

Student stakeholder evaluations of college athletics scandals: The effects of scandal type and organizational responsibility

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Abstract

Athletic scandals continue to threaten the reputation and legitimacy of collegiate athletic programs, yet limited research has examined how different types of scandals and levels of organizational involvement influence student stakeholders' evaluations. This study investigated the effects of scandal type (on-field match-fixing vs. off-field doping) and scandal level (individual vs. organizational) on perceived scandal severity and the perceived effectiveness of organizational crisis response strategies. A 2 by 2 between-subjects factorial experiment was conducted with 250 undergraduate students who were randomly assigned to one of four fictitious collegiate athletic scandal scenarios. Results indicated that organizational-level scandals were perceived as significantly more severe than individual-level scandals, and a significant interaction emerged between scandal type and scandal level. Specifically, organizational doping scandals generated the highest perceived severity. Among the seven crisis response strategies, corrective action and mortification received the highest effectiveness evaluations, whereas denial and attacking the accuser were consistently perceived as least effective. Minimization was evaluated as more appropriate for individual-level than organizational-level scandals. The study provides practical guidance for collegiate athletic administrators seeking to develop effective communication strategies that protect organizational reputation and restore stakeholder trust following athletic scandals.

Keywords: college athletics, athletic scandal, crisis communication, image repair theory, situational crisis communication theory

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1. Introduction

College athletics occupies a unique position within higher education in the United States. Beyond providing competitive sporting events, collegiate athletic programs serve as important institutional assets that strengthen university identity, cultivate student engagement, enhance alumni loyalty, and generate substantial economic value through ticket sales, media rights, sponsorships, and philanthropic contributions (Toma, 2003; Getz & Siegfried, 2012). Athletic success has also been associated with increased university visibility, student applications, alumni giving, and institutional reputation, making athletic departments strategically important components of many universities (Hughes & Shank, 2005; Tucker & Amato, 1993; Pope & Pope, 2009). However, because athletic programs function as highly visible public organizations, they are also particularly vulnerable to reputational crises resulting from unethical or illegal behavior (Coombs, 2007; Brown & Billings, 2013). Over the past several decades, collegiate athletics has experienced numerous high-profile scandals involving academic fraud, recruiting violations, gambling, match-fixing, performance-enhancing drug use, financial misconduct, and other NCAA rule violations (Ridpath, 2018; Brown & Billings, 2013). Cases such as the University of Southern California football sanctions, the Penn State child abuse scandal, the University of North Carolina academic fraud case, the University of Michigan sign-stealing investigation, and multiple sports betting and point-shaving cases have received extensive national media attention and generated substantial reputational damage for the institutions involved (Coombs, 2007; Brown & Billings, 2013; NCAA, 2024).

The prevalence of misconduct within collegiate athletics further illustrates the importance of effective crisis management. Numerous NCAA investigations have documented recurring cases of academic fraud, recruiting violations, and other forms of misconduct in Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) and Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) programs (Ridpath, 2018; NCAA, 2024). Moreover, the continued expansion of legalized sports betting has increased concerns regarding gambling-related misconduct, including insider information sharing and match manipulation (NCAA, 2024; American Gaming Association, 2023). Recent NCAA

investigations involving multiple universities have highlighted the growing vulnerability of college athletics to betting-related integrity violations (NCAA, 2024). Because athletic scandals threaten both organizational legitimacy and stakeholder trust, effective crisis communication has become increasingly important for college athletic departments. Crisis communication research suggests that organizational responses influence stakeholders' perceptions of responsibility, organizational reputation, and behavioral intentions following a crisis (Coombs, 2007; Benoit, 1995). In sport settings, these effects may be even more pronounced because fans often develop strong psychological attachments to athletic teams and universities, causing organizational crises to become identity-threatening events rather than simply organizational failures (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Funk & James, 2001).

Previous research (Brown & Billings, 2013; Fink et al., 2009) has examined a variety of sport crises, including athlete misconduct, doping, gambling, sexual misconduct, and organizational corruption. These studies (Brown & Billings, 2013; Fink et al., 2009) have demonstrated that crises negatively influence organizational reputation, stakeholder trust, and fan support. Similarly, crisis communication scholars have consistently shown that accommodative response strategies, such as apology and corrective action, generally produce more favorable stakeholder evaluations than defensive strategies when organizations are perceived as responsible for the crisis (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007). Nevertheless, much of the existing literature has focused on individual case studies, professional sport organizations, or a single type of crisis.

Relatively little research has experimentally compared different forms of athletic scandals within collegiate sport (Brown & Billings, 2013; Fink et al., 2009). In particular, two characteristics of scandals remain underexplored. First, athletic scandals differ in their nature, with some occurring directly within athletic competition (e.g., match-fixing), whereas others occur outside competition but still violate ethical and competitive norms (e.g., doping) (LaGree et al., 2019; Fink et al., 2009). These different forms of misconduct may threaten different aspects of sport integrity and therefore elicit different stakeholder responses (Brown & Billings, 2013; Coombs, 2007). Second, scandals also differ in the level of organizational involvement. Some incidents involve misconduct by a single student-athlete, whereas others reflect systematic organizational failures involving coaches, athletic administrators, or institutional leadership. According to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), differences in organizational responsibility should substantially influence stakeholder evaluations of crisis severity and the effectiveness of organizational response strategies (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). However, existing sport crisis communication research has rarely examined the combined effects of scandal type and organizational responsibility using an experimental design within the context of collegiate athletics (Brown & Billings, 2013; LaGree et al., 2019).

Understanding these distinctions is increasingly important because contemporary college athletics has become substantially more commercialized and publicly scrutinized than in previous decades. Athletic departments operate in an environment characterized by expanding media coverage, legalized sports betting, social media communication, and increasing public expectations regarding transparency and ethical governance. Consequently, stakeholders are likely to evaluate organizational crises not only according to the occurrence of misconduct itself but also according to the extent to which universities appear responsible for preventing, managing, and correcting unethical behavior.

This study examines how scandal type and organizational involvement influence stakeholders' perceptions of scandal severity and evaluations of seven organizational crisis response strategies derived from Image Repair Theory. By integrating Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory, and sport consumer behavior literature, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of stakeholder responses to collegiate athletic scandals. Specifically, this study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it extends crisis communication research by experimentally distinguishing between scandal type and organizational level within collegiate athletics. Second, it provides empirical evidence regarding the perceived effectiveness of multiple crisis response strategies across different scandal contexts. Finally, the findings offer practical guidance for university athletic administrators seeking to develop communication strategies that effectively protect organizational reputation and restore stakeholder trust following athletic scandals.

RQ1: How do scandal type and scandal level, and their interaction, influence student stakeholders' perceived effectiveness of each of the seven crisis response strategies: minimization, denial, excuse, mortification, bolstering, corrective action, and attacking the accuser?

RQ2: Which of the seven crisis response strategies do student stakeholders perceive as most and least effective across scandal situations?

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Athletic Scandals and Crisis Communication in College Sport

Sport organizations are highly visible social institutions whose reputations depend not only on athletic performance but also on perceptions of integrity, fairness, and institutional responsibility (Shilbury et al., 2013; Fombrun, 1996). In college athletics, scandals can be particularly damaging because athletic departments are closely connected to university identity, student pride, alumni support, and broader institutional legitimacy (Toma, 2003; Hughes & Shank, 2005; Ridpath, 2018). Unlike many commercial crises, college sport scandals often raise moral concerns because they involve student-athletes, educational institutions, and the educational values associated with intercollegiate athletics (Southall & Staurowsky, 2013; Ridpath, 2018).

Prior crisis communication research has established that crises threaten organizational reputation by increasing stakeholders' perceptions of responsibility, anger, and distrust (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007; Coombs, 2013). Organizational crises also influence stakeholders' trust, behavioral intentions, and organizational legitimacy (Benoit, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Jin, 2010). In sport contexts, crises may be intensified because fans often develop emotional and identity-based attachments to teams and athletic programs (Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Funk & James, 2001; Fink et al., 2009). Consequently, sport scandals are evaluated not only as organizational failures but also as violations of the symbolic meanings attached to teams, universities, and athletic communities (Brown & Billings, 2013; LaGree et al., 2019).

Athletic scandals can take various forms, including misconduct by individual athletes, cheating, doping, academic fraud, recruiting violations, gambling, and match-fixing (Brown & Billings, 2013; Ridpath, 2018). These scandals vary in the degree to which they are attributed to individual misconduct or broader organizational failure (Coombs, 2007; Weiner, 1985). This distinction is important because crisis responsibility is one of the central predictors of reputational threat (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). When wrongdoing is perceived as isolated to a single athlete, stakeholders may view the crisis as less reflective of the organization as a whole. In contrast, when misconduct is linked to administrators, coaches, or institutional systems, stakeholders may attribute greater responsibility to the organization and perceive the scandal as more serious (Coombs, 2007; Jin, 2010; LaGree et al., 2019).

2.2 Image Repair Theory and Crisis Response Strategies

Image repair theory provides a useful framework for understanding how organizations respond when they are accused of wrongdoing (Benoit, 1995, 2015; Brinson & Benoit, 1996). Benoit (1995, 1997) argued that image repair discourse is typically used when an actor is held responsible for an offensive act. The theory identifies several broad categories of response strategies, including denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1995, 1997; Gribas et al., 2015). These strategies have been widely applied in crisis communication research because they explain how organizations attempt to reduce blame, restore legitimacy, and protect reputation (Arendt et al., 2017; Fuoli & Paradis, 2014).

Denial involves rejecting the accusation or shifting blame to another party (Benoit, 2015). In the present study, the evasion-of-responsibility category is operationalized as excuse, which attempts to reduce perceived control or intentionality by suggesting that the act resulted from accident, provocation, or circumstances beyond the actor's control (Benoit, 1995; Scovill, 2024). Reducing offensiveness includes strategies such as bolstering past good deeds, minimizing the seriousness of the offense, attacking the accuser, or differentiating the act from more severe wrongdoing (Benoit, 1997; Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). Mortification involves admitting responsibility and asking for forgiveness (Benoit, 2015; Frederick et al., 2021), whereas corrective action involves promising to fix the problem and prevent recurrence (Arendt et al., 2017; Benoit, 1995).

In sport settings, these strategies may not be equally effective (Billings et al., 2018). Sport fans often expect moral accountability from teams and athletic departments, particularly when scandals involve cheating or competitive integrity (Frederick et al., 2023; Hambrick et al., 2015). Previous studies have suggested that accommodative strategies, such as apology and corrective action, are often more effective when responsibility is high (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2008), whereas defensive strategies, such as denial or attacking the accuser, may intensify negative perceptions if stakeholders already believe the organization is responsible (Brown et al., 2012; Scovill, 2024). Thus, the perceived effectiveness of a crisis response strategy is likely to depend on the type and level of scandal (Coombs, 2007; Frederick et al., 2021).

2.3 Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Crisis Responsibility

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) argues that crisis response strategies should be matched to the level of crisis responsibility and reputational threat associated with the crisis (Coombs, 2007, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). SCCT is grounded in attribution theory, which suggests that stakeholders evaluate crises by judging responsibility, controllability, and intentionality (Weiner, 1985, 1986; McAuley et al., 1992). When

stakeholders attribute greater responsibility to an organization, they are more likely to experience anger, trigger negative word-of-mouth, and less likely to support the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, 2007; Jin, 2010; McDonald et al., 2010).

SCCT categorizes crises into clusters based on perceived organizational responsibility. Victim crises create relatively low responsibility, accidental crises create moderate responsibility, and preventable crises create high responsibility (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Doping and match-fixing scandals are generally closer to preventable crises because they involve intentional wrongdoing and violations of ethical or competitive norms (Brown-Devlin & Brown, 2020). However, the degree of responsibility may differ depending on whether the scandal is framed as the action of an individual athlete or as a coordinated organizational practice (Brown et al., 2020).

This distinction is especially relevant to the present study. An individual-level scandal may allow stakeholders to separate the athlete from the institution, thereby reducing perceived organizational responsibility (Chien et al., 2016; Fink et al., 2012). In contrast, an organizational-level scandal involving athletic administrators, coaches, or staff suggests systemic failure, deeper cultural corruption, and stronger institutional responsibility (Brown-Devlin & Brown, 2020; Hughes & Shank, 2005; Meadows & Meadows III, 2020). Therefore, organizational-level scandals should be perceived as more severe and reputational damaging than individual-level scandals (Brown et al., 2020; Coombs, 2018).

2.4 Scandal Type: On-Field and Off-Field

This study distinguishes between on-field and off-field scandals. On-field scandals, such as match-fixing, directly threaten the integrity of competition (Maennig, 2005; Hill, 2010). Match-fixing undermines the fairness and uncertainty of sport outcomes, which are central to the value of sport consumption and spectator confidence (Forrest, McHale, & McAuley, 2008; Maennig, 2005). Because fans invest emotionally in the authenticity of competition, intentional manipulation of game outcomes can damage trust in both the team and the broader sport system (Funk & James, 2001; Brown & Billings, 2013).

Off-field scandals, such as doping, also threaten sport integrity but may be perceived differently because they involve illicit performance enhancement rather than direct manipulation of game outcomes (Pielke, 2016; Mazanov & Connor, 2010). Doping violates principles of fair play, athlete health, and institutional oversight, thereby challenging the ethical legitimacy of sport organizations (Waddington & Smith, 2009; Pielke, 2016). However, its reputational consequences may depend on whether the doping behavior is framed as the misconduct of a single athlete or as part of a systematic organizational program (Coombs, 2007; LaGree et al., 2019).

Prior sport crisis research has shown that the type of crisis affects fan perceptions, emotional responses, and evaluations of organizational communication (Brown & Billings, 2013; Fink et al., 2009; LaGree et al., 2019). For example, scandals involving intentional wrongdoing generally produce stronger negative reactions than accidental or ambiguous crises because stakeholders attribute greater organizational responsibility and moral blame (Coombs, 2007; Weiner, 1985; Jin, 2010). Similarly, crises that threaten core sport values, such as fairness and competitive integrity, may generate stronger reputational damage than crises perceived as peripheral to game outcomes (Maennig, 2005; Brown & Billings, 2013).

2.5 Scandal Level: Individual Misconduct Versus Organizational Failure

A central concern in crisis communication is whether stakeholders attribute wrongdoing to an individual actor or to the organization. Attribution theory suggests that perceived responsibility increases when wrongdoing appears intentional, controllable, and connected to organizational systems (Weiner, 1985, 1986). Consistent with attribution theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) argues that organizational responsibility is one of the primary determinants of stakeholders' evaluations of crisis severity, reputational threat, and organizational accountability (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007). In sport organizations, this distinction is especially important because fans may forgive isolated athlete misconduct while reacting more negatively to institutional corruption, particularly when organizational leaders are perceived to have enabled or tolerated unethical behavior (Fink et al., 2009; Brown & Billings, 2013; LaGree et al., 2019).

Individual-level scandals may be interpreted as deviant behavior by a single athlete. Although such scandals can harm the team or university, stakeholders may believe that the organization had limited control over the individual's actions (Coombs, 2007; Weiner, 1985). Organizational-level scandals, however, suggest structural failure. When administrators, coaches, or staff are involved, the scandal signals that misconduct may be embedded in organizational culture, leadership, or governance practices (Ridpath, 2018; Shilbury et al., 2013). As a result, organizational-level scandals should produce stronger perceptions of severity and greater expectations for corrective action because stakeholders are more likely to attribute responsibility to the institution rather than to a single individual (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Jin, 2010).

This reasoning aligns with SCCT, which suggests that crises involving higher organizational responsibility require more accommodative response strategies (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). When responsibility is high, denial or minimization may appear inappropriate because stakeholders expect acknowledgment, corrective action, and organizational reform (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007). In contrast, minimization may be more acceptable in individual-level scandals because stakeholders may view the wrongdoing as limited in scope and less representative of the organization as a whole (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Brown & Billings, 2013).

2.6 Scandal Level: Team Identification and College Sport Fans

Team identification refers to the psychological connection between a fan and a sport team or athletic program (Lock & Heere, 2017; Wann, 2006). Social identity theory suggests that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In sport, fans often integrate teams into their social identity, producing emotional investment, loyalty, and defensive responses to team-related threats (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Heere & James, 2007; Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

Sport consumer research has consistently shown that highly identified fans are more likely to attend games, purchase merchandise, defend the team, and maintain loyalty during negative events (Funk & James, 2001; Trail et al., 2000; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Identification can also shape how fans interpret scandals (Brown et al., 2020; Fink et al., 2012). Highly identified fans may engage in motivated reasoning, downplay negative information, or support image repair strategies that protect the team's reputation (Meadows & Meadows III, 2020; Wann, 2006). At the same time, scandals may create identity threats because wrongdoing by a favored team reflects negatively on the fan's social group (Coombs, 2018; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

College students are an appropriate sample for research on college athletic scandals because they are embedded in the university community and may function as current student stakeholders, sport consumers, and representatives of the institutional identity (Hambrick et al., 2015; Hughes & Shank, 2005). Their evaluations are particularly relevant because college athletic programs often rely on student support, campus pride, and perceived legitimacy (Clopton, 2008; Fink et al., 2012). Therefore, measuring team identification before exposure to the scandal scenario allows researchers to account for preexisting attachment to the university's athletic programs (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

2.7 Exposure to Athletic Scandals

Prior exposure to sport scandals may influence how participants interpret new crisis information (Brown et al., 2020). Individuals who have previously encountered scandal-related news may be more familiar with the causes, consequences, and media framing of athletic misconduct, which shapes their cognitive schemas during subsequent crises (Chien et al., 2016; Coombs, 2018; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Exposure may increase skepticism toward sport organizations and heighten sensitivity to institutional wrongdoing (Fink et al., 2012; Meadows & Meadows III, 2020). LaGree, Wilbur, and Cameron (2019), for example, found that exposure to media coverage of the NFL concussion crisis was associated with negative perceptions of the organization and its crisis response. In the context of college athletics, prior exposure may shape expectations regarding institutional responsibility and crisis management (Hambrick et al., 2015; Hughes & Shank, 2005). Participants who are aware of previous scandals may be less likely to treat a new scandal as an isolated event and more likely to interpret it as part of a broader pattern in sport governance, a phenomenon aligned with the conceptual spillover effect in crisis communication (Brown-Devlin & Brown, 2020; Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Laufer & Coombs, 2006). Accordingly, exposure to college athletics scandals was measured as a control variable in the present study to isolate its potential confounding effects on stakeholder evaluations (see Coombs, 2012; Jin, 2010).

Based on the preceding literature, the following hypotheses and research questions are proposed:

H1: Organizational-level scandals will be perceived as more severe than individual-level scandals.

H2: Perceived scandal severity will differ by scandal type, such that match-fixing and doping scandals will generate different levels of perceived severity.

H3: Scandal type and scandal level will interact to influence perceived scandal severity.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and Experimental Design

This study employed a 2 (type of scandal: on-field match-fixing vs. off-field doping) $\times$ 2 (level of scandal: individual vs. organizational) between-subjects factorial experimental design. Undergraduate students from a

single university were recruited as participants because they represent an important student stakeholder group and consumer segment within collegiate athletics and are generally familiar with and emotionally invested in college sports. The present study therefore focuses specifically on student stakeholders rather than attempting to represent the full range of collegiate athletics stakeholders. As active consumers of collegiate athletic programs, college students are well positioned to evaluate athletic scandals and organizational crisis responses.

A total of 250 undergraduate students participated in the experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: (a) individual-level doping scandal ($n = 63$), (b) organizational-level doping scandal ($n = 62$), (c) individual-level match-fixing scandal ($n = 63$), and (d) organizational-level match-fixing scandal ($n = 62$). Random assignment was implemented using Qualtrics randomizer.

The experiment was conducted in a behavioral research laboratory. Prior to participation, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the experimental procedure, and their rights as research participants. After providing informed consent, participants first completed a measure of team identification with their university's athletic programs. The computer software then randomly assigned each participant to one of the four experimental conditions, and the corresponding scandal scenario was displayed on the laboratory computer screen. Participants were instructed to carefully read the scenario before completing the questionnaire measuring their perceptions of the scandal and evaluations of various crisis response strategies.

3.2 Experimental Scenarios

Four fictitious scandal scenarios were developed to manipulate scandal type (match-fixing vs. doping) and scandal level (individual vs. organizational). Although the scenarios were based on characteristics of actual collegiate athletic scandals reported in the United States, all university names, individuals, and contextual details were fictionalized. The use of fictitious scenarios minimized potential confounding effects associated with participants' prior attitudes toward real universities, athletic programs, or previously publicized scandals while maintaining ecological validity.

The individual-level doping scenario described a student-athlete who admitted to using prohibited performance-enhancing substances following a police investigation. The organizational-level doping scenario described an institutionalized doping program involving the athletic department, in which administrators, coaches, and medical staff admitted to systematic doping practices.

The individual-level match-fixing scenario described a student-athlete who admitted to intentionally manipulating game outcomes in exchange for financial compensation and providing confidential team information to gambling organizers. The organizational-level match-fixing scenario described a coordinated point-shaving scheme involving athletic administrators, coaches, and student-athletes who collectively participated in manipulating game outcomes for financial gain. These scenarios allowed for independent manipulation of scandal type and organizational responsibility while maintaining a comparable narrative structure across all experimental conditions.

3.3 Measures

Unless otherwise noted, all measurement items were assessed using seven-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

3.3.1 Team Identification

Team identification was measured using four items adapted from Eddy (2014). The scale assessed participants' psychological attachment to their university's athletic programs using statements such as "I consider myself a real fan of the university's athletic programs" and "Being a fan of the college athletic programs is very important to me." Higher scores indicated stronger identification with the university's athletic programs.

3.3.2 Perceived Scandal Severity

Participants evaluated the severity of the scandal using a single-item measure asking, "What would you rate the seriousness of the scandal that deteriorates the university's reputation?" Responses ranged from 1 (not at all serious) to 7 (extremely serious), with higher scores indicating greater perceived scandal severity.

3.3.3 Perceived Effectiveness of Crisis Response Strategies

Participants evaluated the perceived effectiveness of seven crisis response strategies commonly discussed in image restoration and crisis communication research. The strategies included minimization, denial, excuse (evasion of responsibility), mortification, bolstering, corrective action, and attacking the accuser. Participants rated the effectiveness of each strategy on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all effective) to 7 (extremely effective). Each strategy was analyzed separately because they represent conceptually distinct organizational response strategies rather than indicators of a single latent construct.

3.3.4 Exposure to College Athletics Scandals

Prior exposure to college athletics scandals was measured using three items adapted from LaGree et al. (2019). The items assessed participants' familiarity with collegiate athletic scandals through previous awareness, exposure to news coverage, and viewing of documentaries or related media. Higher scores represented greater prior exposure to athletic scandals.

3.4 Manipulation Check

To assess the realism of the experimental stimuli, two manipulation check items adapted from Snoeijs et al. (2014) measured the extent to which participants perceived the scenario as realistic and could imagine it occurring in real life. Higher scores indicated greater perceived realism of the scenarios. Participants generally perceived the scenarios as realistic and imaginable ($M = 5.97$, $SD = 0.74$). A 2×2 ANOVA showed a small but significant main effect of scandal type on the manipulation check, $F(1, 246) = 4.01$, $p = .046$, partial $\eta^2 = .016$. Doping scenarios ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 0.72$) were perceived as slightly more realistic than match-fixing scenarios ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 0.76$). The main effect of scandal level was not significant, $F(1, 246) = 0.15$, $p = .698$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$, nor was the interaction effect, $F(1, 246) = 0.55$, $p = .460$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$. Given that all cell means were high, the manipulation was considered acceptable. The slightly higher realism rating for doping may reflect participants' greater familiarity with doping incidents through frequent sports media coverage, whereas match-fixing may be encountered less often in everyday collegiate sport contexts. Because the difference was small and both conditions received high realism ratings, this minor variation was not considered substantial enough to undermine the overall validity of the experimental manipulation.

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics, internal consistency reliability analyses (Cronbach's α), manipulation checks, and randomization checks across experimental conditions. To examine the effects of scandal type and scandal level on perceived scandal severity, a two-way factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test H1–H3. Separate two-way factorial ANOVAs were subsequently performed to examine RQ1 by testing the effects of the experimental manipulations on the perceived effectiveness of each crisis response strategy. When significant interaction effects were observed, Bonferroni-adjusted simple effects analyses were conducted. Descriptive means across the seven strategies were also examined to address RQ2. Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 level, and partial eta squared (η^2) was reported as an indicator of effect size.

4. Results

4.1 Preliminary Analyses

A total of 250 college students participated in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: doping–individual ($n = 63$), doping–organizational ($n = 62$), match-fixing–individual ($n = 63$), and match-fixing–organizational ($n = 62$). Participants' mean age was 20.36 years ($SD = 2.77$).

Reliability analyses indicated that team identification demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$), prior exposure to college athletics scandals showed good reliability ($\alpha = .86$), and the manipulation check scale demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .78$). The seven perceived effectiveness items were not combined into a single index because each item represented a distinct crisis response strategy, including denial, mortification, corrective action, bolstering, minimization, excuse, and attacking the accuser.

Randomization checks indicated no significant differences across the four experimental conditions in age, $F(3, 246) = 1.94$, $p = .124$; team identification, $F(3, 246) = 1.85$, $p = .138$; or prior exposure to college athletics scandals, $F(3, 246) = 2.02$, $p = .112$. Gender distribution also did not differ significantly across conditions, $\chi^2(6, N = 250) = 1.41$, $p = .965$. These results suggest that random assignment was successful.

4.2 Perceived Scandal Severity

A 2 (scandal type: doping vs. match-fixing) $\times$ 2 (scandal level: individual vs. organizational) factorial ANOVA was conducted to examine perceived scandal severity. The main effect of scandal type was not significant, $F(1, 246) = 0.55$, $p = .457$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$. However, the main effect of scandal level was significant, $F(1, 246) = 42.75$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .148$. Organizational-level scandals ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 0.90$) were perceived as more severe than individual-level scandals ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.35$).

This main effect was qualified by a significant scandal type $\times$ scandal level interaction, $F(1, 246) = 20.43$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .077$. Simple effects analyses showed that, within the doping condition, organizational-level scandals ($M = 6.29$, $SD = 0.91$) were perceived as significantly more severe than individual-level scandals ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.32$), $p < .001$. In contrast, within the match-fixing condition, the difference between organizational-level scandals ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 0.80$) and individual-level scandals ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.28$) was not significant, p

= .143.

4.3 Perceived Effectiveness of Crisis Response Strategies

Separate 2×2 factorial ANOVAs were conducted for each crisis response strategy. For minimization, the main effect of scandal type was not significant, $F(1, 246) = 0.02$, $p = .885$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$. The main effect of scandal level was significant, $F(1, 246) = 9.18$, $p = .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .036$. Minimization was perceived as more effective for individual-level scandals ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.40$) than organizational-level scandals ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.22$). The interaction effect was not significant, $F(1, 246) = 2.54$, $p = .112$, partial $\eta^2 = .010$.

For denial, no significant effects emerged: scandal type, $F(1, 246) = 0.64$, $p = .425$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$; scandal level, $F(1, 246) = 0.00$, $p = .953$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$; and interaction, $F(1, 246) = 1.15$, $p = .285$, partial $\eta^2 = .005$.

For excuse, neither the main effect of scandal type, $F(1, 246) = 1.50$, $p = .221$, partial $\eta^2 = .006$, nor the interaction effect, $F(1, 246) = 0.42$, $p = .518$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$, was significant. The main effect of scandal level approached significance, $F(1, 246) = 2.95$, $p = .087$, partial $\eta^2 = .012$.

For mortification, no significant effects were found: scandal type, $F(1, 246) = 0.02$, $p = .883$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$; scandal level, $F(1, 246) = 1.39$, $p = .240$, partial $\eta^2 = .006$; and interaction, $F(1, 246) = 2.64$, $p = .105$, partial $\eta^2 = .011$.

For bolstering, neither scandal type, $F(1, 246) = 0.44$, $p = .508$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$, nor scandal level, $F(1, 246) = 2.17$, $p = .142$, partial $\eta^2 = .009$, was significant. The interaction effect approached significance, $F(1, 246) = 3.58$, $p = .060$, partial $\eta^2 = .014$.

For corrective action, no significant effects emerged: scandal type, $F(1, 246) = 0.00$, $p = .960$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$; scandal level, $F(1, 246) = 0.05$, $p = .817$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$; and interaction, $F(1, 246) = 1.59$, $p = .208$, partial $\eta^2 = .006$. However, corrective action received the highest overall effectiveness rating among the response strategies ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 1.25$).

Overall, the findings indicate that scandal level played a stronger role than scandal type in shaping perceptions of scandal severity. Organizational scandals were perceived as more severe than individual scandals, particularly in the doping condition. Addressing RQ1, only minimization differed significantly by scandal level, with student stakeholders evaluating it as more effective for individual-level scandals than organizational-level scandals; no significant effects of scandal type or scandal level were found for the other six strategies. Addressing RQ2, corrective action and mortification received the highest overall effectiveness ratings, whereas denial and attacking the accuser received the lowest ratings.

5. Discussion

This study examined how the type of athletic scandal (on-field match-fixing versus off-field doping) and the level of scandal responsibility (individual versus organizational) influence student stakeholders' perceptions of scandal severity and evaluations of organizational crisis response strategies. By experimentally manipulating both scandal type and organizational involvement in a collegiate athletics context, the study extends crisis communication research beyond single-case analyses and provides empirical evidence regarding how student stakeholders evaluate different forms of athletic misconduct. Overall, the findings indicate that organizational responsibility plays a more influential role than scandal type in shaping perceptions of scandal severity, while the perceived effectiveness of crisis response strategies depends primarily on the degree of organizational involvement rather than the specific type of scandal.

The results demonstrate that organizational-level scandals were perceived as significantly more severe than individual-level scandals. This finding is consistent with Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007), which argues that greater organizational responsibility increases reputational threat and stakeholder expectations for organizational accountability. Among the student stakeholders in this study, when the misconduct involved athletic administrators, coaches, or institutional systems, participants appeared to attribute responsibility to the university rather than to isolated individuals. Consequently, organizational scandals were viewed as broader institutional failures rather than isolated incidents of athlete misconduct.

Interestingly, the interaction between scandal type and scandal level further suggests that student stakeholders evaluate crises differently depending on how responsibility is framed. Organizational doping scandals generated substantially higher perceptions of scandal severity than individual doping cases, whereas the difference between organizational and individual match-fixing scandals was considerably smaller. One possible explanation is that systematic doping programs imply long-term institutional planning, coordinated deception, and widespread organizational complicity. In contrast, although match-fixing represents a serious violation of sport integrity, participants may perceive the manipulation of competition as primarily involving the individuals directly

participating in the games rather than reflecting the broader organizational culture.

Regarding crisis response strategies, corrective action and mortification consistently received the highest effectiveness evaluations across all experimental conditions. This finding supports both Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995, 1997) and SCCT (Coombs, 2007), which suggest that accommodative response strategies are generally preferred when stakeholders perceive organizations as responsible for a crisis. Among the student stakeholders examined here, participants appeared to value organizational accountability and future-oriented solutions over defensive communication strategies. Conversely, denial and attacking the accuser received the lowest effectiveness evaluations regardless of scandal type or organizational involvement, suggesting that student stakeholders were generally unwilling to accept defensive communication once organizational misconduct had been established.

The finding that minimization was perceived as more effective in individual-level scandals than organizational-level scandals is also theoretically meaningful. Participants may have considered minimization to be more appropriate when the wrongdoing could reasonably be attributed to a single athlete rather than to systemic organizational misconduct. Once a scandal involves multiple organizational actors, attempts to minimize its seriousness may be interpreted as avoiding responsibility, thereby reducing the perceived credibility of the organization's communication. This finding further supports SCCT's argument that crisis response strategies should match the level of organizational responsibility associated with the crisis.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to the sport crisis communication literature. First, the study extends Situational Crisis Communication Theory by demonstrating that organizational responsibility within athletic scandals significantly influences student stakeholders' perceptions of scandal severity. Although SCCT has consistently emphasized crisis responsibility as a determinant of reputational threat, relatively few studies have experimentally manipulated organizational versus individual responsibility within collegiate sport settings. The present findings provide empirical evidence that student stakeholders distinguish between individual misconduct and institutional failure, suggesting that crisis responsibility should be conceptualized not only according to crisis type but also according to the organizational level at which misconduct occurs.

Second, this study contributes to Image Repair Theory by examining the perceived effectiveness of multiple image restoration strategies within experimentally controlled sport crisis scenarios. Whereas previous sport communication research has frequently focused on a single response strategy or a single crisis case, the present study simultaneously evaluated seven distinct image repair strategies across different scandal contexts. The findings indicate that accommodative strategies, particularly corrective action and mortification, are consistently perceived by student stakeholders as more appropriate than defensive strategies, thereby providing additional empirical support for Benoit's theoretical framework in collegiate athletics.

Third, the study contributes to the sport management literature by distinguishing between two frequently studied but rarely compared forms of athletic misconduct: match-fixing and doping. Previous studies have generally examined these scandals independently or through case-study approaches. By experimentally comparing both scandal types while simultaneously manipulating organizational involvement, this study demonstrates that organizational responsibility has a stronger influence on student stakeholder evaluations than scandal type alone. This finding broadens current understanding of how different forms of ethical misconduct are interpreted within collegiate sport organizations.

Finally, the present study integrates sport consumer behavior with crisis communication by incorporating team identification into the experimental design. Although team identification was primarily included as a control variable, the findings reinforce the importance of considering stakeholder characteristics when examining organizational crises in sport. Future theoretical models may further explore how identification moderates the relationship between crisis responsibility, emotional responses, and evaluations of crisis communication strategies among student stakeholders and other stakeholder groups.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings also provide several practical implications for university athletic departments and sport communication professionals. First, athletic administrators should recognize that organizational involvement substantially amplifies perceptions of scandal severity. When misconduct extends beyond individual athletes to coaches or athletic administrators, student stakeholders appear to interpret the incident as evidence of institutional failure rather than isolated unethical behavior. Consequently, crisis management efforts should prioritize organizational transparency, accountability, and governance reform rather than focusing solely on disciplining individual athletes.

Second, the results suggest that corrective action and mortification represent the most effective crisis response

strategies across different athletic scandal contexts. University athletic departments should therefore acknowledge responsibility when appropriate, communicate specific corrective measures, and demonstrate long-term commitments to preventing future misconduct. Responses emphasizing organizational learning and institutional reform are likely to be perceived as more credible than defensive communication strategies.

Third, the consistently low evaluations of denial and attacking the accuser among student stakeholders suggest that defensive communication should be avoided once credible evidence of misconduct becomes publicly available. Attempting to deny responsibility or discredit external accusations may further damage institutional credibility and increase reputational harm. Instead, university administrators should provide transparent communication that addresses stakeholder concerns while outlining concrete organizational reforms.

Finally, because organizational doping scandals generated particularly high perceptions of scandal severity, athletic departments should invest in preventive governance systems, compliance education, and ethical leadership programs. Establishing comprehensive monitoring systems and fostering ethical organizational cultures may reduce the likelihood of systemic misconduct while strengthening stakeholder confidence in institutional integrity.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study employed a sample of undergraduate students from a single university. Although these participants represent an important student stakeholder group in collegiate athletics, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of the broader stakeholder population. In particular, alumni, high-net-worth donors, university faculty, administrators, media professionals, and the general public may evaluate athletic scandals differently because their relationships with the institution, financial interests, professional roles, and expectations for accountability differ from those of current students. For example, donors may place greater emphasis on institutional stewardship, financial accountability, and protection of the university's reputation, whereas alumni may respond more strongly to perceived threats to institutional identity and long-term tradition. Faculty may be especially attentive to academic integrity, governance, and the educational mission of the university. These possibilities remain speculative and should be tested empirically in future research using samples that include multiple stakeholder groups.

Second, the experiment relied on fictitious scenarios rather than actual athletic scandals. The use of fictional scenarios enhanced internal validity by eliminating potential confounding effects associated with participants' prior attitudes toward specific universities or highly publicized scandals. Nevertheless, responses to hypothetical scenarios may differ from reactions to real-world crises characterized by extensive media coverage, emotional involvement, and ongoing uncertainty. Future research could employ longitudinal designs or analyze naturally occurring scandals to improve ecological validity.

Third, although the present study examined two common forms of athletic misconduct, numerous other crisis types exist within collegiate athletics, including academic fraud, recruiting violations, sexual misconduct, hazing, financial corruption, and athlete abuse. Future studies should investigate whether stakeholder evaluations differ across broader categories of athletic scandals.

Fourth, this study focused on student stakeholders' evaluations of crisis response strategies rather than subsequent behavioral outcomes. Future research should examine how different crisis communication strategies influence organizational reputation, trust restoration, supportive behaviors, attendance intentions, donation intentions, and continued fan identification. Such work would be particularly valuable for determining whether the strategy preferences observed among students translate into consequential behaviors among students, alumni, donors, faculty, and other stakeholder groups.

Finally, future research should investigate potential moderating variables, including team identification, moral identity, prior scandal exposure, political ideology, and trust in university leadership. Examining these individual differences may provide a more comprehensive understanding of why stakeholders respond differently to athletic scandals and organizational crisis communication.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated how scandal type and organizational responsibility influence student stakeholders' evaluations of collegiate athletic scandals and organizational crisis response strategies. The findings indicate that organizational responsibility has a greater influence than scandal type on perceived scandal severity, with organizational-level doping scandals generating the strongest negative evaluations. Among the crisis response strategies, corrective action and mortification were consistently perceived as the most effective, whereas denial and attacking the accuser were viewed as the least effective.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of organizational accountability and transparent communication

in managing collegiate athletic crises. By integrating Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Image Repair Theory within the context of college athletics, this study contributes to the sport crisis communication literature and provides practical guidance for athletic administrators seeking to protect organizational reputation and maintain stakeholder trust following athletic scandals.

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