Analysis of the image repair discourse in the Michael Phelps controversy

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Abstract

The following study reviews the image repair strategies used by Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, his sponsors and the organizations that govern him as an amateur swimmer after a picture of Phelps allegedly smoking from a marijuana pipe appeared in a British tabloid. Additionally, the study reviews media coverage of the controversy to determine whether Phelps was successful in repairing his image. The study concludes that Phelps’ image repair campaign was a success. Implications for public relations practitioners and suggestions for future research also are discussed.

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This essay analyzes and evaluates the rhetorical effectiveness of the discourse of Michael Phelps and other stakeholders after a picture of the 23-year-old swimmer allegedly smoking from a marijuana pipe (bong) appeared in the News of the World tabloid in London.

In terms of media coverage, Phelps benefitted from a variety of events. First, the Phelps firestorm started in the midst of Super Bowl Sunday. Second, columnists dismissed the severity of Phelps’ scenario due to his age, and the use of marijuana as a serious offense. They argued Phelps could have done something much worse—taking a performance-enhancing drug, for example. Ironically, this hypothetical comparison became a reality just a few days after the Phelps controversy began when Sports Illustrated reported that Alex Rodriguez, considered by many to be one of the greatest players in baseball history, tested positive for steroids in 2003 (Roberts & Epstein, 2009). With that, Phelps became an after-thought in the sports lexicon.

This topic merits scholarly attention because, despite the high amount of crises involving athletes, little research has been done in this area. This study also is relevant to public relations practitioners, especially those that work with athletes and sports organizations. After all, according to Brazeal (2008), the “market value” of an athlete’s image hinges on their public reputation (p. 146).

1. Rhetorical context

It is fair to say that Phelps—a decorated Olympic champion named the 2008 Associated Press male athlete of the year (Crouse, 2009)—had a positive reputation before this incident occurred. According to Coombs (2007), a favorable precrisis reputation means the entity in question has reputation capital to spend, unlike those that are unknown or disliked (p. 147). The bong photo, however, presented a two-pronged threat to Phelps’ image. First, it clearly put him in a negative light. The photo could not be ignored and spoke for itself. Second, the photo did something else—it reminded the public of Phelps’ past transgression.
In November 2004, months after winning 8 medals (6 gold, 2 bronze) at the Athens Olympics, Phelps released the following statement after being charged with driving under the influence of alcohol, driving while impaired by alcohol, violation of a license restriction and failure to obey a traffic control device:

Last week, I made a mistake. Getting into a car after anything to drink is wrong. It’s dangerous and unacceptable. I’m 19 and was taught that no matter how old you are, you should take responsibility for your actions, which I will do. I’m sorry. (Michaelis, 2004, ¶3)

1.1. Rhetorical analysis of image repair discourse

When a reputation is threatened, individuals and organizations are motivated to present an image defense (Brinson & Benoit, 1996, p. 30). According to Benoit (1997a), an attack or complaint that triggers a crisis has two components: the accused is held responsible for an action, and, that act is considered offensive. For both conditions to apply, the company/individual must be believed to be responsible for the offensive act. Second, it does not matter if the accused is in fact responsible for the act, but whether they are perceived to be responsible for the act by the relevant stakeholders (p. 178).

Benoit’s (1995) image restoration theory encompasses five strategies: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Since the 1960s, when the philosophical assumptions of image repair focused mainly on public officials, scholars have extended the focus on the role of apologetic rhetoric in crisis communication within corporations, and to a lesser extent, in popular culture figures such as sports and media celebrities (Towner, 2009). The next section will provide a brief review of the literature examining crisis responses through the lens of Benoit’s image restoration theory.

In the corporate realm, Brinson and Benoit (1996) found that Dow’s use of denial and minimization in response to accusations of developing harmful breast implants made Dow look irresponsible, dishonest, and uncaring. Dow’s use of mortification, corrective action and bolstering, however, were deemed successful in limiting continued damage. In response to a federal investigation of Bridgestone-Firestone tires, Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal (2002) found that, while mortification was appropriate and necessary, the corrective action (the tire recall) contradicted the company’s denial that its tires were defective.

Regarding responses of public officials, Benoit and Henson (2009) found that the image repair strategies utilized by President George W. Bush after Hurricane Katrina—bolstering, defeasibility and corrective action—were unsuccessful. Defeasibility was also deemed a poor choice because Bush attempted to portray the hurricane as an “unprecedented” event that could not be prepared for, when in fact, it was known for days that the storm was headed for the Gulf Coast (p. 43). Regarding celebrity responses, Benoit (1997b) found that actor Hugh Grant effectively repaired his image following his arrest for lewd behavior with a prostitute by utilizing mortification, bolstering, denial and attacking the accuser (p. 256).

Scholars have also examined crisis responses of athletes. For example, Nelson (1984) showed how tennis great Billie Jean King overcame the revelation of an affair with a former secretary partly because she had an enormous supply of goodwill with the media, her rivals, and fans. Benoit and Hanczor (1994) examined figure skater Tonya Harding’s failed attempt to defend against charges she was involved in a 1994 attack on rival Nancy Kerrigan, and Brazeal (2008) showed that Terrell Owens used bolstering and mortification after he was suspended by the Philadelphia Eagles for conduct detrimental to the team. While Owens created common ground with his audience by bolstering his passion for football (p. 148), his use of mortification faltered because he never once said “I was wrong.” Furthermore, Owens never once suggested that he would change his ways (p. 149).

Jerome (2008) found that NASCAR driver Tony Stewart used the rhetoric of atonement, a prescriptive sub-genre of apologia which is necessary when a rhetor is faced with a situation for which the rhetor must atone for sins that cannot be denied, justified or transcended (Jerome, 2008, p. 126). While closely related to mortification, Koesten and Rowland (2004) distinguish atonement by arguing, “Where traditional apologia is used to defend one’s character... the rhetoric of atonement functions as a purgative-redemptive device for an individual or an entire organization” (p. 69). Further, atonement is more than just about restoring an image by acknowledging wrongdoing, saying sorry, and asking forgiveness; it is about the creation of an entire new entity (Jerome, 2008, p. 126).

By offering statements of regret and alluding to the need to make a new start, Jerome (2008) found that Stewart’s utilization of atonement was successful among all of his key audiences (stakeholders); as proof, Joe Gibbs Racing and Home Depot both extended their contracts with Stewart, a costly move that would not have been made if Stewart’s image was still damaged (p. 131).

2. Research design

The current study seeks to fill the voids in the literature by posing the following research questions:

RQ1: What image repair strategies did Phelps use to respond to the photo controversy?
RQ2: What image repair strategies did Phelps’ sponsors use to respond to the photo controversy?
RQ3: What image repair strategies did the organizations that govern Phelps as an amateur swimmer use to respond to the photo controversy?

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RQ4: Based upon the reaction of the media, was Phelps’ image repair campaign a success?

Obtained through general Web searching through Google during a 21-day period following the initial reporting of the story on February 1, 2009, this study employs a qualitative content analysis of the image restoration responses of the following three sources: (a) Phelps, (b) Phelps’ sponsors and (c) organizations that govern Phelps as an amateur swimmer.

The study also evaluates the effectiveness of these strategies and tactics through a qualitative content analysis of print and online coverage of the controversy. Due to their national relevance, columns from The New York Times, SportsIllustrated.com (SI.com), ESPN.com and America Online (AOL) Sports were specifically selected; content from The Baltimore Sun was chosen as Baltimore is Phelps’ hometown. While the media does not speak for all people, its reaction to the controversy had the ability to influence how people felt about Phelps. To support this notion, in reviewing Stewart’s image repair campaign, Jerome (2008) states, “Clearly, Stewart was trying to create a new image of him among the media, whose reporting in the future could impact the public’s perception of him” (p. 131).

3. Results

3.1. Description of response strategies: Phelps responds

On the same day the controversial photo was published, Phelps released the following statement through his marketing agency:

I engaged in behavior which was regrettable and demonstrated bad judgment... I acted in a youthful and inappropriate way, not in a manner that people have come to expect from me. For this, I am sorry. I promise my fans and the public—it will not happen again. (Crouse, 2009, ¶3)

Phelps utilizes mortification by acknowledging that he “engaged in behavior which was regrettable and demonstrated bad judgment.” He also admitted that he “acted in a youthful and inappropriate way, not in a manner that people have come to expect from me.” Most importantly, however, Phelps said “I am sorry,” which he also stated in his 2004 apology.

Phelps seeks to reduce offensiveness by bolstering himself by reminding the people of his successes. By doing this, he attempts to shift stakeholders’ perceptions from the possible marijuana smoker to a 14-time gold medal Olympian. Phelps utilizes defeasibility by reminding stakeholders of his young age (23) and admitting he acted in a “youthful” manner. This is the same strategy he used four years earlier when he was 19. While not explicitly stating he should be forgiven because his age permits him to make mistakes, Phelps seems to hint at this.

Phelps goes on to utilize the corrective action tactic by promising that an incident like this will not happen again, but he does not elaborate on what actions he will take to ensure this holds true. Four years earlier, Phelps also promised to take responsibility for his actions.

3.2. Sponsors react

The findings of this study show Phelps’ sponsors—Speedo, Visa, Omega, Hilton, Kellogg Co., Subway, and beverage maker PureSport (Associated Press, 2009a)—used the bolstering and minimization strategies. Speedo, arguably most closely associated with Phelps, issued the following statement on February 2, 2009:

Speedo would like to make it clear that it does not condone such behavior and we know that Michael truly regrets his actions. Michael Phelps is a valued member of the Speedo team and a great champion. We will do all that we can to support him and his family. (Harris, 2009, ¶4–5)

Speedo bolsters Phelps by stating “Michael truly regrets his actions,” and calling him a “valued member of the Speedo family” and “a great champion.”

Similarly, Omega said it was “strongly committed” to Phelps, calling his Olympic performance “among the defining sporting achievements in the history of the sport.” It seeks to reduce offensiveness by stating, “The current story in the press involves Michael Phelps’ private life and is, as far as Omega is concerned, a nonissue” (Harris, 2009). Visa released a statement two days after controversy began:

We have spoken with Michael, and he has expressed regret for the situation, has committed to being accountable and improving his judgment in the future. We intend to support him as he looks to move forward. (Fredrix, 2009, ¶2)

Here, Visa utilizes bolstering by saying Phelps regretted his actions and that he was going to improve his actions in the future.

3.3. Organizational reactions

The organizations that Phelps represents, which include USA Swimming, The United States Olympic Committee (USOC), the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Federation Internationale De Natation Amateur (FINA), used bolstering and
minimization when responding to the controversy. The same day Phelps issued his apology, the USOC issued the following statement:

We are disappointed in the behavior recently exhibited by Michael Phelps. . . Michael has acknowledged that he made a mistake and apologized for his actions. We are confident that, going forward, Michael will consistently set the type of example we all expect from a great Olympic champion. (“USOC Responds to Phelps’ Apology,” 2009)

While it stated that Phelps made a mistake and that it was disappointing in his actions, the USOC clearly bolsters Phelps by calling him a “role model” and a “great Olympic champion.”

On February 5, 2009, USA Swimming posted the following message on its Web site:

USA Swimming has reprimanded Michael Phelps under its Code of Conduct by withdrawing financial support and the eligibility to compete for a period of three months effective today, Feb. 5, 2009. This is not a situation where any anti-doping rule was violated, but we decided to send a strong message to Michael because he disappointed so many people, particularly the hundreds of thousands of USA Swimming member kids who look up to him as a role model and a hero. Michael has voluntarily accepted this reprimand and has committed to earn back our trust. (“USA Swimming Statement Regarding Michael Phelps,” 2009)

In announcing it had suspended Phelps for three months, the organization utilized the bolstering and minimization strategies. While it reprimanded Phelps for his actions, it minimized the seriousness of the situation by highlighting that Phelps has not violated anti-doping rules. It also bolsters Phelps by calling him a “role model” and a “hero.”

The IOC e-mailed the following to the Associated Press one day after the photo was released:

Michael Phelps is a great Olympic champion. He apologized for his inappropriate behavior. We have no reason to doubt his sincerity and his commitment to continue to act as a role model. (Associated Press, 2009b)

Bolstering is most evident in this statement. Besides calling Phelps a “great Olympic champion,” the IOC, like the USOC, called Phelps a “role model.” During the Beijing games, coincidentally, IOC President Jacque Rogge called Phelps “the icon of the games” (Associated Press, 2009b).

On February 4, Switzerland-based FINA issued the following statement:

As a citizen, Michael Phelps displayed inappropriate behavior. But his sincere regret and the promise that such a situation will not happen again are sufficient guarantees that this great star will continue generating respect and appreciation to all fans of our sport around the globe. (Associated Press, 2009c)

Like the other organizations, FINA condemns Phelps’ behavior, but is quick to bolster the swimmer. Phelps is called a “great star” who will continue to generate “respect and appreciation” to fans around the world. Also, despite his past transgression, Phelps’ promise that such a situation will not happen again is called a guarantee.

3.4. Phelps responds. . . again

In his first interview granted to the Baltimore Sun, Phelps not only discussed his recent transgression, he also revisited his 2004 drunk-driving arrest. “. . .reminded me of how it was the day I got my DUI, and I swore to myself I’d never do that again,” he said. “This is just a stupid thing of mine I did and I have to live with it” (Valkenburg, 2009, ¶7). Here, Phelps continues to use the strategy of bolstering. The fact that he was willing to discuss his past—not avoid it—puts him in a more favorable context. He also tries to minimize the bong photo crisis by calling it a “stupid thing” (Valkenburg, 2009).

Phelps maintained his bolstering strategy when reacting to USA Swimming’s decision to suspend him. He said, “It’s fair. Obviously, for a mistake, you should get punished” (Associated Press, 2009d).

3.5. Media reacts

Murphy (2009) of Sportsillustrated.com published a column titled “Phelps used poor judgment, but he was just being a kid.” He points out that marijuana usage is so trivial that it doesn’t matter because if it did, “our current president wouldn’t be our current president” (¶7). He also minimizes the marijuana usage by pointing out Phelps is not using performance-enhancing drugs. “He is an imperfect, but clean, champion,” he asserts (¶16).

Similarly, Baltimore Sun columnist Rick Maese (2009) minimizes the Phelps’ controversy by pointing out the use of performance-enhancing drugs in sports such as football and baseball is a much more serious matter. He also bolsters Phelps by writing, “Phelps isn’t a bad guy. He might not make the kind of decisions you wish for your son or daughter, but he still competes the right way” (¶19).

In a column titled “Phelps’ vow to Kids Goes Up in Smoke” national columnist Jay Mariotti (2009) seems to blame the enormity of Phelps’ fame for his transgression:

All I’m saying is, imagine being 23 and inheriting the wealth, celebrity and expectations of a world that extols you as a god and demands nothing less than exemplary behavior. The very weight of that burden might prompt a human being to run, escape, get drunk, or get high. (¶5)
4. Discussion

Based upon the comprehensive content analysis, it appears that Phelps’ image repair campaign was a success. His statement was well received by his sponsors and organizations, and the media all but dismissed the transgression as a “boys will be boys” scenario. Additionally, Phelps’ sponsors and governing organizations not only supported the swimmer, but also bolstered his image.

Phelps use of the mortification and bolstering strategies is supported by Benoit (1997b), who showed Grant used the same strategies to repair his image. Additionally, Jerome (2008) showed Stewart’s use of a form of apologia, atonement, was also a success. The success of the defeasibility strategy is evident by the fact that more than one columnist seemed to give Phelps a “free pass” because of his age. Phelps used the corrective action strategy but as of the writing of this study, he had yet to take any public steps to correct the situation.

The success of Phelps’ image repair campaign was somewhat predictable as he utilized strategies used by other athletes in the past. According to Kruse (1981), athletes are likely to say “I’m sorry” and express regret for their conduct (p. 281), which is exactly what Phelps did. This expression of regret functions rhetorically as evidence that the athlete has taken the first step in mending their ways (Kruse, 1981, p. 281).

It should be noted the brevity of Phelps’ initial statement most likely was not by accident. According to Kruse (1981), the apologetic statements of sports personalities tend to be brief and general. Additionally, athletes rarely elaborate upon the circumstances in which they were involved because by the time the apologetic statements reach the public, the fans are fairly well acquainted with the situational elements that provoked the discourse. Also, those who explain their circumstances in detail or who extend their arguments risk implicating themselves further (p. 282).

Once he released his statement, Phelps’ sponsors seem to benefit more by standing by him. The lure of Phelps swimming in the 2012 Summer Olympics is well worth the sponsors defending, and even glorifying, Phelps’ image. While the shine of the 2008 games has somewhat dimmed, Phelps’ quest for another eight gold medals should not be underestimated. Brennan (2009) explains the Phelps–sponsor relationship by stating:

They need him. They need him for their bottom line. Imagine for a second the Beijing Games without him. They need him to swim again, and win medals, and become America’s next great story of redemption. (¶4)

Yes, Kellogg did choose to end its sponsorship contract with Phelps after it expired, but there may be more to the story (Macur, 2009, ¶2). Kellogg’s stock dropped nearly 30% this past fall, making sponsorship deals like Phelps’ a luxury not a necessity (MacGregor, 2009, ¶13).

The organizations that govern swimming also seem to benefit by not only standing by, but also bolstering Phelps. His participation in the next Summer Olympics should be a financial windfall for these organizations.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a valuable message for public relations practitioners: when a client’s actions are undeniable, respond quickly and honestly. It can be theorized that Phelps’ rapid, honest response made it easier for his sponsors and governing bodies to release statements of support. The need to respond as quickly and honestly as possible is supported by Benoit (1997a) and Jerome (2008). Conversely, Brazeal (2008) showed the inability to say “I’m sorry” can have negative repercussions.

5.1. Limitations and future research

The researchers admit this study was limited by certain factors. Future researcher may consider examining television coverage. For example, analysis of Phelps’ rhetorical responses utilized on televised appearances on NBC’s “The Today Show” and “Dateline” could examine the potential impact of multimedia response strategies. Another limitation was accessibility. The public statements of the shareholders involved in the photo controversy could only be analyzed. No one can be sure of what Phelps said to his sponsors and governing organizations in private that also may have influenced their support of him.

Despite the limitations, analyzing how athletes use image repair strategies is a fruitful field of research. Future researchers could examine how an athlete responds if their sponsors and organizations are not supportive. Had Speedo, Visa or FINA
taken a different stance toward Phelps’ transgression, the swimmer’s image repair campaign may have taken a decidedly different course.

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