



To invest in the invisible: A case study of Manti Te'o's image repair strategies during the Katie Couric interview



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine Manti Te'o's image repair strategies during an interview with Katie Couric. This interview followed reports that Te'o had been involved in an elaborate hoax featuring a fake girlfriend. The interview was a worthy avenue of investigation as it was Te'o's first opportunity to publicly defend himself on camera following a week of ridicule and speculation by media outlets and the public. A deductive thematic analysis was conducted on Te'o's responses utilizing Benoit's image repair typology and other recently identified image repair strategies as a guide. Results revealed that Te'o did not deviate from previously established strategies by employing defeasibility, victimization, good intentions, stonewalling, retrospective regret, bolstering, shifting blame, and simple denial. Collectively, the employment of these tactics illustrated a timid, naïve, and remorseful approach to image repair. While some of Te'o's choices were appropriate, the heavy use of stonewalling and victimization may have been ineffective in changing audience perception.

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Prior to January 16, 2013, University of Notre Dame football player Manti Te'o was viewed by many as an inspiration – a highly talented athlete who persevered through the death of his girlfriend Lennay Kekua to have the best season of his college football career, finishing as the runner-up for the Heisman Trophy. The Notre Dame football team and community appeared to rally around Te'o and the adversity he was experiencing, fueling a run to the national championship game. Although Te'o and Notre Dame were unsuccessful in winning the national championship, his National Football League (NFL) draft stock and professional future were bright. However, on January 16, *Deadspin* released a story which revealed Te'o had been part of an elaborate Internet hoax and that Kekua, had in fact, never existed (Burke & Dickey, 2013a). Furthermore, the *Deadspin* story revealed that Ronaiah Tuiaosopo (male) had impersonated Kekua over the phone (Kekua and Te'o had never met face-to-face). The extent of Tuiaosopo and Te'o's relationship prior to (and during) the hoax was unclear. However, *Deadspin* implied the two knew each other relatively well, which raised many questions about Te'o's involvement.

Following this announcement, media outlets expressed a range of opinions about the situation. A common sentiment across early media reports was articulated in the work of Eder (2013) who stated, "Much remains unclear about whether

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Te'o was duped or whether he somehow perpetrated the fictitious story" (p. 1). If the former were true, then Te'o had been a victim of "catfishing," a phenomenon where an individual creates a fake online profile in order to fraudulently seduce another person (Harris, 2013). If the latter were true, Te'o's future in the NFL and beyond would be in jeopardy. Thus, a public response by Te'o was necessary to formally address the questions and concerns that had emerged.

One week after *Deadspin* released the story, Te'o participated in an interview on *Katie*. It was his first appearance on camera since he and Notre Dame officials had confirmed their knowledge of the hoax. The interview was a ratings success, with a 2.6 household rating and a number one finish in its afternoon timeslot in major markets such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia (Guthrie, 2013). This interview stands as a worthy avenue of investigation as it was Te'o's first opportunity to publicly defend himself on camera following a week of ridicule and speculation by media outlets and the public. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine Manti Te'o's image repair strategies during the Katie Couric interview. In order to determine whether Te'o's approach was consistent with previously established image repair strategies, Benoit's (1995) typology as well as other recently identified image repair strategies were utilized as a guide. The intention of this study was to lend support for and expand upon existing image repair research by analyzing an event unique to the sport communication landscape. Furthermore, this study was one of the first known attempts to analyze the image repair strategies of a high profile athlete who had possibly been a victim of catfishing, which is a relatively new phenomenon within the realm of media studies.

1. Review of literature

1.1. Image repair

Image repair is grounded in the premise that image or "face" is a valuable commodity that when threatened, can be mitigated by carefully crafted messages (Benoit, 2006). Benoit (1995, 1997, 2000) developed an image repair typology, consisting of five categories: (a) denial, (b) evasion of responsibility, (c) reducing offensiveness, (d) taking corrective action, and (e) mortification. Within those five categories are 14 image repair strategies. Denial consists of two variations – simple denial and shifting blame. Simple denial is refuting any blame, while shifting blame consists of asserting that someone/something else is responsible for an act. Within evasion of responsibility, there are four unique strategies including scapegoating, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. Scapegoating involves blaming the event on the provocation of another. Defeasibility occurs by stating the act was grounded in uncertainty or ignorance. Accident involves claiming that the event was unplanned while good intentions posits that the accused had well-reasoned motives for the act.

Within reducing offensiveness there are six specific strategies: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, reducing credibility (i.e., attack accuser), and compensation. Bolstering occurs by the accused emphasizing positive characteristics. Minimization involves downplaying the significance of the act, whereas differentiation compares the act to other actions that were more offensive. Transcendence occurs when an individual discusses how prior positive behavior outweighs the damage of the offending act. Reducing credibility involves attacking the accuser and questioning the legitimacy of the initial attack. Compensation occurs through paying a victim or making restitution for actions. Corrective action involves taking measures to prevent the recurrence of an event and finally, mortification manifests by an individual admitting guilt and apologizing for offending actions.

While these image repair strategies have generally remained consistent in the literature, the typology has begun to expand. In their examination of British Petroleum's (BP) response to the Deepwater Horizon explosion, Smithson and Venette (2013) discovered a stonewalling strategy. The authors defined this strategy as "uncooperative communication that strategically obstructs and delays the flow of information" (p. 399). Furthermore, stonewalling involves offering superficial responses, refocusing (or redirecting) attention, and denying the accuser access to certain information (Smithson & Venette, 2013). The authors suggested that this strategy be used as a stopgap rather than a long-term solution. Sanderson (2008) explored former Major League Baseball pitcher Roger Clemens' image repair in response to allegations he used performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) during his playing career, and discovered a suffering (i.e., victimization) strategy. This strategy involves the accused stating that self-defense is difficult because the court of public opinion has already condemned the accused. Sanderson also concluded that this strategy should be a temporary tactic rather than a permanent solution. Len-Rios (2010) examined Duke University's image repair efforts after members of its men's lacrosse team were accused of sexually assaulting female dancers at a party. The analysis revealed a disappointment strategy, which consisted of acknowledging bad judgment by the athletes without completely separating or disassociating from them. This strategy enables groups to differentiate the values of the organization from the action of its members by showing disapproval toward questionable behaviors. Finally, in their examination of Lance Armstrong's use of both traditional and social media following allegations of using performance enhancing drugs (PEDs), Hambrick, Frederick, and Sanderson (in press) revealed two new image repair strategies: conforming and retrospective regret. Conforming was defined as attributing actions to one's environment or culture, while retrospective regret was defined as appearing reflective and expressing remorse that past actions were not handled differently.

Image repair is an important task that affects celebrities, politicians, and organizations. Athletes represent one celebrity group that has increasingly come under public scrutiny for incidents ranging from performance-enhancing drug (PEDs) use to transgressions in their personal lives (e.g., Tiger Woods). As a result, researchers have started to devote more attention to how athletes enact image repair, a trajectory we build upon in the current study.

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