WRESTLING WITH CRISIS COMMUNICATION: WWE’S SCANDALS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES IN 2015

BY

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Dedication
To my dad, Tom Steiner, you are still the smartest man I know. This project takes me one step closer to becoming a real doctor like you.
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List of Abbreviations

ACL - Anterior cruciate ligament
ECW – Extreme Championship Wrestling
ESPN - Entertainment and Sports Programming Network
DSW – Deep South Wrestling
HH – Hulk Hogan
HR – Human Resources
MCL - Medial collateral ligament
MLB – Major League Baseball
NBA – National Basketball Association
NFL – National Football League
NHL – National Hockey League
NWO - New World Order
NXT – Next Generation Wrestling (WWE developmental training camp)
PG – Parental Guidance
PR – Public Relations
PWI – Professional Wrestling Illustrated
TNA – Total Nonstop Action Wrestling
TV - Television
WCW – World Championship Wrestling
WWE – World Wrestling Entertainment
WWF – World Wrestling Federation
Abstract

This project examines an intersection of organizational rhetoric, professional wrestling and social media. Professional wrestling, like many other sports, is rich with scandal. Steiner makes a scholarly inquiry into how World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and in particular Seth Rollins, Bill DeMott, and Hulk Hogan handled their respective scandals. These scandals rocked the fans of this popular sport and challenged the popularity of some of the sport’s highest earning wrestlers.

Computer mediated communication plays an important role in sports figure apologies and their aftermath. Steiner applies organizational rhetoric concepts such as apologia, image repair discourse, and corporate social responsibility to analyze the use of internet technology and social media by the WWE and individual wrestlers to restore their images.

When Seth Rollins’ Instagram account was hacked and nude photos were released to all of his followers, the fallout demanded the use of image repair and rhetorical strategies. A coding scheme was developed to further analyze Rollins’ Twitter discourse. WWE’s and Rollins’ successful use of computer mediated communication effectively repaired any damage the scandal had caused and prevented any further fallout. When the hashtags “#FireDeMott” and “FireBillDeMott” started trending on Twitter, Bill DeMott felt a need to take his image repair campaign online. The WWE was able to successfully defend its image after DeMott’s scandal presented a major threat. DeMott’s image, however, remains tarnished. After Hulk Hogan’s sex tape and racist rant videos were leaked online, Hogan’s Twitter activity increased. Hogan saw Twitter as a venue to interact with fans and comment on his upcoming trial. WWE has been able to successfully distance itself from Hogan’s scandal, but it remains to be seen whether Hogan will ever repair his personal image.

After analyzing the public relations strategies by the company and its individual wrestlers in three of the major WWE-related scandals of 2015, Steiner offers suggestions for how the image repair campaigns could be improved in each respective case. Steiner then offers a brief list of recommendations for the WWE broadly to improve their future scandal management.
Chapter I: Justification

Statement of the problem area of inquiry

Professional wrestling, like many other sports, is rich with scandal. Although professional wrestling in some ways cannot be compared to “real” athletic competition, professional wrestling is one of the most successful sport franchises in history, garners millions of fans, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE)’s characters are athletes, and WWE has to deal with scandal the same way other corporations and athletic teams do. This project is a scholarly inquiry into how WWE and three particular athletes wrestled with scandals that rocked the fans of this popular sport by challenging the image and popularity of some of the sport’s highest earning wrestlers and trainers. My thesis investigates whether wrestling superstars apologize in the same way other athletes, celebrities, or corporations do when faced with crisis. I argue the WWE should be studied the same way as other individuals and organizations that have dealt with scandal. What strategies has the WWE used to repair its image when its image is threatened? Likewise, how have individual wrestlers responded?

My thesis is limited to three case studies in professional wrestling from 2015. Many other scandals could be addressed using the same methodology and more research is needed on WWE related scandals such as Vince McMahon’s trial for distributing steroids to wrestlers (1994), Owen Hart’s untimely death as a result of an in-ring accident (1999), Sable’s sexual harassment lawsuit against World Wrestling Federation (1999), The World Wildlife Fund suing World Wrestling Federation over the acronym “WWF” (2002), Miss Elizabeth’s death following a drug overdose
(2003), the steroid backlash following the death of Eddie Guerrero (2005), Sexual assault allegations against Heath Slater (2011), Darren Young becoming the first actively gay superstar to come out while still under contract with WWE (2013), Alberto Del Rio physically assaulting a WWE employee for making a racist slur (2014), Jimmy Snuka’s murder trial (2015), and Perro Aguayo Jr’s in-ring death (2015).

However, 2015 is a unique moment in time to study the scandals in WWE because today is a new era of professional wrestling. In an important sense, the history of pro wrestling parallels the history of 20th century mass media. Notably, professional wrestling was one of the first televised “sports” (appearing on broadcasts as early as the 1940s), and experienced a golden age in the 1950s, featuring wrestlers such as Gorgeous George, arguably one of the first television stars (Wrenn, 2007).

Professional wrestling gained popularity in the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s. In the 1990s professional wrestling became considerably more violent or “extreme.” Extreme-style pro wrestling was considered “sports entertainment,” more spectacle than sport despite its claims to authenticity (Barthes, 1984; Wrenn, 2007). During this era, wrestling was excessively violent, and excessively crude; it adopted a shock aesthetic (a la Howard Stern) called “WWE Attitude” (Wrenn, 2007).

World Wrestling Federation (now WWE as of 2002) owner Vince McMahon during this time repeatedly said that he would promote whatever sells and that he was not the conscience of the country (this trend was especially true in the late ‘90’s when the faction D-Generation X was making waves with the catchphrase “Suck it!” and
crotch chops on TV. Stone Cold Steve Austin mocked Jake “the Snake” Roberts' recital of the biblical passage John 3:16 by saying on live television, "You sit there and you thump your Bible, and you say your prayers, and it didn't get you anywhere! Talk about your Psalms, talk about John 3:16... Austin 3:16 says I just whipped your ass!" Austin frequently appeared on TV drinking beer and flipping off the crowd in promotional photos. Vince McMahon created the “Kiss My Ass Club” and forced employees to join, by literally kissing Vince’s bare behind on live TV, if they did anything to disagree with him. The Attitude Era also marked an increase in female wrestlers being involved in romantic storylines, dressing in scanty outfits, and “bra and panty” matches. McMahon admitted that his programs “walk on the edge of creativity, to shock the public” (Maguire, 159).

The Attitude Era continued through the early 2000’s, but in the past ten years WWE (formerly WWF) has moved in a “PG” and “family friendly” direction, possibly as a result of the government and other critics cracking down on illegal steroids (and other drugs) used by wrestlers and the excessively violent and brain damage-inducing moves that wrestlers use. WWE has a new consciousness. Today WWE bans certain moves, has a detailed and strict Wellness Policy, avoids bloody matches, has increased support for the women’s division, and has taken up an interest in many charitable causes (e.g., Tribute for the Troops show, Susan G. Komen Foundation for breast cancer awareness, creation of Connor’s Cure for pediatric cancer research, and literacy challenges in schools). The way that the WWE has changed direction for its brand also changed the way the WWE deals with public relations scandals related to its company or individual members of its roster.
The present is also a unique moment to study scandals in professional wrestling because today’s scandals also involve the use of the internet and social media. Computer mediated communication plays an important role in sports figure apologies and their aftermath. Social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram are both sites of scandal and often places to apologize. With so many people reading the news online, the internet is a place to get a lot of information quickly about the gossip on their favorite wrestlers and wrestling companies.

This project studies how apologia, image repair discourse, and corporate social responsibility theories applied via internet technology and social media are used by the WWE, two individual wrestlers, and one wrestling trainer to restore their image. I show how the WWE’s and these individuals’ use of computer mediated communication successfully repaired damage the scandals had caused and/or how their image repair campaigns could have been improved.

**Importance of Study**

Noreen Kruse, in her seminal essay “Apologia in Team Sport,” (1981) wrote that the rhetoric of sport is an under-explored research area and my research will fill an open space in the literature. Rhetorical critics can profit from the recognition that sport constitutes a significant area of study. Just as there is a “sociology of sport,” which scholars have established as a legitimate field of investigation, so is there an emerging rhetoric of sport that should be explored. An institution that has such a pervasive effect upon the lives of so many should not be ignored, especially when that effect is produced, in part, by rhetorical means (Kruse, 1981). Few textbooks (Brown and O’Rourke, 2003; Hopwood, Kitchin, and Skinner, 2010; Brummett and Ishak, 2013; Billings, Butterworth,
and Turman, 2014) have been devoted to sports and communication. Few academics have written about professional wrestling in a scholarly manner. Only two scholars that I have found have addressed crisis communication within the WWE or analyzed recent scandals in professional wrestling from a public relations standpoint.

Much as other sports come under fire when their star athletes are involved in scandal, in wrestling the individuals and the company they work for must apologize and/or defend themselves in order to repair the tarnished image. While the apologies of sport figures may seem to some to deal with the trivial, Kruse explains that for many in our society, sports often has greater significance than subjects such as political solutions (Kruse, 1981). Professional wrestling is a multi-billion dollar industry with billions of fans worldwide.

My research will have practical applications. The findings of this thesis may be generalized beyond the three individual wrestlers and the WWE. Other sports entertainers can learn from the successful strategic public relations moves of the wrestlers and company in my case studies. The old adage “any publicity is good publicity” that many of today’s entertainers use was not suitable for the WWE scandals. What individual wrestlers do impacts the image of their entire company. Especially in the case of wrestling, which is not a team sport, one wrestler is often seen as the face of the company. Other sports entertainers can use these case studies as examples of recommendations for how a celebrity or company should deal with similar transgressions.

By discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches used by the WWE, one can find areas for improvement and make suggestions for how the WWE or the
individual wrestlers involved could have handled their scandal/s differently and better. Although in many respects, two of the three scandals in my case studies are “over,” the fourth chapter deals with an on-going scandal related to Hulk Hogan. There is still time for the WWE to adapt its strategy to deal with this crisis. I hope to find patterns among the three different but related case studies that help explain why certain strategies worked. These successes can be used as a template for effectively handling future crises in the WWE. By extending image repair research by detailing its applicability to the world of professional wrestling, I hope to add to present knowledge of effective sports public relations tactics, and give useful knowledge to other researchers, public relations practitioners, and athletes.

Chapter II: Review of Past Literature

Apology, Apologia, and Image Repair
Black (1965) identified the typical and simplest definition of “apologia” as speaking in self-defense. Ware and Linkugel (1973) built on this definition of apologia when they distinguished four factors or techniques that are most commonly used in apologia rhetoric: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Ware and Linkugel articulate that apologetic discourses constitute a distinct form of public address, and attacks upon a person’s character demand a direct response. Although Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) essay uses examples from political speeches and speakers, their essay has informed my arguments about how athletes must mend private relationships and make public statements in front of the media by apologizing to various publics (fans, organizations, and teammates).
Hearit (2006) distinguishes apology and apologia. Apologia is not necessarily an apology (although it may contain one) but a defense that seeks to present a compelling counter description of organizational actions (Hearit, 2006). Hearit suggests organizations should distance themselves from wrong-doing, claim charges do not represent true reality, pass the blame, or call it an accident. Hearit uses a case study about General Motors and Dateline NBC to show how companies can counter-attack their accusers in apologetic exchanges. GM’s C/K trucks were expensive to develop and market, which caused the company to act more aggressively when the trucks were exposed to criticism due to side saddle tanks prone to explode in side impact collisions. Similarly, the higher-paid wrestlers in WWE are usually supported or defended more often than the other members of the roster.

Susan Opt (2013) updated scholarly research on the apology process. Opt (2013) wrote that the apology process has become more complex. No longer does a single person give a single apology in the corporate sphere. Apologies are part of a complex campaign or dramatic production intended to influence public perceptions of the alleged wrongdoer. Apologies are social, complex, and involve many moving parts. Opt’s case study examines Rupert Murdoch, the British police, and the News of the World newspaper.

Scholars overwhelmingly agree that when a crisis is acknowledged in a corporation, a base message must be established (Coombs, 2000). Some message strategies should work better in certain situations when companies deal with crises. Coombs (2000) detailed which of the seven crisis response strategies (attack the accuser,
denial, excuse, justification, ingratiation, corrective action, full apology) work best in particular situations where threats to image occur.

Image restoration theory is also important to diffusing crises of public perception in sports as it is in non-sport companies. Benoit (1997) developed his theory for public relations practitioners to use to design messages during crisis. The theory is also useful to evaluate messages produced during crises. Benoit’s research hoped to answer the question: what can a corporation say when faced with a crisis? Benoit (1997) based his image restoration theory on the idea that an attack, or crisis, requires two components: the figure attacked is held responsible for an action and that action is considered offensive. Only when these two conditions are considered by the public to be true is the individual or organization’s reputation in danger. The foundation of image restoration theory involves two key assumptions: communication is a goal-directed activity and maintaining a positive reputation is one of the key goals of communication (Benoit, 1997).

Responding to a hit to one’s reputation is important for any prominent individual or organization because public relations as a whole is concerned with reputation. The public relations profession exists to create, and once created, maintain a positive reputation for individuals and organizations.

Benoit (1997) stressed that the goal of communication during a personal attack to one’s image is to either restore or protect the reputation of the organization or individual. Benoit (1997) provided 14 image restoration strategies, organized into five categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Described as “the definitive work on strategies used by apologists” (Hearit, 2006), Benoit’s approach has since been applied to corporate (Blaney, 2002; Kinsky,
2014), political and cultural (Drumheller, 2004), and celebrity image repair (Benoit and Hanczor, 1994; Brown, 2012). At first, few studies examined image repair in sports. Benoit and Hanczor (1994) examined American figure skater Tonya Harding’s failed attempt to defend against charges she was involved in a 1994 attack on rival Nancy Kerrigan. Though this study provided a foundation, there are many opportunities for more work in this area.

There is a basis for scholars studying the apologies of sports personalities. Kruse (1981) argued that sport personalities must defend their moral worth as sport figures whenever their conduct might have harmful effects upon teams, games, or the world of sport and their actions seem to result from personal characteristics that make them unworthy to represent the fans. Kruse (1981) explained that any time a sport figure demonstrates bad character by breaking society's rules, that person risks bringing into focus the ways in which the premium upon winning can contribute to a variety of immoral or unethical behaviors. Kruse (1981) outlined several conventions of discourse (e.g., brevity, expressing regret) that athletes use when making apologetic responses. Kruse wrote about the strategies of denial and bolstering as possibilities for sports personalities to restore their image. Kruse (1981) also made the case for sport as a significant area of study for rhetoricians by observing that sport has a pervasive effect upon the lives of many and its effect is produced in part by rhetorical means.

Sports personalities often find themselves making public statements for past transgressions (Meyer, 2008). Recently, more scholars have begun to examine the use of image repair in sports (Williams, 2002; Brazeal, 2008; Fortunato, 2008; Kennedy, 2010). Brazeal (2008) looked at how Terrell Owens sabotaged his own image through an inartful
apologia during his contract dispute with the Philadelphia Eagles in 2005. Brazeal’s study (2008) analyzes the image repair efforts of Owens and his agent, and explores the reasons such a tremendously talented player could not convince his team or fans to support him any longer. The study also identified lessons to be drawn from Owens’ public relations failures: although public figures may be reluctant to admit wrongdoing, it is sometimes essential to a successful apology, when an athlete apologizes, it is critical to embrace the values of their sports, and attacking the media should only be done if the media have been patently unfair. In short, Brazeal observes Owens needed to sincerely apologize, offer corrective action, and demonstrate humility to repair Owens’ image. Brazeal (2008) makes the case that given the impact of sports on contemporary culture, it is appropriate that scholarly attention has turned to sports public relations.

Williams and Olaniran (2002) built on Benoit’s work on image restoration. The case study used was the Texas Tech women’s basketball team and a scandal related to the treatment of black coaches visiting from Hampton University (VA). Williams and Olaniran (2002) explained racial issues are a large risk to an organization’s image: high profile media coverage often follows; and the institution risks large financial loss, distrust, and alienation from critical stakeholders. Denial and ingratiation were employed by Texas Tech University in their attempts to quickly remove themselves from the crisis (Williams and Olaniran, 2002). Texas Tech University chose to claim that it had no control of the events leading to the crisis. The City of Lubbock used several strategies over two years such as an “excuse apology”, denying culpability, instituting corrective action, and attacking the accuser. Many of these strategies were not received well because the public wanted a full apology and a formal apology from the police.
department. Crisis response strategies suggested by Williams and Olaniran (2002) for how to improve the situation included creating a crisis team or crisis manager for the city, an immediate apology, swifter and stronger corrective action, and omit the attacking the accuser strategy. This essay informs my argument related to what strategies the WWE should take regarding the Hulk Hogan racist rants and homophobic slurs scandal in 2015.

Similarly, Hoger and Swem (2000) built on Benoit’s theory of image restoration as it relates to a racially motivated scandal in the organization Texaco. In November 1996, The New York Times reported tape transcripts in which Texaco executives allegedly made racist remarks and considered destroying evidence. This is often referred to as the “1996 Texaco jelly bean crisis.” Allegedly, African Americans were referred to as black “jelly beans,” (Hoger and Swem, 2000). The accusations of racism and “hard copy” evidence (audio tapes) demanded a quick PR response. Texaco chose a spokesperson to give the company a personal face and present messages to the public. Texaco sought to address all necessary audiences, and took advantage of the internet for quick dispersal of its responses (Hoger and Swem, 2000). Texaco’s response strategies included bolstering, corrective action, blame shifting, mortification, and strategic brevity (Hoger and Swem, 2000). Texaco’s crisis management team’s use of the internet in a racially driven scandal offers a unique point of comparison for WWE’s use of internet technologies during scandal.

related to his extra-marital affairs. Shoopman (2012) argues that because Tiger violated a nearly universal norm, he stood to lose his fan base and cost people he worked with a great deal of money. Because Tiger was a public figure, he needed to appear on TV to apologize. Many similarities exist between the strategies used in the Tiger Woods case and the case study I use in my thesis on Seth Rollins’ cheating scandal. Shoopman’s work (2012) builds on Hearit’s (2006) elements of effective apologies.

Brown (2012) conducted an experiment to see what strategies would best improve LeBron James’s image after his decision to change basketball teams. Brown (2012) discussed the notion that rising expectation for athletes to publicly address their alleged “sins” has produced an increased level of importance in understanding the role of image repair in sports. Brown’s research goals are similar to the goals of my thesis: to extend image repair research by detailing its applicability to the sports industry; to add to present knowledge of effective sports public relations tactics; and to provide useful knowledge for other researchers, public relations practitioners, and athletes themselves.

Scholars have started to recognize sport has become a global commodity and the “image value” of athletes has skyrocketed (L’Etang, 2006). Athlete image management has become an important part of sports public relations. Major PR firms have dedicated entire divisions to sports, and a growing number of firms work exclusively in sports (L’Etang, 2006). Sports agents, once charged with the sole task of negotiating club contracts, now actively market the client’s image. L’Etang (2006) explore links between public relations and sport and expresses a need to bring together a variety of critical and functional perspectives to flesh out how PR operates in sport, however her essay only focuses on mega-events such as the Olympics.
Professional Wrestling

My research suggests that few communication scholars have studied professional wrestling from the angle of crisis communication. Hudson wrote an article about organizational legitimacy and stigmatized organizations and spent less than one sentence describing that professional wrestling franchises are stigmatized because of their core attributes (Hudson, 2008). However, Hudson does not address how stigma would impact professional wrestling franchises’ ability to maintain organizational legitimacy, demonstrate corporate social responsibility, or repair their image from scandal. Laura Richardson Walton and Kevin D. Williams (2011) wrote one article about the World Wrestling Entertainment’s response to Chris Benoit’s double-murder-suicide from the perspective of public relations and crisis response. Their research is highly commendable, however, the bulk of scholarly work on professional wrestling recently has focused on whether children or teens who watch professional wrestling engage in more violent behavior (DuRant, 2006; DuRant, 2008; Tamborini, Chory, Lachlan, Westerman & Skalski, 2008). Previous scholarly research on professional wrestling tried to answer the question: why is professional wrestling so appealing? Maguire and Wozniak did a detailed analysis of how the popularity of professional wrestling in the 1980’s was due in part to the promotion and marketability of racial and ethnic stereotypes such as The Wild Samoans, Kamala, Chief Jay Strongbow, The Iron Sheikh, and Sargent Slaughter (Maguire and Wozniak, 1987).

Sociology scholars have studied the factors that create the appeal of professional wrestling more recently (Atkinson, 2002; Pratten, 2003; Maguire, 2005). In the past, many made the case for professional wrestling as more spectacle than sports (Barthes, 1984). Regardless of whether professional wrestling is sport, spectacle, or “sports
entertainment,” scholars today recognize that professional wrestling has become a hugely popular cultural phenomenon (Maguire, 2005). Philosophy scholars have studied professional wrestling as a simulacrum, or imitation, of grappling and combat sports framed by serial narratives of rivalry, jealousy, and theatre. Chow (2014) discusses how extreme styles of wrestling (risky leaps, bloody matches, a performance of pain) demonstrate dangerous labor in their performances which changes how audiences consume, affirm, and encourage the labor of the athlete performers. An affirmation is a performative declaration of the truth or reality of a thing (Chow, 2014). Audience affirmation is the acknowledgement of a job well done (Chow, 2014).

The appeal of professional wrestling has been evaluated thorough a number of academic frameworks, including fantasy theme analysis (Mondak, 1989), masculine melodrama (Jenkins, 1997; Soulliere, 2006), conventional dramatic terms (Mazer, 1990), and the status politics model (Vaughn, 1999). The status politics model argues wrestling’s appeal rests on status considerations. When a fan favorite wins a match, it is a contest that establishes respect for the norms and values of his fans, while simultaneously showering disrespect not only upon the loser, but on the unconventional lifestyle and norms he represents. Fans cheer so strenuously for their favorites because they realize that victory allows them to define symbolically the terms by which American life—family, work, community—is ordered (Vaughn, 1999). Despite the utility of this research, none of this research relates to how WWE as a company conducts itself in the midst of public relations scandals. Additionally, little research has been done on the intersection of professional wrestling and internet technologies.
Martin was the first to study how, although watching professional wrestling on TV is casual leisure, fans who are active in fan communities have started to transform their interest into serious leisure. Fans take the passive experience of watching a TV show and make it active by developing expertise, sharing information, gaining social stature, and learning online (Martin, 2014). Brown (2012) posits that with the extensive coverage of sports on networks such as ESPN and heightened athlete usage of social networking sites Facebook and Twitter, it is critical for athletes to have an understanding of successful tactics for image maintenance and repair. Most studies in sports image repair have been centered on athletes who were involved in scandals, but none have been related to professional wrestling. My research lies at the intersection of apologia, image repair, internet technologies, and professional wrestling and no scholarly studies before now have explicated this precise spot.
Chapter III: Methodology

In order to research how the WWE grapples with scandals and creates crisis communication response strategies, I apply organizational communication concepts such as apology, apologia, and image repair to examine individual wrestlers and company-wide responses to crises in three specific, recent (2015) case studies. I compare the apologies of three wrestling celebrities (Seth Rollins, Bill DeMott, and Hulk Hogan) with Noreen Kruse’s 1981 article “Apologia in Team Sport,” in the Quarterly Journal of Speech. Kruse offered a template for how sport personalities must defend their moral worth as sport figures whenever their conduct might have harmful effects upon teams, games, or the world of sport and their actions seem to result from personal characteristics that make them unworthy to represent the fans (Kruse, 1981). Kruse’s conventions for the discourse of sports apologies and apologia have not yet been compared with how professional wrestlers (non-team sport athletes) apologize.

I also use the guidelines created by William Benoit in “Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication,” (1997) in the Public Relations Review to evaluate the messages produced by individual wrestlers and the WWE during crises. Image is essential to organizations and is crucial to the field of public relations. Benoit is a scholar who has defined basic concepts in the theory of image restoration discourse. He outlines five strategies organizations can and have used when faced with crisis: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action, and mortification. In each chapter, I describe how many of these strategies were used by an individual or the company to repair their image. Benoit’s ideas of the theory of image repair discourse are
discussed as they relate to corporations, but he had not discussed any sports-related corporations in this essay.

The image repair campaigns in the three case studies I chose involve the use of internet technology and social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram. Computer mediated communication plays an important role in the individual wrestler publicity efforts as well as their apologies and the aftermath. I analyze the official Twitter accounts and feeds of the individual wrestlers (@WWERollins, @BillDeMott, @HulkHogan) before, during, and after their respective scandals. In chapter two I focus on Seth Rollins’ cyber hack. I created a coding scheme to further analyze the Rollins’ Twitter discourse. I created categories to help analyze the percentage of tweets used to distract from the scandal and promote himself in various positive ways.

I look closely at what sports journalists and non-wrestling website journalists have written about these scandals and the WWE’s responses. The perception of the severity of the scandals varies from author to author. Wrestling website journalists’ coverage of the scandals often differs from the mainstream media. Both the mainstream media and wrestling website journalists have also commented on whether they think the apologies and other methods of struggling with scandal are appropriate.

My method involves choosing three case studies. By looking at these three different but related scandals, I hope to find patterns among them that can be used to describe strengths and weaknesses of certain approaches chosen by individual wrestlers or their company. Areas for improvement will stand out and I will make suggestions for how these specific situations could have been handled differently or better. By
researching what worked then, I can suggest what has promise to work in the future for the WWE.
Chapter IV: Image Repair, Instagram and the Rhetoric of Sport: How the WWE and Seth Rollins Managed the Message After a Cyber Hack

I. Introduction

Seth Rollins (real name Colby Lopez) is a professional wrestler currently employed by the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). Prior to WWE, he worked in various independent professional wrestling promotions (2003 to 2009) and Ring of Honor Wrestling Entertainment (ROH) (2007 to 2010). Rollins received an invitation to join WWE developmental wrestling territory Florida Championship Wrestling (FCW) and NXT (developmental WWE branch in Winter Park, FL) in 2010. In November 2012, Rollins debuted in the WWE as part of a faction called “The Shield” which included Rollins, Dean Ambrose, and Roman Reigns. They were considered “good guys.”

On June 2, 2014, Rollins betrayed fellow Shield members (he attacked Dean Ambrose with a steel chair, pro wrestling’s version of “stabbing your best friend in the back”) and as a result was considered a “villain” character in the WWE. His betrayal was a total shock to fans and cemented his status as one of the top villains in the company. Later in June, the Vice President of Talent and Live Events, “Triple H” (real name Paul Levesque), allowed Rollins to participate in a Money-In-The-Bank-Ladder Match. If Rollins won, he would carry a special briefcase for up to 12 months and at any time during those 12 months would be allowed to “cash in” for a chance at the WWE Title, the company’s most prized title belt. Rollins won the ladder match and Triple H declared on national TV that he was proud of Rollins. After Rollins won the briefcase, fans began to hate his character even more, as evidenced by the loud boos and “You sold out!” chants at live events.
Triple H’s support has helped build Rollins into a major player in WWE (Clark, 2015). Triple H has been in wrestling for over 23 years. He is the Executive Vice President of Talent, Live Events & Creative as well as a regular on-screen character. He is an eight-time WWE Champion, five-time World Heavyweight Champion, five-time Intercontinental Champion, and he was recently inducted into the International Sports Hall of Fame. He is most famous for his role in the WWF faction D-Generation X in the late 1990’s (this was the peak of when Americans watched professional wrestling. Triple H was a household name). By merely appearing on TV beside Triple H on a consistent basis, fans viewed Rollins as a major player in the sport (Clark, 2015).

As 2014 went on, Rollins feuded on TV with wrestlers Roman Reigns, Dean Ambrose, John Cena, Randy “The Viper” Orton, and many other members of the WWE roster. To strengthen his storyline as a villain, Rollins hired a security staff (Joey Mercury and Jamie Noble, known as J&J Security) for extra protection from former friends Reigns and Ambrose. Joey Mercury and Jamie Noble are former WWE professional wrestlers.

Rollins did his time in smaller wrestling promotions, the WWE developmental territory, learned to train and wrestle the way WWE wanted him to, and to many it was obvious WWE was clearly grooming Rollins to become the face of the company. Throughout 2014 Rollins was often in the main event on Monday Night Raw (the flagship show), the commentary team often hailed his talent and potential to be the top headliner during his matches (Clark, 2015). He had the look (hair, outfits, physique) and microphone skills, he succeeded in being a “good guy” at first, and later (presently) a “bad guy” character (this switch shows he is flexible and can work as either a good guy or bad guy character), and he won the “Money in the Bank” competition which
guaranteed him a World Title belt shot. Rollins was always presented in a very positive light. He won many of his matches, he got the last word on other wrestlers he feuded with in the past and, other than wearing a championship belt, he had really done it all in a very short period of time (Clark, 2015). Rollins went from being the de facto leader of The Shield to being “Mr. Money in the Bank,” the man with the key to the WWE Championship “in the palm of his hand” (Clark, 2015). As long as Rollins did not get injured or find himself in a dangerous PR scandal, he would be WWE Champion within a year (all he needed to do was choose when to cash in his Money-In-The-Bank briefcase).

II. Issue
Seth Rollins was engaged to Leighla Schultz. On Monday, February 9, 2015, Seth Rollins’ phone uploaded one nude photo of female WWE developmental wrestler (NXT) Zahra Schreiber to Rollins’ Instagram account. The caption read “Zahra” and included an emoji of a smiling face with hearts for eyes. The photos were subsequently uploaded to WWE.com (WWE.com automatically allows photos from Instagram feeds of WWE wrestlers). The photos were only up for a few minutes before being taken down by WWE.com. The photos were then re-posted by some third party to Rollins’ Instagram account, suggesting a hack. Someone really wanted those photos out in the public sphere.

Monday, February 9, 2015, during Monday Night Raw (8:00-11:00 pm EST), nude photos of Seth Rollins were posted on Leighla Schultz’s social media sites: Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Schultz and Seth Rollins were engaged, happy, and no wrestling rumor site had evidence to suggest the two had a tumultuous relationship. Schultz presumably would have been very angry if she found nude photos of another woman on her fiancée’s phone. She might have been so angry that she would release nude photos of
Rollins to retaliate. The caption on one of the nude photos of Rollins read “Zaharah? [sic]” This caption suggests retaliation from someone because of the misspelling of Zahra Schreiber’s name and the question mark. Rollins would have no reason to post nude photos of himself online, suggesting it may have been Schultz who posted them from her own account. Throughout the week, more evidence would surface that Schultz had been the one to release the nude photos of Rollins.

On Monday, February 9, Seth Rollins’ official Twitter account (@WWERollins) posted, “I would like to apologize to all the WWE fans and my family and friends for private photographs that were distributed without my consent.” To date, over 7400 people “re-tweeted” this tweet and over 9700 people “favorited” this tweet. On Monday, February 9, and Tuesday, February 10, Schultz bragged to a friend online via Twitter (McDonald, 2015) that she was responsible for leaking the nude photos of Rollins online to retaliate for the nude photo of Zahra she found on Rollins’ phone. Posting via Twitter meant that anyone who looked at her account could see it because no privacy settings are in place for her tweets. Schultz bashed Rollins and wrote about text messages between Rollins and Schreiber that she found in Rollins’ phone. Leighla referenced specific text messages sent between Rollins and Zahra Schreiber, suggesting she learned of their “friendship” for the first time after looking through Rollins’ phone.

On Wednesday, February 11, 2015, Leighla Schultz broke off her engagement with Seth Rollins and changed her relationship status on Facebook to “single” (Walder, 2015). Schultz continued to bash Rollins on Twitter and Facebook for the next few days (Nessif, 2015). On Wednesday, February 11, 2015, a female wrestling fan from Canada produced evidence of Instagram chats between her and Rollins where he asks her for nude photos
(McDonald, 2015). She also claimed they had been exchanging photos and messages via the application Snapchat since 2013 (McDonald, 2015). Zahra Schreiber changed her Instagram settings to “private” during the week of February 9-13. The bulk of evidence at this point suggested Schultz was looking through Rollins’ phone, found the nude photo/s, and posted a nude photo of Schreiber because she was angry at him for cheating on her. Then she posted the nude photos of Rollins for the same reason.

Suddenly, Seth Rollins found himself in the dangerous sort of PR scandal that could derail his plans of becoming the face of the company and winning the WWE Championship Title belt. This kind of drama and press was not good for the company’s fastest rising villain, and one of its most popular wrestlers. Seth Rollins is only one wrestler, but his behavior reflected poorly on him and the company. Although Seth Rollins played a villain character on TV, accusations of cheating on his fiancée and purposely releasing nude photos to fans and the general public go beyond his TV character and transcend wrestling celebrity and reflect on his personal character.

It would be consistent with his in-the-ring character to cheat in a wrestling match, but not to cheat on his soon-to-be wife. Villains can cheat in matches, use illegal weapons, and insult other wrestlers on TV, but once the show goes off the air, wrestling villains must act under the same morality as those wrestlers who are not villains. Even the most hated villains in wrestling are respected off the air and are considered to have good morals. The hack scandal was an issue that needed to be corrected. Seth Rollins and the WWE needed to develop a PR strategy to overcome this issue, restore Rollins’ personal image and the corporate image of the WWE. If they did not implement a swift and effective PR strategy, they risked ruining all of their efforts to make Seth Rollins a viable
world heavyweight champion. As Noreen Kruse explains in her article “Apologia in Team Sport,” sport personalities must defend their moral worth as sport figures whenever their conduct might have harmful effects upon those they represent, especially when their actions seem to result from personal characteristics that make them unworthy to represent the fans (Kruse, 274). Although professional wrestling in some ways cannot be compared to “real” competition, it is one of the most successful sport franchises in history, garners millions of fans, its characters are athletes, and it has to deal with scandal the same way other corporations and athletic teams do. In 2015 it is clear WWE has moved beyond the “Attitude Era.” The old adage “any publicity is good publicity” that may have been useful in the late 1990’s was not valuable in this case. WWE is trying to create a more family-friendly show and wants to be respected as a sports organization. WWE needed to act quickly to overcome the issue to allow Rollins to get back on track to win the title belt. The most logical starting point after deleting the offensive photos was for Seth Rollins to apologize.

### III. Theory Background – Apology, Apologia, and Image Repair

Apologies like Rollins’ are social and involve many moving parts. As Susan Opt explains, “The apology process has become more complex. No longer does a single person give a single apology in the corporate sphere. Apologies are part of a complex campaign or dramatic production intended to influence public perceptions of the alleged wrongdoer” (Opt, 425).

Opt establishes what constitutes an acceptable apology,

An apology involves at least two parties and an event in which one party has offended the other. The criteria include the expectancy of certain behaviors and outcomes -- the offender communicatively assumes responsibility for the
violation, explains why it occurred, expresses regret, and demonstrates a plan of corrective action and changed behavior to reconcile with the offended (Opt, 426).

Rollins did say he would like to apologize, but I argue Rollins’ apology moved beyond apology to apologia. Keith Hearit explains the difference, “Apologia is not an apology (although it may contain one), but a defense that seeks to present a compelling, counter description of organizational actions” (Hearit, 234).

I also consider Rollins’ and the WWE’s way of overcoming this issue to be an image repair campaign. An image repair strategy is a response to a corporate crisis (Benoit, 178). Benoit explains, “The theory of image restoration discourse focuses on message options. In other words, what can a corporation say when faced with a crisis?” (Benoit, 178). The five message option strategies Benoit suggests are denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification. The way Rollins and WWE chose to overcome the issue is consistent with many of these strategies.

IV. Analysis

Mortification

The incriminating photos were only up for minutes on Rollins’ own account before being deleted which means Rollins was sincere in his efforts to get rid of them and/or WWE.com staff acted swiftly to correct the mistake. However, the photos were reposted which suggests Rollins was probably hacked. Nonetheless, Rollins felt the need to apologize to his fans that had seen the photos. Opt writes that an apology must appear voluntary and happen immediately. She says timing is central to an apology’s effectiveness (Opt, 426). Rollins apologized before the WWE publically told him to.
After he deleted the photos from his Instagram account, he apologized immediately via his Twitter account. The Twitter apology was posted at 9:04 pm Pacific Time on Monday, February 9th, 2015. This action provides evidence that Rollins acted speedily and genuinely.

Kruse explains that sports figures are likely to use the words “I’m sorry” and express regret for their conduct because this is a convention of the discourse (Kruse, 281). Rollins knew it was necessary to say he was apologizing, even though he would go on to say the photos were released without his consent. Nonetheless, the “I would like to apologize” expression of regret functioned rhetorically as evidence that Rollins had taken the first step in mending his ways. Kruse explains this action is necessary and serves as temporary proof that the sports figure is worthy of being reunited with the community he has offended (Kruse, 281). Kruse writes that in particular sports figures who violate ethical norms (such as cheating on a romantic partner or dispersing inappropriate photos where children may be able to view them, in Rollins’ case) need to offer apologetic statements. To defend their character, sports figures often do use the same strategies other apologists use. She says, “Only by demonstrating their moral value can sport personalities convince the fans that they are surrogates worthy of participation in the rite of the game” (Kruse, 283).

It was important for Rollins to apologize to begin to restore his personal reputation, but also the reputation of the WWE at large. Kruse explains that sports figures who engage in unethical behavior are selfish and that behavior also demonstrates a lack of commitment to their organization (Kruse, 275). Rollins wanted to be the top villain in WWE as much as WWE wanted Rollins to be its top villain. Rollins had to apologize to
make the WWE know he was sincere and wanted to remain in the wrestling industry. In addition, Kruse explains, any time sport figures demonstrate bad character by breaking society's rules, they risk bringing into focus the ways in which their organization may have contributed to a variety of immoral or unethical behaviors (Kruse, 278). In other words, people may start to believe that Rollins engaged in unethical behaviors because professional wrestling supports immoral and unethical behaviors. It was therefore important for Rollins to apologize to avoid making the company look responsible for his mistakes.

**Medium of the Apology**

Rollins’ apology was posted on Twitter. Twitter only allows 140 characters per tweet, which may seem to some a little too brief. However, Kruse explains, “Conventionally, the apologetic statements of sport personalities tend to be brief and general. These apologists rarely elaborate upon the circumstances in which they were involved” (Kruse, 281). Kruse explains that sports figures often apologize and under-explain their conduct (Kruse, 282). This pattern is deliberate because the fans that Rollins is apologizing to probably already know the particulars if they are devoted enough to him to follow his social media accounts. To over-explain might cause more concern about the offensiveness of Rollins’ act. It might look like he was covering up something. The longer it takes to explain or justify his actions, the more likely the public is to think he is lying or take the side of his unassuming fiancée.

Although Twitter is quickly becoming a place for celebrities to interact with their fans, some may wonder why the WWE did not host a press conference. If this scandal happened in another sport, such as professional baseball or basketball, one might expect
to see highlights of such a press conference on ESPN. For athletes in crisis, this literature suggests that the importance of holding a press conference or providing reporters with a statement is diminishing. Instead, athletes are able to use social media to provide a response, without ever being in contact with traditional media entities or coming face-to-face with the public (Gregory, 2009).

A social media apology in this case may have been chosen over a press conference because it would draw less attention to the scandal. The WWE may have wanted people who did not know about the scandal to remain in the dark. The Twitter apology provides a better chance that only wrestling fans and, in particular, fans of Seth Rollins or Zahra Schreiber would know about the scandal and care about the response. After Rollins issued an apology online, a few sports websites and celebrity gossip sites picked up the story, but it did not become a top story (even when Triple H discussed the situation, it was on a conference call only covered by wrestling rumor websites and blogs). Social media are ideal tools in image repair because they allow for complete control over messages to the public, without the need of filtering them through traditional gatekeepers (Sanderson, 2011). If there had been a press conference (or if Rollins had addressed the issue on national TV during *Monday Night Raw* or *Thursday Night SmackDown!* ) many more people might have found out about the scandal only because of the TV apology. A video record would have created more opportunities for the scandal to have endured more scrutiny.

The social media site for the apology was appropriate because it helped Rollins and the WWE retain control of the way the story was presented to wrestling fans. It also helped them skirt media questions (why DID Rollins have nude photos of Zahra
Schreiber on his phone in the first place? WAS he cheating on his fiancée?) Additionally, the apology on Twitter was appropriate because it was as close as possible to the medium where the initial offense took place. The offense occurred on Instagram. Instagram is an application meant for posting photos, not text. It would be difficult to post a message with only text through this application. Rollins figured those who follow his Instagram most likely also follow his Twitter and that his over 835 thousand followers on Twitter would see his apology. The number of “favorites” and “retweets” shows the minimum number of people who viewed the apology and were happy about it. Twitter allowed the opportunity for interaction via Retweet, Favorite, or Reply to Rollins’ message. Many more followers may have viewed this tweet but chosen not to interact.

**Denial**

Rollins engaged in the tactic of denial. The wording of the Twitter apology was brief, acknowledged the photos were sent, but denied his consent for the photos being distributed from his account. He therefore denied posting them himself. The WWE released an internal memo the same week to its wrestlers and other employees asking them not to publicly discuss the matter with anyone (Paglino, 2015). The memo agreed Rollins was not responsible and was in fact hacked. The memo also said it would be insensitive to Rollins to discuss it further (Paglino, 2015). The memo called Rollins a “victim,” an ideal stance in a scandal.

**Absence of Corrective Action**

After the internal memo was released, CEO and Chairman of the Board Vincent Kennedy McMahon debated with son-in-law, Vice President of Talent Relations and Live Events Triple H, about whether to fine Rollins. Typically when wrestlers engage in practices that reflect poorly on the WWE, they are fined between $5,000 and $100,000
They ultimately decided not to fine Rollins after they decided Rollins was hacked (rather than a wrestler posting material against company guidelines of their own accord) and he did not distribute the photos intentionally (Labar, 2015). WWE instead decided to keep the scandal quiet and not fine Rollins. This approach had the effect of further reducing the visibility of the event.

Not fining Rollins is significant especially to the other wrestlers employed by WWE because it says the WWE was taking a stance to support Rollins and indirectly suggested that the employees should too. Although they decided not to institute corrective action to fine Rollins, all the employees and fans who read rumor websites knew fining Rollins was an option. The WWE’s active decision not to use corrective action was an attempt to repair Seth Rollins’ image. The threat of corrective action was enough to make employees and fans think WWE was taking this issue very seriously. If they investigated and thought Rollins was responsible, he would have been fined. Instead, they investigated it and found Rollins not responsible and chose not to fine him. They sided with Rollins, and not fining him sent a deliberate message to the employees and fans that Rollins was not to blame. His unfaithfulness to his fiancée was not the WWE’s concern.

**Evasion of Responsibility/Minimizing Offensiveness of the Act**

After the internal memo and internal debate about whether to fine Rollins, Triple H was asked about the hack (not even a full 24 hours after the Instagram hack). During a February 11th WWE NXT conference call, Triple H addressed the Seth Rollins social media situation by saying that Rollins had issued an apology for the incident, and described the situation as an “unfortunate personal situation,” for Rollins (Paglino, 2015).
He said, “This is an unfortunate personal incident and that’s all it is” (Paglino, 2015). This statement suggests that the WWE was taking a stance that this situation would have no impact on Rollins’ career in professional wrestling. Triple H did not avoid the subject, but also did not speak at length about the issue. He moved on and discussed other matters, which may be evidence that he was trying to minimize the offensiveness of Rollins’ scandal.

In less than 48 hours, Triple H addressed the situation in a conference call and lobbied to the CEO and Chairman of the Board that Rollins should not get fined; Triple H was taking a stance that the WWE should move forward with plans to make Rollins a world champion. Triple H’s opinion matters a great deal to wrestlers, other employees, and fans. Seeing Triple H on TV with Seth Rollins in storylines and then reading about Triple H’s actions on behalf of Rollins had a major impact on how fans perceived the situation. Triple H’s popularity is unparalleled. If Triple H supported Seth Rollins, so would most dedicated wrestling fans.

On February 11th, less than two full days after the hack, and before Leighla Schultz had even officially broken off their engagement, the WWE shipped Seth Rollins to Abu Dhabi to promote the WWE, do an exclusive Q & A autograph session with fans there and compete in a “street match” against fellow wrestler John Cena. This tour was scheduled for February 11-15, 2015. The timing could have been better, but the WWE allowing Rollins to leave the country and promote its brand in the midst of a PR scandal like this one is evidence WWE was on Rollins’ side and it would continue to minimize the offensiveness of the situation. WWE believed it was important for Seth to act as though life goes on.
Bolstering, Transcendence, Distraction with Alternate Messages

I studied Rollins’ Twitter account (@WWERollins) original posts and re-tweets from after the hack on February 9, 2015 until March 30th, 2015. I hoped to find that a large percentage of his tweets were an attempt to make himself look good and those tweets would distract from the Instagram scandal. I created 11 categories to code these tweets (Appendix 1). I used one to two categories that best described the content of each tweet. There were 146 original posts or retweets made by Seth Rollins during this time. Throughout this time, Rollins often tweeted about his upcoming DVD release and new clothing items, retweeted photos of fans (especially young children) wearing his memorabilia, about his involvement with the Special Olympics and other causes, and about autograph signings he would attend. This activity is a classic example of the image repair technique of bolstering. By bolstering, Rollins was trying to emphasize his good traits to the fans in an effort to make them forgive or forget his past transgression. He was trying to show he is still upholding values good people and good pro wrestlers should support and that he deserves to continue as a respected member of the WWE roster. Kruse writes that this value reinforcement is common for sports personalities. She explains. “Invariably, sport personalities bolster by aligning themselves with the sports they represent and by asserting that their attitudes toward the game are positive” (Kruse, 280).

As part of his apology and image repair campaign, Rollins’ tweets after the hack directed attention to the things he was doing in WWE to show his attitude toward wrestling was positive. He promoted his wrestling DVDs, worked out to prepare for WrestleMania, was photographed for a cover on the prestigious professional wrestling
magazine *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*, and signed autographs. As a follower, I noticed these tweets as a general trend during February and March, but I felt it was necessary to carefully look at and code exactly what percentage of the tweets might be part of this strategy.

As I collected the data, I found a lower percentage of tweets than I expected about young fans wearing his memorabilia, promoting himself and his involvement with charities and good causes. Only about four percent of his tweets during this time were of him directly suggesting people should buy his merchandise. Eleven percent of his tweets during this time were retweets of fans wearing his merchandise. Eleven percent of tweets mentioned information about upcoming autograph signings. A shockingly low number of tweets (two percent) referenced his involvement with or support of WWE charities. A small number of tweets referenced his storyline on TV with celebrity Jon Stewart (thirteen percent). A high volume of tweets was about Crossfit or fitness in general (roughly 28% for each), and he posted infrequently about food, music, and his dog. A small number of tweets were too cryptic to determine what their content was about, even for a seasoned wrestling fan like me.

While I think many of the other PR moves Rollins and the WWE executed after this strategy were effective, I was disappointed after analyzing his Twitter feed. I would grade the Twitter portion of his image repair campaign as a failure. Because Rollins’ apology was on Twitter and he has more followers on Twitter than Instagram, he was apologizing on platforms he knew a majority of his fans would see. Kruse explains sports figures attempts to regain the trust of fans by speaking as directly as possible to the fans are common, “We can assume that the audiences to whom sport figures' apologia are
directed view the game favorably and hold positive attitudes toward the game. If this were not the case, audience members would not be fans and bolstering would be unnecessary” (Kruse, 280).

If the goal was to use his Twitter feed to distract from his Instagram scandal, I would have encouraged Rollins to post more tweets regarding his experience with WWE charities. Rollins was right to post about his involvement with “Superstars For Hope” and the Special Olympics, but could have also posted about an upcoming event with the Make-a-Wish Foundation during WrestleMania weekend. He could have referenced his prior involvement with granting wishes in 2014 with the Make-a-Wish Foundation when promoting the WWE’s 2015 Make-a-Wish involvement. Rollins granted a wish to a Make-a-Wish child on March 21, 2015 prior to the Monday Night Raw TV tapings, but he did not retweet the photo posted by the WWE Community Twitter Account (only followers of the WWE Community Twitter account would see it. Some of Rollins’ twitter followers may not follow the WWE Community account and would therefore not see this photo). Rollins also is actively involved with “Tribute to the Troops” events where WWE hosts events and autograph signings exclusively for military personnel. In 2014, Rollins participated in the “Ice Bucket Challenge” to raise money for ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) research. There are a number of other causes and WWE charities that Rollins could have capitalized on and promoted via his Twitter feed. These were missed opportunities. He should have increased his tweets related to his involvement with WWE charity by at least 15 more tweets during this time (7-8 more tweets per month). He could have even uploaded photos from Instagram of himself at WWE charity functions as tweets.
Similarly, he could have retweeted more photos of fans, especially young children, wearing his memorabilia. Rollins had at least one new t-shirt, one new pant, one new DVD, one new action figure, and other WWE merchandise with his name on it released in 2015. Followers get very excited when one of the celebrities they follow retweets a post they have made. Out of the 146 total posts, 70 were retweets. I think Rollins could have increased his number of retweets specifically of fans wearing his merchandise even by as little as ten to fifteen more retweets per month. He could have done more to tweet or retweet sales on WWE Shopzone (the official website to buy WWE merchandise). Followers with children especially love to see photos of other cute children wearing wrestling gear.

In addition, it would have subtly helped Rollins’ image repair campaign if he had more tweets where he tried to identify himself with other professional wrestlers who had very high credibility with fans and the general public. Identification is a strategy commonly used by organizations when a company believes there is a threat to their organizational legitimacy. In Dowling and Pfeffer’s seminal essay “Organizational Legitimacy: Social Values and Organizational Behavior” they explain, “an organization can use identification as a means for gaining and ensuring legitimacy. An organization can influence stakeholders’ conferrals of legitimacy by associating itself with highly legitimated institutions, symbols, or practices. The symbols presented to indicate legitimacy can influence stakeholders conferrals of legitimacy,” (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975).

In Rollins’ case, it would have been useful if he were to upload an Instagram photo to his Twitter account of him working out with fellow professional wrestler Triple
H. He could have made a tweet about or posted a photo of him working out, traveling to a WWE event, or even eating dinner with fellow wrestlers The Big Show, Kane, Randy Orton, or with well-known wrestling manager Paul Heyman. This exposure would be consistent with his villain character, because those characters are respected veterans who are also in a villain role at this time (In the industry, it is considered taboo when “good guys” are seen traveling with or eating meals with “bad guys.” For example, if a young child who has not been told wrestling is “fake” sees his hero eating dinner with a villain, the child will be confused and upset. Although there is no formal ban on certain wrestlers traveling with others, it is an accepted social norm). Any of the previously mentioned wrestlers could have posted a photo and tagged Rollins’ official Twitter username.

Rollins could have retweeted a congratulatory message from fellow wrestlers regarding his cover of the Pro Wrestling Illustrated magazine. These could have been delicate ways for Rollins to reinforce his association with other wrestlers of prestige, honor, and good character during his crisis.

I did find two elements of the Twitter image repair campaign strategic. First, he did distract from the Instagram scandal by tweeting to comedian and political talk show host Jon Stewart, getting replies, and then retweeting video footage of his TV segments with Jon Stewart. In early 2015, Rollins made a verbal jab at Jon Stewart. Stewart made a reply on his TV show, “The Daily Show.” On February 19th and 20th the two continue to tweet at each other, egging each other on and insulting each other. On February 20th, Rollins went on to “The Daily Show” and challenged Stewart to appear on Monday Night Wrestling. March 2nd Jon Stewart appeared on Monday Night Wrestling, interacted with Rollins in person, Stewart punched Rollins in the groin (referred to in pro wrestling
circles as a “low blow”), and later Rollins tweeted that Stewart “hits like a girl.” Twitter played a major role in this storyline, and it made Seth Rollins look good and distracted wrestling fans and the general public from the Instagram hack.

Second, Rollins chose not to upload any photos from his Instagram feed onto Twitter until he thought the coast was clear. Although he did continue Instagram activity, only his Instagram followers could see the photos. The apology about Instagram was made on Twitter, and then Rollins did not mention anything related to Instagram on Twitter again until February 21. When he did choose to begin uploading Instagram photos onto Twitter again on the 21st, he made sure to post them only infrequently and only about safe subjects such as song lyrics, working out, or his dog.

I also analyzed Rollins’ Instagram Account (@WWERollins) photos from February 9th-March 30, 2015. I anticipated finding that Rollins would deliberately stop all Instagram activity from February 9th for a few weeks. Instead, the volume of Rollins’ Instagram activity did not change at all from February to March, although he has been posting more in 2015 than in 2014 (Appendix 2). His Instagram activity after the hack does not change in the amount of posts he makes, but the posts he does make all have non-controversial subject matter. I think it was a good PR strategy not to stop Instagram activity. If he suspiciously stopped activity after the hack, it might elicit speculation about whether he was actually hacked and it would lead to more people talking about the hack. However, I would have encouraged Rollins to post more photos on Instagram related to his business trip to Abu Dhabi in the immediate week of the hack.

V. Conclusion
Although the question of “Why did Seth Rollins have nude photos of Zahra Schreiber on his phone?” remains, all of these techniques avoid that topic and focus on the hack. Rollins and the WWE did a good job of leading fans not to care about this question because they were too distracted by alternate messages. To be clear, there is no real evidence of a hacking other than the general assumption that Rollins is not dumb enough to post a nude photo of a woman who is not his fiancée on his social media accounts or even if she were his fiancée (Draper, 2015), and yet the fans believe Rollins’ side of the story without question. No other side of the story was ever told. WWE was able to successfully contain the scandal so well that the general public overall did not find out about this scandal. It was limited only to serious wrestling fans who visit wrestling rumor websites or are followers of Rollins’ social media accounts. Rollins was able to make an apology that was timed correctly, appropriately brief, and well-received. He apologized once and no one demanded more apologies or explanation. He and his company successfully restored their image.

The aftermath was planned so well that Rollins was able to continue to move forward as a top villain and the WWE trusted him to participate in the main event at WrestleMania, the Superbowl or Stanley Cup of professional wrestling. On March 29th at WrestleMania 31, Rollins cashed in his Money-In-The-Bank briefcase for a chance at the World title and won. He became the title holder for the company’s most prestigious belt and stood tall as the “Face of WWE.” He became the company’s top villain.

At Summerslam (an annual live WWE pay per view event in August) on August 23, 2015 Rollins defeated decorated wrestler John Cena to retain his world heavyweight title and also win Cena’s United States championship title belt. Rollins was the first wrestler
in history to hold both the World Heavyweight Title and the United States Title simultaneously. Unfortunately, in November 2015 Rollins tore his right anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), medial collateral ligament (MCL) and medial meniscus in a match during an overseas tour in Dublin, Ireland. Rollins was forced to vacate the World Heavyweight Title. At Survivor Series (an annual live WWE pay per view event in November) a new world champion was crowned. However, the fans have not forgotten about Rollins. At the annual December WWE Slammy Awards (pro wrestling’s version of the Grammy or Oscar Awards) Seth Rollins won the award of “Superstar of the Year,” an award voted on by fans. He vowed to reclaim his title once he recovered from injury.

No one in the wrestling world had heard about or cared what had become of Leighla Schultz until a month ago when she unsuccessfully tried to sell on Ebay the engagement ring Rollins gave to her. The story was picked up by a few pro wrestling news sites, but none of the articles made reference to why the couple had broken up. A few months after the Instagram scandal, Zahra Schreiber was fired from NXT for having Nazi propaganda on her social media accounts. She is now working on the independent wrestling promotion scene and is using Seth Rollins’ finishing move “The Curbstomp.” Zahra Schreiber and Seth Rollins quietly started seeing one another again. The two occasionally post photos together on their social media accounts of their dates and vacations. Almost a year has passed since the scandal. It is obvious 2015 was a hectic year for Rollins, but his future looks bright. He is on the road to recovery from injury and his image has been successfully restored. Rollins’ image was successfully repaired was because of the timing of the apology, selecting the appropriate medium for the apology, using denial strategically, and stressing Rollins’ good traits. Other sports entertainers can use this case
as an example of recommendations for how a celebrity or company could deal with a hack or similar transgressions.
Appendix 1

Coding Categories for Rollins’ Tweets from February 9th-March 30th, 2015

1. Rollins directly suggesting people should buy Rollins’ WWE merchandise/memorabilia, 7 of 146 posts (4%)

2. Rollins posting photos of fans wearing his merchandise/memorabilia, especially young children, 17 of 146 posts (11%)

3. Rollins posting information about his own autograph signings, other events he will attend, 18 of 146 (12%) posts

4. Rollins posting about his involvement with or support of WWE charity, 3 of 146 posts (2%)

5. Rollins posting about storylines involving Rollins and Jon Stewart, Rollins supporting/identifying himself with other wrestlers, 20 of 146 posts (13%)

6. Rollins posts related to Crossfit, 40 of 146 posts (27%)

7. Rollins posts related to fitness in general, 42 of 146 posts (28%)

8. Rollins posts related to food, 11 of 146 posts (7%)

9. Rollins posts related to music Rollins enjoys listening to, 12 of 146 posts (8%)

10. Rollins posts related to his dog Kevin, 1 post (less than 1%)

11. Rollins posts that are unclear or of cryptic content, 6 of 146 posts (4%)

Some tweets were placed into multiple categories.
Appendix 2

Seth Rollins’ Instagram Account Activity

February 2014 - 4 posts  
March 2014 - 7 posts  
April 2014 - 6 posts  
May 2014 – 8 posts  
June 2014 – 7 posts  
June 2, 2014 Seth Rollins becomes a villain character on WWE programming  
June 29, 2014 Seth Rollins wins Money-In-The-Bank briefcase at pay per view event  
July 2014 – 9 posts  
August 2014- 12 posts  
September 2014 – 2 posts  
October 2014 – 10 posts  
November 2014 – 10 posts  
December 2014 – 10 posts  
January 2015 – 30 posts  
February 2015 – 30 posts  
February 9, 2015 Instagram scandal begins  
March 2015 – 25 posts  
March 30, 2015 Wrestlemania 31 Seth Rollins wins world heavyweight championship

Seth Rollins Instagram Activity February 2014-March 2015
Chapter V: Motivator! or Sexual Predator? The Relentless Patterns of WWE’s Bill DeMott

I. Introduction

Bill DeMott is a semi-retired professional wrestler and professional wrestling trainer who had a long history working for large scale professional wrestling promotions such as World Championship Wrestling (WCW), World Wrestling Federation (WWF), Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW), and World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). DeMott’s major accomplishments as a wrestler were in WCW in the late 1990s. DeMott’s career had few real successes. He was a WCW United States and Tag Team Champion, but that was in the company’s dying days when it lacked direction and major star power (actor David Arquette won the WCW World Heavyweight Championship during this time).

For most of his career, Bill Demott was referred to in professional wrestling fan circles as a “jobber.” A “jobber” is basically “enhancement” talent. He was paid to go to the ring, have a match for a few minutes, make the other guy look good and then lose. One of the best examples of this function was on September 22, 1997 when DeMott was the first to lose to newcomer Bill Goldberg. After beating DeMott in a short match, Goldberg continued a lengthy undefeated streak in singles competition over the course of 1997 to 1998 (173-0, referred to in pro wrestling circles as simply “The Streak”). At 6’2’’ and 280 pounds DeMott looked like he fit in with the other wrestlers, but he was not anything special. Bill DeMott was a dependable worker, but he was not the man WCW thought could become the next household name such as Hulk Hogan, Ric Flair, or Sting. WCW later changed DeMott’s name to “Hugh Morrus” (a pun on the word “humorous”) and he changed his signature move to a moonsault he called the “No Laughing Matter.”
His character underwent another name change when he joined a faction called Misfits in Action. DeMott was rebranded with a military gimmick and given the name “General Hugh E. Rection” (huge erection). Although he was somewhat popular with the fans, WCW clearly did not trust DeMott as a serious wrestler and did not give him many chances at title belts.

After WWF bought WCW in 2001, DeMott was brought into the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) as an active wrestler and then a color commentator until the end of 2004. From 2004-2007 DeMott served as the head trainer for a WWE developmental territory called Deep South Wrestling (DSW). In January 2007 he was released from his contract. After a few years spent wrestling on the smaller-scale independent wrestling circuit, DeMott returned to the WWE in 2011. DeMott was rehired as a trainer for the company. DeMott is better known as a trainer than as a wrestler. He returned to WWE as a trainer and coach when WWE revived its reality TV show *Tough Enough* in 2011. Once the show’s filmed season came to a close, DeMott stayed on with the WWE and replaced Tom Prichard as the head trainer of WWE’s former developmental territory FCW (Florida Championship Wrestling) until FCW was re-branded as “NXT.” Once FCW was re-branded as NXT, DeMott was the head trainer. DeMott was an integral person in devising the testing and tryout process by which WWE hopefuls were evaluated. He determined whether recruits would have the chance to wrestle in the developmental territory NXT and he would train them once they arrived there.

NXT is WWE’s developmental territory, similar to a “training camp” in football or a “farm team” for the MLB. NXT as a wrestling promotion grew much larger after the creation of WWE Network in 2014. WWE Network is a subscription-based video
streaming service owned by WWE that offers 24/7 access to original WWE programming and archival programming (similar to Netflix, but with only professional wrestling content). After WWE Network was launched, NXT began to air a weekly show on Wednesday evenings. NXT would also have periodic live special episodes, such as NXT TakeOver Brooklyn (August 2015) and NXT TakeOver London (December 2015). Since 2014, NXT’s fan base has grown simply because more people have had access to watch NXT than ever before. In addition, many NXT wrestlers have moved up to the main WWE roster (notably Becky Lynch, Sasha Banks, Kevin Owens, and Tyler Breeze).

WWE CEO and Chairman of the Board Vincent K. McMahon appointed WWE Executive Vice President of Talent, Live Events & Creative for WWE, Paul Levesque (also known as Triple H) to be in charge of NXT. Triple H is also the son-in-law of McMahon. It is likely that when McMahon can no longer run WWE, Triple H will take over. McMahon thus gave NXT to Triple H as a challenge to help him learn what it takes to run a successful wrestling promotion. The fans’ and many sports writers’ perception is, “By all accounts, NXT is his baby, and he has (rightfully so) received praise for his work with the onscreen product” (Paez-Pumar, 2015). It is therefore very important for Triple H to always act decisively and publicly in a way that benefits the up-and-coming roster of young talent (Paez-Pumar, 2015). In early 2015, Triple H started to lobby for NXT to host wrestling events outside of the state of Florida for the first time (prior to 2015, all of the NXT events were held in Florida). On March 18th 2015, NXT was set to have an event in Columbus, Ohio. The same week, Triple H was to be inducted to the 2015 International Sports Hall of Fame. What should have been two beautiful “moments of
personal triumph” for Triple H could only be derailed by a major PR scandal involving NXT (Paez-Pumar, 2015).

II. Issue

In March 2015 allegations surfaced that the head trainer for WWE’s NXT, Bill DeMott, was verbally, physically, and sexually harassing his trainees. Unfortunately, 2015 was not the first time these allegations have been made against DeMott. DeMott was released from his WWE contract as head trainer of Deep South Wrestling (DSW) on January 19, 2007. He was released, at least in part, due to a number of allegations of physical assault against trainees. Accusations included “stiffing” talent in the ring (a term in pro wrestling circles that means hitting the opponent “for real,” not in the practiced softer ways consistent with professional wrestling). Former WWE wrestler Simon Dean refers to DeMott as a “bully,” and former Deep South wrestler Kevin Matthews alleging DeMott forced trainees to train naked and perform the “Stinkface” maneuver on each other. The “Stinkface” is a move made famous by 425 pound former WWE Samoan wrestler named Rikishi. When his opponent was incapacitated in the corner of the ring, Rikishi would stand over his opponent and rub his large buttocks on their face. When discussing DeMott’s training in a 2013 interview, Matthews described it as “… a boot camp style, but a pointless boot camp. There was guy [sic] there, Mike Taylor, who was in the army, he said this was way worse than any boot camp he's done in the army” (West, 2013).

Other wrestlers such as Zack Ryder and Melissa Coates corroborate Matthews’ story and call it DeMott’s “Make a Deal Friday,” (Howse, 2015). The upside of “Make a Deal Friday” was that they would not be subject to DeMott’s usual training regimen (Howse,
Current WWE wrestler Mike “The Miz” Mizanin also verifies an example of DeMott’s “Make a Deal Friday” in which DeMott allowed wrestlers to perform 2500 squats in exchange for a day off from DeMott’s usual training regimen (Howse, 2015).

In 2011, DeMott was brought back to WWE in a training role on the WWE reality TV show *Tough Enough*. Years had passed and presumably WWE corporate officials thought DeMott deserved a second chance. Unfortunately, the pattern continued. In 2013, a promising young female NXT wrestler named Ashley Miller (character name: Audrey Marie) was surprisingly released. Her release was surprising according to Aaron Wrotkowski, pro wrestling department head at Last Word on Sports, because, “Marie wasn’t the most naturally talented wrestler, but she was improving, and her southern belle character stood out in the development program at the time” (Wrotkowski, 2015). While Miller has never publicly stated it, several former development talents including Kevin Matthews and Briley Pierce have authored tweets suggesting that Marie was released after Bill DeMott made sexual advances toward her, and that their releases came after they went to management to defend her (Wrotkoswki, 2015).

The pressure on DeMott increased when a developmental wrestler complained to WWE human resources about DeMott’s practices. Two recently fired NXT wrestlers, Chase Donovan and Chad Baxter, independently corroborated the claims Kevin Matthews had made. Donovan and Baxter also made new accusations of DeMott using homophobic slurs to talent and telling the women wrestlers not to complain to WWE management about NXT’s new strength coach Matt Wichlinski behaving like a sexual predator toward them. TwoAndaHalfWrestlers.com interviewed Donovan and Baxter on its podcast in 2013. The two recounted a second-hand story of trainer Bill DeMott pulling
out a gun in front of some trainees, and also gave firsthand accounts of him hitting talents on the back with a yardstick, using homophobic slurs, telling workers to commit suicide, and general bullying (Donovan and Baxter, 2013).

The allegations against DeMott kept piling up. WWE conducted an internal investigation on the matter. WWE concluded in 2013, “There have been no sexual harassment complaints filed against any employee at the WWE’s training facility in Orlando. Instead there have been baseless allegations made by disgruntled talent recently released by WWE. Regardless, WWE takes these issues seriously and investigated this matter, concluding that there was no wrongdoing” (Middleton, 2013).

In 2015, Austin Matelson (ring name Judas Devlin) a former NXT wrestler, leveled his allegations against DeMott publicly on the “Vendetta Pro Radio 2K15” podcast in 2015. Shortly thereafter, a letter he wrote to WWE executives complaining about DeMott’s behavior in 2013 surfaced on the social media Web site Reddit. The e-mail he sent to WWE management in 2013 accused DeMott of creating an unprofessional work environment in NXT and causing physical injury due to imprudent coaching. “I am composing this memo today because I have had a number of serious concerns about the actions and words of head coach Bill DeMott during my employment as talent for WWE developmental,” Matelson wrote (Matelson, 2015). Matelson continued, “Many of these actions I have tried to ignore or hope that they would cease but because they have now put me in a dangerous situation not only for my career but for my personal health and safety I feel the need to speak out to someone of a higher authority” (Matelson, 2015).
Matelson’s accusations fall into two broad categories: unnecessarily endangering wrestlers’ safety and physical and verbal abuse of wrestlers, often using racial and sexual slurs. In one incident, Matelson claims he witnessed DeMott kicking a Mexican wrestler in the groin and making fun of his accent. In another, Matelson says he has heard DeMott repeatedly tell a black wrestler “to go back to Africa,” as well as criticize the sexual orientation of others (Matelson, 2015).

In the email Matelson says he did not come forward before because he was afraid if DeMott found out he would punish him, and that DeMott had previously said, “the entire process of writing a letter to human resources has been called a ‘faggot’s’ way of dealing with problems by Coach Demott” (Matelson, 2015). Regarding why he did not come forward even about injuries Matleson suffered, he explained, “Based on Coach Demott’s statement I feel that I am in a position where I have to cover up any injuries I may have otherwise I will be punished or fired” (Matelson, 2015). Matelson further says he was not the only one afraid to talk, “I have spoken to several other members of the roster who have been made to feel by Coach DeMott that their current injuries are signs of weakness as men, and could potentially lead Coach DeMott to advocate for their firing” (Matelson, 2015).

Matelson’s email continues with a slew of specific anecdotes of DeMott’s verbal abuse: referring to specific wrestlers by racist, sexist, or generally unprofessional names, telling them he wished they were dead, and suggesting his trainees kill themselves (Matelson, 2015). Matelson details the physical abuse he witnessed: DeMott slapping wrestlers, dropping them purposely on their head and neck, slamming students with
hundred-pound punching bags. Matelson remembered times when DeMott made derogatory remarks about sexual preferences to various wrestlers (Matelson, 2015).

Shortly before DeMott announced his resignation from WWE on Friday March 5, another damning story emerged on Reddit, which was verified by the site’s moderators. Written by a female wrestler who participated in the developmental program, the story alleges several instances of sexual harassment and the consequences of trying to report it.

The woman wrote:

To be honest, I’m not really sure where to start. In developmental, Bill scared us so much that it made us ashamed and scared to speak up about anything. The abusive environment was so hard to operate within, but that fear is very hard to leave behind. The few people who have come forward have alluded to some of what I want to talk about, but understand that this is a harder story to tell. The former divas who have spoken out against the instances of sexual harassment have been punished, up to and including being fired in a demonstration of the power Bill has. When our only female advocate in talent relations tried to speak up, she was removed from the position and sent to work in the office. Now that the conversation has been restarted, it’s been made known that she is no longer with the company. At any level, women who speak up for themselves are disposable. When rumors about their departures make it out, they’re immediately buried and become yesterday’s news, but believe me – it’s true. (Reddit, 2015)

The woman continues to corroborate the allegations of Austin Matelson:

One such instance that has been mentioned by Judas Devlin (Austin Matelson) is the complaint of harassment against Matt Wichlinkski, the current Strength and Conditioning coach. I have attached screncaps of one such photo that he posted alongside his WWE contract. When he was caught filming/taking photos of talent’s [sic] backsides, it was brought to their attention. Some of the male talent attempted to stick up for the developmental divas and help catch him in the act (again, the fear instilled into us made it very hard to say anything), but when it was presented to Bill it was made very clear that he was not going anywhere, and any further complaints would result in dismissal because there a [sic] million girls ready to step in and take our place. In all instances of complaining about sexual harassment (including those outside of this incident), women have been forced out of the company. After one of the talents’ [sic] dismissal, when we couldn’t figure out where she went, we were told “if you go over my head, ask HER how well that works.” (Reddit, 2015)
Anticipating the question of why she had not come forward before or in a public way, she wrote:

It’s been made very clear, from the removal Rob McIntyre and to the firing of at least two divas (I won’t name names as theirs is their own story to tell, but if you’ve paid attention to rumors it’s very easy to put two and two together) to numerous male talents, some of whom will not come forward, that if you use your voice against Bill you will be removed. His patterns of abuse are well established, and I can only hope that more can come forward so people see that this isn’t just a vendetta from “bitter” wrestlers. Bill DeMott is a monster, and we need to start asking why he’s being protected when the evidence has been piling up against him for so long. (Reddit, 2015)

On Friday, March 6th, 2015, Bill DeMott resigned from his position as head trainer of NXT and posted on Twitter, “I deny the recent allegations made about me, however, to avoid any embarrassment or damage to the WWE, I’ve decided to step down from my role effective immediately” (DeMott, 2015). The story of Bill DeMott’s resignation was picked up by The Washington Post. It reported that Bill DeMott resigned from WWE as head trainer “amid allegations from several former WWE wrestlers claiming he propagated an atmosphere of abuse and harassment that included him freely using racist and homophobic slurs” (Payne, 2015). The WWE made only a brief reply to the accusations, “WWE took the accusations made two years ago by Austin Matelson very seriously, conducted a full investigation and was unable to validate the claims. Regardless, WWE continues to reinforce policies and procedures to ensure a positive training environment” (Payne, 2015).

Several other wrestlers who have worked with DeMott, however, came forward in the following weeks with more allegations, following the release of Matelson’s letter. Hours later, “#FireBillDeMott” began to trend on Twitter with several people finding DeMott’s alleged tactics especially ironic given WWE’s association with its “B.A.
STAR” alliance, which seeks to teach tolerance, encourage diversity and anti-bullying (Payne, 2015). Vague references from wrestlers suggesting that DeMott tried to sleep with developmental female wrestlers and then told the other male students that he had done so began to circulate. Similarly, accusations of sexual harassment from DeMott toward female wrestlers were made and when the women did not reciprocate feelings DeMott told them their attitude was poor. Days later, wrestler Terra Calaway tweeted that she had seen DeMott racially abuse a Middle Eastern trainee at an independent wrestling training seminar several years earlier:

At a training seminar, where students paid $100 a person to be in the ring and learn, I witnessed DeMott call a Middle Eastern trainee "Aladdin," "terrorist," and "fat fuck" multiple times. During a bump drill that was nowhere near safe for a green trainee to be doing, he just embarrassed and humiliated him. When anyone else did the drill correctly, he'd turn to this guy and just bash him. When I did the drill, he said "Look even the girl can bump better than the terrorist!" This continued to the end of the session where he told everyone good job, except this guy, and told him to "fucking quit and go back to building bombs." It was completely uncalled for and made everyone uncomfortable. (Calaway, 2015)

The timing of this bad PR for NXT could not have been worse. This scandal created a situation where WWE needed to mount a PR campaign to repair the image of Triple H, NXT, and WWE as a whole. No organization is exempt from crises, especially when the organization is one with as much risk, success, failure, money, and stakeholders as an institution in the world of sports (Sasser, 2015). A crisis or transgression, if detrimental enough, could severely damage an entity’s image and reputation (Chun, 2005). Keith Harris, editor at Cage Side Seats.com, explained, “Although Bill DeMott is fully responsible for his own actions, the internal handling of this scandal rests at the feet of WWE's Talent Relations department ran by Triple H” (Harris, 2015).
Why was Triple H attacked for a scandal related to a trainer? Triple H was the one who made the decision to rehire DeMott as a head trainer in NXT even though he knew WWE fired DeMott from a trainer position in Deep South Wrestling (DSW) in January 2007 after a series of complaints from his trainees to management that DeMott’s boot camp training techniques led to unnecessary injuries (Harris, 2015). Trainees also complained about verbal hazing practices while working under DeMott (Harris, 2015). Triple H would probably be blamed because the physical and verbal harassment DeMott has been accused of clearly should not have been tolerated in 2011, his “second chance” (Harris, 2015). DeMott used to love tweeting #DeMottcracy. It was time the WWE made it clear these accusations against DeMott were #NoLaughingMatter.

Similarly, in DeMott’s autobiography The Last Laugh he was unapologetic for the toxic environment he helped to create in DSW by claiming he “would do it all over again in the same way” (DeMott, 2011). Sportswriters viewed WWE asking DeMott to be a trainer on Tough Enough in 2011 as evidence that WWE had forgiven DeMott (and vindicates DeMott) for how he treated students in DSW (Harris, 2015). Sportswriters acted as though Triple H did not sit DeMott down when they hired him back and made it clear what lines he could not cross as the head trainer of a publicly-traded company which preaches “PG” and “family friendly” (Harris, 2015). DeMott might be able to explain away some of the allegations as “old school toughness” but not the allegations related to racism, homophobia, and sexual assault. If DeMott ever wanted to work for WWE again, or continue to be paid to train wrestlers in non-WWE promotions, he needed to start a campaign to repair his image.

III. Theory Background – Image Repair, Kategoria
Similar to Seth Rollins’ apology, Bill DeMott interacted with the allegations against him via social media. DeMott’s response was part of a complex campaign intended to begin to influence public perceptions of his alleged wrongdoing. I consider Bill DeMott’s approach to addressing this scandal as an image repair campaign and as an example of a kategoria-based apologia. According to Keith Hearit, a kategoria-based apologia has two objectives: to label the charges false and to attack the integrity of the accuser (Hearit, 1996). The point of a kategoria-based apologia, according to Hearit, is to show an accuser to be ethically suspect, thus rendering the moral force of the accusations groundless (Hearit, 1996).

I consider the WWE’s way of overcoming this scandal an image repair campaign. An image repair strategy is a response to a corporate crisis (Benoit, 1997). The WWE launched a separate image repair campaign to restore Triple H and the company’s overall image after this scandal. I assess the communicative methods undertaken by Triple H, and the WWE, which included Benoit’s strategies of denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of the event, and corrective action, and bolstering.

When discussing how to repair a tarnished image, Benoit poses the question, “must the accused always respond to the charges?” (Benoit, 1997). He explained that a firm does not always have to respond to accusations (Benoit, 1997). He noted that it is possible to redefine the attack and focus on other issues (Benoit, 1997). However, when a charge is important to an audience, or if it is repeated often enough by the attackers, a business may well be forced to deal with that accusation (Benoit, 1997).
In DeMott’s case, the accusation has not always been worth responding to for WWE. After the first few allegations in 2006-2007, DeMott was let go in January 2007. In 2011 he was allowed to come back and, despite a large number of accusations, he was allowed to stay. In March 2015, more evidence was piling up and finally the concern was loud enough that the WWE needed to deal with the accusation.

What changed? In 2006 and 2007 the allegations were mostly about DeMott being tough and strict with his training regimen, which the WWE could brush off as simply “old school toughness,” “traditional,” and “typical,” of a male-dominated sport like professional wrestling. The newer accusations included discrimination, intentional and malicious infliction of pain, and the cover-up of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment and sexual assault are incredibly serious accusations that can damage any publicly-traded company, wrestling or not. The organization could be subject to lawsuits. In the 1990s female wrestler Rena Mero (ring name Sable) filed a sexual harassment lawsuit against WWF; the company treated the issue and the lawsuit very seriously by replying to accusations right away, investigating, finding out the victim’s demands, and agreeing to institute corrective action.

It is to the WWE’s credit that the company has made so many strides to support the ethical treatment of female employees since the late 1990’s. In “The Attitude Era” of WWF, women were treated especially poorly. Women were forced to mostly compete in “bra and panty” matches (where the only way to win the match was to strip your opponent down to only bra and panties), degraded into mud wrestling, featured only in storylines where they were engaging in sex acts or romantic relationships with men, encouraged to wear only skimpy clothing, objectified frequently and called derogatory
names on live TV -- such as Vince McMahon himself demanding Trish Stratus “bark like the bitch she is,”-- and told to pose for nude magazines). Today the WWE seems to believe in respecting its female employees more than during the Attitude Era, as evidenced by making major changes to the women’s division (scheduling multiple women’s matches per show, planning longer women’s matches, and arranging women’s matches to be the main event on some shows), and promoting a safer workplace for women.

In addition, newspapers picked up the story, which meant the audience listening to concerns about Bill DeMott was no longer limited to wrestling fans. WWE might have thought it would be in serious trouble because, if it were true DeMott had a pattern of abusive behavior, the media might frame it as the WWE was sweeping concerns of sexual, verbal, and physical abuse under the rug. If WWE knew that DeMott was harassing employees before in any of the ways described by Matelson, the company might look complicit (and, in fact, might be).

Lastly, what changed is the number of people coming forward. As Benoit explained, the more the accusation is repeated by attackers, the more likely the company is to finally listen. One wrestler coming forward might be pushed aside as a disgruntled employee, but the numbers of stories were starting to add up. When one considers all of the disincentives to coming forward, still they came forward. Many wrestlers had not come forward because they felt they would be ostracized, punished, or fired. Many might not want to come forward because they want to eventually move from NXT to the main roster in WWE and if they discredit a trainer in NXT they may never move to the main roster (so they have an incentive to “grin and bear it”).
Once a few wrestlers came forward, others were more likely to come forward with their own allegations. As a result, suddenly lots of wrestlers were talking about the scandal, wrestlers uninvolved were asked to comment. Once those wrestlers commented with their thoughts, their comments assuredly helped shape fans’ opinions of the situation. These myriad voices become harder to ignore for the individual accused of wrongdoing and the company overall.

IV. **Analysis**

**Denial, Absence of Apology**

Benoit describes the key characteristic of a “simple denial” is for the accused to say they did not perform the act that was considered offensive (Benoit, 1997). DeMott’s apology via Twitter is a classic example of a simple denial. DeMott alerted his followers that he was resigning from his role as head trainer, but denied the recent allegations made about him (DeMott, 2015). Similarly, each time the WWE was asked about the previous allegations about DeMott it replied in a brief manner and denied there was evidence to support the allegations.

In 2013, WWE’s official stance was to deny there were any sexual harassments complaints filed against an employee and concluded there was no wrongdoing (Middleton, 2013). The WWE admitted the seriousness of the allegation and investigated before making a statement. In 2015, WWE’s stance also denied the allegations. WWE admitted investigating the allegations and said it was unable to validate the claims made by Matelson and others (Payne, 2015). WWE commented to *The Washington Post* that it
accepted DeMott’s resignation, but did not say anything about whether he was guilty (Payne, 2015).

**Medium of Response to the Charges**

DeMott’s response to the charges was posted on Twitter, which only allowed him 140 characters per tweet. Conventionally, apologies of sports stars are often brief (Kruse, 1981). In DeMott’s case, he was not apologizing. He admitted no truth to the accusations against him. The medium of Twitter forced him to be brief and gave him no ability to elaborate on the circumstances of the allegations against him. In his tweet when he said, “I deny the recent allegations made about me,” he did not have enough characters to even specify that the allegations were three-pronged: verbal abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. Similar to the case of Rollins, the selection of this medium and the benefits of its effects were probably deliberate. Those who follow DeMott on Twitter are probably all aware of the particulars of the situation. To over-explain might suggest more substance about the offensiveness of DeMott’s act. The longer it would take to discuss his actions, the more likely the public is to ask more questions. In the off chance those who follow his account did not know about the particulars of the situation, they might dismiss the tweet. If they did not know the particulars before and then read from his own Twitter account he was being accused of sexual assault, they might turn on him.

A social media interaction with the accusations was probably, as was the case with Rollins, an attempt to draw no further media coverage and thus limit the attention of the general public to the scandal. The general public had not yet heard about this news. The response to allegations on Twitter gives DeMott a better chance that only wrestling fans and, in particular, fans of DeMott or the people attacking DeMott, would know
about the scandal and care about the response. If there had been a press conference, many people may have found out about the scandal only because of that event.

Benoit describes an important element for a successful image repair campaign: identification of relevant audience(s) (Benoit, 1997). Benoit believes it is vital to clearly identify the salient audience(s) because a key part of persuasion is tailoring one’s message(s) to the audience (Benoit, 1997). Through digital media, fans have convenient and accessible mechanisms to intervene in athletes’ media narratives. This interjection enables fans to voice their decision to forgive or not forgive athletes but also to act upon that decision through supportive communication or spiteful commentary (Sanderson and Emmons, 2014). In the case of DeMott, many fans had already jumped on the #FireBillDeMott wagon.

DeMott may have chosen to reply on Twitter because the wrestlers who were attacking him sometimes tweeted about their accusations against him, notably Austin Matelson, Terra Calaway, and Ethan Carter. These individuals were critical in making #FireBillDeMott a trending hashtag and topic on Twitter. DeMott presumably was aware wrestling fans were creating their own original tweets with their thoughts on why he should be fired and/or re-tweeting posts from others about why he should be fired, it seemed like the salient audiences were wrestling fans on Twitter.

Similarly, DeMott chose strategically to discuss this scandal only on Twitter and two established professional wrestling podcasts/radio shows: Vince Russo’s *The Brand* and Chris Jericho’s *Talk Is Jericho*. Vince Russo is one of the most controversial figures in professional wrestling. He has previously worked for WCW, WWF, WWE, and Total
Nonstop Action (TNA) wrestling. He worked as a creative writer. A WWE creative writer is similar to a writer for any television broadcast: they are to create compelling stories and characters that generate interest and drive ratings. Creative writers who work for WWE answer to Vince McMahon, the CEO and Chairman of the Board for the company. McMahon is said to be very involved in suggesting storylines and characters. His opinions on wrestling’s value as entertainment and the shock value of storylines have upset people in multiple wrestling companies. Hulk Hogan sued him for defamation of character. Overall, he is considered very edgy. Nonetheless, he has a sizeable number of people who tune into his weekly podcasts for his thoughts on wrestling and to listen to him interview wrestlers. DeMott agreeing to break his silence to speak on the Russo podcast in May 2015 was very significant. Russo would be willing to let DeMott bash WWE and/or its wrestlers because Russo is in no way affiliated with WWE anymore.

When asked about the scandal by Russo, DeMott again denied all accusations from his attackers. Instead of stopping at denial, he moved to counter-attack (kategoria). DeMott was able to recast the issue and offer a new, compelling version of events that contrasts with the dominant narrative:

I always use the term it’s never the quarterback, it’s the coach. Millennials, I think right that’s what this generation is called the millennials. I think it’s in the whole world. So what I can say and what I will say is as a dad as you are, as I am, I try to figure that out to keep my children away from that entitlement. They are entitled. I guess its old school that you get what you earn and you try to earn what you want. I think that’s all I am going to say about that because I think no matter what the case, Walmart, Publix, IBM, I go to a lot of management seminars and that’s a lot of the conversation, what do we do when they don’t like that? And I want to walk out because I’m not going to learn anything if I’m still trying to figure out. It’s tough, it’s going to be tough for whoever has to figure out what they want tomorrow. (Sapp, 2015)
DeMott attempted to raise questions as to the integrity of the “millennials,” (the wrestlers he trained) while answering questions as to the quality of his training. In so doing, DeMott utilized an opinion/knowledge dissociation; he argued that the charges were unsubstantiated opinions raised by a handful of entitled millennials, and that those who had knowledge of the nuances of management seminars and those who knew the value of hard work certainly would side with DeMott.

In June 2015 DeMott appeared on the podcast Talk is Jericho, hosted by current WWE wrestler Chris Jericho. This show is another podcast only serious wrestling fans tune into, not the general public. Although Jericho -- at the time and currently -- has a very good relationship with WWE, Jericho has been one of the few people in WWE to publicly support and defend DeMott against all of the allegations. Notably, Jericho on March 4, 2015 tweeted, “Hey @BillDeMott is a good friend & great trainer. If u can’t handle it then quit. My training at #HartBrothers camp was 10,000 times worse!” (Jericho, 2015).

The training Jericho refers to is the training facility in the basement of former wrestler Stu Hart’s home in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. It was the home to his extensive professional wrestling family. In pro wrestling circles the basement is referred to adoringly as “The Dungeon.” Anyone in Canada who wants to become a professional wrestler would have given anything to train there under Stu Hart. Most of the Hart’s sons trained in the Dungeon and went on to become involved in the wrestling world, notably Bret and Owen Hart. Other famous Dungeon graduates include Chris Jericho, Lance Storm, Chris Benoit, Justin Credible, Edge, Christian, Natalya Neidhart, and Tyson Kidd. According to former WWE wrestler Chris Benoit, “Going to the Hart family for training
was kind of like, if you're a very religious person, going to the Vatican” (Leiker and Vancil, 2003).

All of the wrestlers trained in The Dungeon describe their training as the most brutal, excruciatingly tough, most physically painful experience of their wrestling career. If those methods were still used to train wrestlers, some may refer to it as torture and physical harassment. A big difference between going to train at the Hart dungeon and being trained by Bill DeMott is that everyone who trained at the dungeon was warned of the excruciating pain that went along with the training. TNA wrestler Ethan Carter made a direct reply to Jericho’s tweet by saying, “I love/sacrificed for pro wrestling. A Hart can stretch me any day. A know nothing dipshit slapping me when I'm concussed is different” (Carter, 2015). In addition, Jericho’s support and defense of DeMott never addressed any of the sexual harassment elements of the Bill DeMott scandal nor the charges of his being racist or homophobic.

Nonetheless, the decision to let Jericho interview him was significant because Jericho has a large fan base that could be swayed by Jericho’s support. During the June 2015 interview, DeMott defended his training methods and said he was not trying to break any of his students – another example of somewhat denying the physical harassment and trying to present a compelling alternative narrative that he was simply an “old school tough guy.” DeMott elaborated and stated that the way that he handled training at NXT was all a part of his job. He said that he was not trying to break his students; he was just trying to give them a taste of what they would later see in WWE (Jericho, 2015). He never addressed the allegations of covering up sexual assault. This omission is another reason the Jericho podcast is strategic. No one realized he did not
address the sexual assault element of the accusations, because Jericho was able to direct questions about only what Jericho wanted to ask about. DeMott’s counter attack says he loves wrestling, and people just assume he is tough, but wrestling is a tough business.

**Evasion of Responsibility, Corrective Action**

The WWE denied and evaded responsibility until DeMott’s resignation. WWE still chose to address the accusations by evading responsibility by saying they took the prior accusations seriously and investigated them, but there was nothing they could do because they were unable to validate claims, but WWE is enforcing policies and procedures to ensure a positive training environment (nothing happened, but it won’t happen again…). The WWE did not feel it had enough evidence to fire DeMott, but once he left WWE instituted corrective action to prevent similar problems in the future.

Since DeMott stepped down so quickly, WWE may have felt DeMott had lost the battle of public opinion and the longer people spoke out against him, the greater the risk was that the allegations would gain mainstream traction and further damage the reputation of the WWE. It was important that the WWE accept DeMott’s resignation and promptly hire a new trainer in his place. The WWE acted swiftly to allow an interim head trainer to take DeMott’s position. The person the WWE appointed was Matt Bloom (ring name Albert, A-Train, or Lord Tensai.)

Some suggest that the reason the WWE had cameras installed in the Performance Center at NXT headquarters is a result of DeMott’s scandal (Middleton, 2015). Similarly, the WWE started requiring that all practices in the Performance Center be filmed (Middleton, 2015). The company perhaps wanted to provide a disincentive to trainers
and trainees to act in ways that are inappropriate during training sessions. WWE also probably wanted video proof to defend itself in case there were any potential lawsuits in the future. Can anyone say the cameras were installed solely because of DeMott? Maybe not, but it does seem to signal the WWE was taking the issue seriously, was making an effort at corrective action, and was doing a great job to protect itself as a company – all without any overt admissions.

While I think replacing DeMott was the right course of action, I was disappointed the WWE did not institute more corrective action. Is it not time the WWE revised the duties and regulation of trainers? Is there a sexual harassment training session all WWE employees (including those in NXT) must attend and agree to comply with before getting hired? Should not trainers be told they will be fined, demoted, or see a reduction in their wages if they are found to be engaging in practices that reflect poorly on the WWE? Is it time for WWE to consider revising its policies on discrimination, specifically homophobia and racism? Should not WWE consider adopting a rule that if an employee is fired from the company once for physical harassment, they cannot be rehired? Should not the WWE sanction the rehire of Bill DeMott indefinitely?

**Minimizing Offensiveness of the Act**

According to Benoit, one of the strategies one can use in an image repair campaign is minimization, or acting like the thing one is being accused of is not as serious as the accuser is making it seem (Benoit, 1997). Bill DeMott purposely used minimization on his Twitter account a few times during 2015. The most egregious example occurred on September 28, 2015 when he used humor to make light of his own
scandal by making reference to a fictional WWE storyline on TV. On the September 28 edition of *Monday Night Raw*, a fictional HR representative named Ashley was supposed to do a “performance evaluation” of the character Kane. When Kane debuted in WWE, he was said to be the brother of character The Undertaker. Kane is a seven feet tall, 320 pound wrestler who wears a scary red and black mask, looks like a demon, and is a raging pyromaniac. In 2014, Kane’s character underwent a radical transformation where he gave up his mask, started wearing a business suit, and assumed the role of Director of Operations for WWE. For the storyline, another character made an anonymous complaint about Kane having a split personality disorder and reverting to his “demon from hell” sensibilities and creating an unsafe work environment (I know it sounds ridiculous, but that was the story on TV). During *Monday Night Raw*, Bill DeMott tweeted, “Finally an HR evaluation I can get into #Raw” (DeMott, 2015). In less than 140 characters, Bill DeMott had just used humor as a strategy to discuss the decade of verbal, physical, and sexual assault allegations against him.

Similarly, some of the talents DeMott worked with, when asked about the scandal, admit DeMott was rough with them, but it was expected and it made them better wrestlers. Jericho’s support of DeMott can also be read as part of the minimization strategy not only to repair DeMott’s tarnished image, but also to attack the credibility of those who accused him in the first place.

**Bolstering, Transcendence, Distraction with Alternate Messages**

One of the ways the WWE attempted to move on from the scandal was to use the strategy of transcendence. Transcendence is a method of reducing the offensiveness of
the act (Benoit, 1997). Transcendence tries to distract the salient audience(s) from the charges with other considerations that are more important (Benoit, 1997). WWE made sure to stress recent hiring of top quality independent wrestling promotion wrestlers like Sami Zayn, Kevin Owens, Finn Bálor and Hideo Itami. The suggested subsequent improvement in the quality of the NXT product has helped fans forget the horror stories that came out about Bill DeMott’s training in 2013 (Harris, 2015).

Additionally, DeMott also engaged in transcendence by constantly tweeting about the success of his new wrestling seminars and the Bill DeMott experience radio show. In October 2015 DeMott’s daughter, Keri, was killed in a car accident by a drunk driver. Since then, DeMott has started to re-tweet many posts related to the social cause of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and promote awareness of Ignition Interlock laws. These tweets are to make him look good and align him with the cause of anti-drunk driving. Benoit refers to this strategy as bolstering (Benoit, 1997). DeMott is trying to emphasize his good traits to the fans in an effort to make them forgive or forget his past transgressions and just focus on what he is doing right now. This strategy could also be explained by Dowling and Pfeffer’s (1975) concept of identification. DeMott may have been purposely associating himself with highly legitimated causes in an effort to raise his own legitimacy with fans.

This tactic is sometimes in the literature also referred to as “stonewalling” (Smithson and Vennette, 2013; Hull and Schmittel, 2015). Stonewalling is a strategy frequently used in an effort to shift the audience’s attention from the issues at hand by focusing on unrelated events (Smithson & Vennette, 2013). By composing messages regarding Ignition Interlock laws, the dangers of drunk driving, his personal life, and his radio
show, he was able to start conversations with followers that did not address the abuse scandals. Twitter lends itself to interactions because fans see all of his posts and have the opportunity to favorite, retweet, or reply to any given tweet (Hull and Schmittel, 2015). This strategy often works to benefit image repair discourse by building stronger ties with fans (Hull and Schmittel, 2015).

V. Conclusion

WWE did what was in the best interest of its company to allow DeMott to resign, institute some forms of corrective action, and bolster its business. The WWE attempt at image repair was overall a success. Room for improvement remains. The WWE could easily update its employment hiring practices to avoid a scandal like this in the future.

Bill DeMott’s image, however, remains ruined. It is clear his image is still ruined because he is not working for a large-scale wrestling promotion anymore. The media and fans still believe he is at fault and was responsible for a sexual harassment cover-up. The media and fans trust the trainees who say DeMott is homophobic and racist. The only somewhat successful element of the DeMott’s image repair campaign is his suggestion that he was too strict and tough on employees physically. Wrestlers and fans in some circles trust Jericho and other grizzled veterans that wrestling is meant to be tough.

DeMott may have been better served by admitting fault, apologizing, and begging for forgiveness of the fans. When athletes and celebrities commit transgressions, admitting wrongdoing and asking for forgiveness is the behavior that can bolster fan support, particularly in the age of digital and social media (Sanderson and Emmons, 2014). The use of, mortification, or apologizing for an offensive act, has been framed as effective for
athlete image repair, according to the analysis in both criminal (Kennedy, 2010; Walsh & McAlister-Spooner, 2011) and noncriminal (Brazeal, 2008; Glantz, 2013) situations (Brown, 2016).

His behavior on the wrestling podcasts to try to reduce the offensiveness of his act was perceived as downplaying the seriousness of his actions, rather than as apologizing or explaining one’s actions. Based on the available evidence, DeMott should have been advised to avoid using image repair strategies that downplay or ignore criminal elements of his scandal. Fans expect athletes and celebrities to address their actions and using strategies similar to bolstering that do not address or explain actions during a scandal or transgression could demonstrate a sense of entitlement or invincibility (Brown, 2016). This impression could create a negative sentiment among fans and stakeholders about the athlete and cause further damage to his or her image (Brown, 2016).

He could have taken some time off after the scandal and stopped trying to train wrestlers for a while until he had time to think critically about his own training methods. He could make a formal apology to the wrestlers making accusations. Because the number of wrestlers who have negative stories to share about DeMott continued to rise from 2006-2015, it is hard to believe DeMott when he and Jericho are the only ones in the industry championing him as a good person. Unless he was truly able to prove each of those instances of accusations were false, his attempts at bolstering may be more effective if he admitted the wrong-doing. It would appear more credible that he was capable of changing his ways and becoming a better trainer if he admitted some of the things he did in the past were wrong. He might also medicalize the issue by entering
himself into a form of counseling to learn why his conduct violated the company policy on sexual harassment or other forms of discrimination.

The important lesson for WWE and Triple H to learn from this scandal is that they should not have rehired DeMott after they fired him in 2007. DeMott had already brought the company tons of bad publicity WWE did not need, and it reflects poorly on Triple H if his hand-picked head trainer had to be fired a second time for being an unprofessional bully. Especially if the WWE wants to look credible with its Corporate Social Responsibility Be-A-Star anti-bullying campaigns, it could not afford to keep DeMott around. DeMott was a “timebomb that could go off at any time, and it did” (Middleton, 2015).

In addition to all the risk DeMott brought WWE because of the abuse scandals, he was not a great wrestler or trainer. WWE has the contacts to get the best possible wrestlers and trainers. Plenty of members of the WWE roster and alumni own or teach at wrestling schools and have trained wrestlers who went on to have better careers than those trained by DeMott. In 2015 only three wrestlers trained by Bill DeMott were wrestling in the WWE on the main roster (The Miz, Ryback, and Fandango). The last time Bill DeMott was ranked in the Pro Wrestling Illustrated (PWI) 500 was in 2003. The last time he had any chance of winning a title belt was in the dying days of WCW when he wrestled under the name General Hugh E. Rection. Why bother protecting him? It is equally important that Triple H learn the lesson that it is not good for morale to have a head trainer who cultivates an environment of fear and loathing in the workplace (Harris, 2015).
March 2015 should have been a month of the best possible publicity for NXT but instead it was one of the worst. All of the bad PR could have easily been prevented if Triple H had taken the allegations more seriously at the time. Instead of doubling down and protecting DeMott, he should have fired DeMott and not looked back years ago.
Chapter VI: WWE & Crisis Communication: Hulk Hogan takes on Gawker

I. Introduction

Hulk Hogan (real name: Terry Bollea) is a professional wrestler previously employed by the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), World Championship Wrestling (WCW) and Total Nonstop Action (TNA) Wrestling. The height of Hulk Hogan’s career in professional wrestling was in the 1980s and 1990s for the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). This era was a unique time in professional wrestling because in 1982 Vincent Kennedy McMahon bought WWF from his father and expanded the company from a regional wrestling territory to a nationwide wrestling company. McMahon handpicked Hulk Hogan to be the company’s number one attraction due to his charisma, physique, and name recognition. At this time Hulk Hogan was already a household name. In 1983, Hulk Hogan became the face of professional wrestling. McMahon successfully moved WWF from a regional to national market. McMahon got his wrestling matches to air on the television channel MTV; he presented his show in multiple cities which drew record live attendance rates, pay-per-view buys, and television ratings in the process.

WrestleMania, understood as the Superbowl of professional wrestling, was created in 1985. The main event for WrestleMania I was Hulk Hogan and actor Mr. T vs. Hulk’s arch nemesis “Rowdy” Roddy Piper and “Mr. Wonderful” Paul Orndoroff. Hogan and Mr. T were victorious. Hogan is a 12-time world champion. In the late 1980’s Hogan won the WWF title and remained champion for four years, which is an unprecedented run. Hulk Hogan was very popular as a wrestler with adults and children alike during this time. Hogan was known for repeating “To all my little Hulkamaniacs, say your prayers, take your vitamins and you will never go wrong,” which parents found endearing.
In the late 1990s Hogan switched wrestling promotions to work for World Championship Wrestling. He joined a powerful wrestling faction called the New World Order (nWo). After WWF bought WCW in 2001, Hogan returned to WWF. WWF was rebranded after losing a lawsuit to the World Wildlife Fund in 2002 and is now referred to as World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). Hogan stayed in WWE. In 2003 he underwent a character change. He began to wear a mask and call himself “Mr. America,” similar to the Marvel superhero Captain America. In 2003 Hogan was frustrated with the creative writers at WWE and quit. In 2005 Hogan was inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame by actor and friend Sylvester Stallone.

From 2009-2013 Hogan wrestled for the company TNA Wrestling. When his contract expired in 2013 Hogan did not renew it. In February 2014 he returned to WWE to help promote the WWE Network (WWE’s version of Netflix) and the upcoming annual WrestleMania event. On February 27, 2015, Hogan was honored at Madison Square Garden during a WWE live event dubbed "Hulk Hogan Appreciation Night" with a special commemorative banner hanging from the rafters, honoring his wrestling career and the historic matches he had in the arena.

Hogan was not an active member of the WWE roster who wrestled each week in 2014 and 2015, but he had a good working relationship with WWE and he was happy to make special appearances, involve himself in the show’s storylines, and wrestle occasionally. In January 2015, WWE announced it would be bringing back its reality TV series Tough Enough for a sixth season. Tough Enough is a reality show where several volunteers undergo exceedingly hardcore professional wrestling training and compete for a contract with WWE. WWE assigns several of its current wrestlers or former wrestlers
to serve as trainers, hosts, and judges for the show. WWE chose injured wrestler Daniel Bryan, former Women’s champion Paige, and Hulk Hogan to serve as judges for Season Six. Their role would be to come on the show weekly to offer advice and criticism to the 14 competitors. They would also get to cast one vote for who should be voted off the show each week. Hulk Hogan appeared happy to have been chosen for this role and was relishing the opportunity to give advice to newcomers to professional wrestling. Hogan also shared in interviews during this time that he was training again so that he could compete at WrestleMania 32 in 2016.

During Hogan’s nearly four-decade-long career, he was not immune from scandal, but the fans and his company have always stood by him. When allegations were made against WWF regarding steroids in the early 1990s, Hogan was cited as an example. However, since the WWE instituted a new Wellness Policy and strict anti-steroid rules, the scandal came and went without tarnishing Hogan’s image. In 2005, Hogan was said to have created a private sex tape. The existence of the tape was leaked, but because no one could produce the whole tape, the scandal quietly went away. Hogan's 2007 separation from ex-wife Linda Bollea made tabloid headlines with accusations of both physical abuse and affairs by both parties. After Hogan’s divorce from Linda, media sources occasionally complained that his new wife was too young for him or looked too much like his daughter. Overall, none of this negatively impacted Hogan’s image enough to stop his career in wrestling. In 2008 when his son Nick Bollea was jailed for driving under the influence of alcohol, Hogan’s legacy as a WWE Hall of Famer and class act remained intact. As a result, he was able to still continue to wrestle for TNA and WWE and keep his status as a WWE Hall of Fame inductee. As long as no larger scandal
occurred, Hogan was set to make a lot of money as a judge on WWE’s *Tough Enough* and he would likely headline WrestleMania 32.

**II. Issue**

WWE was aware of the existence of Hogan’s private sex tape and even that Hogan and Gawker would soon be in a lawsuit over whether Gawker had the right to release portions of the tape to the public. According to Nick Paglino, author at WrestleZone, “Hogan’s current sex tape lawsuit with Gawker has been an ongoing issue for years, and if WWE had a problem with it they probably would have done something a long time ago” (Paglino, 2015).

In July 2015, during Season Six of WWE’s *Tough Enough*, allegations surfaced about a racist tirade Hogan purportedly went on during the private sex tape. The official tape was sealed in court due to the ongoing lawsuit between Hogan and Gawker, however portions of the tape with racially insensitive quotes were leaked to *The National Enquirer*. The quotes the *National Enquirer* released were allegedly from a conversation between Hogan and Heather Clem (the woman he had sex with on the tape). During the conversation, Hogan allegedly gets upset when recalling how his daughter Brooke is dating and having a sexual relationship with a black man. Some of the quotes released included:

I guess we’re all a little racist. She is making some real bad decisions now. My daughter Brooke jumped sides on me. I spent $2-3 million on her music career; I’ve done everything like a jackass for her. The one option Brooke had, Brooke’s career besides me, is [to] sell beach records. I don’t know if Brooke was fucking the black guy’s son. I mean, I don’t have double standards. I mean, I am a racist, to a point, fucking n***ers. But then when it comes to nice people and shit, and whatever. I mean, I’d rather if she was going to fuck some n***er, I’d rather have her marry an 8-foot-tall n***er
worth a hundred million dollars! Like a basketball player! I guess we’re all a little racist. Fucking n***er (Paglino, 2015)

As a result of the existence of this racist tirade becoming known, more sections of the tape were released with more racist and homophobic slurs. This action set into motion other sources coming forward with information or audio recordings of Hogan saying additional racist or homophobic things. On July 28, 2015 RadarOnline released more comments from the same tape that contained racist passages, this time targeting homosexuals. Hogan was talking about his encounter with a gay man on his reality show Hogan Knows Best and said, “VH1 wanted me to do a big thing and go back to the house I grew up in. So we knock on the door and a big fag lives there now! This half-gay was enamored with Linda” (Isenberg, 2015).

On July 29, 2015 Bay News 9 in Tampa, Florida released more racist comments attributed to Hogan, but this time the comments were made during a conversation Hogan had with his son, Nick, who was spending eight months in jail after driving under the influence of alcohol. Someone in the Pinellas County Sheriff’s department leaked two weeks’ worth of recorded phones calls including one where Hogan and Nick had the following chat, “You and me been sitting on some serious phone, phone dialogue here n—a,” Hogan said. “Yeah, ni**a,” Nick said. “N***a, n***a, that means, that means you (are) my best friend,” said Hogan (Paglino, 2015).

In another phone call to Nick, Hogan allegedly says he hopes he does not get re-incarnated as a black man. “You know that God gave you this vibe and this, this, energy that you and I are going to live forever, bro,” Hogan said. “I just hope we don’t come back as a couple, I don’t want to say it, blizz-ack gizz-uys, you know what I’m saying?”
“Brutal,” Nick responded. Hogan also talked to Nick about possibly being transferred from the adult jail to a juvenile facility. “It’s down in St. Pete and it’s mixed-race and we get along with everybody, so that’s fine,” Nick said. Hogan said, “Your mom went there and said it was mainly blizz, you know what I’m sizz-aying?” “Mm-hm,” Nick said. Hogan responded, “And that some of the ladies there that, you know, run the school are nice blizz lizz-adies, you know?” “Mm-hm…. I would go down there, I would make friends with all those kids down there,” said Nick. “I guarantee it. Because you know how all the blizz pizz love us” (Paglino, 2015).

The scandal reflected especially poor timing since Hogan was on TV each week as a host during WWE programming and he spoke openly about having a match at WrestleMania 32 in 2016. It looked bad for the image of the WWE to have the credibility of one of its most decorated stars (on whom their empire was initially built) involved in scandal. The WWE and Hulk Hogan both needed to mount a PR campaign to move forward with image restoration and damage control.

### III. Theory Background

I consider Hogan’s and WWE’s way of overcoming this issue to be an image repair campaign. An image repair strategy is a response to a corporate crisis (Benoit, 1997). Benoit explains, “The theory of image restoration discourse focuses on message options. In other words, what can a corporation say when faced with a crisis?” (Benoit, 1997). The five message option strategies Benoit suggests are denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification. The way Hogan and WWE chose to overcome the issue is consistent with many of these strategies.
Neither Hogan nor the WWE tried to use the strategies of denial or reducing offensiveness of the event.

One strategy which is not a part of Benoit’s list was the WWE’s use of erasure. By “erasure,” I mean the WWE’s active removal of Hulk Hogan’s name, image, audio, and video of Hogan on WWE-affiliated programming, online material, and merchandise. Around the time Hogan’s contract was terminated, WWE began to erase all traces of Hogan from its sites, in order to create distance and cut ties. At first whether the erasure was temporary or permanent was unclear, but as time goes on, it seems as though the erasure is only temporary, as in only a few short months some of the Hogan content was reintroduced on the same sites.

IV. Analysis
Corrective Action

According to Benoit, a general image restoration strategy a company can take when faced with crisis is corrective action, in which the company promises to correct the problem (Benoit, 1997). A key characteristic of corrective action is for a company to create a specific plan to solve or prevent problems from occurring (Benoit, 1997). When the racist and homophobic comments were released via the media, WWE had to consider whether it was in its best interests to associate their company with Hulk Hogan.

Since WWE is a publicly traded company with millions of fans, it needed to think about what was best for business. Sportswriters lamented that WWE stock went down in the wake of the Hogan racism story (Paglino, 2015). *Forbes* reported that as of July 8th, 2015 WWE stock was outperforming expectations, but after the *National Enquirer* leaks,
Hulk Hogan had basically cost the WWE $50 million dollars in one day (Ozanian, 2015). WWE stock fell further when Hogan acknowledge and apologized for his racist remarks (Ozanian, 2015). Earlier WWE stock had not taken a big hit, however, when Hogan was embroiled in only a sex tape scandal. This result might mean that shareholders did not find the sex tape scandal particularly troubling, but they got nervous when a racial element was introduced.

WWE also had to consider the cable company that broadcasts the company’s flagship show’s feelings on the scandal. USA Network broadcasts WWE Monday Night Raw and Smackdown each week. Sportswriters speculated that the USA Network was unhappy about the situation and wanted WWE to take corrective action (Davis, 2015). Perhaps because of the stockholder or cable company pressure, the WWE decided to terminate Hulk Hogan’s contract. WWE told The National Enquirer in a statement: “WWE has terminated its contract with Terry Bollea (aka Hulk Hogan). WWE is committed to embracing and celebrating individuals from all backgrounds as demonstrated by the diversity of our employees, performers and fans worldwide” (Block, 2015).

WWE also decided to replace Hogan with a new judge on Tough Enough. WWE took a few days to decide who would replace Hogan on Tough Enough. Many speculated it would be 16-time world champion and Hall of Famer “Nature Boy” Ric Flair. Some thought WWE would rotate a new third judge to join Paige and Daniel Bryan each week. Instead, WWE eventually decided on replacing him with Mike “The Miz” Mizanin. This was an apt choice, in my opinion. After all, The Miz got his start in WWE by being a part of the MTV reality series The Real World and declaring his love for professional
wrestling. Since then he went on to win multiple WWE titles and starred in quite a few movies.

As part of corrective action, WWE also considered whether they should remove Hogan from the WWE Hall of Fame. Hogan’s name was removed from the Hall of Fame section on WWE.com after the leak in July, but WWE did not make any official determination about whether to keep or remove him from the Hall of Fame itself. Hogan remains in the Hall of Fame, but it seems he was not invited to the 2016 Hall of Fame induction ceremony to give a speech of presentation for any incoming inductees.

**Erasure**

Perhaps as an extension of its corrective action strategy, WWE decided to start erasing Hulk Hogan from all WWE-related content that they could. Hulk Hogan’s biography page was removed from WWE.com. His merchandise was removed from WWEShop.com. Hogan was removed from the soon-to-be-released video game WWE 2K16. WWE 2K16 offered the following statement regarding Hulk Hogan’s character in WWE 2k16: “We are highly respectful of the way that our partners choose to run their business and manage our partnerships accordingly. We can confirm that Hulk Hogan will not appear in WWE 2K16” (Paglino, 2015). On July 24, WWE began to pull Hogan content from the WWE network (WWE’s version of Netflix with new original programming and archival footage). WWE immediately removed the programs “Hulk Hogan Rock ‘n’ Wrestling” (a cartoon) and the Hulk Hogan edition of “Beyond the Ring” (Paglino, 2015).
According to a report from PWInsider.com, WWE reached out to all its major partners and product licensees and demanded that everything from music to images to action figures and everything else – all current and future licensed products and advertisements – featuring Hogan were to be dropped (Killam, 2015). Paglino noted, “WWE has seemingly completely disassociated itself from Hall of Famer Hulk Hogan” (Paglino, 2015). Dave Meltzer, the most well-known professional wrestling journalist and the editor of renowned Wrestling Observer, when asked for his opinion on Twitter refused to comment on why WWE.com had removed all references to Hogan (Paglino, 2015). Paglino articulated that he thought WWE’s choice to disassociate itself with Hogan was not about the sex tape, but instead about the racial tirade (Paglino, 2015).

Mike Chiari, sportswriter for Bleacher Report agreed, and suggested:

Hogan is also in the midst of a legal battle with Gawker over a sex tape, although it seems unlikely that factored into WWE's decision since the company has long been aware of the situation. The six-time WWE champion returned to the fold last year as an ambassador after seven years away from the company. He has made sporadic appearances on WWE programming and even served as the host of WrestleMania 30 in New Orleans (Chiari, 2015)

As part of erasing Hogan from WWE.com, WWE eliminated tangential references to Hogan as well. In 2015, a WWE wrestler named Curtis Axel had started dressing like Hulk Hogan and calling himself “Axelmania.” The Axelmania character was an overt parody of Hogan. After Hogan’s racist rant leaked, Curtis Axel’s WWE.com profile page had been edited back to a default image of him wearing plain wrestling trunks. Axel removed the phrase “Axelmania” from all of his social media accounts. Axelmania did not make any further appearances on TV after this, only Curtis Axel in plain clothing or wrestling attire was shown on TV. Axel eventually was moved into a new storyline.
featuring Adam Rose, Heath Slater, and Bo Dallas. The four call themselves “The Social Outcasts.”

In late July several major retailers like Walmart, Target and Toys R Us started removing Hogan merchandise from their online stores. WWE partner Mattel also announced it would cease production of any Hogan merchandise. The official Mattel Twitter account tweeted, “We are committed to embracing people from all cultures & backgrounds. At this time, we will halt production on Hogan product. — Mattel (@Mattel)” (Pritchard, 2015).

TNA Wrestling started to scrub Hogan content from its website, despite the fact that Hogan had not worked for the company since 2013. Hogan was removed from TNA’s alumni section of its website and his merchandise was removed from TNA’s online shop (Paglino, 2015).

The same day WWE began to scrub all Hogan content, Hogan posted on his official Twitter account (@HulkHogan): “In the storm I release control, God and his Universe will sail me where he wants me to be, one love. HH.” In September, WWE announced it was going to scrap plans to build a statue of Hulk Hogan that would have been unveiled at WrestleMania 32 in 2016 (Paglino, 2015). Even after Hogan won his court case in March 2016 against Gawker over the release of the sex tape (more on that later), WWE Studio Films cut Hogan out of an upcoming movie, causing the film to undergo major edits (Paglino, 2016).

However, as time has gone on, some instances of erasure have been taken back. In October 2015, WWE started to reintroduce some of the Hulk Hogan content that it had
pulled in July, such as Hulk Hogan Unreleased (circa 2009), WWE Rivalries (featuring his feud with “Rowdy” Roddy Piper), and WrestleMania Rivalries (featuring Hogan vs Andre, Hogan vs The Rock & The Mega Powers Collide) (Hausman, 2015). After Hogan won his court case against Gawker for releasing the sex tape, the president of TNA Wrestling, Dixie Carter, tweeted on March 18, 2016, “So happy for @HulkHogan & his family…. So very proud of the faith you have had through this ordeal from day one,” as though she was not the one who lobbied for TNA to scrub all Hogan content from its website in July (Paglino, 2015).

**Mortification**

According to Benoit, mortification is a general strategy for companies or individuals to use for image restoration. The key characteristics of mortification are for the company or individual to confess and beg forgiveness. Whether it was his personal decision to apologize or the result of external pressure cannot be known. Hogan’s first official statement apologizing for the racist rant occurred on July 24th, 2015. He broke the silence on the controversy by offering a statement to People.com:

> Eight years ago I used offensive language during a conversation. It was unacceptable for me to have used that offensive language; there is no excuse for it; and I apologize for having done it…This is not who I am. I believe very strongly that every person in the world is important and should not be treated differently based on race, gender, orientation, religious beliefs or otherwise…I am disappointed with myself that I used language that is offensive and inconsistent with my own beliefs  (Killam, 2015)

About one month later, Hogan appeared on the television show *Good Morning America* to do an interview. Hogan broke down and cried, asking for forgiveness for his racist tirade, "I was at the lowest point of my life, to the point where I wanted to kill myself," he said about the time period when the secret recording was made (Sieczkowski,
As the interview progressed, Hogan not only took some responsibility for his actions but also attempted to deflect responsibility by saying,

No, I'm not a racist. I never should have said what I said. I was wrong; I'm embarrassed by it, but people need to realize that you inherit things from your environment. Where I grew up was South Tampa, and it was a really rough neighborhood, very low income, and all my friends, we greeted each other saying that word. The word was just thrown around like it was nothing (Sieczkowski, 2015)

Hogan admitted he had “inherited” a racial bias, and asked for forgiveness from his fans. His daughter, Brooke, attempted to stand up for her father by using an age old tactic white people often use when accused of racism, "My dad's best friends with Mr. T, he's best friends with Dennis Rodman. He's not racist." In my opinion, Brooke’s statement hurt her father’s credibility because if it is true Hogan’s best friends are black men, it is even worse that he is using derogatory terms for black people.

After Hogan’s apology on Good Morning America, WWE was asked if it would be drafting a new contract for Hulk Hogan to rejoin the company. A WWE spokesperson replied, “At this time, the WWE remains steadfast in its decision” (Powell, 2015). In addition, according to the Wrestling Observer, WWE officials reached out to contracted talents as well as those in good standing with the company and told them to cease communicating with Hulk Hogan (Pritchard, 2015).

When Forbes was asked to evaluated whether the apology on Good Morning America was effective, Forbes’ Alfred Konuwa said,

Hogan is already making the media rounds for his obligatory apology tour. In recent years, pop culture has been dominated not only by scandals, but the ensuing public demand for apologies. And while Hogan’s pleas for forgiveness were to be expected, to resurface so suddenly certainly raises eyebrows. Following a very expensive divorce settlement with his wife of 23 years in 2011,
having reliable streams of income has become very important over the years. Hogan’s current status as a social pariah will make it difficult to be embraced by advertisers, so damage control is imperative (Pritchard, 2015)

Ryan Dilbert, lead WWE writer from *Bleacher Report* agreed. He wrote,

With his public image a truck stuck in mud, Hulk Hogan refuses to let off the gas pedal. His wheels now spin, only making things worse. He is clearly desperate for forgiveness for the racially charged comments that leaked earlier this summer. But Hogan has to be patient. Pleading his case as loudly and as often as he is doing only keeps his indiscretions fresh in people's minds. It makes him a permanent fixture in the news cycle (Dilbert, 2015)

Dilbert explained that because the rant was recorded years ago, but the public only knew of it less than two months before his apology, the apology came too soon. Dilbert then went on to criticize Hogan’s apology in a *Sports Illustrated* interview. Dilbert explained that Hogan said in the *Good Morning America* interview that the n-word was part of his upbringing in an environment where it was often thrown around. However, in the *Sports Illustrated* interview (which occurred after the *Good Morning America* interview) Hogan said, "I'm accountable for it, and I'm so sorry. But the real people who know me, they know I'm not a racist. I don't use the word, ever, except for in that moment of anger" (Dilbert, 2015).

Dilbert criticized this interview strategy because Hogan’s apologies were inconsistent. Pro wrestling writer Mike Mooneyham is also among those who noticed how the conflicting stories poked holes in Hogan's own statement, “This only worsens things for Hogan. The public is sure to dissect his words and wonder if he's telling the truth. Some will analyze his level of contrition. Some will question his sincerity” (Dilbert, 2015).
WWE Hall of Famer Jim Ross also agreed that the apologies on *Good Morning America* and *Sports Illustrated* came too soon when he said about Hogan’s situation, “this is the time to lay low” (Dilbert, 2015). "Just lay back man, lay out brother and let things just get back to normal. We know you're not a racist, but I think every time you bring it up, you bring it up” (Dilbert, 2015). *PWInsider*’s Dave Scherer had similar thoughts back in July. He wrote, "His best move now is to stop tweeting and talking, and instead enter into a sensitivity program and allow his actions to show he is working to get past the issue" (Dilbert, 2015). The consensus among sportswriters seemed to be that people forgive and forget, but only if they are given time to forget. All suggested that Hogan to remove himself from center stage of the scandal.

**Medium of Apology**

Unlike Seth Rollins or Bill DeMott during their respective scandals, Hogan chose to apologize and discuss the controversy in a number of forums. He opened up on his Twitter Account, on the TV show *Good Morning America, Sports Illustrated*, and a number of other sources. It seems likely that Hogan chose to speak to many sources to apologize because he has been a professional wrestling and pop culture icon since the 1980s. Hogan’s fame makes him more likely to be caught; people are likely to take greater offense to his comments. I believe this level of fame has allowed him to feel invincible (Labar, 2015).

Hogan’s scandal is also different from those of Rollins and DeMott because Rollins and DeMott both had an interest in denying the accusations made against them. Hogan, on the other hand, knew he was caught red handed and needed to take responsibility.
Hogan knew many professional wrestling fans are active online via Twitter. Twitter also allows fans to favorite, retweet, or reply to tweets made by Hogan, making it an attractive place to share his side of the story and see how fans are reacting. Because of Hogan’s notoriety, perhaps he also felt that he needed to apologize to non-wrestling fans in the general public, which explains why he chose to go on a show with a very broad audience such as Good Morning America. Unlike Rollins and DeMott’s scandals, Hogan’s story had been picked up by more than a few gossip sites and sports blogs, increasing the pressure on Hogan to respond to accusations. By agreeing to go on TV and talk about his scandal, Hogan also was able to strategically choose which TV shows to appear on and how to frame the issue in a positive light for him.

**Spin control**

When Hogan or his lawyers appeared on TV to discuss his scandal, their story often differed from the official statements made by WWE. For example, WWE’s official statement maintains that WWE terminated Hulk Hogan’s contract. However, when Hogan’s lawyer, David Houston, was asked, Houston claimed Hogan resigned from WWE to save them and his family the public embarrassment and negative press (Killam, 2015). Hogan’s lawyer may have thought that by painting the narrative as though Hogan resigned and apologized, he was taking the high ground which would cast Hogan in a positive light.

In September, Fanpicks.com decided to hire Hogan as the spokesperson for their company. Hogan was happy to land this major spokesman deal, the first since his racially charged comments created controversy. Fanpicks.com told TMZ sports why they chose
Hogan, “We all make mistakes and deserve second chances” (Hausman, 2015). This sponsorship was another way Hogan was able to control the narrative surrounding his controversy: by admitting his mistake and asking for forgiveness because everyone deserves a second chance.

Another way Hogan was able to capitalize on controlling the narrative was when he was asked if he had any hard feelings toward WWE for terminating him. In November Hogan replied that he had no hard feelings toward WWE. He said his racist remarks were a “huge mistake,” and then added, “Even the WWE, they’ve known me 35 years, they know I’m not a racist. They’re in a politically correct environment – they have to do what’s best for business, I understand that” (Paglino, 2015). By making statements like this, Hogan was able to carefully craft a message that he made a mistake but should be forgiven once he learns his lesson. He was able to spin the narrative that this scandal was helping to make him a better person and he does not fault WWE.

Hogan in one sense also engaged in kategoria-based apologia. According to Keith Hearit, a kategoria-based apologia has two objectives: to label the charges false and to attack the integrity of the accuser (Hearit, 1996). The point of a kategoria-based apologia, is to show an accuser to be ethically suspect, thus rendering the moral force of the accusations groundless (Hearit, 1996). Although Hogan admitted using problematic terms, he kept trying to explain “that’s not who I am” (labeling the charge of being racist a false charge) and he also tried to attack the integrity of the accuser by filing a lawsuit against Gawker for releasing the sex tape.
The Vice President of Talent Relations and Live Events, Paul Levesque (also known as Triple H) was asked in November if he thought Hulk Hogan would ever return to WWE. Triple H said he hoped Hogan could return to WWE but that Hogan needed to make amends with the world and reestablish who he is as a human being first (Paglino, 2015). Levesque’s faith in Hogan means a lot to professional wrestling fans because Levesque is a much-respected veteran professional wrestler and is also the son-in-law of the CEO and Chairman of the Board of WWE, Vince McMahon Jr. Many suspect when McMahon can no longer run the company, Levesque will take over.

The Lawsuit Outcome

Hulk Hogan, as previously noted, made the decision to sue the website Gawker for the release of his private sex tape. In 2015 the legal system took a long time to decide dates for the trial, which eventually was set for March 7th, 2016. In an October interview, the President of Gawker Media, Heather Dietrick, said, “it is more likely than not” that a jury will find in favor of Hulk Hogan, but also that they will award him significantly less than the $100 million he is seeking (Robinson, 2015).

Hogan’s lawyer was said to have been attacking Gawker’s credibility before the trial even started. Following Hogan’s WWE release in July, Hogan’s attorney said that the Hall of Famer’s career was “over” (Paglino, 2015). His attorney spoke at length about how the case has had major professional ramifications for Hogan and the tapes should have never been released as they had been marked confidential by the courts (Paglino, 2015).
It seemed unlikely that WWE would bring Hogan back with a new contract until his lawsuit with Gawker is resolved. The result of the trial could have brought more trouble for Hogan, which is something the WWE would want to avoid. The Gawker trial began a few weeks before WrestleMania 32. It would be unwise to involve Hogan in a storyline in WrestleMania 32 (even though Hogan really wanted to wrestle at this event) until the outcome of the trial was known.

When Hogan was asked by fans on Twitter if he was returning to WWE and/or if he would wrestle at WrestleMania 32, Hogan tweeted, “@marvin_massey sorry Marvin but I don’t work for @WWE anymore and I have not had a conversation with anyone about WM, I’ll be there in spirit. HH.” In a different tweet Hogan noted, “@returnhulkhogan I have not talked to anybody since the WWE fired me my [sic] brother HH,” and “@MikeCool29 at this moment I’m not coming back. HH” The trial concluded quickly in March 2016. Hogan won his lawsuit and was awarded over $115 million dollars. Hogan still has not returned to WWE. Hulk Hogan did not return in any sort of capacity for WrestleMania 32 on April 3, 2016.

V. Conclusion
WWE did what was in the best interest of the company to terminate Hogan’s contract, institute some forms of corrective action, and erase traces of Hogan on their current programming and merchandise. The WWE attempt at image repair was overall a success. Now, when the WWE has quietly and gradually reintroduced previously deleted Hogan content, no one has opened fire on WWE.

Hogan, however, has a long way to go to repair his image. Because of Hogan’s fame and longer stint as a wrestler than Rollins or DeMott, some of the contradictions within
his image repair campaign continue to negatively influence his ability to move past scandal. Did his upbringing cause him to use racist language or was it anger? If it was a “one time” use of this language, why were more videos/audio recording leaked? Why did Hogan sleep with someone who was not his wife while he was still married? Why does it matter if he won the court case if the comments he made were in poor taste and offensive regardless of whether he knew he was being recorded? Hogan would have benefited from sticking to one consistent story throughout his interviews.

It may have been smarter for Hogan to take sportswriters’ advice to make a brief apology and then lay low for several months instead of continue to be center stage. Dilbert explains Hogan has it in his power to change his damaged public perception over time, just not immediately (Dilbert, 2015). It was too shocking to wrestling fans for someone so many of us have rooted for as kids to casually rattle off the N-word. Disgust and rage have set in. However, many vilified athletes including professional wrestlers have recovered from past transgressions. Dilbert believes the longer the space between one’s transgression and the present grows, the more one has a shot of netting a second chance (Dilbert, 2015). For example, Dilbert calls:

In 1992 Mike Tyson was convicted of rape. At the time, pronouncing his career as a public figure over made sense. The monstrous act that sent him to prison was not something a PR firm could offer a sly spin on; it was unforgivable. Or so it seemed. Fast-forward to today, and Tyson isn't exiled from society. Instead, he has released a best-selling book, made cameos in comedy films, created a one-man show in Vegas and is the star of a Scooby Doo-like cartoon on Adult Swim. It's also worth noting that WWE made Tyson a member of its Hall of Fame post-conviction (Dilbert, 2015)

Similarly, Dilbert notes wrestler “Stone Cold” Steve Austin allegedly abused his now ex-wife Debra Marshall. Marshall went on Fox News and described in explicit detail how he
physically assaulted her and recounted that she thought she was going to die. In spite of that, Austin remains under contract and supported by WWE. Philadelphia Eagles’ receiver Riley Cooper shouted the N-word at a Kenny Chesney concert in 2013 which caused outrage, but it has since died down dramatically. If Hogan wants to wrestle for WWE again in the future, his best bet may be to lay low, undergo sensitivity training, and promote anti-racism. If he does those three things, he may be on his way to forgiveness.
Chapter VII: Findings and Conclusions

The purpose of this project was to find whether wrestling superstars apologize in the same way other athletes, celebrities, or corporations have done when faced with crisis. After researching the three case studies, I learned that WWE was likely to apologize and respond to crisis very similarly to other corporations. WWE was largely successful in 2015 using apologia, image repair discourse, and corporate social responsibility to restore its company image. Individual wrestlers were likely to apologize and respond to scandal similarly to other athletes and sports celebrities. Unfortunately, the strategies of the individual wrestlers in two cases were generally unsuccessful. I was able to identify some of the reasons sportswriters and fans perceive those two individual wrestlers’ image repair campaigns as not credible.

In each case study, I discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches used by the WWE and found room for improvement. In the case of Hulk Hogan, his scandal is ongoing and there is still time for him to adapt his strategy to deal successfully with this crisis. As of April 2016, Gawker is preparing to appeal the lawsuit which awarded Hulk Hogan over $140.1 million dollars (Grove, 2016). In each of my case studies, I was able to offer suggestions for how the WWE and individual wrestlers could have improved their image repair campaigns for their particular case.

In addition, my research fills an open space in the literature of the rhetoric of sport. Professional wrestling is an under-explored research area in the rhetoric of sport. Only two scholars have previously written about crisis communication in the WWE or analyzed recent scandals in professional wrestling from a public relations standpoint. I
hope my research will pave the way for other scholars to acknowledge the importance of Benoit’s (1997) image restoration theory as it applies to sports scandal management.

After researching these three case studies, I found the WWE used many of the same strategies outlined by William Benoit’s (1997) image restoration theory research. In the following section I describe patterns I found present in all three case studies. Individual wrestlers similarly responded to crisis with many of the already established strategies Benoit (1997) suggested to corporations and/or that Kruse (1981) documented for athletes. I believe the patterns can help explain why some strategies worked or did not work. After considering the patterns in all three case studies, I conclude with final recommendations for the WWE’s future scandal management.

Patterns

Timing of Scandal

WWE’s response to these scandals was likely different now than it would have been ten or more years ago. In the late ‘90s and early ‘00s during the “Attitude Era” where professional wrestling was explicitly violent and vulgar, it may not have mattered for the company’s reputation if one of its wrestlers was “too rough” with its employees (DeMott), or if their soon-to-be World Champion had nude photos leaked onto the internet (Rollins), or if a host on a WWE show was somewhat homophobic (Hogan).

Certainly for the past five years, WWE has made noticeable strides to be associated with a family-friendly, PG product. Because of WWE’s desire to be seen as a legitimate player in the sports world and among publicly traded companies, WWE likely felt a need to mount a PR campaign to defend its image when it felt threatened. WWE
saw a need to institute corrective action when scandal arose and desired a certain type of apologia from the wrestlers who engaged in offensive behavior.

**Scandal Type**

In all cases examined here the scandals were unrelated to the integrity of the sport, instead they were scandals based in personal behavior. Even beyond my case studies, WWE remained scandal-free in 2015 from any charges related to the integrity of the sport such as steroid use. The nature of the sins/offensive acts in my three case studies is irrelevant to the wrestlers’ professional wrestling abilities, and thus demanded a different type of apologia. Kruse’s (1981) suggestions for apologia in team sport included engaging in team sport ethic (the public display of absolute devotion and commitment toward the team, the game, and the world of sport). None of the scandals in my case studies were related to individuals not engaging in team sport ethic or not abiding by rules of the game. Their attitudes toward the sport were never questioned.

**External Pressure**

Unlike the NFL, NBA, and NHL, WWE is a publicly-traded company and the responsibility of having shareholders and public stock likely affected the public relations decisions made in each case, but most notably in the case of Hulk Hogan. WWE had to consider how USA Network, which airs three weekly WWE shows (*Monday Night Raw*, *Smackdown*, and *WWE A.M. Raw*), felt about Hulk Hogan’s scandal. USA Network felt strongly about removing Hogan from the WWE show *Tough Enough* in July 2015, which influenced WWE’s decision to remove Hogan as a judge mid-season. WWE also had to consider its sponsors’ feelings on the scandals. Goldberg (2013) noted WWE’s sponsorship revenue nearly tripled since 2008 when the WWE removed all traces of the

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“Attitude Era” in favor of a PG-product. In 2013 alone WWE attracted sponsors such as Capri Sun, Doritos, Fruity Pebbles, Got Milk, HotPockets, Irish Spring, Norelco, O’Reilly Auto Parts, Totino’s, and 2K Sports (Goldberg, 2013). A scandal like Hogan’s sex tape and racist rants could have caused WWE to lose some of these sponsors if WWE did not act quickly to manage the scandals. If Gawker’s appeal of the lawsuit they lost against Hogan is successful, the drama and negative press related to Hulk Hogan may get even worse than the status quo.

Use of Social Media

In all three case studies, the internet and social media played a major role in the scandal aftermath, and sometimes in the scandal itself. In all three cases, Twitter was the site of apology by the individual wrestlers. In the case of Rollins, his nude photos (and the information about a possible mistress) were first leaked online via Instagram. The scandal continued on Facebook. He apologized on Twitter. Fans interacted with Rollins via favorite, retweet, and direct replies on Twitter. Fans interacted with each other about the Rollins scandal on Twitter.

In the case of DeMott, fans reacted very negatively toward DeMott and the hashtags “#FireDeMott” and “#FireBillDeMott” started trending on Twitter. DeMott announced his resignation via Twitter. In the case of Hulk Hogan, his sex tape and racist rant were leaked on the internet. He apologized to his fans on Twitter. WWE removed Hogan-related content from all of its websites and social media accounts. Social media was a major forum where wrestling fans learned about, formed opinions on, and interacted with all three of these scandals.
Corrective Action

The WWE instituted forms of corrective action after each of these scandals. Corrective action was one of the first and most successful responses WWE had in each case. In the case of Rollins, WWE conducted an internal investigation and considered fining Rollins. The mere threat of corrective action worked to repair the company’s image. The locker room quickly forgot about Rollins’ scandal and the news went away quietly. In the case of DeMott, WWE conducted an investigation and terminated his contract once it established he was responsible for physical, verbal, and sexual harassment. In the case of Hulk Hogan, WWE similarly investigated the tapes and terminated Hogan’s contract when it confirmed that Hogan’s racist rant did not conform to the company’s standards for inclusion and diversity. WWE chose to rapidly remove all traces of Hogan on WWE websites and WWE archived video footage on the WWE Network streaming service. In all three cases, because of corrective action, WWE was able to restore its company image (even if DeMott and Hogan have a long way to go to repair their personal image).

Spin Control

In each case, the individual wrestlers tried to keep the scandal quiet and confined to only wrestling fans. In Rollins’ case, the incriminating photos were taken down immediately and only a few gossip sites picked up the story. Rollins did not address the scandal on television or in any outlet beyond his one sentence apology on Twitter. He apologized briefly once, laid low on Instagram, and used a number of other strategies to distract fans. DeMott similarly did not address the scandal on television or to any non-wrestling news sources. DeMott only spoke about this scandal on friendly radio
shows/podcasts run by his professional wrestler friends such as Chris Jericho. The scandal was picked up by a few non-wrestling websites, but overall the scandal is not known by the general public. By avoiding press conferences and interviews, DeMott and Rollins were able to share only their side of the story, prepare questions and answers in advance, and dodge any issues they did not want to speak about.

In the case of Hulk Hogan, the sex tape and racist rant were hidden for several years before being released. Because Hulk Hogan is more famous than Rollins or DeMott, more non-wrestling sources picked up this story and more non-wrestling fans seemed to care. Hogan discussed his scandal at length online, on television, and in magazines and newspapers.

**Role of Paul Levesque**

Throughout each of these scandals, Vice President of Talent Relations and Live Events, Paul “Triple H” Levesque played a prominent role. In the case of Rollins, Triple H had been personally grooming Rollins to become the face of the company. Triple H had been lobbying on behalf of Rollins to receive more air-time on television and more title belt opportunities. Triple H was shown on TV embracing and praising Rollins throughout 2014 and 2015. Clark (2015) and Paglino (2015) have previously documented the role Triple H’s support played in building Rollins into a major player in WWE (Clark, 2015). Similarly, Triple H was the one who got to make the final call about whether Rollins should be fined for his transgression. Triple H was the one who was asked on a conference call about the Rollins situation by fans. Triple H’s opinion would make or break Rollins. Triple H confidently told interviewers that Rollins’ scandal was an
unfortunate personal incident, but nothing more. Triple H stood up for Rollins in the locker room and decided not to fine Rollins. Triple H supported WWE’s plans to give Rollins the World Championship title a month after his scandal, making Rollins the new “face of the company.”

In the case of DeMott, Triple H was the one who made the decision to rehire DeMott as a head trainer in NXT even though he knew WWE had fired DeMott from a similar trainer position in Deep South Wrestling (DSW). Triple H was also an important person in determining whether the WWE Performance Center should have video cameras installed so that WWE would be able to review tapes of training sessions. It was Triple H who sportswriters blamed for not taking DeMott’s bullying seriously the first time allegations were made against him.

In the case of Hogan, Triple H was less involved directly. Triple H and Hogan are long-time friends and competitors. Triple H’s father-in-law is a very close friend of Hogan. It was Triple H who was asked in November 2015 (about four months after the racist rants leaked) if Hulk Hogan would ever return to WWE. Triple H was asked because his opinion mattered to sportswriters and professional wrestling fans. Many speculate when Vince McMahon can no longer run the WWE, Triple H will take over. If Triple H had faith in a Hogan return, that would shape how fans perceived the scandal.

**Future Recommendations**

Based on my observations, the WWE successfully repaired its company image each time scandal arose in 2015. However, WWE could take more steps to prepare for, or prevent, future scandals. A guide should be created for WWE employees’ behavior on
social media (especially Twitter) following a personal incident. Dilbert (2015) detailed a clear, proactive policy for WWE employees’ social media accounts. I agree WWE should be more vigilant about combing through old posts from its current or potential employees. In addition, at a minimum, title-holding wrestlers should have a social media account manager to monitor current social media activity. This role could easily be fulfilled by a personal assistant or new entry-level position.

Similarly, a new entry level position should be created for the purpose of vetting social media accounts of potential employees (wrestlers who are trying out for a WWE development territory or are currently wrestling in developmental territories). The new position would be attractive to young, social media savvy people and would require minimal work to observe the online activity of prospective employees and new signees. If troubling posts were found, the employee would report them to a higher authority and WWE could counsel them on company social media policy or WWE would have the option to avoid hiring that person. This approach is more thorough than a background check.

WWE could host a social media course for incoming prospects similar to the NFL Rookie Symposium. In the social media course, NFL players learn about the potential dangers even one tweet or Instagram post can pose for an athlete’s career. Similarly, in 2015 the St. Louis Rams partnered with Social Media Sports Management to offer a course to players on social media do’s and don’ts (Sports Business Daily, 2015).

WWE should consider changing its policy on hiring and rehiring practices for people who have been previously terminated by WWE. WWE should look into revising its
policy on what constitutes physical, verbal, and sexual harassment and/or workplace discrimination and whether violations of this conduct policy should result in suspension or termination.

WWE should also consider revising its policy regarding the criteria on which it judges potential WWE Hall of Fame inductees’ eligibility, describing the selection process and board which makes final determinations, defining criteria for sanctioning/banning individuals from ever being inducted, and adding a clause for what constitutes standards for removal of an existing Hall of Fame member. The WWE should also make this information available to wrestling fans. This policy is particularly important now because the WWE is in final stages of building a physical WWE Hall of Fame location. Defining criteria for sanctioning/banning individuals from ever being inducted is especially important for WWE because there is a celebrity wing (for celebrities who were never true wrestlers but nonetheless have been supportive of WWE) in the WWE Hall of Fame in addition to the “true wrestlers” wing.

WWE should also consider which situations warrant removal of a wrestler’s memorabilia and image/video from WWE’s websites and archives. After Chris Benoit’s double murder-suicide scandal (2007), WWE in many ways erased Chris Benoit from its memory. In some ways, it is unfortunate that Chris Benoit’s wrestling matches have been buried forever and technically do not exist anymore (because prior to his scandal, Benoit was considered one of the greatest Canadian wrestlers of all time, held numerous title belts, and was one of the company’s most popular wrestlers). What is more unfortunate is that WWE does not have standing rules for what wrestlers must have done to warrant erasure forever.
From this research I have learned what the WWE’s biggest scandals and public relations strategies were in 2015. By studying the available scholarly research on WWE and these three scandals, I learned valuable background information that helped aid in understanding why WWE chose certain public relations strategies at this moment in time compared to the WWE “Attitude Era.” Crisis communication will continue to be a significant area of study for public relations practitioners in all areas of business. Case studies like the ones studied in this project are useful in providing insight into the specific strategies and actions taken during crisis situations, as well as considering evaluative measures of theoretical or practical effectiveness. I was able to consider all of the strategies taken by WWE chronologically during times of scandal and attempt to grade their efforts as a success or failure. This set of case studies also provided significant information about the risks involved in social media use by WWE employees before, during, or after scandals. This research described the theory of image repair discourse and applied it to the corporate realm of WWE. Suggestions for those who encounter communication crises were developed, showing how this theory can guide public relations practitioners in WWE.
References


Bill DeMott’s Official Twitter Handle (@BillDeMott)


Chris Jericho Official Twitter Handle (@IAMJericho)


Ethan Carter’s Official Twitter Handle (@EthanCarterTNA)


Hulk Hogan’s Official Twitter Handle (@HulkHogan)


Matelson, Austin. “Bullying/NEGLECT in WWE/NXT & Medical Staff; MUST READ & MUST HEAR Interview w/Former NXT Star!” March 2, 2015. https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/related/2xphrq/bullyingneglect_in_wwenxt_medical_staff_must_read/


Paglino, Nick. “Hulk Hogan vs Gawker Trial to Begin This Month, Jury Selection, Complete Details and Lawsuit Backstory, Hogan Comments, More.” March 01, 2016,


Seth Rollins’ Instagram Account (WWERollins) - Photos from February 9, 2015-March 30, 2015

Seth Rollins’ Twitter Handle (@WWERollins) - original posts and re-tweets from Seth Rollins’ official Twitter handle from February 9, 2015-March 30th, 2015

Sieczkowski, Cavan, “Hulk Hogan Wants Forgiveness For Racist Tirade.” August 31, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hulk-hogans-forgiveness-racist-tirade_us_55e452d2e4b0c818f61859b


Terra Calaway Official Twitter Handle (@TerraCalaway)


Curriculum Vitae

REBECCA STEINER

EDUCATION

Master of Arts, Communication  2016
Wake Forest University

Master of Arts, Art History  2014
University of Florida

Bachelor of Arts, Art History  2012
Minor: Communication
Missouri State University

EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

Tutor  Spring 2016-present
Student Athlete Services, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina
Understand and clearly communicate course content to student-athletes, check student’s class notes and planner, help students assess demands of the course by reviewing syllabi and project requirements, assist students in the development of effective learning strategies.

Graduate Student, Assistant Debate Coach  Fall 2014-present
Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina
Attend weekly squad meetings and coaches meetings, judge and give feedback for student practice debates, design drills for students, complete weekly research assignments, prepare students for tournaments, travel to regional and national competitions, and assist associate head coach with hosting duties for three tournaments held on campus.

Debate Staff – Lab Leader  Summer 2015
4th Annual Hoosier High School Debate Camp, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana
Co-taught a two week lab, supervised residential middle school and high school debate students, prepared lectures on debate topics, created drills to help students practice new debate strategies and skills, watched practice speeches, completed research assignments, and judged for the camp tournament.

Debate Staff – Lab Leader  Summer 2014, 2015
University of Missouri Kansas City Summer Debate Institute, Kansas City, Missouri
Supervised residential high school policy debate students for the Summer Debate Institute, completed research assignments, classroom instructor for argumentation theory and practice, and judged for the UMKC SDI tournament.
**Assistant Director of Policy Debate**  
*University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida*  
Fall 2012-Spring 2014  
Served as assistant coach for the policy debate team, attended team meetings, held weekly office hours for student conferences and practice sessions, traveled to and supervised the team at a minimum of three tournaments per semester, assisted with the hosting of on-campus debate events, assisted head coach with research, and assisted in the preparation and record keeping of the team’s budget and decisions regarding the policy squad’s travel schedule.

**Debate Staff**  
*Missouri State University Debate Institute, Springfield, MO*  
Summers 2008-2011  
Coached high school students on policy debate skills including research, reading, writing, and speaking; prepared lesson plans on debate techniques; adjudicated competitive debates for high school students; provided feedback to students on practice speeches and debates; participated in demonstration debates with colleagues and faculty.

**PUBLICATIONS**

Co-editor, *Critical Media Studies: Student Essays on The Wire*  
*Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina*  
Spring 2015  
Served as co-editor and contributing author for an academic anthology. Published by Wake Forest University Press and sold on Amazon.com:  
Essays:  
“All the Pieces Matter: Organizational Legitimacy in Season Two of *The Wire*”  
“Bill Rawls: Career Man to a Fault”  
“Nice Gus Always Finish Last”

Book Review  

**WORKS IN PROGRESS**

Co-editor, *Critical Media Studies: Student Essays on Deadwood*  
*Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina*  
Spring 2016  
Served as co-editor and contributing author for an academic anthology. To be published by Wake Forest University Press and sold on Amazon.com
HONORS AND AWARDS

**Award Recipient**  
*Critic of the Year – District 6 Southeast CEDA Regionals*  
Spring 2016  
This is a highly selective award given to one debate coach per year. Debate coaches are nominated, three finalists are chosen, and undergraduate debaters cast ballots. This award is intended to recognize a judge who goes above and beyond when adjudicating debates and given post-round feedback at tournaments. The winner is awarded a spot on the panel of judges for the final round of the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) Nationals.

**Award Recipient**  
*Matt Grindy Assistant Coach of the Year Award – District 6 Southeast CEDA Regionals*  
Spring 2016  
This award is intended to recognize both the pedagogical and competitive contributions to the growth and development of policy debate by assistant coaches.

**Award Recipient**  
*Matt Grindy Graduate Student of the Year Award – District 6 Southeast CEDA Regionals*  
Spring 2014  
This award is intended to recognize both the pedagogical and competitive contributions to the growth and development of policy debate by graduate student coaches, who are balancing their obligations to their school work and that of their programs.

**Award Recipient**  
*Scott Ogden Memorial Award*  
Spring 2014  
This annual award is given for outstanding contributions to forensics at the University of Florida.

**Award Recipient**  
*Dianne C. Strickland Award for Excellence in Art History*  
Spring 2012  
This is a highly selective annual award created to recognize one undergraduate student for outstanding performance as an Art History major at Missouri State University.

**Forensics Regents Scholarship**  
*Missouri State University*  
Fall 2008-Spring 2012

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

**Editorial Committee, African Studies Quarterly**  
*University of Florida*  
Fall 2012-Spring 2014  
Read, discussed, and evaluated new manuscripts that have been submitted to the *African Studies Quarterly*, an on-line open access peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal published by the Center for African Studies at the University of Florida.

**Researcher and Conservator, “Nimba Headdress,”**  
*August 22-October 6, 2011*  
*Meyer Library Special Collections and Archives Gallery, Missouri State University*
Conserved and researched object and wrote labels and exhibit texts for professional public exhibit *Joining Research, Training, and Practice: Projects from ART 488: Basic Conservation of Art and Artifacts.*

To be published as an online virtual exhibit/catalog, Department of Art and Design, Missouri State University: http://art.missouristate.edu/arthist/homeexhibit.php

**Researcher, “Dogon Sculpture.”**  
March 24-May 16, 2011  
*Meyer Library Special Collections and Archives Gallery, Missouri State University*  

Researchers objects and wrote labels and exhibit texts for professional public exhibit *Art of Africa.*  

Subsequently published as an online virtual exhibit/catalog, Department of Art and Design, Missouri State University: http://art.missouristate.edu/arthist/homeexhibit.php

**Assistant to Dr. Billie Follensbee**  
*Missouri State University, Department of Art and Design, Springfield, MO*  
Spring 2011  
*ART 386: Art of Africa course projects exhibit*  

Designed and developed exhibit on the course final projects for display in the Ellis Hall foyer gallery.

**Intern**  
*History Museum for Springfield-Greene County, MO*  
Summer 2010  

Completed tasks related to inventory, labeling, transcribing documents, archive filing, research, greeted visitors, assisted museum curator.

**Assistant to Dr. Billie Follensbee**  
*Missouri State University, Department of Art and Design, Springfield, MO*  
Spring 2010  
*ART 485: Art of Mesoamerica course projects exhibit*  

Designed and developed exhibit on the course final projects for display in the Ellis Hall foyer gallery.

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

**Graduate Teaching Instructor**  
*Dial Center for Written & Oral Communication*  
Fall 2012-Spring 2014  
*University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida*  

Solely responsible for teaching seven sections of SPC2608: Introduction to Public Speaking.

**Teaching Assistant to Dr. Sherry Piland**  
*Department of Art & Design*  
*Missouri State University, Springfield, MO*  
*ART 200: Art in Context*  
Fall 2011  

Graded multiple choice assessments and non-subjective writing prompts, served as a facilitator for in-class discussions, prepared exam questions, and served as a monitor for quizzes and tests.
CONFERENCE PAPERS AND PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

Presenter
“Laying the Smackdown on Hate: WWE's Paradoxical Relationship with Anti-Bullying Campaigns in Schools,” 2016 Sports and Violence Conference, sponsored by the Ashland Center for Nonviolence at Ashland University
Ashland, Ohio

Panelist
Las Vegas, Nevada

Presenter
“Image Repair, Instagram and the Rhetoric of Sport: How the WWE and Seth Rollins Managed the Message After a Cyber Hack,” Popular Culture Association in the South/American Culture Association in the South 2015 Conference
Wilmington, North Carolina

Accepted Paper
The Terrace Club, New York City

Presenter
“A Jewish Reading of Barnett Newman’s Stations of the Cross Series”
First Friday Art Talk series
Park Central Branch Library, Springfield, MO

Presenter
“Exploring Jewish Themes in Barnett Newman’s Paintings”
Annual Intercollegiate Art History Symposium
Missouri State University

Presenter
“Geography as Renaissance Art”
Geology, Geography, and Planning Conference #4
Missouri State University

Presenter
“Developments in Renaissance Cartography”
Annual Intercollegiate Art History Symposium
Missouri State University