

**Tackling disease and denials:  
The image repair strategies of the National Football League's response to CTE  
and concussions**

by

Logan Patrick Barrett

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Auburn University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Auburn, Alabama  
May 3, 2020

Keywords: Image Restoration, NFL, Concussions, Football, Image Repair, CTE

Copyright 2020 by Logan Patrick Barrett

Approved by

Dr. John Carvalho, Professor, Communication and Journalism  
Dr. Diana Sisson, Assistant Professor, Communication and Journalism  
Dr. Michael Milford, Associate Professor, Communication and Journalism

### **Abstract**

This study discusses the National Football League's (NFL) response campaign to concussions and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) primarily focusing on the response during the tenure of NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell. This is a relevant topic due to the massive following of professional football and the economic and cultural impact that the sport of football possesses. This study uses William Benoit's Theory of Image Restoration (1995) and its strategies to evaluate the different aspects of the NFL's campaign. To do this as accurately and as detailed as possible, this study will split the NFL's campaign into three prongs: the communicative, the programs and initiatives, and the investments in research. The research questions address the strategies used in each of the prongs individually and collectively and contrasts which strategies were used in each prong. Multiple levels of coding were done on several different items to develop a better idea of what strategies were used and why. The results found that the NFL primarily used corrective action followed by bolstering in their response campaign to concussions and CTE supporting the argument made by Compton and Compton (2015).

### **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Rachel Fillingim for your everlasting support and patience during this process.

Thank you to my parents, Melissa, Shawn, and John, for encouraging me to pursue my education and passions in life. Thank you to my peers and professors for dealing with my incessant questions, curiosity, and tangents. Lastly, thanks be to God for giving me the opportunity to receive the education I have and everything that has gotten me to this point in life.

**Table of Contents**

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
List of Tables.....	6
Introduction.....	7
Background.....	7
Purpose.....	12
Literature Review.....	13
General Applications of Image Restoration.....	17
Sports Applications of Image Restoration.....	19
NFL Applications of Image Restoration.....	21
Research Questions.....	25
Methods.....	26
Results.....	29
Strategies used by Prong.....	29
Comparison of Strategies.....	32
Overall use of Strategies.....	34
Discussion.....	36
Image Restoration Strategies in Each Prong.....	36
Image Restoration Strategies Overall.....	40
Analysis of the NFL’s Image Restoration Campaign.....	47
Limitations and Future Research.....	49
Conclusion.....	49

References.....53

**List of Tables**

Table 1.....27

Table 2.....28

Table 3.....31

Table 4.....31

Table 5.....32

Table 6.....33

Table 7.....35

Table 8.....36

## Introduction

### Background

The National Football League (NFL) has been delicately balancing long-term and short-term player health with profits for the last thirty years. One of the most common injuries in the NFL is the concussion, a brain injury that develops from aggressive contact of the head. These injuries can occur from direct hits to the head or from the impact with the ground due to falls and tackles. Chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) was first diagnosed in the early 2000s by Dr. Bennet Omalu, who examined the remains of former NFL lineman Mike Webster. The discovery of this disease has led to hundreds of millions of dollars being spent on research, lawsuits, and health and safety programs.

In 1994, NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue and Dr. Elliot Pellman established the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (MTBI) Committee to research these brain injuries, to explore what the NFL can do to protect these players from injuries, and to prevent premature retirement due to these injuries (Pellman, 2003). This was the beginning of the NFL's fight against concussions and brain injuries. The committee, which consisted of doctors and medical professionals in and out of the NFL, took months to develop a shared definition of a concussion, which they named mild traumatic brain injuries. They understood that their definition "would be broad, realizing that we would rather overidentify injuries than potentially exclude milder ones" (Pellman, 2003, p. 797).

Ultimately, the MTBI Committee defined concussions as "a traumatically induced alteration in brain function that is manifested by 1) alteration of awareness or consciousness – and 2) signs and symptoms commonly associated with postconcussion syndrome" (Pellman, 2003, p. 797). The MTBI committee was not free from lobbyists and salespeople attempting to make some

quick money during its early stages. The committee heard from manufacturers of football equipment. However, they quickly realized that many of them were adding things to their products to make a sale rather than actually make their products safer to use. The MTBI Committee concluded that the NFL should invest in independent research into concussions and “that the NFL Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Committee should be charged with oversight of the project” (Pellman, 2003, p. 798). The MTBI Committee was the first step forward in the NFL’s response to the concussion crisis and has continued to research on concussions and other MTBIs in sports.

Twelve years after the founding of the NFL’s MTBI Committee, one of the biggest pieces of medical research to impact the sports world was released. Dr. Bennet Omalu was a forensic pathologist in the Allegheny County coroner office in the early 2000s when the body of former Pittsburgh Steeler Mike Webster was brought to him for examination. Omalu decided to run tests on Webster’s brain in order to analyze what occurred. Omalu found clusters of tau proteins that created “extracellular amyloid plaques” in multiple parts of Webster’s brain and led to his development of the degenerative brain disease called chronic traumatic encephalopathy (Omalu et al, 2005, p. 130). A fatal illness that can be developed from participation in one of the biggest sports in the world is going to cause an uproar. This discovery was a spark next to a drum of gasoline. These findings were picked up by the media and led to a full-blown crisis for the NFL (Schwarz, 2007; Schwarz, 2009; CBS, 2009). Dr. Anne McKee of Boston University, a leading researcher in CTE, found that 110 out of 111 brains of former NFL football players, 48 out of 53 college football players, and 3 out of 14 high school football players had diagnosable CTE (Moran, 2017).



McKee and Omalu were both featured in a PBS *Frontline* documentary titled “League of denial: The NFL’s concussion crisis.” Michael Kirk, Jim Gilmore, and Mike Wiser interviewed many professionals from the medical field, journalism field, and the football field about CTE and the NFL’s response to it (PBS, 2013). The documentary summarized arguments from both sides of the crisis but appears to be slanted against the NFL because it focuses on their early response rather than their current response. The documentary had a major impact bringing the crisis into public view.

One of the biggest criticisms of the NFL’s handling of the concussion crisis is the alleged similarities and connections to Big Tobacco’s handling, and suppression, of scientific research coming out against them including hiring individuals who worked for large tobacco companies during its crisis (Schwarz, Bognadich, & Williams 2016). Schwarz, Bognadich, and Williams stated that many NFL teams did not participate considerably in the MTBI committee’s research, including the Dallas Cowboys for six seasons, due to the NFL only encouraging participation. This article received a response from the NFL. The NFL (2016a) started off their response with a blistering introduction:

Today’s *New York Times* story on the National Football League is contradicted by clear facts that refute both the thesis of the story and each of its allegations. As the *Times* itself states: ‘The *Times* has found no direct evidence that the league took its strategy from Big Tobacco.’ Despite that concession, the *Times* published pages of innuendo and speculation for a headline with no basis in fact.

This is followed by the NFL claiming that they provided the *New York Times* with over 50 pages of evidence and facts that the NFL claims were ignored by the *New York Times* and then proceeded to publish several statements that countered the accusations from the *New York Times*

(NFL, 2016a). The NFL ended this address highlighting their dedication to their players and their safety by saying that “[t]he *Times*' sensationalized story is further refuted by the NFL's ongoing commitment on the issue of player health and safety -- notably, to the support of research, including that of our most vocal critics, on the long-term effects of concussions in all sports, and to change our game in an effort to make the sport of football as safe as it can be” (NFL, 2016a). The NFL’s concluding statement was a standalone sentence that summarized their argument in this press statement: “Contact sports will never be concussion-free, but we are dedicated to caring for our players, not just throughout long careers but over the course of long lives” (NFL, 2016a).

These circumstances grew into one of the biggest crises in corporate history and required a response. Jeff Miller, the senior vice president for health and safety policy at the NFL, was part of a congressional roundtable discussion regarding concussion research and long-term effects in which Miller stated that there is a connection between football and degenerative brain disorders (Belson & Schwarz, 2016). The *New York Times* picked up on this story and when they reached out to the NFL for confirmation of Miller’s statement, league spokesman Brian McCarthy said that “[t]he comments made by Jeff Miller yesterday accurately reflect the view of the N.F.L.” (Belson & Schwarz, 2016). This shows how much media attention is given to a single sentence stated by an NFL executive in response to the crisis and exemplifies how important the media are to the response campaign conducted by the NFL.

Today, 90 percent of Americans believe that head injuries that cause long-term health problems are a major issue (Kilgore & Clement, 2017). With this view, polls show that 74 percent of Americans describe themselves as football fans. Along with increased scrutiny of injuries comes a decrease in viewership of NFL games. Kilgore and Clement (2017) cite that

“[m]ore than 1 in 5, 23 percent, say their interest in professional football has decreased in recent years, up from 13 percent in 2012,” yet only seven percent cite their decrease of interest to injuries while almost a quarter said that it was due to politics including the protests during the national anthem started by Colin Kaepernick.

To combat concussions, especially in youth football, the NFL pushed for legislation that was passed in 48 states that dealt with youth football and concussions (Fortunato, 2015; Ellenbogen, Berger, & Batjer, 2010). This legislation was directly in response to 13-year-old Zachery Lystedt after he “experienced a life-threatening bilateral subdural hematoma after he returned to play football immediately after a concussion in a school-sanctioned game” (Ellenbogen et al., 2010, p. 563). This legislation had the support of NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, who wrote to 44 governors to encourage them to pass similar legislation. The law was three-pronged:

- 1) an educational piece that included an informed consent that must be signed by parents and youth athletes acknowledging the risk of head injury in any sport, prior to practice or competition; 2) that when a young athlete has experienced a concussion or there is suspicion of concussion, he or she must be immediately removed from competition and practice; and 3) the athlete does not go back into any practice or competition until cleared by a licensed health care professional who is trained in the evaluation and management of concussions (Ellenbogen, et al., 2010, p. 563).

The polling data from the *Washington Post* (Kilgore & Clement, 2017) shows that despite the rising importance of the concussion crisis, the awareness of the public on the issue, and action by several state governments (Ellenbogen et al., 2010), the vast majority of Americans still support

football despite health concerns and those who end their support of professional football, choose to do so mostly for political reasons.

Even when changes are made for the player's best interests in mind, some players do not always agree with them, such as a helmet technology policy change that required that helmets be manufactured within the last 10 years and must pass industry standards (Gutierrez & Seifert, 2019). This policy caused a media sensation with Oakland Raiders wide receiver Antonio Brown. Brown has had the same helmet his entire NFL career and it recently became a banned product because the technology was outdated. When Brown submitted a replacement helmet for certification, the NFL rejected it because it was not manufactured within the past 10 years, so Brown filed a grievance saying that other players got a one-year grace period with their helmets in order to find a replacement. The issue is that the "NFL and NFL Players Association eliminated the grace period after last [2018] season" (Gutierrez & Seifert, 2019). Another star player upset with the helmet policy change was New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, who begrudgingly accepted wearing a new helmet for the 2019 season (Breech, 2019). This policy just a recent example of this program in action and shows how impactful the NFL's response to concussions and CTE can be on the field and in the media.

### **Purpose**

This study will discuss the image restoration strategies of the response campaign from the NFL on the issue of concussions and CTE since its discovery in 2005, focusing on three distinct prongs: the communicative, the investments in research, and the programs and initiatives. The theory that will be used in the analysis of the campaign is Benoit's Theory of Image Restoration (1995), which will show which strategies were used by the NFL and to what extent they were able to have an impact on the overall messaging. A content analysis of press releases, programs,

and investments in order to determine which strategies were used in the NFL's response. This study will examine which image restoration strategies were used by the NFL and how strategies are employed across multiple platforms in the same effort. This will advance our understanding of image restoration and how the strategies interact with one another.

The findings of this study can be used to determine an optimal approach to health crises for organizations. It will also exemplify how image restoration strategies can be used across different media from one entity. This is different from many past studies on image restoration because many studies that focus on multi-sided responses tend to be from multiple rhetors. In this study, it is one rhetor: the NFL.

### **Literature Review**

Benoit's theory of image restoration builds from Ware and Linkugel's (1973) apologia, which focuses on how people handle situations in which they are accused of wrongdoing. Ware and Linkugel's theory centers on public address and identifies multiple strategies that can be used to recover from an accusation (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Ware and Linkugel outline four factors of apologia – denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Denial is the disavowal by the speaker of the act or acts of which they are being accused, while bolstering is basically the reverse of denial in that it takes responsibility for the act or acts accused and reinforces their position behind it. Differentiation is separating the event or act being accused of from something more serious while transcendence is taking the act or event and putting it into a broader context that the audience does not currently view it under.

Ware and Linkugel then take these four factors and translate them into four distinct strategies that can be used exclusively or with each other: absolute (denial and differentiation), vindictive (denial and transcendence), explanative (bolstering and differentiation), and

justificative (bolstering and transcendence) (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). In some cases, using different strategies may be countering a speaker's own message. For example, using absolute with justificative would be seen as initially denying, but then accepting the act or event that the speaker had been accused of such as in Richard Nixon's Watergate rhetoric (Benoit, 1995). Ware and Linkugel provided the foundation for Benoit's theory of image restoration.

This foundation from Ware and Linkugel's apologia has many applications, especially in the sports realm. Martin and McHendry utilized apologia as a lens to analyze the responses of former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick and his supporters of his protests against systematic racism during the national anthem at football games. They found that external factors played a large part in how situations are interpreted and that it is extremely important for strategies to work together rather than against one another.

Benoit's theory of image restoration is based on two primary assumptions: "communication is a goal-directed activity" and that "maintaining a favorable reputation is a key goal of communication" (Benoit, 1995 p. 63, 67). The strategies that Benoit lays out in his theory of image restoration are denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Benoit's definition of denial is almost identical to Ware and Linkugel's but differs in that Benoit expands it to include applying guilt of a situation to another person because "the accused cannot have committed the repugnant act if someone else actually did it" (Benoit, 1995, p. 75). The second strategy is evading responsibility, and there are four tactics of evading responsibility: provocation, defeasibility, make excuses based on accidents, and justification. Provocation is where the blame is shifted to another by claiming that one's actions were in response to an act against them. With defeasibility, the accused doesn't deny that a situation occurred, but argues that he or she should not be held fully accountable because of lack of

information or control over the situation. The last two tactics for evading responsibility are making excuses based on accidents, and justification. Making excuses is fairly self-explanatory and is where the accused says that he or she should not be held accountable for something due to unforeseen circumstances (e.g. someone being late to work due to traffic), while justification is where the accused says that the action was justified based on their intent, somewhat following the idea that the ends justify the means (Benoit, 1995, p. 76).

The next strategy that Benoit discusses is reducing offensiveness. This strategy is arguably the broadest and has six variants: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one's accuser, and compensation. Three of the six variants of reducing offensiveness originate with Ware and Linkugel's *apologia* (1973). Bolstering is where individuals highlight their positive aspects in order to reduce the impact of the negative accusation against them. This differs from minimization, where an individual attempts to decrease the negativity associated with the accusation. Differentiation occurs when "the rhetor attempts to distinguish the act performed from other similar but less desirable actions" (Benoit, 1995, p. 77). Transcendence is another variant that was developed from Ware and Linkugel (1973). With transcendence, the individual attempts to put the act they are accused of in a different context. An example that Benoit (1995) uses is that Robin Hood would not say his actions are stealing, but rather is helping the poor (pp. 78). A more common variant in the political arena, attacking one's accuser, is another method where the individual accused will call the credibility of their accuser(s) into question as a means of reducing the damage to the individual's image. Lastly, compensation is where the individual offers something to the accuser in order to offset the negative impact on their image.

The next image restoration strategy is taking corrective action. There are two forms of corrective action: “restoring the situation to the state of affairs before the objectionable action and/or promising to ‘mend one’s ways’ and make changes to prevent the recurrence of the undesirable act” (Benoit, 1995, p. 79). This is very similar to compensation, but the difference is that corrective action seeks to fix the source of the issue while compensation merely attempts to counterbalance it. The last image restoration strategy, derived from Kenneth Burke (1970), is mortification. With this strategy, the individual admits to the wrongdoing and seeks forgiveness for their actions. Mortification can be used on its own, but Benoit believes that it would be better to use it in combination with corrective action in order to have maximum effectiveness (Benoit, 1995).

Using different strategies together is actually one of the suggestions Benoit states when his theory of image restoration is applied in times of crisis (Benoit, 1997). He states eight other suggestions for image restoration work in times of crisis. Some of these are fairly straightforward such as admitting fault when one is at fault and denying fault when one is not at fault. Others, however, are more specific and nuanced, such as defeasibility can be used effectively when the blame cannot be shifted to others, minimization does not always work to one’s advantage, and shifting the blame can work depending on the situation. These will be helpful when analyzing the results to see if they followed Benoit’s advice on handling crises.

There is a viable alternative that could be used for this analysis in W. Timothy Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (2007). Weber, Erickson, and Stone (2011) use both SCCT and image restoration strategies in their analysis of Citibank during the financial collapse of 2007. The reason this study uses image restoration theory over SCCT is that SCCT focuses more on the crisis as a whole and less on the rhetoric and responses of the organization



in crisis. One of the research questions in this study was the consistency in strategies used between the two theories in the analysis and they found that they were consistent and have the same effect. A common complaint toward image restoration theory is that scapegoating is not named as a strategy, but shifting the blame is often seen as a substitute for this strategy (Weber, Erickson, & Stone, 2011). With this in mind, Benoit's image restoration will be the lens to analyze the NFL's responses.

### **General Applications of Image Restoration**

The Weber, Erickson and Stone (2011) case study on Citibank was also an example of how organizations use image restoration strategies during crises. The banking industry came under crisis following the economic collapse in 2007-2009. In this case study, they found that Citibank used a combination of strategies. Citibank used bolstering as well as corrective action in order to recover their image after the banking industry causing a financial collapse (Weber, Erickson, & Stone, 2011). Another example of the application of this theory would be an analysis of initial strategies implemented by British Petroleum (BP) after the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill conducted by W. Harlow, Brantley, and R. Harlow (2011) in which the authors took press releases from BP's website and coded them for Benoit's image restoration strategies. The finding indicated that the primary strategy used by BP was corrective action (76.3%) followed by compensation (11.9%). Harlow and his colleagues' analysis of the BP *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill illustrates the versatility of Benoit's theory as well as how many different types of strategies can be employed in the same message. It also shows one of Benoit's (1997) suggestions for crisis communication taking place because in this situation, blame and responsibility could not be shifted to another party. This makes it an ideal theory to analyze the NFL's response campaign to concussion and CTE research because of this versatility and precision.

Another oil company that employed image restoration strategies is Texaco. Texaco was under fire in the 1990s for some corporate executives making racially charged comments about their African-American employees. Benoit and Brinson (1999) analyzed their image repair work following this crisis. They analyzed the rhetoric used by the chair of Texaco, Peter Bijur, in six different messages and found that they used four primary image restoration strategies: bolstering, corrective action, mortification, and shifting the blame. Something of note was that instead of shifting the blame to an outside source, they shifted it to a smaller group of individuals inside the organization characterizing them as “bad apples” (Benoit & Brinson, 1999). They called this form of shifting the blame “separation” because it seeks to separate the part of the organization that is bad from the rest. Benoit and Brinson (1999, p. 507) establish three conditions for separation to be implemented. These are that “the organization should show that the offensive action violated company policy, the scapegoats must be physically and symbolically separated from the organization, and corrective action must be instituted to prevent future violations of company policy.” This is different from bolstering because bolstering only highlights the good and ignores the bad while this actively seeks to remove the bad from the rest. These are just a few examples of how image restoration strategies can be used in a broad sense.

Organizations can change image restoration strategies during their response to a crisis, as exemplified in United Airlines’ response to the forced removal and abuse of a passenger, David Dao, from their plane in 2017 (Benoit, 2018). In this analysis, Benoit states, “At first, the discourse attempted to downplay the offense, relying mainly on differentiation and mortification. United’s initial response provoked outrage. The second phase appeared to emerge grudgingly, using mortification and corrective action” (Benoit, 2018, p. 18). This shows that responses can change based on the reactions to them. The differentiation comes in when the CEO apologized

for the situation. Benoit states that “these apologies incorporated differentiation: ‘re-accommodate’ sounds less offensive than ‘drag passengers off an airline,’ while ‘over-booked’ sounds better than ‘we kicked a seated passenger off an airplane to make room for our employees’” (McCann, 2017; Benoit, 2018, p. 18; Thomas, 2017). They then transition to mortification and corrective action after the poor reaction to their initial response. The CEO of United Airlines moved to mortification when he publicly apologized directly to the customer removed and had a corrective action strategy of revisiting their procedures for overbooking and training guidelines for their employees. This response change can also be shown in NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell’s rhetoric in Amanda Turk’s analysis (2017), which will be discussed later in this literature review.

### **Sports Applications of Image Restoration**

When it comes to the theory’s application in sports, there have been several studies that use image restoration as a way to analyze athlete, organization, and fan rhetoric. Chuka Onwumehili and Koren Bedeau (2017) analyzed Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and their response to corruption charges that came in early 2015 against multiple executives. They found that the primary strategy FIFA used was evading responsibility while also using defeasibility and corrective action as secondary strategies. The interesting part of their use of corrective action is that it never materialized and was only promised, and they never admitted responsibility, which is the recommendation when using corrective action (Benoit, 1995; Onwumehili & Bedeau, 2017). Onwumehili and Bedeau (2017, p. 422-423) state, “It seems that FIFA, with its monopoly status, may have felt largely immune to adverse consequences that may otherwise apply to corporations in competing environments if it refuses

to take corrective action.” This thought process could also apply to the NFL since they also have obtained that monopoly status in regard to professional American football.

Even athletes are able to employ image restoration strategies when they are experiencing an attack. Olympic figure skater Tonya Harding is another athlete who employed image restoration strategies after she was all but caught trying to remove an opponent from the Winter Olympics by having her bodyguard attack and injure the rival ice skater, Nancy Kerrigan (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). Harding used bolstering, denial, and attacking one’s accuser in an interview with Connie Chung and the authors even state that “she selected appropriate strategies for repairing her image” (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994, p. 425). Another Olympic athlete, Michael Phelps, faced an image crisis in 2009 after an English tabloid released a picture of Phelps reportedly smoking marijuana (Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). Phelps used primarily mortification and bolstering strategies to protect his image and was actually aided by his corporate sponsors also bolstering his image, which enhanced the image restoration for Phelps. But there are cases where those attempting to help the athletes have actually countered the athlete’s image restoration work.

Terrell Owens, a former NFL star, was caught in a whirlwind of controversy based on his comments and actions over his career (Brazeal, 2008). In an attempt to repair his tarnished image, Owens and Drew Rosenhaus, his agent, held a press conference where Owens read a prepared statement and Rosenhaus held a question and answer session after Owens’ statement. This study found that the prepared statement contained bolstering and mortification as the primary strategies, but Owens never said he would change his ways, nor did he take direct responsibility for what transpired. Brazeal (2008, p. 149) states that “Owens might have had a

chance at redemption had his agent remained silent, but Rosenhaus' contempt destroyed any goodwill his client had created."

Rosenhaus' image restoration strategies were attacking the accuser, bolstering, mortification, and good intentions, but these strategies worked counter to Owens'. Brazeal (2008, p. 149) addresses this by saying:

Though [Rosenhaus'] bolstering of Owens' competitiveness and talent was fitting, his over-reliance on words like "genuine" made him appear disingenuous, and his praise seemed like a set of talking points. Furthermore, by aggressively promoting the image of Owens as a victim, he confirmed that Owens did not accept responsibility for his actions or intend to change them.

This shows that consistency between image restoration strategies is important for cohesiveness and support of the overall image restoration process. Walsh and McAllister-Spooner (2011) reiterates this point. This is important to remember when looking at the NFL's three separate prongs of the campaign because they should be working in unison in order to restore the image.

### **NFL Applications of Image Restoration**

The NFL has been the subject of a few image restoration analyses in the past as well. Amanda Turk (2017), establishes three distinct phases of NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell's rhetoric; 2007-2011, 2012-2015, and 2016, where she notices major shifts in his rhetoric on the issue of player safety. In the first phase, Turk (2017, p. 40) states that it can best be summarized by saying that:

the information was good for the players to have because it contained some useful information they previously had not known or received, but because the NFL was so insistent on directly denying or minimizing the connection between football, head trauma,

and long-term brain health, the current players were still only receiving some of the important information

Turk notes that this period did not have many image restoration strategies in their rhetoric, but the NFL quickly transitioned into using them in order to control media coverage of the crisis.

The next phase, 2012-2015, is where Goodell and the NFL decided to use image restoration strategies while highlighting their accomplishments. Turk said that “[w]hat is important rhetorically is that Goodell was able to take many opportunities to draw similar conclusions: no matter where they had been and where they were currently, there would always be a need for more research” (Turk, 2017, p. 59). She later says that this period uses primarily the image restoration strategies of evading responsibility and corrective action. They primarily do this through stating that there needs to be more research, which falls under the evading responsibility strategy of defeasibility by saying that they lack the information necessary to handle the situation completely, while the corrective action comes in the form of mending one’s ways by financially supporting and conducting more research related to concussions and CTE.

The last phase discussed is the year 2016, where, Turk states, the largest effort in this phase was the “Play Smart. Play Safe.” program. Turk describes the announcement of this campaign as two-fold: “First, it included a donation of another \$100 million to fund various forms of scientific research to improve player health and safety” and secondly, establish the “four pillars on which the program was built: “Protecting Players,” “Advanced Technology,” “Medical Research,” and “Sharing Progress” (Turk, 2017, p. 74). The first half of this announcement would fall under the category of investments in research while the second half, the four pillars, is purely in the communicative prong due to its more rhetorical nature. This program also includes an effort from the NFL to change the way the game is played therefore

also falling into the programs and initiatives prong. Turk's findings will be beneficial when it comes to applying the theory of image restoration to the communicative prong of the NFL's response campaign by highlighting where scholars have previously placed these strategies.

The study of Roger Goodell's rhetoric is continued by another study, which is an analysis of the two open letters written by Goodell in 2013 "that outlined strategies that were in place or in development to protect athletes against concussions" (Compton & Compton, 2015). Compton and Compton used Benoit's image restoration strategies as well and found that the open letters primarily used corrective action and reducing offensiveness through bolstering. This seems to bring in a different perspective than the report by Turk (2017) due to its addition of reducing offensiveness through bolstering to corrective action and evading responsibility during this phase of rhetoric from the NFL.

The timing of these letters seems to add significant weight behind them seeing that the first letter, which bolstered what the NFL had done so far and created an argument for more to be done in regard to concussion and CTE research, came a few weeks before an NFL owners meeting where there would be a vote on new rules. The second letter came just days before the *Frontline* documentary "League of denial: The NFL's concussion crisis" premiered. The authors conclude that the dominant strategy was corrective action, but states that these letters would have been more effective if they also addressed some of the accusations against them. This strategy was seen as effective because after the first letter was released, the owners voted to implement a new rule that advanced player safety called the "crown of the helmet" rule, where players couldn't tackle someone using their forehead first (Compton & Compton, 2015, p. 273).

Fortunato (2015) analyzes the image restoration strategies used by the NFL through investments in research, rule changes, and programs. Fortunato found that corrective action was

the primary strategy that was employed with these three separate areas and that they worked together creating a comprehensive corrective action strategy. Fortunato states that “through the implementation of these initiatives the NFL is very much trying to emerge as a leader in addressing the problem” (Fortunato, 2015, p. 18). The sources analyzing the NFL’s image restoration strategies have a shared pattern of corrective action as one of the primary strategies, but there is disagreement about the secondary strategies. All three agree that the NFL uses corrective action as the primary strategy, but Compton and Compton (2015) state that it is used with bolstering while Turk (2017) state that it is used with defeasibility (Fortunato, 2015; Compton & Compton, 2015; Turk, 2017). The findings of these studies will be either supported or questioned based on the findings in this study and will allow for conclusions to be drawn on the uniformity of the NFL’s response.

Splitting the NFL’s response into three categories is what inspired the design of this study. This study will analyze the NFL’s response campaign to concussions and CTE research. in three different areas: the communicative, the investments in research, and the initiatives and programs. This separation will best show the different image restoration strategies enacted by the NFL overall. The decision to divide the campaign into these distinct categories came from the campaign’s efforts previously being set into separate primary fields as shown in Fortunato (2015). In this, Fortunato’s split was the investments in research, rule changes, initiatives and programs, while having a communicative complimentary aspect that acted as a booster for the two other prongs. This split was found to be simplifying the importance and distinction of communication and that the rule changes and programs may be consolidated into one, which is what inspired the current model of analysis. The difference between programs and investments in research granted them the ability to be analyzed separately because the programs and initiatives



are managed by the NFL while the investments are given to be managed by an outside party. This thought process is what led to the development of the three-pronged model of the NFL's response.

Overall, the NFL's campaign can be split into three prongs: the communicative, investments in research, and initiatives and programs. These prongs are distinct in their content and their rhetoric and therefore need to be analyzed separately. After an initial divided analysis, an overall analysis of the campaign should occur where the three different prongs are compared and contrasted. This study is different than others because it separates the NFL's campaign into three distinct aspects and then compares and contrasts the prongs to show the overall image restoration strategies. While other studies have looked at image restoration strategies in these different aspects individually, this study looks at them altogether and shows patterns in their image restoration strategies. This will advance how future studies could analyze image restoration strategies across multiple platforms.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that will be addressed in this study incorporate the use of Benoit's image restoration strategies across the different prongs of the campaign and whether there is a relationship between them.

RQ1: What image restoration strategies were used in the communicative, investments in research, and initiatives and programs prongs of the NFL's response campaign to concussions and CTE?

RQ2: How do the image restoration strategies in one prong compare with one another?

RQ3: What image restoration strategies were predominantly used in the NFL's overall response campaign to concussions and CTE research? Which strategies were used the least?

These questions will best guide research to find the image restoration strategies used in the NFL's response campaign.

### **Methods**

The method that will be used to answer these questions will be a content analysis of the NFL's responses. These responses will be organized around the three prongs of the campaign: investments in research, initiatives and programs, and the communications used by the NFL. Two coders will comb over the items separately in order to ensure reliability. These coders will be trained beforehand and tested for intercoder reliability as well. The specific content of the communicative prong will be press releases, statements, and announcements that the NFL gave that relate to the topic of concussions and CTE research since the discovery of CTE in 2005. Many of the investments in research will be analyzed for their rhetorical value rather than their content, such as Play Smart, Play Safe, 1<sup>st</sup> and Future, and the Head Health Initiative. Programs and initiatives such as rule changes, legislation pushes, Play Smart, Play Safe, and Heads Up will be analyzed for their written content as well as their rhetorical value. Play Smart, Play Safe is under both categories because of the large donation as well as the program itself. This also gives the overall analysis both intrinsic and extrinsic value. These methods will address RQ1-3. The content analysis will show which image restoration strategies were used in each prong by coding them into the broad categories of denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. They will then be coded further into specific image restoration strategies that were addressed in the literature review.

The multiple levels of coding are to allow for analysis on both a specific and general level. This is important because they may be using similar broad categories overall, but different specific strategies in the separate prongs which could lead to fascinating information for the discussion. Table 1 from W. Harlow, Brantley, and R. Harlow (2011) shows the categorization of the image restoration strategies. The strategy of separation (Benoit & Brinson, 1999) will also be added to the coding scheme. This will be the basis that coders will use to identify strategies. Coders will count the instances of image restoration strategies in the artifacts. This will show how frequently a strategy is used. This method will show whether there is a relationship between specific strategies that the NFL employs like, as previously mentioned, Benoit states that the strategy of mortification works best when coupled with a strategy to amend what has occurred or prevent future occurrences (Benoit, 1995).

**Table 1***Image Restoration Strategies*

Strategy	Example
Denial	We did not do it
Shifting Blame	Someone else did it
Provocation	We did it, but we were provoked
Defeasibility	Lack of information or control
Accident	The incident was an accident
Good Intentions	The error was the result of good intentions
Bolstering	Our good characteristics outweigh any error
Minimization	The problem is not that bad
Differentiation	This incident is different from some other act
Transcendence	The act should be understood in a different context
Attacking Accuser	The person blaming us is the one at fault
Compensation	The victim will be compensated
Corrective Action	We will fix the problem
Mortification	We admit responsibility or ask for forgiveness
Separation	The “bad apples” in our group are responsible

(Harlow, Brantley, & Harlow, 2011; Benoit & Brinson, 1999)

After this coding is done, a second coding will occur. This is to ensure a balance between the three prongs. The data will be recoded using a four-point rating scale on dominance. This rating scale goes from 4 meaning a strategy was non-existent in an artifact, 3 being existent, 2 being the secondary strategy, to 1 being the primary strategy. The next recode will take this a step back by using a simple binary code to determine in how many artifacts contained a certain image restoration strategy. This would be a 1 for present and a 0 for absent. RQ1 and RQ3 will be answered using descriptive statistics to determine which strategies were used overall. The strategies will be found as a percentage of each prong's artifacts. This will show how much of a certain part of the campaign relies on specific strategies. RQ2 will be answered by analyzing the dominance ratings developed as well as using the descriptive statistics.

Coders worked to identify instances of image restorations strategies in a sample, 17.4 percent, of the artifacts for the purposes of intercoder reliability testing. Krippendorff's Alpha was used as the statistical measure of the reliability and found that the coders had a value of 0.763 which passes the threshold for reliability. Reliability varied between the two coders depending on the strategy as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Intercoder reliability per variable*

	Krippendorff's Alpha
Denial	0.611
Shifting Blame	0.414
Provocation	1.00
Defeasibility	0.76
Accident	1.00
Good Intentions	1.00
Bolstering	0.44
Minimization	0.633
Differentiation	0.253

Transcendence	0.451
Attacking Accuser	0.592
Compensation	0.417
Corrective Action	0.496
Mortification	1.00
Separation	1.00

---

Although some are below the ideal level of agreement, this could be attributed to the drastically smaller sample size since each strategy reliability number is 1/15<sup>th</sup> of the overall sample.

### **Results**

Over 60 artifacts were analyzed by two coders in order to obtain these results with 1,985 total instances of image restoration strategies found by both coders. These were then put on a four-point scale to determine the dominant strategies with 1 being the dominant strategy, 2 being secondary, 3 being existent, and 4 being non-existent. The data was also recoded in order to determine the number of artifacts in which an image restoration strategy was used which was a simple binary code of 1 being present and 0 being absent.

#### **Strategies used by Prong**

RQ 1 asked which image restoration strategies were used in each prong of the NFL's response campaign to CTE and concussions. The data shows that 14 out of 15 strategies were used in the communicative prong with nine of these strategies appearing in more than five percent of the artifacts. This is the prong with the most variety of strategies. The investments in research prong has seven out of 15 strategies used, with all seven of those being over 15 percent in that prong. Lastly, the initiatives and programs prong has 10 out of 15 strategies used with all 10 of those being over 10 percent of instances in that prong. The most frequent strategy in each prong is corrective action. The communicative had the lowest amount of corrective action with 98.18 percent (n = 108) followed by the initiatives and programs prong with 100 percent (n = 10)

and the investments in research prong with 100 percent (n = 6). The second most frequent strategy is bolstering which had high amounts of bolstering in each prong with the communicative having 88.18 percent (n = 97), the initiatives and programs having 80 percent (n = 8) and the investments in research having 100 percent (n = 6). This is where the prongs start to differ in strategies. There was a lower amount of transcendence in the communicative prong (36.36%; n = 40) than in the initiatives and programs (70%; n = 7) and investments in research prongs (66.67%; n = 4). The third most frequent strategy for the communicative prong is defeasibility (41.82%; n = 46) while the third most frequent strategy for the initiatives and programs and investments in research prongs is transcendence with 70 percent (n = 7) and 66.67 percent (n = 4) respectively. The initiatives and programs (30%; n = 3) and investments in research (33.33%; n = 2) prongs do not have nearly as much defeasibility as the communicative (41.82%; n = 46), but they still have a larger amount in comparison to most other image restoration strategies.

There were several other strategies that have noticeable results. Attacking the accuser (1.79%; n = 8) is almost entirely from the communicative prong (6.36%; n = 7) with eight out of the 12 of the instances in this prong coming from two artifacts reacting to a *New York Times* article about the NFL's handling of concussions and CTE (NFL 2016a; NFL 2016b). The next difference is in the higher amount of shifting the blame found in the communicative prong (24.55%; n = 27; rating = 3.682) in comparison to the other two prongs with initiatives and programs prong at 20 percent (n = 2; rating = 3.8) and the investments in research prong having none at all. This explains why the denial category, the strategies of denial, shifting the blame, and separation, is higher (10.44%; n = 40) in this prong than the other two with the initiatives and programs prong and investments in research prong staying at five percent (n = 2) and 0

percent (n = 0). Lastly, good intentions (2.47%; n = 11) is not used as frequently in the communicative prong (4.55%; n = 6) in comparison to the initiatives (40%; n = 4) and programs and investments in research (33.33%; n = 2) prongs.

The frequency of the presence of image restoration strategies in each prong as percentages is shown in Table 3. The breakdown of image restoration strategies by their categories is shown in Table 4. The usage of image restoration categories is shown in Table 5.

**Table 3**

*Frequency of presence of image restoration strategies in each prong's artifacts*

	Communicative	Initiatives and Programs	Investments in Research
Corrective Action	98.18 (n = 108)	100 (n = 10)	100 (n = 6)
Bolstering	88.18 (n = 97)	80 (n = 8)	100 (n = 6)
Transcendence	36.36 (n = 40)	70 (n = 7)	66.67 (n = 4)
Defeasibility	41.82 (n = 46)	30 (n = 3)	33.33 (n = 2)
Differentiation	19.09 (n = 21)	20 (n = 2)	16.67 (n = 1)
Good Intentions	4.55 (n = 5)	40 (n = 4)	33.33 (n = 2)
Shifting Blame	24.55 (n = 27)	20 (n = 2)	0 (n = 0)
Compensation	3.63 (n = 4)	20 (n = 2)	16.67 (n = 1)
Minimization	10 (n = 11)	10 (n = 1)	0 (n = 0)
Attacking Accuser	6.36 (n = 7)	10 (n = 1)	0 (n = 0)
Denial	10.91 (n = 12)	0 (n = 0)	0 (n = 0)
Accident	0.91 (n = 1)	0 (n = 0)	0 (n = 0)
Separation	0.91 (n = 1)	0 (n = 0)	0 (n = 0)
Provocation	0 (n = 0)	0 (n = 0)	0 (n = 0)

**Table 4**

*Categorical Breakdown of Image Restoration Strategies*

Category	Strategies
Denial	Denial Shifting the Blame

Evading Responsibility	Separation Provocation Defeasibility Accident Good Intentions
Reducing Offensiveness	Bolstering Minimization Differentiation Transcendence Attacking Accuser Compensation
Corrective Action	Corrective Action
Mortification	Mortification

---

**Table 5***Frequency of use of image restoration categories in each prong*

	Communicative	Initiatives and Programs	Investments in Research
Reducing Offensiveness	46.99 (n = 180)	52.5 (n = 21)	54.55 (n = 12)
Corrective Action	28.2 (n = 108)	25 (n = 10)	27.2 (n = 6)
Evading Responsibility	13.58 (n = 52)	17.5 (n = 7)	18.18 (n = 4)
Denial	10.44 (n = 40)	5 (n = 2)	0 (n = 0)
Mortification	0.78 (n = 3)	0 (n = 0)	0 (n = 0)

The investments in research and initiatives and programs prongs are very similar in their instances of image restoration strategies but we'll see how similar based on the dominance ratings.

### Comparison of Strategies

RQ 2 asked how the image restoration strategies in one prong compared to other prongs' strategies. The scale rating that was developed to analyze the dominance of strategies can be shown below in Table 6. This shows us which image restoration strategies were consistently



dominant in their respective prongs. As shown, the corrective action strategy is the most consistently dominant in all three prongs with a rating of 1.282 in the communicative, 1.2 in the initiatives and programs, and 1 in the investments in research. The initiatives and programs and investments in research prongs have corrective action in every artifact, but the initiatives and programs prong contain fewer cases where corrective action was the dominant strategy (rating = 1.2) than in the investments in research prong (rating = 1). The secondary strategy is bolstering with a rating of 2.2 in the communicative, 2.3 in the initiatives and programs, and 2 in the investments in research. The third most dominant strategy is split between the communicative prong and the other two prongs. In the communicative prong, the third most dominant strategy is defeasibility with a rating of 3.236 while transcendence is the next dominant strategy in the initiatives and programs and investments in research prongs with ratings of 3.2 and 3.333 respectively. The remaining ratings are displayed below in order from most dominant to least dominant.

**Table 6**

*Dominance rating of image restoration strategies in each prong*

	Comm.	IP	IR	Average Rating
Corrective Action	1.282	1.2	1	1.1607
Bolstering	2.2	2.3	2	2.1667
Transcendence	3.545	3.2	3.333	3.3593
Defeasibility	3.236	3.7	3.667	3.5343
Good Intentions	3.955	3.6	3.667	3.7416
Compensation	3.945	3.8	3.5	3.7483
Differentiation	3.782	3.7	3.833	3.7717
Shifting Blame	3.682	3.8	4	3.8273
Minimization	3.872	3.9	4	3.924

Denial	3.782	4	4	3.9273
Attacking Accuser	3.927	3.9	4	3.9423
Mortification	3.973	4	4	3.991
Separation	3.982	4	4	3.994
Accident	3.982	4	4	3.994
Provocation	4	4	4	4

---

Something of note is that despite the disagreement on the third most dominant strategy between prongs, transcendence seems to be the third most dominant rating overall followed closely by defeasibility.

### **Overall use of Strategies**

RQ3 asks which strategies were used in the campaign overall more frequently than others. This research question will be answered by averaging the percentages of the image restoration strategies across each prong. The research found that 14 out of 15 strategies are used at least once but only eight out of 15 strategies appear in at least 10 percent of the cases. The one strategy that is not used at all was provocation. There were several strategies that were lacking in the NFL's response with 11 strategies at less than 10 percent of the overall campaign. There are also six other strategies that appeared in less than 10 percent of artifacts: accident, good intentions, attacking the accuser, compensation, mortification, and separation. The most common category of strategies is reducing offensiveness with 47.87 percent (n = 213) followed by corrective action (27.86%; n = 124), evading responsibility (14.16%; n = 63), denial (9.44%; n = 42), and mortification (0.67%; n = 3).

Breaking it down into strategies, we see a more detailed picture of how the NFL utilizes image restoration strategies. While corrective action is the most used by far (27.86%; n = 124;

rating = 1.1607), the secondary strategy is where previous research has disagreed (Turk, 2017; Compton and Compton, 2015; Fortunato, 2015). The results of this study found that the most frequently used secondary strategy is bolstering with 24.94 percent (n = 111; rating = 2.1667). Bolstering is the most consistent across all three prongs with the highest rate in the investments in research prong with 100 percent (n = 6; rating = 2) followed by the communicative prong in which it accounts for 98.18 percent (n = 97; rating = 2.2) and the initiatives and programs prong with 80 percent (n = 8; rating = 2.3).

Bolstering was followed by transcendence with 11.46 percent (n = 51; rating = 3.3593). Defeasibility has the same number of appearances, yet the dominance rating is slightly weaker than that of transcendence (rating = 3.5343) meaning it is less dominant overall. This also gives context to the categorical percentages because the evading responsibility category is predominantly defeasibility (80.95%; n = 51) with the other three strategies accounting for less than 20 percent (n = 12) of that category. Another area of interest is the low amount in the denial category (denial, shifting the blame, and separation). The denial strategy only accounted for 2.69 percent (n = 12; rating = 3.9273) of the overall campaign and separation was even less of a factor with 0.23% (n = 1; rating = 3.994). The entire denial category is less than 10 percent of the total strategies (9.44%) with shifting the blame accounting for the vast majority of that (6.52%; n = 29; rating = 3.8273). These and the remaining frequencies are shown below in Table 7. The categorical breakdown is shown in Table 8.

**Table 7**  
*Frequency of use of image restoration strategies overall*

	<u>% of Strategies Used</u>
Corrective Action	27.86 (n = 124)
Bolstering	24.94 (n = 111)
Transcendence	11.46 (n = 51)
Defeasibility	11.46 (n = 51)

Shifting Blame	6.52 (n = 29)
Differentiation	5.39 (n = 24)
Denial	2.69 (n = 12)
Minimization	2.69 (n = 12)
Good Intentions	2.47 (n = 11)
Attacking Accuser	1.79 (n = 8)
Compensation	1.57 (n = 7)
Mortification	0.67 (n = 3)
Accident	0.23 (n = 1)
Separation	0.23 (n = 1)
Provocation	0 (n = 0)

---

**Table 8***Frequency of use of image restoration categories overall*

	% of Strategies Used
Reducing Offensiveness	47.87
Corrective Action	27.87
Evading Responsibility	14.16
Denial	9.44
Mortification	0.23

---

The findings of this study will be used to analyze the image restoration strategies in the NFL's response campaign to concussions and CTE. They will also be used to confirm or refute previous studies on the NFL's response and add to the knowledge of image restoration as a whole.

## **Discussion**

### **Image Restoration Strategies in Each Prong**

This section will answer RQ1 and will primarily focus on the differences between the image restoration strategies in each prong. One thing of note is that there are not many differences between the initiatives and programs and investments in research prongs of the NFL's campaign.

This means that most of the differences are going to be between the communicative prong and the other two prongs. The first difference between the communicative prong and the other prongs is in the most common image restoration strategy, corrective action. The communicative had the lowest amount of corrective action of the three prongs.

There are two reasonings for this difference. It could be because there are still several situations in the communicative prong where corrective action is not the dominant strategy or even appeared in an artifact. Not every press release, press conference transcript and statement were centered around corrective actions. Many press releases were responding to an injury, regularly scheduled press conferences, such as with Super Bowls and annual league meetings, or were responding to a news story. Another reasoning for this difference could come from the investments in research and initiatives and programs prongs being analyzed with more context than the communicative prong. Many more instances registered as corrective action based on that context. Both coders agreed on this sentiment and explanation for the higher rate of corrective action in those prongs. The nature of those two prongs being actions themselves could lead to them being categorized more as corrective action.

The difference between the investments in research and initiatives and programs prongs could come from the fact that many of the programs and initiatives were not entirely focused on concussions; rather they were focused on player health and safety in a broad sense. An example of this would be the rule changes enacted by the NFL. Many of these rules were not coded because they had nothing to do with concussions, head health, or mild traumatic brain injuries. The ones that were coded had at least a tangential relationship to them such as a horse-collar tackle or expanding the list of defenseless players (NFL, 2020). The investments in research are much clearer that they are focused entirely on concussions and CTE.

The next difference is in the higher amount of shifting the blame found in the communicative prong in comparison to the other two prongs. This is a logical thing seeing as though the initiatives, programs, and investments that the NFL enacted are seen as their responsibility and to attempt to shift that to another party would seem awkward since they were acting to ameliorate the crisis and prevent further damage to others and their image.

There is also more differentiation in the communicative prong in comparison to the initiatives and programs and investments in research prongs. Benoit defines this strategy as where “the rhetors attempts to distinguish the act performed from other similar but less desirable actions” (Benoit, 1995, p. 77). The higher amount of differentiation in the communicative prong does make more sense when looking at this definition because the actions of establishing programs and investing in research are not ones that should be distinguished from other similar acts.

The difference in transcendence has a much simpler explanation in that the investments in research and initiatives and programs often found themselves discussing their applications outside of professional football. An example of this comes from an investment in research called the Head Health Initiative in which the NFL (2016c) states:

Through its collaboration with GE’s Magnetic Resonance division, the NFL is supporting clinical research into the use of MRI as a tool for advanced methods of imaging and quantifying brain function—which could transform science around brain injury, benefiting not only football and other sports but also society more broadly.

Shifting the focus to be a societal issue rather than just a professional football issue is a common occurrence in the initiatives and programs and investments in research prongs, but not as common in the communicative prong. Many artifacts refer to youth football, which does not necessarily go outside of the realm of concussions and even CTE. For the NFL to actively

discuss youth and collegiate football is a form of transcendence in that it is outside of the inherent responsibility of the NFL, which is professional football and their players.

Transcendence in the communicative could also be seen as a diversion or side-stepping the question, especially in the press conference transcripts

Lastly, the evading responsibility category has some interesting differences between prongs. One of these is that defeasibility has a much higher presence in the communicative prong than the initiatives and programs and the investments in research prongs. Defeasibility accounts for a large portion of evading responsibility used in the communicative prong as well as around half of the initiatives and programs and investments in research prongs. The other part for the latter two prongs is good intentions. The use of good intentions is in an explanative nature discussing why the NFL handled concussions and CTE the way that they did. Defeasibility does not fit well in the initiatives and programs and investments in research prongs because this strategy claims to not have enough information and it would not make logical sense to develop programs without enough knowledge behind the action. The communicative prong is filled with defeasibility. An example of defeasibility in this prong can be seen in a press release after a conference with the NFL, the Australian Football League, the Canadian Football League, and World Rugby discussing health and safety of contact sports. In this press release, NFL chief medical officer Dr. Allen Sills says, “The NFL is in constant pursuit of information in our ongoing effort to improve player safety and evolve our game” (NFL, 2018b).

The NFL used defeasibility more often in press conference transcripts, meaning they were in answers to questions from the media. One example of this is when Dr. Jeff Crandall was asked about helmet-to-body concussions that were on the rise. Part of his response says, “So we look at this and say there is a change in behavior, and the question is now what can we do about

it. We have not had a test with helmet-to-helmet, helmet-to-shoulder, but we're looking at what a test might look at.” (NFL, 2017b). The placement of defeasibility in the NFL’s communications could be a stalling tactic in order for them to develop more information to tackle the issue at a later date. It could also be that the NFL genuinely does not have the information to handle the multi-sided problem of concussions and CTE, which is understandable since there is still so much that is unknown about CTE and concussions.

### **Image Restoration Strategies Overall**

RQ3 asked about the image restoration strategies throughout the entire campaign. The most prominent image restoration strategy in the entirety of the campaign is corrective action. This was agreed upon by past researchers (Compton & Compton, 2015; Fortunato, 2015; Turk, 2017), but the secondary strategy was a point of contention.

The findings of this study support the argument made by Compton and Compton (2015) in that bolstering is the secondary strategy used in the NFL’s response to concussions and CTE. Turk (2017) argues that defeasibility is the secondary strategy but the findings in this study state that this is actually the tertiary strategy overall. Defeasibility is actually tied with transcendence when it comes to the amount but has a weaker dominance rating than transcendence.

Turk (2017) even mentions that her study is very limited in terms of depth of the NFL’s response to concussions and CTE and states that her “intent, then, is to explain a new idea involving crisis communication which I refer to as a compounding crisis.” This is the idea that a rhetor’s reaction to a crisis is disapproved by the audience, which causes a redirection and can continue until the crisis ultimately ends. This study establishes that depth and “thorough analysis” that Turk suggested and uses a more encompassing method of analyzing the NFL’s campaign rather than looking at specific aspects of their response, like open letters or singular



programs, similar to what prior studies have done (Compton & Compton, 2015; Fortunato, 2015; Turk, 2017).

The most consistent relationship between all three prongs is with bolstering. Despite corrective action being the most frequent and dominant strategy in every prong and overall, the NFL made a conscious effort to bolster their reputation with most everything that they produced. The NFL most likely did this because they realized that despite their corrective actions, they must enhance their reputation by making sure they get credit for these corrective actions as well.

One of the easiest things to notice about results is the absence of data. In this study, there are no instances of provocation found by either coder in any prong of the NFL's response campaign. Benoit's definition of provocation comes from Scott and Lyman (1968) which states that in provocation "a person will allege that his questioned behavior is a response to the behavior or attitudes of another" (Benoit, 1995; Scott & Lyman, 1968). The absence of provocation in this study could be because the NFL never claims any wrongdoing has been done against them nor has the NFL responded to something caused by another party, rather they are responding to a by-product of contact sports: concussions and CTE.

There are also low amounts of mortification, separation, good intentions, accident, and attacking the accuser. It would make sense that there would be a lower amount present. Mortification could have legal ramifications and with the many lawsuits filed against the NFL for grievances against their handling of concussions and CTE (Gutierrez & Seifert, 2019; PBS, 2013), apologizing and/or claiming fault could be a major legal blow to the NFL.

Using the image restoration strategy of accident would not be common in this situation because although injuries are accidental in nature, the handling of these injuries is hard to be labeled as accidental, but there was one example of this. In a press release from the NFL, they

discuss how there was a mistake made by medical staff by not evaluating Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson for a potential concussion, despite referees requiring it, until after he returned to the game (NFL, 2017c). Compensation (n = 7) was used primarily when discussing the lawsuit settlement with thousands of former NFL players and their families (PBS, 2013; NFL, 2013). Outside of the lawsuit settlement, compensation would not fit the campaign because the programs, investments, and communications are not to “remunerate the victim to help offset the negative feeling arising from the wrongful act,” rather they are preventative and educational measures (Benoit, 1995, p. 78).

Good intentions is used primarily in an explanative function for when the NFL was accused of negligence or misleading practices. For example, in a press release responding to an article from the *New York Times* attacking their handling of concussion research, the NFL (2016a) says, “the fact that not all concussions were reported is consistent with the fact that reporting was strongly encouraged by the League but not mandated, as documents provided to the *Times* showed.”

Another explanative example of good intentions is in a press release where the NFL is discussing the commitment of funding \$30 million to the National Institute of Health (NIH). In this the NFL (2016d) says, “While there were concerns regarding the NIH’s selection of research applicants, the NFL never suggested—nor considered—doing anything other than honoring that commitment in its entirety.” The form of good intentions in the investments in research and initiatives and programs prongs comes from the various websites and publications from the NFL. These were again explanative in nature by showing the importance of their efforts in relation to preventing and reducing concussions and CTE in their sport and beyond.

Attacking the accuser is another area of interest in that it is primarily from two press releases from the NFL responding to the *New York Times* article previously mentioned about the NFL's handling of concussions and CTE (NFL 2016a; NFL 2016b). These two press releases are essentially the same with one being a shortened version of the other which could be why there are so many instances in these two artifacts alone. An example of an instance that counted in both press releases as attacking the accuser is when the NFL says, "Today's *New York Times* story on the National Football League is contradicted by clear facts that refute both the thesis of the story and each of its allegations" (NFL 2016a; NFL 2016b). These two artifacts alone could have made the attacking the accuser strategy more significant in the analysis than it actually was in the response campaign, but since it is still less than one percent overall, the impact is negligible.

The lack of denial is interesting because this is what is commonly presented by news organizations (PBS, 2013; Schwarz, Bognadich, & Williams, 2016; NPR, 2013). Even if the category is broken down, there are several more instances of shifting the blame than simple denial. This could be because the majority of the artifacts in this study are not based on the early responses of the NFL which did have considerably more denial as stated by Turk (2017).

The high amount of shifting blame in the communicative prong is primarily from attributing responsibility to another party, even a subordinate. Many of these instances of shifting blame were very close to being separation, but the issue came with the strict conditions for separation established by Brinson and Benoit (1999). These are that: (1) the organization should explain that the act goes against policies; (2) "the scapegoats must be physically and symbolically separated from the organization" and; (3) a corrective action has to be implemented to prevent future instances (Benoit & Brinson, 1999, p. 507). The second condition is the one that primarily

created issues for coders trying to decide between shifting the blame and separation, because many of the targets of responsibility were teams and medical staffs, which cannot be separated physically or symbolically. Even when rhetors disassociate from a crisis completely and put the responsibility on a subsidiary or subordinate, it does not necessarily fit the criteria for separation. Examples of this include Toshiba blaming a subsidiary for selling to the Soviet Union and Domino's blaming their drivers for several car accidents (Hearit, 1994; Hearit, 1995). We found that it was better to be conservative with the interpretations of these situations.

It is interesting that the NFL would shift the blame to their own subordinates because it makes the NFL seem like they lack control over their subsidiaries, similar to defeasibility. It is more of an implicit defeasibility argument because the NFL is shifting the blame to one of their subordinate organizations, it shows an inherent lack of control over them. I believe that the confusion about shifting the blame can be ameliorated using attribution theory (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008; Weiner, 1984), in that an organization can attribute responsibility to another party, even a subsidiary. Benoit even says that "the usefulness of attribution theory to the study of image restoration discourse is a question that deserves to be explored (Benoit, 1995, p. 166). The real question is why would the NFL want to attribute the responsibility to one of their own teams and look as if they had no control over them?

The answer lies in the difference between concussion management by teams. If a concussion review is incorrectly enacted, the shifting of blame comes with a lack of control over the team's management. An example of this is how the NFL responded to the Miami Dolphins' handling of quarterback Matt Moore. In a press release, the NFL (2017a) states, "They [the Dolphins medical staff and Unaffiliated Neuro-trauma Consultant (UNC)] jointly cleared Mr. Moore to return to the game, but did not recognize that Mr. Moore presented a documented symptom, bleeding

from the mouth, that required further evaluation in the locker room under the protocol.” The NFL also states in this press release that the Dolphins had been sent a letter advising them to educate their medical staff and warn them that any “future deviation from the Protocol may result in enhanced discipline, including monetary fines assessed against the Club” (NFL, 2017a). This shifting blame combined with simply advising makes the NFL seem less controlling over the teams.

On the other hand, if a concussion review is correctly enacted, the shifting of blame still occurs but shows control over the team’s concussion management. In a press release discussing the concussion protocol review of New England safety Patrick Chung, the NFL shifts the blame for the concussion review on the New England medical staff and UNC (NFL, 2018a). They do this by stating:

Mr. Chung was cleared by the UNC and team medical staff. Subsequently, as is standard practice, the player remained under close observation following the sideline exam. During halftime, Mr. Chung was re-evaluated by the Club's medical staff and the UNC and found to have potential concussion symptoms and therefore was ruled out for the remainder of the game (NFL, 2018a).

They do not, however, argue that they are not in control of the team as they did last time. Instead the NFL states, “As a result of these findings, the NFL and NFLPA both concluded that the Protocol was not violated. The parties will continue to educate all stakeholders about the Protocol and emphasize conservative care” (NFL, 2018a). The absence of passive words like “advising” or “may” there is more affirmative, aggressive, and definite language in this press release, which embodies more control over the situation.

The reason this is an important distinction is that the NFL is taking ownership of only when the concussion protocol is implemented correctly rather than incorrectly. In both situations, the blame or responsibility is put on another party, but in one, they claim no control over this mishandling and in the other, they claim control over the correct handling. It's this attribution of agency to the team that truly distances the NFL from the Dolphins and their mistake while the absence of the attribution makes the NFL seem at least mostly responsible for the successful implementation. This attribution protects the NFL's reputation in that they are taking responsibility for successes while distancing themselves from failures. The Dolphins' medical staff and the UNC were seen as primarily responsible with the NFL distancing itself from the responsibility of the failure. In contrast, the Patriots' medical staff and the UNC are still responsible, but the NFL's presentation of the review make it seem as though they were primarily responsible for the success. This idea that responsibility can be attributed to multiple parties at different levels is not a novel one.

Responsibility has been proven to be attributed to multiple parties including one's self as shown in Lundell, Niederdeppe, and Clarke (2013). That focus group study looks at the responsibility of public health and how that perception can change based on political affiliations. Some of their findings include that "responsibility for health can be held by multiple parties at once, each responsible for different levels of action" and that "acknowledging the responsibility of others for health seems to be grounded in a leadership value, a sense that it is right to feel responsible for others when in a position of authority" (Lundell, Niederdeppe, & Clarke, 2013, p. 17-18). This study can be translated to looking at these situations to show that the NFL is attributing the responsibility and control over unsuccessful concussion reviews more to the team and its medical staff while the successful reviews are shown to have less responsibility and less

control. These attributions further repair the NFL's image when it comes to their handling of concussions and CTE.

One of the biggest questions that came from these results is, why are the initiatives and programs and investments in research prongs more consistent with one another than with the communicative? The investments in research and initiatives and programs prong are very similar in nature in that they are both essentially corrective actions to prevent incidents of injuries, yet one is direct (initiatives and programs) and the other is indirect (investments in research). These prongs have corrective action in every single artifact, but the initiatives and programs prong contain fewer cases where corrective action was the dominant strategy than in the investments in research. This is because of the higher dominance of transcendence. This could be due to the programs being directly related to the NFL's countermeasures to prevent concussions and CTE in professional football and beyond.

This would mean that the NFL had a larger goal of impacting more than just their sport with the initiatives and programs in comparison to their investments in concussion and CTE research. The investments in research studies - the Head Health Initiative, 1<sup>st</sup> and Future, and Play Smart. Play Safe - are all focused primarily on professional football only. One of the NFL's initiatives was pushing a legislation that would require stronger regulations on return-to-game protocols in youth sports (Ellenbogen et al., 2010). This transcends football entirely and looks at youth sports as a whole.

### **Analysis of the NFL's Image Restoration Campaign**

RQ2 asked about how these image restoration strategies compared to one another and worked together. The way that these prongs work together in the NFL's campaign is that the NFL uses their communications to speak about their investments and programs in ways that the

materials from these investments and programs cannot. The comparatively higher dominance ratings of defeasibility, shifting the blame, and denial in the communicative prong show the NFL uses its communications to protect their image from outside sources. The dominance ratings of corrective action, bolstering, and transcendence in the initiatives and programs and investments in research prongs show the NFL's attempting to restore their image internally through their actions. The comparison of these strategies shows a two-sided approach, with one side being what the NFL says (communicative) and the other side being what the NFL does (investments in research and initiatives and programs). This consistency in messaging is vital to their success because contradictory information from one prong would counteract the efforts of another.

This consistency in messaging across different media is important for image restoration (Brazeal, 2008). Benoit (1995, p. 157) says, "Unless a single image restoration strategy is very likely to be particularly effective with the intended audience – and as long as multiple strategies appear do not appear inconsistent – use of multiple image restoration strategies is probably a wise choice." The consistency between image restoration strategies shows that the NFL made an effort to use particular image restoration strategies across all three prongs. This effort was primarily focused on corrective actions to address the issue of concussions and CTE in professional football while bolstering their image in almost everything that they published.

Overall, the NFL focused their image restoration efforts utilizing the remaining four strategies (defeasibility, bolstering, transcendence, and corrective action). This focus shows that NFL's campaign attempts to address the issue of concussions and CTE in their league and beyond while improving their reputation at the same time. This study supports the findings of several previous studies on the primary strategy (Compton & Compton, 2015; Fortunato, 2015;



Turk, 2017). Specifically, the notion developed by Compton and Compton (2015) in that the secondary strategy was bolstering rather than defeasibility, as argued by Turk (2017).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are some limitations of this study. One of these limitations is that the artifacts studied were all published by the NFL and their operations. This means that there were no outside sources written by an NFL operative, whether that is an official, coach, or player, or in which an NFL operative was quoted. This could have left more nuanced forms of communication such as op-eds, blogs, or social media posts from being studied. Future research could accommodate this exclusion.

A longitudinal format similar to Turk (2017) could shed some light on the evolution of the image restoration strategies used in the NFL's response campaign. Looking into attribution theory's heuristic value with image restoration would also be an avenue for future research, especially with shifting the blame and the attribution of agency. Lastly, effectiveness of these strategies can be brought into this subject by using surveys and polling data, finances of the NFL, and conducting a more contextual analysis to see how well the strategies worked if at all. This is how many scholars have judged the effectiveness of image restoration strategies previously (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002; Weber, Erickson, & Stone, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

In sum, concussions and CTE are a serious medical crisis occurring in professional American football, as well as other contact sports. The National Football League, being the largest league for contact sports globally, has been under the spotlight for their handling and response to concussions and CTE in the last two decades. Their use of image restoration strategies shows how the NFL is responding to this crisis. The primary strategy is corrective

action, showing that the NFL actively attempts to reduce the incidence of concussions and CTE in their players or, at least, promises to do so to enhance their image. This was done through their several programs, investments, and statements regarding concussions and CTE. Their next strategy is bolstering. Bolstering being the secondary strategy is evident of the NFL attempting to restore their damaged reputation from several attacks from major media groups (Schwarz, 2007; CBS, 2009; Schwarz, 2009; NPR, 2013; PBS, 2013; Schwarz, Bognadich, & Williams, 2016; Kilgore & Clement, 2017). Their third most dominant strategy was transcendence. This was used to put their actions and statements into broader potential applications like youth sports, military personnel, and other contact sports. Transcendence was almost tied with another strategy, defeasibility, if it weren't for defeasibility's weaker dominance. Defeasibility was almost entirely in the communications of the NFL as a way to excuse their inaction on the issue of concussions and CTE.

Despite the media primarily pushing the idea that the NFL denies time and time again (CBS, 2013; NPR, 2013; Schwarz, Bognadich, & Williams, 2016), there are not any academic studies that supports this idea, including this study (Compton & Compton, 2015; Fortunato, 2015; Turk, 2017). The denial strategy only accounted for a miniscule amount of the overall campaign. The entire denial category is less than a tenth of the total usages with shifting the blame accounting for the vast majority of that. The NFL used shifting the blame in a very interesting way in that they would shift responsibility to teams often, but they would shift control over the situation selectively. This was shown in their handling of two separate concussion protocol reviews with one being successful and the other being unsuccessful (NFL, 2017a; NFL, 2018a). In both reviews, they would attribute responsibility to the teams but would only attribute agency to the team that unsuccessfully implemented the concussion protocol as a way to distance

themselves from the incident. Looking at control and shifting the blame could be an interesting area of future research, especially with the use of attribution theory (Weiner, 1984; Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008).

The three prongs are very similar with only a handful of major differences to one another. These differences are mostly logical differences such as a lack of defeasibility in the programs and investments or less transcendence in their communications. The NFL's efforts were focused on four main strategies overall: corrective action, bolstering, transcendence, and defeasibility. These four strategies alone account for over 75 percent of the total image restoration strategies in the NFL's campaign. This consistency is important for image restoration strategies to be successfully employed (Benoit, 1995; Brazeal, 2008). The focus across all three prongs of their response shows attempts to ameliorate the crisis regarding concussions and CTE to improve their sport and their image at the same time.

This study enhances the understanding of how image restoration strategies work together, especially during health-related crises. The findings of corrective action used with bolstering are supported by many previous studies (Compton & Compton, 2015; Weber, Erickson, & Stone, 2011; Benoit & Brinson, 1999), showing their rhetorical value in image restoration work. This study also highlights bolstering's efficacy as a supporting strategy as it has been used in many prior case studies as well (Brazeal, 2008; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011; Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Weber, Erickson, & Stone, 2011; Compton & Compton, 2015). It also emphasizes the consistency of image restoration strategies across multiple efforts in order to achieve a higher rate of effectiveness (Benoit, 1995; Brazeal, 2008).

Attribution theory is an avenue of image restoration discourse that can be applied to multiple strategies as shown in this study with shifting the blame. The use of shifting the blame

as exemplified in this study is an unusual one. The NFL often shifted the blame to an internal source, usually their teams, but claimed various levels of responsibility with the situations. When their protocol is followed, blame for the injury is still shifted to the team but the responsibility of the handling is either accepted or denied by the NFL depending on the success of its protocol implementation. This is one situation where using attribution theory was highly beneficial in analyzing image restoration strategies at work. Attacking the accuser, good intentions, separation, defeasibility, and provocation are just some of the strategies that could be dissected and enhanced using attribution theory.

### References

- Belson, K., & Schwarz A. (2016, March 15) N.F.L. shifts on concussions, and game may never be the same. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/sports/nfl-concussions-cte-football-jeff-miller.html>
- Benoit, W.L., & Hanczor, R.S. (1994) The Tonya Harding controversy: An analysis of image restoration strategies. *Communication Quarterly*. 42(4), 416-433.
- Benoit, W.L. (1995). *Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration strategies*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Benoit, W.L. (1997) Image repair discourse and crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*. 23(2), 177-186.
- Benoit, W.L. (2018) Crisis and image repair at United Airlines: Fly the unfriendly skies. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*. 1(1), 11-26.  
[doi.org/10.30658/jicrcr.1.1.2](https://doi.org/10.30658/jicrcr.1.1.2)
- Brazeal, L. (2008) The image repair strategies of Terrell Owens. *Public Relations Review*, 34, 145-150. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2008.03.021
- Breech, J. (2019, Aug 13) Tom Brady's helmet banned: QB not a fan of his new helmet, but doesn't sound like he'll be pulling an Antonio Brown. *CBS Sports*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/tom-bradys-helmet-banned-qb-not-a-fan-of-his-new-helmet-but-doesnt-sound-like-hell-be-pulling-an-antonio-brown/>
- Brinson, S. & Benoit, W. L. (1999) The tarnished star: Restoring Texaco's damaged public

- image. *Management Communication Quarterly* 12(4), 483-510.
- Burke, K. (1970), *The rhetoric of motives*. Berkeley, CA: *University of California Press*.
- CBS (2009, Oct. 8) Study Links Concussions To Brain Disease. *CBS News*. Retrieved from:  
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/study-links-concussions-to-brain-disease/2/>
- Coombs, W.T. (2007) Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163-176.
- Compton, J. & Compton, J. (2015) Open letters from the National Football League, concussion prevention, and image-repair rhetoric. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 8, 266-275. doi.org/10.1123/IJSC.2015-0049
- Cowden K. & Sellnow, T. (2002) Issues Advertising as Crisis Communication: Northwest Airlines' Use of Image Restoration Strategies During the 1998 Pilot's Strike. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 39(2), 193-219.  
doi.org/10.1177%2F002194360203900203
- Ellenbogen, R., Berger, M., & Batjer H. (2010) The National Football League and concussion: Leading a culture change in contact sports. *World of Neurosurgery*, 74, 560-565. doi: 10.1016/j.wneu.2010.11.016
- Fortunato, J. A. (2015). The advocacy and corrective strategies of the National Football League: Addressing concussions and player safety. *Journal of Conflict Management*, 3, 7-21.
- Goodell, R. (2016, September 14) NFL commitment to player health and safety: A letter from Commissioner Roger Goodell. *NFL*. Retrieved from: <https://www.playsmartplaysafe.com/commitment-letter/>

Gutierrez, P., & Seifert, K. (2019, August 19) Source: Brown files new grievance over helmet.

*ESPN*. Retrieved from: [https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_/id/27422672/brown-files-new-grievance-helmet](https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/27422672/brown-files-new-grievance-helmet)

Harlow, W.F., Brantley, B., Harlow, R. (2011). BP initial image repair strategies after the

*Deepwater Horizon* spill. *Public Relations Review*, 37, 80-83.

Hearit, K. M. (1994). Apologies and public relations crises at Chrysler, Toshiba, and Volvo.

*Public Relations Review*, 20, 113-125.

Hearit, K. M. (1995). "Mistakes were made": Organizations, apologia, and crises of social

legitimacy. *Communication Studies*, 46, 1-17.

Kilgore, A., & Clement, S. (2017, September 6) Poll: Nine in 10 sports fans say NFL brain

injuries are a problem, but 74 percent are still football fans. *Washington Post*. Retrieved

from: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/poll-nfl-remains-as-popular-as-ever-despite-head-injuries-other-concerns/2017/09/06/238bef8a-9265-11e7-8754-d478688d23b4\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.8440f0bf8974](https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/poll-nfl-remains-as-popular-as-ever-despite-head-injuries-other-concerns/2017/09/06/238bef8a-9265-11e7-8754-d478688d23b4_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8440f0bf8974)

Lundell, H., Niederdeppe, J., & Clarke, C. (2013) Public views about health causation,

attributions of responsibility, and inequality. *Journal of Health Communication*, 18,

1116–1130. DOI: 10.1080/10810730.2013.768724

Manusov, V., & Spitzberg, B. H. (2008). Attributes of attribution theory: Finding good cause in

the search for theory. In D. Braithwaite & L. A. Baxter (Eds.), *Engaging theories in*

*interpersonal communication* (pp. 37–50). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McCann, E. (2017, April 14). United's apologies: A timeline. *New York Times*.

Retrieved from: [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/14/business/united-airlines-passenger-doctor.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/14/business/united-airlines-passenger-doctor.html?_r=1)

- Moran, B. (2017, July 24). CTE found in 99 percent of former NFL players studied. *Boston University*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bu.edu/research/articles/cte-former-nfl-players/>
- NFL (2013, Aug. 29) NFL, ex-players agree to \$765M settlement in concussions suit. *NFL*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap1000000235494/article/nfl-explayers-agree-to-765m-settlement-in-concussions-suit>
- NFL. (2016a, March 24) NFL statement of New York Times' concussion research. *NFL*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000647297/article/nfl-statement-on-new-york-times-concussion-research-story>
- NFL (2016b, March 24) More to the story.... *NFL Communications*. Retrieved from: <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/More-To-The-Story.aspx>
- NFL (2016c, Sept. 14) What is the Head Health Initiative? *NFL*. Retrieved from: <https://www.playsmartplaysafe.com/focus-on-safety/advanced-technology/head-health-initiative/>
- NFL (2016d, Sept. 15) NFL statement 9-15-16. *NFL Communications*. Retrieved from: <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/NFL-Statement-9-15-16.aspx>
- NFL (2017a, Jan. 25) NFL statement on Moore concussion protocol review. *NFL Communications*. Retrieved from: <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/NFL-Statement-on-Moore-Concussion-Protocol-Review.aspx>
- NFL (2017b, March 29) Health and safety conference with Jeff Miller, Dr. Jeff Crandall and Joe Lockhart. *NFL Communications*. Retrieved from: <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/Health-and-Safety-Conference-with-Jeff-Miller,-Dr.-Jeff-Crandall-and-Joe-Lockhart.aspx>
- NFL (2017c, Dec. 21) NFL-NFLPA joint statement. *NFL Communications*. Retrieved from: <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/JOINT-NFL-NFLPA-STATEMENT-.aspx>



NFL (2018a, Sept. 27) NFL and NFLPA joint statement on concussion protocol review. *NFL Communications*. Retrieved from: <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/NFL-AND-NFLPA-JOINT-STATEMENT-ON-CONCUSSION-PROTOCOL-REVIEW.aspx>

NFL (2018b, Oct. 15) Australian Football League, Canadian Football League, National Football League, and World Rugby co-host International Collision Sports Conference. *NFL Communications*. Retrieved from: <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/AUSTRALIAN-FOOTBALL-LEAGUE,-CFL,-NFL-AND-WORLD-RUGBY-CO-HOST-INTERNATIONAL-COLLISION-SPORTS-CONFERENCE.aspx>

NFL (2020) Health and safety rules changes. *NFL*. Retrieved from: <https://operations.nfl.com/football-ops/nfl-ops-honoring-the-game/health-safety-rules-changes/>

NPR (2013, Oct. 7) When it comes to brain injury, authors say NFL is in a 'League Of Denial'. *NPR*. Retrieved from: <https://www.npr.org/2013/10/07/229181970/when-it-comes-to-brain-injury-authors-say-nfl-is-in-a-league-of-denial?ft=1&f=1001?ft=1&f=1001>

Onwumehili, C., & Bedeau, K. (2017) Analysis of FIFA's attempt at image repair. *Communication & Sport*. 5(4) 407-427 doi: 10.1177/2167479516633843

Omalu, B., DeKosky, S., Minster, R., Kamboh, M., Hamilton, R., & Wecht, C. (2005). Chronic traumatic encephalopathy in a National Football League player. *Neurosurgery* 52, 128-134. doi:10.1227/01.NEU.0000163407.92769.ED

PBS (2013, October 3) League of denial: The NFL's concussion crisis. [Video file]. Retrieved from: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/league-of-denial/>

Pellman, E. (2003) Background on the National Football League's research on concussion in professional football. *Neurosurgery*, 53, 797-798. doi.org/10.1093/neurosurgery/53.3.797

- Schwarz, A. (2007, Jan. 18) Expert Ties Ex-Player's Suicide to Brain Damage. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/18/sports/football/18waters.html>
- Schwarz, A. (2009, Oct. 28) N.F.L. scolded over injuries to its players. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/29/sports/football/29hearing.html>
- Schwarz, A., Bogdanich, W., & Williams, J. (2016, March 25) N.F.L.'s flawed concussion research and ties to tobacco industry. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/sports/football/nfl-concussion-research-tobacco.html>
- Scott, M. & Lyman, S. (1968) Accounts. *American Sociological Review*. 33(1), 46-62. DOI: 10.2307/2092239
- Thomas, L. (2017, April 10). United CEO says airline had to "re-accommodate" passenger, and people are having a riot. CNBC. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/10/united-ceo-says-airline-had-to-re-accommodate-passenger-and-twitter-is-having-a-riot.html>
- Turk, A. (2017) "We have work to do, and we're doing it:" An analysis of Roger Goodell's rhetoric during the NFL's ongoing concussion crisis. Retrieved <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/25832>
- Walsh, J. & McAllister-Spooner, S. (2011) Analysis of image repair discourse in the Michael Phelps controversy. *Public Relations Review*, 37, 157-162. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.01.001
- Ware, B. & Linkugel, W. (1973) They spoke in defense of themselves: On the generic

criticism of apologia, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 59:3, 273-283.

[doi.org/10.1080/00335637309383176](https://doi.org/10.1080/00335637309383176)

Weber, M., Erickson, S., & Stone, M. (2011) Corporate reputation management: Citibank's use of image restoration strategies during the U.S. banking crisis. *Journal of Organizational Culture, Communications and Conflict* 15(2), 35-55.

Weiner, B. (1986). An attributional theory of motivation and emotion. *Psychology Review*. 92(4). 548-573.