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Let’s Talk Sports: An Egocentric Discussion Network Analysis Regarding NFL Crisis Perceptions

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Let’s Talk Sports: An Egocentric Discussion Network Analysis Regarding NFL Crisis Perceptions

Jennifer L. Harker

Abstract
This egocentric discussion network analysis examines American sports fans’ crisis perceptions regarding four National Football League (NFL) crises. The purpose of this research was to examine how stakeholders’ perceptions of sport-related crises are communicated within the rhetorical arena. This research addresses several lingering questions regarding the influential role of sport identification, fan communication behavior, and social relationships among sports fans in the development of crisis perceptions. The situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) model is extended by applying it to sport crisis and the network perspective. In sum, this sport crisis egocentric discussion network, driven by functional specificity hypothesis, enabled an in-depth investigation into network selection, activation, and influence regarding sports fans’ crisis perceptions, and the significance of identification and the discordant communication exchanged within a sports fan’s personal network.

Keywords
sport crisis, egocentric discussion networks, sport identification, discordant communication, situational crisis communication theory

1 Reed College of Media, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, USA

Corresponding Author:
Jennifer L. Harker, Reed College of Media, West Virginia University, P.O. Box 6010, Morgantown, WV 26506, USA.
Email: jennifer.harker@mail.wvu.edu
The New England Patriots won both Super Bowl LI on February 5, 2017, and Super Bowl LIII on February 3, 2019. What differed between these two events were the gleeful cheers at Super Bowl LIII and the angry jeers Super Bowl LI aimed at National Football League (NFL) Commissioner Roger Goodell when Goodell took the postgame national stage. Fans watching from home could not hear the presentation of the iconic Lombardi trophy over the roar of Super Bowl LI attendees’ boisterous boos directed toward Goodell. An arena full of NFL fans expressed their dislike for the commissioner who had disciplined Tom Brady, star quarterback of the Patriots, earlier that season. Brady had been implicated in an alleged cheating scandal (e.g., “Deflategate”) and suspended from play by Goodell, all of which was highly publicized and litigated. Why would NFL fans be so angry with the commissioner over disciplining alleged bad behavior? More to the point, why were so many still cheering for the New England Patriots after the team had been accused of cheating?

This research investigates such perceptions of sports fans in response to these sport-related situational dilemmas, and how and with whom sports fans communicate those perceptions. On the one hand, a sports fan is a fan of the team, in this case, the Patriots, and a sports fan can be “die-hard” in remaining loyal to their team (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). On the other hand, a sports fan may be bound to their social and moral values or other intersections of personal identification. So, which hand wins when sport-related dilemmas such as cheating, player health and safety, domestic assault or social justice issues arise? This research explores four such instances of sport-related crises regarding the NFL.

Sport crises can include a myriad of transgressions, and those transgressions can threaten the reputation of an entire league, team, or an individual such an athlete, coach, coordinator, owner, or other organizational celebrity (Benoit, 2015; Wenner, 2013). The history of sport crisis literature reflects these sources of transgressions, and sport crisis scholarship has focused most on the rhetorical self-defense of the offender. Other areas of sport crisis communication research have focused on organizational-level crises (Benoit, 2015; Coombs, 1998, 2014; Fortunato, 2008), individual-level crises (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Brazeal, 2008), fans’ social media use as reaction and response to crisis (Brown & Billings, 2013), apologetic rhetoric in response to crisis (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Harker, 2017; Kruse, 1981), and new media (Sanderson, 2013; Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012). To extend this list, the current research focuses on how NFL stakeholders perceive sport crisis, whether those perceptions are informed by identification, and in what ways sports fans communicate perceptions throughout their social networks.

This investigation therefore explores stakeholders’ perceptions regarding sport-related situational crises alongside the propensity for stakeholders to become “increasingly vocal” in response to such crises (Coombs, 2014; Johansen & Frandsen, 2005). A network approach is utilized to explore the actualizations of perception to behavior (Krosnick & Petty, 1995), as is indicated in the situational crisis
communication theory (SCCT) model (Coombs, 2007b, 2014), to provide insight into the antecedents and outcomes related to crisis perceptions among sports fans. Such a study reaches far beyond crisis typologies and retrospective remediation strategies common in this subfield of research and instead embraces the network perspective to test underutilized components of the SCCT model. An egocentric discussion network (Perry, Pescosolido, & Borgatti, 2018) is applied here to examine how perceptions commingle with sport identification and results in fan communication behavior. In other words, this research explores the ways in which psychological antecedents lead to communicated behavior among sports fans regarding sport-related crises.

**Literature Review**

Over half (59%) of all crisis communication research has focused on outward organizational communication (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010; Ha & Boynton, 2014; Ha & Rifé, 2015). In fact, crisis communication research “reflected a strong sender orientation,” until the ability to mass communicate online opened the rhetorical arena to stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2014, p. 40; Johansen & Frandsen, 2005). The once considered powerful outward communication focus was limiting in its explanatory value because it did not allow for reciprocal dialogue (Leitch & Motion, 2010). Take, for example, the increased ability in the predigital days of an organization’s or a celebrity’s ability to access mediated channels to amplify messages (Kruse, 1977). Today, however, access to the rhetorical arena is much more attainable.

The rhetorical arena is an emerging framework focused on a multivocal approach (Johansen & Frandsen, 2005). This is a receiver-focused context that explains the many ways in which stakeholders come to know, discuss, and form opinions regarding crises. Much like the office water cooler, access to the digital world has enabled the growth of subarenas for shared rhetoric. “Sub-arenas consist of ‘spaces’ where crisis publics may express and hear ideas about the crisis” (Coombs & Holladay, 2014, p. 41). It is within these spaces that opinions are both formed and challenged. The rhetorical arena is precisely where this research is positioned, but before diving deeper into such communication-focused phenomena, an explanation of stakeholder crisis perceptions is first presented.

According to Coombs (2014), “it is the perceptions of a stakeholder that help to define an event as a crisis” (p. 3). Stakeholders consider the crisis, develop perceptions in response to that crisis, and then stakeholders discuss those perceptions (Coombs, 2007b; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Research regarding stakeholders’ perceptions and consumer reactions to organizational crises gained traction in the late 1990s and early 2000s when researchers experimentally captured participants’ emotive reactions to differing crisis situations (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Jorgensen, 1996; Lee, 2004). Crisis responsibility, the organization’s pre- and postcrisis reputation, and stakeholders’ affective responses to organizational crises were found
to be the components that formed perceptions. This research has been refined over the years, and the development and testing of theoretical models have since formed.

According to SCCT, three factors are assessed to measure stakeholders’ perceptions during or following a crisis (Coombs, 2007b): perceived responsibility, crisis history, and relational history. For example, the more a stakeholder believes an organization is responsible for the wrongdoing, which can be multiplied by the wrongdoing occurring more than once, the more negative the resultant reputational assessment (Coombs, 1995). However, a prior positive relationship might serve as a buffer when a crisis occurs, thus reducing anger and blame (Coombs, 2007b). The application of crisis perceptions to sport crises requires an in-depth exploration into these three factors.

**Perceived Responsibility**

SCCT is based upon attribution theory, so crisis responsibility is best explained by the amount of blame attributed to an actor or entity perceived as responsible for the crisis. Locus of control is considered (e.g., was the crisis accidental or intentional), which aids in calibrating that blame (Coombs, 1995, 2007b). The amount of evidence also is assessed. For example, Coombs (1995) noted a “veracity of evidence” results in more negative perceptions than “ambiguous evidence” (p. 458). The NFL’s Ray Rice domestic assault in 2014 relates to these measurements of stakeholders’ perceptions in a sport-related crisis. Rice was suspended from play for two games until TMZ released video footage of the actual violent act (“Ray Rice elevator,” 2014; “Ray Rice suspended,” 2014). The veracity of evidence from stakeholders visualizing the assault resulted in increased blame attribution, revealed intentionality of the act, and resulted in increased punishment due to more severe perceptions.

**Crisis History**

The second factor assessed to form stakeholders’ perceptions is the history or past record of similar events. Crisis history accounts for how common crises occur, from a one-time event to one within a series of events (Coombs, 1998). Repetitive offenses result in increased attribution of responsibility and thus more negative perceptions (Coombs, 1998, 2004, 2014).

**Relational History**

Relational history (Coombs, 2001) is an encompassing term to explain the meaning behind a prior relationship between a stakeholder and an actor or entity. Relational history is identified within SCCT as an “intensifying factor,” and relational history interrelates with crisis history and crisis responsibility to construct postcrisis perceptions (Coombs, 2007b, p. 168). Coombs (2001) describes relational history as an
entity holding a relationship with stakeholders that creates some level of interdependence that “binds the two together” (Coombs, 2014, p. 35). The relational history between a stakeholder and an entity might affect stakeholders’ perceptions. For example, crisis research has noted buffers and halo effects as parts of relational history (Coombs, 1995, 1998, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2006, 2008; Koerber & Zabara, 2017). Favorable ratings from prior interdependence or interaction can become buffers against blame attribution (Coombs, 2007b) and can be conceptualized as a “pre-existing factor that could influence” perceptions of a crisis (Koerber & Zabara, 2017, p. 194). Coombs and Holladay (2006) also investigated halo effects as a subset or type of crisis buffer and noted that a positive prior relational history can result in offering the benefit of the doubt. For example, consumers’ commitment to a brand has been identified as a moderating effect on consumer response to negative publicity regarding that beloved brand (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000). Moreover, social approval of an organization or its crisis remediation strategies, as well as organizational identification, can all act as calibrating components of crisis perceptions and resultant reputational assessment (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Hubbard, 2016). For these reasons, relational history should be considered in stakeholders’ crisis perceptions (Coombs, 1998, 2007b), and at the heart of such an exploration is identification.

**Sport Identification**

Sport offers a heightened environment for the study of crisis communication because stakeholders are such overt fans. Sports fans possess high levels of identification, explained as a social psychological connection to a particular sport, sports team, or other fellow fans (Kruse, 1981; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010; Wann, 2006; Wann & Branscombe, 1990, 1993). Common themes related to sport identification have emerged among sports fans’ perceptions and behaviors, including image management (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980), in-group/out-group bias, and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986), and superiority over other out-groups, rivals, or losing teams (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Wann, 2006). Sport identification is also referred to in the sport communication literature as “team identification” and is applied in this research as the linking mechanism that relates to relational history in crisis assessment.

**Discordant sport communication.** Sport communication scholars have also connected sport identification as an underlying factor to an array of fan behaviors (Brown-Devlin, Devlin, & Vaughan, 2018; Spinda, 2011; Wann & Branscombe, 1990, 1993). Social psychologists and media effects scholars have described sport identification as a multidimensional construct driven by self-esteem that results in fan behaviors (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Wann, 2006; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). One such fan behavior is “blasting.” Blasting is an image management strategy that
results in a discordant communication exchange (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Spinda, 2011). Blasting or “talking trash” occurs when fans of a winning team tease rival losers (Spinda, 2011). Blasting is an out-group derogation (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) driven by a strong positive in-group connection (Wann & Dolan, 1994) and is applied as an image management strategy (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). Such discord has become commonplace in sport communication (Spinda, 2011).

In this research, discordant communication is operationalized as a resultant-communicated behavior prompted by one’s identification with sport and connects with SCCT’s concept of word-of-mouth. To explain, the ultimate goal of crisis remediation under the SCCT perception assessment model includes the minimization of reputational damage, maintaining purchasing intention, and “preventing negative word-of-mouth” (Coombs & Holladay, 2013, p. 40). Coombs (2007b) stated, “ultimately, the model needs to connect the effects of a crisis to behavior” (p. 169).

This research answers that call by connecting each of these crisis perception measurements from SCCT, and substituting sport identification as relational history, to explore stakeholders’ sport-related crisis perceptions. Then, this research explores how those perceptions are communicated in the rhetorical arena by applying a network approach. Therefore, this research is driven by the following overarching research question (RQ):

**Research Question 1 (RQ1):** How likely are a sports fan’s crisis perceptions to initiate engagement with the rhetorical arena through the exchange of discordant communication, and can that discord be predictive of crisis perceptions?

The following sections explain the specific ways in which communication behaviors have been captured in past sociological studies. First, an overview of the network perspective, which aids in the assessment and understanding of the rhetorical arena, is presented.

**Network Perspective**

Researchers suggest that it is one’s social environment that has a direct influence on shaping perceptions (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). For example, from the water cooler to social media, people discuss matters and share opinions with others. These subarenas serve as platforms for shared communication among individuals to interact with their social networks (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). A social network can best be defined as the individuals or entities with which a person comes in contact and engages in some sort of exchange (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013). Research has shown that shared rhetoric within subarenas (which can include, but are not limited to, social networking sites) help to shape an individual’s perception regarding the topic being discussed (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Johansen & Frandsen, 2005).
The network perspective offers investigators an in-depth approach to researching social phenomena because the network perspective allows a social scientist to examine multi-theoretical, multilevel relational data (Monge & Contractor, 2003; Tranmer, Pallotti, & Lomi, 2016). For example, the network perspective offers deeper exploration into sociological phenomena through the investigation of dyadic (meaning two) relationships. These dyads, or connections, can help to explain the variance that exists among relationships or the communication exchanged among dyads regarding certain matters. For example, the study of dyadic relationships can explain who is connected to whom, how individuals are connected to each other, and why they are connecting to one another (Borgatti & Lopez-Kidwell, 2011).

Network research can also help social scientists connect perceptions to behaviors by examining numerous interrelating and relational psychological and sociological variables together (Feldman & Lynch, 1988; Krosnick & Petty, 1995). The network perspective applied in this research therefore allows for an in-depth investigation into stakeholders’ perceptions of sport crisis while exploring with whom in their online and offline social networks stakeholders share those perceptions and whether the exchanging of those perceptions possesses any influential mechanisms. In other words, the network approach is applied in this investigation to explore how stakeholders perceive sport-related crises and with whom and how they discuss those perceptions within the rhetorical arena.

The network perspective can encompass several approaches. For example, network methods include two broad assessments: the whole network or the personal network (Borgatti et al., 2013; Borgatti & Lopez-Kidwell, 2011). A whole network analysis encompasses all possible entities or actors within a specified boundary, but this would be too daunting a task regarding sports fans. Another approach is a personal network analysis, also referred to as egocentric (“ego” meaning “one”), which focuses on a sample of respondents (Borgatti et al., 2013). The respondent in a personal network is called an ego. The ego is the central node within an egocentric network (Borgatti et al., 2013) and can be examined at the traditional monadic level (e.g., the categorical attributes of gender or ethnicity) and at the dyadic level to explore the ego’s ties or relationships to others within their online and offline social networks and the exchanges within those relationships (Borgatti et al., 2013; Perry & Pescosolido, 2015; Perry et al., 2018). Several social functions can be analyzed in egocentric networks including communication exchanges, social support, and other behavioral outcomes (Borgatti et al., 2013; Marsden, 1987; Perry & Pescosolido, 2010, 2015). Therefore, egocentric network data allow researchers to explore multiple relational phenomena measured in tandem. Such a wide-reaching and networked analysis has yet to be conducted regarding stakeholders’ perceptions of sport crises, until now.

Egocentric discussion networks. Egocentric discussion networks measure the relational attributes related to an ego’s communication of beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors between the ego and their dyadic connections, or alters (Bello & Rolfe,
In fact, discussion networks allow investigators to collect attribute, relational, and explanatory data regarding egos and their named alters. “Alters” is the network term for the people a respondent (ego) names as the individuals with which they connect to discuss certain matters. Alters will be referred to from this point forward as “discussants.”

**Types of discussion networks.** This research focuses on the preferential selection of an ego’s discussants to talk about a specific matter. Past egocentric discussion network research has focused on important matters, health matters, and political matters. Important matters discussion networks examine to whom people go to for advice and support on important matters (Bearman & Parigi, 2004; Burt, 1986; Marsden, 1987; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Discussion networks more recently extended beyond important matters to focus on political and health matters. Political matters discussion network studies (Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Cowan & Baldassarri, 2018; Klofstad et al., 2009) examine the proximity, homophily, and social support (Monge & Contractor, 2003) among network members to explore voting likelihood and relational influence on voting choices (Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Cowan & Baldassarri, 2018; Klofstad et al., 2009). Health matters egocentric discussion networks have emerged over the past 15 years (Perkins et al., 2015) with topics ranging from family planning to disease transmission, community support, and mental health outcomes (Perkins et al., 2015; Perry & Pescosolido, 2010, 2015). This investigation is among the first to explore a sports matters discussion network.

**Functional specificity.** What the important matters, health matters, political matters, and now the current research focused on sport crisis matters, all have in common is functional specificity. Functional specificity is an underlying research hypothesis that guides this type of network research related to interpersonal exchanges. Researchers examine egocentric discussion networks for the ways in which people activate communication ties with certain others to meet specific needs (Weiss, 1974). In other words, people “shop” their social networks and select particular individuals for specific types of interaction (Perry & Pescosolido, 2010; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). The selection of functionally specific discussants, the relational ties between egos and those discussants, and the type of communication exchanged within the dyadic relationship can all be examined to explore network influence on an ego’s sport-related crisis perceptions. This research therefore focuses on the functionally specific communication exchanges initiated by stakeholders (e.g., sports fans) to discuss sport-related situational crises.

**The Current Study: Sport Crisis Egocentric Discussion Network**

The current research approach reaches beyond the typologies of crisis communication and rhetorical self-defense and extends the traditional surveying of respondents...
for their perceptions regarding crises. This research therefore not only investigates the crisis perceptions of sports fans but also the rhetorical arena within which sports fans’ perceptions are communicated, with whom fans specifically reach to in communicating those perceptions and whether perceptions are stimulated by these communication exchanges. The network perspective is applied in this research to measure the “interdependence” (Coombs, 2014, p. 35) related to stakeholders’ perceptions and how stakeholders communicate about their sport crisis perceptions. Sport identification (Coombs, 2007b, 2014; Spinda, 2011; Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and sport-specific communication behavior (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Spinda, 2011) are uniquely applied here to extend the SCCT theoretical model specifically to sports. The ability to identify multiple variables in tandem through the network perspective to examine the how and the why certain relationships are activated by communication in response to crisis is a true strength to this approach in extending theory and our understanding of sports fans’ crisis perceptions. To explore these matters and more precisely answer RQ1, the following hypotheses will be tested:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Increased sport identification will increase the likelihood of discordant communication among sport-specific discussants.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Negative crisis perceptions will increase the likelihood of discordant communication among sport-specific discussants.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The discordant communication exchanged in the rhetorical arena is a positive predictor of negative stakeholders’ crisis perceptions.

This research extends not only the SCCT framework but also applies the theory to the study of sport, sport identification, sport communication, fan behavior, and this research introduces the network perspective to sport crises. Next is a detailed account of this unique approach.

Method

An online national survey was launched through Qualtrics data collection services. Qualtrics data collection services offer researchers a paid service for reaching survey respondents and facilitating data collection (Billings, Qiao, Brown, & Devlin, 2017). As part of this data collection service, Qualtrics provides guaranteed respondent verification and screens for “speeders” and “straightliners.” Qualtrics incentivized respondents for this research with award points. Incentives were necessary because of the high respondent burden of the egocentric discussion network data collection instrument.

Survey instruments are the most widely applied tool for gathering primary source data for ego networks (Borgatti et al., 2013; Marsden, 2005) and egocentric discussion network studies (Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Burt, 1984, 1986, 2004; Marsden, 1987; Perkins et al., 2015; Perry & Pescosolido, 2010, 2015; Perry et al., 2018), but the
instruments are lengthy. The instrument developed for this study was also lengthy with an average completion time of 32.4 min because three separate discussion networks were captured: One mimicked past studies regarding important matters (Burt, 1984; Hall, Salfer, & Noar, 2019, p. S62; Marsden, 1987; Perry & Pescosolido, 2010) and the two others captured general sport discussions and sport crisis discussions (Harker, 2018). Only one of the three discussion networks (i.e., sport crisis) is presented in this article.

The survey launched during Week 16 of the NFL’s regular season. An initial screener question asked potential respondents whether they considered themselves a sports fan, and only those who responded “yes” were invited to participate. Response quotas were set for each day’s data collection, which occurred at different times of the day, on different days of each week. Data collection concluded the week of wild card play-offs.

Survey Measures

Survey measurements included attribute, relational, and explanatory variables relating to each respondent’s crisis perceptions regarding one of four NFL situational crises. To capture NFL fans, specifically, respondents were asked “which NFL team is your favorite?” Respondents were asked to choose from a drop-down list of all 32 teams plus one option that read, “no favorite NFL team.” Those who reported having no favorite NFL team were not included in the current data set presented in this article.

Variables were measured along 7-point continuous scales (Marsden & Wright, 2010). Detailed explanations for each measurement are as follows.

Stakeholders’ crisis perceptions. The NFL was chosen for the context of this study because of the nature of the league’s highly publicized, ongoing, multiple crises (Kanski, 2016; “NFL in crisis,” 2017; Rodgers, 2017; Schrottenboer, 2014, 2015). The four crises selected for this investigation situate to differing degrees within SCCT’s crisis perception measurements.

Respondents were first asked their subjective knowledge regarding: (1) chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a brain degeneration disease associated with repeated head trauma, noted to occur at high rates among NFL players; (2) Deflategate: Tom Brady and the New England Patriots were accused of deflating footballs; (3) Domestic Assault: Ezekiel Elliot, Dallas Cowboys running back, was suspended for six games for a domestic assault accusation; and (4) #TakeAKnee: Colin Kaepernick and other NFL players protested police brutality by kneeling during the national anthem at NFL games. Respondents were asked to select all crises they had heard about and talked about and then they were asked to select just one they had discussed the most. This self-selection based on discussion frequency was conducted to facilitate the egocentric discussion network portion of this research. For that reason, no quotas were placed on each of the four crises. In other
words, while the survey was live, data collection for any one crisis was not stopped when responses reached a particular number.

**Level of crisis attribution.** Crisis attribution was measured in an innovative way in this study. Respondents were asked at which level—the macro (league), meso (team), and micro (athlete) levels inherent to sport—they attributed crisis responsibility for the specific crisis into which they had self-selected. The three levels reflect the structural levels of sport (Blaney, Lippert, & Smith, 2013; Coombs, 2014; Wenner, 2013). These structural levels were hypothesized to provide a deeper exploration into sport identification’s role in stakeholders’ crisis perceptions because sport identification is strongest at the team level (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Respondents attributed the four crises across the league level ($n = 299$), team level ($n = 95$), and the athlete level ($n = 365$).

**Crisis perceptions.** Crisis perceptions (Coombs, 1995, 2007b; Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2006, 2008) were measured by examining amount of blame, amount of evidence, whether the act was perceived as accidental or intentional, and crisis history (one time or a series of occurrences). The 4 items were scaled at each level of attribution after acceptable factor analyses, and internal consistency tests were conducted at each level: league ($a = .70; M = 4.92, SD = 1.42$), team ($a = .86; M = 4.92, SD = 1.60$), and athlete ($a = .74; M = 5.91, SD = 1.26$). The higher the mean, the more negative the crisis perception. Crisis perceptions at all three levels were more negative than positive.

**Sport identification.** Sport identification was measured as relational history through an individual’s perception of connectedness to sport (Coombs, 2007b, 2014; Spinda, 2011; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). The 7-item adapted Sport Spectator Identification Scale was asked with the respondents’ self-reported favorite NFL team piped into each question. The measures were examined for internal reliability ($a = .92$), and the resultant Sport Identification Scale ($M = 4.95, SD = 1.52$) revealed a moderate level of sport identification among NFL stakeholders.

**Sport crisis matters discussion network.** The egocentric discussion network portion of the survey instrument captured egos’ social formations concerning the functionally specific matter of sport crisis. The purpose of the sport crisis discussion network was to assess the selection, activation, and influence of an ego’s network in relation to crisis perceptions (Borgatti et al., 2013; Perry et al., 2018). Five name generators captured discussants by asking survey respondents (egos) to list to whom they have spoken to and who had spoken to them about the NFL crisis chosen earlier in the survey. The attribute, relational, and explanatory dyadic tie data captured for each discussant egos listed included discussant demographics and the sport-specific relationship roles of being a fan or rival
of the team or athlete involved in the selected crisis (Perry & Pescosolido, 2010; cf. PhenX Toolkit, 1991).

**Discordant communication.** A fifth relational tie was operationalized as a direct derogatory communicated act, often termed blasting in sport communication literature (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Spinda, 2011). Respondents were asked how likely they were to trash talk each discussant concerning the crisis \( (M = 2.54, SD = 2.16) \) and how likely each discussant was to trash talk the ego concerning the crisis \( (M = 2.61, SD = 2.19) \). Relational ties in egocentric discussion network research vary greatly among egos’ discussants, so measurements typically demonstrate non-normal distributions, hence the high standard deviations for discordant communication (Perry et al., 2018).

**Results**

Demographic information of the survey respondents \( (N = 760) \) is first reported here (see Table 1). Then, the egocentric discussion network data results are presented. Please recall here that egocentric network data allows for multilevel analyses that reach across levels to explore multiple relational phenomena in tandem (Perry et al., 2018). To explain, this research set out to explore how stakeholders (Level 2 egos) develop perceptions of crisis, whether those perceptions are shaped by identification, and then how and with whom (Level 1 discussants) stakeholders express those perceptions through communication. The network approach allows for the assessment of all of these variables across levels (Level 2 egos and their Level 1 discussants) and the variance at each of the two levels all at once (Perry et al., 2018). More on measurement follows later in this section.

The mean age of respondents was 46 years \( (SD = 17.15) \). More males \((60\%, n = 454)\) responded to the survey than females \((40\%, n = 303)\), as expected, and ethnic diversity was not achieved because the majority \((79\%)\) of respondents were Caucasian \( (n = 600) \). Political measurements were captured because of the polarized nature of the #TakeAKnee crisis (Quealy, 2017). Political ideology was reported as liberal \( (28\%, n = 210) \), moderate \( (41\%, n = 309) \), and conservative \( (31\%, n = 240) \), and political partisanship was democrat \( (37\%, n = 285) \), independent \( (29\%, n = 218) \), and republican \( (34\%, n = 257) \).

Respondents reported 2,270 discussants, ranging from 1 to 20 discussants per ego with an average of 3 discussants (see Table 1). The mean age of reported discussants was 45 years \( (SD = 16.98) \). More males \((59\%, n = 1,343)\) were reported as sport crisis discussants than females \((25\%, n = 576)\). Ethnic homogeneity was indicated by the majority \((67\%)\) of discussants reported as Caucasian \( (n = 1,527) \). Political ideology of discussants was reported as perceived by respondents. Discussants were liberal \( (21\%, n = 471) \), moderate \( (34\%, n = 778) \), and conservative \( (29\%, n = 668) \), and political partisanship of discussants was perceived as democrat \( (28\%, n = 640) \), independent \( (25\%, n = 567) \), and republican \( (32\%, n = 721) \).
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Egos and Their Named Discussants.

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<td>72</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political ID</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
<td>471</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
<td>778</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td>668</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
<td>640</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td>567</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
<td>721</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique sports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fan</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rival</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discordant communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blasting others</td>
<td>2,227</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being blasted</td>
<td>2,237</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis perceptions</td>
<td>2,266</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team identification</td>
<td>2,270</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Nested data set of the sport crisis communication egocentric discussion network, which reflects all cases of egos and their named discussants.

RQ1 asked how likely are a sports fan’s crisis perceptions to initiate engagement with the rhetorical arena through the exchange of discordant communication, and can that discord be predictive of crisis perceptions? To explore these questions, a series of regression analyses and multilevel modeling of the network data were conducted. Standard regression analyses are an appropriate statistical test when assessing an ego-level dependent variable (cf. Perry et al., 2018, p. 199), but multilevel modeling is necessary for cross-level examinations of the nested data collected from the egocentric discussion network process (Perry et al., 2018). More on the multilevel modeling and network data analysis follows, but first, results for each regression analysis are presented regarding overall crisis perceptions and crisis perceptions at the league, the team, and at the athlete levels of blame attribution (see Table 2).
At the league level, age (\(b = .122, p < .01\)), gender (\(b = .147, p < .001\)), political ideology (\(b = .154, p < .001\)), and partisanship (\(b = .111, p < .01\)) were the demographic predictors of negative crisis perceptions among survey respondents. Sport identification (\(b = .077, p < .077\)) also was a significant predictor of negative crisis perceptions at the league level of attribution.

At the team level, negative crisis perceptions were influenced by political partisanship (\(b = .337, p < .001\)) and sport identification (\(b = .211, p < .001\)). Ethnicity (\(b = -.247, p < .001\)) was the only demographic predictor. The most variance explained (17\%) among the models was at the team level.

At the athlete level, however, the opposite results emerge regarding sport identification’s role in crisis perceptions (\(ns\)). Ego age (\(b = .196, p < .001\)), political ideology (\(b = .085, p < .05\)), and political partisanship (\(b = .133, p < .001\)) were significant positive predictors of negative crisis perceptions. These results further suggest that the #TakeAKnee crisis, which was highly attributed to the athlete level of blame attribution, was a politically charged issue.

Overall crisis perceptions (\(M = 5.40, SD = 1.46\)) were analyzed. This combination of all crisis perceptions, without regard to the three levels of blame attribution, resulted in a diluted nonsignificant effect of sport identification (\(b = .028, ns\)) as a predictor of crisis perceptions. Age (\(b = .172, p < .001\)), gender (\(b = .045, p < .05\)), political ideology (\(b = .124, p < .001\)), and political partisanship (\(b = .147, p < .001\)) remained significant predictors of negative crisis perceptions, however. These results suggest that older, male, conservative republicans held the most negative perceptions among stakeholders regarding NFL crises. The overall crisis perceptions scale will be used in all subsequent analyses in the interest of brevity.

### Table 2. Crisis Perceptions by Level of Crisis Attribution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Overall (n = 2,255)</th>
<th>League (n = 893)</th>
<th>Team (n = 273)</th>
<th>Athlete (n = 1,089)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(\beta)</td>
<td>(\beta)</td>
<td>(\beta)</td>
<td>(\beta)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego age</td>
<td>.172***</td>
<td>.122***</td>
<td>.073</td>
<td>.196***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego gender</td>
<td>.045*</td>
<td>.147***</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>-.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego ethnicity</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>-.247***</td>
<td>.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political ideology</td>
<td>.124***</td>
<td>.154***</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.085***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>.147***</td>
<td>.111**</td>
<td>.337***</td>
<td>.133****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport identification</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.077*</td>
<td>.211***</td>
<td>-.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(R^2)</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted (R^2)</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(F) for change in (R^2)</td>
<td>50.68****</td>
<td>22.69***</td>
<td>10.16***</td>
<td>17.52****</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

Dummy coded variables included gender: 1 = male, 0 = female; ethnicity: 1 = Caucasian, 0 = all else; political ideology: 1 = conservative, 0 = all else; political partisanship: 1 = republican, 0 = all else.

*\(p < .05\). **\(p < .01\). ***\(p < .001\).
Multilevel models (MLMs) for egocentric discussion network analysis. Two MLMs were conducted to explore which attribute and relational factors of egos and their respective discussants contributed to the activation of fan behaviors in the sport crisis discussion network. Each random intercepts model offers two types of variance as a result: the residual, which is the within-ego, between-discussant variance; and the intercept, which equals the between-ego variance. The total variance is then calculated to offer the percentage of variance that is left unexplained by the model’s independent variables. MLM results are reported similarly to past egocentric studies (Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Perry & Pescosolido, 2010; Snijders, Spreen, & Zwaagstra, 1995).

Two MLMs were analyzed to answer the first hypothesis, which states increased sport identification will increase the likelihood of the exchange of discordant communication among sport-specific discussants, and the second hypothesis, which states negative crisis perceptions, will increase the likelihood of the exchange of discordant communication among sport-specific discussants. Respondents were asked along a 7-point scale how likely they were to blast each listed discussant regarding the crisis they had selected and they were asked how likely each discussant was to blast them in regards to the crisis. Respondents also were asked to identify whether each discussant was a fan or rival of the team or individual involved in the crisis.

Using the two forms of discordant communication—ego blasting discussants and discussant blasting ego—as dependent variables, the two hypotheses were tested to examine the likelihood of sport identification ($b = .264, p < .001; b = .125, p < .001$) or crisis perceptions ($b = .162, p < .001; b = .289, p < .001$) to result in discordant communication, respectively (see Table 3). Both hypotheses were supported in both blasting directions. Egos who blasted their discussants were more likely to be younger ($b = -.013, p < .001$) republicans ($b = .239, p < .05$) who blasted younger ($b = -.012, p < .001$) discussants who were fans ($b = .373, p < .05$) of the team or individual involved in the crisis. Younger ($b = -.014, p < .001$) respondents perceived being blasted by their young ($b = -.010, p < .001$) discussants who were rivals ($b = .381, p < .05$) of the team or individual involved in the crisis.

Finally, the third hypothesis was tested, which states that the discordant communication exchanged in the rhetorical arena would be a positive predictor of negative stakeholders’ crisis perceptions. This final analysis was conducted because social science and communication are not linear. This hypothesis therefore examined the predictive propensity of respondents who reported blasting others ($\beta = -.116, p < .001$) and the predictive propensity of respondents who perceived being blasted by others ($\beta = -0.104, p < .001$), while controlling for ego-level demographics that were significant predictors in the first set of analyses regarding crisis perceptions. Both forms of discordant communication were indeed significant positive predictors of negative crisis perceptions (see Table 4). Therefore, H3 also was supported.
This research set out to explore stakeholder perceptions regarding sport-related crises and with whom NFL stakeholders expressed those perceptions. This examination extended sport crisis communication research in three ways: (1) the application of SCCT to sports crises with a specific focus on stakeholders’ crisis perceptions across the three levels inherent to a sports organization, (2) the inclusion of sport identification and fan communication behavior in researching sport crisis, and (3) the pairing of sport crisis research with a network perspective to explore the rhetorical arena. To date, sport crises have been researched as retrospective analyses, rhetorical in nature, and focused on crisis types or remediation attempts (Benoit, 2015; Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Brazeal, 2008; Brown & Billings, 2013; Coombs, 1998, 2014; Fortunato, 2008; Harker & Saffer, 2018). In fact, throughout the first 25

Table 3. Multilevel Models for Discordant Communication in Sport Crisis Discussion Network.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimate of Covariance (b)</th>
<th>Blasting Others</th>
<th>Being Blasted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>1.865</td>
<td>1.876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego attributes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego age</td>
<td>-.013*** .003</td>
<td>-.014*** .003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego partisanshipa</td>
<td>.239* .111</td>
<td>.098 .114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussant attributes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussant age</td>
<td>-.012*** .003</td>
<td>-.010*** .003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussant partisanshipa</td>
<td>.149 .107</td>
<td>.132 .110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFL crisis measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis perceptions</td>
<td>.162*** .032</td>
<td>.125*** .033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTE</td>
<td>.837*** .298</td>
<td>.752* .308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deflategate</td>
<td>.799** .308</td>
<td>.954*** .319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic assault</td>
<td>.166 .373</td>
<td>.197 .383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#TakeAKnee</td>
<td>.519* .287</td>
<td>.668* .297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport-specific measures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team identification</td>
<td>.264*** .031</td>
<td>.289*** .031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport discussant is rivalb</td>
<td>.180 .173</td>
<td>.381* .179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport discussant is fanb</td>
<td>.373* .194</td>
<td>.157 .200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIC</td>
<td>7,875.8</td>
<td>8,027.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviance</td>
<td>-1.891.24</td>
<td>-1.850.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICC (*model sig.)</td>
<td>58.68***</td>
<td>52.53***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ICC = within and between variance calculated; ICC means the % unexplained for DV by model components. NFL = National Football League; CTE = chronic traumatic encephalopathy; BIC = bayesian information criterion; DV = dependent variable.

*a Dummy coded: Crisis topics; political partisanship: 1 = Republican, 0 = all else. Gender consistently ns and therefore removed from analysis. bDiscussant is fan of team/athlete implicated in crisis: 1 = fan, 0 = all else; and discussant is rival of team/athlete implicated in crisis: 1 = rival, 0 = all else.

Discussion

This research set out to explore stakeholder perceptions regarding sport-related crises and with whom NFL stakeholders expressed those perceptions. This examination extended sport crisis communication research in three ways: (1) the application of SCCT to sports crises with a specific focus on stakeholders’ crisis perceptions across the three levels inherent to a sports organization, (2) the inclusion of sport identification and fan communication behavior in researching sport crisis, and (3) the pairing of sport crisis research with a network perspective to explore the rhetorical arena. To date, sport crises have been researched as retrospective analyses, rhetorical in nature, and focused on crisis types or remediation attempts (Benoit, 2015; Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Brazeal, 2008; Brown & Billings, 2013; Coombs, 1998, 2014; Fortunato, 2008; Harker & Saffer, 2018). In fact, throughout the first 25
years of sport crisis communication, few studies surveyed stakeholders regarding their crisis perceptions (Harker & Saffer, 2018). Research regarding the rhetorical self-defense of fans (Brown & Billings, 2013; Brown, Brown, & Billings, 2015) and sponsors (Fortunato, 2017) on behalf of sports entities or individuals has been conducted, and some of these innovative research efforts were among the first to integrate SCCT and the theory’s measures within the subfield of sport crisis communication (Harker & Saffer, 2018). Since, SCCT’s application to sport crises has grown (Billings, Coombs, & Brown, 2018). Still though, the current research is among the first to capture the antecedent perceptions of sport-related crises among stakeholders alongside the culminating communicated behavior within the rhetorical arena through the network perspective. This research therefore extended the sport crisis communication body of literature by focusing on stakeholders’ perceptions and the discussions stakeholders have, and with whom, regarding sport-related crises and whether those discussions were influential to perceptions. Methodically, this investigation moved the subfield of sport crisis communication forward.

Egocentric discussion network analyses are growing in popularity in sociological studies related to health and political communication, but this investigation demonstrates its additional usefulness for researching sport crisis communication. This sport crisis egocentric discussion network expanded current knowledge regarding who exactly stakeholders select for functionally specific sport crisis-related discussions and the discord exchanged. In so doing, the rivalry of sport and its reach into sport crises revealed an arena of discord. Such discordant, rivalry-focused communication in response to sport crises possesses several implications for the practice and research of sport crisis communication— with functional specificity hypothesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Blasting Others$^a$</th>
<th>Being Blasted$^a$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego age</td>
<td>.205***</td>
<td>.199***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego gender</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political ideology</td>
<td>.107***</td>
<td>.113***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>.151***</td>
<td>.151***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport identification</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discordant communication</td>
<td>.116***</td>
<td>.104***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$ for change in $R^2$</td>
<td>55.46***</td>
<td>54.07***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aDV was overall crisis perceptions scale ($M = 5.40, SD = 1.46$). Blasting others and being blasted are used here only as titles to distinguish results regarding discordant communication. Dummy coded variables included: Gender: 1 = male, 0 = female; political ideology: 1 = conservative, 0 = all else; political partisanship: 1 = Republican, 0 = all else.

$^p < .05, ^{**}p < .01, ^{***}p < .001.$
being among the top considerations. To explain, the more precise the measurement of crisis perceptions, the more information a practitioner or researcher will have to remediate crises. This research captured the functional and specific levels of sport for crisis attribution, the types of sport-specific discussants (fan/rival), and the types of identification that could calibrate perceptions by considering each crisis situation and the emotions and behavioral outcomes those situational crises might incite. Therefore, functional specificity should be an underlying hypothesis of empirical crisis investigations and be a consideration when developing a crisis remediation plan.

Crisis Perceptions. Overall, sports fans perceived the four NFL crises negatively, and the four crises were attributed across all three sports levels of crisis responsibility. CTE was most often attributed to the league level, Deflategate to the team level, domestic assault to the athlete level, and #TakeAKnee to both the athlete and league levels. Levels of blame attribution across the three levels of sport proved significant considerations in researching stakeholder crisis perceptions in sport. For example, sport identification was predictive of crisis perceptions at the league and team levels but not at the athlete level, nor overall. It is clearer from this research that stakeholders perceive crises in very different ways, attribute blame to varying levels of a sports entity for the same crisis, and this research further supports identification as predictive to crisis perceptions and blame attribution.

Past crisis research suggests that personal attachment or relational history results in less negative feelings related to an entity experiencing a crisis (Coombs, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In sport, however, this research suggests crises are perceived and discussed much like game outcomes and sport rivalry, especially at the team level. When the level of blame attribution was combined for overall results, sport identification became nonsignificant in its predictive propensity to affect crisis perceptions among sports fans. This research is among the first to tease out crisis perceptions across the three levels of sport, and these results indicate this is an important assessment to consider regarding identification measurement, at least.

Additionally, political affiliation held the highest predictability for negative perceptions, mostly because older, male, conservative republicans were unhappy with the #TakeAKnee crisis during the time period of data collection. This is especially evident at the league and athlete levels where the majority of respondents self-selected into and attributed the #TakeAKnee crisis. Democrats reported republican discussants, further substantiating that the #TakeAKnee crisis was perceived and discussed as a politically polarized issue. Moreover, the #TakeAKnee crisis attributed at the league and athlete levels featured differing results regarding sport identification, political ideology, age, and gender as predictors of negative crisis perceptions. All of these results combine to suggest that the intersectionality of personal identification may play as large a role in crisis perceptions and resultant communication exchanges than a relational or transactional history, or perhaps even
social identity as is typically hypothesized regarding sport. The latter of which would make for an interesting future research avenue.

**Discordant Communication**

Sport identification has been noted to result in out-group derogation (Spinda, 2011) and active image management in favor of one’s beloved sport entity (Brown & Billings, 2013; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Wann, 2006). This research supports this claim and provides empirical evidence regarding how these types of fan behaviors play out within the rhetorical arena in response to sport crises.

SCCT posits that “negative word-of-mouth” (Coombs & Holladay, 2013, p. 40) is a major concern regarding outcomes of stakeholders’ crisis perceptions. This investigation suggests another layer of discord should be taken into consideration because when it comes to sports, fans are known to activate rivalry discord. It is theorized in crisis communication that stakeholders who possess higher identification with an entity will be more supportive of the entity during a crisis. In sport, and in situational crises that involve political considerations, rivalry exchanges increase defensive discord that clutters the rhetorical arena. Recall here that respondents in this investigation were interested enough in NFL-related crises to have discussed the crisis with up to 20 people throughout their online and offline social networks. Moreover, this data set represented 2,270 communication interactions regarding NFL crises among 760 respondents, which is a 1:3 ratio for engaging the rhetorical arena. How could these defensive exchanges be harnessed to move the needle toward positive crisis perceptions?

The first step would be to examine these crises situationally and specifically. For example, how much of the discord exchanged regarding the #TakeAKnee crisis was sport communication? How much was political? Sports practitioners and researchers will need to decipher among these forms of communication, arguably driven by multiple identities. Ways in which this investigation suggests we might parse out these matters is to capture stakeholder perceptions across the three levels of sport, include identification measurements in addition to or as a part of relational history, and capture the actualized communication behaviors of which stakeholders engage.

**Practical Implications**

Stakeholders develop perceptions regarding crisis situations by observing the rhetorical arena and making individual assessments regarding the crisis and the entity experiencing the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). The rhetorical arena shapes and reshapes crisis perceptions through discourse, the assessment of personal stakes in group membership, and the strategic management of the crisis (Johansen & Frandsen, 2005). Public relations practitioners and crisis communicators should not only assess and measure the subarenas that emerge (Coombs & Holladay, 2014) but also engage the rhetorical arena. If reputation is partly about what others say about you or
your organization (Hopwood, Kitchin, & Skinner, 2010), then practitioners should preemptively and proactively offer identified stakeholders the necessary talking points to effectively compete in the rhetorical arena and engage in as much image management for self as they do for their beloved sports entity (Brown & Billings, 2013; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Spinda, 2011; Wann, 2006). Again that 1:3 ratio could help diffuse remediation attempts throughout the rhetorical arena.

**Implications for Researchers**

This research informs future measurement of sport crisis situations in several ways. First, to effectively assess crises, blame attribution should be precisely measured. Asking stakeholders about blame placement across the three levels inherent to sport should become a best practices protocol moving forward. This research revealed blame attribution differed across the three levels, and sport identification as a predictive variable of crisis perceptions became diluted when crisis perception results were combined. Second, sport identification was not the only form of identification that played a role in developing crisis perceptions regarding sport crises. Stakeholders possess multiple intersections of identity and communicators should approach each crisis with its own unique, sensible, and ethical strategies for remediation while considering these intersectional identities. Third, researchers must be careful to bridge the psychosocial divide when assessing sports fans. It is not enough to measure perceptions and then assume a particular behavior will follow. This investigation gauged perceptions and then asked respondents to report their actualized behavior. This bridging of the psychological impetus to a sociological outcome aided in capturing a more precise, arguably nonlinear description of the rhetorical arena concerning sport crisis communication. Future research should integrate such multilevel, multi-theoretical, and functionally specific approaches for a better understanding of all variables at play in tandem.

Limitations exist within this research, as with any social science investigation. Methodological limitations include the survey respondents’ reported perceptions of their discussants (e.g., perceived political ideology) and the self-selection into one of the four crises. A majority of respondents self-selected into the #TakeAKnee crisis which was the most publicized NFL-related crisis at the time of data collection. This indicates a recency effect.

Future research in sport crisis communication should reach beyond uniplex data collection and include the multiplex relationships that socially influence perceptions and result in communication exchanges with sport-specific discussants within the rhetorical arena (Bello & Rolfe, 2014; Monge & Contractor 2003; Perry & Pescosolido, 2010, 2015). The influential components of discordant communication suggested in this research are another important consideration related to crisis communication regarding sport. One might ask, is discord a form of social support when communicating about sport or sport crises?
This research explored stakeholders’ crisis perceptions and then observed the self-reported dyadic exchange of discordant communication between respondents and their functionally specific discussants. This approach enabled the detailed testing of the theoretical underpinnings of the SCCT model by connecting the model’s attitude-to-behavior flow regarding actual NFL crises. Results indicate that sport-related crises result in layered blame attribution, suggests that numerous forms of identity can be predictive of crisis perceptions, and that sport crisis perceptions result in interpersonal discord exchanges throughout the rhetorical arena. The implications of this research suggest practitioners would do well to offer stakeholders rhetorical self-defense crisis remediation strategies to use when discussing crises within their interpersonal networks.

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ORCID iD
Jennifer L. Harker https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0483-5465

Note
1. To date, network analyses have been applied in sport to explore leadership within sport teams (Fransen et al., 2015), team structure (Lusher, Robins, & Kremer, 2010), and connectedness between sports teams in a community (MacLean, Cousens, & Barnes, 2011). Most closely related to the current study were two Twitter-based analyses on the spread of news coverage regarding sport-related topics (Hambrick, 2012; Hambrick & Sanderson, 2013).

References


