

## **Extending Athlete Reputational Crises: Theorizing Underperformance Crises and the Flip Appeal**

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Crisis management scholarship recommends matching crisis response with crisis type to repair reputational damage. However, focusing on the corporate context has limited our understanding of crisis types and available responses. One crisis context yet to be extensively explored is sport/fan interactions online, an increasing site for athlete crises. This article addresses this gap, developing a theoretical framework for underperformance crises, where online publics perceive athletic underperformance as a norm violation that merits excessive hate toward athletes. Using the crisis case of basketball player E. J. Liddell, whose underperformance during a 2021 March Madness game resulted in widespread online harassment, we extend the situational crisis communication theory and athlete reputational crises to include underperformance as a unique crisis type. We then propose a new response strategy, termed the flip appeal, where underperformers can mitigate the crisis cycle through awareness raising, vulnerability, and inviting publics into the crisis narrative.

*Keywords: athlete reputational crises, attribution theory, crisis, situational crisis communication theory, social media*

On March 19, 2021, during the first round of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) men's basketball March Madness tournament, Oral Roberts (15-seed) upset Ohio State (two-seed) ending the Buckeyes' season. After missing the front end of a one-and-one free throw, which would have likely given Ohio State a lead large enough to win the game outright, forward E. J. Liddell began receiving aggressive and threatening direct messages from spectators on his Twitter (now X) account. After the team lost during overtime, more fans took to social media to express their outrage at what they felt was a premature ending to Ohio State's season due to his poor performance, creating a personal crisis for Liddell (rather than a team crisis). Later that night, Liddell (2021) posted screenshots of the hate messages he received on Twitter, with the words, "Honestly, what did I do to deserve this? I'm human." Liddell's tweet garnered immediate attention as comments of support poured in from fans, other athletes, coaches, and

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sport media personnel. Additionally, sport media ran stories on Liddell's crisis case, denouncing those harassing Liddell and highlighting his role in leading Ohio State to the NCAA tournament in the first place.

Liddell's crisis case and others (e.g., basketball player Terrance Williams II, gymnast Simone Biles) highlight an important reality of sport/fan interactions online that challenge our scholarly understanding of crisis management: Social media facilitate unparalleled access to public figures broadly and athletes specifically, and consequently, many highly identified fans feel emboldened to publicly harass public figures whose behavior violates their expectations (Billings, Coombs, & Brown, 2018). In this case, Liddell missing a free throw, a common occurrence in basketball, violated fans' expectations of his and the team's performance.

We know from crisis communication scholarship that crises result from expectation violations (Coombs, 2007). We also know from the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) that effective crisis responses match the perceived responsibility publics assign (e.g., rebuild responses for preventable crises; Coombs, 2007). However, the social media environment generally—where fans have unprecedented access to public figures—and the sport context specifically—where mistakes/underperformances are common—complicate this theoretical understanding of how crises can and should be addressed. Given that SCCT proposes matching crisis *response* with crisis *type*, further developing an understanding of crisis *type* is essential to effective crisis management in an ever-changing socio-technological world.

Thus, this study offers a new paradigm for understanding and responding to underperformance crises, especially in the sport context, where stakeholders (e.g., fans, sport betters, sport media) perceive failing to maintain certain performance benchmarks as a norm violation. Underperformance as a crisis type is currently unaccounted for by SCCT and athlete reputational crises (ARCs; Coombs, 2018; Sato, Ko, Park, & Tao, 2015). Moreover, crisis communication research privileges organizational settings where corporations have wronged stakeholders in some way (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017). Sport-related crisis literature emphasizes crisis scenarios that occur outside of the competition space (e.g., domestic violence; Coombs, 2018; Richards, Wilson, Boyle, & Mower, 2017) and in which athletes bring attention to issues unrelated to sport (e.g., athlete activism; Feder & Smith, 2023; Frederick, Sanderson, & Schlereth, 2017). Additionally, athlete-related crisis scholarship often examines organizational responses over individual responses (e.g., Brown, Adamson, & Park, 2020; Richards et al., 2017). Scholars have addressed athletes' use of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) as triggers for performance-based crises (Coombs, 2018). However, *underperformance* as a crisis merits further consideration due to the connection between fan identification and aggression towards athletes (Billings et al., 2018), especially because fan aggression can devastate athlete mental health (Pells, 2023). In the age of social media and name, image, and likeness (NIL), where athletes across levels of competition develop personal brands that can fuel their success or lead to their demise, having a specific crisis response that matches this unique context becomes even more crucial.

This theoretical article proceeds in four parts: First, we review the literature on SCCT and ARCs; second, we theorize underperformance crises, using Liddell's case to illustrate this crisis type; third, we explicate a new crisis response termed the flip appeal; finally, we discuss the application of the flip appeal

to other underperformance crises, extending the theorizing to other similar crises, while acknowledging some caveats.<sup>1</sup>

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

To theorize underperformance as a distinct crisis type that needs a unique response, we first discuss the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), which posits that matching crisis responses with crisis types results in greater reputational repair. The situational crisis communication theory builds from the image repair theory (Benoit, 2015) and attribution theory (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008) to offer scholars and practitioners engaging in crisis management a framework that matches crisis scenarios with response strategies (Coombs, 2007). This framework recognizes three crisis types based on the level of attribution publics assign to the organization, entity, or individual involved in the crisis: Victim, accidental, and preventable/intentional (Coombs, 2007). Victim crises (e.g., natural disasters) are those where publics assign little responsibility to any involved organizations. Accidental crises (e.g., technical errors leading to a data breach) are those in which publics assign minimal responsibility to the organization. Preventable crises (e.g., embezzlement) result in publics assigning the most responsibility to the organization because these crises are perceived as intentional and avoidable. Because publics' attribution of responsibility varies depending on the crisis, each crisis type warrants a different response strategy geared toward repairing publics' perceptions of and relationships with organizations in crisis. Coombs (2007) initially matched victim crises with diminish and denial strategies (e.g., denying responsibility), accidental crises with diminish and rebuild strategies (e.g., excusing or justifying the behavior), and preventable crises with rebuild strategies (e.g., corrective action).<sup>2</sup>

The situational crisis communication theory is an effective and widely supported foundation for crisis management. However, while SCCT accounts for many of the more traditional crisis scenarios occurring in organizational contexts, it does not adequately address every crisis communication scenario (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010), nor could it be expected to, given the rapid evolution of the socio-technological environment in which many crises now occur. One of those contexts is online crises involving public figures—in this case, athletes now accessible to the general public. Coombs (2018) has begun filling this gap by explicating ARCs as a specific crisis context under SCCT. Still, ARCs only account for specific sport-related crises, excluding underperformance, which, as Liddell's case demonstrates, can be perceived as a crisis by publics who have expectations regarding athlete performance and thus demand a response.

### ***Athlete Reputational Crises***

Sport-related crisis communication scholarship recognizes sport crises as those triggered by events within and beyond the competition space (Billings, Butterworth, & Turman, 2017). Developed by Sato and colleagues (2015), the concept of ARCs refers to crises that affect athletes' reputations. Intentional and unintentional athlete behaviors can trigger ARCs (Coombs, 2018). Athlete reputational crises considered

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<sup>1</sup> Although our interest is in the sport context, we cast this framework broadly enough to apply to other contexts where public figures are criticized online for failing to perform up to the standards of their fans (e.g., an actor whose movie flops).

<sup>2</sup> See Coombs (2022) for an update to SCCT response strategies.

intentional and/or performance-related yield the most negative fan reactions toward athletes who have transgressed (Sato et al., 2015). *Underperformance* would thus likely lead to these negative reactions from highly identified fans as underperforming is performance-related and perceived as within athletes' control, thereby justifying the need for greater crisis and response theorization.

Much of the literature addressing sport-related crises engages SCCT (Brown, Brown, & Billings, 2015; Brown et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2017). For example, Coombs (2018) engaged ARCs to extend SCCT to the sport context. In doing so, he laid a foundation for inquiries into sport-related crises by establishing ARC scenarios that demand different strategies depending on the intentionality of the crisis, violation clarity, fan and system reactions, and career risk (Coombs, 2018). However, scholars applying SCCT to ARCs primarily examine sport crises triggered by nonperformance-based transgressions, such as athlete activism (Park, Park, & Billings, 2019), domestic violence (Richards et al., 2017), and sexual misconduct (Jackson & Thaker, 2021). Other ARC literature addresses athletes' use of PEDs as a performance-based crisis trigger (Pöppel, Dreiskämper, & Strauss, 2020).

While ARCs recognize performance- and nonperformance-based crisis triggers (Coombs, 2018), they do not account for the increasing phenomenon of excessively criticizing athletes who *underperform* in competition (Pells, 2023), a phenomenon amplified by fan identification, social media, the legalization of sports betting, and NIL. We thus build from SCCT (Coombs, 2007, 2018) and ARCs (Sato et al., 2015) by including underperformance as a sport crisis.

### **Underperformance Crises**

Given the confines of SCCT and ARCs (Coombs, 2016, 2018; Ma & Zhan, 2016), we theorize underperformance as a distinct crisis worthy of academic attention. Although underperformance is a natural part of sport, athletes who underperform in high-profile competition are commonly met with excessive public hate and harassment, which can significantly affect their mental health, future performance, and financial viability (Kurz & Hunzinger, 2022; Pells, 2023; Woike, 2022). This is likely due to fan identification, financial investments in competition outcomes, and social media access.

Fan identification is characterized by a deep psychological connection with an athlete or team from which fans derive self-esteem and self-efficacy (Harker, 2019). Through vicarious achievement, identification with an athlete or team can boost or depress fans' self-esteem and mental health (Bernhardt, Dabbs Jr., Fielden, & Lutter, 1998; Brown et al., 2015). Highly identified fans thus expect more of athletes, especially if they make large salaries (Summers & Morgan, 2008), often holding them "accountable" for underperforming. Accordingly, highly identified fans tend to cut off reflected failure associated with athletes' poor performances by distancing themselves from underperforming athletes and/or demonstrating hostility toward these athletes to preserve their self-esteem (Billings et al., 2018; Larkin, Fink, & Delia, 2022).

Fans' financial investment in the outcome of anticipated matchups also likely fuels their penchant for holding athletes "accountable" for underperforming via hate speech online (Traina, 2022). Indeed, fans have placed more than 220 million dollars in sports bets since 2018 (by the time of this writing), causing a surge in abusive behavior toward athletes (Lipton & Draper, 2023). And, due to social media, fans now have

unparalleled access to athletes, allowing fans to directly message athletes who have caused them emotional and financial distress by underperforming (Weiner, 2021).

Therefore, we define *underperformance crises* as scenarios in which athletes' perceived underperformance in high-profile competition leads to widespread public criticism and backlash, necessitating a response from the athlete. Triggers of underperformance crises can include (a) a stretch of underperformance where an athlete has played poorly for an entire game or series of games or (b) isolated incidents, such as a missed shot at the end of a highly anticipated game, where an athlete's single error in play overshadows their overall performance and results in excessive fan outrage. The widespread public backlash endured by athletes amid underperformance crises is made evident by overwhelmingly harsh criticism targeting the athlete through social media via public posts and/or direct messages and mainstream sports commentary. Importantly, the commentary targeting athletes in these crisis scenarios is hostile and threatening, wherein the criticism far exceeds a reasonable level, going beyond the competition realm and into the personal realm.

Underperformance crises are unique because they exist in the liminal space between paracrises and full-blown crises. Paracrises are defined as a "publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 409). Underperformance crises resemble paracrises in that critiques of underperformance as an expectation violation occur primarily on social media in full stakeholder view; fans often use social media to critique an athlete's or team's performance, and athletes often use social media to respond to critiques. Importantly, not all moments of underperformance will result in an underperformance crisis; multiple stakeholders must agree and articulate that the underperformance violated expectations. This is similar to paracrises in which online "challenges" or "threats" only become full-blown crises insofar as they gain momentum and legitimacy online (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Initially, the act of underperforming is primarily a reputational threat where athletes' statuses as elite competitors come into question, which is similar to paracrises where negative comments online can hurt an organization's reputation even if the crisis threat does not escalate beyond that (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Therefore, underperformance crises, like paracrises, occur *online, may or may not* result in fan outrage/reputational damage, and are *reputational threats* to athletes.

Underperformance crises resemble full-blown crises in that athletes do not have many options for "managing" their underperformance once it has occurred. Whereas paracrises allow organizations to correct their behavior before a full-blown crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), with underperformance, there is little opportunity for athletes to correct their performance at that moment; athletes either perform or underperform. Underperformance can immediately harm publics—either emotionally through fan identification or financially through sports betting. In this sense, underperformance, if deemed a violation, is more akin to a full-blown crisis where a "sudden and unexpected event" threatens an organization or publics (Coombs, 2007, p. 164). Also, in the age of NIL, displeasure with underperformance can affect athletes' financial capital across levels of competition; athletes will be less attractive to brands if they lose fan support or are no longer perceived as "elite." Finally, because underperformance occurs in contexts where athletes do not have their phones (e.g., competition spaces), there are limited opportunities, if any, for athletes to "manage" underperformance threats as they occur (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Instead, athletes can only *respond* to their underperformance, which reflects the retroactive crisis management approach of full-blown crises (Coombs, 2007) rather than the proactive crisis prevention approach of paracrises (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Underperformance crises are also unique given the mismatch between the attribution of responsibility and the response options available to athletes in these situations. Underperformance crises would likely be classified as *preventable* under SCCT due to the high level of responsibility attribution fans place on athletes they perceive to have underperformed. That is, athletes *should* be able to control their performance and can always work harder to improve; therefore, underperformance is the athlete's *fault*. For preventable crises, SCCT recommends rebuild strategies (Coombs, 2007). However, rebuild strategies (e.g., compensation and apology) would be inappropriate for underperformance crises. Indeed, athletes cannot conceivably compensate every fan who takes issue with their performance, a rebuild response strategy sometimes used in the corporate context (Coombs, 2007). This response strategy is particularly nonviable when underperformance is connected to sports betting. Additionally, athletes who publicly apologize to fans after underperforming are not necessarily alleviated from the backlash related to their performance. In fact, apologies are sometimes weaponized as part of the backlash athletes face for their perceived underperformance, especially if they earn a large salary or are compensated for their performances (e.g., NIL deals; Le, 2011; Madu, 2022). Therefore, rebuild strategies do not sufficiently address underperformance crises even though these crises are likely perceived as preventable by highly identified fans (Larkin et al., 2022).

Although athletes certainly do not underperform intentionally, these crises also do not align with SCCT's classifications for victim and accidental crises. Underperformance results in widespread public backlash, whereas victim and accidental crises typically result in lower responsibility attributions where public backlash is less severe. As we will demonstrate by Liddell's case, the backlash to his underperformance was likely driven by fans' belief that athletes control their (under)performance (i.e., underperformance is preventable behavior). In these scenarios, fans often ignore the external forces that could lead to underperformance (e.g., loud noises in stadiums) or the realities of being human (e.g., sometimes athletes just underperform). Accordingly, the diminish strategies for victim or accidental crises prescribed by SCCT do not match this crisis type either as excuses and justifications offered by athletes would likely further fuel backlash. Thus, an additional crisis and response category accounting for underperformance crises is warranted.

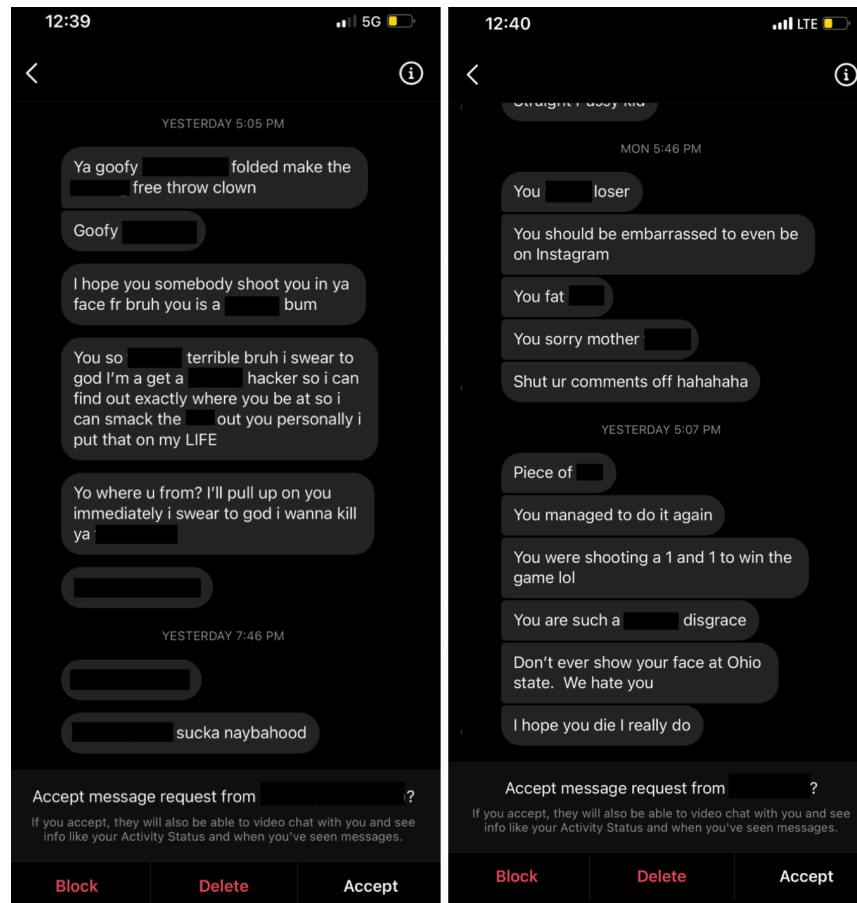
### **Liddell's Underperformance Crisis Case**

We critically interrogated Liddell's crisis case to illustrate underperformance as a unique crisis type. Case study methodologies are well-positioned to make strong contributions to theory development based on their "potential for achieving high conceptual validity; strong procedures for fostering new hypotheses; value as a useful means to closely examine the hypothesized role of causal mechanisms in the context of individual cases; and capacity for addressing causal complexity" (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 19). Considering our aim to extend SCCT and ARCs by proposing a new crisis type and matched response, a case study is needed to draw initial causal links between the crisis and a favorable outcome via the response. Although we see Liddell's case as an exemplar of underperformance crises and one that helps us propose a new crisis response strategy, there are other examples of underperformance and public harassment that fall under this crisis type. We return to these examples at the end of this article.

Liddell played a defining role in leading Ohio State to postseason play in the 2020–2021 NCAA basketball season. By March 2021, Liddell's team was considered a favorite in the March Madness

tournament and was expected to advance to the Final Four, if not win the entire tournament. Having dominated regular season play, Liddell was expected to lead his team through each tournament round. Thus, fans were shocked and outraged when Ohio State lost to Oral Roberts in their first game—a team not expected to make it past the first round.

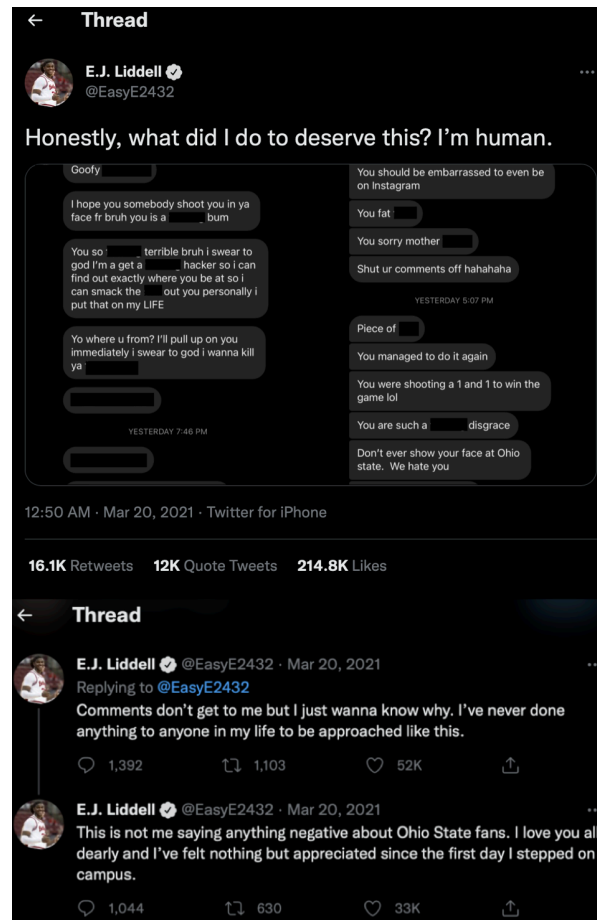
Although Liddell led his team in scoring, fans were particularly displeased with his performance. As theorized above, an isolated incident at the end of regulation triggered Liddell's underperformance crisis; a single error in play overshadowed his otherwise strong performance, resulting in excessive public outrage. Liddell missed the front end of a one-and-one free throw, which could have allowed Ohio State to win the game outright, avoiding overtime. Immediately after missing the free throw, Liddell received backlash via direct messages on his Twitter account (Figure 1). These messages were extremely vulgar, threatening, and racist, with fans/spectators calling Liddell derogatory names and threatening violence. These messages escalated once the Buckeyes officially lost the game at the end of overtime.



**Figure 1. Direct messages received by Liddell (2021) on Twitter after his underperformance.**  
*Note. Account handles, profile pictures, profanity, and racial slurs from all figures have been redacted for this article.*

At this point in the crisis cycle, the messages constituted a personal and private crisis for Liddell rather than a team or paracrisis that occurred in full view of stakeholders. This is because the most violent and vulgar messages were sent via direct message rather than posted to social media publicly. Still, the messages indicate reputational damage resulting from Liddell's underperformance and, due to their violent nature, a potential mental health crisis for Liddell (see Pells, 2023).

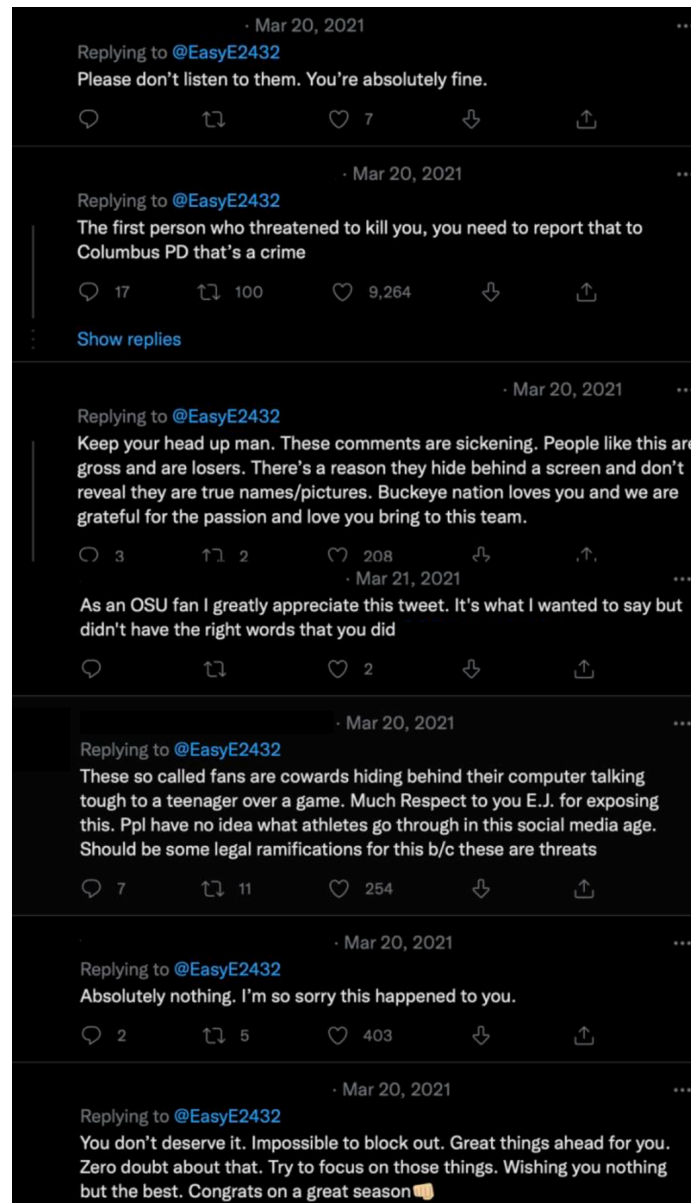
Liddell responded to these messages by posting screenshots on Twitter, making his personal crisis visible to stakeholders, accompanied by posts stating his confusion, frustration, and hurt regarding why fans would react to his missed shot in this aggressive manner (Figure 2). Liddell asked what he did to deserve such dehumanizing and threatening messages, forcing fans and spectators to reckon with their treatment of him and his underperformance even if they were not the ones who sent the violent messages. He also highlighted the mismatch between his underperformance and the reactions he received while expressing appreciation for the fans who supported him throughout the season.



**Figure 2. Liddell's (2021) response to the direct messages.**



Liddell's response proved effective in diminishing his crisis cycle and challenging the source and nature of the "crisis"—from him and his underperformance to his aggressors and their hateful messages. As seen in Figure 3, social media users immediately began supporting Liddell under his post where he exposed the backlash.



**Figure 3. Fans' reactions to Liddell's (2021) response.**

Additionally, rather than emphasizing Liddell's missed free throw when discussing Ohio State's loss in their next-day coverage, which they would have likely done otherwise, further fueling the underperformance crisis, sport media highlighted the positive aspects of Liddell's performance, taking critical aim at those who sent him the racist and threatening messages. Indeed, the next-day coverage from Bleacher Report, CBS Sports, and *Sports Illustrated* all framed Liddell's performance as excellent, recognizing him as the team's leading scorer in the game rather than the person who lost the game for the team (Chiari, 2021; Cobb, 2021; Jackson, 2021). Thus, Liddell's response effectively engaged what we term the *flip appeal*, challenging the classification of underperformance as a norm-violating behavior.

### **The Flip Appeal**

Now that we have defined and illustrated underperformance as a unique crisis type, we theorize the *flip appeal* as the "matched" response, following SCCT. We define the flip appeal as a crisis response strategy that challenges the classification of underperformance as a norm-violating behavior, repositioning the critics and their hateful responses as the true transgressors and transgressions, respectively, in the crisis scenario. That is, the flip appeal raises considerations that delegitimize underperforming as an action that merits *excessively harsh* criticism. To do this, the flip appeal prompts publics to reevaluate the severity of the backlash after the alleged transgression, repositioning the *excessive criticism* of the underperformer and the underperformance as the actual norm-violating behavior.

Given this repositioning of the transgression, the flip appeal is decidedly different from the image repair theory strategies of shifting blame and attacking the accuser. In shifting the blame, the transgression itself is undisputed; the accused simply attempts to shift blame to another target (e.g., "Steve took your wallet, not me"; Benoit, 2015, p. 28). With the flip appeal, the underperformer does not suggest another person underperformed. Instead, the fundamental classification of underperformance as an act worthy of excessive criticism is questioned. Moreover, by attacking the accuser, the accused attempts to reduce the offensiveness of the act by discrediting the credibility of the accusers ("Joe says I embezzled money, but he is a chronic liar"; Benoit, 2015, p. 28). With the flip appeal, the underperformer does not attempt to lessen the offensiveness of the underperformance by suggesting publics do not have the expertise or credentials to evaluate an elite athlete's performance. Instead, the flip appeal allows underperformers to highlight other considerations to evaluate their performance and, in doing so, forces publics to reevaluate their criticism. With this differentiation in mind, we turn to the three components of the flip appeal: Awareness raising, vulnerability, and crisis invitation, all of which help to successfully flip the crisis on its head (Table 1).

**Table 1. The Flip Appeal Components.**

Component	Description	Purpose
Awareness raising	Raising publics' awareness of the underperformer as a <i>human</i> rather than a product designed for public consumption.	Humanizes the underperformer and highlights shared humanity.
Vulnerability	Communicating relatable and genuine emotions about publics' harsh reactions to the underperformance.	Deescalates confrontation between the underperformer and publics by pairing the act of underperforming with confusion and sadness rather than anger and frustration. Encourages publics to reassess their harsh critiques.
Crisis invitation	Inviting publics into the crisis scenario, making them part of the crisis.	Leverages public support online.

### **Awareness Raising**

The baseline component of the flip appeal is *awareness raising*—in this case, raising publics' awareness of the underperformer as a *human* rather than a product designed for public consumption. The dehumanizing and threatening messages Liddell received after his underperformance suggest that highly identified fans often forget that public figures exist as humans outside of their profession as performers/entertainers. Whether consciously or subconsciously, fans are motivated to consume sport as a means of escape and to engage in vicarious achievement (Feder & Smith, 2023). Accordingly, fans often view athletes as superhuman, expecting them to attain what average individuals cannot. Statistics demonstrating the meager percentage of competitive athletes who qualify to compete at the collegiate and professional levels justify these expectations (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2022). In some instances, this recognition of an athlete's exceptionalism fuels highly identified fans' inclination to set their *own* competition goals for the athlete. Through vicarious achievement, fans feel fulfilled by athletes' ability to attain these goals (Feder & Smith, 2023). Consequently, when athletes fall short of these goals, fan reactions can range from disappointment to outrage as fans may not instinctually regard athletes as humans existing outside the sport arena (Feder & Smith, 2023). For this reason, athletes' responses to underperformance crises must highlight when criticism falls outside of a *reasonable* critique within the sport context. The flip appeal raises publics' awareness of the underperformer's humanity first and professional duties/expectations second.

Raising awareness of the humanity of the athlete via the flip appeal is theoretically supported by the concept of priming. The psychological process of priming occurs when the introduction of one stimulus affects a subsequent stimulus, such as when new information influences one's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Hoewe, 2020). Priming is often studied in media and political contexts, where journalists and politicians introduce information or criteria (e.g., the prime) that affects how publics evaluate that news issue and/or politician (e.g., the evaluation; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Raising publics' awareness of the humanity of an athlete during an underperformance crisis likely functions to prime similarly (see Bucy, D'Angelo, & Bauer, 2014). Because athletes gain fame and popularity through their performances, "performing well" is often the criterion for evaluating their success, hence the crisis of *underperforming*. By

reminding publics of an athlete's humanity, the accused underperformer can introduce new criteria for the evaluation of their performance. Indeed, awareness raising via the flip appeal allows athletes to prime publics to consider their underperformance in relation to their overall personhood first, positioning the underperformance as less of a norm violation and more of a common, shared experience.

Athletes critiqued for their underperformance can likely best engage in the awareness-raising component of the flip appeal by explicitly calling attention to any dehumanizing language that is used when critiquing the underperformance, thereby elevating their humanity as the criterion that *should* guide fan reactions in response to underperformance. As illustrated by Figure 2, Liddell (2021) explicitly reminded critics that he is "human," while publicizing the messages that called for his death for missing a free throw. In stating, "I've never done anything to anyone in my *life* to be approached like this," Liddell (2021; emphasis added) also contextualized his actions within the scope of his overall personhood, highlighting how the critiques about his underperformance went far beyond what is/should be appropriate in the sport context. Such a jarring juxtaposition between his "norm-violating" behavior and calls for the end of his personhood contributed to the immediate and overwhelming tone change of the Twitter messages directed at Liddell that evening (Figure 3) and from sport media the next day (Eisenberg, 2021). The flip appeal as a response strategy is thus useful for contextualizing underperformance by reminding publics how a public figure's performance is just one part of their personhood, making the underperformance less egregious and offensive.

### ***Leading With Vulnerability***

Crisis responses engaging the flip appeal should lead with *vulnerability*, with the accused avoiding confrontational and defensive tones and instead communicating relatable and genuine emotions to avoid alienating publics while still holding them accountable for their dehumanizing critiques. Confrontational and defensive responses to underperformance would likely worsen rather than lessen fan frustration. This is consistent with the finding that denials and dismissals such as shifting the blame and attacking the accuser are ineffective crisis response strategies (Arendt, LaFleche, & Limperopulos, 2017). Reactions to basketball player Russel Westbrook's interactions with fans throughout his National Basketball Association (NBA) career also support this contention (Honaker, 2020). As Westbrook has consistently demonstrated, confrontational and defensive responses feed into fans' perception that high-profile athletes with large salaries or lucrative NIL deals are superhuman, paid to perform, can/should control their performance, and therefore can/should "take" the criticism, justifying their outrage. Instead, a vulnerable and emotional crisis response can deescalate the crisis by pairing the act of underperforming with confusion and sadness rather than the more negative emotions of anger and frustration elicited by publics.

Leading with vulnerability is theoretically supported by the "emotion-as-frame perspective" (Nabi, 2003, p. 230). Nabi (2003) argues that emotions can work as a framing mechanism, where the "pairing of certain emotions with particular ideas or events eventually shapes the way in which one interprets and responds to those events" (p. 227). Emotions serve as an important "anchor" through which publics interpret crisis scenarios (Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Kim & Cameron, 2011) and those who frame crises (e.g., athletes, the media) can elicit different emotional responses (Choi & Lin, 2009). In this context, underperformers receive the (often individual) criticism, so they have the most opportunity to respond and reframe the crisis of their underperformance. Being vulnerable and responding to underperformance with

relatable emotions could provide emotional cues for publics to reassess their "crisis" claims (see Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Kim & Cameron, 2011).

We see the effectiveness of Liddell leading with vulnerability and emotionality in his underperformance crisis. Liddell specifically asked fans what he did to "deserve" the backlash he received. By posing this question to fans, Liddell hinted at genuine confusion and sadness, which are vulnerable emotions to which fans could likely relate. He wanted to know "why" he was receiving such aggressive messages, implicitly asking publics to explain *their* negative emotional response. Asking such questions about the fundamental legitimacy of the negative response to the act of underperforming is vulnerable as the accused risks publics doubling down on their criticism. However, when the accused leads with this emotional vulnerability, the critics are forced to reevaluate their harsh stance to provide this understanding, which could soften their criticisms. This reevaluation prompted by Liddell's vulnerable questions resulted in supporters asserting that no underperformance crisis had occurred; supporters were quick to denounce the validity of the underperformance crisis claims. Leading with vulnerability and emotionality is thus a crucial component of the flip appeal because it allows the alleged underperformer to challenge the classification of underperforming as a *crisis* (e.g., questioning the negative reactions) without being defensive about it or asserting that the underperformance did not occur (e.g., denial).

### ***Crisis Invitation***

The final component of the flip appeal is *crisis invitation*. To effectively use the flip appeal, accused underperformers should invite publics, particularly supporters, into the crisis scenario, making them *part* of the crisis rather than *bystanders*. This invitation is essential as underperformance crises may only directly affect stakeholders if sports betting has occurred. Therefore, underperformers need to invite stakeholders into the crisis to leverage their support online. Crisis invitation can be accomplished by visually representing the severity of the backlash being leveled against the perceived underperformer, such as posting screenshots of threatening messages. By showing the messages, the underperformer can make the personal crisis public, implicitly or explicitly ask publics to weigh in on whether these types of messages are (un)acceptable, and hold publics collectively responsible for their treatment of public figures. Crisis invitation can also be accomplished by explicitly mentioning supporters in response to the underperformance, leveraging preestablished relationships/fandom into vocalized support online. The more vocalized support for the underperformer, the more that support will spread through social and traditional media (diffusion of information; Lin, Spence, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2016), with supporters performing public relations work for the underperformer (see Brown & Billings, 2013; Sanderson, 2010).

Crisis invitation is theoretically supported by the stakeholder theory of crisis management (Alpaslan, Green, & Mitroff, 2009) and our understanding of how publics respond to crises online (Zulli, 2020). The stakeholder theory of crisis management suggests that the "most efficient approach to crises requires including as many stakeholders as possible in the crisis preparation and response, allowing them to bring their perspective, identity, and knowledge to the analysis" (Alpaslan et al., 2009, p. 44). This approach recognizes the fundamental value of all stakeholders, even those not directly involved in the crisis. Inviting stakeholders—in this case, supporters or faith-holders (Luoma-Aho, 2015)—into the crisis allows the underperformer more resources to combat the crisis narrative, either through providing new response

strategies or support volume (see Brown & Billings, 2013). Moreover, recent theorizing of crises in a digital age suggests that publics are inclined (and sometimes incentivized) to participate in crisis narratives online, if for no other reason than to be part of the most exciting controversy of the day (Zulli, 2020). The crisis invitation component of the flip appeal thus capitalizes on publics' desire to contribute to crisis narratives online, but in a way that counters the legitimacy of the crisis claims and supports the underperformer.

As exemplified by publics' response to Liddell's crisis response, inviting publics into the crisis by showing them visual evidence of the hateful messages resulted in the shortening of the crisis cycle. By showing screenshots, Liddell provided fans with an immediate and intimate behind-the-scenes look at the realities of being a public figure. Liddell invited publics to witness precisely what he was enduring and to support him through it. And support they did. After seeing the screenshots, fans and other publics denounced the hateful rhetoric Liddell received while establishing that his underperformance was not the crisis critics made it out to be. Crisis invitation is thus central to the flip appeal as it allows publics to witness and vicariously experience the crisis and, in doing so, provides an opportunity for publics to refute crisis claims.

### **Other Applications of Underperformance Crises and the Flip Appeal**

Above, we critically interrogated E. J. Liddell's crisis case to explicate underperformance as a unique crisis type and the flip appeal as the matched response. Here, we illustrate the utility of this new crisis/response with two additional examples: Michigan basketball forward, Terrance Williams II, and Olympic gymnast, Simone Biles.

The underperformance crisis of Terrance Williams II closely mirrors that of Liddell, providing a comparable example of the flip appeal's utility. Williams II was a strong competitor during the 2022–2023 basketball season. Unfortunately, Michigan blew an 8-point lead to Vanderbilt, losing by 1 point in the second round of the National Invitational Tournament in March 2023. Williams II was not solely responsible for the loss, yet he still received death threats on social media in the immediate aftermath. In one notable post, a social media user suggested that Williams II "be left for dead in a ditch" (Pells, 2023, para. 2), to which Williams II's father responded in an interview, saying, "You actually root for them when they're good. But then they make a mistake, and a game doesn't go your way and you turn to hate. That's unacceptable" (Pells, 2023, para. 3).

In this scenario, fans held Williams II responsible for Michigan's loss, creating an underperformance crisis via their hateful and threatening messages online. Although Williams II did not directly respond, his father did, using the flip appeal to challenge the classification of his son's underperformance as a norm violation worthy of death threats and instead reposition the death threats as the norm violation. Williams II's father raised publics' awareness of his son's humanity by saying the underperformance was a "mistake," positioning his son as fallible despite his extraordinary athleticism. Williams II's father strongly condemned social media users for the vitriol hurled at his son. However, he did not deny his son's underperformance, nor did he match the negative energy of the social media users. Instead, he explained the duality of sport fandom and highlighted the hypocrisy of the hateful rhetoric. And, he explicitly invited publics into this underperformance crisis by repeatedly using the word "you." In doing so, Williams II's father centered the

critics as the primary source of the norm-violating behavior (“a game doesn’t go *your way* and *you* turn to hate”; Pells, 2023, para. 3, emphasis added), positioning fan expectations and hypocrisy as “unacceptable.”

Olympic gymnast Simone Biles provides a slightly different example of an underperformance crisis and flip appeal response. Biles is the most decorated gymnast in the world (Associated Press, 2023). However, in the 2021 Olympics, Biles pulled out of most of her team and individual events, citing concerns over her mental health and ability to complete her complicated routines safely. Public reactions were mixed, with some publics, journalists, and sport commentators praising her courageous and “powerful message” of mental health advocacy (Niesen, 2021, para. 2), while others villainized her as selfish, shameful, and “sociopath[ic]” (Niesen, 2021, para. 8). Although Biles eventually responded to these criticisms, support initially came from other athletes, such as fellow-gymnast Aly Raisman and NBA player Jayson Tatum. Raisman (2021) tweeted, “Just a friendly reminder: Olympic athletes are humans & they’re doing the best they can. It’s REALLY hard to peak at the right moment & do the routine of your life under such pressure. Really hard.” In response to conservative talk show host, Charlie Kirk, calling Biles a “selfish sociopath” and a “shame to the country” (see Campbell, 2021), Tatum (2021) tweeted:

Is it that hard to be supportive and empathetic to what others are going through? This is someone’s daughter and her health your [*sic*] referring to. Wonder if he has kids and how he would feel as a parent someone talking about his kids this way.

Biles underperformed by *not* performing at the 2021 Olympics. This created a crisis for her personally—threatening her brand/legacy, widespread criticism online, extensive discussion about her athletic future—and for the women’s gymnastics team as the pressure to perform at the Olympics without Biles increased exponentially. Still, Raisman (2021) and Tatum (2021) supported Biles using the tactics of the flip appeal, which likely influenced coverage of this crisis moving forward (see Niesen, 2021). Raisman (2021) explicitly raised awareness of Biles’ humanity, saying she is a “human,” thus, the critics should be mindful that performing is “REALLY hard,” priming them to respond empathetically. Tatum (2021) prompted publics to be “empathic” and see Biles as someone’s “daughter,” positioning Biles as a person beyond her athlete status and encouraging sensitive reactions to her underperformance. By offering a “friendly reminder” and encouraging publics to see their children in Biles, Raisman (2021) and Tatum (2021), respectively, implicitly invited publics into Biles’ mental health struggle. The flip appeal accounts for the response strategies in this underperformance crisis case.

### **Flip Appeal Caveats and Limitations**

Despite our theorization that the flip appeal can help effectively manage underperformance crises, we acknowledge some mitigating factors that likely impact athletes’ ability to employ this strategy successfully. Namely, the resources available to high-profile athletes and publics’ perception of athletes’ character may impact how publics receive athletes’ use of the flip appeal. For example, professional and collegiate athletes who earn large salaries and lucrative endorsement/NIL deals are likely to face more difficulty encouraging publics to consider their humanity over their jobs as performers compared with up-and-coming athletes if and when they underperform. Similarly, athletes who repeatedly transgress (i.e., have a crisis history; Coombs, 2007) or who have a history of addressing publics with confrontational and

defensive tones (e.g., Russell Westbrook) will likely struggle to successfully engage the flip appeal as their vulnerability may appear uncharacteristic and disingenuous. This is due to publics holding high-profile athletes to exceedingly high standards of performance *and* behavior, which diminishes fans' patience for athletes' underperformances and bad attitudes (Summers & Morgan, 2008). High-profile athletes and their publicists must consider these factors when engaging the flip appeal as wealth, crisis history, and poor character could render the flip appeal less effective.

Additionally, because publics often target athletes on their personal social media accounts, the attacked athlete is responsible for responding. The athlete may not be willing to do so or may not feel capable of being vulnerable or engaging publics amidst the crisis, both central components of the flip appeal. Moreover, while the flip appeal may mitigate the immediate crisis cycle after an underperformance, subsequent underperformances might reignite/intensify the crisis cycle, necessitating multiple responses. Finally, the socio-technological realities of social media platforms may limit the effectiveness of the flip appeal. Indeed, users are beholden to the algorithmic sorting/filtering of the platforms they use (e.g., X, formerly Twitter, TikTok). Thus, flip appeal responses may not garner wide visibility on the platform, potentially hindering the media from picking up the story.

### **Conclusion**

This study introduced two concepts to nuance our understanding of sport-based crises and responses: Underperformance crises and the flip appeal. Athletes regularly endure backlash for their perceived underperformance in high-profile competition (Pells, 2023). This backlash occurs because athletes' underperformance violates fan expectations, which is consistent with crises in general (Coombs, 2007). Following SCCT and using the E. J. Liddell crisis case, we proposed the flip appeal as an appropriate and effective response strategy that works on three mechanisms: awareness raising, vulnerability, and crisis invitation.

This theorizing makes three contributions to crisis communication theory and practice. The first is the extension of SCCT and ARCs to include underperformance as a legitimate and prevalent crisis within the sport context. Knowing that sport fans draw on different values when reacting to athletes' performance versus nonperformance missteps (Summers & Morgan, 2008), and recognizing that scholarship has thus far prioritized nonperformance crises (e.g., Coombs, 2018; Frederick et al., 2017; Richards et al., 2017), this theorization of underperformance crises adds much-needed nuance to our understanding of athlete/fan interactions online.

Second, the theorization of the flip appeal contributes to existing crisis communication scholarship by focusing on individual over organizational response. Crisis communication theories and sport-related crisis scholarship primarily privilege inquiries into organizational crisis responses (e.g., Brown et al., 2020; Bundy et al., 2017; Coombs, 2018; Richards et al., 2017). This is problematic in the social media era, where fans have "direct" access to public figures (Weiner, 2021) who are brands in and of themselves. Therefore, establishing a crisis response accounting for the realities of fan/athlete interactions while considering the expected and appropriate communication in the online space addresses an important scholarship gap.



Third, although discussed in the sport context, the theorization of underperformance crises also has utility in other contexts. There are many professions where reputational and financial capital are tied to public performances, such as actors, singers, and social media influencers. Although defining and assessing the nature of “underperforming” for these more creative professions is challenging, the fact remains that many celebrities and influencers experience excessive and unnecessary hate online because of their performances (e.g., Hannett, 2021; Wright, Kazdin, & Know, 2011). Accordingly, the flip appeal will likely prove efficacious in these crisis scenarios due to the similar performance/capital structures between public figures and athletes and their online accessibility.

Future research should examine underperformance crises beyond the cases presented here and across a range of scenarios within and outside of the sport setting. Following SCCT, another next step will be to experimentally test the flip appeal to assess if awareness-raising, vulnerability, and invitational responses lead to lesser attributions of responsibility and greater reputational repair. Underperformance crises and the flip appeal should also be considered in relation to gender as public commentary regards athletes differently based on gender (Billings et al., 2017). For now, underperformance crises and the flip appeal provide crisis communication scholars and practitioners more guidance in responding to fan criticisms surrounding their violated expectations of athlete performances.

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