

A Comparative Content Analysis about Athletes Involved in Sexual Assault Cases Using  
Situational Crisis Communication Theory

by

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A Thesis

In

Mass Communication

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
of Texas Tech University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of

Master of Arts

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May, 2015

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sexual assault in athletics has become a prevalent issue across college campuses. These sexual assaults cases have turned into public relations crises requiring those who serve as crisis managers to come up with response strategies to best protect the reputation of the athlete involved. The present study is a comparative content analysis that uses Situational Crisis Communication Theory to evaluate the use of response strategies in newspaper articles during the initial response period of two athlete's sexual assault cases. Articles from the first week of the Treon Harris, University of Florida quarterback, and Jameis Winston, Florida State University quarterback, sexual assault cases were selected from top circulating Florida and national newspapers. Eighty-two online articles were coded to identify the crisis response strategy used by the spokesperson, the affect of the article and type of spokesperson identified/mentioned in the article. The primary aim of this research is to compare how two different cases involving sexual assault were presented in the media and, based on this initial media coverage, to evaluate how much initial crisis responsibility was taken in each case. Implications for stakeholder perceptions of organization and player reputations will be discussed.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Athletics is a culture that has come under attack recently due to the many sexual assault cases involving players. Crosset, Benedict and McDonald (1995) conducted a study about the number of sexual assaults complaints made to campus police and the judicial board at 10 universities with major sports programs. What they found was a significant difference in who was named the alleged attacker. Athletes were named as the alleged attacker significantly more often than their non-athlete counterparts. Many of these athletes have been in the media concerning instances of sexual assault and their lack of responsibility for their actions, which affects the stakeholder's view of their responsibility in the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Using Situational Crisis Communication Theory the purpose of the present study is to compare two similar sexual assault cases involving athletes that were handled very differently by comparing the content of state and national newspapers. The cases chosen involve athletes Treon Harris of the University of Florida and Jameis Winston of Florida State University. These comparable Florida quarterbacks' cases will be examined to determine what crisis response strategies were used in the initial crisis response media coverage. The study will also look into the affect of the newspaper articles and which spokespersons responded in the media coverage. By looking at the spokespersons identified it will show who was most frequently mentioned in the initial crisis response period.

Harris is a University of Florida quarterback who was accused of sexual assault in 2014. The news of Harris' crisis broke in the media Oct. 6, 2014. Upon finding out he



was accused of sexual assault the university suspended him from the football team and he was not allowed to attend school. Harris' crisis ended Oct. 11, 2014 when the charges against him were dropped. He was reinstated back on the team and allowed to attend classes on campus again. This crisis was handled quickly within a six-day timeline.

Winston is a Heisman Award-winning quarterback from Florida State University. On Nov. 14, 2013, news of him being accused of sexual assault was published in the media. Winston's alleged sexual assault incident happened in 2012 and was not published in the media until 11 months later. Unlike the University of Florida, however, Florida State University took longer to respond to the sexual assault allegations. No disciplinary actions were taken concerning Winston's status on the team or at the university.

Both athletes were involved in crises involving sexual assault, but their respective institutions chose to handle the crises very differently. The University of Florida took quick action concerning the crisis whereas Florida State's Athletic Department learned about the sexual assault allegations in Jan. 2013 and took a year before they publically addressed the crisis in January of 2014. These differences in response time may be an indicator that different crisis response strategies were also used. Given there are recommended response strategies for this type of crisis outlined by SCCT, whether an organization did or did not adhere to these strategies could determine the subsequent reputation stakeholders have of the athlete (Coombs, 2007).

The present study captures how well each spokesperson responded to the crisis by evaluating the response strategies used by the organizations through their spokespersons compared to the recommended response strategies outlined by SCCT. Unlike previous studies, it analyzes response strategies through media content, instead of relying on self-

report data from stakeholders (e.g., Coombs, 2004), to predict the reputational threat of the crisis. Strategies used in the crisis, overall article affect and spokespersons' identities were observed in newspaper articles published during the initial response (one week) to each crisis. Understanding how the response strategies manifest in the media to potentially produce or shape stakeholder reputation perceptions will provide valuable information for strategic communicators.

## **BACKGROUND**

Athletics on most college campuses are a big deal. Most athletes are praised for their athletic performances on the field, but there are individuals who speculate whether their negative actions off the field are excused. There have been many studies exploring the differences in male athletes' sexual behavior compared to their non-athletic counterparts (e.g., Benedict, Crosset, & McDonald, 1995; Boeringer, 1996; Gage, 2008).

Boeringer (1996) conducted a study on male undergraduates at a large southeastern university and found the following statistics: 60 percent of athletes reported at least one instance using persuasion to get sexual favors, 28 percent reported using alcohol and drugs to get sexual favors from others, and 15 percent reported using physical force. He also found that athletes reported higher percentages of aggressive behavior in all categories compared to non-athletes (Boeringer, 1996).

Murnen and Kohlman (2007) studied members of sports teams or fraternities and found their attitude were slightly more sexually aggressive. Athletes who participated in the study were found to have strong connections to hyper masculinity and were more sexually aggressive than the members of fraternities. Murnen and Kohlman's (2007) results further suggested that there is a possibility that male athletes come to college with attitudes and behaviors supportive of rape.

Due to these types of studies about athletes and their behavior, task forces and calls to action have been created to prevent sexual assaults from occurring. In 2010, The Executive Committee of the National Collegiate Athletic Association targeted sexual assault and interpersonal violence as a major initiative of the association. Four years later, in January of 2014, President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden issued a

document entitled “Rape and Sexual Assault: A Renewed Call to Action.” The document was meant to bring attention to sexual assault with a focus on college campuses. Not only did the president and vice president get involved in this movement, but a task force from the White House, created to protect students from sexual assault, released a call to action named “Not Alone.” “Not Alone” encouraged each college and university across the nation to understand the violence and hostility on its campus, create a safe college environment for students and to have an effective response to sexual abuse incidents. The call to action also provided insight into the legal requirements to protect victims of sexual assault and seek help for sexual assault survivors.

The two athletes whose crises are being reviewed in this study were both quarterbacks who played for universities in the state of Florida. Treon Harris, a student athlete at the University of Florida, was accused of sexual assault allegation in 2014 and Jameis Winston, a student athlete at Florida State University, was accused of sexual assault in 2012. Both cases occurred during football season, but were handled very differently by both the police departments (Gainesville and Tallahassee) and the universities (University of Florida and Florida State University). Articles about Harris’ sexual assault crisis were published during his crisis whereas Winston’s sexual assault crisis was not public knowledge until the police received an inquiry about the incident almost a year after it happened.

Harris was a freshman quarterback at the University of Florida when he was accused of sexual assault in Oct. of 2014. According to the police report, the victim said the sexual encounter was not consensual, which contradicted the statement Harris made. The timeline of the crisis occurred in the following order (English, 2014; Tracy, 2014).

The sexual encounter happened Oct. 5 and the victim filed a complaint against Harris Oct. 6. This complaint led to Harris being suspended from the University of Florida that same day. On Oct. 9, the victim withdrew her complaint against Harris, which led to Harris being reinstated to the school Oct. 10 (English, 2014; Tracy, 2014).

In 2012, a fellow student accused the quarterback for Florida State University, Winston, of sexual assault (Bognadich, 2014). According to the victim the assault happened Dec. 6, but the next day when she reported the assault she was unable to identify her assaulter. Winston was not identified as her assaulter until Jan.10, 2013, after she recognized him on campus and contacted the police. Winston was contacted for questioning about the assault Jan. 23 and on Feb. 11 the lead investigator closed the case without interviewing Winston or collecting his DNA. On Nov. 14, nine months after the case was closed, investigators interviewed a key witness and obtained Winston's DNA. Almost a year after the assault on Dec. 5, 2013, the local prosecutor determined there was not enough evidence to prosecute Winston for the assault. Unlike Harris, Winston was not suspended from the school during this situation. According to an email sent internally at the Tallahassee Police Department, the Athletic Department at Florida State University knew about the sexual assault because the police department received a call from the Athletic Director's assistant inquiring about the case in January of 2013. Below are the two crisis timelines with information about each athlete's crisis (Bognadich, 2014; English, 2014; Tracy, 2014).

**Harris Crisis Timeline**

- Oct 5, 2014
  - Alleged sexual assault occurred
- Oct 6, 2014
  - Accuser reported the sexual assault
  - Harris was suspended from the team
  - Crisis broke in the media
- Oct. 9, 2014
  - Accuser withdrew her complaint
- Oct. 10, 2014
  - Harris was reinstated to the team

**Winston Crisis Timeline**

- Dec. 7, 2012
  - Accuser tells the police about assault
- Jan. 10, 2013
  - Accuser identifies Winston on campus as her assaulter
- Jan. 24, 2013
  - Police contact Winston
- Feb 11, 2013
  - Case is closed by lead investigator
- Nov. 14, 2013
  - Interviewed key witness
  - Obtained Winston's DNA sample

- Crisis breaks in the media
- Dec. 5, 2013
  - Local prosecutor determine there was not enough evidence to prosecute

There were similarities and differences between the crises. Harris and Winston were quarterbacks at National Collegiate Athletic Association Division 1 institutions when their alleged assaults occurred and crises broke in the media. Both athletes' crises also happened during football season. The week prior to the crisis Harris came off the bench to start during a game and Winston was the starting quarterback and a Heisman trophy candidate. Although there were similarities, the cases occurred at different times and were handled by the schools differently. Winston's crisis occurred first, in 2012, and there were not any consequences given to him by the school. He remained on the team and his position as a player and student were never threatened. When a similar crisis occurred at The University of Florida, in 2014, the administration handled it differently by immediately suspending Harris and not allowing him on campus. After his accuser dropped the charges he was reinstated back to the team and school. The reputation of the schools where these players were athletes was also significantly different. Florida State's athletics program has a reputation for their athletes getting into criminal trouble. The New York times stated in an article, published in 2014, that over the past three years there have been at least nine Florida State football players arrested on various charges from sexual assault to being an accessory to fatal shooting. It is a possibility that the University of Florida took notes on how to handle Harris' crisis after Winston's crisis

played out in the media. Both crises involve the players committing a crime, sexual assault, and should be responded to similarly according to SCCT.

Identifying which crisis response strategies spokespersons used in the articles about the athletes and the overall positive or negative affect of the article can shed light on recommended strategies for future cases. In addition, examining the different spokespersons mentioned in newspaper articles during the first week after each crisis broke in the media could show who was mentioned most frequently. This information could help spokespersons of similar crises select the most appropriate spokespersons and response strategies for media encounters in order to better protect the reputation of their athletes.



## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was developed by Tim Coombs, but has foundations in Attribution Theory (Coombs, 2007b). Attribution Theory, which originates from the field of psychology, holds that when an event occurs, negative or positive, people look for the cause of the crisis and try to find who is responsible (Weiner, 2000). Once the person has attributed responsibility they develop emotions towards the event. The core emotions behind Attribution Theory are anger and sympathy (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). Either the person will attribute or will not attribute responsibility. Coombs and Holladay (2005) said feelings of anger occur when a person is thought to be responsible for a negative event and feeling of sympathy occur when a person is thought not to be responsible for a negative event. The emotional responses of the person are dependent on the attribution of responsibility.

These basic assumptions of Attribution Theory can be used to predict the possible reputational threat of a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). When there are stronger attributions of responsibility it is more likely stakeholders' view the organization negatively (Coombs, 1995).

There are various aspects of the theory that can gauge how the stakeholders will perceive the responsibility attribution of the organization. The first is the crisis cluster, which is determined by the crisis situation.

### **Attribution of Responsibility**

Attribution of responsibility is how much responsibility stakeholders attribute to the organization concerning the cause of the crisis (Coombs, 2007a). This is a function of

the type of crisis (crisis cluster) and severity of damage. Coombs (2006) said the severity of damage represents the amount of financial, physical, environmental, or emotional harm a crisis can inflict. Attribution is important because the stronger the attribution of crisis responsibility the more damage a crisis will cause an organization's reputation (Coombs & Schimdt, 2000; Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Laufer & Gillespie, 2004). If stakeholders attribute more responsibility to an organization during a crisis it can lead to a negative reputational affect. If stakeholders do not attribute crisis responsibility it can have a positive reputational affect. This is one of the reasons why it is important for crisis managers to choose the appropriate response strategy for a crisis. The image of an organization will be more positive image when they use the appropriate response strategy opposed to when the wrong response strategy is used (Coombs, 1995).

### Clusters

SCCT holds that the type of crisis or crisis cluster the case is placed in determines the amount of responsibility stakeholders attribute to the organization. Consequently, this attribution of responsibility should determine the response strategy used by the crisis manager within the initial response to the crisis (Coombs, 1995). The situational characteristics surrounding the crisis determine into which crisis cluster the crisis falls. There are three different crisis clusters that a crisis may fall into: (1) victim (2) accident (3) intentional/preventable. The clusters are in this order because they reflect how the reputational damage and crisis responsibility increase (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). More specifically: *victim crisis* is when there is minimal crisis responsibility attributed by the public to an organization and the organization is seen as the crisis victim; *accident crisis* is when there is a low attribution of crisis responsibility by the public and the event is

considered unintentional or uncontrollable by the organization; *intentional/preventable crisis* is when there is a strong attribution of crisis responsibility and the event is considered purposeful by the organization.

***Other Factors that Shape Reputational Threats***

In addition to attribution of responsibility due to crisis cluster, there are other factors that go into determining an organization's reputation after a crisis hits. These factors help crisis managers determine which crisis response strategies to use in order to receive the least reputational damage post crisis (Coombs, 2006).

Crisis history is a factor because it explains whether or not the organization has had a similar crisis previously occur (Coombs, 2007a). If there is a series or history of crises it shows that the company needs to address the problem (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Coombs (2004) conducted a study to see the impact of the history of a similar crisis. He found that if there is a history of similar crises the attributions of crisis responsibility intensifies affecting the reputational threat (Coombs, 2004).

Prior relational reputation is how well or poorly an organization has or is perceived to have treated stakeholders in other context. Coombs said if the organization has an unfavorable prior reputation it suggests the organization does not care about the stakeholders at all (Coombs, 2007a). In 2001, Coombs found that there was no benefit of having a favorable reputation compared to a neutral reputation. Only an unfavorable reputation caused harm to a company during a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). What both studies showed is how these reputational threat factors increase reputational threat. If a crisis is labeled a mild reputational threat it becomes moderate and if a crisis is labeled moderate it becomes severe (Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Coombs, 2004).

### **Reputation**

Reputation is how an organization is viewed by its' stakeholders. What an organization says and does after a crisis hits has a great influence on its reputation, a valuable asset to the company (Alsop, 2004; Barton, 2001; Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1999, Dowling, 2002; Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Research links favorable reputation to favorable organizational results like financial performance, sales, recruitment, success and government influence (Fombrun, 1996; Klein, 1999; Nakra, 2000).

The greater the responsibility attribution, the perceived reputation of the organization declines (Coombs, 2006). SCCT states that, as the reputational threat and negative affect increases, crisis managers should use the crisis response strategy with the requisite level of accepting responsibility (Coombs, 2007a).

### ***Response Strategies***

The crisis response strategy used will affect an organization's reputation after the crisis is over. This is why it is important that crisis managers respond to the crisis in the most appropriate manner. SCCT matches crisis response strategies to types of crisis situations and offers guidance about which strategies are most effective in which situations (Coombs, 1995, 2007a).

Coombs (2007a) suggests there are two different categories of a crisis response: (a) base crisis response and (b) reputation management crisis response. Base crisis includes instructing and adjusting information (Coombs, 2007a; Sturges, 1994). Instructing information lets the public know what happened in the crisis and what they should do to protect themselves from the crisis' effect. Adjusting information is information that helps the public psychologically cope with the crisis. It also includes

actions to fix what happens post crisis and addressing what the public may need during the crisis (Coombs, 2007a). Reputation management crisis response strategies include: denial, diminish, rebuild and reinforce (Coombs, 2007a). The response strategies are designed to manage the reputation of the organization during the crisis. In this current study, the researcher will look at the reputational management response strategies to determine if recommended strategies were used in initial media coverage across both crises.

Reputation management response strategies are used by crisis managers to respond to crises based on what cluster the crisis falls into (Coombs, 2006). Coombs and Holladay (2007a) said the purpose of the crisis response strategy is to repair the reputation, reduce negative affect and reduce behavioral intentions. For instance, stakeholders may be less likely to place blame on an organization if they used a response strategy that reduced perceived responsibility for the crisis. The stronger the severity of the crisis the stronger the attributions of responsibility will be. The strategies that fit best with each cluster are more effective at reducing anger and negative communication dynamics (Coombs & Holladay, 2007a). There are four different types of crisis reputation management response strategies that are used during a crisis: deny, diminish, rebuild and bolstering (Coombs, 2007b).

The deny strategy's purpose is meant to distance and remove any connection from the crisis. If the organization is not involved in a crisis it should use the deny strategy. The diminish strategy intends to make stakeholders think the crisis is not as bad as they think and that the organization had no control over the crisis. If a crisis manager is able to decrease the connection of the organization to the crisis and/or make stakeholders view

the crisis as less severe than it really is he or she decreases the harmful effects of the crisis (Coombs, 2007b). The rebuild strategy is used to help improve the organization's reputation by offering different forms of aid, material/and or symbolic, to crisis victims. This involves the crisis manager saying or doing things that will benefit stakeholders, allowing the organization's positive actions to offset the crisis (Coombs, 2007b).

The final crisis response strategy is bolstering and is best used as supplements to deny, diminish and rebuild strategies and adjusting information. This is strategy is for crisis managers who have positive relationships with stakeholders. Crisis managers can reference the positive relationship between the parties to help protect the reputation of the organization. The crisis manager may also praise stakeholders for their cooperation during the crisis as a way to strengthen and improve the positive relationship between both parties. This can happen or they can draw sympathy from the stakeholders if they are victims of a crisis (Coombs, 2007b).

Each response strategy has a number of tactics, which provide details of how crisis managers implement the strategies. This fosters a better understanding of the interworking and specific communication that takes place for each response strategy.

For the deny strategy there are three different tactics: attack the accuser, denial and scapegoating. Attack the accuser is when the crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming there is a problem with the organization. The denial tactic is used when the crisis manager says there is no crisis present. The final deny response strategy tactic is scapegoating. It is used when the crisis manager blames someone else outside of the organization's group for the crisis (Coombs, 2007b).

The diminish strategy has two tactics: excuse and justification. The excuse tactic is used when a crisis manager attempts to minimize the organization's responsibility. The crisis manager will deny the organization wanted to cause harm on purpose and or claim there was not a way to control what caused the crisis. Crisis managers use the justification tactic when they are trying to lessen how much damage people may think the crisis caused. For example, the crisis manager downplays the crisis and the damage it has caused by saying what happened was not really serious and did not really have an effect (Coombs, 2007b).

Similar to the diminish strategy, the rebuild strategy also has two tactics: compensation and apology. Compensation is when the crisis manager offers incentives (e.g. money or gifts) to crisis victims. The apology tactic is used when the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis then asks for stakeholder's forgiveness (Coombs, 2007b).

The bolster strategy has three different tactics: reminder, integration and victimage. Reminder is used to remind stakeholders of the good things the organization has previously done. Integration is when the crisis manger not only reminds the stakeholders of the good done by the organization in the past but also praises them. Lastly, victimage is used as a reminder to stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis (Coombs, 2007a).

Each crisis cluster has a suggested response strategy and each response strategy has tactics associated with it. This is helpful because it serves as a guide for the crisis manager to respond in an efficient manner. Each crisis cluster has two suggested response

strategies: response 1 (primary) and response 2 (secondary) as shown in Table 1 (Sisco, 2012).

Table 1

*Suggested Crisis Response Strategies for Crisis Clusters*

Scenario	Response 1	Response 2
Victim	Deny	Diminish
Accidental	Diminish	Rebuild
Intentional	Rebuild	Diminish

**Current Crisis Situation Analysis**

The crises being reviewed in the present study are two athletes who were accused of sexual assault. Their cases fall into the intentional/preventable cluster because sexual assault is a crime and is preventable. Sexual assault is frowned upon and perpetrator blame varies with personal and situational factors; for example, perpetrators who have a “good prior reputation” are blamed less (Cohn, Dupuis & Brown, 2009). The attribution of responsibility associated with both of these athletes fall into the intentional/preventable cluster because they are assumed to be the perpetrators. Therefore, the suggested primary response strategy for both is rebuilding and the suggested secondary strategy for both is diminish.

Because of these recommended response strategies for the intentional/preventable crisis cluster, the researcher hypothesizes the rebuild response strategy should appear to be used by spokesperson most frequently and the diminish strategy second most



frequently in the initial media coverage for each athlete's case. The research also seeks to know if there was a difference in the amount of articles where the recommended strategies were identified across each athlete's case.

**H1:** The rebuild strategy should be identifiable in more articles than any of the other strategies during the first week of crisis media coverage.

**H2:** The diminish strategy should be identifiable in more articles than the non-recommended, denial and bolster, strategies during the first week of crisis media coverage.

**RQ1:** Will there be a significant difference in the number of articles where the (a) rebuild and (b) diminish response strategies were identified across each athlete's case?

### ***Affect in Crisis***

Coombs (2007a) found that crisis responsibility not only has an influence on the reputational threat but also on the affective reactions of stakeholders. If stakeholder's emotional reactions are taken into consideration when selecting what crisis response strategy to use, crisis communication is more effective in protecting an organization's reputation (Coombs, 2005). The attributions of responsibility stakeholders make about a crisis influence the emotions they have about an organization and may influence how stakeholders interact with the company in the future.

When there is an increased attribution of crisis responsibility there will be stronger feelings of anger. In some extreme cases schadenfreude, enjoyment obtained from the troubles of others, towards the organizations by the stakeholder causes the stakeholder to feel less sympathetic for the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2005;

Coombs, 2007b). Coombs and Holladay (2005) conducted a study and found that feelings about the crisis depended on the crisis cluster. The strongest feelings of anger were produced when an organization was involved in a crisis involving an illegal act (intentional/preventable cluster). If the organization's crisis fell into the victim cluster it produced the strongest feelings of sympathy. Emotional responses were not present when the organization's crisis fell into the accident cluster (Coombs & Holladay 2005).

The way a crisis is framed in the media can also have an impact on stakeholder emotion. Nabi (2003) highlighted media framing effect's on an audience's emotion and conducted a study to see how different versions of a the same news story provoked different emotions: anger, fear or neither emotion (Nabi, 2002). Han, Lerner and Keltner (2007) conducted a study to see how emotions influence how an individual interprets, evaluates and judges a situation. They found people who were sad attributed blame to situational factors other than the organization and people who were angry attributed blame to the organization. Choi and Lin (2007) also conducted a study about emotions, favorable and unfavorable evaluations, and found the feeling of anger caused consumers to think of the company's reputation as negative or unfavorable. Literature about emotions (e.g. Choi and Lin 2007; Han, Lerner and Keltner, 2007) lead Kim and Cameron (2007) to hypothesize that emotions like anger and sadness evoked by different corporate crisis news frames would influence how people evaluated, favorable or unfavorable, and felt (negative or positive) towards a company. Their results supported their hypothesis that a person exposed to anger-induced news about a company had a more negative/unfavorable attitude towards the company responsible for the crisis compared to a person exposed to sadness-induced news about the company.

Given the links between crisis cluster (attribution of responsibility) and affect, as well as article framing and stakeholder affect, the overall affect of the articles written about these two crises when the news first broke in the media should correlate with the appropriate response strategies. In other words, the articles in which the recommended response strategies were identified should have a more positive affect.

**H3:** The articles in which the recommended response strategies (rebuild and diminish) were identified will be (a) more positive and (b) less negative than those where the non-recommended response strategies (deny and bolster) were identified.

**RQ2:** Does article affect significantly differ across each athlete's case?

### ***Spokespersons' Frequency***

When gathering sources to interview, journalists look for someone who is trustworthy, reliable, authoritative and articulate (Gans, 1980). Journalist tend to have a reliable group of sources they reference depending on the journalist's location, topic specialization or organization routine (Sigal, 1986; Tuchman, 1978). Soley (1992) said as the number of times a source is quoted their credibility increases. The more the source becomes influential, the likeliness of his/her voice being amplified increases (LaRosa & Reese, 1990). Tuchman (1978) said that direct quotes from an interview source also legitimize a news story by making it more authentic and credible. Social reality, attitudes, beliefs and opinions held by a society, are also made from these direct quotes (Tuchman, 1978).

There is research (e.g. Kaufmann, Kesner, & Hozen, 1994; Benoit, 1997; Turner, 1999; Rugo, 2001) that recommends the use of one spokesperson because more than one can cause the message to get mixed and confused, but Barton (2001) said that if a crisis lasts longer than a day it would be physically impossible to have one spokesperson speak on behalf of an organization. There are suggested qualities that research has suggested spokespersons possess. Balian (1999) and Murphy (1996) state that a spokesperson should have working knowledge of the crisis, be flexible in the message he or she presents to the media and positive towards both the press and organization. Other research states individuals chosen as spokesperson should be experienced, trustworthy, prepared, media trained, well informed, credible and able to control what they present to the media (Rugo, 2001; Nicolazzo & Nickson, 2001; Covello, Peters, Wojtecki, and Hyde 2001).

Research about the spokesperson mentioned in newspaper articles about athletes' crises is limited. Previous SCCT research states the purpose of a crisis manager during the crisis but rarely discusses spokesperson roles. The present study looks at what type of spokesperson is mentioned most frequently in the published newspaper articles (e.g., coach, lawyer, university representative, etc.).

**RQ3:** Who was the most frequently mentioned spokesperson in the initial media coverage for each athlete's case?

## **CHAPTER II**

### **METHODS**

#### **OVERVIEW OF CONTENT ANALYSIS**

Content analysis is a systematic way to analyze text. Neuendorf defines it as, “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 1). The units of analysis for this study are articles written in the top three circulating state and national newspapers and the variables are measured within each unit. According to Neuendorf (2002) newspapers fall under mass messaging and are meant to reach a relatively large, undifferentiated audience. In her book, Neuendorf outlines a nine-step flow chart of a content analysis. These steps are and include: (1) Theory and Rationale: What content will be examined and why? What theories will be used and if you have any research questions and hypothesis? (2) Conceptualizations: What variables will be used and how will you define them conceptually? (3) Operationalizations/Internal Validity (measures): What unit of data collection will you use? (4) Coding Schemes: Codebook and coding form. (5) Sampling: How will you randomly select a subset of this sample? (6) Training and Pilot Reliability: During training sessions coders work together to find out whether than can agree on variables. Then in an independent coding test the reliability on each variable is noted. (7) Coding: A minimum of two coders are needed to establish inter-coder reliability. Coding should be done independently with at least 10 percent overlap for reliability test. (8) Final Reliability: Calculate a reliability figure for each variable. Ex: percent agreement, Scott’s pi, Spearman’s rho, or Pear’s r. (9) Tabulation and Reporting: Figures and statistics can be reported one variable at a time, or variables may be cross tabulated in different ways (bivariate and multivariate techniques).

The current analysis completed all steps outlined by Neuendorf and details of these procedures are provided in the following sections.

## **SAMPLE**

This study compared the content of 82 online articles about the sexual assault crises of athletes, Treon Harris and Jameis Winston. Articles were gathered from state and national newspapers in order to look at the variety of articles written about the crises. The following newspapers were chosen because of their top circulation within the state and nation. Circulation statistics were gathered from the Alliance for Audited Media in 2014. The three state newspapers were The Tampa Bay Times (317,275), The Tampa Tribune (198,543) and The Orlando Sentinel (173,542). The national newspapers chosen were USA Today (4,139,380), Wall Street Journal (2,276,207) and New York Times (2,134,150).

Researchers have found when individuals wanted information about events happening in the world they still use traditional media like television, radio and newspapers (Stempel, Hargrove, and Bernt, 2000). Randall, Davenport and Bossen (2003) said there are strengths and benefits associated with newspapers. A newspaper is able to gather and organize information that readers will find beneficial (Randall, Davenport & Bossen, 2003). Now that newspapers have an online presence (multimedia, intermediate large amounts of information and immediate distribution of information) it allows for them to serve as a primary source of information (Randall, Davenport & Bossen, 2003).

Crisis timelines can vary according to how the information about the crisis is released. It can generate a lot of attention or it can be dispersed slowly. Horsley and Barker's (2002) research indicates better communication success if information is disseminated quickly, accurately, and honestly to key stakeholders, including the media. A study was conducted by Jo Robertson (2004) to test whether releasing damaging information immediately, rather than in spurts, will shorten the length of press attention. He compared the number of news stories when the crisis first broke against the number of news stories generated when information seeped out later to determine if journalists searched for more negative information or wrote in a more negative way when they felt there was information being withheld from them. "On average, the greatest media attention was focused on the first several days of the crisis and there is a tendency for media attention to somewhat level off after that"(Robertson, 2004, p. 7). Due to the fact this study focuses on initial crisis responsibility, articles about the crisis were taken from the first week, seven days, when the media started reporting about the crisis. The Harris crisis broke in the media Oct. 6, 2014, so the timeline for his crisis is Oct. 6, 2014 and Oct. 13, 2014. The Winston crisis broke in the media Nov. 14, 2013, so the timeline for this crisis was Nov. 14, 2013 – Nov. 21, 2013. The following tables (Tables 2 and Table 3) show the frequency of articles published about the athletes over the first six weeks and illustrate the rationale to use the first week's coverage as our sample. The amount of articles published about Winston will fluctuate because in the weeks after the first week more incidents happened concerning the crisis.

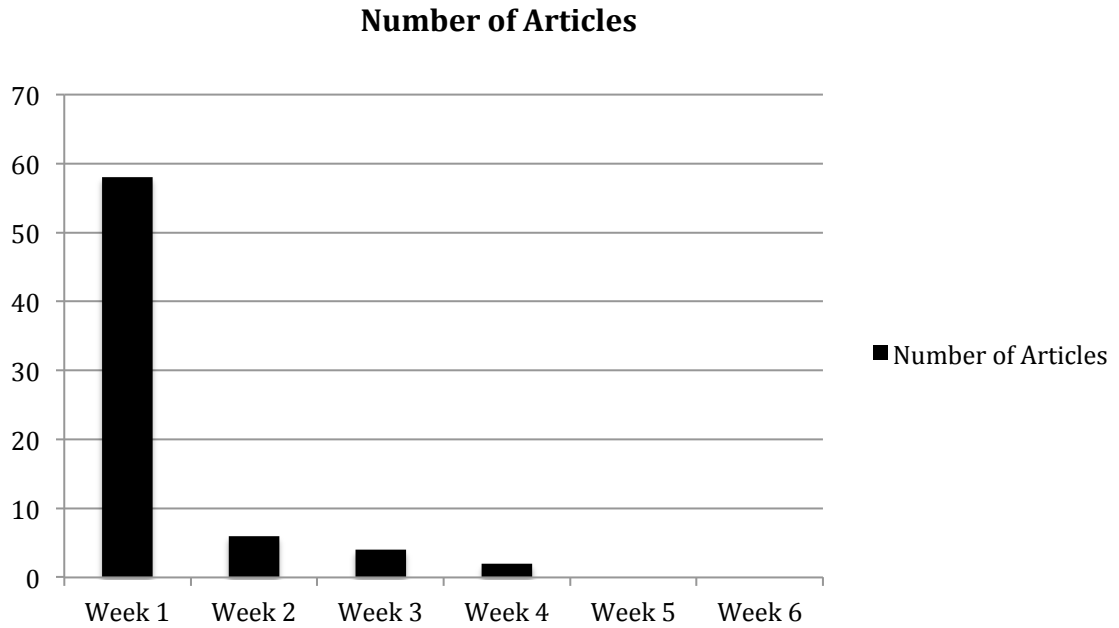


Figure 1. Six-Week Overview of Articles Published about Treon Harris

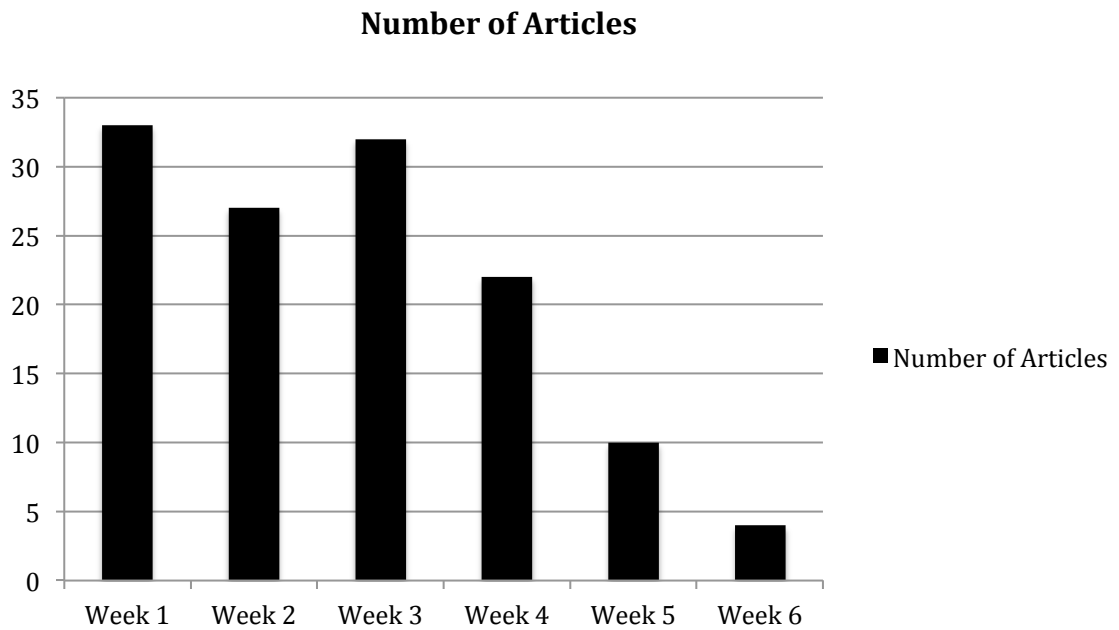


Figure 2. Six-Week Overview of Articles Published about Jameis Winston



To find articles about the Harris sexual assault crisis, “Treon Harris and Sexual Assault” was the search term used in the search bar provided for each newspaper. Articles about Winston’s sexual assault crisis were found by using the search term “Jameis Winston and Sexual Assault” in each newspaper search bar. If there was a button to search by relevance and date the button was chosen in order to list the articles from most recent to oldest. See Table 2 for the number of articles produced for each crisis in each newspaper during the first week.

Table 2

*Newspapers and Amount of Articles Used in the Study*

Newspapers	Treon Harris	Jameis Winston
Tampa Bay Times	8	9
Tampa Bay Tribune	5	8
Orlando Sentinel	20	3
USA Today	10	5
Wall Street Journal	0	0
New York Times	10	4
Total	53	29

## **CODING PROCEDURE**

The following variables were measured during coding: newspaper, date, article title, athlete, spokesperson mentioned, quote by a spokesperson, type of crisis response strategy, number of positive statements and number of negative statements about the crisis identified. Some of these variables were descriptive identifiers for each article and others were variables used to categorize the content within the articles for hypothesis testing and addressing the research questions posed. For instance, crisis response strategies were measured in order to see if the suggested crisis response strategies were used and which one was used most frequently in each case and across both cases.

Variables were categorized by the following in order to better organize the collected information. First the researcher noted which online newspaper the article came from, the date the article was published, the title of the article, how many words were in the article and what athlete the article was about.

For the purpose of the study the researcher looked at the following variables to answer the proposed hypotheses and research questions. Articles were analyzed for the mention of a spokesperson and if the spokesperson made a statement or quote within the article. After looking to see if the spokesperson made a statement or quote within the article the researcher analyzed the quote and categorized it into a crisis response strategy.

After the researcher recorded the information about the spokesperson mentioned, if he or she made a statement or a quote, and what type of response strategy was used by the spokesperson they looked at the amount of positive or negative statements about the crisis identified within the article. The researcher counted and coded how many positive and negative statements were identified throughout the article.

## **RELIABILITY**

According to Neunendorf there is no universally accepted set of criteria for selecting the size of a reliability sample (Neuendorf, 2002). However, it is common for researchers to use 10% of their unit sample for their inter-coder reliability test. This study used about 15% of the coding total to make sure there were a variety of articles from both state and national newspapers. It is ideal for research to use a similar but different sample for inter-coder reliability (Neuendorf, 2002).

Two coders, including the author, coded a sample of twelve articles, six per athlete, that resembled articles used in the study. The newspapers used in the reliability test were the Florida Sentinel and the LA Times. The newspapers were chosen because they were the fourth highest circulating newspapers according the Alliance for Audited Media (2014). The Florida Sentinel (162,675) represent articles on the state level and the L.A. Times (673,171) represented articles on the national level. The coders analyzed three articles per athlete on the state and on the national level to produce the data necessary to establish inter-coder reliability for all variables (see Appendix A for codebook).

To measure inter-coder reliability, the data from each coder was combined into one Excel document. Each coder's data, dependent on the variable, was placed next to each other to compare results. After the excel spread sheet was compiled then it was uploaded to an online reliability calculator called "ReCal". ReCal is a program developed by Deen Freelon, an assistant professor in the School of Communication at America University in Washington, D.C. The ReCal2 option was conducted because the variables' level of measurement was nominal and there were only two coders. Percent agreement

and nominal Krippendorff's Alpha statistics produced from this test are provided in the description for each variable in the following section.

## **MEASURES**

There were ten different variables coded for this research. The first five were general article identifiers and included: online newspaper, date, article title, athlete and number of words. This information was necessary to know descriptive information about the article. The following five variables helped place the content of the article into categories: Spokesperson Mentioned, Spokesperson "Quote", Type of Crisis Response Strategy Used, Number of Positive Statements and Number of Negative Statements. Below are detailed descriptions and reliability for all variables.

*Descriptive variables.* To identify the articles analyzed, descriptive categories were created to determine what newspaper the article was found in (1= Tampa Bay Times; 2 = Tampa Tribune; 3 = Orlando Sentinel; 4 = USA Today; 5 = Wall Street Journal; 6 = New York Times), the date the article was published, what athlete the article was about (1 = Treon Harris; 2 = Jameis Winston), and the number of words used in the article.

*Type of Spokesperson.* Coders identified what spokesperson was mentioned in the articles. There were four options available for a spokesperson. (0 = No Spokesperson; 1 = Someone from the School Administration (e.g., Chancellor, University President, and University Spokesperson); 2 = Someone from the School Judicial System (e.g., School's Lawyer); 3 = Athlete's Lawyer; 4 = Other (e.g., Coach, Fellow Student, and School Affiliate: sponsor/donor). The other category only included one individual who could serve as a spokesperson, the coach. All other individuals in the other category were not

official spokespersons of the schools or the athletes. They simply served as a source in the article. Each spokesperson mentioned was assigned a number in the order they appeared in the article. The first spokesperson was identified as Spokesperson 1 and the information about that spokesperson's quote and response strategy was documented. There was a maximum of four spokespersons (Spokesperson 1 - Spokesperson 4) mentioned in the articles used to establish inter-coder reliability. This means there were four variables with reliability estimates for spokesperson: Spokesperson 1 mentioned (91% agreement;  $\alpha = .88$ ); Spokesperson 2 mentioned (91% agreement;  $\alpha = .88$ ); Spokesperson 3 mentioned (91% agreement;  $\alpha = .79$ ); and Spokesperson 4 mentioned (100% agreement;  $\alpha = 1$ ).

*Spokesperson Statement.* The coders also looked at if there was a statement by that Spokesperson, (0= None) (1 = Yes). If there was not a direct quote from the spokesperson it was not consider to be a statement/quote. If there was a direct quote from the spokesperson it was considered to be a statement/quote. Since there was a maximum of four spokespersons, there were four variables with reliability estimates representing whether they gave a direct quote or not. Those variables and estimates are: Statement by Spokesperson 1 (91% agreement;  $\alpha = .82$ ); Statement by Spokesperson 2 (91% agreement;  $\alpha = .82$ ); Statement by Spokesperson 3 (100% agreement;  $\alpha = 1$ ); and Statement by Spokesperson 4 (100% agreement;  $\alpha = 1$ ).

*Crisis Response Strategy.* There are four different response strategies in the SCCT: deny, diminish, rebuild or bolstering. If there was no crisis response strategy coders put zero (0 = None). The following numbers are associated with the crisis response strategies: (1= Deny; 2 = Diminish; 3 = Rebuild; 4 = Bolster). Again, since there

was a maximum of four spokespersons, there were four variables with reliability estimates representing what type of response strategy a particular spokesperson used. Those include: Spokesperson 1 Response Strategy (91% agreement;  $\alpha = .85$ ); Spokesperson 2 Response Strategy (91% agreement;  $\alpha = .75$ ); Spokesperson 3 Response Strategy (91% agreement;  $\alpha = .75$ ); and Spokesperson 4 Response Strategy (100% agreement;  $\alpha = 1$ ).

*Article Affect.* The number of positive and negative statements identified in an article about the crisis were counted and served as two measures of article affect, positive affect and negative affect. Positive affect represented the number of positive statements within the article (91% agreement;  $\alpha = .86$ ) and negative affect represented the number of negative statements within the article (91% agreement;  $\alpha = .84$ ).

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

Preliminary analyses looking at the frequency of strategies across all articles showed that at least one response strategy was identified in a little over 50% ( $n = 42$ ) of the articles. In about 15% ( $n = 13$ ) of those 42 articles 2 or more strategies were identified. See Table 3 for the frequency of strategies identified in the articles of the sample.

Table 3

*Crisis Response Strategy Frequency*

Articles	Frequency	Percent
0	40	48.8
1	29	35.4
2	11	13.4
3	2	2.4
Total	82	100

The first two hypotheses aim to see if the number of articles where recommended response strategies for the type of cluster both cases classify (intentional/preventable), rebuild (H1) and diminish (H2), would be identified more frequently, compared to the number of articles where the other two non-recommended strategies, deny and bolster, were identified. Frequency tests were run to address these two descriptive hypotheses. For hypothesis one, results show that about 27% ( $n = 22$ ) of the total sample had articles where the rebuild strategy was identified. This strategy was the most frequently identified in articles (see Table 4). Thus, the first hypothesis was supported. For hypothesis two,

results found the diminish strategy was identified in 16% ( $n = 13$ ) of the sample (see Table 4). The other two non-recommended strategies, deny and bolster, were identified in the articles. About 17% ( $n = 14$ ) of the total sample had articles that identified the deny strategy and 6% ( $n = 5$ ) of the total sample had articles where the bolster strategy was identified (see Table 4). Therefore, the number of articles where the diminish strategy was identified was not greater than the number of articles where the non-recommended strategies were identified (H2 not supported).

Table 4

*Number of Articles with Strategy Frequency*

Articles	Deny	Diminish	Rebuild	Bolster
1	14	13	21	4
2	0	0	1	0
3	0	0	0	1
Total	14	13	22	5

Overall, there was a significant difference between both cases in total number of articles with any strategies identified,  $X^2(1) = 7.317, p = .007$ . There were 33 out of 53 articles about Harris where strategies were identified and 9 out of 29 articles about Winston where strategies were identified. To answer research question one, which asked if there was a significant difference in the amount of articles where the (a) rebuild and (b) diminish response strategies were identified across each athlete's case, the researcher ran two cross tabulations (analysis 1: looking at rebuild strategy by athlete variable and analysis 2: looking at diminish strategy by athlete). These results are represented in



Tables 5 and 6. By running these cross tabulations it provided the researcher with chi-square test results, which revealed some of the categories for the athletes contained less than five articles where a strategy was identified. Chi-Square tests do not allow for such small cell sizes so the Fisher's Exact Test result was reported to address RQ1a while the chi-square test statistic was reported for RQ1b. Fisher's Exact Test accommodates small cells sizes, has no expected frequency and can be used regardless of the cell size.

Comparing articles about both athletes where the rebuild strategy was identified revealed there were 22 articles about Harris where the rebuild strategy was identified, and zero articles about Winston where the rebuild strategy was identified (See Table 5). Based on the Fisher's Exact test this was a significance difference,  $p < .000$ . These results show there were significantly more articles where the rebuild response strategy was identified for Harris than Winston. A Pearson's Chi-Square was run to address RQ1b because there were enough articles, five or above, about both athletes where a diminish strategy was identified. Harris was mentioned in 8 articles where the diminish strategy was identified and Winston was mentioned in 5 articles where the diminish strategy was identified (see Table 6). Based on the Chi-Square test statistic,  $X^2 (1) = .065$ ,  $p = .799$ , these results show there was not a significant difference in the amount of articles where the diminish strategy was identified across each athlete's case. The results show that even though the recommended crisis response strategy may not be identified most frequently across both articles it may be identified most frequently in a certain case.

Table 5

*Rebuild Crisis Response Strategy by Athlete*

Athlete	Rebuild	Total
1	22	53
2	0	29
Total	22	82

Table 6

*Diminish Crisis Response Strategy by Athlete*

Athlete	Diminish	Total
1	8	53
2	5	29
Total	13	82

To address hypothesis 3, whether articles where recommended response strategies (rebuild and diminish) were identified also have (a) more positive statements and (b) less negative statements, the researcher conducted two Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney tests. This test is conducted instead of an independent samples t-test if the dependent variable's data is not normally distributed. The researcher created a variable that indicated all articles where the rebuild or diminish strategy was identified as 1 = recommended and all others as 0 = non-recommended to serve as the independent variable. To address H3a, the number of positive statements served as the dependent variable and to address H3b, the

number of negative statements served as the dependent variable. The first test determined that the two conditions (recommended and non-recommended strategies) did not differ in the amount of positive statements they contained,  $p = .144$ . Results from the second test, although approaching significance, but did not reveal a significant difference between the article conditions (recommended and non-recommended strategies) in their number of negative statements,  $p = .052$ . Thus, H3a and H3b were not supported.

To address research question two, the researcher ran the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test twice replacing the recommended/non-recommended variable created for H3 with the variable indicating which athlete the articles were about. One test used the number of positive statements variable as the dependent variable and the other used the number of negative statements variable as the dependent variable. The results revealed a significant difference in the amount of positive statements identified in the articles for each athlete's case,  $p = .020$ . Articles about Harris had significantly more positive statements identified ( $n = 29$ ) than Winston ( $n = 9$ ). A significant difference was also found for the number of negative statements identified in the articles for each athlete's case,  $p = .001$ . Articles about Harris had significantly less negative statements ( $n = 17$ ) than Winston ( $n = 19$ ).

To find out which types of spokesperson were mentioned most frequently in the articles (RQ3), frequency tables for each spokesperson mentioned were analyzed. Table 7 shows what spokesperson was mentioned and how frequently it was mentioned within all the articles analyzed.

Table 7

*Spokesperson/Source Frequency Across Both Cases*

Spokespersons Mentioned	Frequency
Chancellor	0
President	7
Vice President of Public Relations & Public Affairs	1
University Spokesperson	8
Judicial Board (School Lawyer)	0
Athlete's Lawyer	50
Coach	36
<u>Others Mentioned</u>	
Fellow Student	1
School Affiliate (Donor/Alumni)	0
Rape Crisis Center Representative	1

The results of the frequency test show the athlete's Lawyer was the most frequently mentioned spokesperson ( $n = 50$ ) in articles across both athletes' cases. The second most frequently mentioned spokesperson in articles across both athletes' cases was the coach ( $n=36$ ).

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Response Strategies**

SCCT has recommended crisis response strategies for certain clusters. Because these crises had an attributions of responsibility that placed them in the intentional/preventable cluster, the theory suggested using the rebuild strategy as the primary response strategy and the diminish response strategy as the secondary. The researcher hypothesized the amount of articles where the rebuild strategy was identified would be the greatest. It was also hypothesized the secondary recommended response strategy would have the second most amount of articles with the response strategy identified.

Because the crises were similar but handled differently the researcher wanted to know if there would be a significant difference in the types of suggested crisis response strategies used in Week 1 and that was found to be true as the recommended rebuild strategy was used more in Harris' case than in Winstons'. There are several potential reasons for this. Harris' crisis lasted a week and there was a difference in the types of strategies used at the beginning of his crisis when he was suspended from school and the end of his crisis when he was reinstated back to the school. Winston's crisis response strategies stayed the same during the initial media coverage of his crisis.

The crisis timelines for the athletes' crises were very different. Harris' crisis lasted a week since it was published in the media and Winston's crisis has been ongoing since it happened in 2012. The differences in the crises timelines could have influenced how much information was dispersed to the media in the first week of the crisis. During

Harris's crisis his accuser filed and dropped charges against him within a week.

Winston's crisis has speculation surrounding it because of how the police handled the rape investigation and how long it took for authorities to get in contact with him for questioning. Over a year the case was opened and closed, followed by him having to participate in a judicial hearing concerning the case in Dec. of 2014. Unlike Harris' accuser who dropped her charges against him, Winston's accuser has been very active legally. In March of 2014, sixteen months after the sexual assault allegedly occurred, she filed a complaint with the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (espn.com, 2014). This led to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights leading an investigation into how Florida State handled the Winston sexual assault case and other Title XI violations FSU may have committed (espn.go.com. 2014). In Jan. of 2015, Winston's accuser filed a federal suit against Florida State University claiming her Title XI rights were violated (Vaughan, 2015).

Winston, was also a candidate for the Heisman Trophy during that first week of crisis media coverage. His being a candidate for the Heisman Trophy could have influenced the type of response strategies identified in articles about him during that first week. The length of the crises and other factors could have influenced how spokespersons for the athletes addressed the crisis in the media as well as the amount of media coverage over time.

The researcher hypothesized correctly that the number of articles where the primary recommended response strategy was identified more often than the other response strategies. The spokespersons used the most appropriate crisis response strategy in order to protect the reputation of the athletes after the crisis, but what was interesting

was there were not more articles where the secondary recommended response strategy was identified. This illustrates that spokespersons may not always use the suggested response strategies offered by SCCT. They may choose what they feel best will benefit their athlete. Unlike Harris' spokespersons, who used both recommended crisis response strategies, Winston's spokespersons did not use the primary recommended response strategy at all. Deny, a non-recommended response strategy, was identified in the second greatest amount of articles about Harris and Winston. Compared to the other strategies, the amount of articles about Winston where the diminish strategy was identified was more than the amount of articles where any other strategy was identified. His spokespersons chose a recommended response strategy, the secondary, and used it most frequently. The crisis may have played out differently in the media for Winston if his spokespersons would have used the primary recommended response strategy the most. His spokespersons could have helped improve his reputation by saying and doing things (offering different forms of aid, material/and or symbolic, eg; protection) stakeholders would benefit from, which would cause the athlete's positive actions to offset the crisis. There is also a possibility using the primary recommended response strategy caused the spokespersons for Harris to be mentioned more frequently in articles.

Research shows that although spokespersons for Winston utilized at least the secondary response strategy recommended, they did not do so to a greater extent than Harris' spokespersons. Subsequently, it is a possibility the difference in the usage of the secondary response strategy by the spokespersons may have influenced how each crisis played out in the media. The diminish strategy is intended to make stakeholders think the crisis is not as bad as they think it is and decrease the connection of the organization to

the crisis. Maybe the greater attempt by Harris' spokespersons to disconnect him from the crisis influenced how he was covered by the media. Maybe if Winston's spokesperson had used the diminish strategy more frequently they would have been able to decrease how stakeholder's perceived the severity of the crisis.

### **Article Affect**

Article affect can gage the emotions of stakeholders. The way an article is framed can influence how stakeholders interact with an organization in the future. It also has an influence on how stakeholders perceive an organization's reputation. To gage article affect the positive and negative statements about the crisis were identified and counted in each article.

Results showed that the affect of the articles was not dependent on the strategies used. The results also showed that, although the crises were in the same crisis cluster and the recommended crisis response strategies were identified in articles about Harris and Winston, there was a significant difference in the overall article affect about each athlete. What the researcher can conclude is that something about the two crises resulted in a difference between the affect of their media coverage besides the response strategies identified. Perhaps, the level of response strategy identified (primary or secondary) impacted the affect of the article rather than the sheer amount of strategies present.

As mentioned earlier Harris' spokesperson used the primary recommended crisis response strategy most frequently and Winston's spokespersons used the secondary primary recommended crisis response strategy most frequently. This may have had an influence on the amount of positive and negative statements identified in an article. Perhaps even the phrasing of a quote or statement can impact both the number of positive



and or negative statements identified in the article and the article's overall affect. There is also a possibility the type of spokesperson mentioned may have influenced the amount of positive and negative statements that were identified in the articles.

In addition, the athletes had personal lives outside of the crisis that may have influenced the amount of positive and negative statements identified. Harris did not have anything in his life that was public, but Winston did. When Winston's crisis broke in the media he was in the running for Heisman Trophy. He also had a history of run-ins with the law that may have influenced the valence (positive or negative) of the statements identified in the articles. Harris and Winston were also doing well on the field prior to the crisis breaking in the news. Their athletic performance could have possibly influenced the amount of positive and negative statements identified in the articles. It would be interesting to conduct analyses to see if type of spokesperson and the *level* of the recommended crisis response strategy identified influenced the amount of positive and negative statements identified in an article.

### **Spokesperson**

This study looked at the role of the spokesperson during the first week of the crisis. SCCT mentions the crisis manager and what decisions he or she makes, but this study aimed to see which spokesperson was mentioned most frequently within the articles about the athletes' crises. The study looked at the spokespersons for the university, the university's judicial board, the athlete's legal representatives and other individuals mentioned in the articles during the first week the crisis broke in the media.

The results found the athlete's lawyers were the most frequently mentioned spokesperson in articles across Harris and Winston's cases during the first week of the

crisis. This would suggest that the lawyer has the strongest voice out of all spokespersons mentioned, but does not mean they are the most credible spokesperson. The second most frequently mentioned spokesperson was the Coach.

The frequency of spokespersons mentioned from greatest to least goes as follows: (1) athlete's lawyer, (2) coach, (3) university representative and (4) judicial board representative. There was no mention of a representative from the judicial board. For clarification purposes the individuals categorized in the other categories were one of the following: a coach, school affiliate, donor and or alumni. The coach was the only person in the other category who could serve as a spokesperson. All others in the category were individuals who could be quoted in the articles and not official spokespeople. The study had other individuals, like a representative from the rape crisis center and a fellow student, quoted in the articles. What is interesting is that rape crisis center representative's quote may have influenced the affect of the article. The most frequently mentioned university representative was the university spokesperson, followed by the university president. It is interesting that a judicial board representative did not make a statement because following the initial week when the crisis was published, later in 2014, Winston was involved in a judicial board hearing concerning the case. The lack of a judicial board representative may have also influenced the affect of an article. It also is a possibility that reporters were looking for a university spokesperson with a legal background to make a statement, but when there was not one available it could have influenced the affect of the article.

The coach had two reputations to protect: the athlete and the university. He had the choice to use a crisis response strategy that would best protect his player, the school

or one that would benefit both. In the beginning of Harris' crisis the coach used the same crisis response strategy as the university by agreeing with the university's statement concerning the crisis. At the end of the crisis the coach changed his crisis response strategy.

It would be interesting to study the effects of what happens when a spokesperson uses the wrong crisis response strategy. It would also be interesting to see if there was a correlation between the crisis spokesperson, the type of crisis response strategy and the level of that crisis response strategy (primary or secondary). These studies could possibly assist with the protection of an athlete's reputation.

Although the results of Hypothesis 3 found there was not a significant difference in the amount of positive statements and negative statements identified in articles in which recommended and non-recommended strategies were identified, the spokesperson may have had an influence. A spokesperson may influence the amount of positive and negative statements written in an article. There are various variables that can be used to study the credibility of certain spokespersons, the influence spokespersons have on areas like the type of statements identified in an article, the amount of those types of statements and the crisis response strategies they use most frequently.

### **Strengths (Contributions)**

There were many contributions from this study to the SCCT. The study results provided new information about the types of spokespersons mentioned in the articles concerning athletes in crisis. This information will help spokespersons in the future know how other spokesperson have addressed the crisis in the past and help them determine

how their statements may influence the outcome of an article. Spokespersons are individuals who have yet to be looked at in literature about SCCT and athletic crises.

Most importantly, this research contributes to the SCCT because it uniquely used newspaper articles through which to explore the response strategies used by athletes in crisis. Most articles that use SCCT use a survey that asks respondents to self-report information regarding crisis response strategies or utilizes case study method after the fact.

### **Limitations**

Unfortunately, the research only allowed the researcher to see if the spokesperson used the recommended crisis response strategies in the media. It never gave a definite response on how the crisis response strategies used effected the reputation of the athlete. This is something that should be explored in the future: the initial reputation of the athlete and the reputation post the initial crisis response time. It is possible other types of methodology could measure the reputation of an athlete during and after a crisis. Using mixed methods may be beneficial when trying to see if the response strategies identified more frequently in articles have an impact on the athlete's reputation.

While unique, another limitation to this study is that it viewed the crisis through the media. There is a possibility there were several things going on behind the scenes of the crises that were not published in the media. These things could have had an influence on why spokespersons chose to use certain response strategies in the media, which could have influenced which spokesperson were mentioned in the articles and the types of statements they made.

When searching for articles the researcher only used one search term. It is possible more articles could have been analyzed if a variety of search terms were used to gather articles about the athletes' crises. More articles could provide a better insight of what response strategies were used by the spokespersons, the affect of the articles and the spokesperson most frequently mentioned in the published articles.

Finally, this study only focused on the top three circulating newspapers at the state and national level. There were no articles to analyze written on a local level during the first week. The local reporters were closer to the location of the schools and were able to see how the crisis plays out first hand as it progressed. They may have been able to get behind the scenes information from sources to which state and national level newspapers may not have had access. The lack of articles from sports papers also limited the amount of articles the study could analyze. With the focus of the study being on the articles published in the first week there was a lot of information that was not reported due to how the crises played out. Harris' crisis played out in a way the study could analyze the crisis from start to finish in week 1, but Winston's case played out for an extended period of time post the first week the crisis broke in the media.

### **Implications**

Public relations specialist and strategist communicators can take many things from the study. The type of response strategy used by the spokesperson concerning the crisis may influence their frequency of being mentioned/quoted in articles during the initial crisis response strategy.

Spokespersons can conclude that it is best to use the suggested crisis response strategy provided by the SCCT. Along with other research, the research in this study

confirmed that the recommended response strategy, rebuild, was used most frequently. Although this was the most frequently used recommended crisis response strategy across all crisis strategies it was not the most frequently used recommended crisis response in each case.

There was a significant difference in the amount of articles where the primary recommended crisis response strategy was identified in this study. In both crises the athletes were accused of committing sexual assault and that is illegal. Illegal acts have strong attributions of crisis responsibility. The greater the responsibility attribution, the perceived reputation of the organization declines (Coombs, 2006). The use of a suggested response strategy, whether primary or secondary, may have an influence on other variables like which spokesperson is mentioned.

Spokespersons need to consider the lack of correlation found between affect of the articles and the use of the recommended response strategies. Future researchers should attempt to identify other variables that may drive the affect of the articles since it is a factor that also impacts stakeholders' perceptions of an organization.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

The athletes involved in the study, Treon Harris and Jameis Winston, had similar, but different cases. Both athletes' crises fell into the intentional/preventable crisis cluster in SCCT because they both had high attributions of responsibility of an illegal act, However, the crises were handled differently concerning the use of recommended crisis response strategies by spokespersons. The study used SCCT and the method of content analysis to compare the amount of articles about each athlete's case and across both cases. The results from this study highlight differences in the amount of articles where the strategies were identified, the positive and negative statements identified in articles and the spokespersons mentioned most frequently across both cases. These results will help with future studies related to SCCT and also serve as a reference for future spokespersons in a similar crisis.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **CODE BOOK**

**Online newspapers.** There were six different newspapers used to find research about the crisis and were selected based upon highest circulation state wide and nationally. The following newspapers were chosen for the study: The Tampa Bay Times, The Tampa Tribune, Orlando Sentinel, USA Today, Wall Street Journal and NY Times.

- (1) The Tampa Bay Times
- (2) The Tampa Tribune
- (3) Orlando Sentinel
- (4) USA Today
- (5) Wall Street Journal
- (6) NY Times

**Date:** The date is used determine when in the timeline the article was published and is coded: Month/Day/Year.

- Ex: 1/15/2014

**Article Title:** The article title is just a way to classify when coding.

- Ex: Jameis Winston named as rape suspect by alleged victim's family

**Athlete:** Each athlete was assigned a number for coding purposes. Treon Harris was assigned the number (1) and Jameis Winston was assigned number (2) to differentiate what athlete was mentioned in the article.

- Ex: (1) Treon Harris
- Ex: (2) Jameis Winston

**Spokesperson Mentioned:** Spokesperson mentioned is to determine which crisis managers were mentioned in the story and were assigned numbers for coding. (0) indicates no spokespersons were mentioned (1) indicates administration or anyone concerning the university (Ex: Chancellor, University President, University Spokesperson) was mentioned (2) indicates someone from the judicial Board (School Lawyer) was mentioned (3) indicates the athlete's lawyer was mentioned and (4) indicates someone classified as "other" was mentioned like a coach, fellow student or school affiliate (donor/alumni). The Coach was the only individual in the other category who could serve as a spokesperson. Others were individuals who could provide quotes for the article.

**Spokesperson Comment "Quote":** If there was not a quote/statement from a spokesperson in the article it was coded as (0) if there was a quote from a spokesperson it was coded as (1).

- Ex: (0) - No Statement
- Ex: (1) – Statement

**Type of CRS Used:** There were five different options when coding for the crisis response strategy. Below will show the number the strategy received for coding, the definition of the strategy, an example of the strategy:

(0) No Crisis Response Strategy Used:

(1) Deny Crisis Response Strategy: Spokesperson informs the stakeholders that there is no crisis. **Ex:** The spokesperson makes a statement that gives stakeholders the impression that there is no crisis going on.

(2) Diminish Crisis Response Strategy: Argue that a crisis is not as bad as people think or that the organization lacked control over the crisis. If spokespersons

lessen an organization's connection to the crisis and/or have people view the crisis less negatively, the harmful effects of the crisis are reduced. **Ex:** Spokesperson try to downplay what is really happening concerning the crisis causing it to seem less than what it is.

- (3) **Rebuild Crisis Response Strategy:** Attempts to improve the organization's reputation by offering material and/or symbolic forms of aid to victims. The spokesperson says and does things to benefit stakeholders and thereby take positive actions to offset the crisis. Offering compensation or a full apology both are positive reputational actions. **Ex:** The spokesperson offers something to distract the stakeholders in hopes they would not be so concerned with the crisis. They may over something of a false hope in order to help their reputation.
- (4) **Bolstering Crisis Response Strategy:** Managers who had positive relationships with stakeholders can draw upon that goodwill to help protect the organizational reputation, praise stakeholders for their efforts during the crisis as a means of improving relationships with them, or draw sympathy from being a victim of the crisis. **Ex:** Spokesperson goes back down memory lane to all the good things the athlete has done in order to make the athlete look like a victim.

**Type of CRS Tactic Used:** Within each strategy there are several tactics that can be used to respond to a strategy. Below are the strategies associated with the tactics, the tactic definition and the number it is classified by. If there were no tactics mentioned in the article it was given a (0)

- Deny
  - (0) None
  - (1) **Attack the accuser:** The spokesperson confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization. **Ex:** The spokesperson says something concerning the female making allegations against the athlete.
  - (2) **Denial:** Occurs when spokesperson asserts that there is no crisis. **Ex:** Spokesperson states that there is nothing to be concerned about and there is no crisis.
  - (3) **Scapegoat:** Takes place when the spokesperson blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis. **Ex:** The spokesperson takes no responsibility and blames the allegations on something or someone else.
  
- Diminish
  - (0) None
  - (1) **Excuse:** A spokesperson tries to minimize organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis. **Ex:** Spokesperson down plays

the crisis and states that there was no way to control the things that caused the crisis.

- (2) **Justification**: Involves the spokesperson trying to minimize the perceived damage caused by the crisis. **Ex:** the spokesperson downplays the crisis and the damage it has caused like saying what happened was not really serious and didn't really have an effect.
- Rebuild
  - (0) None
  - (1) **Compensation**: Involves the spokesperson offering money or other gifts to victims. **Ex:** The spokesperson offers something to the accuser.
  - (2) **Apology**: The spokesperson indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness. **Ex:** The spokesperson makes an apology, states that it was the athlete's fault and asks for forgiveness on behalf of the athlete.
- Bolstering
  - (0) None
  - (1) **Reminder**: Used to tell stakeholders about past good works of the organization. **Ex:** Reminds the stakeholders of the good things the athlete has done in the past.
  - (2) **Ingratiation**: Occurs when spokesperson praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization. **Ex:** Reminds the stakeholders of the good things the athlete has done in the past and thanks the stakeholders for being supportive during the crisis.

- (3) **Victimage:** Used when spokesperson remind stakeholders that the athlete is a victim of the crisis too **Ex:** Reminds the stakeholder that the athlete is also a victim of the crisis.

**Number of Positive Statements:** The number of positive media statements concerning the athlete/crisis were identified, counted and coded by their respective number. Below is an example:

- (0) None
- (1) One
- (2) Two
- (3) Three
- (4) Four
- (5) Five
- (6) Six
- (7) Seven
- (8) Eight
- (9) Nine
- (10) Ten

**Number of Negative Statements;** The number of negative media statements concerning the athlete/crisis were identified, counted and coded by their respective number. Below is an example:

- (0) None
- (1) One
- (2) Two
- (3) Three
- (4) Four
- (5) Five
- (6) Six
- (7) Seven
- (8) Eight
- (9) Nine
- (10) Ten

**Overall Newspaper Affect:** The overall perceived tone of the article could be positive, negative or neutral. Below is how they were coded:

- (1) Positive
- (2) Negative
- (3) Neutral