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An Examination of Michael Vick's Speech of Apologia: Implications for the Study of Sports

Apologia and Image Repair

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Abstract

Athletes often find themselves in situations wherein they make speeches of apology or seek to repair their images. Michael Vick gave such a speech on August 27, 2007, following his conviction for involvement in dogfighting and gambling. By conducting a close textual analysis of Vick's speech of apology, this study applies apology and image repair theories to his speech and suggests expansion of these theories to more fully account for such instances of sports apology.

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Apologia and Image Repair

Although a vast body of literature addresses apologia (Ryan, 1982) and image repair theories (Benoit, 1995; Blaney & Benoit, 2001) in a variety of contexts, less attention has been devoted to sports apologia and how sports figures seek to repair their tarnished images (Kruse, 1981a). Yet, sports figures often find themselves in situations wherein they make speeches of apologia or seek to repair their images (Kruse, 1981a). Recently, scholars have examined a variety of ways in which communication is linked to sports (Brazeal, 2008; Meyer, 2007; Meyer & Cutbirth, 2005; Sierlecki, 2007; Trujillo, 1994). However, as the study of sports communication continues to grow as a field of scholarship, the boundaries of apologia and image repair theories should be expanded to account for new cases involving sports figures. Whereas, in the past, sports figures often remained involved in their respective sports, tougher rules and penalties for incidents off the field combined with greater public and media scrutiny have resulted in situations in which sports leagues and teams have severed ties with athletes. In particular, instances involving legal troubles have created unique situations calling for apologia and image repair by sports figures.

On August 27, 2007, Michael Vick, who had been the quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons professional football team, made a speech of apologia following his conviction by a U.S. District Court in Virginia for his involvement in dogfighting and gambling. Vick was found guilty of running a dogfighting business, Bad Newz Kennels, placing bets on the dogfights, and killing some of the dogs, in one case by "slamming at least one dog's body to the ground" (Dohrman, 2007). Through a close textual analysis of both Vick's speech of apologia in both video (Vick apologizes..., 2007) and textual form (see Appendix A), the present study analyzes

Vick's statement through apologia and image repair theories. The events leading up to Vick's statement, moral commentary in the media, and actions taken by the Commissioner of the National Football League (NFL), Roger Goodell, are examined as contextual factors framing Vick's speech. The close textual analysis addresses the following questions: What image repair techniques and strategies did Michael Vick employ in his speech of apologia? Did Michael Vick's speech of apologia differ from other instances of sports apologia? Does apologia theory account for all the elements of interest in Michael Vick's speech of apologia? And, if not, how can apologia theory be expanded? Does image repair theory account for all the elements of interest in Michael Vick's speech of apologia? And, if not, how can image repair theory be expanded?

In order to answer these questions, the present study first examines apologia and image repair theories. Second, the study examines the contextual factors surrounding Vick's case and conducts a close textual analysis to Vick's speech of apologia. Third, the study applies apologia and image repair theories to Vick's speech. And, finally, the study suggests ways to expand apologia and image repair theories to more fully account for instances of sports apologia as exemplified in Vick's speech.

Literature Review

Apologia

Apologia is defined as a "speech of self-defense" by Ware and Linkugel (1973). Importantly, they posited that each instance of apologia is unique to some extent. Extending on Abelson's (1959) typology for resolving cognitive conflict, which includes techniques of denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence, Ware and Linkugel (1973) argued that these techniques are used by apologists as strategies for self-defense rhetoric. Specifically, in the

course of denial, they claimed that the apologist may speak of himself or herself in the third person to assume a “stance of one who is acted upon rather than one who acts with intent” (p. 276). In the case of bolstering, on the other hand, the apologist will attempt to identify herself or himself “with something viewed favorably by the audience” (p. 277). Both denial and bolstering “are reformatory in the sense that they do not alter the audience’s meaning for the cognitive elements involved” (p. 278). That is, although the act that occurred is bad, denial and bolstering seek to reduce the apologist’s culpability for the act. In contrast, differentiation and transcendence are transformative to the extent that these strategies attempt to alter the meaning assigned by the audience to certain features of the event. Differentiation, specifically, can entail a request by the apologist for the audience to suspend judgment until a future time, whereas transcendence attempts to “move the audience away from the particulars of the charge at hand in a direction toward some more abstract, general view” of the apologist’s character (p. 280).

Ware and Linkugel (1973) also posited that apologists typically employ “one of four major rhetorical postures when speaking in defense of their characters: absolution, vindication, explanation, or justification” (p. 282). Each posture is reflective of a combination of one or more of the strategies discussed above. For instance, a vindicative address, which relies upon transcendence strategy, “aims not only at the preservation of the accused’s reputation, but also at the recognition of his greater worth as a human being relative to the worth of his accusers” (p. 283). For the purposes of the present study, vindication is potentially useful in examining Michael Vick’s statements.

More recently, several studies have examined the apologia of various organizations (Armstrong, Hallmark, & Williamson, 2005; Benoit, 1995; Blaney & Benoit, 2001; Brinson & Benoit, 1999; Hearit, 1995; Huxman & Bruce, 1995; Rowland & Jerome, 2004; Tollefson,

2000). However, few studies have investigated instances involving sports figures (Brazeal, 2008; Kruse, 1981a; Sierlecki, 2007). Still fewer studies have sought to question the original conceptions of apologia or attempted to broaden the theoretical framework of apologia by exploring case studies that differ from conventional instances of apologia (Downey, 1993; Meyer, 2007; Meyer & Cutbirth, 2005; Mueller, 2004). Thus, the purpose of the present study is to examine a situation that is characterized by contextual differences unique from those traditionally explored by scholars.

Sports Apologia

Apologia in sports has become commonplace. Sports figures often make speeches of apologia for transgressions, real or perceived. Surprisingly, few scholars (Brazeal, 2008; Meyer, 2007; Meyer & Cutbirth, 2005; Sierlecki, 2007) have examined the instances of apologia in sports since Kruse's (1981a) landmark work on the topic. As Kruse explained, sports figures may find themselves in situations where it is necessary to make apologetic responses when society judges "them immoral or unethical" (p. 270). Several conclusions from her study are relevant to the present investigation.

First, Kruse (1981a) observed that sports figures often invoke references to god terms within their particular sport. Second, she explained that sports apologists tend to emphasize the team as more important than their own individual interests. Third, Kruse noted that sports figures are motivated to make responses of apologia in cases where the ethics of sport have been violated or perceived to have been violated. Specifically, she posited that:

Whenever individuals violate the ethical norms that hold simultaneously in both the sport world and the world at large, they will be evaluated negatively by fans and the general

public alike. These individuals will oftentimes attempt to repair their images with apologiae directed at fans. (p. 277)

This violation of ethics, however, may extend to larger concerns. For instance, “people also believe that those who oppose society’s ethical norms reveal lack of good character” (p. 278). Thus, societal members consider conduct that breaches ethics in the sports world and the socio-political world wrong. Fourth, in the course of asserting that all sports apologists employ the same strategies, Kruse contended that bolstering is most often used. Fifth, she argued that sports apologists often say they are sorry and express regret or sorrow for their behavior. Importantly, “regret functions rhetorically as evidence that one has taken the first step in mending one’s ways and, thus, serves as temporary proof that one is worthy of being reunited with the community one has offended” (p. 281). Finally, she observed that apologia “statements are oftentimes brief” and “do not include many of the details of the situations” in which the sports figure in question was involved (p. 283).

Ultimately, Kruse (1981a) concluded that sports apologia has not evolved because fans are more concerned with winning than with the character of athletes. The “what” and “why” of the transgression is less important than assurances that everything is okay at the moment. However, Kruse assumed that the sports apologist has not been exiled from the sport itself. This distinction is critical for the purposes of the present investigation since it demonstrates a critical difference between the case of Michael Vick and previous examinations of sports apologia and apologia in general.

Image Repair

Image repair theory grew, in part, out of the early work of scholars interested in apologia. In essence, image repair theory expanded the analysis of apologia to include other instances of

self-defense rhetoric aimed at restoring one's image. Benoit, Gullifor, and Panici (1991) contended that self-defense discourse "aimed at restoring one's image" is "a routine and unavoidable aspect of the human condition" (p. 273). Building on the works of Kenneth Burke (1970), Ware and Linkugel (1973), and Scott and Lyman (1968), Benoit and his colleagues outlined strategies used in efforts to restore a rhetor's image. Specifically, Benoit et al. (1991) advocated a typology of four general image restoration strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, minimization, and mortification. Importantly, in the case of mortification, "the rhetor may admit the wrongful act and ask for forgiveness" (p. 277). Benoit and his colleagues argued that mortification "coupled with a believable promise to 'mend one's ways' or make changes to prevent the recurrence of the undesirable act" can be effective (p. 277). This strategy, however, is "predicated on the assumption that humans are imperfect" (p. 278). Furthermore, the authors posited that the self-defense "may be enhanced by taking steps to prevent similar acts in the future" (p. 290). Benoit and Drew (1997) concluded that mortification and the promise of corrective action provide the best chance for a positive audience response. Mortification, thus, is an important strategy to consider when evaluating Vick's speech of apology and subsequent actions.

Later, in a debate with Burns and Bruner (2000) over the limitations of image restoration, Benoit (2000) shifted his position slightly and suggested that "image repair" is a more accurate label for such instances of self-defense. Burns and Bruner suggested a need to develop a more audience-oriented point of view. In response, Benoit admitted that image repair discourse can have multiple audiences. Specifically, Benoit argued that although a rhetor's image may never be fully restored, the rhetor can make attempts to repair a broken or damaged image in the view of his or her audience. Although this theoretical framework has spawned a fruitful line of research

investigating instances of image repair, subsequent studies have often been limited to the original conceptual typology outlined by Benoit and his colleagues.

Under the umbrella of image repair, several scholars have investigated instances where corporations and individuals have attempted to repair their tarnished images. Notable case studies of corporations have included examinations of self-defense rhetoric by AT&T (Benoit & Brinson, 1994), Dow Corning (Brinson & Benoit, 1996), Jack in the Box (Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995), Tylenol (Benoit & Lindsey, 1987), and USAir (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997). Other case studies have focused on image repair by individuals such as Hugh Grant (Benoit, 1997), Kenneth Starr (Benoit & McHale, 1999), Newt Gingrich (Kennedy & Benoit, 1997), Queen Elizabeth (Benoit & Brinson, 1999), and Tonya Harding (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). This line of research, however, is subject to Black's (1965) criticism of the neo-Aristotelian paradigm. Black claimed that neo-Aristotelian scholars are often so caught up in the assumptions of their method that they essentially become "blind" to alternative ways of examining rhetorical practice. Specifically, he argued that there is a tendency to look for the typology and nothing else, so that the typology winds up imprisoning one's thinking. Thus, Black indicted the neo-Aristotelian paradigm on the basis that it allows the typology to drive analysis and thought.

Kategoria

Although Benoit et al. (1991) suggested that scholars should focus on the discourse itself, a mindful critic must also engage in an examination of the context in which the apology occurs and subsequent actions which may influence the impressions of the rhetor's audience. For instance, Ryan's (1982) speech set analysis argued that in order to understand the defense or apologia, one must understand *kategoria*, which is defined as the charge or attack. Ryan noted that examining *kategoria* is essential in evaluating the effectiveness of image repair efforts.

Consequently, current theoretical approaches to self-defense rhetoric would benefit from a multi-faceted approach to examining the discourse of apologia, the *kategoria*, the contextual factors involved in a given situation, and the subsequent actions taken by the apologist.

In the present investigation, an examination of Vick's apologia by itself would fail to tell the whole story. To merely consider Vick's speech of apologia without considering the dogfighting and gambling charges made against him by the prosecution would prevent a complete analysis of the effect his apologia had in not only addressing the charges but also in repairing his image. In fact, Vick's discourse is better understood in juxtaposition with the charges, or *kategoria*, leveled against him. Only by examining the charges in relation to the apologia and positioned within the broader context in which the apologia occurs can we gain valuable insight into the contextual factors surrounding the artifact of interest here.

Close Textual Analysis

To analyze Vick's speech of apologia, I viewed the video feed of his speech (Vick apologizes..., 2007) several times, repeatedly read the transcript of the speech (see Appendix A), and dissected each for important thematic concerns, listened to the audio track separately, and then watched the video again for further clarification of the self-defense strategies employed in the speech. Methodologically speaking, repeated exposure to the audio, video, and transcript of Vick's speech permitted delineation of important themes within his apologia. Contextually, however, other factors preceding and following Vick's speech must also be taken into account. For instance, both his silence during the trial as well as his participation in an animal cruelty course sponsored by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) shed more light on the effect of his apologia within the context of his actions (Thompson, 2007). Images of Vick during by the trial and his speech of apologia were also examined (see Appendix B).

Contextual Factors

Prior to his court case and subsequent conviction, Vick was barred from attending the Falcons training camp by the club (McCallum, 2007b). Moreover, Commissioner Goodell suspended Vick indefinitely and without pay from participating in the sport (Associated Press, 2007; McCallum, 2007b; Trotter, 2007). Vick's presumed guilt had the further consequence of casting a dark cloud over the entire sport of professional football. National media attention resulted in a great deal of moral commentary and public outrage over Vick's involvement in dogfighting and gambling (Dohrman, 2007; McCallum, 2007a, 2007b). McCallum (2007b) wrote that "the circus atmosphere that surrounded the Vick hearing" resulted in an onslaught of 24-hour news coverage from ESPN and other networks (p. 41). While some commentary and outrage focused on ethical and legal issues (Dohrman, 2007; McCallum, 2007a), other discourse centered on the topic of animal rights (McCallum, 2007b). For instance, McCallum (2007a) argued that Vick's case represents "the culture of cruelty that infects his sport" (p. 37) and Vick's treatment of animals represents football player's cruelty. Some of this commentary and outrage was divided along racial lines (Bryant, 2007; McCallum, 2007b). Vick's speech of apologia must, therefore, be considered within the context of the charges against him and the events leading up to his speech.

Press Conference

During a press conference held on August 27, 2007, Michael Vick apologized for his role in dogfighting and gambling. His speech of apologia was short. It lasted just four minutes and 24 seconds. He did not use visible gestures during his speech and appears to remain straight-faced, even solemn, throughout the speech. His tone of voice remained relatively stable without much

variation; he expressed few emotions, and did not cry or breakdown. The simplicity and brevity of Vick's speech of apologia is striking.

In contrast to other instances of apologia (e.g., Brazeal, 2008), Vick's speech served his needs well. Although, not all audiences accepted Vick's apology initially, his chosen strategy does serve important goals with his various audiences. Furthermore, Vick's apologia is distinct from other instances of sports apologia. In contrast to Barry Bonds' use of denial in the face of steroids charges (McCallum, 2007b) or other athletes attempts to demonstrate a reverence for the game (Kruse, 1981a), Vick neither attempted to deny his guilt nor return immediately to the game. Unlike other instances of sports apologia (Kruse, 1981a), Vick is motivated by different goals and objectives. Consequently, his speech employs unique strategies that make his apologia quite interesting. As a result of his conviction, Vick will, at least for the foreseeable future, be unable to return to professional football (Associated Press, 2007; Trotter, 2007). Thus, his apologia is focused less on his sport and his team than on his personal character and future maturation.

Silence

Both before and after Vick's trial in the federal district court, he remained relatively silent. Specifically, he did not offer interviews to the media and he made few public statements until his speech on August 27, 2007. Although he initially responded to the charges by indicating that he was looking "forward to clearing his good name" (McCallum, 2007b, p. 42), once one of his three co-defendants struck a plea bargain and agreed to testify for the prosecution, Vick made no further public statements. His silence, therefore, suggested a shift in his position from initial denial to something else as the prosecution's case against him began to look stronger.

During the trial, Vick remained silent and did not testify on his own behalf or against the other three defendants. Although his silence was interpreted by the media as an admission of guilt, it may have aided in other aspects of his apologia and, possibly, have been a sign of redemptive action. For instance, Vick's silence during the trial strengthens the claim that he did not attempt to employ denial as a strategy in his image repair. Following the press conference in which he made his speech of apology, Vick maintained his silence by not granting interviews to the media. In this case, Vick's silence heightens the emphasis placed on his actions since no further statements were offered. In part, his continued silence could have been for legal reasons, since he had an upcoming trial with a state court in Virginia (Associated Press, 2007). Vick's silence, far from damaging his image, as it may have done before the conclusion of his federal case, served to reinforce his expression of remorse and desire to take corrective action following his speech of apology. In this case, then, Vick was better off saying nothing more than he did at the press conference. His subsequent actions, such as taking the PETA course (Thompson, 2007), thus indicated a firmer desire to follow through on his promises of corrective action.

Media Images

The most popular image of Vick during his federal trial showed him with a stoic, perhaps smug, expression in a dark suit and tie with a French blue shirt (see Appendix B). He "was the picture of pomposity" (Hack, 2007, p. 47). Being a rather dark image, this picture, along with media commentary speculating about the outcome of the trial, suggested Vick's guilt. ESPN used this image frequently in both television and website coverage of the trial. Unlike the highly publicized images of Vick dressed in a French blue shirt and dark tie during the trial, he dons a white shirt with matching handkerchief and light-colored tie for the press conference (see Appendix B). Thus, the lighter colored shirt and tie worn during the press conference suggested a

visual change in Vick's appearance and may have served to reinforce his appeal for forgiveness from his audience. During his speech, Vick has his head bowed and did not make eye contact with the cameras for long stretches of time. The media images of Vick are important for a variety of reasons, both conscious and unconscious. For instance, previous media portrayals of black American athletes have unfairly focused on darker images of these individuals (Finnegan, 2000). Thus, the change in colors that Vick chose to wear during the trial and during his press conference may serve an important role in suggesting a change in his image.

Credibility

Michael Vick began his speech of apology by emphasizing that he has "been a football player and not a public speaker." By admitting that he is not a public speaker, Vick attempted to create ground for some leeway in his address. Unlike many instances of apology, Vick began his apology by noting that he was not an experienced public speaker. This admission served two important functions. First, he was able to draw attention to what he said rather than how he said it. In other words, his admission of limited public speaking experience was an appeal to his audience to excuse the manner of his delivery and focus on what is in his "heart." Specifically, Vick said "I take this opportunity to speak from the heart." Thus, his statement may lead the audience to believe that he was disclosing his true feelings and that he was not hiding anything from the audience. In fact, if we trust that he is not an accomplished public speaker, how could he hide anything from us? Surely, the audience would be able to see through any attempts to disguise his feelings or deceive us.

Second, his admission, while diminishing his credibility as a speaker, was a clever tactic that invited the audience to make excuses for him. In a sense, then, his admission may have served to actually enhance his credibility at that moment even though he admitted he has limited

credibility as a speaker. This strategy is akin to lowering his audience's expectations to a point where anything he did in the speech to impress his audience could be seen as all the more impressive given his limited public speaking experience. In sum, his beginning admission of inexperience may have served to both heighten the perception of honesty behind his message as well as to enhance the impression of his performance.

Admission of Guilt

Immediately following his introduction admitting a lack of public speaking ability, Vick launched into the substance of his address. He first apologized, generally, "for all the things" that he had done or "allowed to happen." This statement of apology is quite general and fails to specifically mention the charges that he has just been convicted of by the federal district court. Thus, rather than indicating of what he is guilty or what he allowed to happen, Vick deflected attention away from the charges by making a blanket apology. His choice of the words "allowed to happen" is particularly interesting since this phrasing suggested that he may have played a passive or unwitting role in at least some of the charges. Thus, Vick could have been using carefully chosen words to highlight his lack of involvement. Although this blanket statement suggests that Vick acknowledged that his audience is aware of the charges and history of his case, he was still able to de-emphasize the charges by not mentioning them in detail. The risk here was that by not stating that he was involved in dogfighting or gambling, the audience may not have accepted his apologia as complete or perceived him as repentant.

Vick specifically mentioned dogfighting in only one place during his apology speech. He noted that "dogfighting is a terrible thing, and I did reject it." Rather than clarifying his specific crimes, Vick simply observed that the dogfighting is terrible. Importantly, this statement is not the same as admitting that he was involved in dogfighting. For instance, his statement did not

suggest *how* he was involved. Instead, it attempted to deflect attention away from his actions. The choice of the verb “did” is also curious. By using the past tense, Vick positioned himself as having already rejected the activity. He had already *done* it; mentally he had turned the corner. Again, though, Vick admitted that he was “upset with” himself. Being upset with himself leads the audience to believe that Vick himself is the ultimate judge of his own guilt. Rather than focusing on others who may be upset with him, Vick’s statement suggests that his own disappointment in himself is of greater concern.

Key Individuals and Groups Addressed

Next, however, Vick offered personal apologies to specific individuals and groups of people. He listed NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, Atlanta Falcons owner Arthur Blank, Falcons head coach Bobby Petrino, and his teammates. Ironically, given the context of the press conference in which he was apologizing, his apologies to these individuals are not as personal since it was mediated by television. Vick admitted that he “was not honest and forthright” in his previous discussions with these individuals. Thus, his statement implied that he was being honest at the present time. He further stated that he was “ashamed and disappointed” in himself for not initially being honest and forthright. And, considering that he had remained silent during the trial and pled guilty in contrast to his previous reference of wishing “to clear his good name,” his apologia appeared to be more honest. Here, then, Vick expressed remorse and conveyed his present emotions.

The next group of people that Vick apologized to was the “young kids out there” who are implied to look up to him as a role model. Specifically, Vick said that he acted immaturely and needed “to grow up.” By addressing his apology in this way to his young fans, Vick characterized his actions as mistakes learned in the process of maturation. Just as young children

might be excused for youthful indiscretions, Vick was making a subtle appeal for his audience to likewise excuse his actions as the result of immaturity. Toward the end of his speech, Vick again returned to the idea of being a role model to young fans. Specifically, he observed that he was “disappointed” with himself for letting down young people who see him as a “role model.” Thus, the recurrence of this theme in his speech heightened the importance of the role model argument within his apologia. It was at this point, late in his speech, that Vick said, “I hope that every young kid out there in the world watching this interview right now who’s been following the case will use me as an example to using better judgment and making better decisions.” In fact, during the federal trial, Vick’s supporters spoke of the need for “more role models like him” (McCallum, 2007b, p. 44). With this statement, Vick attempted to use his apologia as a means of transforming his public image into a *different* kind of role model than he had been previously.

Curiously, Vick blanketly noted “I offer my deepest apologies to everybody out there in the world who was affected by this whole situation.” This time, not only was the situation extremely vague and unstated, but so were the people who had been wronged or were deserving of an apology. Despite his earlier attempts in the speech to apologize to particular individuals and groups of people, this more general apology seems rather empty. In fact, it may have been interpreted by some audience members (e.g., the press) as a poor attempt to cover all of his bases.

Forgiveness

Following these specific apologies to individuals and groups of people, Vick requested “forgiveness and understanding” from his various audiences. His appeal was, therefore, an attempt to have the audience empathize with him and accept his apology. Furthermore, this statement suggests that he was requesting forgiveness for his unnamed acts. Interestingly,

however, Vick referred to himself in the third person. In fact, on three separate occasions in his speech, Vick referred to himself in the third person. Thus, these references to a third person persona tend to separate the public image of Michael Vick from the person that Vick says is “upset” with himself and needs to improve. Coupled with his earlier reference to the heart-felt nature of his address, this request for “forgiveness and understanding” could be seen as genuine; as the real Michael Vick.

In the middle section of his speech, Vick declared that he “found Jesus and asked him for forgiveness” and turned his life “over to God.” Although Vick’s conversion is only noted in one sentence of his apology speech, it is an important aspect of his apologia. Athletes frequently thank God for their performance on the field, so the reference to religion is not uncommon for a professional athlete. However, this statement seems to indicate a startling change of course in his apologia. By giving his life to God, Vick positioned himself as answering to a higher authority than his immediate audience. Forgiveness, in this sense, is the province of a deity and not within the territory of his audience. Furthermore, Vick was able to align himself with religious values and appeal to a moral, religious authority that his audience may respect. The brevity of his statement of conversion was also startling. Vick failed to offer any detailed explanation of how he found God. In addition, if the audience trusted that Vick was being honest about turning his “life over to God,” then his salvation appears to lie with religion and the possibility of religious transformation. Vick’s appeal to religion might be an extension of forgiveness; if God forgives him, who are mere mortals to not do so?

Responsibility and Identification

Vick forthrightly stated that he takes “full responsibility” for his actions. By making this statement, he was able to demonstrate part of the maturity that he earlier indicated he would need

to learn in the course of “bettering Michael Vick.” He continued by stating that he was not blaming others or pointing his finger at anyone else. Unlike the three other defendants that were convicted in the case, Vick did not testify against his co-defendants. This appeal to responsibility was also an appeal to values that his various audiences might share. Thus, his acceptance of responsibility served to create identification between his audience and himself. By taking responsibility and not blaming others, Vick appeared to be honest and moral. He seemed to a self-made person in this respect. Next, he stated “I’m totally responsible, and those things just didn’t have to happen.” Again, he did not mention what specific actions he was guilty of committing. Later in his speech, Vick reiterated that he did not point his finger at other individuals and that he accepted responsibility for his actions. Thus, the return to this argument is important in terms of being a repetitive theme of his apologia. He also appealed to the imperfections of his audience when he stated that “we all make mistakes.” He further clarified that “it’s just I made a mistake in using bad judgment and making bad decisions.” Therefore, by admitting that his decisions and judgments were poor, he was able to take responsibility for his actions while not condemning himself as a person beyond improvement. If his audience is able to identify with poor decisions and judgment, then Vick will have positioned himself as someone who made a mistake, but is not beyond the ability to make changes and learn from his mistakes.

Vick discussed the consequences on his actions by juxtaposing the effects on his personal and professional life. In the next section of his speech, Vick stated that he had “to pay the consequences for it.” Again, “it” is a vague and unnamed reference to his specific actions. But, he noted that this will help him “as a person.” By positioning himself as a person, Vick was able to humanize his situation and the consequences that he must pay on a personal level. It is a classical “everyman” appeal that requests the audience to see Vick as a person not unlike his

audience. The comparison between his own actions and those of other, everyday persons would suggest that he also deserves a second chance. This second chance, however, could not come immediately. Unlike other speeches of apology, Vick did not request immediate forgiveness or attempt to put the incident behind him. Instead, in a rather refreshing manner, Vick outlined a course of corrective action that he would undertake during his time away from professional football to earn that forgiveness. The effectiveness of this appeal may, however, be lost when Vick at three different points in his speech referred to himself in the third person. Should the audience see Vick as a person not unlike themselves or as "Michael Vick," the figure portrayed in the popular media? Of course, on the other hand, the use of a third person persona could have also assisted Vick in separating his public image from that of his real self.

Corrective Action and Redemption

Vick ended his speech of apology by resolving to "redeem" himself. He observed that he would have "a lot of down time, a lot of time to think about my actions and what I have done and how to make Michael Vick a better person." This promise of redemption suggested that Vick would embark upon a path of correcting his mistakes by using the time he has away from his chosen profession to make himself a better person. Again, Vick did not ask for immediate forgiveness, which suggests that he may have understood that it will take some time before he is able to regain the confidence of his audience.

All too often, instances of sports apology are characterized by appeals to offer immediate forgiveness of the athlete, to cease focusing on the indiscretion, and to return attention to the field (Kruse, 1981a). However, in this case, Vick is not immediately returning to the field of play (Associated Press, 2007). From a professional standpoint, Vick has been essentially exiled from his sport. Commissioner Goodell and the NFL have suspended Vick indefinitely (SI players...

2007). Furthermore, in December 2007, Vick was sentenced on criminal charges which, in part, determine his future availability. Some NFL executives speculate that his prison sentence means the end of his NFL career (Trotter, 2007). Moreover, following his conviction in the federal court, the NFL announced that in early October Vick had tested positive for marijuana (Associated Press, 2007; SI players..., 2007; Thompson, 2007). Time is on Vick's side, in the sense that he does not need immediate forgiveness or a return to normalcy. Instead, he will serve his punishment away from the field of play, as he is serving 23 months in federal prison (Hack, 2007; Trotter, 2007). Consequently, his impending time away from football provided him with a way out of having to seek immediate forgiveness and understanding. Furthermore, his time away from his sport offers the opportunity for media attention and public interest in his case to dissipate. In fact, some current and former athletes, as well as fans and supporters of Vick, made statements prior to the federal court's decision indicating that Vick was a victim of media scrutiny and it was time to stop focusing attention on Vick's case (McCallum, 2007a, 2007b).

Following up on his proposed methods of corrective action, Vick enrolled in and passed a PETA course on animal cruelty (Thompson, 2007). Vick completed the course voluntarily, seemed interested in the material, and asked thoughtful questions, according to PETA (Thompson, 2007). Thus, his behavior and actions in this instance served to reinforce the claim that he was serious about making good on his promise to make himself a better person. Coupled with his public silence since the press conference, Vick's participation in the animal cruelty class suggested that Vick was already beginning to reform himself as a person. Rather than telling his audience that he has reformed, he was behaving in a way that suggested he had begun to reform on his own accord. However, since Vick tested positive for marijuana use (Associated Press,

2007; SI players..., 2007; Thompson, 2007), the public and media has remained generally skeptical of his character.

Race

A strong undercurrent of Vick's trial and the media attention focused on his crimes is embedded within racial perspectives (McCallum, 2007a, 2007b). In fact, media and public attention was largely been divided along racial lines throughout Vick's federal case (Bryant, 2007). For instance, in Vick's hometown of Newport News, Virginia, local reporters found "almost unanimous support for him" among African-American residents who are "more acutely aware of instances of racial discrimination in the criminal justice system" (McCallum, 2007b, p. 44). The argument was that Vick was being singled out as the face of dogfighting because of his race and his public prominence (McCallum, 2007a, 2007b). Public opinion on his case was also split along racial lines. More recently, some have begun to problematize Vick's downfall by arguing that Vick was a victim of "ghetto loyalty" (Dohrmann & Evans, 2007, p. 72). This line of argument claims that Vick was a victim of his early surroundings and group of friends. Thus, opinion both for and against Vick seems to carry racial undercurrents.

During Vick's press conference, he did not refer to his race or address the topic. If he had mentioned his race, would it have helped him? Or, hurt him? Interestingly, the absence of any mention of the topic on his part suggested that he was not attempting to use race as a grounds for forgiveness or understanding. More importantly, however, Vick did not attempt to deflect blame from his own actions by blaming his public image on racial bias or prejudice. Any such discussion was left to others. Thus, Vick's silence on the issue of race may have served to strengthen any understanding of his plight and could have induced sympathy for his position. He did not make an attempt to scapegoat others, as he repeatedly reminded his audience by stating

that he did not “point the finger” at his co-defendants. Certainly, his silence on the topic of race appeared to suggest that he was not attempting to point fingers on the basis of how his image had been characterized by others. As his federal trial continued, greater numbers of support groups and protesters endorsing Vick appeared outside his trial (McCallum, 2007b). By not addressing race, Vick may have been speaking to the white audience of Goodell, Blank, Petrino, and the NFL executives. Vick might have been implicitly placing whites in a position of power by excluding the topic of race from his apology.

As a result of the charges against him as well as Vick's guilty plea in federal court, a number of other developments have occurred, indicating a public relations fallout (Trotter, 2007) from Vick's legal situation. For example, the NFL and Reebok have stopped selling Vick jerseys (McCallum, 2007b; SI players..., 2007). In a poll of 278 NFL players taken after Vick pled guilty, only 54% of the respondents indicated that they would let their own child wear a Vick jersey (SI players..., 2007). Interestingly, desegregation of the data revealed that NFL players under the age of 24 were likely to answer the poll question in the affirmative, whereas two-thirds of quarterbacks responded in the negative. Importantly, though, the quarterback position has been traditionally considered a white, elite position in the sport. Thus, Vick currently faces image repair issues both within his sport and peer group as well as within the media and public at-large.

Implications for Apologia and Image Repair Theories

As the field of sports communication continues to grow, the boundaries of apologia and image repair theories should be expanded to account for new cases of sports apologia. Specifically, instances involving athletes facing legal troubles create unique situations of apologia and image repair. After first examining apologia and image repair theories the present

study examined the contextual factors surrounding Vick's case and applied a close textual analysis to Vick's speech of apology. Next, apology and image repair theories will be applied to Vick's speech, leading to suggestions for expanding apology and image repair theories to more fully account for instances of sports apology as exemplified in Vick's speech.

Vick's Strategies of Self-Defense

Importantly, Vick did not employ denial in his speech of apology. Abelson (1959) suggested that denial is a relatively weak way of resolving inconsistencies, so Vick's choice not to employ denial as a strategy indicated an attempt to use other strategies in his apology. Although Vick's failure to specifically enumerate his transgressions could be read as denial, his blanket apology statements as well as his guilty plea tended to contradict any stance of denial. Instead, Vick's statements were more reflective of bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Vick's references to religion and needing to better himself as a person indicated the use of both bolstering and transcendence. By stressing the need to improve himself as a person and noting that he found God through the situation, Vick was not only attempting to bolster his own image, but also suggesting that he was rising above the whole ordeal. Moreover, his appeal to young fans to see him as a role model in a new way also suggested transcendence of the situation and media circus atmosphere. By repeatedly reminding his audience that he did not point fingers at others and fully accepted responsibility for his own actions, Vick employed differentiation. In this sense, then, Vick was differentiating himself from the other defendants who were convicted, but chose to testify against Vick at the trial.

Implications for Sports Communication Research

Although attention to sports communication research has grown in recent years (Brazeal, 2008; Sierlecki, 2007), those scholars who have studied sports communication have tended to

concentrate on issues that do not extend Kruse's (1977; 1981a; 1981b) work on sports apologia. For instance, Trujillo (1994) examined how the sports media concentrated on portraying pitcher Nolan Ryan as a hero embodying many American values. In the course of his analysis, Trujillo argued that the sports media exhibits a bias in its coverage of Ryan and other sports figures. Specifically, he claimed that the sports media reacted favorably to Ryan late in his career because he passed their media test. Importantly, if Trujillo is correct that there is a media test for sports figures that determines whether coverage of particular sports figures is biased in either positive or negative ways, then it is logical to conclude that media coverage of the apologia of sports figures may reflect a similar test. However, scholars have not explored instances of sports apologia in recent years. Yet, instances of sports apologia provide the potential to not only extend scholarship about apologia in new directions, but also the field of sports communication more generally.

One of the most salient observations that Trujillo (1994) made in his study of Nolan Ryan is that the sports media covers athletes differently on the basis of their race. For instance, Trujillo illustrated the differences between the ways the sports media covered Ryan's seventh no-hitter as compared to Rickey Henderson's stolen base record. In his analysis, Trujillo demonstrated that the predominately white sports media characterized Ryan as a hero embodying American values and masculinity, whereas Henderson was characterized as striking the "'cool pose' of the black, inner-city athlete" (p. 105). Interestingly, Trujillo concluded that "when white reporters exalt white athletes and denigrate black athletes, they reinforce a racially based sense of masculinity whether they intend to or not" (p. 105). The present study, however, offers a uniquely different context in which to examine issues of race and media coverage. Michael Vick, unlike Henderson, was charged with crimes for his involvement in dogfighting and gambling. Thus, as

opposed to the racially biased coverage that Henderson received as compared to Ryan, the case of Vick represents a unique instance in which the perception of the media and fans was already against Vick for legal reasons.

Theoretical Implications

Although Vick's speech of apology resembled other speeches of apologia by sports figures in several ways, the combination of strategies he employed represented a uniquely different approach worthy of investigation. Moreover, previous scholarship on sports apologia (Brazeal, 2008; Sierlecki, 2007) fails to fully account for the circumstances under which Vick delivered his speech of apologia. In the few studies that have examined sports apologia (Kruse, 1981a), no studies have examined instances where the sports figure had already been suspended from participating in the sport and was also facing legal consequences. Since Vick had already been suspended indefinitely and without pay from his sport, he faced contextual factors quite different from those Kruse (1981a) described. Furthermore, given his conviction in federal court and the impending prison sentence, Vick was not in a situation in which he could realistically expect to be able to return to the field of play as Kruse's previous conception of sports apologia suggested.

One specific proposal for expanding apologia and image repair theories is to regard apologia and kategoria as an ongoing process. For example, Sierlecki (2007) detailed the development of Kobe Bryant's apologia as a process that evolved from initial self-defense strategies into the use of quite different strategies later in the case. Much like Vick did, Kobe Bryant began with a strategy of denial early in his case by professing his innocence (Hack, 2007), but later switched to the use of other tactics. "Only when evidence mounted and his accomplices began to turn on him did Vick appear contrite" (Hack, 2007, p. 47). Meyer (2007)

also examined the processes of apologia and kategoria as ongoing and continuously developing through a study of the steroids controversy in baseball. Michael Vick provides yet another instance in which it would be difficult to argue that his case is closed. Instead, new developments in his legal case necessitate continuous re-examination of the self-defense strategies Vick used in his apologia and their effectiveness. Does the length of his sentence or the positive drug tests alter perceptions of his apologia? How do those perceptions change over time?

In addition, several contextual factors as well as the kategoria to which Vick was responding indicate a situation not previously addressed by apologia and image repair theories. Vick's conviction thus represents a uniquely different combination of kategoria and apologia. For instance, besides the need to repair his public image with fans and the media, Vick also faced a situation in which he needed to repair his image and respond to the legal system itself. By exploring Vick's combination of self-defense strategies in his speech of apologia, it is possible to determine how both apologia and image repair theories ought to be modified to take into account unique instances of sports apologia. Specifically, Vick's apologia indicates a need to closely examine the kategoria and contextual factors surrounding self-defense rhetoric. In sum, then, extant literature on apologia and image repair theories fail to adequately address instances of sports apologia by focusing primarily on the self-defense strategies without accounting for particular circumstances under which the apologia occurs. By examining apologia in the context of sports figures, apologia and image repair theories can be understood in a new way.

Conclusion

In the future, sports figures are likely to face situations of kategoria and apologia similar to the one in which Michael Vick found himself. With 24-hour news coverage and heightened media attention given to star athletes, it is probable that sports apologia will become increasingly

important as a means of addressing a variety of kategoria including legal charges, moral outrage by the public and media alike, and punishments by sports leagues. As more and more cases involving serious ethical troubles involving prominent athletes receive media attention (McCallum, 2007a, 2007b), it seems reasonable to conclude that the self-defense strategies used by athletes to repair their tarnished images with fans and seek reinstatement by sports leagues will take on greater importance.

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APPENDIX A

TEXT OF VICK'S STATEMENT AFTER GUILTY PLEA

Michael Vick's statement following his guilty plea in U.S. District Court in Richmond, Va., to a dogfighting conspiracy charge:

“For most of my life, I’ve been a football player, not a public speaker, so, you know, I really don’t know, you know, how to say what I really want to say. You know, I understand it’s — it’s important or not important, you know, as far as what you say but how you say things. So, you know, I take this opportunity just to speak from the heart. First, I want to apologize, you know, for all the things that — that I’ve done and that I have allowed to happen. I want to personally apologize to commissioner Goodell, Arthur Blank, coach Bobby Petrino, my Atlanta Falcons teammates, you know, for our — for our previous discussions that we had. And I was not honest and forthright in our discussions, and, you know, I was ashamed and totally disappointed in myself to say the least. I want to apologize to all the young kids out there for my immature acts and, you know, what I did was, what I did was very immature so that means I need to grow up. I totally ask for forgiveness and understanding as I move forward to bettering Michael Vick the person, not the football player. 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. I’m totally responsible, and those things just didn’t have to happen. I feel like we all make mistakes. It’s just I made a mistake in using bad judgment and making bad decisions. And you know, those things, you know, just can’t happen. Dog fighting is a terrible thing, and I did reject it. I’m upset with myself, and, you know, through this situation I found Jesus and asked him for forgiveness and turned my life over to God. And I think that’s the right thing to do as of right now. Like I said, for this — for this entire situation I never pointed the finger at anybody else, I accepted responsibility for my actions of what I did and now I have to pay the consequences for it. But in a sense, I think it will help, you know, me as a person. I got a lot to think about in the next year or so. I offer my deepest apologies to everybody out in there in the world who was affected by this whole situation. And if I’m more disappointed with myself than anything it’s because of all the young people, young kids that I’ve let down, who look at Michael Vick as a role model. And to have to go through this and put myself in this situation, you know, I hope that every young kid out there in the world watching this interview right now who’s been following the case will use me as an example to using better judgment and making better decisions. Once again, I offer my deepest apologies to everyone. And I will redeem myself. I have to. So I got a lot of down time, a lot of time to think about my actions and what I’ve done and how to make Michael Vick a better person. Thank you.”

Note. Retrieved on September 19, 2007, from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20462948/> (Updated: 12:30 p.m. ET Aug 27, 2007).

APPENDIX B

PICTURES OF VICK DURING AND AFTER TRIAL

Picture taken during U.S. District Court Trial.



Picture taken during Apology Speech.



Note. Both images were retrieved on October 22, 2007, from Yahoo! News website at http://news.yahoo.com/photos/ss/events/sp/071807michaelvick/im:/071019/photos_en_afp/ef27a840b3afeec019269015ee259af1;_ylt=AssqXu_eibUKD9C9Rx_CERVsaMYA