

Image Repair and Crisis Response of Professional Athlete Adrian Peterson

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Abstract

During the 2014 season, a disastrous year in terms of public relations for the NFL, Adrian Peterson was among those who tainted the league's reputation. Domestic violence was at the forefront of the controversy, and Peterson's child abuse case caused additional damage to the league's image. This qualitative content analysis scrutinized Peterson's attempt to repair his image through the media after receiving public backlash from his child abuse charges. The study found that his media messages used evasion of responsibility and reducing offensiveness as his chief strategies, but their effects were not fully successful.

I. Introduction

As the media continue to become further rooted in professional sports, the more personal lives of athletes become exposed. As a result, sports fans become more knowledgeable to the personal lives of athletes and develop opinions on these athletes, whether good or bad. It is inevitable that athletes are exposed to the public when they commit an offensive act, which is why the study of image repair for modern athletes is critical.

While each account is different and carries diverse consequences whether legal or personal, it is up to athletes to repair their own image. If an athlete is caught in a situation that requires image repair, it is important to understand the most effective tactics and strategies used to help mend reputation.

In this case study, Peterson and his child abuse case will serve as an example of an athlete who has committed an offense and has fallen out of grace with the public.

This paper assessed the image repair strategies used by Peterson in his public statements using a variety of image repair theories in public relations.

II. Background

In a disastrous year in terms of public relations for the NFL, Peterson was amongst those who tainted the league's reputation. Domestic violence was at the forefront of the controversy, and Peterson's child abuse case caused additional damage to the image of the league. Peterson's case began on May 18,

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2014, during the NFL's offseason. While in Texas, Peterson disciplined his son after he pushed his brother during a motorbike video game, according to a police report. Peterson used a switch — a thin branch or rod for whipping — to discipline his son, which caused bruises and lacerations on the boy's back, legs, arms, and buttocks. While back home in Minnesota with his mother, the doctor noticed the injuries during a routine check up. The doctor informed the mother that the injuries were consistent with child abuse, and authorities in Texas were notified (DiMatteo, 2014).

In August 2014, Peterson testified before a grand Jury in Montgomery County, Texas. The jury initially decided not to indict Peterson on charges of child abuse, but in September. Peterson was indicted in Montgomery County and, subsequently, benched by the Vikings for their game against the New England Patriots. During this time Radisson hotels and other sponsors suspended their sponsorship of the Vikings and Adrian Peterson (DiMatteo, 2014). Later in September Peterson was placed on the commissioner's exempt list, which is essentially paid leave (Bien, 2014). He continued to lose sponsors during this time period including Nike and Castrol (DiMatteo, 2014).

In November, Peterson agreed to a plea deal that reduced his felony child-abuse charges to a single charge of reckless assault. This required him to pay a \$4,000 fine and perform community service (Zinser, 2014). Two weeks later the NFL announced that Peterson would be suspended without pay for the remainder of the season. He went on to appeal the suspension, but his motion was denied by the NFL (Vensel 2014, p. 1).

III. Literature Review

To analyze whether Peterson's strategies were effective, this paper relied on two theories: apology theory and image repair theory.

Apologia Theory

Apologia theory has most likely influenced the responses of many athletes in a media crisis. In these situations athletes are presented with an opportunity to respond to the public for their wrongdoings.

When a person or a business fails to live up to certain moral conduct or they fail in any other way, they are expected to defend themselves. The different approaches to this defense is defined as the apologia theory. When one's image is threatened, apologies are utilized to repair the damage to their reputation. Not only does apologia theory allow for a person to be held morally accountable. but it also gives merit to those who expect a higher standard of ethics from the accused. Image repair is accomplished through actions as well as communication and transparency. The media plays a key role in the apologia process for public figures. The media provide a channel for apologia statements to be on the public record and provide public figures with a means for transparent communication with their publics (Borden 2012, pp. 1-2).

For an apologia to be ethical, the guilty party must first admit the transgression if the accusations are truthful. Injury happens not only through harmful consequences but also moral violations, such as a broken promise or unfair advantage. Apologia should be mostly used for the purpose of reconciliation rather than self-interest. Apologizing for an indiscretion out of selfishness will create a hollow and unethical response. Attempting to find the best apologia rather than being strategic by using the most acceptable apologia shows one's attempt to be morally sound (Borden 2012, pp. 2,3,5).

The manner of an ethically ideal apologia begins with an honest admission and avoidance of dishonesty. The apology must be issued as soon as the indiscretion is known and without coercion. Furthermore, it must address all publics that are involved or were affected. Next, it must be performed in the right context, which takes into consideration the location and the medium in which it is expressed. The content of an ethically sound apologia should first acknowledge the wrongdoing as well as fully accept the responsibility of one's actions. The accused must express regret in their actions and attempt to identify with the injured party. This should be followed by a request for forgiveness in addition to pursuing reconciliation with the damaged stakeholder. The accused should not withhold any additional information in regards to the indiscretion and offer an explanation as to why the accused is at fault in the eyes of the accuser. Finally, the accused should offer to make up for their offense in whatever way is deemed necessary (Borden, 2012, pp. 5-6).

Ware and Linkugel conducted the first prominent work on apology theory in 1973. The purpose of their work stems from the studies of social psychologist Abelson, who wrote, "It is natural for an attack on a person's character to create a response from that person because when the public witnesses an attack on a person's morality, motives or reputation, they expect a response from the accused" (Brown 2012, p. 15). Ware and Linkugel categorized the apology theory into four major categories: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence (p. 15).

Denial strategy involves the accused entity denying that the misconduct ever took place. Clearly, denial strategy is used when the accusations of wrongdoing are false or deceptive (Utsler & Epp, 2013, p. 141).

Bolstering technique attempts to identify with the audience through a positive common image. The individual being accused of misconduct attempts to remind the accuser or audience of positive parts of their past. In this technique, the accused is not denying guilt but rather trying to cast off the blame that they are receiving. Bolstering is not seen as an effective apology strategy due to the fact that there is an admittance of guilt by not addressing the problem directly (Brown, Dickhaus, & Long, 2012, p. 151).

Differentiation strategy attempts to separate the act from the accused party's character and the public opinion. The person accused tries to illustrate the accusation in a different context, therefore, giving it a new meaning (Utsler & Epp 2013, p. 142). By using differentiation the party at fault is able to suspend judgment momentarily in hopes that future context of the act in question can be seen differently (Brown, Dickhaus, & Long 2012, p. 152).

The fourth apology strategy is transcendence, which tries to portray the transgression as a smaller part of an overall positive situation that is not readily apparent to the public. This is done in hopes that the accusers will try to understand the broader context and view the offensive act in a more positive sense (Utsler & Epp, 2013, p. 143).

Image Repair Theory

Ware and Linkugel's theory of apology is the foundation of modern day image repair theory developed by Benoit (Utsler & Epp, 2013, p. 143). Image repair theory states, "Because our image is important to us, when we believe that our image is threatened by some attack, we are motivated to take necessary steps to protect it. An attempt to repair one's reputation when faced with allegations is inevitable" (Brown, 2012, p. 16). An attack on one's reputation or image consists of two components: an act must have transpired that is perceived as offensive in the public's opinion and someone is responsible for the indictments. Whether the accusations against a person are true or false, if the public believes them to be accurate, it must be considered an attack against that person's image. (Brown, 2012, p. 16).

Benoit's image repair theory is based on the theory of apology but expands on the topic to create five image repair strategies with subcategories. The first image repair strategy, denial, comes from apology theory. Benoit states that there are two different types of denial, simple denial or evasion of responsibility. Simple denial states that the accused did not commit the act that they are accused of. Evasion of responsibility attempts to shift the blame by arguing that they "were provoked and responded to the act of another, argue defeasibility due to a lack of information or ability, or claim the event was an accident, or that it had good intentions" (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 168).

Reducing offensiveness is another image repair strategy, which can be employed in multiple ways. One can reduce offensiveness through bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, or compensating the victim. Bolstering refocuses the attention onto past positive acts to reduce the negative perception (Brown, n.d., 18). Minimization attempts to show that the "act is not as serious as presented". Differentiation tries to prove the act is not as offensive as other similar acts (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 168). Transcendence paints the act in a more positive circumstance to reduce negative perception. Additionally, the accused can attack the accuser's credibility or compensate the victims of the offensive act (Brown, 2012, p. 19).

The last two image repair strategies are corrective action and mortification. These strategies are often used in unison. The corrective action strategy involves the accused showing commitment to preventing another offensive act from occurring. With mortification strategy the accused admits their responsibility and asks for forgiveness (Brown, 2012, p. 19). All of these image repair strategies are often not used alone but rather in multiple variations. Image repair is complex and dynamic, so every situation is different and must be

treated as such (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 169).

Benoit also conducted a study on the appropriateness and effectiveness of image repair strategies and found how audiences perceive them. Mortification and corrective action are perceived as the most effective and appropriate to repair one's image. When an offensive action takes place, the person at blame is expected to apologize to those they offended. If this apology seems sincere, the audience is more likely to forgive them. Corrective action and mortification strategy are the two strategies most aligned with a sincere apology. On the effectiveness spectrum, mortification and corrective action were highest ranked and followed by the strategies of good intentions, accident, and compensation to round out the top five. Mid-level image repair strategies are defeasibility, transcendence, blame shifting, and differentiation. The study also states that denial, provocation, minimization, and bolstering are considered the least appropriate and effective. These strategies were checked for their effectiveness in one situation while the effectiveness and appropriateness of these strategies can vary by situation, so his study cannot be generalized (Benoit & Drew, 1997, pp. 159-160).

Image Repair in Sports

With an increase of media coverage and athletes interacting with the media in recent years, many studied the subject of image repair for athletes. Image repairs within sports are becoming more important due to the increasing popularity of sports around the world as well as increased media coverage of troubled athletes and fan activism. With these factors on the rise, it is imperative for athletes to understand how to cultivate and defend their positive reputation with their fans and stakeholders (Brown, 2012, p. 20).

Following NFL player Michael Vick's trial for the dogfighting scandal, he issued a statement, which combined the strategies of bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. These combined strategies attempted to reduce the offensiveness of his actions during the scandal, but it is unknown whether these strategies helped repair his image. During NBA player Kobe Bryant's sexual assault case, he used denial strategy as well as mortification to repair his image. He used mortification strategy to apologize for adultery but denied committing sexual assault. Bryant's image repair strategies were successful in part because he was honest and because his accuser had poor credibility. Former MLB player Barry Bonds also tried to use the denial strategy during the BALCO steroids investigation but was not as successful as Bryant when applying a similar strategy. During the Bonds' trial, the evidence was stacked against him and his poor image repair strategy led to further damage to his reputation (Brown, 2012, pp. 22-23).

Although NBA player LeBron James never faced jail time for the TV special *The Decision* in 2010, where he announced, "I'm gonna take my talents to South Beach," he faced immense backlash for his offensive action. By announcing his departure from Cleveland for Miami, he built up immense anxiety among fans everywhere but especially in Cleveland. James faced backlash immediately for the way the announcement was conducted. He did not alert any teams of his decision before the event, and many in sports media felt as though he went about his decision the wrong way (Brown, Dickhaus, & Long, 2012, p. 159). During this situation James attempted to use mortification strategy, attacking the accuser, and bolstering to repair his image. It was found that mortification was the only strategy that improved his image, while attacking the accuser and bolstering only marred his image (Brown, 2012, p. 25).

IV. Methods

Adrian Peterson's statements will be the chief focus of this study. Qualitative content analysis was used as the best way to scrutinize this incident because the statements in media articles are non-biased and the most accurate descriptors of each response.

This study used Benoit's image repair discourse framework to analyze Peterson's statements and how they affect the image repair process. Benoit's image repair discourse, the most recent image repair theory, has been used to analyze many other prominent image repair cases (Utsler & Epp, 2013, p. 147). This discourse is made up of 5 core strategies — denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification — and 12 subcategories — simple denial, blame shift, provocation, defeasibility, accidental, good intentions, bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking accuser, and compensation (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 168).

The Peterson case offered two sources of information: the statement that was addressed to the media and the police report that was released to the media. Peterson has attempted to address the incident and repair his image through these statements. This study analyzed each statement from these two sources to determine which of Benoit's image repair theory was used, even though they were limited. Peterson has been generally silent on the issue, most likely to avoid additional scrutiny on this ongoing incident. The effectiveness of Peterson's image repair strategies were analyzed through Benoit's "Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Image Repair Strategies."

V. Findings and Discussion

There are two sources of statements that Adrian Peterson made during the timespan of the incident: a police report and a media statement.

Police Reports

The *New York Daily News* reported part of the police report. According to the report, he used two of the main image repair strategies with four subcategories: evasion of responsibility with the subcategories of accident, good intentions and defeasibility; and reducing offensiveness with transcendence.

According to the report, Peterson believed he did nothing wrong — evasion of responsibility for his offensive actions. This statement demonstrates that he either believes what he did was an accident or that the event in itself was done with good intentions. This statement was paired with a quote from Peterson: "Anytime I spank my kids, I talk to them before, let them know what they did, and of course after" (Myers, 2014). This also demonstrates that Peterson used the reduce offensiveness strategy in combination with evasion of responsibility. In his attempt to reduce offensiveness he used transcendence to paint his actions in a more positive light by claiming that he was simply disciplining his child because he is a good parent.

Next, Peterson stated that he regretted that his son did not cry because it would have indicated that the switch had done more damage than intended (Myers, 2014). This is evasion of responsibility through defeasibility. Essentially he was saying that during the moment he lacked the information to determine whether he took his discipline too far. Peterson continued his evasion of responsibility by stating that he would not have let his child go back to Minnesota to see the doctor knowing his actions were wrong (Myers, 2014). This is also considered defeasibility because it is suggesting he had a lack of information and did not realize he had abused his child.

In the final statement that was released in the police report, Peterson says, "I feel very confident with my actions because I know my intent" (Myers, 2014). During this period, Peterson asserted to his audience that he acted with good intentions and, therefore, did not commit any offensive act. Peterson's strategy is clear in the police report, but his game plan evolved further in the statement to the media by combining additional strategies.

Media Statement

In September 2014, Adrian Peterson issued his initial statement to the media, a chief statement in his image repair strategy addressing the incident in depth. In this statement Peterson used mortification, reducing offensiveness, evasion of responsibility, and corrective action along with many of their subcategories.

Peterson began his image repair strategy near the beginning of the statement by using the mortification approach. He stated, "I want everyone to understand how sorry I feel about the hurt I have brought to my child" ("Full Statement," 2014). Mortification is a strong beginning to his statement because it is the most honest strategy and has been the most effective in past image repair attempts (Borden 2012). Peterson follows up this strategy by stating that he "never imagined being in a position where the world is judging [his] parenting skills or calling [him] a child abuser because of the discipline [he] administered to [his] son" ("Full Statement," 2014). This statement alluded that this incident was an accident and that good intentions were involved. He hints at his perception of himself as a parent by stating that he is surprised that his discipline practices have caused him to be labeled as a child abuser.

The next portion of his statement applies the evasion of responsibility strategy:

“I voluntarily appeared before the grand jury several weeks ago to answer any and all questions they had. Before my grand jury appearance, I was interviewed by two different police agencies without an attorney. In each of these interviews, I have said the same thing, and that is that I never ever intended to harm my son. I will say the same thing once I have my day in court” (“Full Statement,” 2014).

By attributing the child abuse to an accidental occurrence, Peterson tried to evade responsibility for his actions. He strived to illustrate his honesty in the issue by saying that he spoke to law enforcement without his attorney. This implies that he believed he had nothing to hide and had good intentions in disciplining his son. He continued his good intentions strategy while providing an additional strategy in the next section of the statement:

“I have to live with the fact that when I disciplined my son the way I was disciplined as a child, I caused an injury that I never intended or thought would happen. I know that many people disagree with the way I disciplined my child. I also understand after meeting with a psychologist that there are other alternative ways of disciplining a child that may be more appropriate” (“Full Statement,” 2014).

He combined defeasibility with his good intentions argument by claiming he didn’t know better and that was the way he was raised. Additionally, he claimed that he had taken corrective action to try to improve or change the way he disciplined his children. He continued his corrective action approach at the beginning of the next section of his statement saying, “I have learned a lot and have had to reevaluate how I discipline my son going forward” (“Full Statement,” 2014). This reinforced his claims to change his way of discipline and hopes to persuade the public and law enforcement that another incident of abuse will be avoided. Continuing to strengthen his image repair, he added the reducing offensiveness strategy:

“But deep in my heart I have always believed I could have been one of those kids that was lost in the streets without the discipline instilled in me by my parents and other relatives. I have always believed that the way my parents disciplined me has a great deal to do with the success I have enjoyed as a man” (“Full Statement,” 2014).

In reducing offensiveness of his actions, he first used bolstering to focus the attention on his past. He tried to illustrate the positive effects of strong discipline that he was subject to in his youth that kept him on the right path. He attributed this type of discipline as the reason for his success as an adult, which was employed to reduce the negative perception of his current actions. Next, Peterson came back to the corrective action strategy and stated, “I love my son and I will continue to become a better parent and learn from any mistakes I ever make” (“Full Statement” 2014). This illustrated his love for his son as the motivation for taking corrective action. The hope is that the audience can relate to the emotion of loving their children, which in turn enhances this strategy as an image repair tool. His statement concluded by repeating some of the strategies that have already been used. He referred back to his evasion of responsibility strategy that claimed he lacked information on a better way to discipline, the incident was accidental, he had good intentions, and he will take corrective action. These strategies were executed by stating that he is not a perfect individual, he hoped to teach his son right from wrong, and his love for his son will drive him to become a better father and person.

Effectiveness of Strategy

Peterson used a variety of strategies in the statements in response to his child abuse case. Among his many strategies were corrective action and mortification strategy, which Benoit found to be the most effective image repair strategies. In order to issue a sincere apology these strategies are essential and only served Peterson’s statements in a positive way. It should be noted that corrective action and mortification were not used until he issued his initial statement to the media.

The most consistent strategy that Peterson used in both the police report and his initial statement was evasion of responsibility strategy. He constantly tried to remind his audience that he had good intentions, it was an accident, and he didn’t know a different way to discipline. This strategy did not rank as high as mortification or corrective action, but was somewhat effective for image repair. According to Benoit’s “Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Image Repair Strategies” scale, in Peterson’s case, using evasion of responsibility as a main strategy in the bulk of his statements was less effective than if he had used corrective action and mortification strategies as the main points of emphasis.

Transcendence and bolstering were used to reduce the offensiveness of his actions. Transcendence was ranked as a mid-level strategy, while bolstering was found to be least effective in Benoit's study. In his case, bolstering was the only low ranked strategy that he used and may have only hurt his case minutely according to Benoit's "Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Image Repair Strategies."

VI. Conclusion

With the Adrian Peterson case being a current and ongoing topic, it was difficult to tell whether his strategy was effective. The length it takes to repair one's image generally varies for each case. Those that have committed offensive actions make multiple statements to repair their image, but it does not immediately restore their reputation. Most of the time it doesn't require words but rather action and time to heal.

Peterson only used one main statement to the media, and his testimony in the police report was also released to the public. Only having one main statement to the media over a course of several months may serve as strategy for Peterson in itself. By being generally inactive in the media, it seems as if Peterson is hoping to be hidden from the public eye so that the healing power of time can begin to take its effect.

In addition, Peterson may also be cognizant that many times in a situation such as this, image repair statements must be paired with actions to fix a damaged reputation. Through his general silence in the media on the subject of his child abuse case, he may be allowing himself time to work on improving his own character as well as showing his commitment to forgiveness through actions.

Benoit's study on the "Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Image Repair Strategies" was used to analyze the effectiveness of Peterson's statements. It was found that Peterson used the strategies of mortification, corrective action, and evasion of responsibility as the focal point of his campaign, which are all high-ranking strategies according to the study. While this is a good indicator of whether Peterson used good strategy, it does not necessarily indicate whether or how much his reputation was protected. The only thing that can be measured is whether damage was done to Peterson's reputation. This can be seen through his loss of six sponsors, including his endorsement with Nike and NFLshop.com, the official gear provider of the NFL, discontinuing the sale of Peterson's jersey (Rovell, 2014).

This case study has limitations because the issue is ongoing, so it is difficult to measure the status of his reputation. This study applied Benoit's case study on "Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Image Repair Strategies" for analysis of this topic, but his case study was not based on a case that is similar to Peterson's situation, nor on multiple cases that bolster a big theory that can be applied widely. Future case studies, such as this one, should allow more time between the onset of the situation and when it is analyzed so that enough information can be collected to determine whether a reputation has been effectively repaired.

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