ABSTRACT

The Use of New Media in Professional Sport Image Repair Theory: A Case Study of
Michael Vick, Brett Favre, and Reggie Bush

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Broadening the application of Benoit's image repair theory, this case study
compares and contrasts crisis management strategies of three NFL athletes, Michael
Vick, Brett Favre, and Reggie Bush, to determine which methods were used and who
employed them better. After cross-comparing those results and evaluating them
against a purposive sampling of Sports Illustrated and People Magazine articles for
transference of themes and usage, the researcher concluded that the application of a
unified image repair strategy plan across all of the new media outlets used by each
professional athlete is the best way for future athletes to utilize image repair strategies
when a crisis occurs. Findings indicate social media allow athletes to publish
information quickly and efficiently without a gatekeeper; however, they must still
follow traditional image repair strategies to succeed. Exploring the newest
communication medium, social media, added a fresh dimension to previous image
repair study findings.

The Use of New Media in Professional Sport Image Repair Theory: A Case Study of
Michael Vick, Brett Favre, and Reggie Bush

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Journalism, Public Relations and Media Arts

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Sara J. Stone, Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

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May 2012

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to express sincere appreciation for the mentorship of Dr. Mia Moody-Hall. This thesis would never have been completed without her help and expertise. Also, an especial thanks to all of the faculty and staff in the Department of Journalism, Public Relations, and Media Arts for their extended long-term support.

DEDICATION

This project would have never been possible without the unending support and encouragement of my wonderful family. To my amazing parents, Steve and Theresa, thank you so much for giving me the drive and the ability to accomplish everything I have in my life. Without your faith and guidance, I would have never been able to do what I have. To my sisters, Naomi and Bethany, thank you for always being there to listen and give me the advice I need to make it through every project, especially this one! I am so grateful to have been surrounded by your love all these years. Thank you for always believing in me.

And to Thad, thank you for your understanding and patience throughout this journey. Your faith in my abilities and your support helped me when I needed it most. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Much has changed in recent years in terms of the amount of scrutiny

professional athletes are subjected to by the media. This change is due in major part

to the expansion of new media techniques (Kennedy, 2010). Because of all the

varied ways media outlets can interpret their actions, professional athletes must

monitor their actions both on and off the field. Not only are there traditional forms

of media to contend with, such as television, newspapers, magazines, radio, but now

news and sports media disseminate information via websites, blogs, live updates,

and social media sites.

With society's increased use of new media outlets, athletes' media

representations include not only their on-field performance, but also

representations of their pre- and post- performance assessments, off-field behavior,

public appearances, and their private lives (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). As a result,

new media have a profound effect on virtually all U.S. professional team sports with

more than half of all team players using the unlimited options offered by the

Internet to promote themselves (Wertheim, 2011). The nature of social media is to

be interactive with other people online so by promoting themselves on Twitter,

Facebook, blogs, etc., athletes are opening up the door for fans to feel even more

personally connected and involved with the athletes' lives than they did previously.

That feature can work for an athlete's interests when he or she is doing well and

engaging in activities that fans approve of such as playing well, having a winning season, or participating in positive off-field behavior. However, it can also work against athletes if they are not doing well and are not engaging in activities that fans approve of such as playing poorly, causing issues on his team, or participating in negative off-field behavior (Wertheim, 2011).

The careers of "professional athletes" give them a celebrity status in American culture, which means they receive massive amounts of media attention when a crisis occurs. As professional athletes have come under more and more scrutiny from traditional media, as well as new media outlets, the amount of pressure they face on a consistent basis has increased. Many athletes remain unaffected by the extra attention; however, some are unable to handle the breakdown of their entire lives and end up doing something that places them in the middle of a scandal. In-depth interviews of sports sponsors and sports media representatives have resulted in a consensus that behavior is deemed as "scandalous" primarily when it is considered to be illegal or unethical (Hughes & Shank, 2005). The increase of illegal and unethical situations that professional athletes have found themselves in has created a need for more examination of recent incidents of scandal.

One of the most scrutinized and most followed professional sports leagues in America is the National Football League (NFL) (Soonhwan & Hyosung, 2002). It is also home to some of the biggest scandals involving its players. Scandals occur both on and off the field and happen across a wide range of interesting situations. Sometimes they are created by an athlete's intentional, or unintentional,

inappropriate use of new media options such as Twitter or Facebook to say rashly something that is deemed inappropriate or offensive.

But no matter how a scandal arises, the athlete has to counteract the damage to his or her reputation as a player, role model, person, etc. Applying image repair strategies is often the best bet to help reestablish one's image in the public sphere (Kassing & Sanderson, 2011). With that understanding, it is in the best interest of the NFL and its players to understand image repair theory and the most effective ways to implement it through online venues when a crisis occurs.

However, only a few studies provide a foundation for further research on American professional sports leagues. For instance, Meyer (2007) looked at players in the MLB and Meyer (2008) looked at Michael Vick, an NFL player, although in both studies, Meyer was specifically concerned with the uses of apologia as an image repair strategy. Similarly, Brazeal (2008) studied the image repair statements made by Terrell Owens after the Philadelphia Eagles football team put him on reserve by being unreasonable and publicly insulting his teammates and coaches. Additionally, Kennedy (2010) analyzed the image repair strategies of Kobe Bryant and Barry Bonds after Bryant's adultery scandal and Bond's steroid scandal. This analysis discusses both cases in more detail in a subsequent chapter.

Previous research studies that have addressed crisis management strategies used by professional athletes have primarily emphasized athletes who are involved in single-player sports such as ice skating, swimming, bike riding, or tennis (Benoit & Hanzcor, 1994; Carvalho, 2007; Kassing & Sanderson, 2009; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). Furthermore, they usually focus on traditional media such as

magazines and newspaper articles. While such studies provide valuable insight into crisis management of professional athletes, few focus on those players who are involved in team sports, and even fewer focus on new media aspects of image repair, which leaves a major gap in the literature (Meyer, 2007).

In sum, the body of literature concerning the image repair strategies of major league professional athletes has several gaps. These gaps are worth addressing because new media venues are now the number one form of communication in today's society. For example, Taylor and Kent (2010) found that blogs are a powerful social networking tool when responding to a crisis and the public holds a more positive perception of people and organizations that update their blog soon after a crisis than those who do not. Because of this exchange of information, Wright and Hinson (2008) noted, "the potential impact of blogs on public relations and corporate communications is phenomenal" (p. 4).

Using Benoit's theory of image repair, this study aims to fill that void by presenting an in-depth analysis of new media techniques utilized by these professional athletes, Michael Vick, Philadelphia Eagles quarterback; Brett Favre, Minnesota Vikings quarterback; and Reggie Bush, Miami Dolphins running back. These three men are noteworthy because they are each NFL athletes who have endured a significant crisis that affected their professional careers. In addition, both sports and mainstream media covered the high-profile professional athletes' crises extensively, which meant that each of their cases was highly publicized and was therefore relevant and applicable.

Benoit's Image Repair Theory provides a practical structure for analyzing the image repair strategies of professional athletes. However, to stay relevant, it is

necessary for scholars to test theories in different circumstances (Moody, 2011). In this case, these three athletes use of new media during their crises provided a good opportunity to expand the concept. To gain a better understanding of how professional athletes manage crises, the researcher conducted a content analysis of the online-image repair strategies that appeared on their Twitter accounts, personal website news releases, and personal website blogs. Their social media efforts were cross-compared to what was simultaneously reported about them in sports and mainstream media magazines.

Study findings may prove useful for future crisis and scandal management and provide insight into the best strategies for improving a scarred public image in the rapidly changing media environment. The next section provides background information on each case.

Michael Vick's *Dog Fighting*

The Atlanta Falcons selected Michael Vick first in the 2001 NFL Draft after he had completed one year of college at Virginia Tech. He played six successful seasons in Atlanta and led the team to two playoff games. Vick was also selected to participate in two Pro Bowls during his time with the Falcons. His position as a starting quarterback for the NFL brought him a great deal of popularity, as well as increased media attention (ESPN.com news services, 2009, May 21).

On April 25, 2007, a warrant was served on Vick's property in Surry County, Virginia, concerning allegations that an illegal dog fighting and gambling ring was being conducted there. Hard evidence was found but Vick denied having anything to do with the illegal activities since he did not live there full time. Amid Vick's

denial of any involvement in the scandal, prosecutors found copious amounts evidence to the contrary over the next few months, during which he was indefinitely suspended from the NFL until his legal issues were settled. Then in July 2007, Vick was federally charged for his involvement and operation of the "Bad News Kennels" on his property, as well as in other locations. He was charged with financing the illegal activities, participating in the deaths of several animals, and managing illegal gambling money. In August 2007, Vick pled guilty to the charges and was released on bail but after failing a drug test while awaiting his sentencing, was put under house arrest. He then turned himself in early to begin trying to gain credit-received time on the federal sentence he expected to get and did end up receiving on December 10, 2007, for 23 months in prison (ESPN.com news services, 2009, May 21).

Vick served his time at Leavenworth State Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, but while incarcerated was also charged with a Virginia state felony for dog fighting. He received an additional sentence of three years in prison, which officials suspended on the condition of good behavior during his current sentence and the payment of a fine. On May 20, 2009, he was released from prison 19 months after his sentence began to serve the last two months under house arrest. He was officially released from federal custody on July 20, 2009 (ESPN.com news services, 2009, July 28). At that point, Vick had been released by the Atlanta Falcons but was reinstated to play football by NFL commissioner Roger Goodell on July 28, 2009. The Philadelphia Eagles signed him only a few weeks later on August 14, 2009, and after a successful first season he was re-signed in 2010 to a six-year contract.

Michael Vick's position as a star NFL quarterback who created a major crisis in both his personal life and his career made him a perfect participant selection for this study.

Brett Favre's Sexting

The Atlanta Falcon's selected Brett Favre in the second round of the NFL Draft in 1991 after he graduated from Southern Mississippi University. He played very little that first season and was then traded in1992 to the Green Bay Packers in where he played 16 seasons as their starting quarterback. While playing for the Packers he led them to two Super Bowls and helped to win it in 1997. He also started every game for the Packers from September 1992-January 2008. Favre won three MVP awards during his time with the Packers and also contributed to many team awards and set the records for many accomplishments in his personal career. In the spring of 2008, Favre announced his retirement from the Packers but was then traded to the New York Jets for the 2008 season. In 2009, he was traded to the Minnesota Vikings and continued to set records and gain recognition as their starting quarterback (ESPN.com, n.d.).

In October 2010, during Favre's second season with the Minnesota Vikings, he was accused of having had untoward contact with Jets game-day host, Jenn Sterger, during the 2008 season that he had played for the Jets. The NFL investigated Favre for the allegations that Sterger made saying he had sent her X-rated pictures of himself, as well as that he had left inappropriate voicemails on her private cell phone.

At that time, two other women who had been employed by the Jets came forward to say that Favre had been inappropriate with them as well, but their complaints were dismissed, as they offered no substantial proof of an indiscretion on his part. No hard evidence oneway or the other concerning Sterger's allegations was ever determined by the NFL and Favre was not found to be in violation of the personal conduct policy, although he was fined $50,000 for being less than cooperative with some aspects of the investigation (ESPN.com, n.d.).

 In the late spring of 2011, Favre announced his official retirement from the Minnesota Vikings and asserted that his time in the NFL was over. However, since retiring, Favre has remained actively involved in the media spotlight concerning another potential comeback to the NFL. There has also been a consistent stream of news indicating that a renewed association between him and the Green Bay Packers may be in the works. Favre has also stayed in the spotlight by holding football camps, endorsing new energy drink products, and even appearing as a guest analyst on sports television for his alma mater, Southern Miss (OfficialBrettfavre.com, n.d.).

Brett Favre's position as the most-winning NFL quarterback of all-time who was also involved in an illicit sexting scandal made him a singularity for selection as a participant in this study.

Reggie Bush's Heisman Trophy

The New Orleans Saints drafted Reggie Bush in the first round of the NFL Draft in 2006. He had played three very successful college seasons at the University of Southern California where he received the Heisman Trophy for his performance as a running back during the 2005 football season. Bush played five seasons with

the Saints, during which time he had ups and downs in the form of injuries and other play issues that kept him from always playing to his full potential. He did, however, have some large successes during his time with the Saints, including his participation in important plays during the 2010 Super Bowl game that the Saints won (ESPN.com, n.d.).

Then in April 2010, the news was released that the NCAA was investigating Bush and his alma mater, USC, under suspicion of infractions having been committed during his time at the university. Bush denied accusations that he had taken gifts and inappropriate monetary compensation from boosters at USC, but it became increasingly apparent that he and his family had indeed received large amounts of money in addition to other gifts. In July 2010, the NCAA imposed stiff punishments on the University of Southern California, including vacating some of the games they won in the 2004 and 2005 seasons, four years probation, and the loss of scholarships. USC then volunteered to return their copy of Bush's Heisman Trophy to the Heisman Trust and encouraged Bush to do the same (ESPN.com, n.d.).

However, Bush did not officially admit his part in the scandal until September 14, 2010, when he announced that he would return his trophy to the Heisman Trust amid rumors that executives were about to force him to give it back. The rest of his regular 2010 season was tainted by the aftermath of his Heisman scandal and issues like poor performance and injuries kept occurring. In a surprise move the following summer, Bush was traded to the Miami Dolphins on July 28, 2011 where he is still currently employed (ESPN.com news services, 2012).

Bush's position as a very popular NFL running back and the first player in history to have to return the Heisman trophy made him a one-of-a-kind participant for inclusion in this study.

Conclusion

This section provided an overview of previous image repair studies and biographies of the three athletes featured in this rhetorical analysis. The manner in which Vick, Favre, and Bush handled their crises influenced media coverage of their capability to repair their images, but in different ways.

In sum, researchers have examined media coverage of athletes in crisis for decades, resulting in three broad areas of research: team sports, traditional media portrayal of professional team sports, and new media portrayal of professional athletes.

The next section, a literature review, will explore these topics in more detail and provide a framework for understanding the present study. An awareness of previous narratives, or frames the media might draw upon, is important.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Theoretical Design

In order to begin the process of inquiry, it is necessary to understand the research that has been done on the subject previously. In particular, research having to do with Benoit's (1995a) image repair theory, professional sports, and media coverage of professional sports, will have much to contribute to the background knowledge that is necessary to carry out this study.

Scholars have widely used Benoit's (1995a) theory of image restoration as the focus for an array of studies that take a closer look at the image restoration strategies of many disciplines varying from politicians to celebrities, large corporations to smaller businesses, as well as government entities, but the professional sports industry has been slower to apply image restoration theory to athletes (Benoit, 1995[b]; Benoit, 1997; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Benoit & McHale, 1999; Holtzhausen, 2008; Sheldon, 2009; Len-Rois, 2010; Brazeal & Benoit, 2011; Johnson, 2011).

Although scholars acknowledge Benoit as one of the foremost authorities on the topic of image restoration strategies, even he is open to some reworking of the original theory. For example, Benoit (2000) stated:

> I now tend to prefer image "repair" to image "restoration" because
> "restoration" might imply that one's image has been restored to its
> prior state. Sometimes one has to settle for repairs (or 'patches;' and
> of course image restoration/ repair may not work at all). (p. 40)

11

Since Benoit released this in 2000, studies involving his theory have used the term "image repair theory." Benoit (1995a) outlined "image" as the perception of a communicative entity shared by an audience. For an image to be well composed, it must contain components that will augment an individual's ability to project characteristics such as a perception of power, trust, leadership, and name recognition connected to their image. Benoit (1995a) identified the five major image repair strategies as denial of the accusation, evading responsibility of the act, reducing the offensiveness of the accusation, offering corrective action and mortification or apologizing. Three of these strategies have specific tactics related to them. The subsequent typology of 14 specific options provides a balance between the extremes of too few options, defined as two to four options, and too many options, up to and more than 100. It includes the major forms of image repair but it is not so extensive as to make empirical research practically impossible (Benoit & Drew, 1997).

Much of the current research on image repair strategies originated with Benoit, Gullifor, and Panici's (1991) position that self-defensive discourse is actually a reaction to perceived attacks or threats to one's image, face, or reputation. They claimed that the inclination to apply image restoration in such a situation is universal in nature. Audiences might be willing to offer the person a second chance if the apology looks to be sincere, indicates that steps are to be taken to prevent future transgressions or reoccurrences of the behavior, and if they maintain consistent messages and positions throughout their use of the image repair strategies (Benoit et al., 1991). Importantly, they argued that the strategies

embodied in the discussions are of greater importance than the categories used, therefore, the central concern should be the discussion itself (Meyer, 2007).

Later, Benoit (1995) explained that the theory of image restoration creates a typology of self-defense messages drawing partially on Scott and Lyman's (1968) classification of accounts by content as excuses or justifications, Ware and Linkugel's (1973) rhetorical criticism of apologia, and Burke's (1970) discussion of guilt purification. Benoit (1995a) argued that when there is a threat to face or reputation, i.e. one's image, the accused feels compelled to explain or defend his or her behavior to cleanse his or her reputation.

When considered individually, Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies are fairly simple to understand. Through denying the accusation, the accused either denies that they did it or they shift the blame to someone else. In evading responsibility for the act, the accused may say they were provoked, that it was an accident, they had good intentions, or they may try to plead defeasibility and say they did not have enough information to know better. To try to reduce the offensiveness of the event, the accused may try to bolster their image through stressing their good traits or minimizing the importance of the act and saying it was not as bad as similar acts. They also might try to transcend the issue, attack their accusers, or offer compensation to the people involved in the situation. By offering corrective actions the accused puts forth a plan to solve the problem and in using mortification, they simply apologize and take responsibility for their actions.

Previous studies looking at image repair have found that different strategies, as well as combinations of strategies used with varying degrees of success. Many

13

have found that the use of mortification, or apologizing, can be the best strategy to use after a scandal or crisis has occurred (e.g. Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Benoit, 1997; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Johnson, 2011). For instance, Sheldon and Sallot (2009) used image repair theory to study Mississippi senator Trent Lott after an incident involving racial remarks he made at South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party. They found that when a politician makes a mistake, creates a crisis, or commits a faux pas, he should immediately employ the mortification strategy and apologize if he wants to be able to save his reputation because past good deeds will not be enough to save him on their own.

In Johnson's (2011) study of the image repair techniques used by actor and celebrity Christian Bale, he too counteracted the scandal that stemmed from an audiotape of a profanity-laden tirade of his that ended up being made public on the Internet by mainly using mortification. The incident had occurred on set while he was filming a scene for the second movie in the new installment of the "Terminator" series. He had been interrupted during a scene so many times that he ranted and yelled for four minutes. The audio for the incident was released on the Internet months after it had actually occurred and prompted a host of reactions from various media outlets.

Bales surprised everyone by handling the situation completely on his own by calling in to a local radio talk show that had been using a professional vocalist to perform parodies of his tirade on air. According to Johnson (2011), the two image repair strategies that Bale used during that conversation were identified as mortification and reducing the offensiveness of the act, with mortification being the

primary strategy since he apologized multiple times and made sure to take full responsibility for his actions.

Apologia and Image Repair

Researchers have identified apologia as those statements of self-defense produced by individuals whose conduct has led society to judge them as immoral or unethical for a very long time (Kruse, 1981a). The concept of apologia states that people are concerned with appearance and image and usually want others to view their behavior in a favorable way. Apologia has been a part of theories of self-defense, and in turn, image restoration, from the beginning. It was discussed in three of the original key approaches to image restoration of Scott and Lyman (1968), Ware and Linkugel (1973), and Burke (1970), in addition to several other approaches that expanded from those three (Benoit & Drew, 1997).

Benoit (1995) was the first researcher to synthesize various approaches into one comprehensive model of image restoration strategies. In his book, "Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration strategies," Benoit established five general strategies for image restoration known as denial, evasion of responsibility, minimization, corrective action and mortification. Those five strategies are more cohesive than the innumerable options of image restoration tactics presented within the previous theories.

Other studies have also found that employing an apology, along with an apologia defense is very effective (Meyer, 2007; Meyer, 2008). However, this may cause some confusion in that employing mortification and giving an apology is not the same thing as using apologia in one's defense. As Hearit (1994) put it, "An

'apologia' is not an apology, although it may contain one, but a defense that seeks to present a compelling, counter description of organizational actions" (p.115). Benoit (1995a) accounted for this presence in image repair strategies by explaining that humans are motivated to explain their behaviors to others when others perceive their actions in a negative way, which is why people will sometimes try to use an apologia defense before they are actually willing to give an apology. Sometimes a mixed apology and apologia strategy can be very effective, but, in some cases, it is simply better to just apologize and take responsibility for one's actions (Benoit, 1997).

Most image repair scholars agree that a person's success or failure depends greatly on who is involved in the crisis as well as the specific circumstances. Users' past actions and perceived characters may serve to help or to hinder them, as they try to sway the publics' opinion. Similarly, people may correct the particulars of their exact crisis easily with one image repair strategy, or the crisis may require a complex combination of strategies in order to address the problem successfully (Benoit, 1997; Benoit & Drew, 1997).

Timing and use of medium are also important factors to consider. For instance, in her study of the online image repair tactics of Jon and Kate Gosselin, Moody (2011) concluded that celebrities should use both social media and traditional media outlets with discretion. Social media outlets allow celebrities to publish information fast and efficiently without a gatekeeper; however, celebrities must still follow traditional crisis management strategies to retain credibility. For instance, Jon appeared informal and unprofessional by repeatedly misspelling

words and publishing careless Twitter posts. The media can take a careless tweet out of context and use it against the person who posts it.

On the other hand, Kate did not use social media during the early phases of the crisis; however, she may have improved her image by posting an occasional well-planned tweet (Moody, 2011). Posts about her everyday activities and interactions with her children may have helped her appear more approachable and might have reassured her fans that she was spending quality time with her children instead of dating or working nonstop, which might have improved her image.

Image Repair and Sports

Benoit (1997) discussed identification of the relevant audiences as a primary concern in image repair studies. In crisis management campaigns involving athletes, fans are one of the most important key publics. Fans tend to have a special sense of devotion to a certain team, or for certain members of a team, and, as such, the idea of professional sports as an integral part of fans' lives has developed (Kennedy, 2010). Rather than just being observers, fans have now become involved participants because of a self-determined affinity for "their" teams and players. Fans expect a great deal from professional sports players, and though they constantly want to know more about their lives, on and off the court, fans are very quick to judge any problems or imperfect qualities that come to the forefront through an athlete's behavior (Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008).

Surprisingly, researchers concerned with professional sports have been the smallest group to utilize the theory to study the increasing phenomenon of sports crisis (Kennedy, 2010). Benoit and Hanczor (1994) were the first to use it for a

sports-related topic when they examined the image repair strategies used by figure skater, Tonya Harding, to deny charges that she was involved in the attack on Nancy Kerrigan that injured her leg and rendered her unable to compete in the Olympics. More recently Walsh and McAlister-Spooner (2011) looked at the image repair strategies used by Olympic swimmer, Michael Phelps, who faced negative press concerning the YouTube video that showed him smoking pot.

Those studies were years apart but they both concerned athletes involved in individual player sports. The number of studies involving team sports is very small in comparison to how many athletes are involved in them in the United States alone. And of the image repair studies done concerning sports in the last ten years, players participating in the three major professional American sports leagues -the National Football League (NFL), the NBA (National Basketball Association), and Major League Baseball (the MLB)- have been excluded from almost all.

Kruse (1981a) first introduced this idea in her landmark study of the use of apologia in team sports. Before Kruse, no academic research had been conducted concerning sports figures and their use of apologia as a defensive strategy for bad conduct. In her study titled, "Apologia in Team Sport," Kruse (1981a) defined professional sports as an important and far from trivial piece of society. She stated that while the players are the principal participants in the "ritual" of a sporting event, the entire organization that supports a team is, for the fans, an extended "family" in which they, too, participate. Any event that affects one member of the team affects them all, including fans. Through their self-identification with a certain

18

team or individual, a fan chooses to "place one- self under the fate of a particular group . . . and thereby risks one's security" (Novak, as cited in Kruse, 1981a, p. 272).

From that delineation of professional sports and their unusual relationship with their fans, Kruse (1981a) combined the concept of apologia with her new standpoint on professional sports. Subsequently, scholars began to apply that combination of models to the world of sports and it slowly became established as an important method for athletes, coaches, and other participants of professional sports commonly chose to use when dealing with situations of misbehavior (Meyer, 2008). By establishing professional sports as both a social and psychological phenomenon, which necessitates the frequent use of statements of self-defense by its participants, Kruse (1981a) opened the door for further study on the world of professional sports and the ways that its members attempt to handle embarrassing situations.

Image Repair Strategy Application in Team Sports

The principles of Benoit's image repair strategies apply to athletes in professional team sports in the same ways that they apply to politicians and celebrities. The success of image repair techniques depends on the athlete, the sport they are a part of, the reputation that they have already established for themselves (both on and off the field), what techniques they use, as well as the circumstances surrounding their particular scandalous situation (Benoit, 2000). Some athletes are able to come back from a scandal with very little struggle, others have to work much harder. That can be due to the public's emotional attachment to the player before the scandal occurs. As Kruse (1981a) put it, "...the essence of

sport is its affective dimension, its emotional import for spectators" (p. 271). That emotional attachment and the importance that spectators have ascribed to an athlete can work for, or against them, and it very much depends on how athletes handle themselves in each individual crisis.

Additionally, athletes involved in team sports have to consider their team when they try to repair a damaged reputation. Unlike athletes in individual sports, they have the potential to help or to hinder the reputation of their entire team through their image repair strategies. Not only do they have to repair the damage done to their own reputation, but they also have to be careful to avoid anything that could be more damaging to the image of their team during that process. Kruse (1981a) illustrated this concept by stating, "Within the world of team sport, the governing dictum that constrains all other rules for behavior is Vince Lombardi's, 'Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing'…" (p. 273).

The unmitigated ethic of team sport holds that the team is always greater than any of its individual participants. Players, coaches, managers, personnel, basically anyone who is directly allied with the game, must function optimally as a part of the unit, be willing to "accommodate their selves to predetermined roles," and learn to suppress their individual ego demands (Kruse, 1981a). Loyalty and the ability to place the good of the group above one's own welfare are the basic components of the team sport world's ethic. Those who think and act as individuals rather than as members of their team can sometimes risk condemnation, and even rejection.

The team sport ethic requires its members to display publicly absolute devotion and commitment toward their team, their sport, and the world of sport in general. So when a researcher wishes to examine the image repair strategies of team athletes who find themselves in a crisis situation, their actions must be examined in relation to their role as a part of the whole team, not simply in relation to their role as an individual who happens to be involved in sports (Kruse, 1981a).

Of the few studies involving image repair studies and sports that have been done in the past ten years, only a handful have dealt with players participating in professional team sports. Meyer (2007) was the first to address the topic when he looked at the use of apologia and image repair theory to try to understand the discourse of the MLB and the MLBPA (Major League Baseball Player Association) that was used when they had introduced a series of steroid testing agreements that they then had to defend. Meyer (2007) wanted to see if apologia and image repair theories could entirely explain the responses of both the MLB and MLBPA representatives during this situation. During the 2005 season, several Congressional leaders called for an investigation into steroid use in baseball, as well as other professional sports. In response to fan polls and pressure from Congress, MLB Commissioner Allan H. Selig announced a new bid for a "three strikes and you're out" policy on steroids that was not an immediate hit with the players or the MLBPA.

After Congressional leaders "blasted" the head of the MLBPA, Donald Fehr, for not being instantly on board with the policy, they continued to pressure the MLB and the MLBPA until they agreed to a new steroids testing policy on November 15,

2005 (Meyer, 2007). The new steroid policy was tougher than the one implemented in January 2005 and had stricter consequences for testing positive for steroids and amphetamines. After the media made it clear they thought Selig had pressured Fehr and the MLBPA into accepting the new policy, both sides came back saying that was not the case, that the decision was reached amicably, and that everyone should just get back to the business of baseball and stop talking about steroids.

Meyer (2007) concluded that apologia and image repair theories could not fully account for the inappropriate way they handled this situation. This may have very well been due to the fact that rather than looking at individual baseball players, he examined the rhetoric of two people who, in fact, by name and position, actually represented the entire sport of baseball. Meyer (2007) thought this factor might have been an issue when he intimated that the theories failed to offer enough explanation to address all the issues he was interested in.

Similarly, Brazeal (2007) analyzed Terrell Owens' 2005 press conference concerning his conduct when the Philadelphia Eagles refused to renegotiate his $48.97 million contract after he had played just one season. Owens is one of the NFL's most talented athletes, but he is also widely criticized as one of its most selfish and self-seeking. After the Philadelphia Eagles refused to renegotiate, he became sullen with the press, belligerent with the coaching staff, and publicly critical of his team and quarterback (Brazeal, 2007). Consequently, the Eagles deactivated Owens for his fully anti-team sport ethic behavior. Then Owens and his agent, Drew Rosenhaus, held a press conference to try to fix the situation, but Brazeal's analysis of their image repair strategies found it to be a total failure. Although Owens

displayed a contrite demeanor and emphasized mortification and bolstering strategies, he did not convince anyone that he was actually sorry for his actions because he would not take any blame for the conflict. Rosenhaus then made it worse by attacking Owens' accusers and appearing aggressive and arrogant while trying to employ both bolstering and mortification strategies.

Brazeal (2007) concluded that Owens and Rosenhaus' decision to use image repair strategies incorrectly was carried to such a point that they portrayed Owens as the victim of the situation, even though it was clearly his fault. Ultimately that decision caused officials to fire him because it demonstrated Owens's inability to function as part of a team since he also withheld any offer for corrective action in order to keep from repeating the situation.

Meyer (2008) revisited apologia and image repair theories in sports when he examined a single press conference speech given by NFL player, Michael Vick, following his 2007 conviction by a U.S. District Court in Virginia for involvement in dog fighting and gambling. Meyer conducted a contextual analysis of that one speech in order to try to understand Vick's use of apologia. Some of the contextual factors surrounding the speech were used in the analysis, such as the events that led up to Vick's statement, moral commentary from traditional media outlets, etc. Meyer (2008) conducted the study that way because he felt that by examining the apologia within the broader context there would be valuable insight into Vick's decisions within the speech. Meyer (2008) then delineated the important themes after repeated exposure to the audio, video, and transcript of Vick's speech.

However, he was cognizant of other factors that came before and after the speech that may have contributed to statements.

In addition, Meyer (2008) discussed Vick's silence during the trial, his refusal to talk to the media, along with other circumstances in order to shed light on the effect of his apologia within the context of previous actions. Images of Vick during the trial and his speech of apologia were examined for perspective and possible themes associated with image repair theories. After contextually analyzing Vick's speech at the press conference, Meyer (2008) concluded that Vick's strategies were mostly those of bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence, although he also used mortification extensively by apologizing and taking full responsibility for his actions multiple times throughout the course of the speech. Seen within the specific context of the one speech, Meyer (2008) decided that Vick's use of apologia was mostly successful, but still left room for improvement in the consistency of his chosen statements.

More recently, Kennedy (2010) addressed questions of image repair theories in regard to major league team athletes. In her study, she discussed NBA player Kobe Bryant's sex scandal and MLB player Barry Bond's doping scandal. Kobe Bryant was charged with sexual assault, and at first, simply responded to the media by saying that he "wouldn't do something like that," but then after DNA evidence was brought to light, he held a press conference to admit to committing adultery. He declared that it was consensual and vehemently denied that he was guilty of a crime. According to Kennedy (2010), Bryant handled the situation very well in that he responded quickly to the charges. His wife was with him during the press

24

conference, showing her support as he apologized publicly to her and the audience as he repented for committing adultery, but he fervently denied having committed a crime. In light of his previous reputation as being a good man in conjunction with his speedy and apparently heartfelt response to the situation, Kennedy (2010) concluded that, "All of these elements combined to give a fairly convincing, heartfelt statement to the press that said Bryant was sorry for not being perfect but that he did not commit a crime" (p. 97).

In comparison, Kennedy's (2011) analysis of Barry Bonds' response to the accusations of steroid use found that he was largely unsuccessful in repairing his image in the public eye in any substantial way. Bonds had a reputation for being combative and self-centered, and he had poor relationships within his team, as well as within the league, and many fans did not like him. All of those things worked against him when it was made apparent throughout the trial that he had denied taking steroids, or knowing that the substance he was taking from BALCO laboratories was steroids, when it was a quite obvious that he had known everything. Even after other players admitted to taking steroids from BALCO, Bonds continued to deny that he knowingly took them or that steroids could be in any way responsible for the dramatic increase in his performance on the field.

Kennedy (2010) concluded that, "...Bonds' past precedent, along with Bryant's proof that past precedent can play a large role in image reparation, show that the course of events to follow will most likely not differ much from what has already occurred" (p. 101). In light of the evidence against Bonds, she concluded that his best bet would have been to admit the truth. Kennedy's (2010) takeaway

25

point from her study was that image repair is only effective if the tactics that are used appear to be genuine, heartfelt, and legitimate in the audience's opinion.

When paralleled, these image repair studies of major league sports have consistently similar results. In order to successfully repair one's image after a crisis, an athlete's best bet is to take full responsibility for his actions and give a real apology to whoever was involved, as well as to the public. If accused of something that he or she did not do, then one has to make sure to be specific in his denial of that exact act. In addition, when an athlete is quite obviously guilty of doing something illegal or distasteful, his best course of action is to avoid denial and employ other image repair strategies that do not involve lying to the public.

Traditional Media Portrayal of Professional Team Sports

When viewed as a whole, traditional media coverage of sporting events has become an undeniably pervasive part of American society over the course of the past 70 years. Its effect on society and the way society functions and views itself, as well as the rest of the world, continues to be of great importance. However, as the outlets for sports coverage have expanded into even more venues through the advent of new media outlets because of the rapid-fire development of the Internet, "traditional" media coverage of the sports world has changed and will never look exactly the same (Beck & Bosshart, 2003a).

The 1920s saw the beginning of professional team sports as an outlet for entertainment escape in the United States. As the country recovered from World War I, spectator involved team sports became a much-needed diversion for society. Suddenly, fame and wealth were awarded to any athlete who performed well and

that is where the traditional media started to get involved. Sports promoters relied

on the publicity they got in the press, and magazines and newspapers profited

greatly from the coverage they gave because sports were inexpensive to cover and

those stories brought in a high number of readers (Carvalho, 2007). Back then,

media outlets were concerned with the ethics involved with giving so much

attention to reporting something that was pure entertainment, but the ethics

committees lost that fight in the face of potential profits.

That legacy of profit first still continues in the media sports coverage today.

Beginning in the 1960s, television was the next big media outlet to capitalize on the

production of sports reporting since those programs have always reached

enormously large audiences and have consistently achieved high ratings on TV.

Media could then demand extremely high prices for advertising spots before, during,

and after any sports event that they were broadcasting.

According to Beck and Bosshart (2003b), television stations could easily

refinance expensive sports programs by upping the price for advertising and

everybody took advantage of it, both media producers and sports promoters alike.

That system of give and take between media producers, advertisers, and sports

promoters worked, and continues to work, in their favor because, "The advertisers

could send their message to a vast audience; the media could produce an attractive

program; the organizers earned a lot of money; and the athletes could earn higher

salaries or prizes" (Beck & Bosshart, 2003b, para. 2).

One of the issues with television coverage of sporting events that has

developed in the past 40 years is that more and more broadcasters want to buy the

rights to cover games because of the potential profit. However, there are not enough events to go around so the licensing fees charged by sports organizations to have rights to broadcast the event have become astronomically high. Television network's usual answer to that problem is to simply include more advertisements in order to cover costs and still make a profit. However, during a sporting event, too big of an increase in advertisement spots really isn't an option because of the amount of time that takes away from the game coverage which then makes audiences mad and lowers the network's profit (Beck & Bosshart, 2003b).

Not only do media outlets such as television, newspapers, and magazines have an effect on the sports world through the amount of money that they generate, but they also dictate the way that countries view sports. That in turn means that sports media has an influence on the way that people look at their own country, as well as other countries around the world.

Sporting events provide a broad coverage platform because they are played all around the world and that has allowed certain stereotypes to be spread through that coverage (Beck & Bosshart, 2003c). Ideas like, "Germans are hard-working and ambitious, Italians are passionate, French are proud and also ambitious, Brits are tough and fair, Asians are quick and nimble" (Beck & Bosshart, 2003c) have been perpetrated by sports reporters and sports programs for generations. Using such national stereotypes can describe an event in a simplified way or even raise certain expectations about an upcoming event.

These clichés reported by the media often correspond to the traditional clichés of the spectators and readers, which then perpetuates the cycle of those

national stereotypes. This kind of sports reporting explains to a certain extent why success in sports can increase the prestige of a country, since positive cultural stereotypes are pointed out to the rest of the world when one of their teams is doing well (Beck & Bosshart, 2003c).

In addition to cultural commentary that televised sports coverage provides audiences, the media serve as agents for fan-athlete relationship development. For example, television time allotted for sports programming grew more than 600% between 1960 and 1988 (Rowe, 2005). Over the next two decades, access to sports programs and athletes continued to grow in a major way as specialized channels and pay-per-view showcases became additional choices for cable and satellite subscriptions. Channels dedicated to 24-hour sports coverage such as ESPN, FoxSports, and all of ESPN's affiliates provide audiences with access to the professional and personal lives of favorite athletes on a regular basis.

Numbers indicating that ESPN ranked first among the cable networks with 92.3 million subscribers suggest that sports fans are still turning to television in large numbers to build on their knowledge of and interest in sports and athletes (Earnheardt & Haridakis, 2009). Even though these extensive television programs and their related newspaper stories allow fans to feel connected to their favorite athletes, that connection is purely one-sided because the athlete has no control of what the fans are seeing, other than their athletic performance on the field.

New Media Portrayal of Professional Athletes

The spectacle of professional sports has been in a constant state of evolution over the past century. Its progression in society from a simple pastime to a way of

life has been swift and unprecedented. Not only are professional sports a popular choice of entertainment by the masses, but they are also a major contributor to the economy because of the amount of revenue that they produce (Hopwood, 2005). They generate billions of dollars through ticket sales, merchandise, travel costs, advertising, and media promotions yearly. Today, professional sports are widely regarded as a vital cultural subsystem of modern society (Hopwood, 2005).

According to Soonhwan & Hyosung (2002), revenues earned by professional team sports have traditionally been viewed as a combination of media revenues, game receipts and particularly income from luxury boxes and club seats. The majority of their results indicated that in the coming 10 years, media revenues will increase dramatically because of the consolidation of media and entertainment companies and the "voracious appetite these companies will have for sport programming"(Soonhwan & Hyosung, 2002, para. 20). That consolidation of media and entertainment venues that the authors predicted has proven true. New media options have grown substantially with the arrival of websites, blogs, live updates, and social media sites that are dedicated to professional sports topics (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009).

The mid-1990s marked the real turning point in media portrayal of professional team sports and athletes because that was when personal computers with unlimited access to the Internet became a staple of contemporary society (Beck & Bosshart, 2003a). Not only does the Internet offer an unlimited number of ways for fans to find out information about their favorite sports and athletes, but it also

offers the first platform from which teams and athletes can present themselves

directly and cut out the traditional intermediary of journalists.

Every professional team and all athletes now have access to their own sites

from which to give their side of whatever story they choose, concerning whatever

topics they would like, including actions that occur both on and off the field.

Additionally, the Internet is an interactive medium, so sports fans can directly

interact with team sites and athletes' personal sites. Fans are also able to run their

own sites and are free to talk about teams and athletes in whatever way they want

(Beck & Bosshart, 2003a).

Options such as blogs, discussion boards, Facebook groups, and Twitter allow

fans to directly express their identification with a team or an athlete, engage other

fans across geographic barriers, and express approval or disapproval about

decisions made by sports organizations and athletes (Sanderson, 2008). Those

same options offer sports teams and athletes the ability to be involved online in the

same way as their fans. Specifically, they allow individual athletes to strategically

and selectively self-present information to the public in a way that is going to show

their point of view. That unfiltered personal content provides points of connection

and identification for fans that athletes are unavailable to convey through

conventional media outlets.

Internet technologies also promote the idea that athletes are accessible and

foster the idea that one can relate to them as if they were friends. By affording fans

and athletes opportunities to engage one another, Internet technologies advance

fan–athlete interaction to a level that has never been possible until now (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009).

However, while control over self-presentation can be empowering, it can also be very problematic, as athletes are not always able to express themselves in ways that actually help them get their point of view across appropriately. Considering the significant traditional and new media coverage that is devoted to professional athletes, it seems inevitable that they may sometimes be the subjects of uncomplimentary depictions made by sports journalists (Sanderson, 2008). However, when that happens, professional athletes now have online means from which to give their own rejoinder and offer a more favorable representation of themselves.

The most recent Internet development to influence greatly professional athletes, their teams, and their fans is Twitter. Hutchins (2011) most completely described the phenomenon that Twitter has created when he stated:

> Twitter is approached here as a relatively new online service that is attracting extensive media coverage, and a media practice undertaken by millions of users. This platform's operations is helping to produce stories about sports, intensifying and proliferating sports content and information available in the public sphere, and forcing new ways of thinking about the interaction between sport and digital media by sports organizations, athletes, journalists, publicists, and fans. Twitter's importance stems from the fact that it is both a constitutive part of contemporary media experience, and a frame through which this experience is filtered and understood. As a form of media, it adds another layer to an already complicated 'media sport culture complex' that is seeing analogue, broadcast and print media bypassed, challenged, and complemented by digital networked media sport. (p. 239)

In and of itself, the idea of digitally messaging one's thoughts about team sports and athletes is not a new concept. Email, instant messaging, text messaging, blogs,

bulletin boards, post sites, etc., have been around for a number of years. The

difference that Twitter presents in relation to sports is its novelty in only allowing

140 characters at a time and having them accessible to millions of people in one

location on a second-by-second basis. It also allows for a visual component since

"twitpics" (photographs) can be instantly attached to any tweet that is posted

(Hutchins, 2011). Twitter is one of the most publicized forms of online

communication and is growing in popularity. It has between 15 and 18 million

active users. That is a very large pool in which sports teams, athletes, and fans can

have instantaneous contact with, and a huge impact on, each other's perceptions

and opinions.

Additionally, as Twitter has increased in popularity with sports teams,

athletes, and fans, it has increasingly become a major source of information for

journalists. Instead of tracking down a team's publicist or calling an athlete's agent

for leads, they now simply sign onto Twitter (Hutchins, 2011). Both traditional

newspaper and new media journalists, and even some television hosts, are turning

to Twitter posts as a quick source of information on the latest buzz. If something

catches their eye, they do a little follow up (usually online), maybe check the source,

and then write an article, blog post, 60-second postgame television spot, etc.,

gleaned entirely from the 140-characters they read on Twitter (Hutchins, 2011).

Rather than doing footwork and establishing newsworthy stories from trusted

sources, journalists are increasingly turning to Twitter for topics with which to

catch their audience's attention.

Image repair theory strategies have much to offer professional sports teams

and athletes in the way of understanding what works and what does not work when

they find themselves in situations that necessitate crisis-communication techniques.

Traditional media outlets are still viable options for sports coverage, but the advent

of new media venues such as online coverage, social media sites, blogs, and

especially Twitter, have taken over as the primary sources of information

concerning professional athletes and their teams. Because professional athletes are

continuously finding themselves in "crisis" situations that require a response in

order to repair their images, they now need to know how to manage those situations

through new media outlets rather than just traditional ones.

In sum, there is ample support for incorporating social media into their plan of

action. It is popular, pervasive and easy to control messages. Based on a review of the

literature, this study was guided by the following three research questions.

RQ$_1$: What image repair strategies did Vick, Favre, and Bush utilize in their
Twitter streams, online personal website news releases, and online personal
website blogs?

RQ$_2$: Who (Vick, Favre, or Bush) was most successful in his use of online
image repair strategies, and why?

RQ$_3$: What transference was evident of Vick's, Favre's, and Bush's online
image repair strategies to sports and mainstream media publications?

Rationale

Literature outlined in this section helped the researcher identify several

areas of inquiry to guide the study: a) identifying the online image repair strategies

used by the sample participants, b) deciding which participant used them the most

successfully, and c) finding out whether or not there was transference of their usage to sports and mainstream media publications.

The researcher anticipates that study results may help remove the guesswork involved in structuring online image repair strategies and provide guidance to help athletes identify the best strategies for using new media outlets like Twitter, personal website news release, and personal website blogs. Hence, findings might provide a model that professional athletes may use in the future for effective crisis management. The next section explains the research design, sample and analysis methods used to achieve study goals.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Research Design

This research uses a collective case study method to analyze the online image repair strategies Vick, Favre, and Bush used after their respective crises. Creswell (2004) explained a case study design as a method that targets one issue or concern; however, the inquirer selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue. This rhetorical analysis focuses on the issue of discovering the best application of online image repair strategies for professional athletes to follow. The researcher chose NFL players Michael Vick, Brett Favre, and Reggie Bush because of the crises they suffered and the subsequent alternative perspectives their cases will provide through a cross-comparison.

Creswell (2004) encourages the use of a case study format when the researcher seeks to provide in-depth understanding of the cases or a comparison of several cases. The researcher believes these methods will provide an in-depth understanding and comparison of the three athletes and their use of online image repair strategies. Furthermore, by analyzing and comparing three diverse crisis cases, results will have the potential for greater generalization to other crises.

Participants

The researcher chose to focus on National Football League athletes because the NFL is one of the most closely followed professional sports leagues in America

and few image repair studies of online strategies have focused exclusively on NFL

athletes (Kennedy, 2010). Furthermore, the NFL has many players who have been

involved in a crisis, but the crises of Vick, Favre, and Bush occurred in the last few

years. The three men are all very well-known athletes with a large fan base of their

own that is separate from their respective teams.

Also worth noting is the media coverage of each of their scandals had been

extensive in print and online media and the scandals are still mentioned in sport and

mainstream media occasionally. Finally, the three crises represented different

situations involving unrelated crises, and therefore, they indicate study results

might be applicable to a broad range of issues that professional athletes encounter.

As indicated by the previous summaries of Vick's, Favre's, and Bush's crisis

situations, all three athletes experienced completely different scandals during their

NFL careers. Each of these cases lends a different outlook on how professional

athletes have used image repair strategies.

Data Collection

To categorize each player's individual image repair strategies, according to

Benoit's (1995a) typology, the researcher evaluated data from their respective

Twitter accounts, personal website news releases, and personal website blogs.

As the newest social media to be used as a public relations tool, Twitter,

which was released in July of 2006, is still catching on as a viable image repair

technique. Vick and Bush both have personal Twitter accounts, but at the time this

research commenced, Favre had yet to create a Twitter account and that fact will be

used for analysis. Because both Vick and Bush have more than 1,000 Tweets apiece

(Table 1) the researcher comprehensively analyzed their Twitter streams for

relevance within the defined parameters of Benoit's (1995a) five strategies of image

repair.

Table 1
Sample to be analyzed against Benoit's (1995a) Image Repair Theory

Athlete	# Tweets	# News Releases	# Blog entries	# SI articles	#P articles
Vick	1574	1	2	12	1
Favre	0	3	0	12	5
Bush	1569	7	7	18	11

Key: SI= Sports Illustrated/ P=People Magazine

All three athletes have verified personal websites that the researcher found

by using a standard Google-search. The URLs for each site are as follows;

MikeVick.com, OfficialBrettFavre.com, and ReggieBush.com. Two of the three

athletes had Twitter accounts. Vick's verified Twitter account is @MikeVick and

was created on October 22, 2009. According to Table 1, which provides a

breakdown of the data collected for the sample of this study, Vick Tweeted 1, 574

times from that crisis date until December 1, 2011. On December 1, 2011, Vick's

Twitter had well over one million followers, and he was following about 150 people.

Bush's verified Twitter account is @reggie_Bush and was created on August

4, 2009. From that date until December 1, 2011, Bush Tweeted 2, 468 times. On

December 1, 2011, Bush's Twitter account had close to 2 million followers, and he

was following about 165 people. Favre on the other hand did not have a Twitter

account at this time.

   To ascertain the transference of their online image repair techniques and

image repair themes to mainstream media, the researcher gathered cover stories

and articles that featured Vick, Favre or Bush and referred to their use of new media

outlets, or contained the same themes as the image repair strategies in their new

media outlets. The researcher discarded irrelevant clips that did not pertain to this

study.

   S*ports Illustrated Magazine* and *People Magazine* were selected as the

representative samples of sports and entertainment publications because they both

have an exceptionally large reader-base and are well known as leaders in the

coverage of their fields. In addition, although media are becoming more and more

centered in online coverage, print outlets still play an extremely important role in

the way scandals are covered. Hutchins (2011) stated that television reporters,

online publication journalists, and bloggers are increasingly using Twitter and

online new media as sources for their stories without doing any outside verification

of the information. By choosing *Sports Illustrated* and *People Magazine* as the

comparison publications, the researcher wanted to see if that same idea held true

for print articles where writers often do more fieldwork because their articles

appear in print.

   With that in mind, the researcher gathered cover stories and articles that

featured Vick, Favre or Bush and referred to their use of new media outlets, or

contained the same themes as the image repair strategies in their new media

outlets. A sample of relevant cover stories and articles for each athlete was selected

from archived collections of each magazine online. They were categorized as either

full articles or as clips, which simply used the athlete's name, but discussed another

issue. The researcher discarded irrelevant clips that did not pertain to the study

focus, which left an appropriate sample.

Michael Vick's dog-fighting scandal occurred in April 2007, after which he

had two cover stories and 72 articles that appeared in *Sports Illustrated*. The covers

appeared in December 2008 and in November 2010. Of those articles that included

his name, the researcher discarded 25 that were either clips or printed before he

created a Twitter account, which left 12 articles for the final analysis. *People*

Magazine had no cover stories that featured Vick after his crisis, but it had nine

inside articles that mentioned him. Of those nine, only one appeared during the

period of this study.

Favre's sexting scandal occurred in October 2010, after which, he had zero

covers and 16 articles in *Sports Illustrated* that featured him. Of those 16 articles,

the researcher discarded four clips that only mentioned his name, which left 12

articles that fell within the study dates. *People Magazine* had five articles that were

relevant and talked about him after October 2010; however, there were no cover

stories featuring the athlete.

Bush's Heisman scandal began in April 2010. After the scandal, *Sports*

Illustrated did not feature the athlete on any covers; however, it featured him in 18

articles that fit within the time frame and were analyzed. Similarly, *People* did not

feature the athlete on any covers. However, the magazine mentioned him in 14

articles after April 2010, 11 of which qualified for this study.

Data Analysis

Following the selection of a suitable sample, the researcher analyzed each

article, blog entry and tweet to assess all three athlete's use of Benoit's image repair

tactics outlined in Table 2. Each strategy is explained in more detail below:

1) *Denial:* One accused of wrongdoing may simply deny that the act occurred

or that he or she committed it. This strategy is sometimes termed refusal.

One may also shift the blame for the offensive act from self to another

person, claiming that he or she performed the act.

2) *Evade Responsibility for event:* One may also evade or reduce

responsibility for an offensive act ("excuse"). Provocation suggests that

the accused performed the act in question in response to another, prior,

wrongful act, which understandably provoked the undesirable reaction.

Defeasibility pleads a lack of information or control over events. An

excuse based on accidents may reduce or absolve an actor of

responsibility. Finally, we are sometimes willing to forgive a wrongful act

if done with good intentions.

3) *Reduce Offensiveness of Event:* A person who is accused of misbehavior

may attempt to reduce the degree of ill feeling associated with the act

("justification"). Bolstering may be used to mitigate the negative effects of

the act on the actor by strengthening the audience's positive affect for the

actor. It may be possible to minimize the perceived offensiveness of the

act in question. The actor may try to differentiate a wrongful act from

other less desirable, but similar actions. An actor can employ

transcendence, attempting to place the act in a larger, more desirable

context. It is possible to attack one's accuser, suggesting that the victim

deserved what happened to them, to lessen the impact of the attack.

Compensation may be made through offers of positive reinforcements

(cash, goods, services) to help offset the negative feeling associated with a

wrongful act.

4) *Corrective Action:* Those accused of wrongdoing may offer to take

corrective action. The speaker may offer to repair existing damages

and/or to take steps to prevent recurrence of the offensive act.

5) *Mortification:* Finally, the accused may admit the wrongful act and ask for

forgiveness ("concession" or "apology"). Mortification may include

expressions of regret (for one's role in the offensive act, or for the

consequences of the act, or both), and requests for forgiveness.

Table 2

Summary of Benoit's (1995a) Image Repair Strategies, Tactics and Key Characteristics

Strategies	Tactics	Key Characteristic
Denial		
	Simple Denial	Did not perform the act
	Shift Blame	Another caused the act
Evade Responsibility for Event		
	Provocation	Responded to act of another
	Defeasibility	Lack of information or ability
	Accident	Mishap
	Good Intentions	Meant well
Reduce Offensiveness of Event		
	Bolstering	Stress good traits
	Minimization	Act is not serious
	Differentiation	Act is less offensive than similar ones
	Transcendence	More important considerations
	Attack Accuser	Reduce credibility of accuser
	Compensation	Reimburse victim
Corrective Action		Plan to solve/prevent problem
Mortification		Apologize/Take responsibility

(Benoit, 1995a)

In sum, this section explains the methodology the researcher used to examine the tweets, personal website news releases/blogs, and *Sports Illustrated* and *People Magazine* articles illustrated in Table 1 using Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies discussed in Table 2.

The next section outlines the athletes' unique image repair strategies in comparison to the resulting coverage by sports and mainstream media publications. These methods provide the means to establish the best practices for using new media in team sports crisis management.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings and Discussions

Findings

Throughout the study process, the researcher discovered differences and

similarities between the image repair strategies that the three athletes chose to use

in their own defense. As mentioned in the method's section, Vick's verified Twitter

account is @MikeVick and was created on October 22, 2009. From that date until

December 1, 2011, Vick Tweeted 1,574 times, and the researcher examined the

entirety of his Twitter stream. Conversely, Bush's verified Twitter account is

@reggie_Bush and was created on August 4, 2009. From that date until December 1,

2011, Bush tweeted 2,468 times total, but this study only looks at those tweeted

during his crisis.

Each of the three athlete's websites has a link to personal news releases and

personal blogs, which the researcher used to establish their location. On Vick's site,

the news releases may be viewed by clicking the "News" tab and the blog may be

viewed by selecting the "Blogs" tab. On the other hand, Favre's news releases are

located on the "News" tab, while his blog may be viewed by selecting the "Message

Board" tab, and Bush's news releases and blog may be viewed by selecting the "RB

Talk" tab.

In order to best explain study findings, the crises are split by athlete into

three case studies. Each case discusses the contents of their Twitter account,

personal website news releases and blogs, according to the parameters of the study. To conclude the analysis, the author discusses the success and/or failure, of the transference of each athlete's image repair themes to media outlets, *Sports Illustrated* and *People Magazine*.

Michael Vick

Twitter Findings

Before Vick went to prison, Twitter was new and unproven as an established means of successful online communication. However, by the time Vick was released from prison, Twitter had become recognized as an online social media that rivaled Facebook. Michael Vick joined Twitter on November 13, 2009, six months after he was released from prison, and a little over two months after his first game as quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles. His first Tweet to the world was, "The Official Twitter Page of Michael Vick and MichaelVickZone.com..." (MikeVick, snapbird.com, 2009, Nov 13). After being fully reinstated to the NFL and joining a new team, Vick reached out to his fans, both old and new. Twitter allowed him to have direct contact with his fans and the media.

From the onset, it seems Vick decided to treat his Twitter stream as a public relations tool rather than as a personal social media account. For the first few months of participating in Twitter, his posts were sporadic and mainly informational and impersonal in tone. They simply announced mundane occurrences such as his next game, an award he had won, or the address for his new

website with no personal details. The tone of those early tweets suggests that someone else may have even been posting the information about him.

It was not until January 17, 2010, that his site posted a tweet that read as if Vick actually wrote it: "Whats up Twitter... I know y'all coming to my event, right?? Check it out http://thergsc.com/MV7" (MikeVick, snapbird.com). From that date until July 22, 2011, Vick's stream consisted almost exclusively of him retweeting positive things that people had said about him, @mentioning and responding to things that people had said about him, advertising for his show on BET entitled "The Michael Vick Project", and asking people to visit his personal website, which at the time, was called the "MichaelVickZone."

However, from July 23, 2011, on, Vick started to really interact with his fans by giving them a degree of personal information for them to comment on, retweet, and respond to. He began discussing information about his day such as what he is doing, how his practice went, how his team is doing and what they are working on, or what sporting events he is watching. He also began to ask direct questions such as, "I was wondering ...what do yall think about Lebron going to the heat?" (MikeVick, snapbird.com, 2010, July 24). Those more personal tactics were appreciated by followers, and by his fans especially, as seen by the amount of responses he gets, as well as the "50+ retweets" which appear on the majority of what he tweeted.

Vick's implementation of Twitter as an image repair technique appears to be very successful. Of Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies, the one he used the most was bolstering. He was careful to present himself in a particular way through

the use of positive, friendly language in his tweets and by never responding

negatively to anything that might be being said about him. Another image repair

strategy that Vick used in smart and discreet ways is that of mortification. For

example he said on July 24, 2010, "I wake up in the morning take a knee and thank

God!" (MikeVick, snapbird.com), which implies that he was aware of the fact that he

did not deserve to have what he did after being responsible for the crisis that he had

created.

Another image repair strategy that Vick indirectly draws attention to on

Twitter was his implementation of corrective action in his personal life. He never

specifically addressed his crisis by openly saying that he was participating in special

events to show everyone that he had changed, but that was the intent of advertising

his presence at charity events or the Michael Vick Football Camp for Kids that he

hosted in 2010 (MikeVick, snapbird.com, n.d.). By drawing attention to the

corrective actions he was taking to change his behavior, he let his fans know that he

would not repeat the same mistakes.

The very first mention that Vick made concerning his crisis was on July 25,

2010, "To all my fans that stuck with me through my up's and down's: I love yall!

#realtalk" (MikeVick, snapbird.com). By acknowledging his past trouble and

thanking the fans for still supporting him, he was backhandedly employing

mortification and apologizing once more for his actions, as well as telling his fans

that he knows they did not have to forgive him for what he did. However, from that

point on when he thanks fans for their support, he simply says "thank you" without

referring to his crisis, which is the appropriate next step to take in order to minimize the amount of attention given to his past actions.

Vick continued to employ bolstering with almost every tweet. He wrote a great deal about the beginning of the new football season and how excited he was to get back to work with the Eagles. He continued to constantly interact with his fans by retweeting his followers, @mentioning people who were talking about him or his teammates, and posting things about groups he was involved in. He also made sure to bolster through positive representations of the companies that he represents such as MusclePharm and Coresynergy (MikeVick, snapbird.com).

Vick also actively continued to bolster his image by talking about his charity contributions, asking people to pray for victims of world events, and referencing his use of prayer and need for God's help and guidance as seen by his tweets on November 14, 2010, and November 16, 2010, saying, "Yes, my pre-game ritual is prayer" and "God Can Turn Mistakes Into Miracles .... Good Morning Twitter Family!" (MikeVick, snapbird.com). Those references to God and prayer become a theme in his tweets throughout the rest of 2010 and up until the end date of this study, which is December 1, 2011. On January 1, 2011, he tweets, "Thank God for this journey called 2010!" (MikeVick, snapbird.com), and then when asked by a follower what was the biggest thing that helped him get himself together he responded with, "Stronger faith in God!" (MikeVick, snapbird.com, 2011, Jan 1).

Besides the bolstering theme of spirituality that is evident in Vick's Twitter stream, another less obtrusive use of bolstering manifests itself through the way that Vick never tweeted anything that could possibly be misconstrued as rude,

deprecating towards his team or fans, or that might even hint of negativity. Even when he addressed a team loss Vick spun it positively and made sure talk about getting better and working harder. He never opened himself up to criticism for a bad attitude or for looking like he had not actually changed.

When considering Vick's use of Twitter as an image repair technique, the most noteworthy thing that stands out about his style of bolstering was that even though he is very effective at generating feedback and participation, he never crossed the line into over-disclosure. His Twitter followers grew from around 43,000 people to more than 1,000,000 people in a little over three months during the fall of 2011, yet Vick never made the mistake of getting too deep into his personal life or his personal thoughts (MikeVick, snapbird.com). Everything that he said seemed to be sincere and genuine, but he did not use Twitter as an outlet for his emotions or random thoughts. He rarely referenced his personal life outside of football and if he did it was to say that he was proud of his kids or that he could not wait to see his fiancé. Vick made sure to never give any ammunition to the media or people who do not like him by saying inappropriate things, being immature, etc.

When analyzed against Benoit's (1995a) image repair theory and compared to Hutchins (2011) findings indicated the importance of using Twitter appropriately, Vick's use of Twitter as an image repair strategy is very successful in combatting the after effects of his crisis. Through the direct appliance of mortification, corrective action, and bolstering as continuing themes in his Twitter stream, Vick's tweets are well executed as image repair strategies.

Personal Website News Release Findings

The Web address for Vick's personal website was found on his Twitter

stream after he tweeted specifically about the site being made public on December

1, 2010. Of the 15 posts, only one of those news articles was actually written by his

PR team as a news release for his website. The post titled, "Vick Will 'Absolutely'

Play vs. Miami," is the only article written specifically as a news release for his site.

A second post called, "Mike Vick Repeat A Must vs. Cowboys" was written as a news

release by someone working for the Philadelphia Eagles site and was then posted on

his, which is the only other article written by someone associated with him or his

team. The other posts are all articles written by other news outlets that his site

reposted from online news sites such as the Associated Press, Philadelphia Daily

News, and the Philadelphia Inquirer.

Table 3
Summary of Vick's Use of New Media Outlets for Image Repair Strategies

Strategy/Tactic	New Media Outlets
Mortification:	
Apologize/Take Responsibility	Twitter
Reduce Offensive of Events:	
Bolstering-	Twitter
Stress good traits	Personal Website News Releases
	Personal Website Blog
Corrective Action	Twitter

The one article written as a news release from Vick and his PR team that

appears in the "News" section of his website employs some of Benoit's (1995a)

image repair strategies. According to Table 3, which provides a summary table of the image repair strategies that Vick utilized, several articles showed bolstering through the use of direct quotes from him, as well as inside facts about what is going on with the team. For example, Vick says the following in the article "Vick Will 'Absolutely' Play vs. Miami" written specifically for his site:

> It's been tough watching the last three weeks from home, especially with us losing the last two. I am still enthusiastic about the rest of the season and where we are. Obviously we want to finish strong and win these last four games. We just need to keep our heads up and keep moving in the right direction. I feel like I, personally, have to be accountable to my team. I just want to get back to doing what I love to do, which is playing football. There's nothing in the world like this game that I put my heart and soul into. (Rappaport, n.d.)

By being positive about returning after his injury and using the phrases "keep moving in the right direction" and "accountable to my team," Vick let his fans and the media know that he was being a good leader. In saying, "There's nothing in the world like this game that I put my heart and soul into," he reassured everyone that his focus was to be a part of the team and to keep improving. That kind of bolstering was a beneficial use of image repair strategies in this news release.

However, the fact that only one news release was written specifically for his site after being active for a full year is unfortunate. Vick and his PR team did not utilize the potential of his "News" tab to constantly put out news releases that the media may use in their coverage. By using that tab primarily as a sounding board for what the mainstream media is saying about Vick, they did not send out as much positive information as they could.

Personal Website Blog Findings

The only official blog that Michael Vick and his associates control and update is found on his website, MikeVick.com, under the "Blog" tab. The blog posts are separated into three different file names labeled at the top of each post as "NFL," "MV7 VIDEO," and "Blog." There are two blog posts located across all three of those files that fall into the date parameters of this study which are from the first day the site was made public on December 1, 2010, to December 1, 2011. While all three types of files are located within the blog tab, the posts labeled, "NFL," are simply shortened versions of the news articles and news releases found in the "News" tab of his website. There were no "News" posts or "Blog" posts within the date range of this study. Under the "MV7 VIDEO" file, there were two blog posts available.

On August 24, 2011, the first blog post titled "ESPN the Magazine: Mike Vick Cover" showed only a picture of the cover and the tagline, "Watch as Michael Vick poses for the cover for the new ESPN The Magazine, the NFL Preview issue. He also talked about the challenges he faces as Eagles quarterback" (MikeVick.com). The second was uploaded on October 30, 2011, called "Cowboys Postgame," and was footage of Vick's press conference following the Eagles' win against the Cowboys. The video showed Vick being very humble about the win and he made sure to give a lot of credit to the team as a whole and their work ethic with statements like, "We just got to keep working hard to be the best that we can be" (MikeVick.com).

Within both of these "Blog" posts, Vick employed Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategy of bolstering. By saying that Vick would be addressing the "challenges he faces as Eagles quarterback," that post bolstered Vick's image in

letting people see that he was still working hard and was aware that he had to keep

working. It suggested a humility that was becoming to Vick's situation post-crisis.

Throughout the video, Vick employed bolstering through the use of positive

language, the expression of thankfulness for what the team had achieved, and

continual praise of the team as a whole. He also made sure not to take credit for

winning the game.

While those blog posts were successful in helping to bolster Vick's image

repair, the site could have been much more helpful if his blog had been updated

regularly throughout the whole of the 2011-year. By not blogging on a consistent

basis, Vick and his PR team limited the effectiveness of that aspect of their website.

If visitors to his site see that the "Blog" and its three sub-files are not being regularly

kept up with, they might think that the information from the site is not important.

Overall, Vick's use of his blog could be much more effective than it is currently.

Sports Illustrated & People Magazine Findings

The 12 relevant *Sports Illustrated* articles about Vick talked about a variety of

things like his past crisis, the current standing of his image, and the future he might

be able to have in the NFL. None of them directly referenced any quotes from his

Twitter stream or from his personal website news releases and blogs but even so,

the themes of bolstering and corrective action that were found in his Twitter stream

did show transference to some of the articles. That was seen through the articles

focus on how well he was playing for the Eagles, Vick's personal thoughts and

feelings after being able to make a comeback to the NFL, and how they talked only

about his current football performance rather than his past (King, 2011).

The one relevant *People Magazine* article about Vick had no evidence of

transference. That one article entitled, "Picks and Pans Review: Update: Vick's

Dogs" (Perry, et.al., 2010) talked only about what had happened to some of the dogs

involved in his dog-fighting ring. It did not actively talk about Vick in any way and

as such, it did not show transference of any of the image repair strategies and

themes that he employed in his new media outlets.

As summarized in Table 3, Vick's uses of online new media outlets to assist in

his image repair strategy were successful. The use of three of Benoit's (1995a)

image repair strategies in the form of mortification, bolstering, and corrective action

could be easily identified on his Twitter stream, and that of bolstering could also be

seen in his personal website news releases and blog. Even though no direct

transference from what he was saying and doing on his online new media sites

made it into the *Sport Illustrated* and *People Magazine* publications that fit into the

parameters of this study, some transference of the theme of bolstering was apparent

in the *Sports Illustrated* articles.

<p align="center">*Brett Favre*</p>

Twitter Findings

As was briefly mentioned in Chapter 3, at the time this study was established,

Brett Favre did not have a Twitter account, and he still does not have one. Table 1

indicated that there is no link from his personal website and when searched on

Twitter, copious numbers of fan groups associated with Favre were all that appear.

The decision to abstain from Twitter even after his sexting crisis occurred seems to be an odd one in light of the fact that it could have been a very beneficial tool for him to be able to gain back some good will from his fans after the unsatisfying results of his crisis situation. Although the NFL commissioner fined Favre for his lack of cooperation, there was never any proof of his guilt or innocence and that left many people with mixed feelings about the situation (espn.com).

However, the decision not to create a Twitter account may have been intentional as a means to keep his personal life and his personal feelings about the situation private. Also, it could have been a result of the fact that his name and the most widely searched variations of his name with words like "Official" or "Real" were already taken as Twitter labels by fan groups and other people by the time that his crisis occurred. Plus, he may have felt that since he did not have any type of social media before his crisis occurred that it was better to be consistent and stay off Twitter as well. Whatever the reasoning behind his decision, Favre denied himself the possibility to effectively utilize Twitter as an image repair technique by not creating one.

Personal Website News Release Findings

The "News" page on Favre's personal website, which acts as the news release area of his site, incorporates news articles written about, or referencing him, all the way back to October 2004.

Since his crisis occurred in October 2010, all articles preceding that date were discarded. From October 2010 to December 1, 2011, 106 articles were posted on his "News" tab and were all taken from outside sources such as ESPN, the Star

Tribune, or the Associated Press. All of the articles posted were ones that presented

Favre in a mainly complimentary light. Some were very positive and some were

simply straightforward accounts, but none of them were overtly negative in what

they had to say about him. That inclusion of only complimentary articles is an

implicit use of Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategy of bolstering. By only posting

articles that have decent or neutral things to say about Favre, he is bolstering his

image through the perpetuation of the idea that he only has good standing in the

media.

Though no posts in his "News" tab were written as news releases directly for

his website, three of the 106 articles included under "News" referred to Favre's

crisis situation. Those three articles that directly referenced it were all written by

outside sources but they were written in Favre's defense. He made no statement

concerning the crisis anywhere on his website but again, by excluding any negative

coverage of his crisis and only posting three articles in his favor, Favre was

implicitly applying bolstering to his to appeal to his key publics.

Essentially, Favre's decision not to openly address his crisis through a

statement or a news release written by himself or his PR team shows his use of

minimization (Benoit, 1995a) as an image repair strategy. By refusing to directly

engage in commentary on the situation, Favre is clearly showing that he does not

consider it to be serious enough to demand his attention. His disregard suggests

that he might have counted on his celebrity position in the NFL to carry him through

the scandal without having to tell his side of the story.

Through Favre's use the "News" tab to repost what the media was saying about him, he used both bolstering and minimization as image repair strategies through the fact that he only includes certain articles. However, he still denied himself the ability to have a direct affect on what it is that the sports and mainstream media are saying about him. Instead of taking the opportunity to have news releases written on a regular basis that are released solely on his website and with his approval, he put all of the control for what is seen about him online in the hands of others. Favre was able to implicitly use Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies of bolstering and minimization through the articles he chose to include in his personal website news releases, but he could have had a much more positive effect if he had chosen to be directly involved.

Personal Website Blog Findings

As mentioned through this study process, the researcher discovered that Brett Favre does not have an official blog that he or his PR team controls and updates. On his website, the closest thing available is the "Message Board" tab which allows people visiting his site to ask for membership and post comments, ask questions, and engage in a forum-like conversation concerning whatever topic someone chooses to post about. As such, Favre's associates manage it in that they monitor it to make sure that nothing illicit takes place but they do not actively engage with the members or post topics for discussion.

By not actively using the "Message Board" feature as a type of personal blog where he could directly interact with his fans, Favre or his PR team again made the decision to abstain from using any type of interactive social media. That decision

leaves the entirety of the posted information released about him on his own

website's "Message Board" in the hands of others. Since only positive content is

ever allowed to stay on the forum, bolstering once again becomes implied through

the lack of allowing anything negative to be said about Favre on his site (Table 4).

But because Favre did not actively use the "Message Board" as a way to let his voice

be heard, he once again left the majority of the control for what gets said about him

online in the hands of others.

Table 4
Summary of Favre's Use of New Media Outlets for Image Repair Strategies

Strategies/ Tactic	New Media Outlet
Reduce Offensiveness of Events:	
Bolstering	Personal website news releases
	Personal website blog
Minimization	Personal website news releases

Sports Illustrated & People Magazine Findings

Of the 12 *Sports Illustrated* articles about Favre after his crisis, there were

none that showed direct transference from the image repair strategies that he

implicitly employed on his personal website news releases and blog. The articles

instead focused on Favre's lack-luster football performance and the few that did

mention his sexting crisis simply reported the facts without any transference of the

themes of bolstering or minimizing that Favre had shown online. Similarly, the five

People Magazine articles chose to concentrate on what other people had to say

about the sexting scandal rather than on showing any transference from his website.

None of his implicit uses or similar themes of bolstering and minimization appeared in those articles.

As seen in Table 4, Favre's overall uses of online new media outlets to assist in his image repair strategies were only slightly successful. He chose to not use Twitter at all, and only implicitly employed two of Benoit's (1995a) strategies in the form of bolstering and minimization although he and his PR team were never actively involved in either his personal website news releases or blog. There was no transference of his image repair strategies to the articles about him in *Sports Illustrated* or *People Magazine*.

Reggie Bush

Twitter Findings

Reggie Bush made his first foray onto Twitter on August 4, 2009, by announcing, "I gave in I'm now on Twitter! I tried to avoid but it kept calling me! Lol!" (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com). As he joined a full eight months before his Heisman trophy crisis happened, the researcher decided that a short synopsis of his Twitter activities preceding his crisis was necessary to see if any changes were made to his utilization of Twitter as an image repair technique after the crisis occurred.

Bush had not experienced any major crisis situation at that point so he joined Twitter mainly as a social media outlet for himself. After his initial comment, he began to tweet at a quick pace and almost immediately started to post at least four or five times a day, if not more. The large majority of his tweets fell into a few

categories having to do with himself, his team, other sports that he was interested in, or just random things that he wanted to share. Early on he used a lot of retweets and @mentions while he was trying to let everyone know that the account was actually his. For example he tweeted, "@ michaelstrahn what up homie! shout me out on your page I need some friends! LOL! I have ventured over to the dark side" (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com, 2009, Aug 5).

Bush began to add a substantial number of followers within only a couple of days and he started to use Twitter as a mixed platform. He did not seem to care that everything he said was available for anyone to see, and while his status as a professional athlete and celebrity should have made him think about what he said before he said it, he did not censor himself at all. He was very informal with the information that he tweeted. Rather than treating Twitter as an online tool that could help or hinder his image, he decided to use it in a much more personal way even though he made his account publicly known.

For example, Bush did not sensor his thoughts if he was annoyed with someone as seen by his tweet on August 6, 2009, saying, "Man somebody talk to Michael Crabtree that boy trippin!" (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com). He also shared a great deal about his personal feelings and opinions and would even tweet random questions such as, "Is anybody else addicted to car washes like I am? I can't drive by a car wash without stopping! I go like 3 times a week. Is it a guy thing?" (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com, 2009, Oct 7). He did manage to add some information of substance about what he was doing such as a shout out for Breast Cancer Awareness Month or his tweet that said, "Just did this tv spot for St. Jude Childrens

Cancer Research Hospital. Check out me and my new best friend Anna!!"

(Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com, 2009, Oct 13). That same pattern of using Twitter

mostly as a personalized social media instead of tool to manage his image stayed in

effect on his Twitter stream until April 8, 2010, which is the day before his Heisman

crisis occurred.

On April 9, 2010, the day that the NCAA board officially announced their

investigation, Bush tweeted, "You can't judge me unless you've walked a mile in

these shoes…" (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com). With that statement, he did not

outright use the image repair strategy of denial but it was implied. From that tweet

until the middle of June, Bush chose not to address the situation again either directly

or indirectly. He continued with his retweets and random postings like nothing was

any different until the five days between the dates of June 10, 2010 to June 15, 2010,

when the NCAA board was deciding it's ruling on his Heisman case. During that

time he stayed silent on Twitter, which was an obvious break from his norm of

tweeting multiple times a day. On June 16, 2010, he broke his silence and finally

addressed the outcome of the NCAA board's decision about his crisis on Twitter

with a series of five tweets, one right after the other. They have been placed into

one running paragraph in order to read them comprehensively:

> I want 2 thank the New Orleans fans, USC fans, my teammates, and Twitter
> followers 4 all of their support over the past few days. I was obviously
> disappointed & disagree w/ the NCAA report that was released! We will fight
> this thing to end and plan to win the appeal! My focus now is to continue to
> work hard, restore my relationship with USC fans and the university, and to
> help the Saints REPEAT! There's a lot of untold truth & fabricated lies 2 this
> matter but God works in mysterious ways & we will all grow stronger from
> this! My love, respect, & passion for USC cannot & will not ever be
> compromised & I will make things better even if it takes the rest of my life.
> (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com).

In those five statements alone, Bush utilized quite a few of Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies. He implied denial through saying that he "disagrees," "will fight," and "plan to win" because to win one must be able to prove innocence so the immediate assumption is that he is denying that he did anything wrong. He implicitly attacked his accusers by associating "untold truth & fabricated lies" with their decision as if they had misinterpreted the situation and ruled against him on purpose.

However, he then counteracted his position of denial by inserting both mortification and corrective action into his statement. By saying that he would work hard to "restore his relationship" with the USC fans and university, he took some measure of responsibility for the actions that caused the negative state of the relationship. Then by ending the conversation addressing his connection to USC specifically and stating that he will "make things better even if it takes the rest of my life", he implied the need for corrective action on his part. While it was necessary for Bush to make a statement on Twitter regarding his crisis, he should have found a better way to say what he intended because he left his followers unsure of his position.

After Bush's statements on June 16, 2010, it was another few months before he explicitly addressed the situation again. For the rest of June and July, Bush did very little to change the way that he used Twitter to manage his image. Only six days after the NCAA ruled on his case, he fully disclosed his opinion of dissent concerning his team's decision to trade a player when he said, "Man they cut my boy from the team. This part of the bizz players hate & fans don't really understand!

It's a game & we are the chess piece" (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com, 2009, June

22). So closely following the announcement of his own crisis, Bush's decision to

openly attack his bosses for doing their jobs was not smart. That statement made

Bush seem as if he thought of himself as a victim of circumstances out of his control

and was trying to implicitly shift the blame for his own crisis to those who were

over him.

After that, Bush continued in much the same fashion as before his crisis

occurred. He stated his opinion, asked questions of fans, retweeted followers, and

gave random updates on his life. One slightly positive change that he made was that

he started to talk about his sponsors a bit more by mentioning Adidas and Redbull

sporadically, but it was not really enough to count as advertising for them or

bolstering for him. But the next obvious use of one of Benoit's (1995a) image repair

strategies occurred on August 12, 2010, when he wrote a series of four spiritually

directed tweets actually aimed to bolster his image. They have been placed together

in order to read them comprehensively:

> Today's word: Greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world! If you
> follow God's game plan you will win! Today is a new day! If you are not
> careful your past success can become a present liability! Everyday presents
> new challenges don't rely on the past! Satan is patient and relentless! He will
> strike when you are in the pinnacle of your life! You must always be on your
> A game in life! It's funny how in life when we have a little success, we slack
> off w/ our prayer or god! Gods word says, 'apart from me you can do
> nothing! (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com)

By addressing this kind of inspirational speech to himself as well as his followers,

Bush helped to make himself seem humble as opposed to his previous statement of

feeling like a "chess piece". He closely followed up these statements with more

bolstering tweets only four days later on August 16, 2010, when he stated both of

the following, "It's easy to be positive and lead when times are good. But how will you act when times are tough? Give up? Quit? Or use it as motivation!" and "Trials and tribulations breed success! It's where winners are made. Don't be afraid of it, allow it to make you smarter, stronger, & faster!" (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com). Again, he was obviously referencing his own situation and what he was willing to do and how he would change himself.

The fact that he began to use bolstering more than denial at this point suggested that he was trying to move away from outright statements in one direction or the other. That translated to mean that he was not sure whether his position on his crisis was guilty or innocent and that created a problem for his image repair strategy. An in-between stance is never a good one for athletes to take on their position when dealing with a crisis situation because it can come back to them later (Kennedy, 2010).

On September 6, 2010, Bush regressed in his use of Twitter to bolster his image when he initiated a very long series of negative responses from his followers in regards to his question of what they had to say about the possibility of an NFL lockout the following season. He chose to reply to only one his followers who had said, "Reggie it's hard for the average American making 45 to 50k a yr watch millionares and billionares fight over money" (Sep 6, 2010, snapbird.com). Bush had called attention to the fact that NFL players would be denied health coverage but that only made someone point out that NFL players make enough to pay for their own health care. After which Reggie said, "Every NFL Athlete does not make millions. That's a small percentage of the NFL. The vast majority makes nowhere

near that" (Sep 6, 2010, snapbird.com), but that again just upset his followers because it is common knowledge that even if they are not making millions, NFL players still make a great deal more money than the average middle class worker. Bush tried to salvage the situation by saying that he was not asking for pity but just wanted "people to be knowledgeable" but that did not undo the negative image of himself he had given by likening an NFL player's salary to a middle class worker as though they were comparable.

For the next eight days, Bush tweeted a little less than normal and on September 14, 2010, he officially announced that he would give back his Heisman Trophy to the Heisman Trust. The University of Southern California had already returned their copy of the trophy and the Heisman Trust was set to meet the following week. They were presumably going to discuss whether or not they would take the trophy away from Bush so he preempted that embarrassing move when he chose to give it back instead. He addressed the issue on Twitter with the following series of four tweets, which have been combined into one in order to read his statement comprehensively;

> Just want to thank everyone for their support throughout this tough time. This has been a hard decision for me today but I feel it's right. I hope that kids and upcoming youth can look at me and use this story as an example and learning tool. Challenges are a part of life. But the key is to never allow your faults or mistakes to define you, yet use them as an opportunity to mature and grow to become better! Now that this is behind me I look forward to the future and winning more awards and championships here in New Orleans! Who Dat! (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com, 2010, Sept 14)

In this statement, readers see Bush's implicit use of mortification, transcendence, and corrective action as image repair strategies. By feeling that his decision to give up his trophy was "right" he admitted to some amount of guilt but he did not take

full responsibility for the situation. When he said that he hoped kids will use him as a learning tool and that mistakes have to be made as "an opportunity to mature and grow and become better", he tried to point out more important considerations that could come from a crisis and transcend the obvious negativity of his situation. Lastly when he referenced his wish to win "more awards and championships here in New Orleans" he implied that through the corrective action of working hard and helping the Saints to win, he could somehow make up for his actions.

For a time after his official announcement to return his Heisman Trophy, Bush kept a bit of a lower profile on Twitter except to promote good-will projects he was involved with. The very next day after his crisis, he tweeted, "Just finished up my PSA for Muscular Dystrophy and made some new friends!" (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com, 2010, Sept 15), which was a good idea for his image repair since that is a direct tool of bolstering. He continued to retweet fans and interact with them through saying "hello" and "happy birthday" but that was basically it.

Bush did use Twitter as a positive means of image repair sometimes, such as when he used bolstering in a tweet on November 9, 2010, ""Fans don't get enough appreciation in my opinion. You guys are the reason we wake up every morning and go to work! Love you all thank you!" (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com). But then he would take a step backwards in his image repair by saying something negative such as when he posed a politically incorrect question on December 30, 2010, concerning the use of the phrase "no homo" and sparked some very angry responses from his followers. He tried to fix the situation by saying that he was just trying to

understand, but that did not help to undo the negative impression he had given (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com).

Throughout the entirety of 2011, Bush's Twitter stream continued to fluctuate back and forth between positive and negative uses of Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies. He continued to employ bolstering strategies on a semi-regular basis through talking about charities he participated in, thanking fans for their support, interacting with followers and choosing some of them to follow, etc. Unfortunately he also continued to post tweets where he would take a step back in the progress of his image repair, for instance, when he would say something insensitive, address a topic that he knew nothing about, or by being crude such as when he would include the abbreviations for profanities in his tweets (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com).

When Bush was traded to the Miami Dolphins in late July 2011, he was very tactful with his exit from New Orleans by saying some positive things about the Saints and then ended with a bolstering statement which said, "Change is never easy but I look forward to building something special in Miami and can't wait to embark on this new journey! Here we go...." (Reggie_Bush, snapbird.com, 2011, July 28). That was a good stance to take because at that point doing anything other than being positive about the situation would have greatly hurt his ability to join the Dolphins without an immediate problem.

After Bush transferred to Miami, his Twitter stream took on a more conversational tone, but with an extra dose of tweets about the team and their progress to show his solidarity with his new home and bolster his presence there,

even though the team was not always doing well that season. Until December 1, 2011, he mostly tweeted about football and other sports and concentrated on retweeting his fans and interacting with his followers again.

When analyzed as whole against Benoit's (1995a) image repair theory, the way Bush used his Twitter to implement image repair strategies is lacking. Before his crisis, Bush did not consider Twitter a tool to help his image or career. He used it in the same exact way that a non-high profile person would, which proved to be detrimental to people's view of him.

Once his crisis occurred, Bush did not use a few image repair strategies to implement but rather jumped around and used whatever he thought would work well in that moment. He used the image repair strategies of denial, attack of accusers, mortification, corrective action, bolstering, and transcendence at different times, as well as some of them together at the same time. Once he had given the trophy back, Bush finally realized that he should try a little harder to stick with one and then applied mainly bolstering but by then, his pattern of including negativity in his tweets was too set and even with the bolstering, he continued to take steps backwards.

Unlike Vick, Bush already used Twitter when his crisis occurred. However, once he realized his need for damage control related to his image, he should have changed his behavior and from that point on, only used Twitter as an image repair tool rather than continuing to combine it with the personal aspects. Overall, Bush's use of Twitter as an image repair technique leaves room for improvement.

Personal Website News Release & Blog Findings

On Bush's website, there was not a tab specifically for news releases. Instead, Bush's tab called "RB Talk" is the link where he has seven different blog topics that his personal posts go under which are called "Football," Music," "Politics," "Cars," "Movies," "Lifestyle," and "Miscellaneous". All of the blog topics except for "Football" are used as a place for Bush to share about random things that he likes and is interested in rather than any information that is pertinent to his career. The "Football" topic allows for information that is centered on his performance and his career, written in the first person so that it seems to come directly from him, which makes each post function as both a blog and a news release. Of the 41 blogs and news releases in the "Football" section, only seven were written from the time his crisis occurred in April 2010, until December 1, 2011.

The first four "Football" posts written after Bush's crisis employed bolstering as one of Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies. They positively addressed a few of his sponsors such as Adidas and made sure to talk about his team's progress. The next post is the only one that directly referenced his crisis and that was posted on September 14, 2010, the day he officially announced that he would give the Heisman Trophy back. Throughout that post Bush used four image repair strategies of bolstering, denial, transcendence, and corrective action. Transcendence is obvious throughout the first part where he explained his decision and said how important his team, coaches, and family were in helping him to win in the first place but he also knew that, "Each individual carries the legacy of the award and each one is entrusted with its good name" (Bush, 2010, September 14). He made sure to let

everyone know that he did not view himself as the most important consideration in his decision but rather that he was thinking of everyone else's best interest. He went on to display bolstering, shifting blame, and corrective action all at the same time when he said:

> I would like to begin in this effort by turning a negative situation into a positive one by working with the Trustees to establish an educational program which will assist student-athletes and their families avoid some of the mistakes that I made. I am determined to view this event as an opportunity to help others and to advance the values and mission of the Heisman Trophy Trust. (Bush, 2010, September 14)

By saying that other student-athletes would need help to not make his same mistakes, Bush was subtly implying that what happened to cause him to have to return the trophy was not entirely his fault. Bolstering is evident in the fact that he wants to help others and was willing to help advance the Trust's mission. The corrective action he offered was the educational program that he said he wished to work on with the members of the Trust.

The last two blog posts continued with Bush's theme of bolstering and talked about how even though he was injured, he would be back soon so because he "...[couldn't] wait to get back out there for all you great fans" (Bush, 2010, October 16) and "You all are what we play for. You all are part of the team" (Bush, 2010, November 9). By making his fans the focus of his posts, he bolstered his image through humility and the appearance that he cared more about his fans than he did for himself. However, those last two posts were written on October 16, 2010, and November 9, 2010. From that time until the end date of this study on December 1, 2011, Bush failed to update his "Football" blog or any other part of his website. For the entirety of the time that elapsed from November 9, 2010, and December 1, 2011,

nothing on his website changed. Even after being traded to the Miami Dolphins in July 2011, Bush failed to update his website and the background was still of him in his New Orleans Saints uniform. The researcher rechecked the links from both his Twitter and his Facebook page for reliability, and deducted that Bush was aware of the state of his website because that was the official website attached to both of his social media accounts.

While Bush used Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies through the "Football" topic for his blog and news release option on his website up until November 2010, his failure to continue in that same way was unfortunate. The decision to leave his website dormant is strange especially considering that Bush had switched NFL teams. But regardless of why he stopped updating the website, Bush used the "Football" blog and news release topic to implement image repair strategies effectively while it was being maintained as summarized in Table 5.

Table 5
Summary of Bush's Use of New Media Outlets for Image Repair Strategies

Strategy/Tactic	New Media Outlets
Denial:	
Simple Denial	Twitter
Shift Blame	Twitter/ Personal website blog
Reduce Offensiveness of Events:	
Bolstering	Twitter/ Personal website blog
Transcendence	Twitter/ Personal website blog
Attack of accusers	Twitter/ Personal website blog
Corrective Action	Twitter/ Personal website blog
Mortification	Twitter

Sports Illustrated & People Magazine Findings

The majority of the 18 usable *Sports Illustrated* articles mentioned Bush's

Heisman crisis and his current performance on the field, none of them directly

referenced anything from his Twitter stream or from his personal website blog and

news releases. The articles focused the bulk of their attention on how he was not

playing as well as he should for the Saints and then after he was traded, for the

Dolphins. Bush's lack of performance on the field kept his crisis on people's radar

because it made them speculate as to whether he had deserved the Heisman in the

first place. So while the *Sports Illustrated* articles discussed Bush, it was not in a

positive light, and they did not directly reference any of the uses of image repair

strategies from his new media outlets or the themes of bolstering that he had

sporadically tried to employ.

Of the 11 *People Magazine* articles involving Bush, 10 only mentioned Bush in

regards to his standing as the ex-boyfriend of a reality television star. The one other

article was the only one to specifically reference his Heisman crisis but even then it

was only about his ex-girlfriend's opinion on the situation. As such, it did not

directly reference any of Bush's image repair strategies that he employed through

his new media outlet. However, it shows transference of the theme of bolstering

because his ex-girlfriend's opinion was that it was not fair for him to give it back

because he deserved it (Oh & Garcia, 2010). That use of a positive opinion showed

bolstering even though it did not come directly from him.

According to Table 5, Bush's overall use of new media outlets to assist in his

online image repair strategies was only partially successful. He used his Twitter

feed to employ simple denial, shifting of blame, bolstering, and attack of accusers

while his personal website news releases used all of those plus transcendence and

corrective action. The only use of transference that was evident to the relevant

Sports Illustrated and *People Magazine* articles was the show of bolstering evidenced

by his ex-girlfriend's opinion of his crisis situation. Bush's use of so many of Benoit's

(1995a) image repair strategies left his efforts very muddled and did not produce

any clearly positive results. If Bush had heeded the advice of Benoit, et al. (1991)

and paid attention to the importance of maintaining a consistent message and

position in one's image repair strategy, he could have had a much greater degree of

success.

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Cross-Case Discussion

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The findings of this study helped the researcher answer research questions

as outlined in the methodology. In order to understand the full answers to the

questions, a cross-case analysis was applied to the three cases of Vick, Favre and

Bush.

Research Question 1

Between the Twitter streams, personal website news releases and personal

website blogs of the three professional NFL athletes involved in this study, there

was evidence of eight of Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies. Bolstering,

corrective action, mortification, minimization, simple denial, shift of blame,

transcendence, and attack of accusers were used by at least one of the three in at

least one of their online new media outlets. Of those eight, the only image repair

strategy used by all three athletes was that of bolstering. Corrective action and

mortification were both used by Vick and Bush while Favre was the only one to

employ minimization (Table 6).

Table 6
Comparison of Vick, Favre & Bush's Use of New Media Outlets-Image Repair Strategies

Athlete	Strategy/Tactic	T	NR	B	SI	P
Vick						
	Reduce Offensiveness of Events- Bolstering	X	X	X	X	
	Corrective Action-	X				
	Mortification-	X				
Favre						
	Reduce Offensiveness of Events- Bolstering		X			
	Minimization		X	X		
Bush						
	Denial-					
	Simple Denial	X				
	Shift Blame	X	X	X		
	Reduce Offensiveness of Events-					
	Bolstering	X	X	X		X
	Transcendence		X	X		
	Attack of accusers	X				
	Corrective Action-		X	X		
	Mortification	X				

*Key: T=Twitter/ NR=personal website news releases/ B= personal website blog/
SI=Sports Illustrated/ P=People Magazine

Research Question 2

According to Table 6, which summarizes the strategies Vick, Favre, and Bush used individually, of the three crisis cases examined in this study, Vick showed the most success in his use of Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies through his online new media outlets. His implementation of bolstering, corrective action, and mortification was the one that most closely resembled the results of Meyer (2007), Brazael (2007), and Kennedy (2010) who suggested that a professional athlete's best plan of action after a crisis is to take responsibility for their actions, apologize, and find a way to help their reputation.

Although Bush used mortification as an image repair strategy, Vick was the only athlete who used it correctly, employing it without any qualifiers or excuses being used at the same time (Benoit, 2000). Not only that but he was also able to take responsibility through the use of his Twitter but then moved on in an appropriate manner. He stuck with one active plan of bolstering that spread throughout all three of his online new media outlets. Vick presented a united image repair front through making sure to use the image repair strategies that best fit the aftermath of his crisis situation (Benoit, 2000). He figured out how to use the interactive aspects of Twitter in a way that presented the best view of him at all times. Vick never confused the issue of whether or not his Twitter could be a place for him to act like everyone else. He remained aware of the fact that everything he tweeted could be cross-examined by anyone and chose to use Twitter in a solely image repair manner.

However, Vick's personal website news releases and blog posts left much room for improvement. If he and his PR team continue to only contribute original material at arbitrary times, they will continue to lose out on the opportunity to truly have a positive effect on Vick's online image repair strategy. By providing first-hand accounts of his activities on a regular basis instead of a sporadic one, they would be able to have more control of the information that people see about what Vick is doing to move on and change.

Between Bush and Favre, it is arguable as to which athlete used his online image repair strategies better. At first, it seems that because Bush used so many image repair strategies, he must have done better than Favre's unassuming allusions to bolstering and minimization. But upon closer examination, the researcher found that Bush would have had more success if he had cut back on the number of strategies he used and kept it to a few. When the information first came out about his Heisman crisis, rather than denying his involvement since he obviously knew he was guilty, he should have chosen to use a different tactic from the start. Once it was proved that he was involved, he was forced to change his story and that switch greatly marred the progress of his image repair.

From that point on, Bush never made a clear decision on the tactic he would use. He kept going back and forth with the use of his Twitter and personal website news releases and blog between treating them as personal accounts or as image repair tools. He used bolstering along with a few other strategies on his personal website news releases and blog for a short amount of time but then he stopped updating his website. That decision caused him to lose out on an entire year that he

could have been using his website as a helpful means of image repair and made him appear as though he does not care about his current team, the Miami Dolphins. By choosing to allow that site to stay unchanged, Bush is disregarding all of the essential points that Kruse (1981a) made about the importance of professional athletes remembering that they are part of a team and incorporating that in to the way that they handle their image repair.

Instead, the lack of updating and the moving back and forth from using shift of blame, to bolstering, and then transcendence in his online new media outlets caused Bush's image repair strategies to be much less effectual than they could have been. He should have picked one plan and stuck with it. Similarly to Brazeal's (2007) analysis of Terrell Owens' issue, Bush tried too many strategies at once, which did not work to his advantage.

Favre, on the other hand, could have done infinitely more to positively affect his online image repair strategies than he did if he had chosen to be actively involved in at least one of them. By abstaining from Twitter and only having reposted information on his personal website news releases and blog, he completely allowed the full control for what is seen about him online to be in the hands of others. Even if he had made a personal decision up to the time of his sexting crisis to stay out of all types of interactive social media, Favre should have gotten involved post-crisis in order to present his side of the story and actively help to repair his image. In this day and age, an active online presence is entirely necessary for a professional athlete in order have any say in how the world views them (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009).

After juxtaposing Vick's professional use of Twitter against Bush's more personalized use of Twitter, it is seen that Vick's decision to use it as only an image repair tool was much more effective in improving his image than was Bush's mixed method. But when comparing Bush's Twitter usage to Favre's complete non-usage, we see too that a mixed method is far more effective then no method at all.

Similarly, when looking at the three athletes' use of their personal website news releases and personal website blogs, the researcher concluded that they all had room for improving their use of image repair strategies in that new media outlet. Vick had a few news releases and blog posts written specifically for his site, Favre had no news releases or blogs written specifically for his site, and Bush stopped updating his site for more than a year. But out of the three, Vick's Twitter was used the best and his personal website news releases and blogs still need a great deal of work, but his online image repair strategies proved to have the best usage through his new media outlets.

Research Question 3

When evaluating the transference of Vick, Favre, and Bush's usage and themes of image repair strategies employed in their Twitter streams, personal website news releases and blogs, very little transference was found. Some transference of the theme of bolstering was evident for the *Sports Illustrated* articles associated with Vick in the discussion of his improved performance and comeback (Hack, 2011). Bolstering was also seen in the *People Magazine* article about Bush when they repeated his ex-girlfriend's opinion that he should not have to return the trophy because he deserved it for his performance on the football field (Eunice &

Garcia, 2010). However, there was no direct transference of content or quotes from any of the athlete's Twitters or personal websites.

Hutchins (2011) established the thought that journalists had begun to turn to Twitter for inspiration for their news coverage. But by looking at *Sports Illustrated* and *People Magazine* in order to see if that was also the case with traditional media publications, the transference findings of this study suggest that the practice for gathering leads from Twitter and online media sources has not yet found its way into the print publications of traditional sport and mainstream magazines.

Discussion Conclusion

When looking at the findings of this study as a whole, it appears Vick and Bush greatly benefitted from their use of Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies within their new media outlets, while it seems that Favre was at a disadvantage by not actively employing any of those new media outlets in an effective way. Despite the lack of evidence of exact transference of image repair strategies to sports and mainstream media print publications, Twitter is most decidedly shown as a highly beneficial outlet for professional athletes to engage in image repair strategies. As seen by the 1,000,000 plus followers that both Vick and Bush were able to gain by their usage, and the number of tweets that each sent out and received within the parameters of this study, it is apparent that no other new media outlet can provide that same amount of attention, interaction, and control by the athlete themself.

Professional athletes who find themselves in a crisis in the future should refer to the suggested applications of online image repair strategy proposed by this study if they would like to have the best results possible.

80

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Summary

The starting point for this thesis was the examination of Benoit's (1995a) image repair theory in reference to the implications that it could have for the online image repair practices of professional league athletes through the use of new media outlets. After looking further into the limited amount of studies done concerning image repair and professional league athletes (Kruse, 1981a; Meyer, 2007; Brazeal, 2007; Meyer, 2008; Kennedy, 2010), it was concluded that this study would be beneficial in light of the fact that very few studies with this same focus had been done. When that was taken into consideration, this study developed from the gaps in the literature as no recent studies used the design of having only NFL athletes as participant case studies and measuring their online new media outlets against Benoit's (1995a) image repair theory.

Another purpose of this study was to identify an appropriate model of the best uses of online image repair strategies that should be employed by professional athletes in team sports through their new media outlets after a crisis has occurred. The researcher chose Michael Vick, Brett Favre, and Reggie Bush as the three NFL athletes to study because of the recent occurrence of their crises, their celebrity standing in the sport and mainstream media world, the high-profile nature of each of their crises, and the cross-comparison their distinct issues would give this study.

The collective cross-case study design of this study called for an in-depth analysis into Vick's, Favre's, and Bush's Twitter accounts, personal website news releases, and personal website blogs from the time each of their crises began, until the end date of December 1, 2011. In order to establish the effectiveness of each of their usage, Benoit's (1995a) image repair theory was applied to each athlete's new media outlets to understand the best ways for them to be used in the future. From there, the results were compared to sports and mainstream media articles from *Sports Illustrated* and *People Magazine* for evidence of transference of themes and content from their new media outlets. By doing so, the researcher was able to assess which image repair strategies would be the most effective to use in a model for professional athletes' online image repair strategies in the future.

The study findings showed that in order to have a new media outlet be effective in employing image repair strategies for a professional athlete, the athlete must first be willing to use that venue as an image repair tool. For example, Vick's use of Twitter to tweet information about his team and its progress in practice, his involvement with his sponsors and charities, or his personal improvement rather than random information made his Twitter a non-stop stream of bolstering statements. By focusing on his career and his personal/team progress in football, his dedication to his transformation is all that his followers take away from the information that he is shares. In doing that, Vick constantly bolsters his image without being overt.

Secondly, this study showed that new media outlets are most effective if they are used solely as image repair tools instead of trying to use them for personal

amusement at the same time. By limiting the new media outlet to one purpose, it

allows the athlete to concentrate his image repair efforts in a concise and easily

implemented manner. For example, Bush's use of Twitter to tweet information

mainly focused on his personal life with a few bits of information related to football,

his team, or his sponsors, sent a very mixed message about the purpose of his

Twitter. After his crisis occurred, he still continued to use Twitter in in informal

manner rather than making the move to make it solely into an image repair tool.

That decision continued to hurt his image repair progress because he would use

bolstering and then follow it up with something controversial and inappropriate.

Thirdly, when it comes to their personal website news releases and blogs

Vick, Favre, and Bush all need to do a great deal of work to improve their sites. Of

the three, Vick used his website the best. His personal website news releases and

blog were maintained and updated periodically. Although Favre's news releases

were updated on a regular basis, none of them came directly from him or his PR

team but rather just reiterated what other news outlets were already saying. His

site would have a much better potential for helping his image repair if they would

actively contribute to its content. However, Favre's website is in better shape than

Bush's since Bush has not updated any part of his website in over a year. In that

instance, reiterated news is better than no news and no sign of life.

Finally, this study indicated that transference of an athlete's new media

image repair strategy to the traditional publications of sports and mainstream

media magazines has not yet fully been realized. As society continues to turn more

and more to the use of online publications and new media outlets as the source of

information for what is being printed, it seems reasonable to think that magazines will follow in the footsteps of newspapers and television anchors and begin to find their leads online as well.

Future Implications & Solutions

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher identified successful applications of online image repairs strategies for professional athletes to utilize through their new media outlets when they find themselves in crisis situations in the future.

At the first moment that professional athletes have a crisis, they must come up with a coherent image repair plan of action that they will utilize simultaneously across all of their online outlets. Whether their first step is mortification, bolstering, or attack of accuser, what they choose to do and say has to be consistent. If they are not sure of their position on the crisis, then no one else will be either and the athlete will come across as being culpable whether they are guilty or not.

If professional athletes are using a Twitter account at the time he or she begin to repair their image, they should immediately take stock of the way they had been tweeting up until that time and make the conscious decision to begin to use it as an image repair tool from that time forward. If they do not have a Twitter account then they need to create one solely for the purpose of it being an image repair tool. By doing so, the athlete will lessen the amount of ammunition that he or she might otherwise be giving to critics through the use of Twitter as a personalized social media account. Through limiting their Twitter communication to interaction with fans about their team and their sport, @mentioning their sponsors and

charities, and retweeting their followers with a minimum amount of private information, the professional athlete will be able to greatly enhance their image repair through the use of Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies.

At the same time, professional athletes are actively engaging in the appropriate image repair usage of their Twitter account, they and their PR team should also be aggressively occupied with consistently updating the athlete's personal website news releases and personal website blog with that same kind of information. In order for traditional and new media journalists to have the opportunity of using direct content and quotes from the athlete's website, the appropriate information has to first be made accessible.

Overall, professional athletes in the future need to remember that their status as a part of a league team puts them under more scrutiny than a regular person. That means that millions of people are watching whatever they do or say online and that it will be out there for everyone to see. As such, their Twitter and personal website news releases and blogs should always be retained as image repair tools rather than personalized social media outlets. If they do, then they will have a better chance of not finding themselves in a crisis in the first place or they will have a better chance of coming back from a crisis more quickly if they have one occur.

The findings of this study provide significant information for professional athletes who find themselves in crisis situations in the future. It shows that they should absolutely utilize the new media outlets of Twitter, personal website news releases, and personal website blogs in order to successfully implement image repair strategies. Simply having a Twitter stream, personal website news releases,

and a personal website blog with the one purpose of tweeting and posting information that concentrates on repairing their image will be invaluable to them in reaching their long term image repair goals.

It will be important for professional athletes in the future to make sure that their personal website news releases and blogs are kept up to date and are regularly added to, otherwise it gives the impression that the athlete does not care about their image or the impression that they are giving. When using Twitter specifically, future athletes should make sure to find the balance in their tweets between being friendly and over-sharing with their followers. They must interact with their followers in a genuine way while being careful to not give too much personal information that might have the potential to harm their image repair progress.

By playing an active role in the distribution of the most easily accessible information concerning their careers that exists in today's society, future professional athletes have the potential to fix a problem before it ever happens. The amount of fans and followers that professional athletes are able to generate through the use of Twitter and personal websites is astronomically greater than the amount of fans that has been traditionally available to them. The new media implications allow a professional athlete to potentially gain fans and followers in every corner of the globe, in numbers upwards of 1,000,000 people. The potential benefits available through the appropriate use of new media outlets as image repair strategies are virtually limitless. If a professional athlete's usage of those three new media outlets follows the appropriate combination of Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies

that applies to their specific crisis situation, future athletes will have a much better chance of repairing their image quickly, efficiently, and permanently.

Limitations & Future Studies

Throughout the process of this study, a few unexpected discoveries were made. The first was that Favre did not have a Twitter account. As one of the biggest celebrity quarterbacks in the nation, the researcher assumed that he would be a part of that social media outlet so the fact that he was not was unanticipated. The second finding worth noting was that none of the three athletes' personal websites continually updated the news releases or the blogs found on their websites. The researcher thought that celebrity NFL athletes of the caliber of Vick, Favre, and Bush would all have professionally run websites so it was very strange that they were not as well put together as expected. Bush's website had not been updated since before he had been transferred to the Miami Dolphins, which happened at the time this study was beginning so that development was also unforeseen.

The third and most important revelation was that of the three athletes involved in the study, Vick was the only one who had been to prison, and yet he was the one who was most successful at using online image repair strategies to his best advantage. Perhaps having to deal with the stigma of having recently been in prison is what prompted Vick to be so conscientious with his usage of new media for image repair. Whatever the reason, it was very surprising that the one who should have had the worst results based on the severity of his crisis, actually had the best results of the cases in the study.

A few limitations and ways that that this study could have been done more effectively became evident after the previously mentioned discoveries were made. The choice of Brett Favre as one of the three NFL athletes involved in the study was sound based on his celebrity status, the recent occurrence of his crisis, and the amount of publicity that it had received. From his popular standing in both sports and mainstream media, his continued involvement in the NFL, and his placement in the media spotlight made him a very logical athlete to choose for participation. But the fact that Favre did not have a Twitter account might have left some room for improvement.

However, the analysis of Favre's lack of new media usage added to the results since his lack of Twitter made the finding clear that having a mixed Twitter account like Bush did is better than not having one at all. Having the ability to appropriately tweet image repair strategies to more than 1,000,000 people some of the time is better than never having the ability to reach that many people at all. So while Favre's lack of a Twitter could be seen as an issue, it was still relevant to the findings and helped to make the case for the importance of Twitter in a professional athlete's online image repair strategy plan.

Even though Favre's lack of Twitter was relevant in this study, future studies on this topic may want to include athletes who have each of the new media outlets that are being researched. Another way that future research might expand upon this study would be to take the results and add to them to establish an exact formula for implementing image repair strategies based on similar crises. That way, different types of people such as PR practitioner, attorneys, or journalists might be

able to apply it their clients or stories when they want to understand how people use image repair strategies to make themselves appear a certain way.

Conclusion

The infiltration of the Internet into every aspect of daily life in the United States is causing people to continually change and alter the way that they see the world and interact with it. As this process continues to rapidly progress, it is essential for researchers to address pertinent topics that will help people understand how to capably navigate through this ever-changing, technologically driven world. In order to find pertinent topics, where better for researchers to look than to new media.

Through the advent of smart phones, laptops, and the iPad, new media outlets are quickly becoming more popular than traditional media outlets because they are so easily accessed. That means that there is a whole new frontier for the way that people get their information about celebrities and how they interact with them. Since professional league sports have become an integral part of American culture, they are now recognized as one of the most widely watched and closely followed industries in the nation. That makes the professional athletes who participate in league sports into instant celebrities, whether they are ready for the pressures that status brings or not. Having that forced celebrity status has proven to be the downfall of many professional athletes, both those who are brand new to the industry, as well as those who have been in the business for a long time. More often than not, athletes who experience a crisis are in need of tools to help them fix their image in order to save their reputations and their careers.

With that thought in mind, this study aimed to establish appropriate and successful new media uses of Benoit's (1995a) image repair strategies for athletes involved in professional sports to utilize in their new media outlets after they have a crisis occur. By closely examining the Twitter streams, personal website news releases, and personal website blogs of three high profile NFL athletes, Michael Vick, Brett Favre, and Reggie Bush, this study found that of the three new media outlets, Twitter is currently the most influential. If used correctly as an image repair tool, Twitter has the potential to help professional athletes with the most tarnished reputations turn their entire image around and become even more successful than they were before their crisis occurred.

Additionally, if the right combination of image repair strategies suitable to each individual crisis is utilized in a cohesive plan across all three new media outlets of Twitter, personal website news releases, and personal website blogs, professional athletes will have an even better chance of success at repairing their image and reaching every possible audience.

The suggested application of online image repair strategies that is put forth from this study was established to assist future professional athletes so they may have the best chance of success at coming back from a crisis with the greatest ease possible. By presenting a united front of image repair across their new media outlets, professional athletes might be able to establish their point of view and give a substantial contribution to the online information that people are able to access about them. In doing so, athletes also make it possible for journalists and reporters to disseminate their preferred information to other traditional and new media

sources for the highest chance of their image repair strategies succeeding in every type of coverage.

The suggested application of online image repair strategies put forth by this study established a successful model for the implementation of new media image repair strategies to assist future professional athletes so that they might have the best chance of success at coming back after a crisis.

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