To invest in the invisible: A case study of Manti Te’o’s image repair strategies during the Katie Couric interview

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The purpose of this study was to examine Manti Te’o’s image repair strategies during an interview with Katie Couric. This interview followed reports that Te’o had been involved in an elaborate hoax featuring a fake girlfriend. The interview was a worthy avenue of investigation as it was Te’o’s first opportunity to publicly defend himself on camera following a week of ridicule and speculation by media outlets and the public. A deductive thematic analysis was conducted on Te’o’s responses utilizing Benoit’s image repair typology and other recently identified image repair strategies as a guide. Results revealed that Te’o did not deviate from previously established strategies by employing defensibility, victimization, good intentions, stonewalling, retrospective regret, bolstering, shifting blame, and simple denial. Collectively, the employment of these tactics illustrated a timid, naive, and remorseful approach to image repair. While some of Te’o’s choices were appropriate, the heavy use of stonewalling and victimization may have been ineffective in changing audience perception.

Prior to January 16, 2013, University of Notre Dame football player Manti Te’o was viewed by many as an inspiration—a highly talented athlete who persevered through the death of his girlfriend Lennay Kekua to have the best season of his college football career, finishing as the runner-up for the Heisman Trophy. The Notre Dame football team and community appeared to rally around Te’o and the adversity he was experiencing, fueling a run to the national championship game. Although Te’o and Notre Dame were unsuccessful in winning the national championship, his National Football League (NFL) draft stock and professional future were bright. However, on January 16, Deadspin released a story which revealed Te’o had been part of an elaborate Internet hoax and that Kekua, had in fact, never existed (Burke & Dickey, 2013a). Furthermore, the Deadspin story revealed that Ronaiah Tuiasosopo (male) had impersonated Kekua over the phone (Kekua and Te’o had never met face-to-face). The extent of Tuiasosopo and Te’o’s relationship prior to (and during) the hoax was unclear. However, Deadspin implied the two knew each other relatively well, which raised many questions about Te’o’s involvement.

Following this announcement, media outlets expressed a range of opinions about the situation. A common sentiment across early media reports was articulated in the work of Eder (2013) who stated, “Much remains unclear about whether

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Te’o was duped or whether he somehow perpetrated the fictitious story” (p. 1). If the former were true, then Te’o had been a victim of “catfishing,” a phenomenon where an individual creates a fake online profile in order to fraudulently seduce another person (Harris, 2013). If the latter were true, Te’o’s future in the NFL and beyond would be in jeopardy. Thus, a public response by Te’o was necessary to formally address the questions and concerns that had emerged.

One week after Deadspin released the story, Te’o participated in an interview on camera since he and Notre Dame officials had confirmed their knowledge of the hoax. The interview was a ratings success, with a 2.6 household rating and a number one finish in its afternoon timeslot in major markets such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia (Guthrie, 2013). This interview stands as a worthy avenue of investigation as it was Te’o’s first opportunity to publicly defend himself on camera following a week of ridicule and speculation by media outlets and the public. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine Manti Te’o’s image repair strategies during the Katie Couric interview. In order to determine whether Te’o’s approach was consistent with previously established image repair strategies, Benoit’s (1995) typology as well as other recently identified image repair strategies were utilized as a guide. The intention of this study was to lend support for and expand upon existing image repair research by analyzing an event unique to the sport communication landscape. Furthermore, this study was one of the first known attempts to analyze the image repair strategies of a high profile athlete who had possibly been a victim of catfishing, which is a relatively new phenomenon within the realm of media studies.

1. Review of literature

1.1. Image repair

Image repair is grounded in the premise that image or “face” is a valuable commodity that when threatened, can be mitigated by carefully crafted messages (Benoit, 2006). Benoit (1995, 1997, 2000) developed an image repair typology, consisting of five categories: (a) denial, (b) evasion of responsibility, (c) reducing offensiveness, (d) taking corrective action, and (e) mortification. Within those five categories are 14 image repair strategies. Denial consists of two variations – simple denial and shifting blame. Simple denial is refuting any blame, while shifting blame consists of asserting that someone/something else is responsible for an act. Within evasion of responsibility, there are four unique strategies including scapegoating, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. Scapegoating involves blaming the event on the provocation of another. Defeasibility occurs by stating the act was grounded in uncertainty or ignorance. Accident involves claiming that the event was unplanned while good intentions posits that the accused had well-reasoned motives for the act.

Within reducing offensiveness there are six specific strategies: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, reducing credibility (i.e., attack accuser), and compensation. Boostering occurs by the accused emphasizing positive characteristics. Minimization involves downplaying the significance of the act, whereas differentiation compares the act to other actions that were more offensive. Transcendence occurs when an individual discusses how prior positive behavior outweighs the damage of the offending act. Reducing credibility involves attacking the accuser and questioning the legitimacy of the initial attack. Compensation occurs through paying a victim or making restitution for actions. Corrective action involves taking measures to prevent the recurrence of an event and finally, mortification manifests by an individual admitting guilt and apologizing for offending actions.

While these image repair strategies have generally remained consistent in the literature, the typology has begun to expand. In their examination of British Petroleum’s (BP) response to the Deepwater Horizon explosion, Smithson and Venette (2013) discovered a stonewalling strategy. The authors defined this strategy as “uncooperative communication that strategically obstructs and delays the flow of information” (p. 399). Furthermore, stonewalling involves offering superficial responses, refocusing (or redirecting) attention, and denying the accuser access to certain information (Smithson & Venette, 2013). The authors suggested that this strategy be used as a stopgap rather than a long-term solution. Sanderson (2008) explored former Major League Baseball pitcher Roger Clemens’ image repair in response to allegations he used performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) during his playing career, and discovered a suffering (i.e., victimization) strategy. This strategy involves the accused stating that self-defense is difficult because the court of public opinion has already condemned the accused. Sanderson also concluded that this strategy should be a temporary tactic rather than a permanent solution. Len-Rios (2010) examined Duke University’s image repair efforts after members of its men’s lacrosse team were accused of sexually assaulting female dancers at a party. The analysis revealed a disappointment strategy, which consisted of acknowledging bad judgment by the athletes without completely separating or dissociating from them. This strategy enables groups to differentiate the values of the organization from the action of its members by showing disapproval toward questionable behaviors. Finally, in their examination of Lance Armstrong’s use of both traditional and social media following allegations of using performance enhancing drugs (PEDs), Hambrick, Frederick, and Sanderson (in press) revealed two new image repair strategies: conforming and retrospective regret. Conforming was defined as attributing actions to one’s environment or culture, while retrospective regret was defined as appearing reflective and expressing remorse that past actions were not handled differently.

Image repair is an important task that affects celebrities, politicians, and organizations. Athletes represent one celebrity group that has increasingly come under public scrutiny for incidents ranging from performance-enhancing drug (PEDs) use to transgressions in their personal lives (e.g., Tiger Woods). As a result, researchers have started to devote more attention to how athletes enact image repair, a trajectory we build upon in the current study.

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1.2. Athletes and image repair

Image is an important commodity (Benoit, 2006) and is particularly salient for athletes (Hambrick et al., in press; Sanderson, 2008). Public image is a viable mechanism for athletes to obtain publicity as well as endorsements, and these opportunities can fluctuate based on the public’s perception of the athlete. Additionally, many people associate a significant portion of their self-esteem and identity with players’ performances (Wann, 2006; Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000). Accordingly, when an athlete commits a public mistake, image repair is often necessary to rectify reputational damage and standing with fans. Kruse (1981) posited that sports figures who committed transgressions by prioritizing individual over collective goals, could employ apologia to rectify fractured relationships with fans. In one of the first studies on athletes’ image repair, Benoit and Hancerz (1994) examined figure skater Tonya Harding’s efforts after she was accused of conspiring to injure fellow competitor Nancy Kerrigan. They found Harding employed bolstering, denial, and attack accuser strategies, which she failed to maximize, and that her performance was incongruent with audience expectations.

Subsequent work has focused primarily on sports organizations (e.g., DiSanza, Legge, Allen, & Wilde, 2013; Len-Rios, 2010; Meyer & Cutbirth, 2013; Milford, 2013) and professional athletes such as NFL player Terrell Owens’s contract dispute with the Philadelphia Eagles (Brazeal, 2008), or American swimmer Michael Phelps addressing public reaction to a photograph depicting him with drug paraphernalia (Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). With respect to sports organizations, Len-Rios (2010) examined Duke University’s image repair efforts in response to male lacrosse student-athletes being accused of sexual assault, and found the university defended the athletes through simple denial and mortification, yet also distanced itself from the behavior of the athletes (disappointment).

In regard to professional athletes, one of the challenges with image repair is implementing the appropriate strategy to match the situation. Most research indicates that to date, athletes have been underwhelming in their image repair efforts. In Sanderson’s (2008) analysis of Roger Clemens’s image repair after being accused of using PEDs during his playing career, he observed that Clemens and his attorney Rusty Hardin used denial, reducing offensiveness, and attack accuser strategies in addition to painting Clemens as a victim of public opinion. Sanderson argued these strategies ultimately raised more questions than they answered.

Glantz (2010) examined Floyd Landis’s image repair after responding to a positive drug test during the 2006 Tour de France, and found that Landis used a multiplicity of strategies: denial, evading responsibility, bolstering, attack accuser, and differentiation. Glantz argued that instead of convincing others of his innocence, Landis lost his Tour de France title, his sponsors, and became a pariah in the cycling community. In Hambrick et al.’s (in press) study of Lance Armstrong they argued that while Armstrong was able to embolden attachment and identification with his Twitter usage, his inconsistent strategies across Twitter and his confessional with Oprah Winfrey hindered his image repair efforts.

Although image repair research focusing on professional sports organizations and professional athletes has been fruitful, amateur athletes have been understudied. The studies previously identified (Benoit & Hancerz, 1994; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011) focused on Olympic athletes in conventional image repair situations (allegations of criminal action). In this study, we explore how an amateur athlete, Manti Te’o, employed image repair in response to a complex and unique situation. While an argument can be made that Te’o should have been aware of the deception being carried out in relation to him, this situation was not criminal or directly related to on-field action. Nevertheless, media coverage and public interest in Te’o’s predicament was immense, and his mea culpa with Katie Couric was only a short time after Lance Armstrong’s confessional. Thus, this interview provided a prime opportunity to investigate how an amateur athlete enacts image repair when the transgression involves a personal incident that is unrelated to criminal activity or other wrongdoing. Additionally, Te’o was in a situation where this incident was causing angst about his prospects for being drafted into the NFL (Belzer, 2013), providing another impetus for Te’o to strategically repair his image. With these elements in mind, the following research question was employed:

RQ1: What image repair strategies did Manti Te’o use during the Katie Couric interview?

2. Methodology

To address this study’s research question, the Katie interview was watched and transcribed by the primary investigator. The entire interview was available on YouTube. Once the interview was transcribed, a thematic analysis was conducted. Specifically, a deductive approach was utilized to determine whether Te’o’s responses could be categorized according to the pre-existing response strategies outlined in Benoit’s typology and other recent image repair research. Responses that could not be categorized were set aside for further thematic analysis, which allowed new themes to emerge that were not consistent with Benoit’s typology or other recently discovered image repair strategies. The methodological approach incorporated in this study was consistent with previous qualitative research that used Benoit’s typology (e.g., Hambrick et al., in press; Smithson & Venette, 2013).

Coder responses were chosen for this study based upon their familiarity with image repair research and thematic analysis. The transcripts were initially read to familiarize each coder with the data. The deductive process was then used to code the data. Each response given by Te’o was treated as the unit of analysis. A total of 56 responses were analyzed. Due to the length of some responses, multiple image repair strategies could have been present within one response. If any disagreement existed
during the initial coding phase, a final category placement was discussed among the coders. Discussions were conducted among the coders until 100% agreement could be reached on all categorizations.

3. Results and interpretation

The results revealed that Te’o utilized multiple image repair strategies throughout the interview including: (a) defeasibility; (b) victimization; (c) stonewalling; (d) good intentions; (e) retrospective regret; (f) bolstering; (g) shifting blame; and (h) simple denial. While the intention of this paper was not to quantitatively examine the frequency with which Te’o used certain image repair strategies, a secondary analysis of the transcript revealed that Te’o employed stonewalling, good intentions, and defeasibility most frequently, followed by victimization, shifting blame, and retrospective regret. Simple denial and bolstering were utilized least frequently. All of the quotations provided were transcribed verbatim.

3.1. Defeasibility

Throughout the duration of the interview, Te’o expressed that he did not know how to properly handle the Lennay Kekua situation. He stated multiple times that he was overwhelmed and unsure of what to do when confronted with questions about his relationship with Kekua and his role in the hoax. When Couric asked if he had lied or intentionally misled fans and the media regarding the nature of his relationship with Kekua, Te’o responded:

“Through the embarrassment and, you know, the fear of what people may think that I was committed to this person who I didn’t have the chance to meet and she all of a sudden died, now that scared me. And so to avoid any further conversation I kind of wasn’t as forthcoming as I should have been.

As the interview progressed, Couric began to press Te’o as to why he “stuck to the script” during the Heisman Trophy ceremony even though he had been informed two days prior that Kekua was actually alive. Te’o responded to this inquiry by saying:

“Now I get a phone call on December 6th saying that she is alive and then I am going to be put on national TV two days later and to ask me the same question, you know, what would you do?

This was perhaps an attempt by Te’o to garner sympathy and guide the interview in his favor. However, Couric quickly followed this response by questioning Te’o’s motives and inferring that he stuck with this story only because he was being considered for the Heisman. Te’o responded:

Part of me was saying if you say that she is alive, what would everybody think? You know, what are you going to tell everybody who follow [sic] you, who you’ve inspired, what are you going to say? I did not know who to turn to, I did not know who [sic] to tell, I did not know who [sic] to trust. It was a big thing for me and I was scared. That’s the truth. I was just scared and I didn’t know what to do.

Utilizing the image repair strategy of defeasibility allowed Te’o to present himself as a naïve bystander rather than someone who actively perpetuated a lie. In doing so, Te’o set the wheels in motion to be seen as a victim of a cruel hoax, someone who had been taken advantage of due to his trusting nature.

3.2. Victimization

There were multiple instances throughout the interview where Te’o portrayed himself as a casualty of the hoax. He assumed this role through two victimization image repair tactics including general suffering and dealing with the effects of public opinion. In terms of general suffering, Te’o expressed how this situation affected his quality of life. For example, when asked how he felt when he spoke with Tuiasosopo over the phone regarding the hoax, Te’o said, “You know, I was still speechless. I just found out that everything, you know, I believed to be my reality wasn’t actually reality at all.” Te’o also mentioned how both he and his family had been victimized by this situation, saying:

“I think for me, it’s been hard. It’s been difficult. Just, not only for myself but, you know, to see your last name and just to see it plastered everywhere and that my family is experiencing the same thing. I think that is what was the most hard for me.

When pressed, Te’o emphasized that his feelings for Kekua were genuine, “What I went through was real. You know, the feelings, the pain, the sorrow, that was all real. And that is something that I can’t fake.”

While the previous examples highlight Te’o's general feelings of suffering, he also expressed, rather circuitously, the view that the public had abandoned him after the Deadspin story was released. For example, “When something like this happens, you see who is actually in your corner. You see who actually loves you. You see who actually has always been there and it starts with these two sitting right next to me.” Te’o was referencing his parents, who joined him on stage for the latter half of the interview. Without mentioning specific outlets, Te’o was implying that he had been portrayed in a negative light by the media and that public opinion had turned against him and those actions were unfair. This finding aligns with previous image repair research, where an athlete utilized the victimization strategy due to what was perceived as unfair treatment.
by the media (e.g., Sanderson, 2008). Whereas Te’o emphasized that he was taken advantage of, he also used image repair strategies to refocus the interview on minor, less relevant circumstances of the hoax.

3.3. Stonewalling

While previous research has indicated that the stonewalling strategy should be used only as a stopgap rather than a long-term solution (e.g., Smithson & Venette, 2013), Te’o utilized this strategy often throughout the interview. It was the most commonly employed strategy by Te’o, especially as the line of questioning and accusations intensified. Couric was blunt with her line of questioning and Te’o frequently dodged the probing nature of her inquiries by offering superficial details, thereby denying her the information she wanted. When asked at what point he began to doubt Kekua’s existence, Te’o responded:

What everybody has to realize is our relationship wasn’t a four-year relationship. Like, I knew of her and we would speak as friends, you know, ever since my freshman year. And she had boyfriends and you know, I had girls who I knew it was pretty; it was a friend-friend relationship.

In this instance, Te’o provided an answer without really answering the question. He attempted to amend the length of his formal relationship with Kekua perhaps to minimize his knowledge of the falsehood regarding her existence and to distance himself from the situation.

Shortly after this response, Couric began to question why Te’o would not want a “real” girlfriend with whom he could spend “real” time. Te’o responded to this inquiry by saying:

Well, this Lenay person, there is so many similarities. She was Polynesian supposedly she is Samoan, I am Samoan. She loved her faith and she knew a lot about, you know, I am Mormon. She knew a lot about that. I found a lot of peace, you know, and a lot of comfort in being able to talk to somebody and they knew my standards, they knew my culture, they knew what is expected of me and I knew what is expected of her.

Once again, instead of directly addressing Couric’s question, Te’o spoke around the issue by focusing on the perceived similarities between himself and the fictional Kekua. He never addressed the unusual nature of his relationship with Kekua, which is what many media outlets focused their attention on in the days following the announcement of the hoax. While Te’o attempted to re-direct the interview to more minor details, he also had to face questions about why he had not revealed aspects of his relationship with others. Not surprisingly, then, Te’o stressed that his actions had been well-meaning, and thus, although problematic, these decisions were undertaken with only the purest of motives.

3.4. Good intentions

Te’o employed the good intentions image repair strategy to explain why he had hidden certain truths from his family and the media. Due to the intense media scrutiny Te’o received in the days leading up to the Couric interview, it is not surprising that this was the second most frequently employed strategy. Couric (like other media outlets) accused Te’o of lying (or being misleading) about whether he had actually met Kekua in person. Te’o responded, “And for me, I was so invested in, you know, Lenay and getting to know her that, you know, when Dad asked me ‘did you meet her?’ I said yeah.” In this instance, Te’o stated that he had been dishonest with his father because he genuinely wanted to meet Kekua and he wanted his father to believe that he had met her – perhaps in an effort to maintain the façade of a “normal” relationship. Later in the interview, Te’o formulated a similar response, saying, “And it was my way of trying to get my dad’s approval, umm, of this young lady, umm, cause I knew that if he knew that I didn’t meet her it would, immediately he would have just said no.” Once again, Te’o justified his actions as an effort to maintain harmony in the relationship between himself and his father. Throughout the interview, it became clear that in Te’o’s eyes, being misleading was warranted.

Another way in which this image repair strategy was utilized dealt with Te’o explaining how unforeseen circumstances had derailed his efforts to meet with Kekua in person. For example, when Couric asked a question regarding Te’o’s efforts (or lack thereof) to see Kekua after she had been involved in a car accident, he stated, “We actually planned to meet each other in San Diego throughout my layover in San Diego and this was before the accident happened.” Instead of addressing why he had not met with Kekua after her accident, he explained that they intended to meet one another and that the accident had altered those plans. Therefore, he framed the accident as a roadblock to his good intentions. Te’o expressed similar sentiments throughout the interview, “And, thing is, you know there are countless times where we tried to meet up. And things just never, never worked out.” Here again, he claimed that the intention to meet was there yet for a host of reasons, it never materialized.

3.5. Retrospective regret

While Te’o did not claim any overt involvement in the hoax, he often appeared reflective and remorseful in his responses, which is similar to findings of existing athlete image repair research (e.g., Hambrick et al., in press). In fact, Te’o offered regret for misleading actions in which he engaged. When asked whether he had been forthright regarding his public responses once he was aware that Kekua was a personality created by Tuiasosopo, Te’o responded, “For that, you know, for people
feeling that they are misled, you know, that I am sorry for.” Though Te’o expressed regret regarding the hoax itself, most of his remorse was related to misleading his family. In many of his responses, Te’o placed his own feelings on the proverbial back burner as he reflected on the impact that the situation had on his family. Near the end of the interview, Te’o stated:

“The hardest part of this whole experience is seeing my family go through it. All because of something that I did. That’s the hardest part for me. The greatest joy in any child’s life is to make your parents proud. The greatest pain is to know that they are experiencing pain because of you.

When using this strategy, Te’o placed emphasis on the experiences of others rather than on his own personal struggles and turmoil. Perhaps Te’o utilized this image repair strategy to paint himself in a more favorable light as someone who was sympathetic to the pain of others. It is important to note, that this strategy served to bookend the interview. By beginning and ending the interview in an apologetic and remorseful manner, Te’o was able to lead off and close out the interview with a strategy that likely elicited sympathy and forgiveness among the public.

3.6. Bolstering

The bolstering image repair strategy is marked by an individual’s use of puffery to build their image (Benoit, 1995). This strategy was utilized in concert with other strategies, often serving as a bridge between strategies such as victimization and good intentions. At the beginning of the interview, Couric asked Te’o how his life had been affected since the Deadspin story had broken. While Te’o occupied the role of victim almost immediately, he also made comments such as “to know I represent so many people” along with his feelings of suffering. These comments appeared to be an attempt at garnering sympathy from those who Te’o would later imply had abandoned him once the hoax became public.

There was only one other instance where Te’o used this strategy. Couric asked the question, “Didn’t you have something to gain by keeping this story alive, didn’t it make you into this completely sympathetic figure? Was this intoxicating in a way for you?” Te’o responded by saying, “I think for me, the only thing I basked in is that I could, you know, I had an impact on people. That people turned to me for inspiration.” After he made this comment, he quickly transitioned to the strategy of good intentions, stating that he was looking out for the interests of those who admired him. Therefore, Te’o rationalized his misleading actions as a means of looking out for vested constituencies. Although Te’o acknowledged he had withheld information about his knowledge of Kekua’s inauthenticity, he took great pains to refute a popular opinion that surfaced during the reporting of this story – that to some extent, he was involved in the formation and perpetuation of the hoax.

3.7. Shifting blame and simple denial

These two strategies were used in concert when Te’o was confronted with questions regarding his involvement in the hoax. When asked if he had any involvement in the “scam,” Te’o responded:

“No. I did not. I think what people don’t realize is that the same day that everybody else found out about this situation, I found out. See I got the call on December 6th saying that she was alive. And from December 6th to January 16th my whole reality was that she was uhh dead and suddenly she is alive. At that time, I didn’t know that it was just somebody’s prank.

Te’o began by denying his involvement and closed the response by shifting responsibility to “somebody’s prank.” In addition to denying participation in the hoax, Te’o countered media reports by lessening the extent of his relationship with Tuiasosopo. When asked if he and Tuiasosopo were family friends, Te’o claimed:

“No, I’ve previously, previous to that conversation that he and I had on January 16th, I had only talked to Ronaiah twice. Uh, he from my understanding was Lenay’s cousin and was Lenay’s favorite cousin. And the only time I talked to Ronaiah was when I couldn’t find Lenay.

This statement went against the Deadspin story, which implied a more meaningful relationship between Te’o and Tuiasosopo.

Te’o continued to minimize his role by placing blame on others and the excuses that they had created. Couric asked if Te’o ever questioned Kekua’s existence as multiple excuses began to arise. He responded by saying:

“For me, I guess I was just so caught up in the whole thing that it was like, OK, she can’t see me and she would give me good reasons too. She’d just say, ‘oh my brother has my car’ or you know, ‘I am in the hospital’ or you know I wasn’t gonna tell a person who just came out of coma like uh you need to call and come and see me right now, you know.

Once again, Te’o was alluding to his underlying intentions of meeting Kekua and engaging in a “normal” relationship, despite the obstacles that had emerged. This strategy involved presenting their failed attempts to meet as being beyond his control.
4. Discussion

Although initially projected to be a first round pick in the NFL draft, it was suggested that Te’o’s draft stock could plummet as a result of the fallout from the Kekua situation (Belzer, 2013). Thus, the stakes were quite high in regard to the proper image repair approach. In his interview with Couric, Te’o utilized the image repair strategies of defeasibility, victimization, stonewalling, good intentions, retrospective regret, bolstering, shifting blame, and simple denial. All of the strategies that Te’o employed were previously identified in existing literature (Benoit, 1995, 1997, 2000; Hambrick et al., in press; Sanderson, 2008; Smithson & Venette, 2013). In fact, Te’o did not deviate from these established strategies. It is important to note that this study not only highlights the usefulness of Benoit’s typology, it also provides validation that recently identified strategies (i.e., stonewalling, victimization, and retrospective regret) are being used during image repair efforts. Collectively, the employment of these tactics illustrated a timid, naive, and remorseful approach to image repair.

Matching or crafting the appropriate image repair strategy can be a difficult task, and research has revealed that athletes have struggled in this regard, which has resulted in less-than-desirable image repair efforts (Glantz, 2010; Hambrick et al., in press; Sanderson, 2008). Perhaps further complicating Te’o’s image repair effort was the inherent uniqueness of the situation that served to differentiate it from previously investigated scenarios. It should be noted that in this instance, the actions committed by Te’o were not criminal offenses (in contrast to Harding and Phelps), were not taken in response to contract disputes (e.g., Owens), and were not in response to accusations of using PEDs (e.g., Armstrong, Clemens, and Landis). In reality, he may have legitimately been a trusting and naive victim of catfishing.

In order for a catfishing scheme to function, two roles must be filled: the individual perpetuating the fake online persona, and the individual who is unknowingly deceived (Harris, 2013). Thus, if one has unknowingly been deceived, image repair strategies consisting of simple denial, shifting blame, victimization, bolstering, good intentions, and retrospective regret may be appropriate. The utilization of simple denial and shifting blame would serve to reemphasize that Te’o was an unknowing participant in the situation. Victimization, in the form of general suffering, as well as bolstering, and good intentions would highlight that he was deceived due to his trusting nature, but ultimately is a reputable individual who had constructive reasons for his actions. Lastly, retrospective regret would be a proper approach to employ as Te’o could simultaneously appear contrite and apologetic, a tactic highlighted by Kruse (1981) to repair relationships with fans.

Where Te’o may have made potential missteps in regard to his strategy was the heavy employment of defeasibility, victimization, and stonewalling. According to previous research (Sanderson, 2008; Smithson & Venette, 2013), while defeasibility may have long-term benefits, victimization and stonewalling are intended to be temporary (or short-term) solutions. However, Te’o relied frequently on both strategies, especially stonewalling. The use of these tactics may have contributed to Te’o appearing as if he could not provide reasonable or logical responses to explain his actions. Additionally, employing victimization would have placed some of the blame for the situation on the public, which is troublesome considering the public, who championed Te’o and his plight, most likely felt deceived after buying in to the hoax. When attempting to repair one’s image, and change audience perceptions, failing to provide adequate explanation, and placing some of the blame on the audience could decrease one’s potential for success. Additionally, the emphasis on victimization in the court of public opinion, defeasibility, and stonewalling may have conflicted with audience expectations. In fact, the audience may have wanted a heavier emphasis on retrospective regret and potentially even mortification for continuing with the story after learning it was a hoax.

It is interesting to note that utilization of the victimization strategy could have been in response to the mass media attention and public inquiry after the event became public. Not only did Notre Dame use Te’o’s uplifting story regarding perseverance through personal tragedy continually during the Heisman Trophy campaign, but several media outlets publicized it as well (Hutchins, 2013). When Deadspin, which is not considered a traditional news outlet, revealed the hoax, the mass media outlets that previously covered the story may have felt deceived by Te’o, prompting many of them to enact their own image repair (Liebler & Moritz, 2013). Their response to feeling deceived was to question Te’o’s innocence, instead of providing the support that Te’o may have felt he deserved. Instead of support, he received skepticism. This skepticism may have led to Te’o’s use of the victimization strategy. Though understandable, this may have been ill-advised.

Given the emphasis and attention that both Notre Dame and the press placed on Te’o’s narrative, Te’o’s season took on mythical form. Te’o also may have possessed some leverage in this situation, as significant skepticism and questioning was directed at Notre Dame for not being more forthright in the situation and the press for not pursuing greater due diligence in the story. Perhaps Te’o recognized that he had little power to come forward even if he had wanted to, and therefore, was lower on the hierarchy of blame for this situation. Essentially, Te’o may have subscribed to the public relations program centered on what now appears to be faux adversity, knowing that if the truth was discovered, he would have more leeway to enact victimization than that of either the other two parties.

Whereas this research was focused on Te’o’s image repair, this case does hold interesting implications for sports organization personnel and the press. Specifically, with similar situations in the future, sports organization administrators may utilize greater scrutiny to ensure that a catfishing situation is caught before it ever sees the light of the Internet. Nevertheless, suppressing such a story in hopes it will not be made public is a doubtful move at best, as in the age of digital media, it is very difficult to keep such information concealed. Members of the press also may be more diligent in verifying such stories in the future as well. On one hand, it is perhaps understandable that a reporter did not vigorously pursue the story, so as not to be cast negatively (e.g., the person skeptical of a person having cancer) yet, as difficult as such verification may be, that is ultimately a duty that journalists have to undertake.

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While the majority of research investigating image repair has focused on professional athletes or Olympic athletes under investigation for criminal acts (e.g., Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Brazeal, 2008; Glantz, 2010; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011), this situation is unique in that it involved an amateur athlete and a non-criminal act. The utilization of online technologies and social media has become intrinsically linked to the overall collegiate landscape, and student-athletes have previously utilized social media platforms in ways that could be potentially damaging to their future endeavors (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). The Te’o hoax brings to light another aspect of the online landscape that both athletes and institutions of higher education need to guard against: online fraud. Proactive measures in regard to athlete education about online fraud would help raise awareness of this issue, and encourage athletes to engage in due diligence. One example of this type of education, which illustrates the seriousness placed on the phenomenon of catfishing, involved the University of Michigan hiring an outside consultant to catfish freshman football players as an awareness exercise (Jennings, 2013). If nothing else, the Te’o hoax can serve as further confirmation regarding the importance of education and awareness, proving that situations involving online fraud have realistic consequences.

5. Limitations and directions for future research

This study was not without limitations. First, this study analyzed one moment in time. This study was not intended to examine Te’o’s image repair strategies during multiple timeframes. Future studies could examine how Te’o communicated about the hoax following the Couric interview and compare that with the findings of the current study. Second, this study focused its attention on Te’o’s communication patterns during a televised interview. Future research should explore how Te’o engaged in image repair tactics across multiple media platforms including social media such as Twitter and Facebook. This type of examination would provide a more nuanced picture of Te’o’s communication efforts during a time of intense media scrutiny. After all, the “relationship” between Te’o and Kekua was one that existed behind mediated lines (i.e., Internet and telephone). Third, this study only analyzed Te’o’s image repair strategies. The University of Notre Dame was undoubtedly affected by this situation as well. Therefore, scholars would be wise to investigate how Notre Dame officials responded to this crisis within the framework of image repair. Finally, while this study does not provide conclusive proof regarding the existence of recently identified image repair strategies (i.e., stonewalling, victimization, and retrospective regret) it does provide some confirmation for previous research findings. Therefore, scholars should incorporate these strategies in future image repair research to truly test and evaluate their presence.

6. Conclusion

In the aftermath of the Te’o interview, two important events took place. One week following the Couric interview, Tuiasosopo appeared on the Dr. Phil Show to address questions surrounding the hoax. During the interview, when referring to Te’o, Tuiasosopo claimed, “He had no involvement. He did not know anything” (Eaton-Robb, 2013, p. 1). This statement supported the proclamations made by Te’o throughout the Couric interview. Furthermore, Tuiasosopo claimed to be the voice of Kekua. However, he became nervous when pressed by Dr. Phil McGraw to perform the voice live on air (Eaton-Robb, 2013). This behavior shed lingering doubt on the exact nature of the hoax and the involvement of the accused parties. In a follow-up story, Burke and Dickey (2013b) expressed this doubt by saying, “Put however much stock you like in these details: Tuiasosopo is an avowed liar and hoaxer” (p. 1). It is fair to say, that even after the Te’o and Tuiasosopo interviews, this situation was still surrounded by uncertainty with many unanswered questions.

The other event that took place in the aftermath of the Internet hoax was the NFL Draft. Couric concluded the interview by asking Te’o whether the situation would affect his professional future. He responded by saying, “You know, as far as my draft status, I hope and pray that good happens, obviously. But as long as my family is OK I can live with whatever happens.” One could argue that the acceptance of his fate rang true with the powers that be as Te’o was drafted in the 2nd round by the San Diego Chargers. Prior to the hoax, Te’o was projected by various analysts to be a 1st round draft pick. Many argued that his poor performance in the national championship game, subpar scores during the NFL combine, and the “fake girlfriend hoax” all affected his draft stock, leading to a net loss of at least $8 million over the life of his rookie contract (Schactman, 2013). While Te’o has been given the opportunity to continue his career in football, it is clear that various factors (including the hoax) affected his financial future and perhaps his longevity in the NFL. While the Couric interview and Te’o’s image repair strategies may have alleviated some concerns, it appears that this situation will loom over Te’o for the foreseeable future.

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