

**Masking corporatas with communitas rhetoric: How the National Football League influences fans through their public messages**

by

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the National Football League's (NFL) complex communication strategies, focusing on how teams navigate the tension between two opposing rhetorical frameworks: *corporatas* and *communitas*. *Corporatas*, characterized by competition, hierarchy, and profitability, contrasts with *communitas*, which emphasizes community, equality, and shared passion (Boyd & Stahley, 2008). By analyzing press releases and social media posts—specifically, those addressing player trades, releases, and promotions—this research explores how NFL teams balance these competing discourses to maintain fan engagement while upholding their corporate interests. This study employs a rhetorical analysis of NFL team communications to examine how organizations craft messages that address business imperatives and fan engagement. Social media platforms and team press releases provide teams with a direct means of engaging audiences to balance professionalism, transparency, and fan loyalty. The analysis highlights the rhetorical strategies teams employ to reinforce brand identity, manage public perception, and navigate sports communication in the digital era.

The findings enhance understanding of how professional sports organizations merge corporate identity with community messaging. By showing the relationship between *corporatas* and *communitas*, this research provides insights into fan engagement and organizational expectations in professional sports. Ultimately, it emphasizes the balance NFL teams need to maintain for competitive success and strong emotional ties with fans.

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## Introduction

The National Football League (NFL) operates at the intersection of intense competition, commercial interests, and fan engagement. As one of the world's most popular sports leagues, the NFL must resolve the tension between two opposing yet intertwined forms of rhetoric: corporatas and communitas, which describe the organizational and fan engagement perspectives. Boyd and Stahley (2008) describe these rhetorical frameworks as offering distinct approaches to how sports organizations communicate with their audiences. Communitas rhetoric emphasizes equality, purity, and a shared passion for the game, often tapping into feelings of innocence and unity (Boyd & Stahley, 2008). In contrast, corporatas rhetoric reflects a more structured, business-driven messaging, focusing on competition, hierarchy, and success regarding profitability and performance (Boyd & Stahley, 2008). Corporatas focuses on business decisions, official updates, and professional tones, while communitas emphasizes fan engagement and community fulfillment; both are critical in shaping the NFL's communication strategies.

Their outcomes are similarly different: where corporatas seeks to prosper from audience exploitation, communitas creates unity among fans (Heath, 2006). While different, both corporatas and communitas must be considered when creating messages because the relationships are mutually beneficial. Despite their seeming differences, Heath (2006) found that in successful organizational messaging, “a narrow ridge exists between sets of competing and complementary interests” (p. 107). Messaging that seeks to resolve tension between communitas and corporatas rhetoric is viewed in a “control, trust, and positive regard” (Heath, 2006, p. 107). To be successful, sports organizations must find productive methods to work with both the communitas and corporatas aspects of rhetoric.

The tension between *communitas* and *corporatas* rhetoric is evident in the NFL, where messages strategically layer *communitas* rhetoric to obscure *corporatas* motives. Rather than balancing these rhetorical forces, NFL communications highlight unity and shared identity to disguise business-driven decisions. On one hand, teams must project an image of strength, discipline, and tradition to appeal to their fan base, who value loyalty and trust (Watanabe et al., 2019). In their study on fan loyalty in the English Premier League, Harris & Ogbonna (2008) found that loyal relationships between teams and their fans need to be built upon shared values, interactions, and mutuality to attain high levels of commitment from fans. Similarly, while studying the loyalty of soccer fans whose teams face relegation, Koenigstorfer et al. (2010) found that “fandom is about expressing identity and attitude to life, sharing intimate details with the club, and standing by it, in both good and bad times. Thus, fans and their clubs are strongly bound to each other” (p. 649). An example of this bond between fans and their teams can be seen in Wegner et al. (2020), which examined the impact and feelings of fans regarding the relocation of the St. Louis Rams from St. Louis, Missouri, to Los Angeles, California:

Several fans coped with the threat of the Rams relocating by focusing on the Rams franchise (e.g., its history, vast fan base, players) instead of linking the Rams to a particular place (i.e., St. Louis); doing so provided them an opportunity to maintain a positive team identity. However, the St. Louis component of the team identity was not eliminated entirely, and for many fans it will likely always be part of the identity, albeit in a less salient way. (p. 226)

As this example shows, to cultivate loyal and committed fans, teams must connect with their fan base on a deeper level.

On the other hand, there is pressure to drive financial growth by enhancing brand image and expanding reach. Since “skilled competition regulates markets” (Heath & Waymer, 2019, p. 240), the NFL must prioritize competition to meet the needs of both their organization and their audiences (Martin, 2012). An example of the NFL prioritizing competition to uphold their and their audience’s needs can be seen through its International Games. When it comes to the International Games, the NFL is increasing its global market by taking NFL regular season games to international stadiums to engage fanbases beyond the United States (National Football League, 2025a). According to Troy Vincent, Sr., Executive Vice President of NFL Football Operations:

American football is for all. It’s a global game, an all-inclusive sport, that provides the opportunity for all ages to enjoy the values, fun and competitive environment unique to the sport of football. The NFL is committed to expanding NFL action to international fans in their home countries and developing young athletes around the world (Vincent, 2023). Through its International Games, the NFL can keep competition at the forefront while bringing the game to a wider audience. In their study regarding the NFL’s social media communications to global markets, Cavanaugh (2023) states, “Being able to engage and relate to new audiences helps to gain a stronger presence in the global market, which overall is beneficial and crucial for international growth of the organization” (p. 28). This highlights social media’s pivotal role in balancing audience needs with organizational needs. With its direct and immediate reach, social media has revolutionized how sports organizations interact with their audience. Steiner et al. (2023) state that “the more devout fans are, the more social media platforms they likely use as they attempt to keep abreast of all the activities of their favorite team” (pg. 141). However, the nature of social media makes balancing corporatas and communitas difficult.

This is challenging for sports organizations because they must manage the tensions between pursuing commercial goals (*corporatas*) while simultaneously trying to foster authentic fan connections (*communitas*). This often leads to a conflict between profit-driven rhetoric and community engagement. For example, in an announcement by the Tennessee Titans regarding the trade of DeAndre Hopkins, who “During his time with the Titans, Hopkins tallied 90 catches for 1,230 yards and eight touchdowns while appearing in 23 games and making 19 starts,” the organization had to strike a compromise between the two types of rhetoric (Dimmitt, 2025, p. 1). The Tennessee Titans announced on social media and their team website:

The Titans have agreed to terms on a trade that will send receiver DeAndre Hopkins to the Kansas City Chiefs. In exchange for Hopkins, the Titans will receive a conditional fifth-round pick in the 2025 NFL Draft that could become a fourth-round pick. (Wyatt, 2024, p. 1)

This announcement by the Titans helps to show how *corporatas* is used to engage partisans (fans) to reach commercial goals (Heath, 2006). The Titans illustrate how *communitas* rhetoric softens the corporate nature of a transactional decision. By providing a hopeful outlook and reinforcing fan identity, the *communitas* framing conceals the profit-oriented logic behind the trade, mitigating backlash and preserving fan loyalty.

While exploring the relationship between sports organizations and their audience, *corporatas* and *communitas* are essential for understanding how teams and fans connect through digital platforms. Sports organizations can closely interact and engage with their audience through social media (Watanabe et al., 2019). NFL teams can directly release real-time information through platforms like X (formerly Twitter), from player updates to strategic changes, directly to their followers. This immediate interaction helps shape public perceptions

and enhance fan identification but also presents unique challenges. NFL teams use social media posts regarding general information and team statistics to help engage their fans and inform them on all things football-related (Annamalai et al., 2021; Wang, 2023). In-game postings (posts made during a live game) made by teams regarding players, performances, and statistics have been found to get more fans engaged in the team's comment section, in turn increasing the team's social media engagement (Wang, 2023; Santos et al., 2019; Stavros et al., 2014). However, regardless of when a team posts on social media, whether during a game or not, fan engagement is impacted by the rhetoric produced in the messaging put out by the team (Wang, 2023). Postings and messages on social media must inform and maintain fan loyalty and brand image while also addressing expectations of competitiveness. These messages often reflect the rhetorical tension between *corporatas* and *communitas* as teams organize their business objectives in a manner that will allow them to maintain a sense of community and emotional connection with fans while also producing the successes that generate revenue for their businesses. The NFL's strategic use of social media to communicate player moves, roster changes, and organizational shifts provides a lens through which we can examine the intersection of corporate rhetoric and communal identity.

This thesis examines how NFL teams use *communitas* rhetoric to disguise corporate motives, particularly in player changes. Drawing on a sample of press releases and social media posts, I explore how this rhetoric preserves the organization's image, manages public expectations, and maintains fan support through shared identity. In an age of transparency, NFL teams employ *communitas* rhetoric to foster loyalty while concealing commercial motives. This study shows how organizational messaging often acts as rhetorical camouflage.

## Contextual Analysis

The NFL and social media are excellent platforms for exploring corporatas and communitas due to their broad influence. Together, the NFL and social media demonstrate how formal corporate structures (corporatas) and informal communal connections (communitas) work together and shape fan experiences. As the demand for live sports like NFL games has increased, so has the demand for extensive media coverage (Issacson, 2010). Studies have found that “Professional sports command constant media and consumer attention” (Burton & Howard, 1999, p. 44). Through this need for attention, digital Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) tools such as social media and digital technology allow sports organizations to increase consumer attention by increasing sports availability to audiences (Whitburn et al., 2020; Abeza et al., 2017; Belch & Belch, 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015). Whitburn et al. (2020) describe IMC tools as “public relations and communications strategies that influence the public by informing, persuading, and motivating consumers to display favorable behavior toward an organization” (Whitburn et al., 2020, p. 419). Using IMC tools, sports organizations can state their audiences’ needs for constant media.

As a response to this rising demand, the NFL has shifted its approach to media distribution, leveraging both traditional and emerging digital platforms to engage with their audience (McGehee et al., 2020; Annamalai et al., 2021; Ioakimidis, 2010). One of the NFL’s responses to this growing media demand has been direct communication through official team websites and social media accounts. Through this use of media, NFL teams allow fans to “get news and updates, discuss their favorite teams, the season and all things NFL” (National Football League, 2025b). NFL teams can also connect directly with media outlets and voice their organizational changes directly to their fans (Issacson, 2010; Sheffer & Schultz, 2013; Stoldt et

al., 2020). An example of voicing changes directly to fans via social media and media outlets can be seen in the Jacksonville Jaguars organization. An announcement was made by the team's owner Shad Khan addressing the need for a head coaching change that better aligned with the team's goals and would position the Jaguars for future success. On January 6, 2025, Khan announced:

I had the difficult task this morning of informing Doug Pederson of my intention to hire a new head coach to lead the Jacksonville Jaguars. Doug is an accomplished football man who will undoubtedly enjoy another chapter in his impressive NFL career, and I will be rooting for Doug and his wife, Jeannie, when that occasion arrives. As much as Doug and I both wish his experience here in Jacksonville would have ended better, I have an obligation first and foremost to serve the best interests of our team and especially our fans, who faithfully support our team and are overdue to be rewarded. In that spirit, the time to summon new leadership is now.

I strongly believe it is possible next season to restore the winning environment we had here not long ago. I will collaborate with General Manager Trent Baalke and others, within and close to our organization, to hire a leader who shares my ambition and is ready to seize the extraordinary opportunity we will offer in Jacksonville. (Jacksonville Jaguars, 2025)

This announcement was released publicly by the Jacksonville Jaguars to their fans on their team website, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X pages to voice their immediate organizational change.

One of the areas that has grown is the way teams provide updates on their rosters and organizational structure. In the past, before the rise of social media, articles from organizations

like *ESPN* and *Sports Illustrated* were the main sources of information for fans about team changes. In a *Sports Illustrated* article titled “Strictly Business,” detailing roster moves within the Buffalo Bills as well as the New Orleans Saints, King (2000) writes:

So as teams tightened their belts for the start of the free-agent signing period last Friday, three players who were instrumental in taking Buffalo to four straight Super Bowls in the 1990s were on the street. "It's sad, but they're not the guys carrying this team anymore," Bills coach Wade Phillips said. "In today's football you had better realize things can't go on forever, and you'd better be ready to change when you have to." So while teams such as the 49ers and the Vikings try to hold together rosters with fading veterans, the Bills have cleared the way for rising young talent. (p.74)

This article demonstrates how roster moves, and organizational changes were provided to fans in the 2000 NFL season. However, the landscape of how teams communicate with fans has dramatically shifted since then. Today, NFL teams use social media platforms to distribute their own content, offering real-time updates on team news, player movements, and organizational changes. NFL teams use these real-time updates as modern public statements for their organization; utilizing these direct channels for sharing information enables them to control their messages and maintain conciseness throughout their organizational messaging (Filo et al., 2015). Providing direct messaging to fans allows NFL teams to shape the narrative surrounding their movements (Stoldt et al., 2020; Seate et al., 2010). Upholding a clear and continuous presence from the organization across various media distribution platforms allows NFL teams to enhance their visibility, which is crucial in an era that relies on media consumption for success (Stoldt et al., 2020; McGehee et al., 2020).

When NFL teams directly connect with their fans via social media platforms, they have greater control over how their messages are voiced and disseminated. Unfortunately, that means they also need to manage their community and commercial interests. Connecting directly with fans on social media allows teams to foster their fans' engagement (Geurin, 2023). Social media engagement has been consistently defined as the average number of interactions (such as likes, comments, and shares) a social media account receives per post (Brison & Geurin, 2021; Geurin, 2023; Wang, 2023). In their study, Thompson et al. (2014) found that sports organizations can deepen their relationships with fans by increasing their social media engagement.

### ***Announcing Roster Changes***

In the National Football League (NFL), roster changes are essential to team management and strategy. In their study, Reynolds et al. (2015) state that there are three main ways of acquiring players in the NFL other than through the NFL draft: 1) free agency, 2) undrafted free agency, and 3) trades with other teams. Free agency "is an opportunity for players to land lucrative paydays or find better team fits while also serving as another avenue for teams to upgrade and improve their rosters" (Holzman-Escareno, 2023, p. 1). An undrafted free agent is "a player who is neither signed in the draft nor selected as a free agent. These players are often signed onto teams as backup players after the draft has occurred" (Reynolds et al., 2015, p. 74). Reynolds et al. (2015) also states that "teams may obtain players through trades with other teams or teams may trade draft positions in order to gain an advantage" (p. 74). Each of these different types of roster changes helps to make each NFL team have a competitive advantage (Reynolds et al., 2015).

These changes directly impact each team's organizational performance and long-term success (Stern, 2020). Roster changes can be announced in various ways; however, they must adhere to league-wide rules and regulations established by the NFL's Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) and the NFL's own policies (NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement, 2020). As stated in the agreement, "NFL Clubs maintain and reserve the right to manage and direct their operations in any manner whatsoever, except as specifically limited by the provisions of this Agreement" (NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement, 2020, p. 5, Article 2, Section 3). If NFL teams do not break any rules set forth by the CBA, they can announce their roster changes however they wish.

The most common roster changes involve player signings, releases, trades, and injury-related designations (National Football League, 2025a). These changes are typically made public through official channels to maintain transparency and consistency within the league (Stern, 2020). In addition to these announcements, the NFL has specific rules and deadlines for announcing certain types of roster changes. The difference between pre-season and post-season roster rules, as well as regular-season roster rules, makes all the difference for NFL teams and their roster numbers.

For example, NFL teams can have a maximum of 90 players at the start of training camp during the pre-season; however, once the regular season begins, NFL teams must reduce their active roster to only 53 players and are permitted to have a practice squad of up to 16 players (National Football League, 2024b). These reductions from 90 to 53 players during the final preseason cutdown are typically announced through team statements, yet the timing and nature of the cuts are often anticipated through league-wide reporting (Jenkins, 2024; O'Sullivan, 2024). At most, 69 players can be associated with an NFL team, but only 53 athletes can be

active on any team's roster. As teams strive to build competitive rosters, the announcement and communication of these changes remain a central aspect of the NFL's operational framework.

While these decisions are often made to showcase team strategy and performance, they can also evoke strong emotional reactions from the fanbase. Roster changes in the NFL can have significant emotional implications for fans, whose attachment to the team is often rooted in personal connections to specific players. For instance, the Seattle Seahawks trading Russell Wilson to the Denver Broncos generated frustrations among fans due to their strong bond with the player. Wilson was selected in the 2012 NFL Draft and became the most successful quarterback in franchise history for the organization (Seattle Seahawks, 2022). During his time with the Seahawks, Wilson established the Why Not You Foundation, a nonprofit aimed at empowering and supporting local youth. "Since its founding in 2014, the Why Not You Foundation has raised more than \$10 million in partnership with Safeway and Albertsons to fund cancer treatments and research, including life-saving immunotherapy treatments that combat pediatric cancer" (Boyle, 2022). Wilson contributed to Seattle with his on-field performance while also making a visible impact in the community. The team's Vice President and General Manager, John Schneider, said the following about Wilson's trade:

His tireless work ethic has helped make him one of the most successful QBs in NFL history and we thank him for his many contributions on the field and in the community. When it became evident that Russell was interested in playing elsewhere, we used that opportunity to explore the market, allowing us to acquire three quality players, tremendous draft capital, and create salary cap flexibility. We have a clear vision about the direction of this team, and this is an exciting time for our organization. (Seattle Seahawks, 2022, p. 1)

Schneider thanked Wilson for his impact not only with the team but also in the community, using *communitas* to emphasize the emotional connection fans had with the organization. At the same time, he also used *corporatas* strategies to stress how the organization will still be successful, even though their beloved player is leaving.

The Seattle Seahawks created unity by focusing on future success after losing a beloved player, whereas the New Orleans Saints failed to do the same. In the 1999 NFL Draft, the New Orleans Saints were originally supposed to have the 12<sup>th</sup> pick of the draft. Fearful of losing the player they wanted, the Saints traded all of their 1999 draft picks and two of their first three draft picks in the 2000 NFL draft to the Washington Redskins (now Washington Commanders), who had the 5<sup>th</sup> overall pick in the 1999 NFL Draft. After trading for the 5<sup>th</sup> pick, the Saints drafted Ricky Williams, a running back from the University of Texas, who won the Heisman in 1998. This decision did not turn out well for the Saints, as they ended with a 3-13 record (New Orleans Saints, 1999). After playing for the Saints for 3 years, Williams was traded to the Miami Dolphins. While the Saints believed that by drafting Williams, they could have a new fan favorite (*communitas*) and a player who could bring success to their franchise (*corporatas*), the Saints instead made a bad overall decision for its organization. This decision shows how misjudging a player's impact can create instability within a fanbase, ultimately hurting organizational support.

One reason communities respond so strongly to player moves is that fans develop a deep attachment to individual athletes, which influences their overall attachment to the team (Branscombe et al., 1999). Fan identities are shaped by the feelings and physiological connections an individual has with a team and by how that team performs (Wann, 2001; Wann et al., 2021). As Gill (2012) found, “Individuals create part of their identity by identifying with one group and thus distancing from other groups. This process is obvious in fanhood because when

we choose to support one team, we distance ourselves from the others” (p. 154). This means that the announcement of a player’s release, trade, or injury-related change requires careful consideration of its potential impact on fans (Trujillo, 1992). As stated in their research, "Team loyalties that develop over many years provide spectators with a sense of roots and stability" (Trujillo, 1992, p. 262). This sense of stability is what makes roster changes so emotionally impactful for fans. These moves disrupt fan engagement, leading to diminished emotional investment. The tension between financial decisions and fan loyalty negatively affects the bottom line as teams balance community and corporate interests.

NFL roster changes significantly affect team strategy and fan engagement. These changes result from free agency, trades, and undrafted players but must adhere to league rules and deadlines. Emotional responses from fans complicate these decisions, potentially impacting team loyalty and creating tension between financial goals and emotional connections. The effects vary: some teams manage fan sentiment well, while others, like the New Orleans Saints with Ricky Williams, struggle to maintain stability. Ultimately, teams must balance performance, corporate interests, and fan loyalty for long-term success. The following section will examine the implications of the study’s findings, focusing on how NFL teams balance *corporatas* and *communitas* rhetoric in their communications. This analysis will explore how these rhetorical structures shape fan engagement and team identity during pivotal moments like roster changes. It will also assess the effects of these strategies on fan experiences and loyalty, emphasizing the tension between financial goals and community-building in sports organizations.

## **Literature Review**

*Corporatas* and *communitas* rhetoric demonstrate the tensions in sports rhetoric. Sports organizations manage these tensions in their messages to engage fans and meet competitive and

financial goals (Boyd & Stahley, 2008). In sports rhetoric *communitas* creates a sense of community by emphasizing equality, health, and gameplay (Boyd & Stahley, 2008). Turner (1974) notes that “*Communitas* at its inception is between individuals—it is what we believe we share, and its outputs emerge from dialogue” (p. 89). *Communitas* rhetoric empowers audiences to build community through shared identities, allowing sports organizations to unify and cooperate in a competitive environment (Kemp, 1999; Thomassen, 2018; Lev, 2022). For example, Kemp (1999) found that in competitive sports, *communitas* emerges when roles such as gender and social class become irrelevant for all involved, allowing collective unity to be the focal point. Fans of the Buffalo Bills organization, known as the “Bills Mafia,” provide an example of community identity:

The nickname for the fan base, only 12 years old, has become associated with raucous tailgates and fans jumping through folding tables, but also for fans giving back. The name has helped bring a spotlight to a tight-knit community that goes above and beyond to connect with its football team. (Getzenberg, 2023, p. 1).

The love and loyalty of Buffalo Bills fans create a community beyond the sport. *Communitas*, a concept of shared experience, strengthens this bond and fosters connections and a sense of belonging among fans (Turner, 1974).

*Corporatas* is a rhetorical structure that divides individuals due to their power, social status, and athletic ability. Kruse (1981) states, “The team sport ethic requires the public display of absolute devotion and commitment toward the team, the game, and the world of sport” (p. 274). This competitive framework reflects *corporatas* ideals by fostering individual rivalries that are essential for success. While *communitas* messages celebrate unity, *corporatas* messages celebrate winning outcomes and the bottom line (Boyd & Stahley, 2008). Heath (2006) argues

that corporatas rhetoric allows “organizations intrude into and dominate as well as manipulate any stake exchange” (p.106). Essentially, through corporatas rhetoric, organizations prioritize their success and survival (Turner, 1969; Heath & Waymer, 2019; Heath, 2006). An example of corporatas rhetoric being used by a sports organization can be seen on the Buffalo Bills online store:

Become a part of Bills Mafia and upgrade your closet with Buffalo Bills Mafia apparel!  
Show your pride in being a part of one of the best fanbases in the world and get your hands on Buffalo Bills Mafia apparel today! (Buffalo Bills, 2020)

While the “Bills Mafia” is a “tight-knit community that goes above and beyond to connect with its football team” (Getzenberg, 2023, p. 1), the organization is concerned with its bottom line by marketing its fan community.

Sports organizations cannot simply choose to put their interests first (corporatas) and prioritize public service. Their messages must meet community identity obligations while pursuing competitive goals, which often clash. For instance, Heath (2013) observed:

Because sports create such high communitas expectations, corporatas behaviors can shatter these idyllic illusions and even cause fans to feel betrayed. Suppose the team can no longer afford to keep the star player. In that case, if it trades established players for prospects, or if a season is interrupted because of contract disputes, the corporatas nature of sports-as-business can create public relations problems for the team, players, and management because it violates fans’ expectations for a more communitas-oriented enterprise. (p. 165)

Sports organizations can never fully commit to communitas or corporatas rhetoric, both critical for success (Boyd & Stahley, 2008; Heath & Waymer, 2019; Heath, 2006). Managing tensions

requires acknowledging “the interplay between an open, knowledge-sharing culture and a rigid, hierarchal knowledge-concealing culture” (Kersh, 2014, p. 22). Recognizing this tension allows organizations navigate the need for community building and hierarchical control, ensuring their rhetoric fosters collaboration while maintaining structure and accountability (Boyd & Stahley, 2008; Heath & Waymer, 2019; Kersh, 2014). Kersh (2014) states, “an athletic department must maintain their corporatas ideals to maintain hierarchies but cultivate communitas values to reach out to their publics” (p. 7). Similarly, Richardson et al. (2014) explained:

Communitas can also enhance consensus building among members of the community, thus aiding the planning process for long-term disaster recovery activities. Cooperation among local citizens in the disaster recovery decision-making process can help create a new vision that can produce a community that is socially stronger and ideally more resilient to future disasters (p. 213)

While their study (Richardson et al., 2014) focused on the creation of communitas through natural disasters, their findings can be applied to the rhetoric of sports organizations. Knowing that communitas contributes to public cooperation means a stronger and more resilient community, NFL messaging works to draw their community (fans) together so that they can maintain their collective identity when confronted with the harsh realities of professional sports, such as the retirement of a long-time player with a team, the firing of a coach, or the trading of a player. The Philadelphia Eagles organization provide a recent example of a sports organization attempting to maintain its collective identity through harsh commercial realities after the announcement of long-time center Jason Kelce. In his public statement regarding Kelce’s retirement, team CEO Jeffery Lurie stated:

He gave everything he had to all of us for 13 years, and he did it in a way that was truly authentic. Jason was an incredible football player; a future Hall of Famer who would have been successful anywhere. But has there ever been a more perfect marriage between a player, a city, and a team? (Lurie, 2024).

As this statement demonstrates, a sense of community, fostered by *communitas* rhetoric, allows the organizations to ease the pain of difficulties while also encouraging stronger bonds.

Organizations can find themselves in dire straits if the tensions between *communitas* and *corporatas* are spread too far. Heath and Waymer (2019) found that elite organizations are motivated by the conflicting tensions between the rhetoric of *communitas* and *corporatas*. They argue, “Self-interested organizations collide with the interests of communities where they operate. The micro-political tension is whether the corporate organization bends the community to serve its interest (*corporatas*), or whether it bends itself to serve the community (*communitas*)” (Heath & Waymer, 2019, p. 237). For instance, despite their support, the Buffalo Bills organization sometimes conflicts with the Bills Mafia's interests. While the Bills Mafia's main purpose is to bring Bills fans together in a community and to give back to that community, sometimes the Bills organization's own self-interests get in the way. For example, in an X post, the Buffalo Bills (2021) stated, “Mafia means family.” They then stated, “The newest @BennyBsf x Buffalo Bills merch has dropped” (Buffalo Bills, 2021). In this X post, they employ *communitas* rhetoric of associating the Bills Mafia identity as part of the Buffalo Bills family but immediately follow that rhetoric up with bottom-line seeking messaging (*corporatas*) attempting to make more money off their new merchandise. This example shows how sports organizations can either pull their community together (*communitas*) or serve the organization's self-interest (*corporatas*).

## *Social Media and Rhetoric*

Social media is one of the key arenas where the tensions between *communitas* and *corporatas*. Social media allows organizations to engage directly with their target audiences (Eddy et al., 2021; Delia & Armstrong, 2015; Donlan & Crowther, 2012). As Fido et al. (2014) argue, “The emergence of social media has profoundly impacted the delivery and consumption of sport” as organizations share previously private information to engage followers (p. 166; see also Eddy et al., 2021; Shilbury et al., 2015). These platforms allow real-time updates and direct fan interaction, making it easier for organizations to control their narratives and respond quickly. This is not just a strategic choice but a league-mandated practice (National Football League, 2017). According to the NFL’s Personnel Report Policy (2017), “Each Public Relations Director is responsible for ensuring that all required injury and practice/game participation information is reported to the NFL Communications Department, and issued to the opposing team, local and national media, broadcast partners, etc” (National Football League, 2017, p. 1). As part of this change, press releases and X (Twitter) posts have become primary channels for NFL teams to communicate player and staff changes.

The Houston Texans provide a good look at how sports organization use social media to break news of player movement. On March 18, 2022, two days before any other announcements, the Texans shared a message and image of a press statement from General Manager Nick Caserio about quarterback Deshaun Watson’s trade to the Cleveland Browns. The post read:

We have agreed to trade QB Deshaun Watson and a 2024 sixth-round pick to the Cleveland Browns for a 2022 first-round pick (Overall #13), 2023 first-round pick, 2024

first-round pick, 2023 third-round pick, 2022 fourth-round (Overall #107) and 2024 fourth-round pick. (Houston Texans, 2022)

The Texans provided real-time updates to fans about organizational changes before any other source, showcasing social media's role in keeping fans engaged.

Because of this unique relationship, sports organizations have increasingly used their social media to promote communitas and corporatas rhetoric. In 2013, the NFL and X (Twitter) joined to create a beneficial partnership. The original goal was to increase the NFL's social reach and overall following would allow for a larger audience to have access to NFL messaging (Sloane, 2014). The NFL took part in Twitter's Amplify Program, which allows brands and organizations to "Connect with what's happening through alignment with premium video content from the top, most relevant publishers that your target audience is already watching" (Twitter Amplify, 2013). After joining this program, the NFL nearly tripled its Twitter following and earned over seven figures through sponsorships from other prominent brands to repost and share their clips and tweets (Sloane, 2014). The partnership between the NFL and Twitter (X) helped increase the NFL's social media engagement, creating more power for both organizations among many audiences.

Real-time engagement is a significant trend, as sports organizations increasingly rely on social media to foster fan connections and corporate partnerships. Building on the NFL's successful partnership with Twitter, research suggests that sports organizations can further enhance user engagement by refining their relationship marketing strategies on the platform. In examining user engagement within the professional sports community on the Twitter (X) platform, Naraine et al. (2019) found that "to enhance their Twitter community, organizations should refine their relationship marketing strategies accordingly, including reconsidering when

they post and activate campaigns, to align with users' interests and Twitter peak activity" (p. 275). Tweets hold significant power because their intended audience sees them and gain momentum through being shared by others (Billings, 2014). In their study, Li et al. (2018) discovered that "expressing support toward the team was the main driver for Twitter users to follow sports organizations. Therefore, providing more team-related content, such as a team's game videos and practice information, could increase users' loyalty toward the sport organization" (Li et al., 2018, p. 345). This indicates that a tweet's influence can translate into value by having organizations boost their visibility and reputation through active audience engagement on the X platform (Goh et al., 2013; Billings, 2014; Eddy et al., 2021). This aligns well with *communitas*' mission of creating community engagement and connecting fans by offering exclusive behind-the-scenes content that creates an emotional investment. Reaching more brands also fits *corporatas*' strategy of leveraging targeted content to build strategic partnerships and drive brand loyalty.

Sports organizations encounter the challenge of engaging both fans and business objectives and the dynamics of social media, particularly the influence of a tweet. These dynamics illustrate how they navigate the tension between *communitas* and *corporatas*. The impact of a tweet extends beyond its immediate audience, gaining additional influence as it is shared and adopted by NFL teams. As Billings (2014) stated, "The power of a tweet is not primarily derived from the number of followers who receive it but the number of media gatekeepers (traditional and new) embracing it in some ancillary format" (pg. 110). Tweets are powerful because their intended audience sees them and gain power through sharing by others (Billings, 2014). A tweet's influence can be transformed into value by encouraging organizations

to enhance their visibility and image through active engagement with their audience on the X platform (Goh et al., 2013; Billings, 2014; Eddy et al., 2021).

However, despite the potential for a broad reach, Billings (2014) notes that Twitter does not represent the broader social media landscape. They argue,

The majority of Americans participate in social media but substantially less participate on Twitter; social media use (broadly defined) canvasses a representative swath of the overall population, while Twitter is far more niche, ably setting agendas for media and offline discussion while not representing majority opinions on most of these discussions. (p. 108)

This means that X is used as a niche area to talk about and post content to a specific audience instead of attempting to reach the app's population (Billings, 2014; Wang, 2023). As tweets put out by NFL teams are intended for a specific audience, we can assume the content of these tweets is not intended for the public's opinion but to relay information on behalf of the NFL team to their most engaged fans (Billings, 2014). Public opinion refers to the collective attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions held by the public (Glynn, 2018), and it can significantly influence how tweets are received. While the primary intent of these messages is to engage a targeted audience, the broader public's opinions can still impact how the messages are interpreted and discussed. Additionally, NFL teams tend to craft nonpartisan messaging aimed directly at their audience. These messages are often based on information, with minimal overt personal opinions from the organization, to arrange them to keep their audience engaged while seeking to achieve bottom-line goals.

In sum, social media plays a crucial role in managing the tension between *communitas* and *corporatas*, particularly in the sports industry, where organizations can directly engage with

audiences through platforms like X. By sharing up-to-date information, sports organizations can keep their followers engaged and control their narratives with real-time updates. The NFL's partnership with Twitter, launched in 2013, significantly expanded its social media reach, allowing the league to boost its visibility and engagement while attracting substantial sponsorships. Tweets hold power not only through direct interactions but also through their accessibility by fans. While Twitter's audience is niche compared to other social media platforms, its influence remains strong in shaping agendas and discussions. NFL teams use X to communicate rhetoric-filled messages to keep fans engaged while attempting to attain bottom-line organizational goals. This strategic use of social media enables sports organizations to deliver *communitas* and *corporatas* messages using elements of brand promotion and fan engagement. Through real-time interactions and content, teams can create a sense of community while advancing corporate objectives, ensuring that fan loyalty and financial goals see eye to eye.

## **Method**

This study analyzes the social media reports of roster and personnel changes to better understand how sports organizations manage tensions between *corporatas* and *communitas* on social media. To accomplish this, I employed textual analysis, a method for interpreting the meanings and values of messages (Smith, 2017), to analyze the rhetorical messages conveyed by the NFL regarding player personnel changes. Textual analysis was chosen because, for the NFL and other sports organizations, messages, “the whole must be understood from its parts, and all parts must be understood from the whole” (Pickles, 2011, p. 405). At the same time, interpreters must respect the context of the text and remain self-reflective about potential biases. The study

used an exploratory design with multiple texts, including press releases and social media posts, to analyze NFL teams' rhetorical strategies in public messages. This approach also allowed for comparisons with similar studies.

Findings from this study will be generalizable to more areas within rhetorical research. For instance, findings from this study can transfer to other sports organizations who are managing tensions in their public statements. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), write that there are 10 indicators for which a qualitative study can achieve transferability:

(a) by sufficiently describing persons, settings, and processes; (b) by identifying limitations through critical reflection; (c) through a theoretically diverse sampling; (d) by using “thick description” in the findings; (e) through readers finding results consistent with their own experiences; (f) when findings align with existing theory; (g) when selected cases are replicable; (h) when the potential for transferability is outlined; (i) when the report suggests alternative sites for further testing of findings; and (j) when findings have been replicated in other studies. (p. 314)

These indicators allow for this study to be transferred due to two indicators being present: 1) “when selected cases are replicable” and 2) “when the report suggests alternative sites for further testing of findings” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 314). Since these indicators are present, this study can be recreated by other scholars who wish to provide insight into their choice of rhetorical messaging.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis occurred in three main stages. First, an extensive online inquiry was conducted by analyzing relevant X postings spanning the past two NFL seasons, carefully identifying tweets that aligned with the study's parameters. Additionally, official press releases

issued by NFL teams on their respective websites were thoroughly examined further to ensure alignment with the specified criteria of the study. Second, both press releases and X posts were reviewed and categorized based on the focus of their messaging (player releases, trades, and promotions). Third, after categorizing the messages found, a further within-message analysis was conducted to understand the context and intent of each message. This section outlines the individual messages and concludes with a rhetorical case report. I found approximately 200 X posts and press releases to complete this analysis. I then read them, focusing on the language and overall messaging strategy. Each message was evaluated for its alignment with the team's branding goals, fan engagement tactics, and responses to key events such as player acquisitions or releases. I also noted any recurring phrases or symbols that appeared to indicate a specific rhetorical strategy or approach to fan interaction. Once the analysis was complete, I synthesized the findings to draw connections between the types of messages and the intended outcomes of each communication effort.

In conclusion, the analysis reveals significant insights into how NFL teams use digital platforms to shape public perception, engage with fans, and showcase their brand identity. The combination of strategic message categorization and rhetorical analysis offers a comprehensive view of how these organizations manage communications during pivotal moments. In the next section, I will explore the broader implications of these findings, discussing the balance between corporatas and communitas messaging in NFL communications, and how these strategies influence fan engagement, team identity, and the overall fan experience.

## **Data**

NFL teams' communication channels, such as their official websites and social media accounts, are essential platforms for delivering important updates to fans. These channels enable

direct engagement with their audience and serve as valuable sources of information regarding organizational changes and team developments. This makes them valuable resources for researching trends in sports organizational communication (Ozgun & Broekel, 2022). In this study, content was primarily gathered from two sources: official press releases found on team websites and social media posts made on X (formerly Twitter). Press releases were also found through X, as NFL teams link to press releases in their X posts or include images of press releases created by the team. The social media content analyzed was collected from X because of the platform's extensive use by teams for real-time communication and public engagement (Chen et al., 2021; Ozgun & Broekel, 2022). This immediacy and visibility make X particularly important for understanding how sports organizations manage their image and convey rhetorical intent during personnel changes (Chen et al., 2021; Ozgun & Broekel, 2022).

During this analysis, one hundred fifty press releases and X posts containing messages from NFL teams to their fans were gathered from team websites and team X pages to create a textual corpus. The messages were issued between March 2023 and January 2025. The official websites and X accounts of NFL teams are excellent means (Chen et al., 2021; Ozgun & Broekel, 2022) for accessing each team's messages related to organizational changes. Searches were conducted on official NFL team websites and the X platform to collect any messages from NFL teams concerning organizational changes, specifically player releases, trades, and promotions.

## **Analysis**

The analysis of NFL team communication strategies occurred in three stages, focusing on how press releases and social media (X posts) shape public perception and manage fan engagement. The first stage involved reviewing X posts from the past two NFL seasons and

identifying tweets within the study's parameters. Official press releases from NFL teams were also analyzed to meet the study's criteria. Team-created content, such as official statements or announcements shared on team websites, was also included as press releases, as they served as public-facing communications intended to inform the public about personnel changes. These sources offered insights into how NFL teams frame messages and engage with fans during key events like player releases, trades, and promotions. Saturation was reached in the study's findings, as press releases and X posts eventually showcased no new themes or insights, indicating that sufficient data had been collected for meaningful analysis.

In the second stage, X posts and press releases were categorized based on the primary communication strategies they employed, specifically focusing on *corporatas* and *communitas*. The messages were divided into two key categories. The first category, *corporatas*, encompassed messages emphasizing the organizational perspective, such as business decisions, official updates, and professional tones, often addressing player releases and team operations in a corporate context. *Communitas*, on the other hand, focused on fan engagement, community fulfillment, and creating emotional connections. This categorization was crucial for understanding how NFL teams communicated with internal stakeholders and their broader fan base during organizational changes.

The third stage involved a rhetorical analysis of the language and intent behind each message. It examined recurring phrases, symbols, and themes during key moments such as player releases, trades, or promotions. The focus was on how these messages balanced *corporatas* and *communitas*, particularly in their approach to managing the organizational goals of professionalism while fostering emotional connections to maintain fan loyalty. This chapter highlights the underlying tensions between:

1. Professional tones (corporatas) vs. Emotional Connections (communitas)
2. Business decisions (corporatas) vs. Fan Identities (communitas)
3. Organizational Success (corporatas) vs. Community Fulfillment (communitas)

The analysis of the tensions between these themes provides insights into how NFL teams manage conflicting priorities. The next section delves deeper into how these tensions are navigated and demonstrates the methods teams use to maintain fan connection while pursuing organizational objectives.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Tensions Between Professional Tones and Emotional Connections**

Tensions between professional tones and emotional connections affect how the NFL communicates. Tables 1 and 2 highlight these differences. Professional tones use formal language, are transactional, and prioritize efficiency, minimizing emotional impact. Conversely, emotional connections utilize inclusive language, are emotional, and are geared toward shared values. NFL messages about player releases, trades, and promotions are mostly direct and objective, aimed at giving fans a factual understanding of players and rationalizing team decisions. Consider the release of Brad Robbins from the Cincinnati Bengals. The press release states, “The Bengals today waived P Brad Robbins. Robbins, a second-year player, was returned to the active roster from the Reserve/Injured list yesterday. He originally was a sixth-round draft pick of the Bengals in 2023” (Cincinnati Bengals, 2024). The tone of this message is professional, concise, and formal; it focuses on the business aspects of the team’s decision. It emphasizes factual details, such as his time with the team and his status as a sixth-round pick. By

highlighting his experience with the team, the audience gains critical business-related insights necessary for understanding roster decisions. For example, through formal and transactional language, the Chicago Bears could inform their fans about the release of nine players from the roster. The press release states, "The Bears on Monday waived nine players: Receivers John Jackson and Peter LeBlanc, offensive linemen Ja'Tyre Carter and Jerome Carvin, defensive linemen Michael Dwumfour and Jaylon Hutchings, linebackers Paul Moala and Javin White, and safety Quindell Johnson" (Mayer, 2024). The Bears utilize professional tones by concentrating on exchanging information regarding roster changes with fans. Such as the trade of Donovan Peoples-Jones from the Cleveland Browns to the Detroit Lions. The press release states:

The Cleveland Browns and Detroit Lions have agreed to the following trade:

Browns receive:

2025 6th round pick.

Lions receive:

WR Donovan Peoples-Jones.

Peoples-Jones has eight receptions for 97 yards this season. He's averaging 12.1 yards per catch, and his longest reception was for 29 yards. (Cleveland Browns, 2023b)

By providing the seasonal statistics for Peoples-Jones, the Browns emphasize a factual, data-driven depiction of his contributions to the team. Corporate language demonstrates to the audience that this trade is a business transaction.

NFL teams use professional tones to frame player moves as strategic. For instance, Bo Nix was promoted to starting quarterback for the Denver Broncos, as highlighted in an X post: "It's Bo Time. HC Sean Payton has named Bo Nix our starting quarterback" (Denver Broncos, 2024). This announcement aimed to inform fans of the change in starting quarterback, indicating

that the team anticipated improved organizational outcomes. The Broncos maintain a professional tone, ensuring the message is concise and effective, prioritizing clarity over emotional connections.

The presentation of the NFL team's professional tone creates tension between NFL teams and their fans' emotional connection. This tension arises because professional tones do not foster identification through a sense of belonging, as their language is formal, transactional, and focused on efficiency. This is evident in an announcement by the Washington Commanders: "We have released K Cade York" (Washington Commanders, 2024d). This announcement is direct and efficient, informing fans that the team has released their kicker, Cade York. NFL teams attempt to alleviate these tensions by engaging in open dialogue with their fans- connecting directly through social media and press releases- evoking nostalgia and pride for the team while balancing business-oriented rhetoric with emotional tributes to a player's performance. When the Baltimore Ravens decided to release linebacker Tyus Bowser, they sought to appeal to their fans' emotional connection to the player by including a tribute to Bowser:

Bowser's impact went beyond the field, however. He was a regular in the Baltimore community, helping children and many others with his generosity, including through his foundation. It became a tradition before games that Bowser would toss a football with fans in the stands, even when he was injured. Bowser also hosted a weekly radio show where he interacted with fans. (Mink, 2024).

Highlighting Bowser's connection to the community during his time with the team helps the Baltimore Ravens foster an emotional bond between their linemen and fans, easing the tension surrounding their decision.

Conversely, the decisions made by NFL teams can directly influence the emotional investment that fans have in the players on the field. For example, consider the trade of D'Andre Swift from the Detroit Lions to the Philadelphia Eagles. The press release states:

Swift now gets a fresh start with the Eagles. The Philadelphia native was a second-round pick in 2020 by the Lions and has been a dynamic playmaker when healthy. But that's always been the knock on Swift. He's dealt with a lot of injuries. (Twentyman, 2023)

The phrase "Swift now gets a fresh start" (Twentyman, 2023) gives Lions fans closure and hope regarding Swift's departure. This positive framing of the trade helps establish a personal connection with fans. By acknowledging the human side of the business, NFL teams can create a deeper resonance with supporters, who often see players as part of their community. This connection fosters fan loyalty. For instance, the Chicago Bears promoted Byron Cowart from the practice squad to replace the injured Travis Homer, as noted in the press release:

Coach Matt Eberflus told reporters Friday that Homer underwent surgery to repair a finger injury he sustained Wednesday in practice. Being on IR, the sixth-year pro is required to miss four games, making him eligible to return for the Bears' Week 8 road game Oct. 27 against the Commanders. (Mayer, 2024)

The Bears' transparency regarding Travis Homer's injury fosters emotional connections with fans by emphasizing the necessity of a surgical procedure due to an injury sustained in the sport. This approach allows the organization to create space for fans to empathize with the player and understand the team's decisions. Such communication strengthens the bond between fans and the organization, reinforcing loyalty and a shared identity.

When professional tones and emotional connections are present in a message, NFL teams experience tension. This is highlighted by Isaiah Simmons' trade from the Arizona Cardinals to

the New York Giants. The press release states, "Moving forward, we feel this is the best way to play football against other people. We're going to try and put the best guys out there that can function and do the best job" (Urban, 2023). This message rationalizes the team's decision and connects with fans emotionally by noting, "Simmons flashed at times, with a game-turning interception against the Seahawks in 2020 and a forced fumble against the Raiders in 2022, but consistency was never there" (Urban, 2023). Fans see players as symbols of team identity, so trading Simmons might evoke loss or disappointment. While not overtly emotional, the focus on future success resonates with fans' hopes, strengthening their bond with the team's goals.

### ***The Importance of Building Connections with Released or Traded Players***

Through my research, I found that NFL teams invest time in building connections with players who have been released or traded. I believe they do this for several reasons: 1) the strategic value of maintaining ties, 2) protecting fan relationships, and 3) the role of long-term players in an NFL team's culture. Regarding the strategic value of maintaining ties with released or traded players, NFL teams primarily aim to preserve positive relationships. This is because released or traded players who have strong ties to the organization often become figureheads, representing the team in media appearances, community events, or as future mentors. This is exemplified by the trade of Aaron Rodgers from the Green Bay Packers to the New York Jets.

The press release states:

We wish Aaron well in New York and look forward to welcoming him back to Green Bay to retire his No. 12, celebrate his induction into the Packers Hall of Fame and unveil his name on the Lambeau Field façade. (Green Bay Packers, 2023)

This message illustrates how NFL teams leverage relationships with former players to maintain their public image and benefit from the continued association with players who have a lasting influence on the team and its fans. While teams can gain from these ongoing connections, they also have the capacity to protect fan relationships. The release of Tyus Bowser from the Baltimore Ravens serves as a prime example of how NFL teams can safeguard fan relationships when a player is let go. The press release states, “Bowser's impact went beyond the field, however. He was a regular in the Baltimore community, helping children and many others with his generosity, including through his foundation” (Mink, 2024). This statement demonstrates how NFL teams can preserve the emotional bonds that fans develop with players. While a player's release or trade may upset the fanbase, if the process is handled with respect, the organization can convey transparency and care, thereby maintaining fan loyalty.

Lastly, long-term players are more than just athletes; they embody the identity of the team. As highlighted in the press release regarding the trade of Aaron Rodgers, “He was and will always be a great representative of the 'G' and what it means to be a Green Bay Packer” (Green Bay Packers, 2023). Teams that value the bonds between fans and players are more likely to maintain fan loyalty. These players often symbolize the franchise; their departure can feel like a loss. By nurturing relationships with them, even after they have been released or traded, teams can uphold their integrity and support a consistent narrative for fans. In summary, keeping connections with traded players enhances NFL teams’ public image, protects fan relationships, and preserves team culture. This strategy promotes lasting loyalty and engagement with fans and the community.

### **Tensions Between Business Decisions and Fan Identities**

The tension between business decisions and fan identities is evident in the NFL's messaging regarding player trades, promotions, and releases. Fan identities emphasize a sense of

belonging and shared values, promoting engaging language, while business decisions utilize formal, transactional language focused on efficiency and strategic goals. These decisions are communicated in a direct, impersonal tone centered on organizational objectives. For example, consider the release of Riley Patterson from the Washington Commanders while the team simultaneously announced the promotion of Sheldrick Redwine. The press release states: "We have made the following roster moves: -- Signed S Sheldrick Redwine -- Released K Riley Patterson" (Washington Commanders, 2024b). This language reflects a business-driven approach to enhance team performance. Its neutrality underscores the professional nature of the NFL team's decisions. A clear example of transactional language appears in the Houston Texans' promotion of Teagan Quitoriano from the practice squad to the active roster. The X post states, "We have signed Teagan Quitoriano to the active roster from the Chicago Bears practice squad and made other roster moves" (Houston Texans, 2024c). By employing this type of language, the team focuses fan attention on the business aspects of the organization. The use of neutral language to represent a team's decision-making process is evident in the signing of Nick Bawden with the Houston Texans. The Texans' X post states, "We have signed Nick Bawden and made another roster move" (Houston Texans, 2024a). This message reflects the team's professional approach to roster management.

Fan identities cultivate belonging, shared values, and a collective purpose, while business decisions employ formal, transactional language to highlight efficiency, strategic goals, and financial results. The promotion (re-signing) of Jared Goff to the Detroit Lions illustrates how NFL teams shape fan identities and reinforce a sense of belonging and shared purpose. The press release states:

In the 2023 season, Goff led Detroit to a 12-5 record, tying the single-season franchise record for victories, en route to helping the team capture its first division title in 30 years. During the postseason, he joined QBs Tobin Rote (1957) and Bobby Layne (1952-53) as the only quarterbacks in franchise history to win multiple playoff games while guiding Detroit to their second-ever NFC Championship Game appearance and their first since 1991. (Detroit Lions, 2024)

The Lions draw on their history and compare Goff to past greats, positioning him as a key figure in the team's identity and enhancing fan connections with the team.

By highlighting a player's importance to both the team and its fans, NFL teams create more opportunities for fans to form strong identities around players. An example of a strong fan identity surrounding a player can be seen in the promotion (re-signing) of Sam Cosmi to the Washington Commanders. The press release states, "He is a pillar of our offensive line and we believe that Sam's best playing days are ahead. Sam is a great leader and teammate, and we're excited that he will be a member of our team for years to come" (Washington Commanders, 2024c). This message positions the player as a figure fans and the team can rally behind.

Mentioning the player's tenure fosters connections, allowing fans to build relationships. Viewing the player as a strong team figure enhances these connections. To make stronger collective identities, NFL teams can emphasize a unifying narrative between fans and players. This can be seen in Kevin Byard's trade from the Tennessee Titans to the Philadelphia Eagles. As the press release states:

Kevin has been a model of leadership on and off the field, always setting such a wonderful example for teammates and others to follow. His phenomenal play and tireless

charitable efforts have earned him a special and lasting place in our hearts. Kevin will always be a Titan, and we wish him well this year and in the years to come. (Wyatt, 2023)

This statement highlights the emotional bond between players and fans, emphasizing that fans support those who embody the shared values of both the fans and the team. This approach helps fans see themselves as part of the team's story, strengthening emotional ties and fostering a sense of belonging as players change. Business decisions emphasize efficiency, formal language, and a transactional tone, focusing on objectives and outcomes. In contrast, fan identities nurture emotional connections through inclusive language, shared values, and collective identity. When both business decisions and fan identities coexist in a message, NFL teams experience tension between maintaining professional, outcome-driven communication and nurturing emotional, community-based bonds with their fan base. This tension can be observed in the promotion (signing) of Haggai Chisom Ndubuisi to the Washington Commanders. The press release states, "He joined the Arizona Cardinals in 2022 and the Denver Broncos this past season as a part of the NFL's International Player Pathway Program" (Washington Commanders, 2024a). This message from the Commanders evokes excitement and curiosity among fans while reflecting the team's professionalism in ongoing organizational moves. By mentioning the player's international roots and background, the team encourages fans to open their arms in welcome and support for their new player. The press release also states:

Washington will be permitted to elevate its international practice squad player to its active roster a maximum of three times throughout the season. This has been done to increase the flexibility for NFL clubs to leverage the additional player, while creating more opportunity to play. (Washington Commanders, 2024)

Highlighting the player’s international status enables the team to utilize the NFL’s International Player Pathway, providing the Commanders with increased flexibility regarding the roster, the player’s status, and strategic decisions. Balancing the business-oriented aspects with key elements of fan identity makes the player’s promotion more relatable to fans while also stressing the business decisions that contribute to greater organizational success.

### **Tensions Between Organizational Success and Community Fulfillment**

The balance between organizational success and community fulfillment surfaces during player trades, promotions, and releases. Tables 1 and 2 clarify the differences between these tensions. Organizational success prioritizes performance, financial stability, and long-term growth while addressing strategic needs. It is illustrated by emphasizing a player's statistical contributions with previous teams, reinforcing professional goals—performance and results—and positioning the player as a valuable asset to the team. Community fulfillment values collective experiences and meaningful connections among fans, highlighting cultural traditions and shared narratives over financial gains. This tension underscores the challenge of balancing corporate objectives with the deep-rooted loyalties that shape a team’s identity.

Organizational success centers on the structural and operational factors that influence a professional football team's performance. Structural factors like roster changes, statistics, and competition are evident in the trade of Dustin Hopkins from the Los Angeles Chargers to the Cleveland Browns. The press release states:

The Cleveland Browns and Los Angeles Chargers have agreed to the following trade:

Browns receive: K Dustin Hopkins

Chargers receive: 2025 7th round pick

Hopkins is entering his 10th NFL season out of Florida State. Originally a sixth-round pick by Buffalo in 2013, Hopkins has appeared in 109 career games with the Commanders (2015-21) and Chargers (2021-22). He has converted 190 of 224 field goal attempts (84.8%) and 221 of 234 extra points (94.4%) for 791 total points. (Cleveland Browns, 2023a)

Emphasizing a player's statistical contributions reinforces professional goals and positions the player as a valuable asset to the team. These messages are strategic as they ensure progress in a unified direction. Such communications can be seen in the announcements regarding Jody Fortson Jr. and Mike White from the Miami Dolphins. The X post states: “We have released TE Jody Fortson Jr. and QB Mike White. We have also placed WR Anthony Schwartz on injured reserve” (Miami Dolphins, 2023). This announcement focuses on delivering factual information directly to fans, informing them of the team’s decisions and roster changes. By making roster adjustments, particularly by opening spots, the team can enhance its prospects for future organizational success.

While roster moves contribute to organizational success, community fulfillment prioritizes collective experiences that emphasize cultural traditions and shared narratives over financial gains. This focus on shared narratives is exemplified by the trade of Brandin Cooks from the Houston Texans to the Dallas Cowboys. The press release states:

It's no secret Dallas needed a speedster to help take the pressure off of CeeDee Lamb and Michael Gallup, and it's Cooks who gets the nod after a very public courtship in December with a still-healing Odell Beckham, Jr.; and this likely means they're now out on Beckham (though time will ultimately tell). (Walker, 2023)

The acquisition of a new player after a failed pursuit of another creates a narrative for fans to discuss and bond over. Referring to the unsuccessful “courtship” allows emotionally invested fans to witness how the team moves on and how this decision will influence the team's dynamics. This, in turn, fosters a new collective experience among the team and fans.

Organizational success emphasizes efficiency, objectives, and future outcomes. In contrast, community fulfillment values collective experiences and meaningful connections among fans through personalized interactions, shared values, and a strong sense of belonging. NFL teams experience tension between maintaining professional, outcome-driven communication and nurturing emotional, relationship-based bonds with their fan base when both organizational success and community fulfillment are present in a message, especially during player trades, promotions, and releases. This tension highlights the challenge of balancing corporate goals with the cultural values that shape loyalty and team identity. A clear example of this tension is evident in the trade of Jerry Jeudy from the Denver Broncos to the Cleveland Browns. The press release states:

“I had heard that the Browns were interested in me even two years ago," Jeudy said. "To hear that, and then be here now is exciting. It's surreal. I feel like I am wanted, and the team has really made me feel welcomed. (Russo, 2024)

In this message, the player’s hope for joining the team resonates with the fans, allowing a sense of community and excitement to be felt. This excitement is further amplified by the player’s connection with fellow players on the team, as the press release states:

The Browns already had a great receiving corps with guys like Amari Cooper and Elijah Moore and I think I will fit in with them. Amari is actually a guy I've been modeling my

game after since I was young and we became friends while I was at Bama. I am excited to see what the future holds. (Russo, 2024)

Creating a shared narrative strengthens the bond between the team and its supporters. Fans can relate to the team's relationships, helping to foster a collective sense of anticipation for the future and the possibilities ahead. The trade reflects the Brown's goal of improving their roster while acknowledging the relationships being built on the team among teammates and off the field among fans, reinforcing the importance of team culture and performance. The message not only fosters a sense of community for fans around the new player, but also prioritizes performance, financial stability, and long-term growth. As the press release states:

Jeudy spent four seasons with the Broncos after he was drafted at No. 15 overall pick of the 2020 draft. He appeared in 57 games with 44 starts and recorded 211 receptions for 3,053 yards and 11 touchdowns. During the 2022 season, Jeudy set career highs with 67 receptions, 972 receiving yards and six touchdowns. (Russo, 2024)

This message highlights the player's performance and potential contributions to the team by emphasizing his past achievements and roles within previous teams. It frames the message as a strategic move to strengthen the team's roster and ensure long-term growth and stability within the organization. This dual focus on performance and community underscores the complexity of balancing professional demands with fans' emotional connections to players, which is essential for achieving short-term success and fostering long-term loyalty.

In conclusion, the communication strategies used by NFL teams during player trades, releases, and promotions reveal an ongoing tension between 1) professional tones and emotional connections, 2) business objectives and fan identities, and 3) organizational success and community fulfillment. While professional language prioritizes clarity, efficiency, and strategic

goals, it often overlooks the deep emotional ties fans develop with players who symbolize team culture and history. NFL teams must skillfully balance their messaging with emotional narratives to preserve fan loyalty and uphold brand identity. By honoring a player's contributions both on and off the field, teams can bridge the gap between business-driven decisions and the emotional investment of their communities. By humanizing their actions, NFL teams subtly mask strategic objectives, reinforcing a shared identity that keeps fans emotionally invested. This demonstrates that even in a data-driven, competitive league like the NFL, emotional appeal can effectively conceal calculated intentions.

**Table 1 Communitas Terminology Uses and Examples**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Terminology</b>	<b>Explanations &amp; Examples</b>
Emotional Connections	Inclusive Language	Using language evokes feelings of respect and acknowledgement.  Example:  I want to thank Kevin and Clarke for what they have meant to the Titans family and our community. (Wyatt, 2023)
	Emotional Language	Using words, phrases, or storytelling techniques that elicit strong emotional responses from the audience.  Example:  I will never forget his post-practice interactions with our families. His ability to connect with kids, including my own, was a great example for our locker room (Green Bay Packers, 2023).
	Shared Values	Emphasis of a team's core values, including teamwork, perseverance, respect, that unite team, fans, and players.  Example:

When I arrived, he helped carry a new message into the locker room and establish the mindset and work ethic we were trying to instill throughout the team. (Wyatt, 2023)

	Collective Identity	<p>Emphasis on a unifying narrative that connects fans to their teams and broader football culture.</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>He was a regular in the Baltimore community, helping children and many others with his generosity, including through his foundation. (Mink, 2024)</p>
Fan Identities	Collective Purpose	<p>A shared goal or mission that unites fans, teams, and players.</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>We are obviously trying to win games. (Urban, 2023)</p>
Community Fulfillment	Collective Experiences	<p>The shared moments, events, and emotions that brings fans closer to teams.</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>He was also part of their Super Bowl LVI-winning team in 2021. (Jackson, 2024)</p>
	Meaningful Connections	<p>Emphasis on meaningful bonds formed between players, fans, and teams.</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>I feel like I am wanted, and the team has really made me feel welcomed. (Russo, 2024)</p>

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Cultural Traditions

The rituals, customs, and practices that have been created to connect fans to teams.

Example:

The way the Dallas Cowboys have been cooking these past few days, you'd think it was the week of Thanksgiving. (The Dallas Cowboys are known for playing a game on Thanksgiving Day each season.) (Walker, 2023)

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Shared Narratives

The shared stories, themes, and experiences that connect fans and teams.

Example:

During a team-record 18-year career, he brought great joy to our fans through a Super Bowl championship, countless thrilling victories and breathtaking quarterback plays. (Green Bay Packers, 2023).

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**Table 2 Corporatas Terminology Uses and Examples**

Theme	Terminology	Explanations & Examples
Professional	Formal Language	Avoids slang and ensures clarity and respect.
Tones		<p>Example:</p> <p>We have elevated J.J. Taylor and Ezekiel Turner to the active roster from the practice squad. (Houston Texans, 2024b)</p>
	Transactional Language	<p>Specific words and phrases used to complete a transaction, focusing on exchanging information.</p> <p>Example:</p> <p>We have made the following roster moves:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-- Signed S Sheldrick Redwine</li> <li>-- Released K Riley Patterson.</li> </ul> <p>(Washington Commanders, 2024b)</p>
	Focused on Efficiency	<p>The use of clarity, conciseness, and plain language to organize information in a logical manner.</p> <p>Example:</p>

The Detroit Lions announced today that they have signed QB Jared Goff to a contract extension through the 2028 season. (Detroit Lions, 2024)

Business	Highlighting Strategic	Communicating long-term objectives, roster priorities, and team business efforts.
Decisions	Goals	<p>Example:</p> <p>The trade rearranges the Buccaneers' draft capital this spring a bit. The team now owns three picks in the sixth round and just one in the seventh, with its total number of selections holding steady at nine. (Smith, 2023)</p>
	Focus on Bottom-Line	Highlighting the financial impact of strategic decisions.
	Outcomes	<p>Example:</p> <p>Bowser's release creates about \$5.5 million in salary-cap space, per Over the Cap. (Mink, 2024)</p>
Organizational	Focus on Performance	Emphasis placed on the athletic and operational achievements and goals.
Success		<p>Example:</p> <p>Initially set to hit the Texans salary cap in 2023 for \$24.4 million — \$18 million being base salary — it's currently unknown if the current deal will be reworked to allow for some relief toward the Cowboys' salary cap, but they've restructured several deals recently (e.g., Dak</p>

Prescott, Tyron Smith, Zack Martin, Michael Gallup) to free up room for such a move.  
(Walker, 2023)

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Focus on Financial

Messages focus on strategic financial decisions for long-term profitability.

Stability

Example:

The Texans have agreed to consume \$6 million in guaranteed money to make the deal go through though, per multiple reports, and that certainly helps the situation on Dallas' end.  
(Walker, 2023)

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Focus on Long-Term

Emphasis on creating a competitive team for long-term success.

Growth

Example:

We're going to try and put the best guys out there that can function and do the best job.  
(Urban, 2023)

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## Conclusion

This thesis examines how sports organizations, particularly NFL teams, use *communitas* rhetoric to mask corporate motives in their messaging. Focusing on communications about player personnel changes—particularly releases, trades, and promotions—this study reveals how emotional appeals to community, loyalty, and identity conceal profit-driven decisions. By analyzing a sample of press releases and social media posts, the study explores how teams utilize these communication strategies to protect their organizational image, manage public expectations, and maintain fan loyalty in an era where transparency and engagement are critical for survival. The research examines how NFL teams mask corporate rhetoric—rooted in commercial interests and organizational control—by highlighting *communitas* rhetoric that promotes emotional investment and solidarity among fans. While *corporatas* rhetoric emphasizes business-oriented decisions—highlighting profitability, success, and organizational survival—*communitas* taps into the emotional bond between fans and teams, focusing on shared loyalty, passion, and community. These two frameworks are essential for the growth and sustainability of sports leagues, with *corporatas* ensuring financial stability and *communitas* driving fan engagement. However, the tension between these forces often creates challenges, as teams must reconcile business-driven goals with fan-centric narratives.

In NFL team messaging, tension exists between two frameworks: *corporatas* and *communitas*. *Corporatas* refers to sports organizations' formal, profit-driven aspects, where decisions focus on business outcomes (Heath, 2006; Heath & Waymer, 2019; Boyd & Stahley, 2008). This positions the organization as the authority, using messaging to maintain dominance. Even community symbols like the Buffalo Bills' "mafia" reinforce *corporatas* ideals through

merchandise, monetizing fan identity (Buffalo Bills, 2020; 2021). In contrast, *communitas* is rooted in community, shared identity, and emotional connections. Fans invest in players and team culture, forming deep bonds beyond performance. The “Bills Mafia” is known for its intense fan behavior and charitable efforts (Getzenberg, 2023; Buffalo Bills, 2020). These models often conflict; while *communitas* fosters unity, *corporatas* disrupts bonds by prioritizing profits. The tension between *corporatas* and *communitas* is symbiotic; they rely on each other. Emotional investment is significant to organizational outcomes, while corporate structures reinforce fans' identity. Fans need the organization to define traditions, while the organization relies on this identity to justify profit-driven choices. This interdependent relationship illustrates how NFL teams align community values with their business interests.

This study reveals how NFL teams selectively use *communitas* rhetoric to mask the commercial imperatives of *corporatas*, crafting a public image that sustains fan loyalty while advancing organizational goals. Teams use social media, such as X, to connect with fans, creating messages that appear transparent and emotionally engaging while subtly promoting corporate goals under the guise of community-focused language. By examining the rhetorical strategies employed in messages regarding player transactions, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how sports organizations operate in a highly competitive landscape. NFL teams preserve their identity by nurturing community—employing *communitas* rhetoric to emotionally shield fans from the impersonal, profit-driven nature of decisions. *Corporatas* rhetoric often involves formal messages regarding business decisions, such as player releases and team updates, presented in a professional tone. In contrast, *communitas* rhetoric centers on fan engagement, shared values, and emotional connections. The study highlights the complexities of sports communication in the digital era, showcasing how teams leverage both strategies to retain

fan loyalty and achieve success. By understanding the rhetoric behind these communications, we gain valuable insights into the dynamics of sports organizations, branding, and fan engagement in an age of unprecedented access to information and direct updates.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations to the research presented here. First, a broader consideration of sports organizations that have varying amounts of player movement could yield more nuanced strategies as to how sports organizations manage corporatas and communitas. For example, the number of messages that NFL teams release could be more as other professional sports leagues, like the National Basketball Association (NBA), release more public messages each season regarding promotions, trades, and player releases than any other sport. While for this study, enough data was found to reach saturation, for future research, looking at more messages could allow for more in-depth findings and more applicable data for a study of this type.

Second, consider organizational access to information. Future studies could examine inter-organizational messaging about player trades, releases, and promotions for a comprehensive perspective. Acknowledgment of external influences like media coverage, fan engagement, and public relations campaigns on messages from sports organizations. Social media's role is increasingly significant in shaping narratives around player movements. Research could investigate how digital platforms interact with traditional messaging to affect public perception and community sentiment, revealing new insights into how sports organizations handle communication in an age of direct fan interaction. Lastly, expanding the study's timeframe to multiple seasons could reveal how messaging strategies evolve and are influenced by team performance, player dynamics, and societal trends. Examining these aspects would

enhance understanding of the complex interactions among sports organizations, players, and the community.

## **Future Research**

Future research could explore several key areas regarding the impact of roster moves on NFL players and teams. One potential avenue is examining the psychological effects of roster changes on players. As athletes are traded or released, their mental health, team dynamics, and overall performance can be significantly impacted. Understanding how these moves influence a player's emotional well-being, motivation, and long-term career satisfaction could provide valuable insights into the hidden challenges that NFL athletes face. Additionally, research could focus on the role of media in shaping public perception of roster moves. Media coverage often amplifies or mitigates the effects of these changes, influencing not only player reputation but also fan support and team morale. Investigating how the media shapes public reactions to roster moves could reveal its impact on players' marketability and organizational unity. Finally, an intriguing area for exploration could be the relationship between roster moves and trends within the online gambling community. As players are traded, injured, or released, betting and gambling behavior shifts may occur. Researching how these roster changes influence the gambling community's interaction with the NFL could provide deeper insights into the growing connection between sports and online betting.

Future research could examine how high-profile roster moves, like the Cleveland Browns' acquisition of Deshaun Watson, highlight the strategic balance between *corporatas* and *communitas* in NFL messaging (Cleveland Browns, 2022). Decisions such as acquiring a player who,

was suspended for the first 11 games in 2022 for violating the league's personal-conduct policy after more than two dozen women accused him of sexual assault and inappropriate conduct during massage therapy sessions. Watson was also fined \$5 million and had to undergo mandatory evaluation before he was reinstated by the league. (Associated Press, 2024)

NFL teams often face significant financial and reputational risks when acquiring players with strong on-field records but poor off-field behavior, requiring justification to stakeholders and fans. In Watson's case, despite serious off-field allegations, the Browns leaned into *communitas* rhetoric—emphasizing themes of redemption, second chances, and trust in due process—to soften a move rooted in *corporatas* logic: securing a top-tier quarterback to enhance competitiveness and profitability (Cleveland Browns, 2022). Masking these types of messages invites deeper analysis into how franchises frame such moves and how fans either accept or resist these narratives. In a broader sense, it raises the question of whether *communitas* still holds meaningful influence in commercial sports or if it merely serves as a performative tool to maintain fan loyalty and brand image in an increasingly transactional environment. As sports interact with online gambling and fantasy leagues, examining if genuine messaging values remain or have been hollowed out by commercial interests could provide vital insight into the changing relationship between fans, players, and organizations.

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