ATHLETES ON SOCIAL MEDIA:
A SOCIAL MEDIA CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN
FOR DIVISION I INSTITUTIONS

A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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MASTER OF ARTS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

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This creative project results in a student-athlete social media policy and crisis communications plan for Ball State University’s athletics department. This particular research focused on the crisis management practice developed by W. Timothy Coombs, which formed the theoretical foundation of the project. The researcher sought the most common steps to monitor student-athlete social media activity. A content analysis of social media policies from Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) Mid-American Conference (MAC) universities was performed. This analysis was then evaluated and combined with the researcher’s previous research that examined BSU’s athletics department and its role in monitoring student-athlete social media. From these two studies, the following theory-based materials were developed specifically for BSU: a social media policy and a crisis communication plan.

**Rationale**

Public Relations (PR) is arguably emerging as a major industry in today’s growing global information society. Although relatively still young as a discipline, PR has developed into a relationship building and management oriented asset to an organization. PR has many definitions, but has been defined by the leading professional organization, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) as the communication process of building meaningful relationships between an organization and its publics (“PRSA Widely Accepted Definition,” 2012). In general, the field of PR has been growing and expanding at a rapid rate (Coffee, 2013) and was ranked as one of the top careers to watch and as one of the three fastest growing jobs in 2013 (Hooks, 2013; Schwart, 2012). PR has even been called one of the “best creative jobs” to have today (Public Relations Specialist, 2015). The industry itself saw an 11 percent growth increase in the same year compared to a just eight percent growth in 2012 and 2011 (Suhhaman, 2014). This growth was powered by the “independent third-party recognition and endorsement [PR]
provides an incredible asset in a crowded, distracted, and confused world” (Torossian, 2011, para. 3). With the exponential growth and use of social media, there is more noise and distraction than ever going on in the world. The public feels that when an objective third party features an organization in a positive light, it must be authentic. This is where PR comes into play. In addition, social media enable massive exposure to large audiences, which increases the probability and severity of crises. Again, PR can alleviate these situations and even work to prevent them in the future.

Sports as an industry is one of the many that utilizes PR. It is actually “one of the world’s major businesses, but it also involves entertainment, celebrity, participation, fandom and a crucial part of culture and social identification” (L’Etang, 2006, p.1). Similar to the PR industry, the sports industry has been growing quickly and this growth is only expected to accelerate (Riper, 2013). Sports teams everywhere have begun to invest in all different types of technology that have made it easier for fans to watch their favorite game. Using Wi-Fi in sports facilities and developing smart phone applications are just two examples of such technologies (Broughton, 2014). More content is now available online, which also makes it easier for fans to access information anytime regarding their teams. In addition, media rights are continuing to grow and expand as new media is becoming more popular. This leads to an increase in advertising and marketing. New venues are continuing to open, which also brings in more revenue. Lastly, the opportunity and transparency of fan interaction is more intimate than ever via social media. All of these reasons have contributed to the projected 4.8 percent growth in annual industry outlook from $53.6 billion in 2012 to $67.7 billion in 2017 (Riper, 2013).

As the sports industry expands, PR plays a fundamental role and is involved at all levels of the sports industry since it plays a role in portraying the team’s image. Similar to other fields,
sports PR works to maintain and establish positive relationships between the organization and its publics (L’Etang, 2006). For a sports team, these publics can include players, coaches, organization employees, media, sponsors, and fans. The main PR goals are to maintain a positive image of the team and create beneficial relationships with these publics. In order to accomplish these goals, sports PR experts coordinate the flow of information from teams to the press and their various audiences. A sports PR practitioner also upholds a relationship with the athletes of a team by advising and counseling them in everyday situations and interviews. Lastly, PR sports staff moderate press conferences, coordinate player and coach appearances within the community, provide media training, and create strategic plans if a crisis does occur.

Social Media and PR

Social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012, p. 101). According to a report by eMarketer (2013), one fourth of the world’s population use some type of social network. By 2017, it is estimated that there will be 2.55 billion global social media users. This clearly demonstrates the massive use of social media in our world. Social media has entered into every aspect of life whether that includes business, family, government, or pleasure; and the PR field is no different.

Social media has become an integral part of public relations because of its numerous advantageous with communicating (Warren, 2013). PR professionals have found social media to help drive authenticity, build brand loyalty, form and maintain relationships, measure effectiveness of other PR strategies, and promote stories. The obvious interactive and wide reaching capabilities of social media make it ideal for PR practitioners as a communications channel with key publics (Swallow, 2013). Probably one of the most significant advantages is the
ability to use social media to communicate immediately. Instead of having to wait hours or days for replies, social media allows for conversations to occur in real time. This communication allows for an avenue to improve stakeholder relationships, which essentially is the main objective of public relations. Social media has permanently become a part of a PR professional’s tool kit in order to communicate with their publics (Warren, 2013).

**Twitter and Its Use as a PR Tool**

This research focused on student-athlete social media policies, one of the most popular used by students includes Twitter, a micro-blogging service that allows people to post messages of up to 140 characters. Launched on July 13, 2006, it rapidly gained worldwide popularity (Janson, Zhang, & Chowdury, 2009). Available for free in 27 different languages, Twitter reaches populations in countries all over the world. As of May 7, 2013, a daily average of 135,000 new Twitter accounts are created, with an average of 58 million “tweets” sent every day (Twitter Statistics, 2014). “Tweets” are messages available to followers who have subscribed to someone’s Twitter stream (Lehart & Fox, 2009). The primary use of Twitter has been as a social-networking tool (S. Johnson, 2009). However, others have discovered uses for the service beyond social networking, including the field of public relations and sports.

Since social media, specifically Twitter, is an important part to the public relations toolkit, building any type of social media presence allows a brand to interact and converse with their public directly (Wynne, 2014). More specifically, public relations professionals use Twitter to share content for their client or organization. Whether this is publicizing news, blog posts, videos or pictures, Twitter can be used as a PR tool to get information to a public (Swallow, 2010). In addition, retweeting, favoriting a tweet, or replying are all ways for organizations to specifically interact and communicate with their publics. Even “live-tweeting”, posting
comments about an event on Twitter while it is taking place, has become popular. This generates real time conversation usually with the help of a hashtag identified for the event.

Besides publicizing information and generating conversation, Twitter can also be used as a research and networking tool (Burke, 2013). Following industry leaders, organization competitors, and related professionals is a way for a client to stay up to date on information and the industry. This allows for opportunity to exchange information and advice, reference each other, or even collaborate on different projects. With a global reach, Twitter offers these types of opportunities with people worldwide. Connections like these were once almost impossible to create and maintain, but now they are common everyday practice in the field. It is for these reasons that public relations practitioners cannot imagine doing their job without Twitter today (Grinavich, 2014)

**Twitter and Sports**

Social media, more specifically Twitter, has become a fundamental part of the sports industry. Sports teams, athletes, and sports organizations have accepted and integrated the social media trend by creating their own social media presence and establishing policies to help oversee athlete behavior. (Pegoraro & Clavio, 2010). Consequently, social media and sports are now in a permanent relationship (Sanderson, 2011). Possibly the most-adopted social media tool has been Twitter (S. Johnson, 2009). Given the positive advantages of Twitter, it is apparent the tool has found a home in the sports world. Since its launch, Twitter went from a social media tool that could compliment the sports industry to something that now is an integral part of it. According to Burns (2014), “Even with other channels like Facebook, Instagram, Vine, Snapchat and YouTube, Twitter clearly remains the vehicle of choice for sports, especially with fans.” The
platform’s “versatility” and real time communicating capabilities have helped it become a built-in part of the sports world (Burns, 2014).

According to Pew Research Center (Social Networking Fact Sheet, 2013), the primary users of Twitter are between 18 to 49 years old, which matches with the demographics of sports consumption (Gantz & Wenner, 1991). The obvious attraction with Twitter is it allows athletes to communicate directly with their fans because they can avoid the mainstream media (gatekeepers) and present their messages in an unfiltered way (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010).

Although Twitter has enabled athletes and sports organizations to foster stronger relationships with fans through these communications, it has also shaped PR fiascos (Sanderson, 2011). The Atlanta Hawks is one National Basketball Association (NBA) team that uses Twitter to build and maintain fan relationships. The team’s Twitter account focuses on creating interesting and interactive content that fans will react to and care about (Schwartz, 2013). One example of this was a satirical tweet involving NFL Dallas Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo who was blamed for several game losses by throwing interceptions. The tweet featured a picture of Hawks center Al Horford shooting the game winning shot against the Dallas Mavericks with only five seconds left on the clock. The irony and humor of the tweet was meant to illustrate Horford’s ability to operate under pressure where clearly Romo was struggling. The tweet received over 1500 retweets and over 700 favorites, which was the exact type of fan interaction any sports organization would want to accomplish with their Twitter account (Schwartz, 2013).

Nevertheless, Twitter has also been the avenue that fueled sports PR crises such as the “#SochiFails” incident during the 2014 Sochi Russia Winter Olympics (McShane, 2014). Tweets were focused more on the terrible living conditions and ongoing construction than on the Olympic performances. Hotels were unfinished and roads left unpaved days before and during
the games. Pictures and stories of the conditions spread like wildfire on social media, but mainly on Twitter. Accounts such as @sochiproblems or @sochifailure even gained more attention than official Olympic accounts by over 118,000 followers (Huffington Post Canada, 2014). Further, Adweek (2014) went on to recognize the fiasco as ‘The Worst PR Ever’.

More specifically, Twitter has become a prevalent issue for the world of collegiate sports. Whether it’s posting controversial content or violating NCAA rules through their remarks, student-athletes’ tweets are causing crises for college athletics departments nationwide. One example involves tweets from Ohio State University’s quarterback Cardale Jones including, “Why should we have to go to class if we here to play FOOTBALL, we ain’t come play SCHOOL, classes are pointless” (Cullen, 2013, para. 3). Not only questioning the value of academics, but Jones also displayed his incorrect grammar usage to all his 129,000 followers. His tweet caught the attention of several national media outlets including CBS, USA Today, and Deadspin (Cullen, 2013; ESPN.com, 2012; Rauch, 2012).

Ultimately, Twitter has greatly shifted sports media and sports communication practices in college sports because both student-athletes and athletics programs can experience negative consequences from problematic postings (Sanderson, 2011). Thus, collegiate athletes’ use of Twitter is an important topic for sport communication scholars to investigate to determine crisis management of these athletes and their behavior on Twitter.

**Student-Athletes on Social Media**

There is recognition by the public, the PR field, and the sports industry that Twitter and other forms of social media are potentially powerful and revolutionary tools (Evans, Twomey, & Talan, 2011; Gantz & Wenner, 1991; Pegoraro & Clavio, 2010). But even as Twitter has gained widespread popularity, it also has become potentially disruptive. Athletes’ uncensored behavior
on Twitter has resulted in negative and controversial tweets involving impulsive, angry, or racist comments or conversations (Holmes, 2011). This type of behavior has caused PR crises for athletes and the team affiliations (B. Johnson, 2013). Some students build up strong followings, potentially hundreds of thousands of people who see their social media behaviors. One college athlete’s Twitter who made national headlines on numerous occasions was Johnny Manziel. As a quarterback at Texas A & M, Manziel tweeted about his frustrations in school and his excitement to leave (Khan Jr., 2013). Not only did Manziel catch national attention, but he also stimulated conversation regarding his past and present Twitter behavior including mentions of money and parties. Now playing in the NFL for the Cleveland Browns, Manziel still causes uneasiness based solely on his behavior through social media (Cabot, 2014).

Recently, it has become the norm for these Division I athletes to obtain large followings (McCluskey, 2013). With this many followers and the impact social media has created, the irresponsible behavior of a student-athlete can have many repercussions. From being suspended from a practice to having to sit out multiple games, social media can cost a student-athlete more than ever expected. For example, University of Oklahoma wide receiver Jaz Reynolds was suspended for multiple games for tweeting disapproving remarks about rival University of Texas (Ortiz, 2012). The same punishment was given to Michigan State University’s Kyle Artinian after making a remark about an opponent on Twitter and the tweet becoming national news (Steinback, 2012).

Nonetheless, the consequences of such poor behavior could even go so far as to cost a student-athlete their scholarship. In 20014, Brandon Chambers, an assistant men’s basketball coach at Marymount University said it best when he tweeted, “Never let a 140 character tweet cost you a $140,000 scholarship” (DiVeronica, 2014). He was referring to one of his mentees
who had recently been recruited only to be denied a scholarship after the school reviewed his Twitter feed and found vulgar language and images from parties. The list of examples can go on and on for the various punishments given for a student-athlete’s poor behavior on social media. As Twitter and social media continue to make more of an impact in the sports world, it is important to examine the boundaries in which collegiate athletes should operate. It is also important to determine what efforts and strategies athletics department PR professionals are using to ensure good student-athlete behavior on social networking sites.

**Contribution of the Project**

Research conducted regarding student-athletes and their use of Twitter is still in its infancy. More specifically, the PR strategies and practices of the athletics departments during a Twitter crisis have yet to be thoroughly examined. Therefore, the contribution this research made was adding to the existing body of knowledge of sports and Twitter by providing a PR perspective to crisis situations in collegiate athletics departments. This research sought to examine social media policies of Division I universities in order to develop a policy for Ball State University (BSU). Further, this research served as a foundation for a crisis communication plan that could be used by the BSU Athletics Department in order to handle crises caused by student-athletes’ Twitter behavior.

**Problem Statement**

This research examined Division I collegiate athletics department public relations (PR) efforts and strategies used to alleviate crisis situations that occur as a result of student-athlete behavior on the social media network of Twitter. As social media becomes more and more a part of everyday life, it has recently created a dilemma amongst collegiate athletics departments. Since its release to the public in 2006, Twitter has slowly made its way into the professional and
collegiate sports world, with a number of athletes, coaches, and officials creating accounts. With no gatekeeping of the information can be tweeted, athletes can easily break university rules and even cause National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) violations through their behavior on Twitter. A number of Division I athletics departments have created their own social media policies in order to govern student-athlete behavior on different platforms.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to take a closer look at these Division I policies, how these athletics departments are handling situations that arise and develop a theory-based plan which could be utilized by institutions when a student-athlete tweets something that ultimately causes a crisis: injuring not only the athlete’s reputation, but that of the team and university.
Literature Review

This literature review discusses crisis management theory from Coombs (2007) in order to set the foundation for the crisis communication plan. Further, crisis management is extensively discussed in the sports realm, more specifically Division I college sports. Universities have changed the way they manage crisis communications as a result of social media. Policies have been created to try and monitor student-athlete social media behavior in hopes of alleviating any major crisis. This particular research will also develop a social networking policy tailed specifically to student-athletes at Ball State University.

Crisis Management

In daily conversation, “crisis” as a word is used quite casually. The term “crisis” is used to describe routine daily problems, such as forgotten appointments or bad hair days. Although bad experiences, these examples are not by practical definition a crisis. Hermann (1963) identified three characteristics separating crises from other unpleasant occurrences: surprise, threat, and short response time. A troubling event reaches the level of crisis when coming as a surprise, posing a serious level of threat, and forcing a short response time. Furthermore, according to Coombs (1999), a crisis can be defined as “a major occurrence with potentially negative outcomes affecting an organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good-name” (p.2). In the case of the potential research, the crisis would come as a result of a student-athlete’s social media post.

Because a crisis is unexpected and an unplanned event, it creates high levels of uncertainty, and it presents an organization with both opportunities and threats to its goals (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011). Therefore, crisis management is a critical organizational function (Coombs, 2014). Crisis management is “a process designed to prevent or lessen the damage a crisis can inflict on an organization and its stakeholders” (Coombs, 2007, p. 1). An
organization’s failure to practice proper crisis management can result in stakeholder harm, organizational losses, or even the organization’s end to its very existence. It is public relations practitioners who play an essential role as crisis management leaders and who help develop the crisis management teams utilized during these times of emergency. Today, organizations carry out a variety of forms of crisis management, but all are designed to help organizations both avert and mitigate crises as they occur (Pearson, Roux-Dufort, & Clair, 2007). Effective plans help organizations in crisis to make not only timely, but also rational decisions based on clear thinking about the most important facts of the situation.

This particular research focused on the crisis management practices developed by W. Timothy Coombs. In 2007, he first defined crisis management as occurring in three stages: precrisis, crisis response, and post crisis. The precrisis approach involves developing and maintaining a crisis communications plan that describes procedures for managing internal and external communication during the time of the crisis. The beginning of a crisis leads to the second stage of the approach, managing the crisis. This phase includes the activation of the crisis communications plan and additional strategies used to protect and repair the organization’s reputation. Finally, the conclusion of the crisis allows for proper assessment and evaluation. Postcrisis evaluation can help an organization learn from mistakes and efficiently prepare for managing of any future crisis.

The precrisis phase is concerned with prevention and preparation (Coombs, 2007). Prevention includes efforts to minimize any known risks that could lead to a potential crisis. Preparation involves creating and testing a crisis management plan and team. This plan should be updated annually, and the team must be properly trained. He suggested drafting “select crisis
management messages” to be used constantly throughout the event (p.2). All of these measures help public relations leaders and their crisis management teams react faster during times of crisis.

Once a crisis occurs, the crisis response is how the management team reacts. According to Coombs (2007), “public relations plays a critical role is the crisis response by helping to develop the messages that are sent to various publics” (p.4). PR practitioners perform thorough research in order to develop proper management responses for crises. There are essentially two parts of the response, the initial response, and the reputation repair and behavioral intentions. Research has helped define the following three guidelines for the initial response: be quick, be accurate, and be consistent. Responding within the first hour is most ideal, but as our technological world continues to advance, some have argued this window of time has been immensely shortened (PRSA Special Newsline, 2011). Accuracy can be assured by fact checking, and consistency can be achieved by keeping all those involved informed about key message points.

Reputation repair and behavior intentions can best be accomplished through selective reputation repair strategies. Coombs (2014) developed a mater list of these strategies from a variety of public relations, communications, and marketing researchers. Table 1 presents this list of strategies (Coombs, 2014, p. 190). These strategies have been proven effective either in singular or combinational use.
Table 1: Master List of Reputation Repair Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Attack the accuser</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Denial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Scapegoat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Excuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do hard and/or claiming inability to control the events that trigged the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis was a result of response to someone else’s actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defeasibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of information about events leading to the crisis situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accidental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of control over events leading to the crisis situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good intentions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization meant to do well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Justification</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Reminder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis managers tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ingratitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager praises stakeholders for their actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Compensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Apology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsivity for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to these strategies, public relations crisis managers must assess the reputational threat of a crisis. This involves determining the basic crisis type and then reviewing the factors of crisis history and prior reputation. An organization with a history of crises or negative reputation will significantly increase reputational threat. Being aware of an organization’s history can help in determining the appropriate reputation repair strategy to use.

Finally, Coombs (2007) explained the post crisis phase as when the crisis is no longer the “focal point of management’s attention” (p.9). However, the crisis still does require some attention. There is often follow-up communication that must be sent out promised by the management team during the event. This can include recovery updates, corrective actions, or
investigation conclusions. After these matters are taken care of, the crisis management effort most be evaluated to see what worked and what needs improvement.

There are many different approaches to crisis communication, but it is Coombs’ (2014) approach that will be utilized for this particular research because of his expertise on the topic. He has been at the forefront of crisis communication research for years publishing more than 40 research articles and more than 30 book chapters (“Coombs Biography”, 2015). Coombs has even worked globally with consulting firms, corporations, and governments to improve their crisis communication and management efforts. According to Coombs (2014), crises are challenges that any organization can face and often many organizations fail. Management must recognize and incorporate strategic crisis communication and crisis management. He emphasizes the importance of the role of communication through the crisis management process and justifies the need for both during crisis situations.

**Crisis Management in Sports**

Crises can occur in any type of organization, and sports organizations are no different. Over the years, numerous sports crises have caught national attention. Now more than ever, with the 24/7 news cycle and social media, sports crises are happening faster and hitting organizations harder than ever before (Brown & Billings, 2013). Recently, two of the most profound sports crises have involved the professional football and basketball leagues, the NFL and the NBA. The first crisis involved Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice and the NFL. Rice was indicated on assault charges and suspended by the Ravens for two games for hitting his then-finance, now wife, in February 2014 and rendering her unconscious (Natta & Valkenburg, 2014). In September, a video showing additional detail was released. The NFL and Commissioner Roger Goodell were heavily scrutinized by the public and the media for the perceived lax punishment
given to Rice. He was then suspended again by the league and ultimately terminated by the Ravens. He later appealed the second suspension and won.

Another crisis in the professional sports industry that received national attention was the scandal involving then-NBA Los Angeles Clippers owner, Donald Sterling. The scandal started when celebrity news website, TMZ, released an audio recording of Sterling making offensive, racist comments towards V. Stiviano, his personal assistant (Price, 2014). The recording went viral and more media uncovered details of Sterling’s lengthy history of racial discrimination. Major sponsors began to drop the Clippers as the scandal continued. Even President Barack Obama made public comments about the situation (Botelho, Smith, & Fantz, 2014). The NBA immediately performed an investigation that resulted in Sterling being banned for life and fined $2.5 million. The Clippers franchise was eventually sold and Sterling was ousted from the organization. Both of these sports crises received extensive media attention for months.

Those were just two examples of recent crises that have swept the professional sports world, but the college sports world has not gone unscathed from crises either. In early 2013, Notre Dame and their football team suffered an intense PR crisis. Deadspin, reported Notre Dame linebacker, Manti Te’o’s supposed girlfriend never even existed (Burke & Dickey, 2013). Teo had credited her with being the source of his inspiration for good work ethic and earning him the Heisman trophy nomination. Many sports media outlets reported on Teo’s girlfriend and her tragic death during his season. This situation is defined as a crisis because Teo’s entire credibility was called into question by the media, the public, and his fans. As one of the most decorated college football players of all time, Teo’s reputation and work ethic were scrutinized by this very incident.
Also in 2013, the University of North Carolina (UNC) Chapel Hill men’s basketball team suffered a crisis after losing star player P.J. Hairston. Hairston was under a lengthy investigation for several months after allegedly receiving thousands of dollars in benefits from NBA agent Rodney Blackstock (C. Johnson, 2013). As a result, UNC decided not to reinstate Hairston even though he led UNC in scoring during the previous season.

As evident from the preceding examples, sport organizations are susceptible to a variety of crisis scenarios. After a crisis occurs, the manner in which the sport organization’s staff responds often has enormous PR implications (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Branvold, 2012). All PR professionals who work in sports need to recognize the importance of managing crises and making sound decisions. In the beginning of these crises, it is important for sports organizations to employ two types of communication, internal and external. Internal communication is exchanged between employees and staff, and external communication is exchanged between the organization and the media and stakeholder publics. Many sports organizations use a call tree, in which the responsibilities for disseminating this information are delegated to multiple parties, each of whom have specific contacts to make. This call tree begins with the athletics director (AD) and then is divided by deputy ADs and associate ADs. These directors are responsible for a variety of sports, and thus, relay the crisis information to them. Other departments, such as media relations and athletics training, are contacted directly through their directors by the AD.

Essentially, the first overall main task for the organization is to inform these important internal publics about what has happened and how they should react because of the crisis. The second task includes gathering additional internal and external information that is relevant to managing the crisis.
Ultimately, crises occur in all types of organizations and clearly professional and college sports organizations are no different. More recently, these crises have been caused and fueled by social media (Escuela, 2014). It is Twitter that has greatly shifted sports media and sports communication practices in college sports because both student-athletes and athletic programs can experience negative consequences from problematic postings (Sanderson, 2011). Thus, student-athletes’ use of Twitter is an important topic for sport communication scholars to investigate to determine crisis management of these athletes and their behavior on Twitter.

**Social Media Crisis Management in College Sports**

Today, crises occur in college sports involving social media that challenge universities to respond. One infamous scandal included Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky who was found guilty on 45 charges for molesting 10 boys over a 15-year period (Scott, 2012). Initially, the university’s president directed the football marketing and promotions department not to post on social media about the scandal. Despite the absence of any scandal-related post, fans commented on existing content voicing their opinions both positively and negatively. Kelly Burns, interned with the department during the time of the crisis and explained, “We patrolled for foul language, rude jokes, and other disturbing comments and removed them. In several cases we needed to block individuals who insisted on continuing to make fun of Penn State in very inappropriate ways” (p. 1). Burns explained there was no crisis management plan in place at Penn State during the time of the scandal. Because of this, the university was greatly criticized by the public and the media for their poor crisis management and social media skills. Even today, nothing about the crisis itself has ever been talked about on any Penn State social media.
On a more individual scale, universities have had to manage student-athletes’ crises on a personal basis based on the content posted via Twitter. Texas Tech University’s Marlon Williams tweeted about the head football coach being late to a meeting (Sarkisova & Parham, 2013). As a result, Williams faced issues with school officials and his social media privileges were revoked. Texas Tech became aware of the tweet and decided that preventing Williams’ use of Twitter was the best strategy to alleviate future issues. This incident was defined as a crisis by the athletics department and university because it defied one of their basic rules: internal matters remain private. Some management strategies of these universities even went so far to indefinitely suspend players such as running back Jamal Shuman of Elon College after tweeting about his lack of playing time and hashtagging an abusive phrase about the head football coach (Sarkisova & Parham, 2013). These are just a few of examples of social media crises that have occurred in the collegiate sports world. The amount and the variety of such crises is endless. It is these crises that are becoming commonplace in college athletics. Thus, crisis management must be practiced and utilized by universities in order to anticipate, contain, and respond effectively (Social media in crisis, 2012). Because any crisis that generally affects a collegiate team affects the entire university as well, athletics departments must be prepared to manage any social media crises.

**Twitter’s Impact on Sport Crisis Communication**

Student-athletes’ social media postings are increasingly creating PR crises for college athletics programs (Sanderson, 2011). These social media disasters by athletes have become consistent topics in sports media. In addition, college athletics compliance departments are under immense pressure to make sure students follow NCAA rules and regulations. As if maintaining compliance were not difficult enough, social media have worsened the problem. The NCAA is now using student-athletes’ social media profiles as a compliance assessment resource (Mandel,
2010). This means the NCAA can use information on a student-athlete’s profile to determine if they are following NCAA rules and regulations. If there is any evidence or suspicion, the NCAA has the right to act and punish. Thus, investigating crises caused by poor social media etiquette is of paramount importance for college athletics departments.

Essentially, social media encompass a predominant form of communication among college students (Miller, Parsons, & Lifer, 2010). Thus, student-athletes are one of the many primary uses of social media. More specifically, student-athletes have taken to Twitter because of the following advantages: keeping in contact with others, communicating with followers, accessing information, and forming their identity (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). Nevertheless, when student-athletes use Twitter, they become susceptible to certain issues that do not arise for the everyday college student user (Mayer, 2012). Students may believe their content and postings belongs to them, but many athletics departments believe the department and school are considered co-owners of the information because of their invested interest in the student (Sanderson, 2011). In addition, if a student-athlete posts something inappropriate or unacceptable by their athletics department’s standards, their punishment might look differently than that of a non-student-athlete. These are just two examples of some of the issues that arise for student-athletes on social media.

**Division I Social Media Policies**

As illustrated above, crises occur due to student-athletes’ behavior on Twitter. This social networking site continues to be an important communications channel, and it is imperative both academic and collegiate personnel understand the Twitter landscape and how to deal with crises that could occur from student-athlete’s tweets. Currently, the NCAA does not require all member universities to monitor or even create social media policies. In addition, the NCAA does not have
a comprehensive social media policy. Instead, it has left it up to individual universities to
develop their own policies (Blohm, 2012). However, the NCAA does note that the “duty to
[create a policy] may arise as a part of an institution’s heightened awareness when it has or
should have a reasonable suspicion of rule violations” (NCAA, 2012). Creating a policy has
proven to aid in preventing NCAA violations and the public relations nightmares caused by
inappropriate content.

Thus, as universities began to confront student-athletes’ social media use, they came to
realize the importance of determining acceptable boundaries and parameters (Sanderson, 2011).
In an attempt to more clearly define these, many Division I athletics department staffs wrote
social media policies for their athletes’ to follow. Student-athletes usually have minimal to no
opportunity to provide input. This is one reason issues potentially arise. athletics departments
expect these policies to be followed by students just as other policies in the student-athlete
handbook. However, student-athletes tend to disregard these policies because they believe their
social media “aren’t that serious of a matter” (p. 496) and their content should be regulated by
them and not their university (Sanderson, 2011).

These Division I social policies differ, whether they require the athlete to affirm and
adhere to the policy by signing the document like the University of Southern California or they
simply encourage students to follow and practice the policy like South Dakota State University
(USC, 2014; SDSU, 2014). According to Santus, (2014) many of these policies warn students
that participation in collegiate athletics is “a privilege, not a right” (para.10). With that
responsibility comes the requirement to follow a higher code of ethics such as one dealing with
reputation. Missouri State’s athletics department forbids student-athletes from posting all content
“which contain offensive or foul language that could embarrass or ruin the reputation of yourself,
your family, your team, the athletics department or Missouri State University” (MSU, 2014). Missouri State even holds athletes responsible for any information, photos or items that are posted by others on their page.

Essentially, athletics departments at different universities have varying outcomes if their policies are not followed. Kent State’s policy, which students must sign, states they can introduce “education, counseling, team suspension, termination from the varsity team and reduction or non-renewal of any athletics scholarships” from social media content that is deemed inappropriate (Kent, 2006, para.2). On the other hand, some universities specifically require athletes to take down any content deemed unacceptable. One such school is Florida State, which requires that students must follow requests from officials “requiring that the unacceptable content be removed or the social network account be deactivated” (FSU, 2014, para. 14).

**Research Questions**

Based on Coombs (2007) and the above research, the following research questions were developed:

**RQ1:** What are the most common elements that Division I universities employ in their student-athlete social media policies?

**RQ2:** What are the common steps taken by Division I universities in order to monitor student-athlete social media activity?

**RQ3:** What are the most common repercussions for student-athletes at Division I universities for not following the set social media policy?
Methodology

This study employed quantitative research methods to examine and answer the three research questions. To answer RQ1 and RQ2, a content analysis study was performed of Division I social media policies. Content analysis is “the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numerical values according to valid measurement rules, and the analysis of relationship involving those values using statistical methods, in order to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to is context, both of production and consumption” (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998, p.20).

Content analysis was chosen as the research study method because of its advantages for examining content. The policies that were studied are separate from communicators, which allowed the researcher to draw conclusions from content evidence without having to get access to communicators who may not have been willing to be examined directly (Riffe, Lacy, Fico, 1998). Also, content analysis allowed for the examination of archived materials. Researchers are able to study content regardless of the time frame. Lastly, communication is universal and content analysis can be used to help answer a number of questions from a variety of disciplines. For all of these reasons content analysis was chosen in order to understand a variety of NCAA Division I universities and how they have outlined their social media policies for their student-athletes.

Content analysis is commonly used to analyze various types of communications (Krippendorff, 1980). Researchers have used the technique extensively in sport to study sports-related events (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). In order to perform content analysis, a sample of the content must be drawn from the population of available material (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). A
sample is defined as a “subset of units from the entire population being studied” (p. 81) with the goal being to represent the entire population. The entire population in this study was all NCAA Division I social media policies. Headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana, the NCAA is a membership-driven organization that regulates athletes of 1,281 college and universities nationwide. They also organize athletics programs for college and universities and regulate rules for competition (“Who we are,” 2015).

The sample in this study was a purposive convenience sample of Division I Mid-American Conference (MAC) Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) universities. This sample was chosen because Ball State University is in the MAC and is a FBS university. The MAC is a NCAA Division I athletics conference, which contains 12 full member schools. There are six schools in the eastern conference and six in the western. Ball State is one of six universities in the western division of the conference. Started in 1946, the conference has grown and developed into “the most aggressive Division I conference in the country” (“This is the Mid-American Conference”, 2015).

The MAC is one of ten FBS conferences. In these Division I conferences, there are two subdivisions for football, Bowl and Championship. The NCAA determines the type of subdivision based on attendance numbers and scholarship numbers (“Divisional differences”, 2015). Formally known as Division I-A, FBS is the top subdivision level of college football. These schools compete in post-season bowl games, hence the name. As of 2014, there were 128 full members of Division I FBS (“Divisional differences”, 2015).

This study examined the 12 Division I MAC FBS schools’ social media policies. The purpose behind choosing these policies instead of choosing the athletics department’s handbooks or other materials was because of the unique and specific guidelines of social media etiquette
defined for each student-athlete. The study examined exactly what content is in these policies and how the student-athletes are instructed to follow them. Then, a social media networking policy was developed for Ball State University. This study also used Coombs (2007) crisis management framework in order to construct a crisis communications plan for Ball State University’s athletics department in times of student-athlete social media crisis.

Data was obtained from NCAA Division I MAC FBS universities. A list of these schools was obtained from the NCAA website. From this list, each athletics department website was visited to obtain the student-athlete handbook. Upon finding the handbook, the social media policy was located and copied into a Microsoft Word document. In some cases, no social media policy was found in the handbook. If this occurred, then the university’s athletics department staff directory page was visited and a request for such policy was emailed to a compliance department director or graduate assistant. Every university contacted in this way sent a social media policy via email. A social media policy was found for every university.

After these policies are collected, the process of coding began. In order to answer RQ1 and RQ2, the researcher coded for specific variables within each policy. The coding process began and then was halted because of issues found in the code sheet. There were not enough elements defined in the coding scheme to encompass the entire social media policies. Therefore, elements were added and then coding was started over for accuracy. For reliability, a second coder took part in the study (Krippendorff, 1980). The second coder examined 100 percent of the coding because of the small sample size.

After the content analysis was completed, findings were evaluated and discussed in conjunction with another small-scale research study previously conducted regarding social media and the BSU athletics department. That study employed qualitative research methods to examine
themes from semi-structured interviews with staff from the BSU athletics department. It focused on how the department handled monitoring behavior and handling social media crises. The content analysis and the in-depth interviews were used to formulate a social media networking policy appropriate for BSU. Further, a crisis communication plan was constructed based on Coombs’ crisis management model to help the BSU athletics department in any future crises caused from a student-athlete on social media. The code sheet and the code book are available in Appendices A and B.
Results of Content Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine Division I athletics departments’ student-athlete social media policies in order to determine what elements should be included in a policy for Ball State University. A content analysis study was performed including policies from all 12 Division I MAC FBS universities. Two coders conducted coding of this purposive convenience sample. A second coder was used in order to ensure reliability. Both coders were responsible for 100 percent of the coding. Overall, there was a 98.2% percent agreement between the two coders. Scott’s Pi was calculated to measure inter-rater reliability for nominal data, and the reliability was found to be high (Scott’s Pi= .909).

Some preliminary elements were analyzed in order to determine prominence of the policy. The word length of the policies varied greatly with the shortest policy being on 65 words and the longest policy including details for 923 words. The mean for the amount of words was 393.2 words. This element was measured in order to determine the amount of detail allocated to thoroughly explain a student-athlete social media policy.

In addition, the date the policy went into effect was examined and noted as well. These dates were collected and recorded to note when these policies were developed. With social media’s rapid advancement and evolution of changes, the date of older policies and content was taken into consideration. However, the majority of the policies did not list a date, only four of the 12 universities did so. This was noted as an important element to consider including on a student-athlete social media policy in order to illustrate timeliness.

Further, the placement of the policy, or where students could access the policy, was also examined. This element was assessed in order to determine the best placement for the Ball State
policy. The content analysis revealed the optimal location for the policy is in the student-athlete handbook, with 75 percent of the sample including the policy in their student-athlete handbook. For the other 25 percent of the sample, social media policies were available to student-athletes via a separate type of file (examples included a PDF or Word Document) located somewhere on the athletics department website.

The first research question focused on what were the most common elements that Division I universities employ in their student-athlete social media policies. The next element examined in order to answer this question was the type of policy format. All of the universities included some type of information about social media in their policy. Eight universities (67%) structured their policy as recommendations or suggestions for their student-athletes to follow, where four (33%) universities structured their polices as guidelines. There were also another four universities (33%) that made their policy an agreement between the athletics department and the student-athletes that required the athlete to sign the document and abide by it.

Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Social Media Policy</th>
<th>Number of Polices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidelines</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next, social media that was specifically mentioned within the policy was examined. Facebook was the most popular platform mentioned by all 12 universities. Following Facebook (100%), Twitter was the second most mentioned platform (75%) proceeded by MySpace (58%, then YouTube (33%) and Instagram (25%). It must also be noted that all 12 universities also mentioned other social media platforms not coded for.

Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Social Media</th>
<th>Number of Times Mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MySpace</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each policy was coded to determine if the university granted permission for their student-athletes to be on social media. In preliminary research, some Division I universities prohibited their student-athletes entirely from being on social media during the season. However, that was not the case in this research. All 12 universities did not restrict their student-athletes from being on any social media platforms.

When examining the limitations on the type of content student-athletes could post on their social media, the most common terminology used was “No inappropriate
information/pictures” (50%). The second most common language used was “No illegal information/pictures” (42%). Three of the universities did not even specifically clarify what type of information was restricted from posts.

To determine the university suggestions of student-athlete behavior on social media, the coder identified anywhere from one to five elements. All universities (100%) recommended student-athletes conduct themselves in a positive way through their social media activity. In addition, half of the universities (50%) encouraged student-athletes not to post any personally identifiable information for safety purposes. A quarter (25%) suggested alerting the compliance office if anyone appeared as a student-athlete falsely and a mere 17 percent encouraged students to immediately review all their posts to make sure they followed department policy. Further, all policies listed various other suggestions on proper behavior. However, these elements were the most prominent.

The second research question focused on the most common repercussions for student-athletes for not following the set social media policy. To answer RQ2, consequences of violating the policy were evaluated. The most common penalty for not following the athletics department’s social media policy included being suspended from the team and removal of an athletics scholarship (both at 33%). Following these consequences was counsel and education regarding proper social media behavior to the student-athlete and review of all the student-athletes posts by the athletics department. In addition, all 12 universities listed a variety of other consequences varying by degree.
Table 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consequences of Violating the Social Media Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counsel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral to Student Judicial Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removal of content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law enforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access of account granted to Athletic Department and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All posts subject to review by athletic department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removal of scholarship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of eligibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspended from team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspended from practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspended from game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting with coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notifications of parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Previously Conducted Small-Scale Research Project of the Ball State Athletics Department

To answer an additional aspect of RQ2 regarding the most common steps taken by Division I universities to monitor student-athlete social media activity, a small-scale research project was previously conducted on the Ball State University Athletics Department. The study employed qualitative methods to examine themes that emerged from semi-structured in depth interviews with staff from the BSU athletics department. BSU was chosen as the university of study because the school has a Division-1 athletics program, availability and time constraint of the study.
Before the recruitment efforts began, Institutional Review Board approval was obtained. In total, eight staff members participated in the study. Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed. Analyzing involved re-reading the interview transcripts to identify themes emerging from the respondents’ answers. Themes and patterns among participants were extracted and organized into categories. This process continued until new observations of themes failed to add significantly to any existing categories (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The researchers then discussed themes until reaching a consensus regarding the content and nature of the themes. Each theme is then discussed in the following sections.

The compliance office described social media monitoring of student-athletes as difficult. Among other responsibilities, the compliance office is the main office responsible for heading up social media monitoring for the department. Because the compliance office only has three staff members, monitoring the behavior of over 450 student-athletes was described as challenging.

Compliance staff admitted to not monitoring student-athlete behavior 24 hours, seven days a week. The staff described social media monitoring an “all effort” among the department, because of the limited compliance staff. There was mention of possibly hiring another staff member to solely focus on this purpose, but no definite answer was given.

In addition, it is interesting to note the compliance office uses JumpForward, which is a compliance monitoring system. Compliance staff described a social media dashboard capability on JumpForward, which can be used to monitor athletics social media behavior. Compliance staff explained this capability requires more payment, and BSU does not pay for this capability.

**Current monitoring efforts**

Staff monitoring behaviors fell into the following categories: hashtags/mentions, following, self-policing, and informing compliance.
Hashtags/Mentions

Staff members shared one of the main ways they monitored student-athlete behavior on Twitter was through hashtags and mentions. Staff members disclosed by searching the BSU athletics hashtag or a particular team hashtag, they are able to see what student-athletes are talking about. The same applies for mentions.

Staff members stated they are in charge of managing various athletics Twitter accounts for the department. Examples include BSU Compliance, BSU Athletics, BSU Football, etc. Staff members conveyed monitoring is conducted as a part of managing these separate accounts. By searching BSU Compliance hashtags and mentions on Twitter, staff can also monitor what student-athletes are saying.

One staff member stated, “If [student-athletes] tweet @athletics I’ll see things. You know, I look through all the mentions and I search the hashtag ‘chirpchirp’ to see what athletes are saying.”

Following

Another way staff members reported to be monitoring is by following student-athletes’ personal accounts. Examples included: “We follow student-athletes on our BSU Compliance handle. I’ll scroll through our news feed, and see what they are tweeting about.”

“I kind of went and followed all my athletes on Twitter, using the [team] account, not using my own. I’ve told them that. I follow a lot of them on my own personal one too.”

Self-policing: Coaches conveyed monitoring Twitter behavior through what they called “self-policing.” Coaches explained this as having student-athletes and assistant coaches aware of the team’s behavior on Twitter and reporting any questionable behavior.

An example included,
We basically self-police ourselves, and we hold each other to a higher regard. An assistant coach will bring it to our attention or if not them, even another player will bring it to our attention. So, we kind of, we understand the severity of the situation, and we believe in the importance. It’s kind of a self-preservation kind of deal.

**Informing compliance**

Lastly, staff members shared their effort to bring any issues or crises on Twitter to the compliance office directly. For instance,

A lot of [staff] have been good about, because they are more involved with the student-athlete body, they interact with them more often [than the compliance office], if they see something that is going on Twitter they’ll bring it to our attention.

The BSU athletics department reported to not have a department wide policy regarding social media monitoring. Staff stated a social media statement is being formulated for marketing purposes, which, once completed, all coaches, teams, and student-athletes would have to follow. The statement entails uniform personality, language, and pictures of content that are posted to all the specific BSU athletics sports accounts.

Staff reported the department recognizing the importance of social media and social media monitoring. The department was described as being behind in the social media age in the past. However, staff claimed the new administration recognizes the importance of social media and continuing to develop and expand their education and knowledge in the future.

Currently, a “Best Practices of Social Media” document is available on the BSU compliance office’s webpage of the department’s website. This document was crafted by the compliance office as advice to student-athletes about how to behave on social media. The compliance office also reported to send out monthly newsletters to student-athletes that included tips on appropriate social media behavior. In addition, staff explained there is a paragraph in the student-athlete handbook on social media behavior.
The athletics department reported making efforts to ensure student-athletes are educated about Twitter and other social media. Reportedly, student-athletes are required to attend mandatory meetings in the beginning of the year with the athletics directors, compliance office, sports information directors, media relations, and personal team meetings. During each one of these meetings, social media behavior is addressed.

Staff members described the conversation about social media education to student-athletes during these meetings in several ways. Coaches claimed to define their own personal guidelines for their particular team about what was appropriate versus inappropriate at the meetings. Coaches also mentioned pulling up individual team profiles on Twitter and Facebook to demonstrate the easy access of individual information. Sports information directors and media relations claimed to remind student-athletes to be careful what they post and tweet.

In the discussion about these preseason informational meetings, one point repeatedly brought up was the idea that student-athletes are held to a higher standard. Staff reported the importance of student-athletes’ realization of being looked at as a focal point and a representation of the university. Therefore, staff explained student-athletes being held to a higher standard by the athletics department and the university. Their social media accounts (including Twitter account) are put under more scrutiny than a non-student-athlete.

Some of Ball State’s athletics teams reported to seek out information on social media and best practices for student-athletes. Earlier this year, the teams requested to have training sessions on these matters. This training session only came about after a specific request from the coach.

Staff members described the athletics department making an effort to constantly educate them about the topic of social media and possible issues that could arise throughout the entire year. Several staff members described the information flow and education about social media
monitoring even as being redundant. Protecting student-athletes from any harm was described as the main priority of the department and purpose behind the persistent education.

The next section will investigate the significance and interests of the content analysis findings and the small-scale research project findings.
Body of the Project

New Social Networking Policy Development

This project’s content analysis and semi-structured in depth interviews were both used in order to develop the following social networking policy and crisis communications plan for the Ball State University Athletics Department. The current social networking information listed in the BSU student-athlete handbook is included in order to demonstrate the improvement of the new social networking policy grounded in research.

Following this section is the newly developed policy based on the results of the content analysis. Each element of the content analysis was include and incorporated during this policy’s writing process. The policy totals 585 words, a little more than the mean of the 12 policies examined. It also makes note of a potential effective date and where to place the policy once it is approved- the student-athlete handbook. It then begins with an informational section on student-athlete social media use and Ball State’s purpose of the policy. This includes the specifically mentioned platforms analyzed in the content analysis. This segment is followed by a recommendations section of how BSU student-athletes should behave on social media. The policy ends with consequences BSU student-athletes will face if they violate the policy. Lastly, student-athletes are encouraged to contact the athletics compliance department if they have any questions regarding the policy. This action was encouraged by BSU staff members during all in depth interviews of the small-scale research project and seemed essential to the policy.

The following includes the current social networking information in the BSU student-athlete handbook.
Social Networking
Social networking is a great way to express yourself, keep in contact with friends, and build your network. As a Ball State University student-athlete, you are responsible for the information you voluntary post on the online networks, such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter or any other social networking site. Profiles are permitted by student-athletes provided that:

- No offensive or inappropriate pictures are posted.
- No offensive or inappropriate comments are posted.

What you are posting may not only affect you, it may affect others as well. You are free to express yourself on social networks. However, it is important that you respect the privacy and rights of others. Although you may not be aware the information you post is public information, be aware that what you post may affect your future.

The following includes the newly drafted social networking policy.
Newly Developed Creative Project Policy

Potential Date Effective: Fall 2015
Needs to be contained in Student-Athlete Handbook

Ball State University Student-Athlete Social Networking Policy
Ball State University Department of Athletics Student-Athlete Social Networking Policy provides guidelines for students communicating via the Internet through various social media platforms. These platforms include, but are not limited to the following: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat, MySpace, as well as other digital communication platforms and distribution mechanisms. Participation and activity in these online communities could have both positive appeal and potentially negative consequences. It is important that Ball State University student-athletes are educated on the appropriate behavior necessary to participate on social networks. In addition, it is important that these students are aware of the consequences of violating this policy.

Participation in intercollegiate athletics at Ball State University is a privilege, not a right. Therefore, student-athletes are expected to conduct themselves in a manner that reflects the highest standards and upholds the integrity of the university. Student-athletes choosing to participate in online social network sites and digital platforms must remember that the university and Athletics Department will hold them to a high standard of excellence and integrity involving any and all social network comments and posts. Student-athletes should understand that any content they post via online social networks or digital platforms should comply with the rules, regulations and laws of local, state, and federal government, Ball State University, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and Mid-American Conference (MAC).

Social Networking Recommendations for Student-Athletes
The following recommendations are intended to provide a framework for student-athletes to conduct themselves safely and responsibly on social networking sites. As a Ball State University student-athlete, you should follow these steps:

• Do not post any personally identifiable information including but not limited to: birth date, phone numbers, addresses, class schedules, or details about your daily routine.
• Do not post any information or pictures that are illegal or could be deemed inappropriate.
  o Posts of illegal acts could result in criminal or judicial investigations.
  o Examples of inappropriate posts include but are not limited to the following:
    ▪ Content that is abusive, such as that using cruel or rude comments
    ▪ Sexually explicit content
    ▪ Content involving substance abuse
    ▪ Content involving threats of vandalism or violence
    ▪ Content involving hate speech, harassment, or racial discrimination
    ▪ Content involving profanity
• Do not own, operate, or maintain any type of salacious social media account under an alias or a fake name.
• Overall, be sure to conduct yourself in a positive way. All content and activity on social networking sites should be managed in a responsible, appropriate, and professional way that reflects positively on you, your program and the university.

Consequences of Social Networking Violations
Student-athletes who fail to adhere to these recommendations could face discipline for violation of the standards or philosophies of the University, the Athletics Department, the NCAA and/or laws of city.

Any violations of this policy will be subject to consequences as determined by the discretion of the sport’s head coach, associate athletics administrators, and if necessary the athletics director. More specifically, when student-athletes’ use of social networking has been deemed to have violated Ball State University’s Social Networking Policy the following consequences apply but are not limited to the following:

• Education on appropriate social networking behavior
• Counseling on best social networking practices
• Suspension from the team
• Reduction, cancellation, or non-renewal of athletics scholarships

Further, upon request, a student-athlete will grant access for coaches and/or department administrators to view all of his/her account. This includes the public and non-public portions of the student-athlete’s social networking profile in order to determine if the policy was indeed violated. This would require the student-athlete to disclose their password information to the department’s administrators during discipline.

Student-athletes who have questions about benefits, risks, or appropriate behavior of social media are encouraged to speak with their head coach, athletics administrator, or anyone in the Athletics Compliance office.

As a student-athlete, you are required to know, understand, and follow the standards contained in Ball State University’s Student-Athlete Social Networking Policy.

By my signature below, I hereby affirm that I have read and understood the Ball State University Student-Athlete Social Networking Policy. My signature confirms that I will abide by it while I am a student-athlete at Ball State. Furthermore, I understand that failure to adhere to this policy could result in action up to and including termination from participation in intercollegiate athletes at Ball State and loss of any athletics scholarships.

__________________________________________
Print Name

__________________________________________            ___________
Student-Athlete’s Signature            Date
Crisis Communications Plan Development

The following crisis communications plan was developed for the BSU Athletics Department to be used in time of emergency, specifically crises caused by student-athlete behavior on various social media platforms. To date, the department does not have such a plan. However, it is essential to prepare in order to respond promptly, accurately and confidently.

This particular communications plan was developed based on Coombs’ (2007) crisis management and communication practices as well as reputation repair strategies. The plan is divided into three phases, pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. It begins with an introduction and explanation of the purpose of the plan. It then provides Coombs’ (2007) definition of a crisis and crisis management. Following these sections, the bulk of the plan outlines the details of the three phases.

According to Coombs (2007), the pre-crisis phase involves a crisis management plan, crisis management team, spokesperson, pre-draft messages, and various communication channels. The crisis phase itself entails the initial response of the organization and the reputation repair and behavior intentions implemented in response to the crisis. Lastly, the post-crisis phase requires evaluation of the crisis management efforts and suggestions for improvement for the future. All of these elements are extensively outlines in the plan below. Highlights of the plan include the following: a list of the core and support crisis management team, basic communication guidelines for spokespeople, pre-drafted social media crisis management statements, reputation repair strategies, and a list of crisis management evaluation questions.

The following includes the developed crisis communication plan.
Ball State University Athletics Department

Crisis Communications Plan

Spring 2015
SUMMARY

This crisis communications plan has been developed for the Ball State Athletics Department in times of crises, specifically social media crises involving student-athletes. The plan is divided into three separate phases including pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. Each phase contains detailed information about the proper steps and communication strategies the department should take in order to handle the crisis appropriately.

Highlights of this plan include the initial response section under the crisis phase which lists detailed steps the athletics department should take when a crisis occurs. In addition, the crisis management team section under the pre-crisis phase describes what members of personnel will be involved with communication strategies for the department during this time. Lastly, this plan provides a list of reputation repair strategy options for the department to utilize during crisis.

This crisis communications plan should be maintained in both paper and electronic copy in the athletics department. The paper copy should be housed in the athletics administration main office. The electronic copy should be contained on the main athletics administration server. Finally, every crisis management team member must have access to the most current version of this crisis communication plan at all times.

INTRODUCTION

Ball State University’s Athletics Department Crisis Communications Plan outlines the roles, responsibilities and protocols that will guide the department prior to, during and after an emergency or crisis. Ball State Athletics is committed to preparing for, responding to, and recovering from all crisis situations in order to protect the reputations of the student-athletes, the teams and the mission and the integrity of the university.

The department must be prepared to communicate effectively both internally with its staff, student-athletes, other current and prospective students, alumni, donors and all other university stakeholders, as well as externally with the, community, and media, especially in time of crisis. In addition, it is absolutely necessary that the athletic department has a strategy in place to help guide the staff to effectively manage the crisis, minimize the damage created, and possibly allow for the department to emerge stronger than before.

No organization is immune to a crisis, and the Ball State Athletics Department is no different. With that being said, the department must do their best in order to prepare. This crisis communications plan serves as a framework to navigate the coordination of communications both internally and externally in the event of a crisis situation within the Ball State University Athletics Department.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this plan is to define Ball State’s Athletics Department crisis communications policies and procedures. It is designed primarily for the athletics department rather than for the university as a whole. However, it should be carried out in close coordination with the university in order to align messages and operations and promote communications across the entire Ball State community.

DEFINITIONS

There are many definitions for a crisis. For the purpose of this plan, a crisis is defined as a significant threat to athletics operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly.
Crisis management may prevent or lessen the damage a crisis can have on organization and its stakeholders. Effective crisis management handles threats in succession. It is a process consisting of three phases, pre-crisis, crisis response, and post crisis. This crisis communications plan is divided into these three phases.

**PRE-CRISIS-PHASE**
Pre-crisis is concerned primarily with prevention of a crisis and preparation of how to handle one when it occurs.

**CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN**
This crisis management plan is designed for implantation when a crisis occurs. It includes lists of key contact information, reminders of what typically should be done in a crisis, and forms that can be used to document the crisis response.

**CRISIS MANAGEMENT TEAM**
During a crisis, the designated crisis management team is responsible for leadership and has been trained to implement the plan. This is a group of handpicked individuals identified as primary communicators in charge of sharing key messages and emerging facts to both internal and external publics.

It is important that this team has been identified before the crisis occurs. Therefore, time is saved because the team has already been chosen and will perform the majority of all tasks required. It is important this team practices different scenarios or order to be prepared in an actual crisis situation. Practice can improve a crisis team’s decision making and related task performance.

The following is a full listing of the core and support teams who have received copies of this crisis communications plan:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Team</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Contact Number</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Team</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Contact Number</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
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The following individuals from the athletics department should be a part of these teams:

**CORE TEAM**
- Athletics Director
- Deputy Athletics Director for External Affairs
- Associate Athletics Director for Media and Alumni Relations
- Senior Associate Athletics Director
- Deputy Athletics Director for Compliance and Operations
- Director of Marketing and Promotions
- Director of Compliance
SUPPORT TEAM

- Director of Development for Athletics
- Assistant Director of Media Relations/Coordinator of Multimedia Compliance
- Head Coaches of sports (depending upon what the crisis is and the severity)

These two teams are meant to be the key communicators for the department in time of crisis. However, not all individuals must be involved in every single crisis that occurs. It depends on the scale and severity of the crisis. For example, a smaller scale crisis resulting from a student-athlete’s behavior on social media can be handled between that particular’s sports head coach and the core team. On the other hand, larger scale crisis effecting the entire department would need to be handled by the core team and the help of multiple members of the support team.

Each crisis management team member has the contact information of each member of the team.

The following are the basic responsibilities of the crisis communications team:
- Serve as the main point of contact.
- Serve as the athletics department spokespeople.
- Clearly identify if the situation is indeed a crisis.
- Review and assess the situation.
- Assist in decision-making process for recommended action.
- Create the crisis management plan of action.
- Determine the message, audience, and channel(s) of distribution.
- Enact the crisis management steps.
- Update management and other staff.
- Manage the distribution of the message.
- Handle any and all problems that occur during a crisis not covered in the crisis management plan.

Once this team has an opportunity to determine whether the department is facing a crisis, execution of the crisis management plan will be initialized and adjusted accordingly based on the situation.

SPOKESPERSON

Crisis management team members will be trained to communicate with a variety of publics, including the media, in time of crisis.

The following list includes basic crisis communications guidelines to be used by the athletics department crisis management team:
- Avoid the phrase “no comment” because people will think it means the department is guilty and trying to hide something.
- It is okay to say, “I don’t know.” However, make sure to follow with a future commitment of finding and presenting an answer.
- With that, set a time table to include updates.
- Present all information clearly by avoiding jargon or technical terms. Aim for clarity.
- Appear collected during an audio interview or on camera by keeping good eye contact, avoiding pauses and stutters of “uhh” or “um” and nervous gestures.
- Ensure the entire crisis communication team is briefed on the key messages and strategies the organization wants to convey to its stakeholders.
  - The goal is to ensure the message is unified. All crisis management team members are to demonstrate one clear voice.
MESSAGE PREPARATION
While the crisis managers may face a wide range of situations, a few pre-drafted messages may serve as a foundation for statements that may be needed during a time of crisis. These include statements by top management and offer blank spots where key information can later be inserted depending upon the crisis.

Example of a drafted statement includes the following:
A (what happened) at (location) involving (who) occurred today at (time). The incident is under investigation by the athletics department and more information is forthcoming.

Example of a drafted statement specifically involving social media includes the following:
Today at (time), (who including name, year, and sport played) posted (what the post/comment/picture was) on (social media platform). This was (explain either they initiated the post or what/who it was in response to). This social media incident is under investigation by the athletics department and more information is forthcoming.

These are very basic messages. More detailed information can be added or inserted based on the crisis situation of the athletics department. In addition, it should be noted that each crisis situation absolutely must be discussed based on the situation’s own merit. Further, any reoccurring crises must not be classified as a standard but rather has foundation to learn.

See the plan’s appendix for further examples.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS
In order to communicate effectively during a crisis, the athletics department must be aware of its communication channels. The department could create a designated tab for its current web site for crisis information. Essentially, this should be designed prior to the crisis. This communication outlet may prevent criticism by stakeholders and by the media for response times. Using this web page could also be a way for the department to present their side of the story.

Examples of potential information to be shared on this website/section of the website include:
  - Formal statements made by top leadership
  - Constant updates of efforts of the department
  - Any media documents including press releases, facts sheets, etc. pertaining to the crisis
  - Announcements of upcoming actions and efforts

The social media accounts of the athletics department should be used to communicate during a crisis as well. These channels include: Ball State Athletics, Ball State Sports Link, Cardinal Varsity Club, Charlie the Cardinal, and each individual sports team. Accounts for these include Facebook, Twitter, and some Instagram.

A formal well written statement explaining the events of the crisis should be posted on the website instead of in a tweet or Facebook message. However, once this message is posted, anyone on social media can be directed to the website link of the statement. This can help keep messaging consistent.

These accounts and social media conversation should be monitored for possible questions or inquirers and responded to as seen appropriate. Not all posts or comments must be answered due to time restraints and availability, but there still should be a significant effort to interact with the audience and help them understand the situation.

CRISIS RESPONSE
The crisis response is the actual response to a crisis made by management. The crisis response will be broken into two different parts: the initial response and reputation repair and behavioral intentions.
The following is a detailed list of communications steps of the ideal initial response to a crisis:

1. **Identifying the crisis.**
   - This involves identifying the 5 W’s, who, what, where, when, why, and how.

2. **Notifying the appropriate personnel.**
   - The appropriate people must be notified of what has happened. These would be the core and support team listed above.

3. **Determining the crisis level.**
   - These levels from least to most severe include: warning, caution, hazard, severe.

4. **Ongoing communication coordination.**
   - As new information is acquired, both crisis communications teams and staff must be updated.

5. **Developing specific messaging and releasing this information.**
   - The appropriate communications messages must be written and disseminated. All necessary approvals must be granted included legal approval.

6. **Monitoring media.**
   - Observing media coverage and behavior is essential, but this will different depending on the specific situation.

* Then, go back to #1 and cycle through again.

Further, there are three main guidelines the athletics department must remember during their initial response to a crisis:

1. **Be quick** - Respond to the crisis as soon as possible. No time is too soon to get all the facts of the crisis straight and respond to it head-on. This does put pressure on the crisis management team to have a message ready in short amount of time. However, this is where preparation and templates can come into play. The sooner the department responds to a crisis, the more they demonstrate control.

2. **Be accurate** - Speed is meaningless if the information presented is wrong. Therefore, accuracy is of utmost importance anytime the department communicates with its publics. Don’t give the audience a reason to attack you even further by responding with incorrect information. Get the facts straight and compose a clear and precise message.

3. **Be consistent** - Speaking with one voice can help maintain accuracy. Because it is nearly impossible for one person to speak for the entire department at all hours of the day, the crisis team must be able to consistently convey the same message. The idea is to maintain one consistent voice. This consistent voice must also exist among the department’s social media channels communications. This includes but is not limited to a consistent tone, message, response format, and directions on where to receive updated information.

4. **Be honest** - To establish and maintain credibility, the department must communicate openly and honestly. This does not necessarily mean the department must reveal all facts. However, this also does not mean the department can present false information. An open and honest strategy involves presenting the facts and allowing for the public to make their own choices to make appropriate decisions.

Statements and messages of the crisis management team during the crisis response should follow this type of pattern:
First, express concern and sympathy for the individuals involved (if appropriate). In addition, make it known that health and public safety is of number one priority (if pertinent to the crisis).

Second, discuss and disclose significant facts associated with the crisis. Clarify any information that has been misconstrued. Update the public with current information.

Third, reveal what actions the athletics department is taking in order to resolve the crisis situation and guarantee the return to normal operations. Include future plans to prevent such a crisis from occurring again.

REPUTATION REPAIR AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS

Often times a crisis will negatively affect an organization’s reputation. Therefore, the organization must make some type of effort in order to repair their reputation due to the crisis.

The following is a table of reputation repair strategies suggested for the athletics department to use in a crisis situation. These strategies vary in how much they accommodate victims of the crisis. Accommodation refers to how much the organization focuses on helping the victim before addressing the organizational concerns. The list is ordered from least accommodation of a victim to most accommodation for a victim.

**TABLE 1: LIST OF REPUTATION REPAIR STRATEGIES FOR BSU ATHLETICS DEPARTMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strategy Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Identify ulterior motives or likelihood of accuser bias</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Truthful denial of false allegations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Identification of third parties who were true cause of crisis</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Explanation of mitigating factors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do hard and/or claiming inability to control the events that trigged the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis was a result of response to someone else’s actions.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defeasibility</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of information about events leading to the crisis situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accidental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of control over events leading to the crisis situation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good intentions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization meant to do well.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Justification</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Reminder</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis managers tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager praises stakeholders for their actions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Compensation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Note: Because of possible ramifications, legal should always be consulted with this strategy.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
9. Apology  
Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.  
*Note: Because of possible ramifications of admitting full responsibility, legal should also be consulted with this strategy.

This table is meant to be a set of guidelines used for possible reputation repair strategies. It should be noted that not all crises need reputation repair efforts. Essentially, these reputation repair strategies should be matched to their reputation threat of the crisis situation. As the reputation threat intensifies, the department should use increasingly accommodative strategies (#7-9).

There are two steps in identifying reputation threat.

1. Identify the basic crisis type.
   Examples of possible social media crises of the athletics department include but are not limited to the following:
   - **Victim crises**
     - Rumors- false and damaging information being circulated about a student-athlete, a certain sport, the athletics department
   - **Accident crises**
     - Challenges- stakeholder claims that the department is operating in an inappropriate manner
   - **Preventable crises**
     - These are most likely where the social media crises will fall.
     - Human-error harm- any harm caused by human error

2. Reviewing crisis history and prior reputation.
   If the athletics department has a history of similar crises or has a negative prior reputation, the reputational threat could be in intensified.

Based on the crisis situation, the department should choose which one of these strategies would best help improve their reputation after damage of a crisis.

**POST CRISIS PHASE**
Post-crisis takes the opportunity to find ways to better prepare for the next crisis and to complete any commitments made during the crisis phase such as following up with additional information.

At this point in time, reputation repair could be initiated at this time or still be occurring.

The crisis management team must be sure to provide any and all additional informational information promised earlier during the crisis. This could include but is not limited to updating the crisis webpage, continuing to respond to inquiries and concerns on social media channels, sending out informational emails, making announcements, etc. Although the crisis might be over, social media chatter about it could be long lasting. There must be a continued monitoring effort to interact with those still discussing the event. In addition, the department must continue to release updates on their recovery process, corrective actions, and investigations of the crisis incident.

The crisis management effort must be evaluated in order to determine what worked and what needs improvement. Every crisis management effort must be carefully dissected as a learning experience (See post crisis evaluation questions in the appendix). This will be how management learns and improves their crisis management effort.
A final crisis report will be prepared documenting the crisis, its impact, lessons learned, and any possible changes made as a result of the crisis. The report will be presented to the department and kept on file for future reference.

Lastly, even during periods of time of no crisis, this plan should be formally reviewed and updated at least twice a year to ensure appropriate and accurate content and protocols. Specifically, the correct names and numbers of individuals must be checked closely. Anyone who makes changes should record their name, position, and date.
Crisis Plan Appendix

Other potential foundational messages (divided by types of crises):

Victims
“Student-athlete well-being is our number one priority, and the Ball State Athletics Department is currently investigating (insert specifics about social media incident),” said Mark Sandy, Director of Intercollegiate Athletics. “(Add further detail).”

Accidents
The Ball State Athletics Department has investigated the claims of (stakeholder with the challenge) and is working to (specifics on corrective action). Further information can be found on (insert web address of crisis webpage).

Preventable
(Student-athlete name and sport played) posted (brief about content and social media platform) at (time) on (day). The Athletics Department is currently investigating the situation and will release a more detailed statement when the investigation is complete. Plans of action will be determined (time period e.g. this afternoon).

The Ball State Athletics Department takes all allegations of (insert specifics about social media incident) seriously and plans to address the situation immediately. Further information will be release (insert time period).

Post crisis evaluation questions:
- What sparked the crisis? Why?
- Were staff members confuse of implementation of the crisis plan? Why?
  - Did staff understand what they were supposed to do?
- Was the public updated in a timely manner?
  - Was our message consistent across all communications channels including social media platforms?
  - Was the media given accurate information?
- Was the crisis management team effective in terms of the following standards:
  - Easily accessible to staff, stakeholders, and the media
  - Swift and efficient in the decision-making process for a plan of action
  - Executing the crisis management plan
- Was the crisis management team assembled in with in the first 2-4 hours of the crisis and ready to take action?
- Were facts gathered quickly and accurately?
- Were there any major challenges or obstacles?
- How could we have been better prepared in the future?
- Could the crisis have been avoided if certain actions had been taken prior to? What, why and how?
- Rate the spokespeople on a scale from 1-10 based on efficiency and consistency of message.
  - How could they have improved?
Discussion and Suggestions

This creative project was designed to analyze NCAA Division I Athletics student-athlete social media policies and develop a crisis management plan for crises that might occur as a result of student-athlete behavior on social media. The goal was to create a student-athlete social media networking policy and a crisis communications plan specifically for the Ball State University Athletics Department.

The literature review highlighted the importance of crisis communication and management in the sports world, especially with dealings of social media use by athletes. By directly reviewing Coombs (2007) crisis management practices, this project proposed some of the most effective ways to handle crises. The final products applied the results from the content analysis and the small-scale research project. The results included an exclusively tailored social networking policy and a step-by-step crisis communications plan. Both serve as working documents that could be further developed for eventual implementation for Ball State Athletics.

With more time, further analysis of other Division I university social media policies could be conducted and results of the content analysis could be more extensive. The sample for the content analysis was rather small, only 12 universities. If a larger number of universities and elements are analyzed, there could be more descriptive results and a more specific social networking policy.

An additional suggestion would be to examine other Division I athletics departments’ crisis communications plans. This plan was specifically modeled after Coombs (2007) crisis management practices. However, examining other universities’ plans could shed light on differing practices and strategies.

The project received two outside reviews, and each person commented on the social media networking policy and the crisis communications plan.
Both of the outside reviews for the project provided good suggestions for improving the depth and specificity of both the policy and the plan. Based on both evaluators’ notes and suggestions, changes were made to each document and included in the final versions of this creative project. The second evaluator, Jon Babul, included two separate addendums with extensive notes and suggestions included in these documents. These were examined and all notes and changes were made and included in the final drafts of the policy and plan.

As mentioned above, the two final products of this creative project are merely meant to be working documents for the Ball State Athletics Department. As suggested by both evaluators, other parties would need to be involved in the development, approval, and eventual implementation of both of these working documents in order to successfully put them to use. These parties would include but are not limited to administration, athletics department administration, legal counsel, students, and potentially a specialized crisis communications firm.

Overall, the most significant suggestion made by both evaluators included involving legal counsel in the development of the crisis communications plan. As time goes on and technology advances, legal issues are becoming a part of social media. In order to ensure an efficient and all-encompassing crisis plan, both evaluators encouraged the counsel of the university’s legal team. With more time, legal could be contacted and involved with ensuring the plan’s completeness.

Overall, this creative project has met its goal to draft and develop a student-athlete social networking policy and a crisis communications plan for Ball State University’s Athletics. The improvements suggested above help clarify what would need to be accomplished in order for these documents to be implemented and put to good use in the Ball State Athletics Department.
Outside Reviews of the Project

Evaluation for Natalie Demarko Creative Project

Evaluator: Joe Hernandez, Ball State Associate Athletics Director

Brief discussion of evaluator’s credentials (knowledge and experience of the subject area)

As an evaluator for the project, I bring the knowledge of the Ball State University Athletics Department, where I have been employed for 28 years fulltime. My role as the person who oversees media relations includes the policing of the social media usage by the over 400 student-athletes at the university.

Relationship to the student and subject matter

I have no relationship to the student except to assist in setting up the project with members of the Ball State Athletics Department.

Evaluation of the topic as appropriate for the creative endeavor

This is a very timely and appropriate topic for intercollegiate athletics as the social media aspect of student-athletes, teams, coaches and the university are at an all-time high. The immediacy that social media creates and the good and bad of how it affects an athletics department and the individuals involved are of grave concern at this time. In addition, the ability to police or the inability to police is a major topic in intercollegiate athletics.

Evaluation of student’s approach

The student’s approach was a good one in that she did not take a side in defending the use of social media. It was very well explained that Ball State student-athletes are held to certain standards, and although some may not always deem it as fair, it is important to know their posts throughout social media reflect on the individual, their team and the department. The setting up of a crisis management team is essential and the players involved in her approach were very
good selections. However, the support team may have gotten too many people involved and made it very difficult for the proper work to get done when something needs to be addressed either positively or negatively. The use of pre-drafted messages is not a practical approach for crisis issues that arrive. It is necessary to be sure each instance is discussed on that situations merit and although if it has happened before, that is a good background but not a standard.

Evaluation of the body of the project

(Quality, Depth of Treatment, Coverage)

The work was good, although very general. Very detailed from the committee setup to the communication channels and then to the responses in the case of a crisis. The strategies for the department were good and well thought out, but the ability to put them into a real-life situation is KEY and should be addressed. The post-crisis phase is probably the one that is very vital.

Evaluation of the student’s work as contributing to the field (e.g., body of knowledge)

Natalie’s work addresses many of the concerns, situations and crisis management aspects of social media. This is a much needed project with over 400 student-athletes annually and those athletes using many, many platforms throughout the course of a year. One of the primary issues with Ball State establishing a social media policy for its student-athletes are the legal ramifications of “policing” accounts by the staff, university or athletics personnel. Natalie’s social media policy would need to be more in-depth to be implemented, but certainly heading in the right direction.

Evaluation for Natalie Demarko Creative Project

Evaluator: Jon Babul, Director of Basketball Programs-Atlanta Hawks

Brief discussion of evaluator’s credentials (knowledge and experience of the subject area)
As an evaluator for this project, I offer a unique set of skills, education and experience. Currently, I am the Director of Basketball Programs & Alumni Relations for the Atlanta Hawks. I also serve as a TV and radio analyst for the Georgia Tech Men’s Basketball Program. Communications, Marketing & Promotions, Government Relations, Corporate Relations and Civic Engagement are all areas of responsibility in my current role. I report to the Senior Director of Corporate Social Responsibility and Senior VP of External Affairs for the Atlanta Hawks. The content presented by Natalie is present, real and relevant as it pertains to my day to day job function.

Professionally, I have fourteen years of experience in the sports industry. I have held leadership positions at the high school, collegiate and professional level. I have served in a number of different roles and capacities including: high school athletic director, high school coach, educator, academic advisor, director of operations, college coach, recruiting coordinator, manager of event marketing, on air talent, public speaker, salesman and camp director.

I have worked with high school athletes, collegiate athletes and professional athletes and have a firm understanding of the power of social media exposure and how and why it MUST be managed effectively.

Relationship to the student and subject matter

Natalie was an intern for the Event Marketing and Promotions Staff with the Atlanta Hawks. I served as her manager for 4 months. She was extremely active in the planning and execution of our summer camp program. Today, we are friends and colleagues.

Evaluation of the topic as appropriate for the creative endeavor
This is a very appropriate topic for a creative project in the sports industry, specifically collegiate athletics. Issues around this topic are very real and present in today’s world of college sports.

**Evaluation of the student’s approach:**

Natalie has clearly defined the Social Networking Policy and the Crisis Communication Plan for the Ball State Athletics Department. The Social Networking Policy is well written and simple to follow. It clearly defines the policy, recommendations for safe practice, and consequences due to non-compliance.

The Crisis Communication Plan is strategically crafted and is organized by pre-crisis, crisis, and post crisis action plans. Preparation, organization, practice and review of the plan implementation is emphasized and practical.

**Suggestions**

Social Media Policy is a very delicate topic to manage and requires guidance from professional counsel. Law is developing and evolving as it pertains to social media and requires highly specialized legal professionals to examine, monitor, evaluate, and maintain enforceable, institutional rules regarding social networking policies. Continuous evaluation of law around the subject matter is vital to the success of effective implementation. Main takeaway is to devise the plan with the assistance of a 3rd party firm that specializes in crisis management planning. I also suggest having counsel from the university legal team. The athletics department policy MUST align with the school policy and be enforced consistently amongst the entire student body and athletics department. Inconsistencies in enforcement will be problematic long term.

**Evaluation of the body of the project: Quality, Depth of Treatment, Coverage**

a. Quality
Natalie has presented a practical policy with an extensive crisis communication plan. It is well researched and is a legitimate working document. Please see (addendum 1) and (addendum 2) to this review for quality improvement suggestions.

b. **Depth of Treatment**

The Social Media Policy and Crisis Communication Plan is extremely comprehensive, detailed and easy to follow. Please see (addendum 1) and (addendum 2) for suggestions for improvement to the existing policy and plan.

**Suggestions**

Review attached documents regarding case law as it pertains to social media policy at educational institutes. “Specialized” legal counsel is advised to construct a legitimate and practical policy and crisis communication plan for the institute. I would also recommend seeking counsel from high ranking officials in the school and input from the student body leaders. Students should have a voice in crafting the policy if you expect them to take ownership in following the law. Some statements in the policy and plan are vague and can be interpreted loosely. Enforcement of vague terminology is impossible. I suggest reviewing (addendum 1) and (addendum 2) and implementing the suggestions presented to more clearly define the policy and plan.

**C. Coverage**

The Policy should align with the student body handbook and values of the institute. Enforcement must be consistent at all levels and endorsed by the school president, dean and athletics leadership team. All parties must be on the same page for the policy and plan to be effective. This cannot be a small-minded endeavor. Input should come from school
administration, athletics administration, legal counsel, student body, and 3rd party specialized firm to complete a finalized draft of the policy and plan.

**Evaluation of the student’s work as contributing to the field (e.g., body of knowledge)**

Natalie’s project is extremely relevant to the current world of collegiate athletics and institutes of higher education. The policy and plan presented in her creative project can add value to the school’s current student-athlete handbook AND student body handbook. The plan could be presented to school officials once suggested edits from legal counsel (see addendum 1 and addendum 2) and a 3rd party crisis management firm are implemented.
References


eMarketer. (2013, June 18). Social networking reaches nearly one in four around the world: By 2014, the ranking regions by social network users will reflect regional shares of the global population. *eMarketer.* Retrieved from http://www.emarketer.com


Appendix

A. Code Sheet

B. Code Book
Coding Sheet

NCAA Division I Social Media Policies

V1. Coder
V2. Policy identification number
V3. Word Length of Policy
V4. University Name

General Policy Characteristics
V5. Date effective
1- Fill in actual date
2- Date not available

V6. Policy placement
1- Student-Athlete Handbook
2- Separate file
3- Unable to determine

V7. Type of policy
1- Informational
2- Recommendations
3- Guidelines
4- Agreement (may require signature)
5- Other

V8. Social media in general mentioned
1- Facebook
2- Twitter
3- Instagram
4- MySpace
5- YouTube
6- Snapchat
7- Other

Monitoring
V9. Social media ownership
1- Restricted from using social media
2- Not restricted from using social media
3- Some restrictions
4- Not able to determine

V10. Worded restrictions on posting
1- No inappropriate information/pictures
2- No embarrassing information/pictures
3- No offensive information/picture
4- No illegal information/pictures
5- No derogatory information/pictures
6- None
7- Other

V11. Suggestions on behavior
1- Do not post personally identifiable information
2- Alert compliance if anyone appears as a student-athlete falsely
3- Conduct self in a positive way
4- Immediately review postings to ensure consistency with department rules
5- Other

Repercussions of Not Following the Policy
V12. Consequences of violating policy
1- Notification of parents
2- Meeting with coach
3- Suspended from game/match/tournament
4- Suspended from practice
5- Suspended from team
6- Loss of eligibility
7- Removal of scholarship
8- All posts subject to review by athletics department
9- Access of account granted to athletics department and administrators
10- Investigation
11- Law enforcement
12- Removal of content
13- Referral to Student Judicial Affairs
14- Counsel
15- Educate
16- Other
Code Book

NCAA Division I Social Media Policies

V1. Coder: For this study there is the primary coder and the secondary coder. Each coder will identify themselves in each story they code.

V2. Policy identification number: Each policy will be identified by a specific identification number, which is assigned by the researcher.

V3. Word Length of Policy: The entire word length of the policy, specifically including all articles and numbers.

V4. University Name: The name of the university whose social media policy is being coded.

General Policy Characteristics

V5. Date effective: The date the policy went into effect.
1- Fill in actual date- Fill in the date in which the policy went into effect.
2- Date not available- There is not date available as to which when the policy went into effect.

V6. Policy placement: Where the social media policy can be found in regards to the student-athlete handbook or other materials available to student-athletes.
1- Student-Athlete Handbook- The social media policy is located within the student-athlete handbook.
2- Separate file- The social media policy is a separate type of file (examples include PDF, Word Document) available to students via the athletics department website and is not included in the student-athlete handbook.
3- Unable to determine- There is no way to determine where the social media policy is located.

V7. Type of policy: The type of policy and format of the social media policy.
1- Informational- The policy only provides information about social media practices for student-athletes.
2- Recommendations- The policy is written as suggestions for the student-athletes to follow when conducting themselves on social media
3- Guidelines- The policy is set up as a list of requirements that students must follow when conducting themselves safely and responsibly in the social media environment.
4- Agreement (may require signature)- The policy is an agreement between the athletics department and the student-athlete and requires the student-athlete to sign it and abide by it.
5- Other- Any other type of policy.

V8. Social media in general mentioned: Any of the following social media platforms mentioned within the social media policy.
1- Facebook: A social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them. (www.facebook.com)
2- Twitter: An online social networking service that enables users to send and read short 140-character messages called “tweets.” (www.twitter.com)
3- Instagram: An online mobile photo-sharing, video-sharing and social networking service that enables its users to take pictures and videos, and share them on a variety of social networking platforms. (www.instagram.com)
4- MySpace: A social networking service with a strong music emphasis. (www.myspace.com)
5- YouTube: A video-sharing social networking website. (www.youtube.com)
6- Snapchat: A photo messaging social networking application. (www.snapchat.com)
7- Other: Any other social networking site mentioned.

Monitoring

V9. Social media ownership: University permission for student-athletes to be social media.
1- Restricted from using social media: Students are prohibited from using any social media.
2- Not restricted from using social media: Students are allowed to use any social media.
3- Some restrictions: After a certain act, student-athletes are prohibited from using some social media. An example of this would include if students violate the policy, they are then prohibited from using that social media in the future.
4- Not able to determine: Unable to determine if the university is restricting students from using social media.

V10. Worded restrictions on posting: Limitations on the type of content student-athletes can post on their social media.
1- No inappropriate information/pictures: The policy specifically states these words.
2- No embarrassing information/pictures: The policy specifically states these words.
3- No offensive information/picture: The policy specifically states these words.
4- No illegal information/pictures: The policy specifically states these words.
5- No derogatory information/pictures: The policy specifically states these words.
6- None: None of these are listed.
7- Other: Some other terms are used.

V11. Suggestions on behavior: Recommendations on appropriate behavior for student-athletes on Twitter.
1- Do not post personally identifiable information: Avoid releasing any personal information including phone numbers, addresses, class schedules, or places frequently visited.
2- Alert compliance if anyone appears as a student-athlete falsely: Notify the compliance office of the athletics department if any sites or accounts falsely appear to be student-athlete.
3- Conduct self in a positive way: All content and activity on social media site should be conducted in a responsible, appropriate, and professional way.
4- Immediately review postings to ensure consistency with department rules- After posting content, double check to make sure you have not violated the university’s social media policy.
5- Other- Any other possible suggestions.

Repercussions of Not Following the Policy

V12. Consequences of violating policy: Penalties for not following the social media policy.
1- Notification of parents- The athletics department will notify the student-athlete’s parents of the violation of the policy and the details of the incident.
2- Meeting with coach- The athletics department will set up a meeting with the student-athlete and the coach about the incident.
3- Suspended from game/match/tournament- The student-athlete will be suspended for one or more games, matches, tournaments (depending on the sport and game).
4- Suspended from practice- The student-athlete will be suspended from practice.
5- Suspended from team- The student-athlete will be suspended from the team.
6- Loss of eligibility- The student-athlete will lose their eligibility to play. Their parents will be notified of this and why.
7- Removal of scholarship- The student-athlete will lose their scholarship dollars.
8- All posts subject to review by athletics department- If the policy is violated, the athletics department has the right to review any and all posts of the student-athlete.
9- Access of account granted to athletics department and administrators- If the policy is violated, the athletics department has the right to access the entire account of the student-athlete for review.
10- Investigation- The athletics department reserves the right to launch an investigation due to a student-athlete violating the policy.
11- Law enforcement- The athletics department reserves the right to involve the law enforcement if any laws were broken.
12- Removal of content- The athletics department will have the student-athlete remove the any and all content that violates the social media policy.
13- Referral to Student Judicial Affairs- The athletics department will refer the student-athlete to the student judicial affairs office if need be based on the content posted.
14- Counsel- The athletics department will counsel the student-athlete on the proper social media behavior according to the university’s policy.
15- Educate- The athletics department will educate the student-athlete on do’s and don’ts of social media behavior based on the university’s policy.
16- Other- Any other possible suggestions.