to June 5th, 2020, 11:59PM. The four strategies and the corresponding tweets are below.

Bolstering can be defined as when the organization stresses its good qualities, this can be from past or current CSR, public image, or actions regarding the attack (Benoit, 1997). The NFL tweeted, "The NFL family is greatly saddened by the tragic events across our country. The protestors' reactions to these incidents reflect the pain, anger and frustration that so many of us feel. Our deepest condolences go out to the family of Mr. George Floyd and to those who have lost loved ones, including the families of Ms. Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and Mr. Ahmaud Arbery, the cousin of Tracy Walker

of the Detroit Lions. As current events dramatically underscore, there remains much more to do as a country and as a league. These tragedies inform the NFL's commitment and our ongoing efforts. These remain an urgent need for action. We recognize the power of our platform in the communities and as a part of the fabric of American society. We embrace that responsibility and are committed to continuing the important work to address these systemic issues together with our players, clubs and partners.". This tweet had an engagement of 3,767 retweets, 31,500 quote tweets, 23,400 likes and 22,600 replies at 6:03pm on May 30th, 2020.

Compensation is best explained when an organization under attack tries to compensate the victims in any way (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). "This is a time of self-reflection for all – the NFL is no exception. We stand with the black community because Black Lives Matter". After this tweet, @NFL did a self-reply beginning a thread. The following two tweets are, "Through Inspire Change, the NFL, Players and our partners have supported programs and initiatives throughout the country to address systemic racism. We will continue using our platform to challenge the injustice around us." and the third "To date we have donated $44 million to support hundreds of worthy organizations. This year, we are committing an additional $20 million to these causes, and we will accelerate efforts to highlight their critical work. We know that we can and need to do more." ending the thread. This tweet had an engagement of 352 retweets, 1,034 quote tweets, 2,230 likes and 872 replies at 6:32pm, on June 4th, 2020.

Corrective action is when the organization creates a plan to solve the prevention of future or continued problems (Benoit, 1997). "Players, we hear you. #StrongerTogether" with an attached video montage of 2020 players asking the NFL to

'do more'. This tweet had an engagement of 3,361 retweets, 823 quote tweets, 12,900 likes, and 901 replies at 5:59pm, on June 5th, 2020.

Mortification is when an organization confesses and admits to wrong doings while asking for forgiveness from its audiences (Benoit, 1997). "We, the NFL, condemn racism and the systematic oppression of Black People. We, the NFL, admit we were wrong for not listening to NFL players earlier and encourage all to speak out and peacefully protest. We, the NFL, believe Black Lives Matter. #InspireChange" with an attached video of Rodger Goodell, the NFL's commissioner. This tweet had an engagement of 14,300 retweets, 23,100 quote tweets, 48,700 likes, and 20,900 replies at 6:31pm, on June 5h, 2020.

Sentiment

Coders measured if the reply is positive, negative, both, or neutral in responses to strategies based on Masngut and Mohamad (2021) and Wilson et al.'s (2005) sentiment research. The full codebook can be seen in Appendix A. Positive reactions were defined by if there is any uplifting messaging or support for the NFL teams, players, public statements, CSR work, etc. Language that is seen as positive includes, but is not limited to, encouragement (great job! /proud of you!), acceptance (thank you for your kind words/I appreciate this), excitement (woohoo! /so inspiring!), and "positive emotions (I'm happy), evaluations (Great idea!), and stances (She supports the bill)" (Wilson et el., 2005). Negative reactions can be distinguished from negative name calling about the organization or its staff, implying inauthenticity of the organization, verbally abusive messaging, including videos of socially negative poses (e.g., middle finger), etc. Language that is seen as negative includes but is not limited to "distress (I cannot believe this.), anger (how could they do this!), sadness (I am so disappointed in

them.), outrage (this is unacceptable!), including "evaluations (Bad idea!), and stances (She's against the bill)" (Wilson et al., 2005). A both code were used for a sentiment expression that has both positive and negative qualities (Wilson et al., 2005). An example of this could be "I love the NFL in general, but dislike these actions". "If a clue appears in at least one positive and one negative subjective expression (or in a subjective expression marked as both), then its class is both. If it is in a mixture of negative and neutral subjective expressions, its class is negative; if it is in a mixture of positive and neutral subjective expressions, its class is positive" (Wilson et al., 2005). A neutral code is used for a sentiment expression that does not contain either negative or positive valence on the subject (Wilson et al., 2005). An example of this would be "I hope everyone is okay". These sentiment variables can help determine possible emotionality in each twitter response.

Incivility

Further sentiment research was conducted by looking at the incivility (or uncivil language) received within replies, helping in measuring the public's emotional response to each strategy. Codes are based on Vargo and Hopp (2016) and Santana's (2014) incivility definitions and Esau's (2021) work in the DOCA – Database of Variable for Content Analysis. The variables coded for were name-calling, vulgarities, aspersion, and shouting.

Name-calling was defined as "mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at a person or group of people. E.g., "weirdo", "traitor"" (Coe et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2014). Name-calling can be directed at members of an organization (e.g., NFL's leadership). Vulgarities is present when there is "use of profanity or language that would not be considered proper (e.g., "pissed", "screw") in professional discourse. E.g.,

"shit", "damn", "hell"" (Coe et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2014). Aspersion, "mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at an idea, plan, policy, or behavior, e.g., "reckless", "irrational"," (Coe et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2014). Aspersion could have been directed at the NFL directly, its statements, or actions. Shouting, "Excessive capitalization and/or exclamation points" (Seely, 2017). To create the incivility code, the four different incivility indicators were summed in order to reflect the number of markers of incivility present in a given tweet reply, and thus this could range from zero to four. In final data coding in SPSS, the four elements creating the incivility variable were combined and tested against the IRT strategies.

Past History

The next variable category was Past History, covering past NFL crises, statements, systemic history, and Colin Kaepernick. Past NFL Crises were coded present if there was any mention of past crises, such as Colin Kaepernick's dismissal or protests, Michael Vick, Adrian Peterson, etc. Tweets do not need to reference a specific crisis, vs. the corporation's entire history. History can be from an organizational perspective, or from just a single player or team. These individuals and teams still represent the league and need to be coded as present for mentions of past NFL crises.

Past NFL Statements allowed the coder to flag and later evaluate which messaging strategies that organizations have said in the past. Past NFL Statement refers to the messaging of the organization that was previously put out in prior crises. Past NFL Statements were coded if there was any mention of NFL's messaging on previous crises are present. Tweets do not need to refer to a specific statement or message, they could have referenced the entire corporation's messaging history. Past messaging could have been from an organizational perspective or from just a single

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player or team. These individuals and teams still represent the league and need to be coded as present for mentions of past NFL messaging.

Systemic History brings light to structural inequities in the NFL. Systemic history was based on systematic or structural racism which is "forms of racism that are pervasively embedded in and throughout systems, laws, written or unwritten policies, entrenched practices, and established beliefs and attitudes that produce, condone, and perpetuate widespread unfair treatment of people of color" (Braveman et al., 2022). For Systemic History coding, any mention of issues with NFL's system or structure, such as racism, desegregation timelines, etc. Were coded as present. The structural inequity does not need to be for the whole organization, but can refer to specific teams' inequities as well. Although focused on racism, structural inequities against any minority, such as homophobia or sexism was coded as present if mentioned in any form. The NFL in 2020 announced they were going to donate 250 million dollars "over 10 years to a fund to combat systemic racism and support the battle against injustices faced by African Americans" (Battista, 2020). This commitment was made following the image attacks on their own structural faults, deeming this variable relevant to this research.

Any mention of Colin Kaepernick and his activism, this included any mention of kneeling for the anthem and the aftermath of bans/fines surrounding this. Images or videos of the player or any player kneeling were coded as present. Coders may need to look out for nicknames for Colin Kaepernick, such as "Kaep", "Kap", or "7". References to peaceful protesting in the NFL, taking a knee, the fining of teams or players,

blackballing, kneeling and any leadership involvement in this direct situation were coded as present.

To create the history code, the four different history indicators were summed in order to reflect the number of markers of incivility present in a given tweet reply, and thus this could range from zero to four. In final data coding in SPSS, the four elements creating the history variable were combined and tested against the IRT strategies.

An additional 100 tweets were pulled in the preliminary Twitter for testing intercoder reliability, meaning another 25 tweets per strategy. The author was joined by a second coder (who had previously completed content analyses) to establish reliability. After an extensive code training session was done, we trained for two rounds, discussing disagreements after each round which lead to revising definitions until there was a unanimous agreement (Riffe et al., 2019). After we determined that we were reliable on our training data, we coded 40 tweets (10% of the random sub-sample). This resulted in Krippendorff's alpha with > .66 for each variable. This was calculated using ReCal2 (Freelon, 2010). All variables exceed the generally accepted threshold of .7 for Krippendorf's alpha with the exception of name-calling, which was a .66. Although slightly below the threshold, given the high value on percent agreement, the decision was made to retain this variable for the full coding.

Table 3-1. Intercoder Reliability Results for Variables

Coding Variable	Level of Measurement	Krippendorff's Alpha
Sentiment	Nominal	.77
Name-Calling	Nominal	.66
Vulgarities	Nominal	.85
Aspersion	Nominal	.77
Shouting	Nominal	.85

Table 3-1. Continued

Coding Variable	Level of Measurement	Krippendorff's Alpha
Past NFL Crises	Nominal	.9
NFL Statement	Nominal	1
Systemic History	Nominal	.85
Colin Kaepernick	Nominal	.9

All of the coded variables, excluding IRT strategy explanations, can be found in Appendix A. Codebook.

The image repair strategy tweets (N = 400) were coded and then analyzed on

SPSS using their Chi-square crosstab analysis of sentiment, alongside descriptives and

one-way ANOVA for past history and incivility. Responding to RQ1, 'Which image repair

theory strategy garnered the most positive sentiments in public response?', the chi-

square test indicates that significant differences between all four image repair theory

strategies and sentiment were found, χ 2 = 22.17, df = 9, p < .008. Corrective action

received the most positive (8) and neutral sentiment (14), while mortification received

the most both sentiment (10) and bolstering received the most negative (89). Data

further shows that corrective action received the most non-negative responses (29

positive, both, neutral combined tweets and 71 negative), then mortification (20 positive,

both, neutral combined and 80 negative), followed by compensation (13 positive, both,

neutral combined and 87 negative) and bolstering (11 positive, both, neutral combined

and 89 negative). See Table 4.1 for the full count of statistics.

Table 4-1. Sentiment vs. Image Repair Strategies Crosstabulation Tweet Reply Count

	Positive	Negative	Both	Neutral
Bolstering	4	89	0	7
Compensation	3	87	4	6
Corrective Action	8	71	7	14
Mortification	2	80	10	8
Total	17	327	21	35

To determine which strategy was most overtly disliked, I then looked at the

incivility each strategy received. The results indicate there is a significant difference

between IRT strategies and the use of incivility, F (3,396) = 9.46, p < .001. To determine

where the difference lies, pairwise contrasts with a Games-Howell correction were used.

Bolstering (M = .79, SD = .96) received significantly more incivility than corrective action (M = .48, SD = .69; mean difference = .31, p = .045) and mortification (M = .22, SD = .56; mean difference = .57, p = < .001). Compensation (M = .48, SD = .77) received significantly more incivility than mortification (mean difference = .26, p = .035) while corrective action received significantly more incivility than mortification (mean difference = .26, p = .02). Bolstering with the highest negativity sentiment (89 negative) and incivility mean (M = .79) received significantly more negative responses than the other strategies, suggesting it was the least well received strategy from an IRT perspective when dealing with crisis on Twitter. While corrective action is the best strategy to use due to the comparatively high sentiment rating (8 positive), and second lowest incivility mean (M = .22), mortification is a close runner-up with the lowest overall incivility.

Table 4-2. Incivility Descriptive Statistics

	# Present out of 400 Tweets	Percentage
Name-Calling	8	2%
Vulgarities	39	9.75%
Aspersion	119	29.75%
Shouting	34	8.5%

For RQ2, 'How often does prior image (reputational) history get brought up in a current image crisis?' the results found that organizational history was mentioned in 57.5% of the Twitter replies, 230/400 tweets, and the other 170 Twitter replies with no history mentions. 26 replies had one history mention, 177 replies had two mentions, 26 had three mentions, and 1 which mentioned all four past history topics. One-way ANOVA tests concluded that there was a significant difference between image repair strategies and past history, $F(3,396)$ = 3.790, p < .011. Pairwise comparisons using a Games-Howell correction showed compensation (M = 1.43, SD = 1.06) having

significantly more mentions of past history than bolstering ($M = .98$, $SD = 1.03$; mean

difference = .45, $p = .014$) and corrective action ($M = 1.02$, $SD = 1.06$; mean difference

= .41, $p = .033$). Mortification ($M = 1.19$, $SD = 1.06$) had no statistically significant

differences from the other three image repair strategies. Compensation received the

highest response of past history inclusion in Twitter replies along with second highest

disapproval sentiment rating (87 negative tweet sentiments), showing that when dealing

with negative past history, this is not the best strategy to use. If there is an interest in

the past history of which the organization wants discussed, compensation may be a

great strategy.

Table 4-3. Past History Descriptive Statistics

	# Present out of 400 Tweets	Percentage
Past NFL Crises	211	52.75%
Past NFL Statement	10	2.5%
Systemic History	39	9.75%
Colin Kaepernick	202	50.5%

CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Image Repair Theory Implications

Image repair theory, formed in the '90s, has been successful in molding its theory over the past 30 years to the changing industry, including new technologies. This study found that no image repair strategies used were received positively by Twitter users. All strategies received over 70 negative sentiments out of 100 reply tweets, concluding that no image repair strategy was successful. In the following implications, I look comparatively at the results, discussing which had the most image repair potential.

First, the bolstering strategy was considered. To review, bolstering is when an organization responds to a crisis by focusing on what its positive qualities are in relation to the crisis. Bolstering is a subcategory of the reducing offensiveness of the event category. The NFL bolstered in this tweet by emphasizing their ongoing efforts and commitment to systematic issues. The NFL infers they are already working on Black Lives Matter within and do not need to acknowledge what the movement means for their brand. This strategy was not received well. As Benoit (2018) stated, if the wrong strategy was used in the response to a crisis it can backfire on the corporation that produced it. This tweet put NFL in the spotlight and grouped it with the corporations being performative on Twitter, which invited backlash for the league. It received the highest negative backlash of all the tweets and the most incivility. Bringing out the most powerful negative reactions from the public on Twitter; particularly a reaction of anger, and not accepting this response. Bolstering's flaw was not acknowledging the NFL's place within the social justice issue as there was no mention of their past history. There has been prior research (Heppell, 2021) in which bolstering is used as a defensive

strategy when issued with social justice claims. This strategy was not effective, which is consistent with my results. This further suggests that within a social justice setting, bolstering is seen negatively and should be avoided. In this research, and Heppell's (2021), both accused parties were able to move to post-crisis strategies after an acceptance of wrong-doing and offering apologies, or a mortification strategy.

Compensation is also a subcategory of the theory's reducing offensiveness of the event strategy. Compensation as a strategy focuses on what the organization can give back to the victims of the crisis. This reducing strategy also received extremely high negative sentiment, closely following bolstering. As the second strategy the NFL used, it is shown that their direction was misguided. This tweet praising its own charity for work done within its programs was seen as self-centric and still not acknowledging its role in larger social justice issues. The tweet threw money, specifically $20 million, at the issue of systemic racism which did not win the community's respect. The community, full of activists and supporters of Black Lives Matter had been facing an issue in the public eye for now over 10 years, with no definitive solution shown. Compensation did receive less incivility than bolstering and had the same mean as corrective action, proving that although there was mass negative sentiment the NFL was moving in the correct direction in their strategies. Unfortunately for the NFL, their compensation strategy raised extreme visibility about their previous crises. Receiving the highest number of history mentions in the replies. The results showed that Colin Kaepernick was mentioned significantly more in compensation than any other tweet. This further suggests that there is a direct relationship between past crises and compensation. Among the 202 mentions of Kaepernick, it could be interesting to note there were

references to his financials, particularly to his loss of a job, which seemed to be a

reoccurring theme. Within the 400 tweets, Kaepernick's job was mentioned in 17, in

addition to the hashtag #GiveKapAJob which was used by large activist organizations,

such as Color Of Change (@ColorOfChange) with over 240,000 followers. In prior

research, compensation has a strong correlation with money or goods and is consistent

with the possible relationship discussed here (Coombs, 2010). The use of

compensation where there is active harm to a community is encouraged (Coombs,

2010). This is consistent with prior research recommendations for this research, but

inconsistent with the placement of the strategy. I believe that compensation should be a

post-crisis strategy. This is consistent with compensation being often seen in rebuilding

attempts (Coombs, 2010).

The corrective action strategy, which was displayed in the third tweet occurs

when the organization plans to solve the prevention of future or continued problems

(Benoit, 1997). The corrective action tweet was received significantly better than the

bolstering and compensation mentioned above. It received the highest reaction of

positive and neutral sentiment, which was 8 positive tweets out of 100, and another 14

neutral tweets. While this was more positive than others, I acknowledge that corrective

action still received a majority of negative sentiment responses with 71 negative tweets.

Corrective action received the second lowest incivility marks, ahead of mortification

which received the lowest. These results indicate that corrective action was received

best by the public from a sentiment point of view. This indicates that corrective action

would be a useful strategy in an image recovery situation with close crisis history and

high media attention. Since corrective action was lower on incivility markers, I can

conclude that it is a neutral strategy for emotionality, not invoking strong responses.

This is beneficial for image repair, because of the implications the strategy does not

cause further damage. In previous research, it has been shown that when there is high

emotion it can stimulate high mobilization and continued discussion around an issue

(Kosmidis & Theocharis, 2020). IRT suggests the crisis be restored to normal as soon

as possible, and continuing the discussion goes against this strategy (Marsen, 2020).

Mortification is used when an organization attempts to reconcile for their

involvement by admitting wrongdoings and asking for forgiveness. Mortification received

the highest number of both tweets which indicates there was some forgiveness from the

public, but overall, still may question the authenticity of the NFL's statements.

Mortification received the lowest overall incivility, showing that although the tweet was

not fully accepted by audiences, it received the least emotional response. This is

positive, as we indicated above higher incivility continues the conversation surrounding

the issue, therefore slowing image repair. The sooner the public accepts the strategy

put forth, the quicker rebuilding can begin. In the Mortification tweet, Rodger Goodell,

the NFL's commissioner, encourages owners to give Kaepernick an opportunity to play

on their teams. I believe this indicates during the time of the crisis the NFL was

engaging in social listening and implemented what was heard in response to previous

tweets. Prior research recommends social listening in crisis situations, results are

consistent with Veil et al.'s research, with the presumption the NFL did use social

listening (2011).

The IRT's strategies that weren't used were - denial, evasion of responsibility

subcategories: provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions, reducing

offensiveness of event other subcategories: minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser. Based on the results, The NFL made a correct choice when choosing the category - reducing effectiveness. In prior research, particularly in a social justice environment, denial or evasion of responsibility strategies have led to more negative outcomes, which is consistent with the suggestions above (Heppell, 2021). If the NFL were to have another opportunity similar to this, I would recommend them using a mortification strategy first, then compensation, followed by corrective action and bolstering. This slight shift in order would allow them to be forthcoming with their apologies, acknowledging faults in prior crises. Mortification in a video from one of the highest public leaders at the NFL, Rodger Goodell, would allow for a much higher acceptance from the general public. They can support this statement with compensation. The video montage of players supporting the NFL and the NFL's recap of all the positives they have done after this statement is much better placed. In a simple reorder the NFL has now turned an intense image crisis into a small issue.

History had statistical significance between strategies. The lower presence of systemic history (present in 39 of 400 tweets, 9.75%) and past NFL statements (present in 10 of 400 tweets, 2.5%) was an interesting find, compared to Colin Kaepernick (present in 202 of 400 tweets, 50.5%). There may be multiple reasons for this disparity. Two possible explanations brought from these would be the similarities between current and past crisis topics, and previous media attention on past crises.

First, in this study, the past crisis dealt with the same social justice issue as the current crisis, with Black Lives Matter and the NFL discussion beginning 4 years earlier with Colin Kaepernick's protests. Hypothesizing, if the past crisis topic is similar, history

will be mentioned more frequently. Therefore, when a crisis occurs, the image repair

tactic should not deny or ignore its past. Prior research (Adkins, 2010) suggests that

when there is a crisis scenario with a challenge that is warranted by stakeholders, it is

more effective to take a rebuilding strategy, possibly using corrective action. This is

consistent with the suggestion of acknowledgment of past history, with no denial or

evasion strategies.

Second, I believe this difference could be due to the cultural relevancy of Colin

Kaepernick's crisis and the media attention it received from 2016 to 2020. Kaepernick

famously had a Nike endorsement and was a public figurehead of the Black Lives

Matter movement (Reid, 2017). These associations and subsequent media attention

may have greatly impacted the presence of his activism in Twitter responses. Further

research looking into the relevancy of media attention in crises and their presence in

current crises would be beneficial to understanding these findings. Prior research of

Colin Kaepernick's 2016 kneeling found that the public viewed Kaepernick as an

entertainer, who had no capacity within an activism space. Discussion around

Kaepernick framed him as an individual voicing his opinion, versus a protest standing

for the larger collective movement (Coombs et al., 2019). I believe my research is

inconsistent with this narrative. Kaepernick, who was not initially linked in the four

statements, was brought up consistently in the Twitter responses. I believe this

indicates that the larger Black Lives Matter movement, includes Kaepernick in its frame.

Lower presences of past NFL statements (present in 10 of 400 tweets, 2.5%) can

be hypothesized to have a lower recall rate of online statements. Systemic history

(present in 39 of 400 tweets, 9.75%) and its low presence could be speculated to be

due to the memory of the Twitter public. Understanding why certain points of crisis history are focused on or ignored on certain social platforms may be of further interest. When analyzing the NFL's statements, my results suggest that when dealing with a social justice movement that is closely connected with past crisis histories, the IRT strategy should be primarily mortification based, with corrective action included. I believe there would be better results if after apologizing for any wrongdoing, the NFL used compensation as well as other supporting strategies to establish an authenticity based on CSR.

Past History Practical Implications

Looking at the results above, I then looked at what this means for practitioners, in organizations like the NFL and also the activists who are looking to stick up for social justice against performative acts. Practitioners should note that if they are interested in the public looking into past history, compensation would be a great strategy. This strategy would only be beneficial if there were no crises in the past for the organization, as well as significant donations or giving to bolster with. From this research, using compensation as a strategy is not advised, especially if there is any significant past crisis history. Practitioners working for multi-national corporations based on profit can face many ethical dilemmas when responding to crises like the NFL BLM response. There could be a moral obligation from their own values to stand up for a social justice movement, but a practical obligation to only post what the higher organization leadership wants them to. Prior research on ethical practices suggests that practitioners attempt to maintain respect, minimize harm, and communicate positives and negatives to all parties fairly (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). With this responsibility, it is implied

that practitioners should act as a middleman between the public and leadership within the organization. From the responsibility model, practitioners should stand up for what they believe in, while always taking into consideration the public's knowledge. With the internet allowing past history to be retrieved in a matter of moments, it's important to determine any potential history within your organization that could be pointed to. The NFL's largest mistake in this case study was not considering their 2016 crises in their strategies until there was already public negative sentiment.

Crisis Communication Implications

This research aligns with previous research that communication with empathy, and acknowledging cultural differences are key parts of crisis communications (Veil, 2011). The NFL demonstrated its attempts at using these concepts, although they were predominately unsuccessful. The NFL also attempted to bring an amount of empathy to the situation with condolences to the victims' families. I predict this did not work, as there was public contention that the organization has previously silenced protests about the issue, Colin Kaepernick and players kneeling, which could have made a societal difference in police brutality. While attempting to acknowledge cultural differences, stating they recognize the "power of the league", they also bring to the attention they have not previously done anything with this power beyond their "ongoing efforts". I believe this attempt at acknowledging their differences could have been strengthened by discussing prior history, using mortification, which was eventually done in the final tweet of this case study.

The NFL was able to successfully use a major concept from precious social media crisis communication research, environmental scanning, or social listening. As the NFL responded to public opinion, we see that incivility lessened with every tweet

produced. This indicates proper social listening tools were being used within crisis

management, and allowed for them to diminish emotionality and bring the situation to

post-crisis. It is of interest to note that the Black Lives Matter movement was brought

back to the public's attention on May 26th, 2020, and the NFL made its first response

tweet on May 30th, 2020, 4 days later (Anderson et al., 2020). This is an adequate reply

time, but public endorsement can always be strengthened with an organization's quick

responses, or backing off the subject, instead of a wave of public response asking an

organization to speak on it (Marsen, 2020).

<center>**Social Media Implications**</center>

Throughout the tweets coded, incivility was in around 44% of them. Incivility

variables were name-calling, vulgarities, aspersion, and shouting. 85 replies had one

incivility mention, 42 have two mentions, 8 with three mentions, and one contained all

four incivility variables. It should be noted that Twitter is an informal platform, which

means it can be very common to use or see vulgarities (Kosmidis & Theocharis, 2020).

It's important to note because it could be an influence on the incivility variable. Closely

linked with incivility, prior research indicates that anger is a very strong motivator

(Coombs, 2010). This could be a potential explanation for the high engagement in the

following two tweets:

In the research, the most replied tweet out of the 400 involved vulgarity "Save the

bullshit" (@KSTiLLS, 2020), a reply to the bolstering strategy. The total engagement on

this tweet was 1,278 retweets, 8,196 likes, and 100 replies. The most retweeted and

liked tweet from the 400 replies scraped was from @Ava in reply to the bolstering

strategy as well (2020). "Shame on you. This is beyond hollow + disingenuous. This is a

lie. Your actions show who you are. You've done nothing but the exact opposite of what

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you describe here. Keep Mr. Floyd's name out of your mouth. Shame on you + the "consultants" of this travesty of an organization.". This tweet shows clear incivility markers, predominately aspersion. @Ava infers to past NFL actions, calling their bolstering response disingenuous. The total engagement of this tweet was 2,196 retweets, 14,900 likes, and 89 replies.

Both of the tweets mentioned were from verified accounts, which may have contributed to their popularity and possible algorithmic boosts. Another factor could also be that the bolstering strategy was the first tweet put out by the NFL, making it the primary outlet for backlash. The engagement of these tweets points to the larger online community supporting these negative sentiments and incivilities. Both responses were aimed at the bolstering strategy confirming out of the four strategies it was met with the least amount of forgiveness from the public. This indicates that there could be a pattern of the first tweet sent after a crisis may face the most criticism. To concretely confirm this, there would need to be multiple Twitter crisis responses analyzed. Other research focuses on the timing of Twitter's responses to crises, indicating the responses slow as time lapses, typically with most responses happening the same day (Terpstra et al., 2012; Gruber et al., 2015).

Twitter

The concept of this research began in mid-September of 2022, about a month and a half before Elon Musk purchased the social network. On October 27th, 2022, there was a change of power on Twitter from Jack Dorsey to Elon Musk, who vowed to bring 'free speech' back to the platform (Wile, 2022; Wagner, 2022). In the following months, the platform descended into "chaos, inept decisions, and constant ridicule, leaving many to believe that Twitter would collapse under Musk's poor management."

(Carpenter, 2023). This is being noted due to the credibility of Twitter as a social platform to do research. As advertisers pulled back on the platform, verification of accounts was unreliable, working conditions turned abusive and overall uncertainty (Carpenter, 2023); it is important to note; there was no reliance on any of these components for this study. At the current time the case study happened, there was no 'free speech' allowing hateful rhetoric to a variety of marginalized groups. As this could have caused a disparity in the number of incivility replies, I added an addendum that all tweets must be in the one year following the original NFL tweets.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is based on time as well as social media. Due to the wide variety of users on Twitter, this study may be based on a global scale instead of specifically the United States which is most relevant. Further limitations lay in the objectivity of the user profiles, as there is no pre-screen for this study. Bots are always a potential issue when looking at responses on social media. I did not analyze profiles individually so there is a possibility of a spam account within the 400 tweets. It should be noted that I did not notice any fake profiles. Social media is typically filled with people who are focused on a certain issue; therefore, the study did not get a full scope of the entire fan-bases opinions, just those on Twitter who had an opportunity to respond in the timeframe. This study could have been expanded by having a sample of 400 replies per strategy, instead of the entire study. This could have allowed me to look more intently into past history in certain strategies and find statistical significance. Another subject that could have been expanded on was Colin Kaepernick and his influence on this crisis. In the coding variables, both Past NFL Crises and Colin Kaepernick were used, with the indication if Colin Kaepernick was coded as present, Past NFL Crises

also would be present. When creating variables, I wondered if there would be more Past NFL Crises mentioned than Kaepernick, but with 202 Kaepernick mentions and 212 Past NFL Crises, we see there were only 10 additional mentions of crises beyond Kaepernick. If redone, the study would exclusively have a Kaepernick variable in history.

The Black Lives Matter movement has been seen to be extremely politicized. Therefore, using this specific movement may cause a lapse in objectivity behind the responses. Black Lives Matter has been framed as a majority democratic issue, as the NFL has been framed as a republican figurehead. Using Twitter as the social media, which has been seen leaning toward the democratic party (Mitchell, 2020), must be considered when looking at the results shown. Although I noticed this framing, image repair strategies should focus on who their audience is when choosing one strategy over the other. If audiences would have been considered more thoughtful and thorough, practitioners may have chosen different strategies, which would have greatly impacted social response. This research was non-funded and therefore the resources for the study were scraped from free online resources such as Octoparse. Although this is a reliable software, I understand there may be more primary ways to scrape data (Krotov et al., 2020; Ahamad et al., 2017).

Future Research

In regard to future research, I believe that an activist perspective in a qualitative research setting would be extremely beneficial. The views of 'slacktivism' and being performative on social media are more recently becoming identifiable, and a closer look at the NFL's responses from a public interest perspective would be interesting. Social justice movements and social media are continuously getting more interdependent as

it's shown that the public look to these platforms in crisis (Azar et al., 2021). Further, looking into how professional athletes who stand as figureheads for social justice movements may be of interest to the activist community, looking at the correlation between fanbases and social justice. A case study similar to Colin Kaepernick could be Brittney Griner, a Women's National Basketball Association player, who consistently speaks about LGBTQ+ rights in the United States (Abrams & Rhim, 2022). This would be expanding on 2016 case studies such as Chawansky, which focused on the possibilities of activism in this realm.

Another perspective that may be interesting to look into would be looking into the authenticity of corporations during the Black Lives Matter movement on Twitter, or more broadly on any social media. Prior research such as Bludau's 2021 thesis which focuses on company activism and Black Lives Matter on Instagram discusses a corporation's responsibility on social media and is similar to the future research being suggested here.

Another interesting research topic would be looking at these statements from an integrated crisis mapping theory standpoint. This theory considers four core main emotions, anger, anxiety, freight, and sadness, which would be particularly interesting in such a high-stakes movement (Marsen, 2020). Related would be interested to look at the relationship between emoji and hashtag use in incivility markers such as shouting and aspersion.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

There are many different factors that play into a social media response, the original account, their wording, the online discussion influencing this account, the public response, the prior engagement, or lack thereof. Social media's expansive questions allow for more and more important research on how to understand it. The goal of this thesis was to look at social media from a crisis communication perspective, which it succeeded in doing with the use of image repair theory. Crisis communication and social media will continue to overlap, as the public begins to look more than ever to social media accounts for explanations of man-made problems, environmental tragedies, and accidents. Practitioners that run these accounts work around the clock, through weekends, and through constant social listening. There is no doubt that as these social media platforms transform, the responses and practitioners will adapt to them.

The research conducted in this thesis hopes to provide further context for image repair theory and its connection with social media and past historical crises. The National Football League tried many image repair strategies, with mortification proving to be the best in a situation with negative past crisis history. As research on social justice movements and social media continues, it is important to not get lost in the details of these specific case studies, remembering the broader picture of why communication research matters. As research was going on for this study, another unarmed Black Man, Trye Nichols, 29, was a victim of police brutality in January 2023 (Florido, 2023). The Black Lives Matter movement is still fighting for equity and social justice. It is bigger than the hashtag, or what goes on within these social platforms.

There is a disparity in the United States, and I encourage readers to find their local

coalitions and do what they can to help activists fix this systemic racism. Digital activism

is a growing field, and as public interest communication groups navigate how to best

use it, they are attempting to create a better world around us.

The first section asks for the following information.

Coder ID:

Coder 1 = 10

Coder 2 = 11

Data Set: The following will be recorded from the data set.

1. Twitter handle

2. Date of publishing

3. Text

4. Hashtags

5. User Mentions

6. Contained Media: Image, Video, GIF, or None

    a. Text of Image, Video or GIF.

7. Number of Likes

8. Number of Retweets

9. Number of Replies

10. NFL Image Repair Strategy Tweets: In this section, the coder will choose which original NFL Tweet the reply is directed too.

1. **Bolstering Tweet,** "The NFL family is greatly saddened by the tragic events across our country. The protestors' reactions to these incidents reflect the pain, anger and frustration that so many of us feel. Our deepest condolences go out to the family of Mr. George Floyd and to those who have lost loved ones, including the families of Ms. Breonna Taylor in

Louisville, and Mr. Ahmaud Arbery, the cousin of Tracy Walker of the Detroit Lions. As current events dramatically underscore, there remains much more to do as a country and as a league. These tragedies inform the NFL's commitment and our ongoing efforts. These remain an urgent need for action. We recognize the power of our platform in the communities and as a part of the fabric of American society. We embrace that responsibility and are committed to continuing the important work to address these systemic issues together with our players, clubs and partners.".

2. **Compensation Tweet,** "This is a time of self-reflection for all – the NFL is no exception. We stand with the black community because Black Lives Matter.".

3. **Corrective Action Tweet, "**Players, we hear you. #StrongerTogether" with an attached video montage of 2020 players".

4. **Mortification Tweet,** "We, the NFL, condemn racism and the systematic oppression of Black People. We, the NFL, admit we were wrong for not listening to NFL players earlier and encourage all to speak out and peacefully protest. We, the NFL, believe Black Lives Matter. #InspireChange"; with an attached video of Rodger Goodell apologizing.

11. Sentiment. In this section, coders out of the following four which sentiment is primary in the post.

1. **Positive.** Positive reactions in replies will be coded if there is any uplifting messaging or support for the NFL discussing teams, players, public statements, CSR work, etc. A positive reply example is '#Stronger

Together Inspire Change is inspiring!'. #StrongerTogether is a hashtag that the NFL consistently used in their strategy, meaning the mimicking implies support while Inspire Change is the NFL's charity. Language that is seen as positive includes but is not limited to encouragement (great job!/proud of you!), acceptance (thank you for your kind words/I appreciate this), excitement (woohoo!/so inspiring!), and "positive emotions (I'm happy), evaluations (Great idea!), and stances (She supports the bill)" (Wilson et el., 2005).

2. **Negative.** Negative reactions in replies can be distinguished from negative name calling about the organization or its staff, implying inauthenticity of the organization, verbally abusive messaging, including videos of socially negative poses (e.g. middle finger), etc.. An example of this is 'Pass, the NFL is showing it's true colors and it's disgusting. I will NOT be watching anymore.' Notes from this negative tweet are the public calling the NFL disgusting, discussing boycotting and saying pass. A negative twitter response can be as simple as 'No thanks.'. Language that is seen as negative includes but is not limited to distress (I cannot believe this.), anger (how could they do this!), sadness (I am so disappointed in them.), outrage (this is unacceptable!), including "evaluations (Bad idea!), and stances (She's against the bill)" (Wilson et al., 2005).

3. **Both.** A both code is used for a sentiment expression that has both positive and negative qualities (Wilson et al., 2005). An example of this could be "I love the NFL in general, but dislike these actions".

4. **Neutral.** A neutral code is used for a sentiment expression that does not contain either negative or positive valence on the subject (Wilson et al., 2005). "If a clue appears in at least one positive and one negative subjective expression (or in a subjective expression marked as both), then its class is both. If it is in a mixture of negative and neutral subjective expressions, its class is negative; if it is in a mixture of positive and neutral subjective expressions, its class is positive" (Wilson et al., 2005). An example of this would be "I hope everyone is okay".

12. Incivility. In this section, code mentions the following uncivil language in the post. Codes are based on Vargo and Hopp (2016), Santana's (2014) incivility definitions and Esau's (2021) work in the DOCA – Database of Variable for Content Analysis. For each post, write a 1 indicating absence or presence of the following items.

1=Present

0=Absent

1. **Name-calling.** "Mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at a person or group of people. E.g., "weirdo", "traitor"" (Coe et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2014). Name-calling can be directed at members of an organization (e.g., NFL's leadership).

2. **Vulgarities.** "Using profanity or language that would not be considered proper (e.g., "pissed", "screw") in professional discourse. E.g., "shit", "damn", "hell"" (Coe et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2014).

3. **Aspersion.** "mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at an idea, plan, policy, or behavior, e.g., "reckless", "irrational"," (Coe et al., 2014;

Papacharissi, 2014). This could be directed at the NFL directly, its statements, or actions.

4. **Shouting.** "Excessive capitalization and/or exclamation points" (Seely, 2017).

Crisis History in Public Response: In this section, code for mentions of the following types of previous crises in the post. For each post, write a 1 indicating absence or presence of the following items.

1=Present

0=Absent

1. **Past NFL Crises**. Past crises are a prominent way publics shape their ideas about current crises. This perception on past crises, even if the crisis ended positively, can build irritation from stakeholders (Eaddy & Jin, 2018). This idea comes from the organizations being seen as 'repeat offenders' in the eyes of their publics (Eaddy & Jin, 2018). Coding for past NFL history in correlation to IRT strategies will allow researchers to analyze which strategy brings up this 'repeat offender' history the most. Coders will code present to Past NFL crises if there is any mention of past crises, such as Colin Kaepernick's dismissal or protests, Michael Vick, Adrian Peterson, etc. An example tweet is 'Why does the NFL care about #BLM now?? When Kaepernick was protesting peacefully you blackballed him!?'. These tweets do not need to refer to a specific crises, versus the corporation's entire history. An example of this is 'You never cared about your athletes and we all know it!'. This refers to the abundance of crises, but no specific attack. History can be from an organizational perspective

(Ex. This isn't the first time the NFL has done this!), or from just a single player or team (Ex. The Jaguars coach fired her!). These individuals and teams still represent the league and need to be coded as present for mentions of past NFL crises.

2. **Past NFL Statements:** Past NFL Statement refer to the messaging of the organization that was previously put out in prior crises. This variable allows coders to flag and later evaluate which messaging strategies that organizations have said in the past. Understanding which strategies still upset publics from prior crises will allow for recommendations for future crises. Past NFL Statements will be coded if any mention of NFL's messaging on previous crises are present. Twitter reply examples of this are 'Goodell's statement that he 'should've listened to Kaepernick earlier' is such bs considering he blackballed him in 2016'. This references NFL's Commissioner discussing the NFL's opinion on racism and US police systems years prior, making it a relevant example for coders. Tweets do not need to reference a specific statement or message, they can reference the entire corporation's messaging history. An example of this is 'You said yourself you don't think that this is an issue' or 'The NFLs tweets have always been fake'. This refers to overall specific messaging picked up from publics, but no specific comment or statement. Past messaging can be from an organizational perspective (Ex. This isn't the first time the NFL has said this!), or from just a single player or team (Ex. The Jaguars coach tweeted he doesn't care!). These individuals and teams still represent the

league and need to be coded as present for mentions of past NFL messaging.

3. **Systemic History:** Systemic history is based on systematic or structural racism which is "forms of racism that are pervasively embedded in and throughout systems, laws, written or unwritten policies, entrenched practices, and established beliefs and attitudes that produce, condone, and perpetuate widespread unfair treatment of people of color" (Braveman et al., 2022). The NFL in 2020 announced they were going to donate 250 million dollars "over 10 years to a fund to combat systemic racism and support the battle against injustices faced by African Americans" (Battista, 2020). This commitment was made following the image attacks on their own structural faults. For Systemic History coding, any mention of issues with NFL's system or structure, such as racism, desegregation timelines, etc. will be coded as present. An example reply would be 'How are there only 4 black head coaches out of 32 in the NFL? Doesn't seem like you want to change'. This example points out the structural inequity of the NFL. The structural inequity does not need to be in the whole organization, but can refer to specific teams inequities as well (Ex. 'The Washington Redskins didn't desegregate until 1962, barely 60 years. They don't care.'). Although focused on racism, structural inequities against any minority, such as homophobia or sexism should be coded as present if mentioned in any form (Ex. 'Why are there no women announcers for the NFL?').

4. **Mention of Colin Kaepernick and Social Justice Activism:** Any

   mention of Colin Kaepernick and his activism, this includes any mention of

   kneeling for the anthem and the aftermath of bans/fines surrounding this.

   Images or videos of the player or any player kneeling should be included.

   Coders may need to look out for nicknames for Colin Kaepernick; such as

   "Kaep", "Kap", or "7". References to peaceful protesting in the NFL, taking

   a knee, the fining of teams or players, blackballing, kneeling and any

   leadership involvement in this direct situation are to be coded as present.

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