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Getting out of the doghouse: The image repair strategies of Michael Vick

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ABSTRACT

Michael Vick's federal dog-fighting conviction in 2007 made him notorious. Vick spoke publicly about his role in the dog-fighting operation only once before beginning a prison term. Three years after entering prison, he returned to National Football League action. By 2011, some in the media proposed that Vick had successfully rehabilitated his image and redeemed himself in the eyes of the public. This study examines the image repair strategies Vick employed at his August 27, 2007, press conference. It concludes that Vick chose appropriate strategies but did not fully develop one critical strategy: corrective action. The paper also explores Vick's strategic use of the third person and appeals to a supernatural being.

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1. Introduction

In July 2007, a federal grand jury in Richmond, Virginia, charged professional football player Michael Vick and two other men with conspiracy to engage in dog-fighting and a host of related offenses. Vick's reputation came under fire immediately. Lipper (2007) proposed that Vick's "image" had been "battered beyond repair" (p. 1). Vick responded nine days later, pleading "innocent" to the allegations. Through his attorney, Vick said he looked "forward to clearing my name" (p. 1). However, within a month, Vick admitted to the charges and pleaded guilty. At a press conference on August 27, 2007, Vick made a public apology. Schmidt and Battista (2007) said that most of Vick's comments at the press conference "involved trying to resurrect his public image" (p. 1). Similarly, Gorley Schufo (2007) observed that Vick's "image-rebuilding campaign starts today" (p. 1).

This study examines the image repair strategies Vick employed at his August 27, 2007, press conference. It concludes that Vick chose appropriate strategies but did not fully develop one critical strategy: corrective action. The paper also explores the strategic implications of Vick's use of the third person and appeals to a supernatural being.

2. Literature review

Benoit's (1995) image restoration theory represents the dominant model for analyzing responses to image-related crises. Benoit (1995) described five broad categories of response strategy, some of which feature subcategories: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Denial may involve saying that the offensive act never took place or that the accused bears no responsibility for the act. When denying responsibility, the accused may point a finger at someone or something else, thereby shifting the blame.

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Evasion of responsibility also allows the accused party to accept partial blame while offering explanations for the offensive act that may not be immediately observable to the public. Using the sub-strategies of evasion of responsibility, the accused party may assert that the offensive act occurred in response to a previous act from another party (provocation), that the offensive act came as a result of poor or unavailable information and/or a lack of ability to avoid commission of this act (defeasibility), that the offensive act was merely a mistake (accident), or that the regrettable offensive act was the product of benevolence gone bad (good intentions). Each of these sub-strategies presents additional information intended to counteract the perception of willful commission of the offensive act.

Reducing offensiveness permits the accused party to accept responsibility while placing the offensive act in a less offensive light. One may remind the public of positive qualities (bolstering), to reduce the negative feelings associated with the offensive act (minimization), to draw a favorable comparison between the act in question and a more serious offense (differentiation), to explain how the offensive act was a painful part of a positive development (transcendence), to insinuate that the whistle-blower lacks credibility or good character (attack the accuser), and to make amends for the offensive act, through either financial or other means (compensation).

Corrective action and mortification both require the accused to accept responsibility for the offensive act. Even if accused parties are not solely responsible, Benoit (1995) advised them to consider these strategies as the best option for repairing a tarnished image. Corrective action involves the implementation of proactive steps to prevent a recurrence of the offensive act, and it may include a plan for dealing with fallout from the offensive act.

Benoit (1995) applied the term "mortification" to the acceptance of full responsibility for an offensive act. Because Americans tend to forgive someone who shows remorse for a misstep, a genuine apology can go a long way to repair one's image. Of course, the nature of the offensive act and the public's perception of the sincerity of the apology factor into the overall effectiveness of this strategy. However, Benoit (1995) wholeheartedly endorsed a mortification strategy for responsible parties as the primary option, possibly relying on corrective action as a means to repair the damage to one's image quickly and effectively.

Certain combinations of strategies can lessen the chances that accused parties will repair their image. While denial, evasion of responsibility, and reducing offensiveness all seek to reduce either the responsibility of the accused or the negativity surrounding the offensive act, corrective action and mortification both embrace this responsibility and the reprehensible nature of the act. Benoit (1995) argues that to employ any of the former three strategies in combination with any of the latter two strategies compromises the credibility of the accused party and one's ability to repair a soiled image.

Benoit (1997) amended his image restoration theory to include cases of celebrity. In analyzing the differences between politicians and celebrities, Benoit noted that a celebrity may more easily admit guilt than either a politician or corporation due to the celebrity's lack of enemies and the likelihood of far fewer repercussions due to the admission. Conversely, celebrities would find it more difficult to diffuse their responsibility for an offensive act by claiming that they were merely following the party or company line. These same findings ought to apply to a professional athlete as well, as one may reasonably view them as a subset of celebrity.

When defending himself against dog-fighting charges, Vick had to give the appearance of sincerity; he had to embrace fully the heinous nature of his crimes and take responsibility for them; he could possibly curb damage from any additional charges directed at him; and he could plead with the media to focus its attacks solely on him as opposed to teammates and/or loved ones. Yet, Vick's situation proves different from many celebrities in trouble. Vick incurred the wrath of animal rights groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Humane Society of the United States. So, rather than finding himself attacked only by media figures, Vick created enemies who had a vested interest in using his dog-fighting case as a focal point to garner sustained media attention for their groups. Such attacks would galvanize their membership, potentially attract new members, and create additional exposure for their organizations.

2.1. Image repair efforts of sports figures

Academics have begun to develop image repair studies centered on sports-related crises. Blaney, Lippert, and Smith (2012) devote an entire book to sports image restoration, offering twenty case studies. The book includes new research regarding professional athletes and the mortification strategy. Twork and Blaney (2012) tested whether mortification coupled with corrective action would provide greater repair of a reputation than mortification alone for athletes following an accusation of wrongdoing. The authors did not find a significant difference between the two approaches. The findings suggest that promises of corrective action "do not add to reputational outcomes" (p. 396). The authors caution that the findings should be considered tentative until additional research is conducted.

At least one study has examined Michael Vick's attempt to repair his image. Smith (2012) provides a detailed examination of the image repair strategies Vick employed in response to the dog-fighting charges. This study adds to Smith's research in two ways. First, it identifies and theorizes about two rhetorical strategies Vick employed: the third person and appeals to a supreme being. Second, this study incorporates the latest research regarding professional athletes and image repair. In so doing, it questions whether Vick needed to use mortification-corrective action strategies or if he could have been as effective using a mortification-only strategy.

Researchers have examined the image repair efforts of numerous athletes. Walsh and McAllister-Spooner (2011) addressed an incident involving swimmer Michael Phelps in a photograph with marijuana paraphernalia; Epp (2010) compared and contrasted the image repair strategies of Major League Baseball players Mark McGuire, Alex Rodriguez, and Barry