As part of strategic communication, the purpose of public relations is to manage information dissemination as well as maintain a mutually beneficial relationship between individuals and/or organizations and their external publics. Public relations practitioners are concerned with assisting their clients by maintaining a positive image in the public eye; they play a vital role in assisting organizations and/or public figures spread their intended messages. After conducting extensive interviews with many seasoned public relations practitioners, Reber and Cameron (2003) found that the public relations industry is an industry where the practitioners’ main objective is bridge building between their client(s) and its targeted audience.

Crisis communication has become an important area of research within public relations literature. During a crisis, public relations practitioners take on the role as crisis managers who aim to improve an organization’s reputation or image by first identifying the issue through primary or secondary research and then selecting the appropriate communication tactics to resolve the problem (Clark, 2000). Public relations at its finest can foster better relationships between the organizations and their public, greater organizational effectiveness, stronger ethics and higher profits. The need for public relations, especially in cases of public crises, exists across all industries. And speaking of public crises, an industry that seems to be prone to controversies and disorder is the sports industry.

Over the years, the sports industry has continued its growth and has evolved into a major driving force in people’s lives. There are countless magazines dedicated to each individual sport,
television networks committed to reporting everything sports related, and fans follow their favorite athletes and sports organizations on various social media platforms. The sports industry has endured its share of crises over time, both on an individual level and organizational level: Kobe Bryant sexual assault allegations in 2003, Duke University’s Lacrosse team rape scandal in 2006, Floyd Landis doping scandal during 2006 Tour de France, Tiger Woods’s marriage crumbled in 2009 due to the revelation of his over 120 affairs, and the Jerry Sandusky sexual assault scandal at Penn State in 2011, just to name a few. The root causes for these crises were the player’s or the organizations clear wrongdoings. However, in late August 2016, the sports industry and the San Francisco 49ers saw a different type of crisis, one that split public opinion and makes one wonder if the person in the center of everything is in the wrong.

There are a myriad of theories and strategies that can be implemented by public relations practitioners during crisis management. One theory, the interest of this research, is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). This research seeks to use the SCCT as the underlying theoretical framework, and addresses the research question of what crisis response strategies were used and how the public relations practitioners for the San Francisco 49ers handled the National Anthem crisis.

The Crisis: National Anthem Protest

The American ritual for the national anthem has always been to stand and place one’s right hand over his or her heart while facing the American flag during the national anthem, The Star-Spangled Banner. The gesture is a representation of respect for America, its history, and pride in being an American. However, the national anthem has also served as a vessel for patriotism and protest. Willingham (2016) claims that because sporting events are often closely tied to the rhetoric of American pride, the national anthem presents a particularly fraught dynamic for athletes.
Therefore, when a highly visible opinion clashes with a highly visible symbol, it stirs up controversy and starts heated public debates (Willingham, 2016).

On August 26, 2016, during a NFL preseason football game between the Green Bay Packers and the San Francisco 49ers, a reporter for NFL.com noticed that while everyone else was standing for the singing of the national anthem, San Francisco 49ers backup quarterback Colin Kaepernick was sitting down on the sidelines. When Colin Kaepernick was asked why he did not stand with his teammates during the national anthem, he was ready with an answer: “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder” (Leitch & Keith, 2016, p. 13). Kaepernick was referring to the series of cases of police brutality against African Americans in the United States, such as the deaths of Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and the list goes on and on. As these innocent lives fell victim to the justice system, the members of the police who committed the brutal acts have gone unscathed and unpunished.

Social media exploded as news of Colin Kaepernick’s national anthem protest became public. People expressed their opinions on the matter through different social media platforms. The court of public opinion seemed to be split on either end of the spectrum. Some supported Kaepernick and his cause while others became angry and highly offended by his seemingly unpatriotic actions. A video of a 49ers fan setting fire to Kaepernick’s jersey went viral in a matter of minutes. Kaepernick began to receive death threats if he continued his protest to the national anthem. He remained unwavered and unfazed in his efforts to bring awareness to this important social issue. He continued to sit out of the national anthem even as NFL regular season started in September. His teammates and other players around the league have joined him in protest by taking
a knee on the field or standing with a fist in air during the national anthem. President Obama has praised Kaepernick for taking a stand for his beliefs. On the other hand, there are athletes, managers, sports analysts, and politicians who publicly criticized Kaepernick’s actions. Some fans of the San Francisco 49ers have threatened to stop supporting the football team if the executives of the organization continue to allow Kaepernick and company to protest from the sidelines.

The National Basketball Association (NBA) has an unequivocal rule about the national anthem: “Players, coaches and trainers are to stand and line up in a dignified posture along the sidelines or on the foul line during the playing of the National Anthem” (Official Rules of the NBA, p. 60). The San Francisco 49ers managers have their hands tied because, unlike the NBA, NFL has no official rules to impose on its players about the national anthem. Roger Goodell, NFL commissioner, released a statement saying the league merely encourages players to be respectful during the singing of the national anthem. Those sympathetic to Kaepernick’s cause make the argument that Kaepernick is simply exercising his First Amendment rights as an American citizen. Therefore, he cannot be forced by management to stand during the national anthem.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

A crisis can be defined as an unexpected or unforeseen event that poses as a threat to interrupt an organization’s operations, negatively impact its finances, and damage organizational reputation in the public eye. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory, originally posited by W. Timothy Coombs (2004), suggests how “a crisis might shape the selection of crisis response strategies and/or the effect of crisis response strategies on organizational reputation” (p. 269). Simply put, when dealing with a crisis, it is essential for managers to match strategic responses to the level of crisis responsibility and reputational threat posed by that crisis. The theory provides framework for understanding how organizations can use crisis communication to protect
reputational assets. Additionally, it is an essential tool used by public relations professionals to investigate which strategies to apply depending on specific types of crisis situations.

One cannot gain a full understanding of the SCCT without knowing the Attribution Theory. Attribution Theory suggests that people tend to search for causes of events especially when they are negative and unexpected (Coombs, 2007). The theory lays the groundwork for the SCCT by making connections between many of the variables found in SCCT. SCCT is an extension of the Attribution Theory by using the variables and building upon the theory to make predictions about the level of reputational threat a crisis poses to an organization. The variables also allow management to gain further insight to a crisis, determine level of reputational threat, identify the type of crisis, and subsequently decide the appropriate crisis response strategies to use to protect an organization’s existing reputational capital. According to Coombs (2007), an organization’s reputational threat is dependent on three factors: 1). Initial crisis responsibility, how much the organization is to blame for the crisis; 2). Crisis history, whether similar crisis have occurred in organization’s past; and 3). Prior relational reputation, how an organization have treated stakeholders under other circumstances.

Based on SCCT research, Coombs identifies three types of crisis clusters that serve to guide crisis managers: victim, accidental and preventable or intentional. According to Coombs (2004), the victim cluster contains situations in which organizations are seen as the victim of the crisis due to external factors beyond their control, therefore this cluster contains very weak attributions of crisis responsibility; the accidental cluster consists of crises related to technical errors and/or breakdowns where organizations claim moderate responsibility or minimal attributions of crisis responsibility; finally, the preventable or intentional cluster includes crises caused by intentional human errors and organizational misdeeds. The events are considered purposeful, hence very
strong attributions of crisis responsibility. These three categories of crises serve as frames to the public’s interpretation of each crisis. Coombs (2007) provides a summarization of crisis types by crisis clusters and its correlations to crisis responsibility and reputational threat (p. 168):

Victim cluster: In these crisis types, the organization is also a victim of the crisis.
- Natural disaster: Acts of nature damage an organization such as an earthquake.
- Rumor: False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated.
- Workplace violence: Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite.
- Product tampering/Malevolence: External agent causes damage to an organization.

Accidental cluster: In these crisis types, the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional.
- Challenges: Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner.
- Technical-error accidents: A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident.
- Technical-error product harm: A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled.

Preventable cluster: In these crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation.
- Human-error accidents: Human error causes an industrial accident.
- Human-error product harm: Human error causes a product to be recalled.
- Organizational misdeed with no injuries: Stakeholders are deceived without injury.
- Organizational misdeed management misconduct: Laws or regulations are violated by management.
- Organizational misdeed with injuries: Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur.

**SCCT’s crisis response strategies**

When an organization is embroiled in public turmoil, it must assume accountability and take responsibility for its actions to some degree to appease the public. It is essential for crisis managers to decide suitable response strategies because they are considered as the organization’s answer to the crisis. Coombs have spent extensive time over the years conducting research in the
field of crisis communication. His earlier research found that there are three objectives for crisis response strategies in reputation protection: to shape recognition of the crisis at hand, to change perception of the organization in crisis, and to reduce the negative impact caused by the crisis (Coombs, 1995). The crisis response strategies found in the SCCT are shaped by an organization’s perceived acceptance or responsibility for a crisis.

SCCT first divide its list of crisis response strategies into primary and secondary categories. Based on previous research, primary crisis response strategies are further broken down into three groups: deny, diminish, and rebuild (Coombs, 2006). Under the primary crisis response strategies umbrella, deny strategies include attack the accuser, denial, and scapegoat. In circumstances where deny strategies are employed, organizations and its crisis managers attempt to place the blame on other party or parties because they do not accept any responsibility for the crisis. Therefore, deny strategies are designed to eliminate all connections between the organization and the crisis. The underlying rationale behind this type of response strategy is that if people are unable to make the association for organizational involvement in a crisis, then that organization will not suffer any reputational damage. Diminish strategies consist of excuse and justification. Here, crisis managers take some responsibility for the crisis but still attempt to use excuses to minimize responsibility on an organization’s behalf or use justification to lessen apparent damage already caused by a crisis. Compensation and apology are strategies found under rebuild crisis response strategies. Crisis managers accept full responsibility for a crisis, become more accommodating, and show greater concern for the victim(s) to quickly pacify the situation and improve organizational reputation. The SCCT posits that the most appropriate response to intentional crisis is rebuild, followed by diminish response; accidental crisis calls for diminish response first followed by
rebuild; and victim crisis uses deny as a first response followed by diminish as second response (Sisco, 2012).

Secondary crisis response strategies consist of bolstering strategies such as reminder and ingratiating, where it is the goal for crisis management to remind the public the positive works the organization has done in the past. Victimage is third and final strategy found under bolstering strategies in which crisis managers tries to remind others that the company is also a victim to the crisis.

**Crisis response strategy guidelines**

Coombs further proposed an eight-part model, which acts as a list of crisis response strategy guidelines for crisis managers. Sisco (2012) insists that based on Coombs’s theory, managers should examine and evaluate each crisis based on factors outlined by the SCCT and crisis managers should then choose the appropriate corresponding strategy. The eight-part guidelines are as follows (Coombs, 2007, p. 173):

1. Informing and adjusting information alone can be enough when crises have minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (victim crises), no history of similar crises and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation.
2. Victimage can be used as part of the response for workplace violence, product tampering, natural disasters and rumors.
3. Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (victim crises) coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation.
4. Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility (accident crises), which have no history of similar crises, and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation.
5. Rebuild crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility (accident crises), coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation.
6. Rebuild crisis response strategies should be used for crises with strong attributions of crisis responsibility (preventable crises) regardless of crisis history or prior relationship reputation.
7. The deny posture crisis response strategies should be used for rumor and challenge crises, when possible.
response strategies with either diminish or rebuild strategies will erode the effectiveness of the overall response.

**Application of SCCT**

Crisis communication research in the world of sports that uses the Situational Crisis Communication Theory as basis for research seems to be scarce. However, past studies exist from other industries. Howell and Miller (2010) conducted a study in which the crisis response strategies employed by Maple Leaf Foods Inc. during a large-scale product recall in 2008 were evaluated using the SCCT. Through textual analysis, the study analyzed online documents released by the company as well as available online media coverage regarding the case. The study defined the type of crisis faced by Maple Leaf Foods Inc. and identified response strategies the company used in dealing with the fiasco. In the case of the food product recall, the crisis was classified as under the accidental cluster due to technical errors by Maple Leaf Foods Inc. Although the cause of the crisis was not intentional on behalf of the company, the potential for reputational damage in this case was extremely high. The negative publicity would create tons of backlashes from the public and media. Maple Leaf Foods Inc. quickly accepted full blame and opted for rebuild strategies. Howell and Miller (2010) found that Maple Leaf Foods Inc. employed apology (a rebuild strategy) as its dominant strategy and used excuse (a diminish strategy) to deny any intentional harm, thereby reassert the crisis as an accident. According to Howell and Miller (2010), the reaction by Maple Leaf Foods Inc. is consistent with rules set out by Coombs’s SCCT: “rebuild strategies should be used for crises with strong attributions of responsibility regardless of crisis history or prior relationship reputation” (Coombs, 2007, p. 173). By apologizing during the initial phase of the crisis and subsequently offering compensation to the victims, the company demonstrated great concern for the stakeholders, which eventually led to minimal reputational damage.
Sisco (2012) tested the applicability of each strategy as stated by the SCCT (deny, diminish, and rebuild) in situations where non-profit organizations were at the center of turmoil. The results yielded from a 3 x 2 experimental design where participants were asked to read to an initial crisis response strategy from a fictitious non-profit organization in crisis. Participants were then asked to answer questions about how they view the organizational response, how much blame do they place on the organization, and how they perceive the organization in the future to measure the overall appropriateness and effectiveness of the strategies. The combined results of the study demonstrated that the SCCT is indeed an effective crisis management theory in public relations. The study was also able to prove that for non-profit organizations, the crisis response strategies suggested by Coombs did seem to reduce reputational damage and maintain positive image in the public eye (Sisco, 2012). The study concluded that in the real world, public relations practitioners working for non-profit organizations would find the SCCT to be a valuable tool to develop a crisis management plan before crises occur.

The SCCT has been applied to many crisis communications case studies in the modern business world. However, research for how the theory fits into crisis management in the sports industry is limited. This is unexpected considering its size, its dominant presence in people’s lives, and the high frequency in which crises occur in sports. The research will hopefully produce findings that will be useful to crisis managers working in the sports industry.

**Research Questions**

RQ1: What were the strategies employed by the San Francisco 49ers in responding to the National Anthem crisis?

RQ2: To what degree did the response strategies selected by the San Francisco 49ers match the response strategies suggested by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory?
Methodology

Qualitative research methods, textual analysis and case study, will be the methodologies used for this research. Textual analysis is a research technique in which data are gathered to help researchers understand how other “human beings make sense of the world” (McKee, 2003, p. 1). Contemporary textual analysis has been used in a variety of ways by drawing from diverse interpretive strategies (Fursich, 2009). This approach focuses on the “underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text” (Fursich, 2009, p. 240) and allows the researcher to discover and understand the meaning behind the text in a broader cultural context. McKee (2001) asserts that context is imperative to textual analysis because it determines how texts will be interpreted.

McKee (2003) states that there are three levels of context one should consider when analyzing elements of a text: the rest of the text, the genre of the text, and the wider public context in which a text is circulated. The rest of the text means that researchers should ask what the element means in the context of a text. The genre of the text looks at the meaning of the element in a genre and how it will influence the audience’s overall understanding of the text. And finally, McKee emphasizes that it is easy to misunderstand a text if one does not examine the general context in which it circulates and its influence on the audience’s reading of the text. The more one understands about the context of a text, at all three levels, the more he or she will be able to make meaningful interpretations of a text.

Barrett (2005) employed textual analysis to examine the role of spokespersons and message control in the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) response to the anthrax crisis in 2001. Data for the study consisted of CDC press releases, CDC tele-briefing transcripts, and regional and national newspaper coverage published from October 2001 to February 2002 (Barrett, 2005). The study used press releases for background information and newspaper coverage to
understand how the public received the CDC messages. Textual analysis was conducted on telebriefing transcripts and corresponding print media to “determine major communication themes, identify communication inconsistencies, and examine the role of CDC spokespersons during the crisis” (Barrett, 2005, p. 61).

Coding for the textual analysis for this research is decided by using the principles of directed content analysis. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), directed content analysis is an approach used to “validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory” (p. 1281). Compared to the conventional approach, this method of coding takes a more structured approach by using key variables identified by the existing theory, the SCCT, as coding categories (see Appendix B). Data for the textual analysis are then analyzed using the coding scheme to classify major themes thereby identify what crisis response strategies are employed.

Data source for the proposed textual analysis will be relevant social media posts made on San Francisco 49ers Facebook page and official 49ers news releases at the start Keapernick’s boycott of the national anthem starting on August 26, 2016 to the end of the crisis, November 2016, as media ceased talks of the national anthem and Colin Kaepernick. The plan is to examine each post and identify the strategies employed by the football team based on key terms and/or phrases that reflect the characteristics of each crisis response strategy as outlined in the SCCT.

To assure the overall reliability and validity of this research, a second method, case study, will be used for data triangulation. Case study is a qualitative research method that has been cited by researchers as a method that is useful to study historical events (Baxter & Jack, 2008). By employing case study as a research methodology, Yin (2003) was able to explore her subject(s) through complex interventions, relationships, communities, or programs. Furthermore, a case
study approach allows for the “deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544).

So how does one decide to use the case study approach for his or her research? Yin (2003) asserts that researchers should consider the case study method when (1) the aim of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions; (2) the behaviors of those involved in the study are independent of the researcher therefore cannot be influenced or changed; (3) the subject is being studied because the researcher believes it to be relevant to the research topic at hand; or (4) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. In addition, the case study method works to simplify complex issues and allows for great flexibility.

The purpose of this study is to examine how an organization responds to crisis in the public eye. And the National Anthem crisis experienced by the San Francisco 49ers is one that became an organizational crisis based on the behavior of a single player. Therefore, the case study analyses will come from organizational crises of similar nature.

The first scandal will be the 2014 incident involving Ray Rice and his then-fiancée Janay Palmer. A video surfaced online showing the Baltimore Ravens running back knocking out Palmer in a hotel elevator in Atlantic City. Players around the league and fans reacted with outrage. A closer examination of the crisis response strategies used by the Baltimore Ravens will reveal what tools were used during the process, how the response strategies affected the public perceptions of the team as well as its impact on the reputation of the Ravens organization.

Next, the study will look into the Michael Vick dog fighting scandal. News of Vick’s arrest for his role in a dog fighting ring shocked the NFL world. Following his arrest, the NFL took instant action against Vick. The Atlanta Falcons, Vick’s team at the time of his arrest, also responded immediately. This case study will be useful in identifying how the league and its
executives used the appropriate strategies in handling this crisis to preserve and maintain their overall positive images despite the disgraceful actions of a single player.

The third and final case study will be conducted on the Kobe Bryant sexual assault scandal in 2003. The scandal hurt Bryant’s image tremendously and it posed as a dilemma for the Los Angeles Lakers organization because Bryant is their star player. His actions both on and off the court have a direct impact on the Lakers. Considering the accusations against Kobe Bryant, how can the Lakers support their star player while protect the Lakers brand and maintain its favorable image in the public eye?

Conclusions will be drawn based on both methodologies upon the completion of the textual analysis and case studies. There will be drawbacks and limitations with both approaches; they will be discussed at the end of the research study.

**Findings**

**Textual analysis**

The textual analysis of sixteen 49ers Facebook posts and news releases produced the following findings:

- Eight of the dataset received code 8, meaning they showed qualities consistent with reminder, a bolstering strategy.
- Four of the dataset received code 9, meaning they showed qualities consistent with ingratiation, a bolstering strategy.
- Two of the dataset received code 5, meaning they showed qualities consistent with justification, a diminish strategy.
- Two of the dataset received code 6, meaning they showed qualities consistent with compensation, a rebuild strategy.
Half of the data suggests that the San Francisco 49ers used reminder as a crisis response strategy during the national anthem crisis. It is worthy to note though, these posts and news releases made no mention of the crisis. This was done deliberately because, during that time, Kaepernick and the 49ers received plenty of backlash from the media and the public for Kaepernick not standing for the national anthem. The Facebook posts and news releases in this dataset served to remind the public the positive qualities of Kaepernick, from both a professional and personal standpoint.

Professionally, the 49ers highlighted Kaepernick’s mental and physical toughness as a player by presenting him as someone who values his team as priority and is resilient through adversity. This is further supported by quotes from Kaepernick and his coaching staff such as: “I have to wait my time and work. I’ve been in this position before”, “Kap has a history of being really good in this league”, and “I’m always going to be prepared, always ready to put it on the line for this team”. Additionally, the team also showcased Kaepernick’s work with Camp Taylor, a charity for kids with heart diseases. Kaepernick has been involved with Camp Taylor since he was first drafted by the 49ers; he continues to not only donate to the charity but also spends quality time with the kids at the camp as if he is a kid himself.

Coombs (2007) defines ingratiation as a bolstering strategy where “crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization” (p. 170). A video posted on September 9, 2016 showing the 49ers safety Eric Reid, Kaepernick’s teammate and supporter of his cause commending the football team’s $1 million donation towards improving social issues in America reminds the public of the good work by the organization. Three days later the team’s Facebook page posted an image of members of the Santa Clara Police Department and Fire Department, thanking them for opening the locker room doors. The 49ers praise of the services of
the police and fire departments is important because the main cause for Kaepernick to sit out of the national anthem is numerous acts of police brutality against African-Americans around the country. The 49ers wanted to show people that their organization praises and appreciates the policemen and firemen.

The same night, 49ers also posted four images taken during the singing of the national anthem: three images showing the American flag in the center of the field, members of the military and players from the 49ers standing around the flag and one showing players in a team huddle. These imageries are powerful in that they highlight nationalism and promote unity. They also serve to praise the fans for their continued support for the team and more importantly, their respect for the American flag and the national anthem. At the start of the 2016-17 NFL season, many fans responded to Kaepernick’s boycott of the national anthem by burning his jersey and vowing to stop attending 49ers games for as long as he is a member of the team. These images posted on September 13, 2016 tell a different story. This was done to also praise the fans and promote positivity at 49ers home games.

One Facebook post and one news release on 49ers official website from the start of the crisis employed justification, a diminish strategy, as initial crisis response. Justification is a crisis response strategy in which crisis manager tries to minimize the perceived damage caused by a crisis (Coombs, 2007). The team attempted to explain Kaepernick’s reasoning for not standing during the national anthem to their audience. The news release denied “anti-America” sentiments from Kaepernick and stressed that the reasoning behind his actions is the intent to start social change. The show of support from others around the league further shows justification efforts.

Finally, statements from 49ers CEO Jed York regarding his $1 million contribution towards the cause of improving racial and economic inequality and fostering communication between law
enforcement and the public community can be classified as compensation, a rebuild strategy. The donation was made in the early stage of the crisis which helped the 49ers’ public image and reputation. Although the money is not compensation for victims, the purpose of the donation aligned with the ideals and goals offered by Kaepernick as explanation for not standing during the national anthem. The organization wanted to show that they are doing something good by giving money towards a cause that their community will benefit from.

Case study 1: Ray Rice

In February 2014, security footage surfaced showing Ray Rice, running back for the Baltimore Ravens, dragging his then-fiancé Janay Palmer’s limp unconscious body out of a hotel elevator by her feet. The National Football League issued a two-game suspension as damage control (Sweeney et al., 2016; Weathers et al., 2016). However, a second surveillance video was obtained and released by TMZ in September 2014 depicting exactly what transpired inside the elevator that rendered Palmer unconscious. The Ravens running back can be seen striking Palmer on two separate occasions while inside the elevator; his second blow struck so hard that Palmer passed out immediately, hitting the railing on the way down. The fallout from the second video stirred up uproar and brought about criticism from those within the league as well as the public.

The following is a detailed timeline regarding the Ray Rice domestic violence incident:

**February 15:** Ray Rice and Janay Palmer are arrested and charged with simple assault following their physical altercation at the Revel Casino in Atlantic City (Fenton, 2014).

**February 19:** TMZ releases video showing Rice dragging the unconscious Palmer out of the elevator by her feet. Rice’s attorney makes the statement:

“We are confident that by the time all of the facts are in the open, the public will have a complete and true picture of what actually transpired, and we just ask the
public remember what a high-character, good person Ray is, and that they reserve judgment until all the facts are out” (Gray, 2014, SB Nation).

The Baltimore Ravens also released an official statement: “We have seen the video, this is a serious matter and we are currently gathering more information” (Gray, 2014, SB Nation).

**February 21:** Heads of the Ravens organization came to Rice’s defense and maintain that he will remain to be part of the team. Raven’s head coach John Harbaugh defends Rice’s character, “There are a lot of facts and a process that has to be worked through in anything like this. There are a lot of question marks. But Ray’s character, you guys know his character. So you start with that” (Downing, 2014, Baltimore Ravens).

**February 22:** Ravens General Manager Ozzie Newsome comments, “I’m going to reserve all my comments until I’ve had a chance to talk to Ray. The whole video needs to be reviewed” (Kadar, 2014, SB Nation).

**March 5:** Baltimore Ravens (via Twitter) and Coach Harbaugh announce that Rice and Palmer will attend couples seminar. Coach Harbaugh states, “Ray has told me his side of it, and everything we’ve seen so far is very consistent with what he said” (Hensley, 2014, ESPN).

**March 26:** When asked if the league is aware of the Ray Rice incident and will there be discipline against Ray Rice, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell says, “The answer to that is yes. And I don’t know the second part. We will let the facts dictate that” (Mink, 2014, Baltimore Ravens).

**March 27:** Rice is indicted by a grand jury on third-degree assault charges. The Ravens releases a statement that read: “This is part of the due process for Ray. We know there is more to Ray Rice than this one incident” (ESPN.com news services, 2014).

**March 28:** Rice and Palmer get married.
May 1: Rice pleads not guilty on charges and applies for a pretrial intervention program. If accepted, he will avoid formal prosecution (Hensley, 2014).

May 20: Rice is accepted into the pretrial intervention program. His charges are to be dismissed upon his completion of the year-long program.

May 23: Rice and his now wife hold a press conference from the Ravens practice facility. The Ravens live-tweet the event. Ray Rice states, “I apologize for the situation my wife and I were in.” The Ravens also tweets, “Janay Rice says she deeply regrets the role she played the night of the incident” (Van Bibber, 2014, SB Nation).

July 27: The NFL announces a two-game suspension for Rice. Ozzie Newsome releases a statement: “While not having Ray for the first two games is significant to our team, we respect the league’s decision and believe it is fair” (@Ravens). Furthermore, Newsome maintains: “That night was not typical of the Ray Rice we know and respect” (@Ravens).

July 29: The NFL claims that they did not see the full video of the incident.

July 31: Rice tells reporters that his actions were inexcusable.

August 1: NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell defends his two-game suspension decision, “I take into account all of the information before I make a decision on what the discipline will be. In this case, there was no discipline by the criminal justice system. They put him in that diversionary program” (Graziano, 2014, ESPN).

August 28: Goodell and the NFL announce new domestic violence policy for the league. Goodell sent a lengthy letter to league’s team owners outlining a six-game suspension without pay for first-time offenders and lifetime ban for second offenders. Goodell also admits, “I take responsibility both for the decision and for ensuring that our actions in the future properly reflect
our values. I didn’t get it right. Simply put, we have to do better. And we will” (McManus, 2014, ESPNW).

**September 8:** TMZ releases the video showing Rice striking Palmer. Hours later, Ravens announces Rice’s contract had been terminated (@Ravens). The Baltimore Ravens also deletes tweet from Rice and Palmer’s press conference. Roger Goodell announces Rice is suspended from the league indefinitely.

**September 8:** Coach Harbaugh says the Ravens did not see the video until released by TMZ (Sandritter, 2014).

**September 9:** The NFL says the video was never seen by anyone at the league until released by TMZ (Verderame, 2014). Roger Goodell also denies ever seeing the video, “We assumed that there was a video, we asked for video, we asked for anything that was pertinent, but we were never granted that opportunity” (Conner, 2014, SB Nation).

**September 9:** Ravens owner Steve Bisciotti issues an apology letter for their response to the incident:

“The decision to let Ray Rice go was unanimous. Seeing that video changed everything. We should have seen it earlier. We should have pursued our own investigation more vigorously. We didn't and we were wrong. Because of his positive contributions on and off the field over the last six years, Ray had earned every benefit of the doubt from our organization. We took everything we knew and decided to support Ray Rice until we could not. I am sorry we let you down” (Hensley, 2014, ESPN).

**September 10:** The NFL announces an independent investigation of the incident and those involved.
September 16: Rice appeals the indefinite suspension.

November 28: Rice wins the appeal and is reinstated by the NFL.

With the emergence of the first video in February 2014, the Ray Rice incident became an instant crisis for the Baltimore Ravens and the National Football League. The crisis caused by the football running back should be considered as one belonging to the accidental cluster in that Rice’s actions leading up to the crisis were unintentional in nature. According to the SCCT, the most appropriate response in accidental crises is diminish strategies, followed by using rebuild strategies. The football franchise and the league both employed diminish strategies as their initial crisis response strategies. For the Baltimore Ravens, their responses are critical as it has direct impact on its organizational image in the court of public opinion. As stated by the SCCT, the purpose of diminish strategies are to minimize an individual or an organization’s role in the crisis and to reduce the offensiveness caused by the crisis. Upon seeing the video, the management of the Ravens did not take immediate actions against Rice but instead they appeared to be using still gathering information pertaining to the incident as excuse (a diminish strategy) for inaction on behalf of the organization. The Ravens also employed bolstering strategies, which the SCCT identify as secondary crisis response strategies. The heads of the Ravens, including the head coach, repeatedly attempted to remind the public the good qualities of Rice on and off the field. By bolstering Rice’s character, the Ravens are attempting to distract the public from forming potential negative opinions against the running back and more importantly, against the Ravens organization. Roger Goodell and the NFL were slow in their response. When they did, they cited lack of information on the incident as well.

Following the grand jury indictment, Rice turned to the woman he assaulted to save his public image. Upon getting married, they held a press conference at the Ravens practice facility as
husband and wife. Here, the Baltimore Ravens attempts to frame the incident under a different light by live-tweeting the press conference via Twitter. The team tweets, “Janay Rice says she deeply regrets the role she played the night of the incident” (Van Bibber, 2014, SB Nation) shifts the blame by framing Janay Rice’s role in the incident from that of a victim to the role of a perpetrator. The guilt attached to Ray Rice seems to also transfer to Janay Rice. Therefore, the negative public perception towards Ray Rice and the Ravens organization may shift onto Janay Rice by using Janay Rice as scapegoat, which is considered a deny crisis response strategy by the SCCT. This strategy eventually backfired and the Ravens received much criticism for portraying Janay Rice as a party to blame. The Ravens, more than three months later, finally deleted the tweet from the organization’s official Twitter account (Brinson, 2014).

At the beginning of August 2014, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell finally acts and disciplines Rice for his actions based on the first video by imposing a two-game suspension on the professional running back. The court of public opinion deems the punishment too light. Past NFL history reflects that players received four-game suspension for violating the league’s drug policy; the punishment for Rice did not reflect the values we hold dear as a society in an impartial and just manner (NPR Special Series, 2014). Goodell subsequently tries to take corrective action again by implementing a new domestic violence policy within the league and openly taking responsibility for not “getting it right” with Ray Rice (McManus, 2014, ESPNW). At this point, any actions taken by the league were considered too late. Critics and franchise owners around the league expressed that the reputation of the NFL has been tainted by the Ray Rice incident due to the league’s “failure to hand out proper punishments” (Belson & Eder, 2015, nytimes.com).

The situation worsened for all involved by early September 2014 as TMZ released a second video showing Rice striking his then-fiancé in the elevator. Many media outlets reported that both
the Baltimore Ravens and the NFL had seen the video months prior to its release. Deny strategies came to play once more as the Ravens and the NFL repeatedly denied the allegation against them (Conner 2014; Sandritter, 2014; Verderame, 2014). The issue received mixed responses and the public may never know the truth behind such allegations. After the second video was made public, in addition to terminating Rice’s contract, Raven’s owner used rebuild strategies and attempted to restore the organization’s image by publicly apologizing to the fans for the team’s response. The apology would have been a more effective strategy had it been employed earlier in the crisis.

Case study 2: Michael Vick

Michael Vick, quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons from 2001 to 2006, was one of the most talented and explosive players of his generation out on the football field. Under his leadership, the Atlanta Falcons made the playoffs in 2002 and again in 2004; in 2006, Vick set the league’s rushing yards record for a quarterback (Rapp, 2017). Despite Vick’s impressive stats and electrifying performances on the field, perhaps what he will be known and remembered for the most does not have anything to do with football at all. In 2007, federal charges were brought against Vick and his associates for their roles in a dog-fighting ring and a list of related offenses. Vick eventually plead guilty to the charges and subsequently served time in federal prison as punishment. The scandal that surrounded Michael Vick received attention and coverage from every form of media outlet. The story not only destroyed his public image but also sent the Atlanta Falcons and the NFL into a frenzy to protect their organizational reputations. The following is a timeline of the Michael Vick dog-fighting ring scandal (ESPN.com news services, 2007; 2009):

April 25: The police serve a warrant to Vick’s property and discover what appears to be an on-site dog-training facility. Officers seized 66 dogs during the search.
**June 7:** Another search of Vick’s property is conducted by more than a dozen federal agents.

**July 2:** Official court documents are filed alleging Bad Newz Kennels had been operating from Vick’s property for the past five years.

**July 6:** Federal agents conduct another search looking for evidence such as dog remains.

**July 17:** Michael Vick and three other men are indicted by a federal grand jury on dog-fighting charges that include activities such as force breeding and training fighting dogs, hosting fights, traveling to other states for dog fights, and killing dogs that are deemed unfit to fight over a six-year period.

NFL releases the following statement:

“We are disappointed that Michael Vick has put himself in a position where a federal grand jury has returned an indictment against him. The activities alleged are cruel, degrading and illegal. Michael Vick's guilt has not yet been proven, and we believe that all concerned should allow the legal process to determine the facts”.

The Atlanta Falcons posts a statement on the team’s website, “We are disturbed by today’s news. We will do the right thing for our club as the legal process plays out. We have a season to prepare for”.

**July 20:** Activists from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) protest in front NFL headquarter urging for the league to fire Vick.

**July 20:** The NFL Players Association, the Atlanta Falcons, and the NFL urge Vick to take voluntary leave of absence for the upcoming season.

**July 23:** Three days before first day of Falcons training camp, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell orders Vick to steer clear of Falcons training camp until the league reviews the charges
against him. According to Associated Press (2007), in a letter addressed to the quarterback, Goodell stated:

“While it is for the criminal justice system to determine your guilt or innocence, it is my responsibility as commissioner of the National Football League to determine whether your conduct, even if not criminal, nonetheless violated league policies, including the Personal Conduct Policy”.

**July 24**: Atlanta Falcons owner Arthur Blank formally address the Michael Vick scandal in a press conference saying he is ready to impose the maximum 4-day suspension on Vick. He declares Vick’s involvement as “horrific” actions but does not make statements regarding Vick’s future career.

**July 26**: Vick pleads not guilty to charges against him in federal court.

**July 30**: One of Vick’s three co-defendants pleads guilty and agrees to testify against others involved. Vick tells an Atlanta-based radio station that he hopes to play with the Falcons again.

**August 17**: Vick’s other co-defendants plead guilty. They admit to traveling with Vick to other states for dog fights and describe details of the execution of six to eight dogs.

**August 23**: Vick pleads guilty to conspiracy in dog fighting ring and helping to kill dogs. He also admits to funding the dog fights. Goodell suspends Vick from the league indefinitely.

**December 10**: Vick receives a 23-month sentence from a federal judge who believed Vick to be “instrumental in promoting, funding and facilitating” the act of “inhumane sporting activity”.

**February 19, 2009**: Atlanta Falcons general manager Thomas Dimitroff makes statements on team’s website that the Falcons intends to trade Vick to another team.
May 21, 2009: Vick is released from prison after serving 18 months. Goodell maintains that he will review Vick’s status once the criminal case is over to decide whether Vick will be reinstated by the league.

June 12, 2009: Atlanta Falcons release statements on team’s website permanently cutting ties with Michael Vick.

July 27, 2009: Vick is reinstated by the NFL.

Vick’s dog-fighting crisis, by SCCT definition, is classified as a preventable or intentional crisis; he knowingly placed himself and his employers at risk with inappropriate as well as illegal behavior. In such crisis, rebuild strategies are deemed most appropriate, followed by diminish strategies.

Although case study revealed that organizations involved did not follow strategies and guidelines outlined by the SCCT, both the NFL and the Atlanta Falcons responded to the Michael Vick dog-fighting crisis in a manner that was considered appropriate and favorable by the public. Each made prompt public statements in the beginning as Vick and company were indicted by a federal grand jury. In the event of a crisis, the timeliness of response is crucial for organizational image to public perception. In this case, at a time when information was limited to the public, the reactions on behalf of the league and the Falcons franchise were sufficient. The organizations were clear in denouncing the Vick’s actions so that there would be no confusion when it comes to their stance on the issue. The move to urge Vick to take a leave of absence and to stay away from training camp were good moves because to allow Vick further participation in league and team events send the message that Vick’s employers condone his behavior off the field. After more details related to dog-fighting charges came to light, Atlanta Falcons owner Arthur Blank stated in an interview, “There was no indication, no sign, no whisper of that type of behavior. That
in the indictment] is not the person I've known the past six years” (Fleming, 2007). This statement is an example of victimage, a bolstering strategy, where crisis manager attempts to remind others that his or her organization is also a victim of the crisis. As a franchise owner in the NFL, Blank had previously believed in Vick so much that in 2004, he offered Vick a 10-year contract worth $130 million (Fleming, 2007). Blank built a team based on Vick’s needs. The reputation of the Falcons suffered minimal damage, if any, considering the severity of allegations and charges against Vick. By the time Vick plead guilty and was sentenced, the public viewed the Falcons as a victim of the ordeal.

In February 2009, while Vick was still serving his prison sentence, the Falcons expressed the team’s intent to trade Vick to another franchise. The timing for this was most likely because Vick was set to complete his sentence therefore will be released later that year. Following his release, the Falcons knew that Vick will be seeking to be reinstated by the NFL. Therefore, General Manager Thomas Dimitroff said, “Michael remains suspended by the NFL. However, in the event NFL commissioner Roger Goodell decides to reinstate Michael, we feel his best opportunity to re-engage his football career would be at another club” (CNN, 2009). This was the way the Falcons chose to announce that the organization intends to permanently cut ties with Vick. The announcement came as no surprise since owner Arthur Blank has always maintained that Vick will never return to the Falcons. By late July 2009, Roger Goodell offered Vick the opportunity to return to the NFL. “Needless to say, your margin for error is extremely limited," Goodell said in his letter to Vick. "I urge you to take full advantage of the resources available to support you and to dedicate yourself to rebuilding your life and your career. If you do this, the NFL will support you” (ESPN news services, 2009). Goodell stressed to the media that he did not make the decision to reinstate Vick lightly; he consulted the opinions of numerous past and current coaches and
players and received mixed answers. While the NFL commissioner recognized that some people may never forgive Vick for his actions, he urged the public to give Vick a second chance. Goodell’s sentiments, coupled with Vick’s own efforts to repair his image since the beginning of the scandal, made it easier for the public to accept Vick’s reinstatement. The timing was also a factor since it had been nearly two years since the scandal and Vick served time in prison for his crime. Many felt that Vick had been punished enough and chose to accept and welcome his return to the sport.

The primary response strategies used by the organizations involved in this case study are not consistent with the SCCT. It does prove, however, SCCT’s claim that bolstering strategies are best used to supplement primary crisis response strategies and adjusting information (Coombs, 2007).

**Case study 3: Kobe Bryant**

In 1996, Kobe Bryant was a first-round draft pick for the Charlotte Hornets and became a professional basketball player for the National Basketball Association at the age of 17. He was traded to the Los Angeles Lakers later in the same year where he eventually became a franchise player for the organization. Merely two years after he turned pro, Bryant became the youngest player selected for NBA All-Star Game. Bryant was an integral part of the Lakers team that won three straight NBA championships during 2000-2002 seasons (CNN, 2003). In the summer of 2003, however, Bryant seemed to be on the verge of losing everything he has worked so hard for. A 19-year-old Colorado hotel employee came forth with rape allegations against the NBA star. Bryant was charged with one count felony sexual assault. The following is a timeline of the key events in the Kobe Bryant rape case (CNN, 2003; Chicago Tribune, 2017):
June 30: Bryant flies to Colorado for an upcoming knees surgery. A 19-year-old woman working at the front desk checks him in and accompany him on a tour of the hotel. She later goes to Bryant’s room, where she claims the rape took place.

July 1: Bryant’s accuser report the rape to Eagle County Sheriff’s Department.

July 18: Bryant is officially charged with one count of felony sexual assault. Bryant holds a press conference at Staples Center during which he admits to sexual intercourse with the accuser but insists it was consensual and that he is innocent.

March 24, 2004: The accuser testifies behind closed doors regarding her sexual history.

May 11, 2004: Bryant pleads not guilty in criminal case.

June 24, 2004: A court reporter accidentally releases transcripts of the accuser’s closed door testimony.

August 10, 2004: The accuser files civil lawsuit against Bryant in federal court.

September 1, 2004: The accuser no longer wishes to proceed with the criminal trial. Therefore, prosecution decides to drop the criminal charges.

March 2, 2005: Both sides reached settlement in the case, but no specific terms were made public.

The analysis for this case differs from the previous case studies because the organizations relevant to Kobe Bryant, the Los Angeles Lakers and the NBA, stayed away from making any comments regarding the scandal. Both organizations viewed the scandal as a personal crisis for Bryant rather than an organizational crisis. Further probe into the crisis response strategies used by the Lakers and the NBA in the Kobe Bryant rape scandal revealed nearly no results. David Stern, NBA commissioner at the time, decided to wait for the outcome of the trial before taking any actions against Bryant, citing the league’s policy as reason. “As with all allegations of a
criminal nature, the NBA’s policy is to await the outcome of a judicial proceeding before taking any action. We do not anticipate making further comments during the pendency of the judicial process,” Stern said (CNN, 2003). The Lakers defended Bryant’s character while allowing the judicial process to take its course. Lakers commentator John Ireland stated:

“People won’t believe it unless [District Attorney Mark Hurlbert] can actually prove it to them. He says he’s got to prove it to a jury. He’s going to have to prove it to the people of Los Angeles, because [Kobe] has built up that much good over seven years” (CNN, 2003).

When it comes to Bryant’s scandal, while it can be viewed as an accidental crisis in that the actions leading to the crisis were unplanned (in the sense that Bryant most likely never intended for the public to find out about him committing adultery), it more so belongs in the intentional or preventable cluster. Coombs (2007) maintain that in this cluster perpetrators knowingly put others at risk and took inappropriate actions. According to the SCCT, the crisis responses strategies for the intentional or preventable cluster are rebuild followed by diminish. The way Bryant handled his crisis seem to validate this point in the SCCT. The basketball star employed both strategies in his public apology when he said:

“Although I truly believe this encounter between us was consensual, I recognize now that she did not and does not view this incident the same way I did. After months of reviewing discovery, listening to her attorney, and even her testimony in person, I now understand how she feels that she did not consent to this encounter” (Kenworthy & O’Driscoll, 2004).

His apology (a rebuild strategy) expressed deep remorse for his actions and heartfelt compassion for the alleged victim. However, Bryant also used excuse and justification (diminish strategies) by
denying an ill intent and attempting to minimize the perceived damage caused by the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

**Discussion**

RQ1: What were the strategies employed by the San Francisco 49ers in responding to the National Anthem crisis?

Based on the textual analysis conducted in this study, the crisis response strategies that the San Francisco 49ers used are diminish strategies, immediately followed by rebuild strategies; bolstering strategies supplemented both primary response strategies. As stated in the previous section, the 49ers used justification, a diminish strategy, during the initial phase of the national anthem crisis to provide an explanation to the public and to minimize the perceived damage to the organization’s reputation. Days later, the CEO of the football club used compensation, a rebuild strategy. Although there are no victims who endured physical pain from the crisis, the donation is intended to shine a positive light on the organization.

RQ2: To what degree did the response strategies selected by the San Francisco 49ers match the response strategies suggested by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory?

Case study 1 matched the response strategies suggested by the SCCT where in the event of an accidental crisis. An organization will first respond by using diminish strategies followed by rebuild strategies. However, conclusions regarding organizational primary crisis response strategies are inconclusive. While case study 3 lacked sufficient research relevant to crisis response strategies on behalf of the organization, research revealed that primary crisis response strategies used by the individual, who is at the center of the crisis, are consistent with strategies outlined by the SCCT. Furthermore, textual analysis and case studies confirmed the role of bolstering
strategies as stated by Coombs (2007) amid crises. Bolstering strategies are supplemental to any primary crisis response strategies.

The answer to this research question is dependent on how one categorize the type of crisis experienced by the San Francisco 49ers. If one views the national anthem crisis one belonging to the accidental cluster of the SCCT, then the primary response strategies agree with the guidelines suggested by the SCCT: diminish strategies are first, then rebuild strategies. If one identify the national anthem crisis as an intentional crisis, then the strategies used by the 49ers do not match those suggested by the theory because the SCCT states that in such crisis clusters, rebuild strategies are used as primary response strategies followed by diminish strategies.

**Limitations and Future Research**

One of the major limitations of the research is the role of social media and its effect on crisis response strategies of cases such as Michael Vick and Kobe Bryant. Although both are significant crises in the sports industry, they occurred before social media platforms became a prevalent communications tool. Therefore, due to the timing of each crisis, research materials are extremely limited compared to that of the Ray Rice crisis. Secondly, given the research topic, in-depth interviews with professional public relations practitioners with knowledge and expertise in the sports industry would have been a more effective second methodology as opposed to case studies. But due to the researcher’s limited time and inexperience, in-depth interviews did not come to fruition as originally planned before the research process began.

Although the crises selected for case studies are like the National Anthem crisis in that all are situations where the actions of a single player are the catalyst for the organizational crisis that followed, the case studies differ due to nature of the players’ actions. Rice’s and Vick’s conducts
were illegal crimes whereas Bryant’s act was considered immoral. It is important to realize that organizations may react and respond to these situations differently.

Case studies of the Kobe Bryant’s rape scandal, Michael Vick’s dog-fighting charges, and Ray Rice’s domestic violence controversy show that due to the existence and wide use of social media, the public demand more from organizations during a crisis. Future research of similar nature should take into consideration how public relations and crisis communication have evolved over time, especially since the emergence of the Internet and social media.

Conclusion

This research has confirmed the validity of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory in crises experienced by the sports industry. The San Francisco 49ers employed primary response strategies indicated by the SCCT in the organization’s handling of the national anthem crisis. Findings show that organizations must employ bolstering strategies to support primary crisis response strategies efforts. The results also suggest that additional research is necessary in uncovering how social media has influenced organizational crisis response strategies over time.