

Millersville University

Image Restoration Theory: NFL Athletes

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Note to Reader:

This is not a traditional thesis, this is a standard research project with the inclusion of a literature review. This will not resemble the traditional structure of a thesis, but will highlight the overarching themes and analysis of image repair strategies utilized by three different NFL athletes. Further research could be utilized in the areas of social media content analysis and traditional content analysis to further analyze patterns in public responses, effectiveness in public perception, the percentages of positive to negative comments to the athletes responses, and what image repair strategies are deemed to be most effective.

I would also like to make a statement of acknowledgement in regards to my research and the scope of limitations. In every other professional sports league, people from every race, religion, age bracket, etc. there are crises happening often. In the context of my research, I chose three athletes who responded to the incident publicly more than once and who faced public scrutiny via online platforms. I acknowledge there is an inherent bias that comes with news outlets reporting and acknowledgement.

With that being said I would like to thank Dr. Boyle for being the best mentor and support throughout this whole process. With his knowledge in the areas of public relations and sports, he guided me through the process with a well-rounded understanding and valuable insight.

I would also like to thank Dr. Wolfgang, Dr. Russell-Loretz, and Dr. Hutto for their continued support throughout the course of my academic career and for joining my committee to support my research project. None of this would have been possible without your help, guidance, and the knowledge I haven gained from working with you for the past four years.

Literature Review

Professional athletes hardly ever have a private life due to society's idealization and fanatic ideals surrounding these individuals. Although many of these athletes chose to pursue a professional career due to their love and dedication to the sport, being in the public eye is unseemingly part of the territory. Not only are these athletes constantly critiqued for their skill while playing their game and helping assist their favorite teams in pursuing championship wins, but professional athletes have reached a level of stardom adjacent to many of your favorite celebrities. Scott MacDonald, a senior assistant athletic director in the Oakland University athletic department says “When you are a high-level athlete, it is impossible to separate your athletic and personal life. I’m not sure if it’s fair or not, but it’s the nature of the world” (Deatsch, 2015). Due to the athletes' obligations to provide an ideal image for themselves, family, the town they are from, the high school and colleges they attended, the professional team they are on, and the organization of the sport, the mistakes that athletes make allow for severe consequences than the average person (Deatsch, 2015).

NFL athletes specifically have been subjected to high amounts of reporting, press, and exposure. According to nfl.com particularly within the last year, there has been a high increase in viewership and engagement of NFL content within the past year. Notably, the 2024 Super Bowl played between the Kansas City Chiefs and San Francisco 49ers had a global audience of 62.5 million viewers with a 10% growth in international viewership since the 2023 Super Bowl. Noting this same increase in viewership internationally, the same can be said for the following engagements with NFL accounts. Between all NFL social media platforms there are collectively over 17 million people following the NFL with a 1.3 million followers increase across these

platforms since the 2022-2023 season (NFL, 2024). Knowing how engagement has increased across the NFL as an organization, this has had the same effect on individual players as well.

Some notably influential players include Odell Beckham Jr. who has 17.5 million followers on Instagram, Travis Kelce with 6.7 million, and Patrick Mahomes with 6.7 million (Chen, 2024). Fans are extremely passionate about certain teams and specific players due to their talent and ability to help a team win but for other reasons as well. In looking at the social identity theory, fans connect with a team or player because it allows them to share common goals and values and makes them feel they are part of something bigger than just themselves (Glover, 2023). Other reasons athletes connect with their fans is through building and maintaining a community through similar interests and the desire for accomplishment. With the increase in social media utilization, fans can feel more connected to these players for better or for worse (Glover, 2023).

Due to the expansion of social media, there is no waiting period between when an incident occurs and when the story is printed. Social media has allowed for stories to be posted in a matter of seconds whether it be a controversial header on “X”, a picture of someone posted on Snapchat or Instagram, or a video that doesn’t show the full context of a situation. These athletes are constantly under a microscope which increases the pressures they deal with as an athlete, but also as an individual who is learning and growing each day (Weisfeld, 2024). Charlotte Hornets head coach Steve Clifford says that with the scope of influence increasing in organizations like the NFL, it's led to larger sizes of staff, agents, and people involved in everyday affairs. More people involved in these athletes' lives on and off the court or field leads to more people with access to private information or stories that have the potential to damage the athlete and organization's reputation (Weisfeld, 2024).

Controversial actions and incidents that professional athletes are involved in have proven over time that it is their response style that determines if their image has the ability to be repaired. When major scandals hit the news the first thing that is ruined and also the hardest to recover is reputation and image (Rivas Cruz, 2019). Image is defined as what a shared audience perceives of a communicative entity, which is derived through the words and actions of the entity (Benoit, 1995).

Benoit formulated the image repair theory because of his belief that there is a proportional relationship between how much a reputation is damaged and the extent to which a person is held responsible (Holtzhausen, 2009). Within this theory, five different image repair strategies have emerged which are denial, reducing offensiveness, evasion of responsibility, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit & Pang, 2008, pp. 247-251). Strategies from these categories can be utilized within the same statement, however, each has different purposes and reasonings.

When utilizing denial, people can deny that they are part of the act being discussed at all or shift the blame. Shifting the blame pertains to saying that the offensive act was not performed by yourself, but rather by someone else (Benoit, 1997). Denial must be used carefully because evidence against the accused can be collected rather quickly in order to fit a narrative, but can be effective when proving one's innocence.

Another area of the theory is reducing offensiveness. Reducing offensiveness consists of bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking accusers, and compensation. Bolstering refers to shifting the negative feelings associated with the act and redirecting it to focus on the positive attributes of the person or organization to remind the public of the positive

attributes they possess. Minimization is when an incident is attempted to be discussed in a way that demonstrates it is not as offensive as it is being portrayed (Benoit, 1997). Differentiation applies when the act is compared to a far worse act which would try to influence the audience to think that it could have been much worse, but it wasn't. Transcendence is an attempt to move the focus from the negative aspects of the offensive act onto the positive aspects so the audience isn't focused on all negative areas (Rivas Cruz, 2019). Compensation refers to when the accused offers something to make up for the act such as offering to donate to a charity, providing a discount or store credit, or committing time and service to something else.

Evasion of responsibility has four different areas which consist of provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions (Rivas Cruz, 2019). Provocation occurs when the accused says that their act was only a result of a previous act that they reacted to. This allows the accused to take the blame for what they did, but remove aspects of responsibility they have with it (Rivas Cruz, 2019). Defeasibility allows the accused to say that they lacked all of the information or control needed over elements of the situation which would have allowed for them to act more rationally. Accidents refer to the fact that the act happened due to an accident and inadvertently. This allows the accused to remove accountability from the situation and ensures the public that the results that have transpired are not of their values (Benoit, 1997). Finally, claiming good intentions means that the act was never supposed to have resulted in the way that it did, meaning that the organization or person never intended harm or damage from what they did. This potentially allows the accused to maintain their positive image with the public by assuring that what transpired isn't due to their values (Benoit, 1997).

Corrective action allows the organization or person to take responsibility for the action and ensure that it won't happen again by providing a solution and plan of action moving forward

(Rivas Cruz, 2019). Finally, mortification is arguably the most human approach of them all which allows the accused to apologize, ask for forgiveness, and take responsibility for what transpired (Benoit, 1997).

For the image repair theory to apply to a situation two things must apply: the accused has to be held responsible for an action and the act has to be considered offensive (Benoit, 1997). Without an offensive act having taken place, the reputation of a person or organization isn't threatened with being ruined. Another factor to note is that an act does not necessarily have to have happened, but the perception of the audience is the reality. If an audience regards the organization/person as responsible then it is up to them to restore their image to the public.

Delving into the world of professional sports leagues, specifically the NFL, there is a complex relationship between the athletes responding to crises or controversies. Not only is the athlete expected to make a statement in response to allegations or controversies, but there is also an expectation for the team and league to respond. Another aspect in the realm of athletes is their relationship with brand partners and sponsors they work with which also rely on an athlete to have an overall positive image in the public and play to a high standard. It is through all of these associations and relationships that when negative publicity occurs and is associated directly with an athlete, there must be a communication strategy implemented immediately to salvage their image (Blaney, Lippert & Smith, 2012). A damaged image has a direct effect on the athletes' relationships which ultimately means an impact on money earned. The more money an athlete makes, the more money organizations have to allocate to handle the response to their actions, and the amount of money a sponsor might lose out on a deal they had with an athlete (Blaney, Lippert & Smith, 2012).

Responding to a crisis as an athlete is a difficult situation depending on the offensiveness of the crime, the past reputation of the player, and statements made by both people in their personal lives and the athletes themselves. Lori Levine, CEO of Flying Television says that there is a redemption method for celebrities in America when dealing with controversies or scandals which involves the celebrity staying quiet, staying off of social media, and after a period of reflection allowing the celebrity to state the consequences of their actions, what they had learned, and explained how they have done the work (Garvey, 2021). It is also described that the evolution and creation of cancel culture has been highly influential in the world of celebrities because of the way people are empowered to speak out now in comparison to 10-20 years ago. When something has been said, captured, or done it is posted on various social media platforms and after this controversy has been battled, it is not the last it has dealt with due to its ability to resurface after a certain amount of time has passed, more information has come out about it, or a new event is seemingly parallel to this (Garvey 2021). The world between celebrity and professional athletes intertwines in various ways, so the repercussions and effects of doing something criminal and controversial are highly similar and impactful.

Several controversies and crises have occurred within the highly popular sports league known as the NFL, specifically with players over the years that dependent on their responses have either led to the demise of their career, the ability for the athlete to play with loud “boo’s” from the crowd, or for the athlete to deal with months of public scrutiny and their eventual return to normalcy.

Within the NFL one of the most infamous crises involving a player is the Dogfighting scandal with Michael Vick. Vick was an NFL player who at the time of his scandal was a quarterback for the Falcons and the highest paid NFL player in 2006 who became a registered

dog breeder that same year. It was discovered that Vick and several others had formed “Bad News Kennels” which housed and trained over 50 pit bulls where they ran a high-stakes gambling ring betting on dog fights. It was also reported that they were responsible for killing dogs who “didn’t perform” (Animal Legal Defense Fund, 2009). The state was able to search his property due to probable cause and found things such as a blood-stained fighting area, animal and breeding equipment, and tools that are used to discipline dogs in inappropriate ways. Vick was indicted by the Federal Government and pled guilty to all charges he was faced with 23 months in prison and received a suspension from the NFL without pay for the time being (Animal Legal Defense Fund, 2009).

Vick had a questionable image before this instance and throughout the time of this incident he had utilized several different aspects of the image repair theory throughout the time between the accusations, conviction, and upon his return to the NFL. Vick shifted from utilizing denial and shifting blame to bolstering and eventual mortification. Vick also tied in his connection and newfound relationship with God, tying in an American moral that many share (Blaney, Lippert & Smith, 2012). In this particular scenario, Vick was able to return to the NFL after this incident. Many people still held him in low regard and criticized him throughout his career.

Another NFL player who also faced a public scandal but was unable to return to his career after the incident was former Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice. In February 2014, news broke to the public that Rice and his then-girlfriend were arrested and released from jail on simple assault charges in Atlantic City. It wasn’t until a few days after that a video was released of Rice dragging Palmer, former girlfriend, out of an elevator causing havoc in the media. (Bien, 2014). Rice was indicted on aggravated assault charges in March 2014, and the day after Rice

and Palmer got married which caused massive confusion and frustration by the public.

Prosecutors ultimately allowed Ray Rice to go into a 12-month intervention program rather than go to trial. It wasn't until May 2023 that Janay Palmer and Ray Rice held a press conference with the public (Bien, 2014).

Ray Rice's first punishment was a two-game sentence, but after another video was leaked this time of Rice punching Palmer unconscious he was suspended indefinitely by the NFL and dropped by the Ravens. Rice appealed this suspension and was reinstated by the NFL, but due to the controversy surrounding his name, he was never picked up as a free agent (Bien, 2014). Throughout this controversy and even years later, Rice primarily utilized mortification, evasion of responsibility, and corrective action. Although years after his career ended he has spoken out about domestic violence and has done work to improve himself, he is met with disapproval from the public after he was honored by the Baltimore Ravens pregame in the 2023-2024 season. He was honored as a "Legend of the Game" and the Ravens president justified this by saying that he had an immensely successful career, has owned up to what happened, and is actively working to improve his life (Fox Sports, 2023). This was met with many news articles and social media posts critiquing this decision and stating that he shouldn't be forgiven.

A current player in the NFL facing public scrutiny and current legal battles is the highly talented Kansas City Chiefs wide receiver Rashee Rice. According to a police summary obtained by USA Today in April, Rashee Rice was involved in a hit-and-run incident that impacted six different cars and left four severely injured. After a collection of evidence including dashcam video picturing Rice and another driver walking away from the crash, a warrant for his arrest was issued on April 10th Rashee Rice turned himself in (Reyes, 2024). Rice has been

charged with one count of aggravated assault, one count of collision involving serious bodily injury, and six counts of collision involving injury (Heinz & Sweat, 2024).

After taking to his Instagram story to issue a public apology, Rashee has chosen to engage in mortification and take full responsibility for his involvement (Heinz et. al, 2024). However, in a later statement, he chose to engage in evasion of responsibility and neutrality (Foote, 2024). As he begins playing in the NFL 2024 season awaiting disciplinary sentences from the law there has been a lot of criticism of him as a person and the NFL as an organization for the lack of accountability and punishment for a serious crime. The case of Rashee Rice and his response to a crisis that is currently unfolding helps us understand the impact of social media in hurting or aiding the athlete in creating and maintaining their image as well as how good performance of an athlete can help contribute to forgiveness in the public eye for a professional athlete.

RQ1: What image repair strategies are used by the NFL athletes chosen to analyze throughout the different stages of the crisis they are facing?

RQ2: What combination of methods from the image repair theory are the most effective in restoring a positive public perception for professional athletes in the NFL?

Research

Reputation is vital and valuable to most people in their day-to-day lives for many different reasons. When interviewing for a new position, your potential employer may contact your references regarding your work ethic, experience at the company, and how you left that job. In your dating life when meeting a potential partner, you may ask friends or family what they have heard about the person or even head to the Internet for more information. If applying to be a contestant on a reality TV show, a team does a thorough background check on your criminal background, fact-checking all information you've provided to them, as well as analyzing your social media platforms to ensure that the program would not be associated with any negative or offensive posts you've interacted with. If reputation holds this rank of significance for the "average" person, imagine the weight that it holds for an organization, government, celebrity, or professional athlete.

As the years have gone on, professional sports viewership has grown as well as the types of media. In the 2024 season, the NFL achieved the highest television ratings within nine years, averaging 18.6 million viewers (MOS Editorial Team, 2024). The line between celebrity and athlete has been blurred over the years due to the athlete's ability to develop associations in people's minds and viewers having a sense of idolization towards these professional athletes (Biz & Schubert, 2024). There is a specific type of emotional attachment that sports fans have to their selected team and with its players; feeling the impact of the wins, losses, and accomplishments. In a survey conducted to analyze the relationship between sports fans and their view of their favorite teams as a brand, researchers focused on two different Norwegian football clubs and their fans. The survey found that in the category of emotional attachment, the supporters held a sense of identity, care, and belonging to their relationship with their team furthermore when their

team is achieving success the team's brand becomes more successful resulting in the fans feeling emotionally fulfilled and have a higher level of self-esteem (Arakaki, 2017). Other areas of pride towards a team and its players include wearing a specific player jersey, or team colors, hosting watch parties, tailgating before a game, reposting the team's posts, interacting with specific players' social media platforms, singing a team's given cheer or chant, and many other ways (Arakiki, 2017).

Many prominent athletes have found a way to turn their fans' pride into cultivating their brand and expanding their scope of influence to many other platforms. One way that athletes have gained prominence and leveraged their fame is by establishing partnerships with popular brands and/or social causes. The athletes endorsing a cause, a product, or a brand can prove to be extremely influential and beneficial to their partner because of their mutually established relationship and the athlete's established credibility (Biz & Schubert, 2024). Athletes such as Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neil have been able to become a household name, even for those who are not avid sports fans due to their ability to capitalize on their brand and extend their reach beyond the court (Armato, 2023).

Although these athletes have been able to do plenty of good for their team, and their brand, and support other organizations or companies in the process, this increased visibility and opportunity to engage with fans has put these athletes under an intense microscope. Off-field attitudes, statements, and actions have extreme consequences on their fans, endorsers, businesses, and someone the league itself (Biz & Schubert). The increased ways that athletes have been able to cultivate their brand and reach their fans on a more personal level have also served to be the same ways in which it has contributed to supporting their downfall in a professional and personal matter.

Specifically within the NFL, there are several infamous incidents and scandals that individual athletes have taken part in and gotten consequences for as well as many other criminal offenses committed by a variety of players. USAToday compiled information that explained that about one in 40 NFL players are arrested every calendar year (Pumphrey Jr., 2024). In research conducted by the Violence Against Women Academic journal, they found that although it might be expected for the more prominent players who commit a crime to face higher punishment, it is the 'less important players' who receive higher punishment. The more prominent athlete oftentimes is subjected to higher public scrutiny and media coverage but is oftentimes still provided the privilege to make an impact on the field (Pumphrey Jr., 2024). Regardless, players within the NFL have been involved in controversies since its creation and have had to utilize many different strategies and tactics in an attempt to repair their reputation in the public eye and not impact their other streams of income through brand partnerships, collaborations, interviews, etc.

The Image Repair Theory has proven to be an effective strategy for understanding various crises and scenarios. The theory includes 5 different strategies of repair which require understanding and consideration of many different factors such as the organizational context, crisis type, scope of influence, perceptions of stakeholders, and audience impression (Benoit, 1997). According to Benoit, to truly understand the image repair strategies one must investigate the attacks or complaints by considering that the accused is held responsible for the action and that the act is considered offensive (Benoit, 1997). It is imperative to take into account that whilst this crisis is occurring the public's perception is more important than the reality and if that audience truly considers the accused act to be offensive. Using the Image Repair Theory can help individuals or organizations assess how they could address the problems to be the most effective

with audiences and stakeholders. This theory can also classify past responses in crises to determine the effectiveness of those.

The Image Repair Theory can be used to examine scandals or crises that professional athletes have faced and determine if the strategies they chose were beneficial in restoring their image in the public eye. Players in the NFL specifically have undergone public scrutiny for a variety of things such as inappropriate tweets, domestic abuse charges, public intoxication, and even murder. Within the NFL, the study will focus on three prominent athletes who have faced a variety of different crises including Michael Vick, Ray Rice, and Rashee Rice.

Michael Vick

Michael Vick is best known for his record-breaking NFL career between 2001 and 2017, which began with being the number one overall draft pick at the 2001 NFL draft (Lance, 2024). In 2002, Vick became the Falcon's full-time starting quarterback and made his first Pro Bowl, and made the Pro Bowl 3 times following this over the course of his career (Lance, 2024). Michael Vick was regarded as one of the most entertaining and athletic players in the NFL at the time, until 2007.

Vick's cousin Davon Boddie was arrested on drug charges on April 25, 2007, and when asked for his place of residence provided authorities with Michael Vick's address. After doing a brief search of the property the authorities had found probable cause to obtain a second search warrant because they had seen and suspected evidence of animal cruelty and dogfighting (ALDF, 2010). The police had found 66 dogs, treadmills, a "parting" stick that was used to pry dogs' mouths open during fights, performance-enhancing drugs to increase the fighting potential in the dogs, and blood-stained objects and medical supplies to which the news of these findings

immediately caused a media frenzy in the general public as well as animal rights groups (Blaney et. al, 2013).

After rumors of deceased dogs being buried on the property, authorities obtained two more search warrants which revealed up to eight dogs buried in shallow graves (ALDF, 2010). Vick and his three co-conspirators were indicted by a federal grand jury and charged with conspiracy charges involving competitive dogfighting, procuring, and training pit bulls for fighting, and conducting enterprise across state lines (Associated Press News Service). Michael Vick and his other three accomplices pled guilty on August 27, 2007, after denying claims and not fully cooperating with authorities at the beginning of the investigation. Although prison time for these crimes is usually within the range of 0-6 months the judge had stated that these acts were so inhumane that he would recommend 12-18 months instead. It was this same day that Vick was suspended by the NFL without pay (ALDF, 2010). Ultimately Vick served 21 months in prison and two months of house arrest and was released in July 2009. Vick was reinstated by the NFL in August 2009 to the Philadelphia Eagles and worked on rebuilding his brand and image (Rodgers, 2024).

Throughout all of the legal processes and charges Vick was facing and how he needed to regain trust in the public eye upon being reinstated by the NFL it's clear that Vick didn't just stick with one type of message when speaking to the public about his accusations and sentencing. This research will aim to break down Vicks's responses to the initial allegations, sentencing, release, and what he is saying about his experiences even today as well as the public's perception of these tactics.

Initial Charges

After Vick's cousin was arrested and the search warrant was executed, rumors and speculation began to spiral. On April 27, 2007, there was a press conference to promote the upcoming NFL draft and updates on current players. When asked about the dogfighting allegations and his involvement, Vick denied any involvement or knowledge about the entire operation. Vicks' first comment about the dogfighting allegations as a whole stated "I'm never there. I'm never at the house (Knobler & Wyche, 2007). In terms of the Image Restoration Theory, this initial response represents the use of denial. Vick chooses to deny his involvement in all aspects because there was no proof released of his direct involvement yet, and aimed to clear his name from being at the property often and participating in the dogfighting occurring there.

Vick goes on at the press conference to state "If I'm not there, I don't know what's going on" (Knobler & Wyche, 2007). This falls under the strategy of defeasibility, which is a subcategory of evasion of responsibility. By saying this simple sentence to the public, there was a de emphasis on his knowledge of the situation and lack of information surrounding it. This was an attempt to shift the blame over to other people who frequented the house and family members who lived there. This sentence in summary told the public that he can't be in control because he isn't ever there, so they should look towards his family who lived there.

In July 2007, the federal indictment of the investigation was released to the public, which cited the entire dog fighting rings history from May 2001 to April 2007 and Vicks co-conspirators. The indictment revealed Vick as not only being involved with bankrolling and partaking in dogfighting but also killing dogs who didn't perform to their standards. On July 26, 2007, Michael Vick's arraignment occurred.

Vick's lawyer Billy Martin read his statements for him, which people found strange at the time since the statement given was rather short. Vick's statement began with pleading not guilty to all allegations made against him, continuing his tactics of denial. He then went on to say "I take these charges very seriously and look forward to clearing my good name. I respectfully ask all of you to hold your judgment until all of the facts are shown" (Walker et. al, 2007). This continues Vick's previous strategies of denial but without evading responsibility to others.

His final words of this statement used the technique of bolstering which can be defined as attempting to strengthen the audience's positive impression of themselves to distract from the negative acts revealed in the public (Benoit, 1997). Martin, on behalf of Vick, stated "I would like to say to my mom I'm sorry for what she has had to go through in this most trying of times." He also apologized to his teammates for not being with them at the beginning of their training camp (Walker et. al, 2007). By Vick acknowledging his support system and other people in his life in this interview, it was likely this was his attempt to connect him back to familial values in the public eye and emphasize that he has people who love him, even through tough times.

Just a few days after, Vick in a shocking appearance, did an interview with DJ Porsche Fox on WVEE-FM, which was the first interview he had done since the indictment. This entire interview seemed to focus on the technique of bolstering (Scott Smith, 2012). Instead of speaking head-on about the dog fighting and relevant charges, Vick spoke about all of the ways that the incident as a whole has impacted the people in his life, expressed sympathy for those people, and spoke about how religion was guiding him (Wyche, 2007). Firstly, by emphasizing remorse for his family, team, and the team's owner, there was an attempt to use bolstering, and expressing remorse towards others. If people listened to this and were convinced his concerns were genuine, this had the potential to enhance his reputation. Mentioning religion and God,

allowed him to connect with another population. By expressing his belief and faith in God, he is attempting to create an image of a man who has these religious principles and morals. He explained how thankful he was for his fans, to cultivate support from his previous, proud fans and maintain their support through the case (Wyche, 2007).

Court and Sentencing

On August 27, 2007, Michael Vick pleaded guilty to a single count of conspiracy to travel across state lines with intent to dogfight after his other co-defendants also agreed to plea deals (ABC News, 2009). Upon pleading guilty, Vick held a press conference outside of the U.S. District Court in Virginia where he heavily utilized mortification and bolstering in order to repair his reputation amid his plea (The Associated Press, 2007).

His guilty plea goes against all of the denials he had made, making him out to be a liar. Michael Vick knew he committed the crimes and took to the public to apologize and ask for forgiveness. Vick apologized heavily to the people in his professional life and his personal life including his teammates, the NFL commissioner, and his young fans. He even incorporates bolstering within his message to younger fans by saying that he hopes people could use his story as an example to use better judgment in their lives. He follows up these apologies by asking for forgiveness and owning up to his mistakes. He said “I take full responsibility for my actions. For one second will I sit right here- not for one second will I sit right here and point the finger and try to blame anybody else for my actions or what I’ve done (The Associated Press, 2007). As demonstrated, Vick relied mostly on mortification and bolstering to apologize for his actions and own up to his mistakes, not using any form of denial any more.

The last thing that Vick used that day with the technique of bolstering was mentioning the impact of religion on his life, which is consistent with the interview he had conducted prior.

He claimed that he turned his life over to God, and is asking him for forgiveness as well (Associated Press, 2007). Overall, it is clear that Vick had attempted to be vague with his words, not discussing anything about dogfighting in-depth, but attempting to repair his image as a whole by covering many different aspects of his life. Through using mortification and bolstering, Vick tried to appeal to the public as a whole and emphasize that he was working on himself.

After this plea deal took place, Vick was indefinitely suspended by the NFL and lost almost all of his product endorsement contracts. He was also required to liquidate some of his assets to pay the bills and loans he had taken out. In December of that year, he was ultimately sentenced to 23 months in prison and three years of probation (Hayslett-McCall, 2022). The judge stated publicly during his sentence that Vick was receiving a harsher punishment than his co-defendants because he lied about his involvement with dogfighting, specifically by rejecting the idea that he killed some of the dogs and claimed that Vicks's funding and role, proven by the other co-defendants were instrumental in continuing the dog fighting ring (ESPN.com news services, 2007).

Following Vick's sentencing in court, there was a large, public conversation regarding Vick as a person and dog fighting as a whole. It served as an opportunity for animal welfare groups to educate the public about the detrimental effects of dogfighting and their ability to get the message out. All of the dogs, besides one, were able to be rehoused by ASPCA and allowed multiple bills/acts to be passed about dogfighting (Bershadker, 2017). However, loyal Michael Vick and Atlanta Falcons fans overlooked these aspects and spoke out about how they didn't think dogfighting should be a criminal offense and wanted Vick back on the field. In a controversial time, it would be crucial to Vicks' livelihood and career to see how he stepped back into the public eye upon release.

Release and Reinstatement

Michael Vick's first interview upon his release was with James Brown on CBS's 60 Minutes. In this interview, Vick showed up to this interview clean-cut and seemingly professional. He was asked many tough questions about whether he had learned his lesson, how his time in prison was, and his moral character. Vick answered these questions and used the techniques of mortification and taking accountability. Vick had stated that he deserved to lose all of the money he had lost and even stated that he knew he could've put a stop to it, but didn't. Vick claimed that football isn't what he holds close to his heart right now and that he needs to make up for what he did wrong (Wright, 2017).

The interview also included a conversation about Vick's work which will continue to be conducted with the Humane Society. He had support figures with him during the interview who vouched for Vick and his character improvement and how Vick as a public figure, could be a beneficial advocate against dogfighting, and speak to the youth about avoiding the same decisions as he did (Wright, 2017).

Upon his release and this interview, Vick was signed to a 2-year deal with the Eagles which was met with public controversy. President Obama spoke out at this time and advocated for Vick to have a second chance as a black man in society who could now use his platform to his benefit (Wright, 2017).

Present Day

Although met with controversy, over the years Vick has worked with schools, and animal welfare organizations, and conducted several interviews discussing his growth as a person, owning up to his mistakes, and acknowledging the effect that these events had on his life and many others. Michael Vick is now a football coach at Norfolk State and is continuing to aim to

be a role model to many young people through coaching and advocating against dog fighting. He has done interviews over the past few years with VladTV, The Dan Patrick Show, Tyreek Hill, The Wall Street Journal, and Shannon Sharpe. He continues to acknowledge that he knows people out there might not forgive him, but he continues to move forward with no more controversies as he aims to repair his image over time.

Ray Rice

Ray Rice, a New York native, is considered a football legend by his former High School and achieved major success even at a young age. Upon graduation, Rice continued this success on the field at Rutgers University where he achieved many accomplishments such as setting the rushing record for the team and becoming a finalist for the Heisman Trophy. He was even chosen MVP of both the Texas Bowl and the International Bowl. This success didn't go unnoticed because Ray Rice entered the 2008 NFL draft at age 21. Rice was drafted by the Baltimore Ravens as the 55th overall pick and began his NFL career (Momodu, 2017).

During his career with the Ravens, Rice made the Pro Bowl three times and helped the Ravens make and win the Super Bowl in 2013. He had a reputation for being a truly kind and selfless person outside of football, and Baltimore welcomed him with open arms, which caused his actions to touch people's hearts across the nation (Mink, 2023).

On February 15, 2014, Rice and his now-wife, Janay Palmer were visiting Atlantic City when The Atlantic City police were called and discovered that both parties were guilty of striking each other. Ray and Janay both were charged with assault (Cripps, 2014). It was on February 19 of that same year that TMZ acquired video footage from the hotel that showed Rice dragging Palmer out of the elevator but didn't show the actual acts of violence (CNN Staff, 2024).

After about a month of investigation, Janay Palmer's charges were dropped and Ray Rice's charges indicted him for felony third-degree aggravated assault. The day after the escalation of charges was announced, Janay and Ray got legally married to show solidarity with one another (Elliott, 2014).

On May 1st, 2014 Rice pleaded not guilty to aggravated assault and instead made an effort to apply for a pre-trial intervention program for first-time offenders (Cripps, 2014). Rice was accepted into the program and his case was never brought to trial as a result of this. Shortly after the NFL banned Rice for two games without pay and fined him \$58,000 for his aggravated assault charge (Elliott, 2014).

Ray Rice was under the assumption he would go back to playing football and begin working on clearing up his name and image, but on September 8, 2014, TMZ released the full footage of the incident that took place between Janay and Rice. The video showed that this incident was indeed not mutual and that Rice aggressively punched Palmer in the face and knocked her out unconscious (CNN Staff, 2024). Immediately after this video was released to the public the Baltimore Ravens release Rice from the team and the NFL suspended him indefinitely (Elliot, 2014).

This incident sparked a lot of controversy at the time for how Ray Rice and Janay Palmer had handled the incident and its severity, but also for the Ravens, NFL Commissioner, Roger Goodell, and the NFL's overall policies. This incident ended Ray Rice's NFL career but didn't stop his efforts to try to restore his image in the public. This research will analyze Ray Rice's responses to this incident at the beginning of the controversy, after being cut from the NFL, and what he is saying today about his experience.

Beginning Words

After the initial release of the video, Rice said nothing. He didn't speak out about anything related to the incident until after Rice was accepted into the diversionary program on May 23rd. A very public conversation was had after Rice and Palmer married on March 28th before he pleaded not guilty on May 1st (CNN Staff, 2014). Although we may know the culture of the world now to be very outspoken regarding domestic violence, this incident at the time was huge in terms of how people viewed domestic violence. People were very confused about the lack of accountability at the time and their decision to marry amidst all of this.

The first time Rice had spoken out about the incident publicly was at a news conference held by the Baltimore Ravens on May 23rd alongside his wife Janay Rice. Ray Rice used mortification, corrective action, bolstering, and his wife actually utilized evasion of responsibility to take time to take responsibility for her actions in the situation.

He began the conference by recognizing the amount of time he had to reflect on his decisions, choices, and the impact they had. He first apologized to the Ravens staff and coach followed by his fans, and then said "I apologize to everyone who was affected by the situation my wife and I were in (CBS Baltimore, 2014). Many people discussed at this time how it seemed as though Ray Rice was not fully taking accountability for his actions and almost made this incident a group effort. Ray Rice discussed the impact that counseling has had on their relationship and how badly their relationship needed an outlet to communicate like counseling. He ended his statement by expressing he wasn't a failure because he was working his way back up and wanted his wife to speak because "they were in it together (CBS Baltimore, 2014). Janay didn't speak for long, but she expressed her thanks to the people who have been supportive of them throughout this journey and followed that up by expressing she regrets the role she played in that incident. She expressed that they are trying to continue to work through their

relationship and advocated for Ray Rice's character. She expressed how they will earn their respect and platform role models in the community back in due time (CBS Baltimore, 2014).

By utilizing mortification he was able to try to apologize for the incident, but he didn't fully accept responsibility for his actions, he mostly used this technique to apologize to the people who supported him. He used corrective action in the ways he described counseling, how he is working himself back up, and how he and Janay are working as a team. Janay attempted to evade all of the responsibility that it seemed that Ray Rice had in the incident by expressing that she had a prominent role as well, and finally used bolstering to express motivational statements about him as a person throughout the press conference to express that he is still a good person.

Many people at this time read the conference as emotional and raw, but other people found it strange that he didn't apologize to his wife and allowed DV to be expressed as almost a team effort. Many people also expressed that a real heartfelt apology shouldn't have required Rice to have a bullet point list he was referencing on his phone as well.

On July 31st, 2014, when Rice addressed the media at the Ravens training camp base, Rice used bolstering and evasion of responsibility. In terms of evading responsibility, he does this indirectly by not discussing the incident or explaining what happened in the elevator, before dragging Janay. He is quoted saying "I'm not going backward" (Pengelly, 2014). He is still not accepting full responsibility for his actions and is, as cited by people at this time, seen as suspicious for not addressing what had happened in the elevator until it was released unbeknownst to him months later.

Although he is constantly apologizing in this news conference, he is not accepting full responsibility. The apologies he is expressing to his wife and young daughter seem to be an attempt to bolster his character by expressing that he is a dad, a husband, and trying to make

things right with his family. The event went on to state “If you go biblically, the husband is the head of the household. My job is to lead my family, my job is to lead my wife. My job is to lead in whatever I do. And if I’m not being the example, then my family crumbles (Pengelly, 2014). By expressing his familial values and now referencing the bible, he is attempting to bolster his character through his attempt to express his morals.

Video Release; NFL Career End

After Ray Rice’s suspension and release from the Ravens due to the unseen footage of what had occurred in the elevator, Rice made his first public statement to ESPN’s Josina Anderson. He expressed that he needed to be there for his wife, stating that his wife is so strong, and they have a lot of people in their corner supporting them through these tough times, an attempt to evade responsibility and bolstering, through his values and still not accepting responsibility for the full incident in its entirety (NFL, 2014).

In their first public interview since Rice’s release from the Baltimore Ravens, Janay and Ray sat down with Matt Lauer on December 3rd, 2014. In this interview, Rice appears to now utilize mortification in saying that he takes full responsibility for his actions and accepts the consequences of his actions. He claimed that he has always taken full responsibility and never complained about any of the scrutiny he was facing, which also had experienced much controversy at the time as many people didn’t believe he had seemed remorseful before (NBC News, 2014). Janay Rice claimed that there was never any violence before the elevator incident and after that day as well (NBC News, 2014). Despite these efforts to speak publicly, Rice was never picked up by any NFL team and his NFL career ended. The conflicted comments on this YouTube video of the news segment read:

“If he took full responsibility, why did SHE apologize as well??? Sigh...”

“I’m surprised he was even reinstated.”

“Let this man play the game he loves. We all make mistakes but don't take his life. He ain't a murderer, it's his personal life and relationship smh.”

“It's unfortunate what had happened to Ray Rice. He was a good player, but he made a stupid mistake. You don't lay your hands on a woman just because you feel like it. Unless she hit you first, don't do it.”

Present Day

Since all of the controversy in 2013, Janay and Ray did an interview in 2018 with CBS Mornings to reflect on the incident between them and speak out on current NFL assault incidents in that year. Ray Rice attempted to use corrective action, bolstering, and evading responsibility in this interview.

Ray Rice began the interview by expressing that all of this was brought by underlying issues in his life, and expressing that he never wanted to ask for help in regards to anything in his life. He said that seeing his mom in bad relationships growing up allowed him to normalize things in relationships that aren't “normal” (CBS Mornings, 2018). In this current moment of the interview, he is evading the responsibility by shifting the blame over to his unresolved issues from his childhood. He still claimed at this point that there were financial and emotional issues, and it eventually reached physical abuse, but that it wasn't an “abusive relationship”. He evaded the responsibility of expressing that they were both young, dumb, and in love (CBS Mornings, 2018).

He utilized bolstering and corrective action to express that counseling and meeting with his psychologist are the things that have allowed him to reflect on his own life, his relationship, and how he moves on day to day with his future. He claims that he hates the person in the video

and claims that although he didn't get a second chance in football, he got it with his wife (CBS Mornings, 2018). Ray Rice tries to express remorse and empathy towards people with rough pasts and how that could impact people's decision-making skills to seem like an emotionally mature person who has grown since then (CBS Mornings, 2018).

Since this interview, Rice has done several other interviews emphasizing the same things he has always said: the impact counseling has had on his life, the impact that childhood trauma can have on a person's life, and how he works to be a better person for his wife and kids every day (Koch, 2023).

Even with Rice's rather short NFL career, he was inducted into the Westchester Sports Hall of Fame in 2021 and honored by the Baltimore Ravens in 2023 as the "Legend of the Game". He has attempted to bring awareness and education towards domestic violence by speaking out at events and doing interviews but is still referred to as "controversial" to this day. Ray Rice's case of domestic violence is what forced the NFL to look inward at how they handled these scenarios and is an example of how dishonesty and not expressing the full truth can be career-damaging.

Rashee Rice

Rashee Rice was born on April 22, 2000, in Philadelphia and quickly moved to North Richland Hills, Texas. Rice was a breakout football star at Richland High School, earning him first-team all-district as a junior (Kolb, 2024). Rashee attended Southern Methodist College, not too far from home, and continued his pursuit to be a standout player there as well. During his 2022 season at SMU, he achieved the personal best of his collegiate career, earning 96 catches for 1,355 yards as well as 10 touchdowns, and was named first-team All-ACC. His collegiate success earned him the 55th overall pick in the 2023 draft (Kolb, 2024).

Rashee earned substantial success in his first season, contributing to the team's in-season success and ultimately their win in the 2024 Super Bowl. Rice also earned the "Mack Lee Hill Award" by the Kansas City Chiefs players, commemorating the team's top rookie of the year (McMullen, 2024). There was much excitement for Rice's second NFL season, as he was beginning to make a name for himself as a successful wide receiver on the team and in the league itself. However, Rice saw his first controversy in the off-season in 2024.

On March 31, 2024, a major traffic collision occurred in Dallas at about 6:20 p.m. Although very limited information was available to the public at first, Rashee Rice was originally sought after by police because the car involved in the accident was leased to him (Harding, 2024). In the first local news broadcasts, one person was recorded as being hospitalized and multiple cars were involved in the collision.

On April 1, just a day later, dash cam footage of the accident was released, which revealed that drivers of both a Lamborghini, suspected to be driven by Rice, and a Corvette were racing on the North Central Expressway. Both of the cars were speeding, swerved, and subsequently crashed, involving six cars in total. After the collision, all of the people in the two vehicles that caused the crash fled the scene. Kayla Quinn, a victim of the crash, spoke out about the fact that her four-year-old son was very scared in the car and that the lack of sympathy and remorse by the other drivers was appalling (Bilicki, 2024).

On April 2nd, an attorney for the car rental company the Lamborghini in the crash was from called The Classic Lifestyle, said that in the contract for the car rental Rice should have been the only driver of the car, but at the time the drivers had not been identified (Stengle, 2024). Finally, on April 4, 2024, Rice admitted to being the driver of the Lamborghini. Speculation of the charges he could be facing and potential fines to pay started circulating online because according

to the Texas Transportation Code, fleeing the scene of a crash can face up to five years in prison and/or a \$5,000 fine. Another dash cam video from a different vehicle revealed the footage of both the accident at a different angle and Rashee Rice and all of the people in the vehicles walking away from the scene, corroborating witness statements (Hernandez & Reyes, 2024). As a relatively new NFL player just gaining traction with his successful rookie year and kind words from star QB, Patrick Mahomes, this scenario varies from the other two instances discussed. Rashee Rice has also grown up and developed with social media being a prominent force which has had a large impact on his reputation as well. The research will explore Rice's public responses and how the public as a whole reacted to these responses in these very recent times.

Public Responses

Rashee Rice's first public response, which focused on mortification, took place via an Instagram story on April 3rd, 2024. The apology was a black screen with white text and was signed with his signature at the end. The statement read:

"Today I met with Dallas PD investigators regarding Saturday's accident. I take full responsibility for my part in this matter and will continue to cooperate with the necessary authorities. I sincerely apologize to everyone impacted by Saturday's accident. Signed Rashee Rice" (Heinz et. al, 2024).

It is clear that although in fewer words than expected, Rashee Rice used mortification by acknowledging people's concerns about the incident, expressing his responsibility, and acknowledging that he is working with the police. He also utilized corrective action by expressing that he was meeting with the police and taking all necessary steps to make amends. The apology posted on Instagram Story was only active for 24 hours, which faced criticism from

people at the moment, but was defended by others because it was an ongoing investigation at the time.

On June 9, 2024, Rashee Rice spoke out for the first time publicly since the incident at a Kansas City youth camp. In this appearance, Rashee Rice appeared to use mortification and corrective action. He expressed how much he had learned from the crash, apologized to the victims, how big of a mistake it was, and that he is going to continue to mature and grow from the incident (Benjamin, 2024).

Rashee was quoted saying “Accidents and stuff like that happen, but all you can do is move forward and walk around being the same person, try to be positive so that everybody can feel your love and your great energy (Benjamin, 2024). Alongside public support from the JC Chiefs players like Patrick Mahomes, people felt that he was being genuine, but others didn’t feel the same. Although he was taking full responsibility, he also neglected to speak about the impact of his actions and the severity of the crash. Some of the comments on the YouTube publishing of this interview clip reads:

“He couldn’t care less about any of the people he injured... what a loser.”

“Smh.”

“He’s laughing. No more team by the way to lean on.”

Present Day

Although at the time this crash had seemed huge and seemed like it could be extremely detrimental to Rice’s career it doesn’t seem like it has made an impact on his career and on people’s opinions of him. Rice is still facing two civil lawsuits and criminal charges as a result of the accident, but has gotten pushed forward to unknown dates in 2025 (NBCDFW Staff, 2025).

Rashee Rice suffered a season-ending ACL injury in Week 4 of the NFL season but has gotten extreme public support from the Chiefs, his teammates, and his fans. In comparison to the instances with Ray Rice and Michael Vick, this is due to a few reasons.

1. There is no urgency with the charges and sentencing. As soon as news broke of the other instances, and those are seen as more severe to the public there was pressure to make statements, charges, sentences, etc. a lot quicker. Since the public views Rashee Rice's crisis as just a collision, there isn't this sense of urgency.
2. Lack of Longevity in his Career- With Vick and Ray Rice, their experience in the NFL and the positions played allowed them to become a household name quickly. They both assisted in making touchdowns and history for their respective teams at the time and couldn't fly under the radar. Rashee Rice had an impressive rookie season for the Kansas City Chiefs but didn't receive any awards directly from the NFL and most people during their SuperBowl win focused on more well-known players on the team at the time. In the off-season even with the impending charges, due to his ACL injury, he wasn't in conversation by any news outlets as being a player that could highly impact the Chiefs in this upcoming season, allowing him to lay low with the developments in his court dates.
3. Social Media.- Fortunately for Rashee Rice, 2024 is very different in terms of the media versus 2007 or 2014. Although some social media platforms were around at the time, they were not as oversaturated as they are now. Rashee Rice exists in a time where a different news story is trending every minute and unless it is a more severe tragedy according to the public, it is very easy for people in this oversaturated world to move on to the next. From 2007 to 2015 if TMZ posted an incident, that was the main thing being discussed at the time across all media outlets. Nowadays, a "simple crime", a

controversial tweet, or anything not positive many times is a scroll on social media and forgetting it happened until the next big break in the case.

Overall, the Image Restoration Theory is as relevant today as it was during its creation. PR teams work relentlessly to try and provide the best responses to their clients, especially in the world of professional athletics, where you go from being a regular person to a celebrity overnight. From the research conducted, the only way to truly gain back trust and your reputation is by acknowledging your mistakes and including the whole truth. For Ray Rice and Michael Vick, we can see that they both did not acknowledge the entirety of the truth from the beginning, it hurt both of their reputations in the end. Speaking out about these crises as quickly as you can, taking ownership, and sounding genuine even when working with PR professionals are extremely vital in repairing your image in the public. The Image Restoration Theory can continue to be used to evaluate professional athletes' responses, rate their effectiveness, and help their teams plan preemptively the best way for their clients to respond publicly, without further damaging their reputation. These cases in conjunction with this theory are a great and effective way to analyze both mistakes and things done right with their responses and classifications in which their responses fit best.

The research was limited in looking at three extremely different instances of crises within the NFL and having them be around different periods. Further research could be done in this area to compare similar crises to compare and contrast their responses and gauge public reactions. Further research can also further examine social media comments from each instance, looking at player profiles, and news outlets to determine the ratios of public to negative responses as well.

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