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A limited number of studies have examined the effectiveness of apology techniques in image restoration of athletes involved in sex scandals. This case study used Benoit’s (1995) image-restoration strategies to examine the apology techniques 3 athletes used to negotiate their sex scandals and attempted to encourage further discussion of these techniques. Three athletes’ sex scandals were comparatively analyzed, including those of golfer Tiger Woods, National Football League quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, and the National Basketball Association’s Kobe Bryant. This case study integrated the apology statements made by each athlete and examined sports-news coverage of the scandals from The New York Times, USA Today, and The Washington Post. This case study offers important insights on how these athletes restored their images and handled the crises surrounded their sex scandals.

Keywords: sports public relations, Tiger Woods, Kobe Bryant, Ben Roethlisberger

Americans are obsessed with sports. On any given Saturday or Sunday in October, sports fans will flock to every available sports bar in their favorite athlete’s jersey to root for their football team of choice. Many fans dedicate rooms in their homes to favorite sports teams and plaster their vehicles’ bumpers with stickers, decals, and flags that represent their allegiance to a particular team. Today, sport is widely regarded as a cultural subsystem of modern society, and, due to the widespread participation from fans who watch or engage in sporting activities, sport has also become a major business enterprise (Hopwood, 2005). Fans no longer just observe the athletic feats of the players. They expect players to serve as role models and icons. Athletes are expected to represent not only themselves but also their team, city, sponsors, and fans. Therefore, an athlete’s involvement in a scandal can have a profound impact on the entire operation that supports and surrounds them.

Throughout the past few decades, there have been many sex scandals associated with athletes. These scandals often escalate due to widespread media coverage and fans’ ability to circulate information through social media. When a scandal breaks, the athlete must take steps to restore his or her image to the public and
mend private relationships. Therefore, the athlete is expected to make public statements, usually before the media, apologizing to various publics to stop the spread of the crisis (Brazeal, 2008). However, crises also affect the athlete’s organization and sponsors. Each entity must decide what type of public relations strategies to use to manage a crisis.

This case study used Benoit’s (1995) image-restoration theory to examine the apology techniques athletes and organizations used when sex scandals arose and to open discussion on the effectiveness of these techniques. Although most studies to date have examined image restoration in the field of sports public relations (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Brazeal, 2008; Bruce & Tahlia, 2008; Fortunato, 2008; Jerome, 2008), few explored how these strategies are applied in sex-scandal crises involving individual athletes. This integrated study analyzed three athlete sex scandals including golfer Tiger Woods, National Football League (NFL) quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, and the National Basketball Association’s (NBA) Kobe Bryant. The three athletes were chosen due to the widespread media coverage of their respective sex scandals and to examine sex scandals for a range of sports. To gain insights into the effectiveness of apology statements, this case study comparatively analyzed the athletes’ personal statements and other sports news from The New York Times, USA Today, and The Washington Post about their scandals. Using various news sources, we hoped to provide a better understanding of how these athletes and organizations attempted to restore their images and manage their sex-scandal crises.

**Sports Public Relations**

Sports public relations is a unique specialty within the field because of numerous stakeholders involved and the values that drive them. Because sport is international and a part of everyday life, it shapes relationships at every level, including diplomatic, cultural, economic, organizational, community, and interpersonal (L’Etang, 2006). Furthermore, sports teams or organizations must be concerned not only with their athletes but also with sponsors, fans, owners, and numerous other audiences.

Most sports public relations research to date has examined the importance of media coverage (Anderson, 2005; L’Etang, 2006; Summers & Morgan, 2008). For example, Anderson’s (2008) review of former NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle explored the importance of media coverage in building the NFL into a multibillion-dollar enterprise. As a former public relations practitioner, Rozelle saw sports as an “escape” for viewers from their everyday lives and knew that promoting escapism through media outlets would help build loyal fan bases.

The role of public relations is crucial in the popularity of sports due to the number of endorsements athletes and teams acquire. It is impossible to watch a sporting event without being inundated by advertisements. When a brand sponsors an athlete or a team, it attaches a new group of stakeholders to the athlete’s or team’s image. Therefore, endorsements create a reciprocal relationship where the athlete or team can affect how people view a brand or product, but the product and brand can also affect how people view an athlete or team. In some cases, this relationship can create public relations liability. For instance, the Houston Astros baseball team experienced significant fallout from Enron’s financial scandal due to naming rights associated with the Astros’ stadium (Jensen & Butler, 2007). Consequently, practitioners in commercialized industries like sports must develop
effective public relations initiatives to maintain the unique relationships between stakeholders, organizations, and teams and athletes, as well as the impacts these relationships can have on the public.

The commercialization of sports also leads to increased "hero worship" of athletes (Gilchrist, 2005; L'Etang, 2006). Frequent media coverage of athletes increases fans' interest in every aspect of the athletes' lives. Fans are no longer just interested in how many points athletes scored in the last game, they are also interested in their clothing styles, their personal relationships, and their misdeeds. This heightened level of interest tends to encourage idolization of sports stars by their fans, and therefore star athletes are expected to be bastions of exemplary behavior, especially when associated with a brand (Summers & Morgan, 2008). When a brand endorses an athlete, the athlete "becomes the brand" (Gilchrist, 2005). Therefore, when an athletes' image is tarnished, the brand is also tarnished, as fans begin to question their buying decisions.

### Image-Restoration Strategies

Athletes and the images they project tend to receive close public scrutiny. Benoit (1995) defines image as the perceptions of the source held by the audience, shaped by the words and deeds of that source, as well as by the actions of other relevant actors. When a public figure's actions are closely watched, Benoit argues that to maintain a positive image people need to understand the behaviors the public finds acceptable and govern themselves accordingly. When a figure's image is damaged in some way, he or she must take the necessary steps to repair it. Benoit provides a typology of image-repair strategies and organizes them into five categories, namely, denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. He divides the first three categories into multiple subcategories to explain how the strategies can be used for image repair.

#### Denial

The first image-repair strategy is complete denial of the offensive act. If the public accepts this denial by the offender, the figure's image should be restored. Typically, providing an alibi can strengthen the plausibility of the offender's denial. Another option is to shift the blame. If the offense can be attributed to another person, the offender can name another offender to divert negative attention (Benoit, 1995).

#### Evasion of Responsibility

The second strategy is evasion of responsibility. If the accused offender cannot deny the action, that offender can attempt to evade or reduce his or her responsibility for it. Evading responsibility includes four substrategies: scapegoating or provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. Scapegoating or provocation involves claiming that someone provoked the misdeed, causing the offender to react to the initial wrongful act. Defeasibility involves pleading lack of information about or control over important factors in the situation (Benoit, 1995). If the public accepts these claims, the offender can reduce his or her level of responsibility for the misdeed. Making an excuse based on accidents allows the accused to displace blame.
by citing uncontrollable forces as the reason for the offense. Finally, the person in question could claim that he or she performed the act with good intentions to elicit sympathy from the public (Benoit, 1995).

**Reduction of Offensiveness**

The third strategy attempts to reduce the degree of ill feeling experienced by the audience (Benoit, 1995). This can be done through bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one’s accuser, and compensation. Bolstering involves building up one’s character to show the audience positive qualities. This can effectively offset negative views of the offender, especially if the positive qualities directly contradict the act in question (Benoit, 1995). Minimization involves attempts to convince the audience that the misdeed is not as bad as it seems. By reducing the negativity the audience associates with the act, the accused can also reduce the negative impact to his or her image. Next is differentiation. Here the offender distinguishes the act he or she performed from other similar but more offensive actions. In comparison, the act in question may seem less offensive, reducing the audience’s negative feelings toward the actor (Benoit, 1995).

Another reduction strategy is transcendence, which involves placing the act in a different context. By changing the frame of the transgression, the person in question can attempt to place the action in a more positive light and therefore reduce its perceived offensiveness. A person accused of wrongdoing can also attack the accuser. If the accused can attribute a lack of credibility to the accuser, the accuser will hold less weight and the accused’s image will be restored. Finally, an accused person can engage in compensation, offering to reimburse the victim for any damages. Compensation can show the audience that the offender is taking steps to atone for his or her misbehavior.

**Corrective Action**

The fourth strategy for image restoration is corrective action. The accused attempts to correct the problem by restoring the state of affairs existing before the objectionable action, promising to take action to prevent the recurrence of the offensive act, or both (Benoit, 1995). Consequently, the audiences are able to see the sincerity of the accused and retain a more positive view of him or her, even considering the misdeed.

**Mortification**

A person who needs to restore his or her image after committing an offense can simply confess and beg for forgiveness. To do this, he or she must first admit responsibility for the act. While this can be difficult to do, if the audience believes the apology is sincere, they will be more forgiving toward the offender.

**Image-Restoration Approaches to Athlete Scandals**

Few studies have examined image-restoration strategies in regard to individual athletes. Some showed that the more successful the athlete is in his or her sport, the greater the negative impact of a scandal (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Brazeal,
Revisiting Image-Restoration Strategies

In essence, the audiences create a halo effect. Fans see great athletes and expect them to be great in every area of life. Therefore, when athletes do display unacceptable behaviors, they cannot hide or ignore the issue; rather, they must address it publicly. Fans must believe the athlete is sincerely contrite to rebuild faith. In the case of figure skater Tonya Harding, this was difficult to do. After being accused of participating in the attack of fellow figure skater Nancy Kerrigan, she used many of the image-restoration techniques outlined by Benoit (1995). However, they were not effective for her. Her presentation of inconsistent facts and an unfamiliar image to her fans rendered her apology weak and ineffective. In the case of NASCAR driver Tony Stewart, he was able to restore his image after publicly assaulting a photographer. Stewart publicly apologized to all his key audiences and repeatedly stated that he did not expect forgiveness. He also took numerous steps to show that his apologies were sincere, increasing his believability to his audiences.

Furthermore, little research on individual athletes and image restoration has focused on athlete sex scandals, while several studies examined sports-team sex scandals (Fortunato, 2008; Toffoletti, 2007). In those cases, the misdeeds of one or a few offenders affected the whole team or organization. In the case of the Duke University lacrosse scandal, the whole university had to implement image-restoration strategies due to the alleged actions of a few student athletes. By creating positive key messages and admitting to the incident, Duke University effectively employed multiple strategies and kept its image as a prestigious institution. The university knew that the media played a key role in creating public perception. Thus, it took corrective actions to disseminate its desired messages. “The framing of messages is clearly designed to favorably persuade stakeholder groups including the mass media whose reporting can also positively influence the larger general audience” (Fortunato, 2008, p. 121).

Hopwood (2005) pointed out that sport has evolved from an important social phenomenon to a significant economic and political phenomenon. Therefore, image management is very important. Each stakeholder is affected by an athlete or team image. In this vein, sports public relations is necessary when the athlete or team engages in undesirable behavior.

Three Athlete Sex Scandals

Tiger Woods

One of the athletes that this study will focus on is Tiger Woods. Woods, 35, has been an international icon in the world of sports and golf since 1997 when he became the youngest man and the first African American ever to win the U.S. Masters. Since then, he has won multiple golfing championships and become synonymous with greatness in golf and sport. Woods appears as the face for many different companies, most notably Nike, and generates millions of dollars in revenue for his sponsors. In November 2009, Woods was accused of having extramarital affairs with multiple women. The media quickly became obsessed with the details of the scandal and Wood’s personal life. Consequently, he took an indefinite leave from golf and did not offer a public apology for his actions until February 2010. According to Farhi (2010), the Woods scandal may have constituted a watershed
many in American journalism—many “respectable” news outlets abandoned traditional news-gathering methods and standards of fair play and relied primarily on aggressive, often inaccurate, “tabloid” reporting to document a major news story. The Woods scandal blurred the distinction between mainstream and tabloid news. The widespread and constant media coverage of his personal life greatly affected Woods’s image and his career.

**Kobe Bryant**

The second athlete considered in this study is professional basketball player Kobe Bryant. Bryant, 33, has played for the NBA Los Angeles Lakers since 1996. Bryant immediately became a fan favorite and helped the team win three consecutive NBA championships. In 2003, Bryant was accused of sexual assault on a hotel worker in Colorado. Bryant admitted to cheating on his wife but did not plead guilty to the assault charge. In his public apology, he stated, “Although I truly believe this encounter between us was consensual, I recognize now that she did not and does not view this incident the same way I did” (Johnson, 2004). After a yearlong battle that captured the media’s attention, Bryant’s accuser refused to testify against him, which led to a dismissal of the case. The civil lawsuit the victim filed against Bryant was settled out of court. While Bryant was never punished for his alleged actions, the case still positioned him as a sex offender in the media, leading many of his endorsers to drop him. Since then, Bryant has had a very successful career and continues to be popular with fans.

**Ben Roethlisberger**

The last athlete we consider is NFL Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger. Roethlisberger was drafted to the Pittsburgh Steelers in 2004 at the age of 22. An instant fan favorite, he has led the Steelers to three Super Bowl appearances and two wins. In 2006, Roethlisberger made history by becoming the youngest quarterback to win the Super Bowl. He quickly became a hero in the city of Pittsburgh and was known throughout the NFL for his skills on the field. However, in the fall of 2008 and the spring of 2010, Roethlisberger was accused of sexual assault. Neither case led to criminal charges, but Roethlisberger was punished by the NFL and was suspended for six games of the 2010 season for violating the league’s personal-conduct policy. The NFL later reduced his punishment to a four-game suspension for good behavior. Even though Roethlisberger’s fans welcomed him back on the field, his reputation was irreparably damaged because of the scandal.

Ultimately, the evidence shows that fans care when their favorite athletes are involved in sex scandals. Applying the various aspects of Benoit’s image-restoration strategies in these three scandal cases, this case study will shed light in the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What were the presentation styles of the sex scandals of Woods, Bryant, and Roethlisberger in news coverage?

**RQ2:** How are female characters in sex scandals portrayed in news coverage?

**RQ3:** How do sponsors and sporting organizations handle athletes’ images when their athletes are dealing with sex scandals?
RQ4: Which image-restoration strategies did Woods, Bryant, and Roethlisberger use for their apologies?

Method

A qualitative case study was used to examine how three athletes dealt with their sex scandals. This integrated study analyzed news articles about a subject and examined certain correlations and patterns. Specifically, this case study explored sports coverage of Tiger Woods's, Kobe Bryant's, and Ben Roethlisberger's sex scandals due to the nature of the offenses, the amount of media coverage generated, and the popularity of the athletes involved. Moreover, news articles from The New York Times, USA Today, and The Washington Post discussing their sex scandals were comparatively analyzed—six articles for each athlete, including three from the beginning of the scandal and three from after the public apology.

This study aimed to examine how the athletes handled their scandals and how they attempted to restore their images. Thus, the case study was an appropriate approach to examine the effectiveness of communication strategies three athletes used in their public statements. We analyzed news articles from The New York Times, USA Today, and The Washington Post because they are widely read legitimate news sources. The first set of data analysis reflected each athlete's own public apology based on Benoit's image-restoration strategies. News articles about the apologies were coded to determine which of Benoit's strategies were used. Next, news articles were analyzed to look for statements made by the athletes' sporting organizations and their sponsors. Finally, we examined how news media portrayed the women involved in the scandals.

Findings

Presentation Styles in News Coverage

The results showed significant differences in how each athlete handled his apology statement. To organize these differences, we categorized the articles into three groups: those from the beginning of each scandal, those written after the apology, and the athlete's apology itself. First, both Woods and Bryant were accused of and admitted to extramarital affairs, but Roethlisberger faced a scandal of different nature. However, Bryant's and Roethlisberger's cases involved accusations of sexual assault or rape, but Woods's did not. These distinctions may explain why news articles on Bryant and Roethlisberger included discussions of possible punishment. That is, Bryant and Roethlisberger were accused of breaking the law, while Woods was only accused of infidelity. The news articles discussing Bryant's scandal provided four statements about possible punishment for Bryant (Wise & Markels, 2003). These included mention of possible prison time, probation, and supervision in a sex-offender treatment program. In Bryant's case, the NBA decided to wait for the outcome of the trial before determining his punishment. However, for Roethlisberger, the NFL decided to take direct and immediate action by issuing Roethlisberger a multigame suspension. The differences in timing and sources of punishment reflected significant differences in crisis-management strategies. In addition, the NFL and the Steelers were the most scathing in negative statements...
regarding the incident. The Steelers’ owner Art Rooney was quoted as saying “The Pittsburgh Steelers take the conduct of players and staff very seriously. Ben will have to work hard to earn back the respect and trust of Steelers fans, and to live up to the leadership responsibilities we all expect of him” (Battista, 2010a). The PGA took a completely different stance in responding to Woods’s scandal. The PGA officials were quoted:

“We fully support Tiger’s decision to step away from competitive golf to focus on his family. His priorities are where they need to be, and we will continue to respect and honor his family’s request for privacy. We look forward to Tiger’s return to the PGA tour when he determines the time is right for him.” (Dorman, 2009)

However, the reason for the strategy differences across sports was unclear. One possible explanation is that the Woods incident did not involve sexual assault and was a more private matter, while Roethlisberger’s was more public. The news articles also showed that Roethlisberger had committed misdeeds before the major sex scandal. In addition, at the beginning of their scandals, Bryant and Woods made statements to the media regarding the incidents, and both mentioned the negative effects of the scandals on their families. Furthermore, Roethlisberger’s statement was merely an informal public apology, while Bryant and Woods made more formal apologies over time after their scandals.

The results also showed differences in the frequency with which the media mentioned the athletes’ success. As demonstrated in Table 1, Woods’s success on the golf course was mentioned 27 times, while Bryant only had 10 mentions and Roethlisberger only three. This difference reflected some variances in the nature of the athletes’ sports. For instance, Woods participates in a one-man sport, but Bryant and Roethlisberger play team sports. Therefore, Woods’s success is only attributed to him and not a whole team. Due to the halo effect, sports audiences may not have had such strong negative reactions to Woods, since he is so good at his sport. However, sports audiences could also have more harshly evaluated his transgressions because of their expectations of success and good judgment on and off the course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athlete</th>
<th>Career success, no. of media reports</th>
<th>Public or private life</th>
<th>Female characters, no. of media reports</th>
<th>Support of professional organizations</th>
<th>Support of sponsors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woods</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>private</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Neutral (PGA)</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryant</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>public</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Suspended (NBA)</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roethlisberger</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>public</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Punishment and suspended (NFL)</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. NBA = National Basketball Association; NFL = National Football League.
Female Characters in News Coverage

This case study also analyzed how the news articles depicted various women involved with the athletes. Again, Woods’s incident was very different from Bryant’s and Roethlisberger’s, and those nuances may explain some differences in portrayals. Bryant and Roethlisberger were each being accused of the sexual assault of one woman. Thus, the woman was mentioned numerous times throughout news articles. As indicated in Table 1, regarding news articles about Bryant’s incident, she was mentioned 30 times in the first period and 34 times in the second period. All articles also revealed her age (19) and her occupation (front-desk employee at the SPA in Colorado, where the incident was took place). In Roethlisberger’s incident, the woman was mentioned 21 times in the first period and 7 times in the second period. Most articles identified her as a 20-year-old student. For Woods, the articles contained only one mention of the women involved and only said that Woods was “recovering from injuries and hearing a flood of marital infidelities linking him to multiple women that has swamped the worldwide airwaves” (Dorman, 2009). Most tabloids and news stations were constantly reporting on Woods’s extramarital sex partners. However, the news articles did not focus on these women. Finally, the articles in both periods for Roethlisberger and Bryant used the words sexual assault and rape. However, sexual assault was used 26 times in the Bryant articles from the beginning, while it was only used 5 times in the Roethlisberger articles. This may be due to the fact that Bryant was criminally charged with sexual assault, while Roethlisberger was not. However, the association of sexual assault and rape with these athletes definitely damaged their reputations and images. The articles discussing Tiger Woods only mentioned his affair. Those articles tended to focus on the negative impacts of his affairs on his marriage and not on how he treated the women. The only article that discussed morals was one from the beginning of Roethlisberger’s scandal. When discussing why Roethlisberger was not charged, district attorney for the Ocmulgee Judicial Circuit in Milledgeville, Georgia, said, “Here, the overall circumstances do not lead to a viable prosecution. We are not condoning Mr. Roethlisberger’s actions that night, but we do not prosecute morals. We prosecute crimes” (Battista, 2010a).

Sponsors and Sporting Organizations

The next aspect analyzed was the mention of the athletes’ sponsors in the news articles. Having endorsements from sponsors is a very important part of the sports industry and a major source of income for athletes. Sponsors also serve as important image-building tools for athletes. When fans can associate their favorite athletes with their favorite brands, it boosts the images of athletes and companies. Sponsors for each of three athletes responded publicly to their behaviors. Nike sponsored all three athletes and supported each in the initial stages of his crisis. In reference to Woods, Nike stated, “Tiger has been part of Nike for more than a decade. He is the best golfer in the world and one of the greatest athletes of his era. We look forward to his return to golf. He and his family have Nike’s full support” (Dorman, 2009). However, not all sponsors were as supportive of the athletes as Nike was. The images of Woods were removed from Accenture Plc.’s Web site, and Roethlisberger was removed from the Pittsburgh-based company PLB Sports, which marketed Big Ben Beef Jerky. The owner of PLB Sports, Ty Ballou, was quoted
saying, “Enough is enough. I hope there is a suspension. At some point in time, Ben as got to put himself in the right position and understand what it means to be a celebrity, a quarterback, a Steelers player” (Battista, 2010b).

In the period after the scandals broke, news articles increasingly discussed whether the athletes would keep or lose their respective endorsements. Bryant was dropped from McDonalds and Nutella (Johnson, 2004; Wise & Markels, 2003), but Woods continued to receive support from his sponsors, including Upper Deck and TAG Heuer, who both stated that they “were encouraged by Woods’s statement and that their relationship with him would continue” (Araton, 2010).

Image-Restoration Strategies

The next set of data examined the athletes’ apology statements. Benoit’s (1995) image-restoration theory was used to determine which strategies the three athletes attempted to use for their image restoration. Some statements included more than one strategy. It is important to note that Woods’s apology was much lengthier than those of the other two athletes. Therefore, he had more time to use different image-restoration strategies. The results showed many similarities in the strategies the athletes employed in their apology statements, although there were some differences. As indicated in Table 2, all three athletes used mortification at some point in their apologies. In these cases, the athletes simply confessed to the misdeed and asked for forgiveness. Within the first few sentences of each of the statements, all three athletes said “I’m sorry” or “I want to apologize.” Throughout the rest of their statements, they used mortification strategies to restore their images. For example, as Woods said, “I know I have bitterly disappointed all of you. I have made you question who I am and how I could have done the things I did. I am embarrassed that I have put you in this position” (Sheinin, 2010). Each athlete attempted to apologize to all parties affected by his scandal. For Roethlisberger, this included his family, teammates, coaches, the Rooney, and the NFL. For Bryant, this also included his family, the woman involved and her family, and the citizens of Eagle, Colorado.

Each athlete also used corrective-action strategies. In other words, he attempted to restore the state of affairs that existed before the objectionable action. Bryant attempted to restore the state of affairs for the State of Colorado when he said,

I understand that the civil case against me will go forward. That part of the case would be decided by and between the parties directly involved in the incident and would no longer be a financial or emotional drain on the citizens of the state of Colorado. (Kenworthy & O’Driscoll, 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athlete</th>
<th>Denial</th>
<th>Corrective action</th>
<th>Evasion of responsibility</th>
<th>Reduction of offensiveness</th>
<th>Mortification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woods</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryant</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roethlisberger</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bryant acknowledged the widespread impact of his action, and he made a statement of hope that things would return to normal. Roethlisberger also used corrective action by stating, “I’m happy to put this behind me and move forward. . . . I am excited to get back to work with my teammates, and I’m more determined than ever to have a great season” (Maske, 2010). Woods used corrective-action statements numerous times; however, he used them most notably when he discussed his inpatient therapy. In sharing this with his sports audience and fans, Woods attempted to prove that he was trying to atone for his mistakes and prevent a recurrence.

While mortification and corrective action were the only strategies that were used by all three athletes, they did employ other strategies. Bryant used both minimization and evasion of responsibility in his apology when he said,

> Although I truly believe this encounter between us was consensual, I recognize now that she did not and does not view this incident the same way I did. After months of reviewing discovery, listening to her attorney, and even her testimony in person, I now understand how she feels that she did not consent to this encounter. (Kenworthy & O’Driscoll, 2004)

While this statement expressed compassion and remorse for the alleged victim, Bryant still attempted to communicate his good intentions in the encounter.

Both Roethlisberger and Woods employed bolstering strategies, which involved attempts to build up one character to display positive qualities to the publics. Both athletes discussed their positions as role models to kids and promised to continue to try to act as such. Woods went on to talk about his foundation and its positive impact on the lives of millions of kids. Discussing this publicly detracted from the negativity of the scandal and was an attempt to make the audiences remember his good deeds. Woods also used compensation in his apology to his wife. As he stated, “My real apology to her will not come in the form of words it will come from my behavior over time. . . . Elin deserves praise, not blame” (Sheinin, 2010). Woods wanted to make it clear in his apology that he would try to atone for his misdeeds against his wife to her and to praise her and protect her from media scrutiny.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The results showed that image restoration is very important during sex-scandal crises. The case study suggested that these athletes were strategic in their communication management, using mortification and corrective action as their main strategies. They did not try to deny their actions but, rather, apologized and attempted to move on. To determine the effectiveness of the image-restoration strategies, it would be critical to examine the media’s response to the scandals after their implementation and, ultimately, to survey sports fans. All three athletes are still thriving in their careers. Thus, it is fair to say the athletes did recover from the scandals to some degree. This study also examined the connection between the image-restoration strategies used and the news coverage of the scandals. Since the results showed little difference in the strategies used by three athletes, there may not be any connections.

Future research might explore news coverage of a scandal in which the athlete used denial and blame-shifting strategies. Future research could also investigate the differences in news coverage based on sport. For example, golf has always been
seen as a "gentlemen’s game," whereas basketball and football may be perceived differently. Therefore, future research could compare the shock value in media coverage of a golfer’s sex scandal with that of a football or basketball player.

The study further explored how the athletes’ endorsers and organizations managed the scandals. The results showed great differences for each athlete. The NFL was much stricter in punishing Roethlisberger than the NBA with Bryant or the PGA with Woods. Woods received more support from his sponsors and sporting organizations. However, this could be attributed to the fact that his offenses were not illegal. It is clear, however, that sponsors disapprove of scandals, as they can tarnish their brand’s image and alter the value of the athlete to the brand. Future research could examine how sponsors react to their athlete spokespersons amid a scandal. For Nike, Woods’s level of fame may have prevented the sporting organization from dropping him as a spokesperson. Possibly, the more successful the sports star, the less likely the sponsor is to drop him or her during a scandal. However, this likely depends on the nature of the scandal.

Limitations

While this study did offer many interesting insights into the world of athlete sex scandals, it did have many limitations. First, the study only examined news articles published in The New York Times, USA Today, and The Washington Post, decreasing its generalizability. Numerous articles about these athletes and their scandals in many professional sports magazines were not included in the study. To get a more complete picture of image-management functions, it would be necessary to include a greater number and variety of articles. Moreover, this case study cannot offer any real correlations in the data. Therefore, future research might examine correlations between the strategies used and athletes’ images in news coverage.

The impact of sports on American society should be investigated. This multi-billion-dollar industry has become a major social phenomenon. Sports audiences spend their time and money on their favorite teams. Sport is no longer just about the game. Athletes are celebrities and sports are highly commercialized. Therefore, sports are a prime area for the use of public relations. Because athletes are often idolized, they are expected to perform perfectly both on and off the field. This case study shed some light on what happens when athletes exhibit undesirable behavior off the field. By looking at their image-restoration attempts and the articles associated with the scandals, this study opened up conversation about the possibility of redemption for athletes after sex scandals and the extent to which an athlete’s personal life affects his or her professional endeavors.

Case Questions

• In this case study, none of the three athletes was charged with a crime. In similar instances in the PGA, NFL, and NBA, if these athletes were facing charges for the crimes, what would their image-restoration strategies be and how would their sponsor organizations deal with their sex scandals?
• Athletes’ successes in their sports were mentioned several times at the beginning of their scandals. Is there any correlation between athletes’ successes and
their apology strategies when they have to deal with their sex scandals? Is it possible that their individual successes directly affect how sports journalists report on their sex scandals in news coverage?

- The frequent coverage of female victims in athlete sex scandals is related to the negative portrayal of athletes in news coverage. Is there any correlation between the descriptions of female victims and athletes' image-repair strategies? How do negative portrayals of athletes in their interactions with female victims in sex scandals influence their image-restoration strategies?

- Nike was one sporting-good company that sponsored all three athletes who had to deal with sex scandals. Nike showed its full support to the three athletes, while the PGA, NBA, and NFL did show their trustfulness of their athletes. Why are there some differences between sporting-good companies and sponsor organizations in terms of corporate crisis management? Were there any communication strategies used by Nike for its brand management?

- Saying "I am sorry" is a common strategy used by the three athletes. Does this mean that confessing the mistakes will reduce the seriousness of the scandal crisis? Do the publics and sports fans respond to mortification strategies in a positive way?

- All three athletes used corrective-action strategies to restore their public images. Since Bryant and Roethlisberger were accused of sexual assault, do their corrective actions in news coverage affect their trials or the litigation process?

References


