Ohio State University football coach Urban Meyer became the subject of controversy when it was reported that one of his assistant coaches, Zach Smith, allegedly abused his spouse—not only at Ohio State University, but also years before when Smith worked for Meyer at the University of Florida (Cullinane, 2018; Rowland, 2018). The media and public tried to understand Meyer’s interactions with Smith, Meyer’s knowledge of Smith’s conduct, whether Meyer engaged in the proper reporting of that conduct, and Meyer’s handling of public relations prior to the 2018 college football season (“The Transcript,” 2018). The purpose of this study is to utilize an understanding of image repair theory to analyze the content found in statements by Meyer and others during the 2018 Meyer communication crisis.

Image repair theory (also known as image restoration theory) is utilized in this study to assess Meyer’s public relations tactics in a time of crisis from July 24, 2018 to Sept. 22, 2018. Benoit’s (1997) image repair theory noted five strategies people utilize in crisis communication including: (a) denial, (b) evasion of responsibility, (c) reducing offensiveness of the event, (d) corrective action, and (e) mortification. The closest image repair theory sport articles to the current article involved college teams. Compton and Compton (2014) provided an article that examined open letters to fans from two college coaches and two athletic directors. In another study, the Duke lacrosse team’s effort to repair its image following rape allegations was examined through newspaper articles and other documents (Len-Rios, 2010). Finally, a pair of team-oriented image repair articles primarily considered fan messages over Twitter in response to the Miami booster scandal and the Penn State football sex abuse scandal (Brown & Billings, 2013; Brown, Brown, & Billings, 2015). None of these articles focused on the statements of a prominent college coach in response to off-field issues impacting the team.

In the current study, the researchers utilized image repair theory to analyze Meyer’s crisis communication. A number of resources were analyzed including: (a) a transcript of Meyer’s comments regarding Zach Smith at the Big Ten Conference football media days—an event that started driving pressure on Ohio State University and Meyer (“Big Ten Conference,” 2018); (b) an Aug. 3 statement issued by Meyer after the Ohio State University investigation into Meyer’s relationship with Zach Smith and Smith’s issues (“Read the full,” 2018), (c) Ohio State University’s report—The Independent Investigation Summary of Findings—on Meyer’s conduct with Zach Smith (Ohio State University, 2018), (d) a transcript of the Aug. 22 press conference announcing those findings (“The Transcript,” 2018), (e) an Aug. 24 apology Meyer tweeted to Courtney Smith (Crawford, 2018; Gottlieb, 2018), (f) Meyers’ press conferences after his return from suspension. The researchers found that Meyer used four of the five major image repair strategies noted by Benoit—failing to incorporate corrective action. Meyer more heavily leaned on reducing offensiveness of the event and mortification as he went deeper into the crisis communication process.