

The Gobert Report: How Rudy's reputational crisis followed him to Minneapolis

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Abstract

Rudy Gobert's reputational crisis began in 2020, when he was diagnosed with COVID-19 and labeled the NBA's Patient Zero, after displaying a lackadaisical attitude toward the pandemic. This brief report outlines the events that have happened since that incident. They include an interview with national reporter Lisa Salters, a blockbuster trade to Minnesota, and a sideline scuffle which resulted in Gobert punching a teammate. Each of these incidents are framed within media studies concepts and the image repair theory, as we attempt to shed light on Gobert's curious unlikeability.

Keywords: Brief report, case study, image repair, NBA, reputation.

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, National Basketball Player Rudy Gobert became the first person to test positive for the deadly virus. Much of this event is detailed in an earlier version of this project (Bagley, 2020). To summarize the event, as well as the previous arguments from the chapter cited above, the media framed Gobert as the league's Patient Zero. This name comes from a term originated early in the 1980s by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) to label the person who was thought to have brought the AIDS virus to the United States (Auerbach, Darrow, Jaffe, & Curran, 1984). A brief media frenzy surrounded Gobert due to the novelty of the diagnosis, an incident where Gobert intentionally touched each of the media members' microphones during a press conference (Gardner, 2020), and a public dispute

with all-star teammate Donovan Mitchell (Kasabian, 2020). However, the attention lasted only long enough for Gobert to feel the heat of the criticism, and then the media moved on to other quickly developing pandemic stories (such as NCAA march madness being canceled the day after) before Gobert's apology (Gobert, 2020) could get the attention needed to repair his reputation.

There is a low likelihood that Gobert was the first NBA player to get COVID-19. In retrospect, it would be quite unfair to pin all of the pandemic related losses that the league experienced on Gobert. Perhaps the only difference a negative test would have spared the league is one or two more days of games before the inevitable postponement of the season. It doesn't seem to matter however, as the Patient

Zero designation appears to be attached to him for the foreseeable future.

Just when the dust appeared to be settling for Gobert, the Utah Jazz traded him to the Minnesota Timberwolves. While it's not uncommon for a player to be traded to another franchise, the assets that Minnesota sent to Utah in exchange for Gobert were uncommonly high. In fact, Minnesota gave up so much, many refer to the trade as "an all-time disaster" (Beame, 2023, headline). Now, once again, Gobert faced a mountain of criticism. Although unlike the COVID-19 image crisis, this new situation was completely out of Gobert's giant hands.

This brief report is organized into two sections. The first section discusses an interview that Gobert had with Lisa Salters months after the 2020 season had ended. The second section discusses media reactions to the Minnesota trade. Both sections are contextualized into the framework of image repair theory.

The Lisa Salters Interview

Nine months after the 2020 NBA season ended, Gobert sat down with journalist Lisa Salters to look back at the microphone and diagnosis incidents (Salters, 2020). This is perhaps the only time Gobert sat down with a national journalist one-on-one to specifically address his COVID-19 ordeal. In the interview, Gobert spent significant time trying to redefine and recontextualize the event. He does this by trying to move the spotlight away from himself and onto humanity as a whole. For example, he said "[The pandemic] is something that we are all going through right now, and hopefully, we turn the corner pretty soon." By changing the "I" to "we", he places himself among the crowd, or among "us". Not only does he do this with humanity in general, but with the NBA and how it handled the situation.

"I thought it was great. It was great that the NBA reacted as fast as they did because just having thousands and thousands of people in a closed space, next to each other, while having way more people testing positive ... it was really the smartest thing to do to try to save as many lives as they could."

Here, he phrases the event of cancellation as a smart thing to do. Gobert also positioned himself as a mentor to other players, referencing the good conversations that came from his experience. "Some guys were asking me questions about my personal experience, my symptoms... A lot of good conversations." While his positive attitude could be commended, it is also a clear attempt to transcend the original

view of the event. Transcendence strategies have been found to backfire, especially in the eyes of those affected by the event (Stein, 2008). In this case, it certainly doesn't appear that people are now looking to Gobert as a mentor or hero for anything that happened in 2020.

Gobert referred to family several times throughout the interview. When recalling the night of the event, he said he was "thinking about my family that wasn't able to be with me." He also specifically mentioned his mother, saying that calling her was the first thought he had after hearing he had been diagnosed with COVID-19. "It was really important for me to tell her -- that she hears my voice and she actually knows that I'm doing OK... I kept calling, kept calling, until she ended up answering." Some may view this focus being a family-man as an attempt at bolstering, another strategy that often fails because "one positive element cannot compensate for other deficiencies, no matter how good that element may be" (Stein et al., 2019, p.22).

When looking back at the night of the diagnosis specifically, Gobert claimed ignorance, saying he had no idea he was sick until he tested positive. He also added, "usually, until people around you or until you experience it, you never really know what you're going against." This defeasibility tactic can serve to soften criticism (Stein, Barton, & Pierson, 2021), but likely didn't restore any trust as this strategy fails to reconcile his own shortcomings, and doesn't address his lackadaisical attitude touching all the microphones in a press conference the day before testing positive (Bagley, 2020). Gobert also used the good intention strategy, as he literally used the phrase "good intention," referencing the microphone incident as a way to "liven the mood a little." He does have some credibility making this statement, as reporters at the time felt it was a gesture of goodwill (Bagley, 2020).

Gobert never utilized the corrective action or mortification strategies in his interview that often accompany successful image repair statements. Perhaps this is partially why the optics surrounding Gobert have not changed much since 2020. At least until the summer of 2022, when a new event unfolded that would greatly impact Gobert's reputation.

The Minnesota Trade and the Play-in Punch

On July 1, 2022, more than two years after Gobert's original COVID-19 diagnosis, he was traded from the Utah Jazz to the Minnesota Timberwolves (McMahon, 2022). While it is not uncommon for a player to get traded, what was unusual about this particular trade was how many assets (players and draft picks) were sent

to Utah in exchange for the polarizing center. In exchange for Gobert, Minnesota traded the rights to five players, four first round draft picks, and the right to swap another draft pick if it favored the Jazz franchise (NBA, 2022). The trade was immediately criticized by the media, including famous podcaster Bill Simmons, who said “[I’m] gonna spend the next 48 hours... wondering if Minnesota just made the most inexplicable NBA overpay trade of all time” (Crisafulli, 2022, para 4). More recently, Bleacher Report’s Andy Bailey named the trade one of the worst trades of the last five years, saying that the odds of the trade working out for Minnesota feel beyond optimistic (Bailey, 2023). ESPN podcaster Zach Lowe suggested that there wasn’t a single person around the league that considered Minnesota’s trade a good one (Lowe, 2022; Silva, 2022). While Gobert can’t be blamed for any of this (he didn’t request the trade), he did add fuel to the fire near the end of his first full season in Minnesota.

On April 9, 2023, Minnesota was playing in a high stakes play-in tournament game with their season on the line. During a second-quarter timeout, an argument developed between Gobert and his teammate, Kyle Anderson. The exchange ended with Gobert throwing a punch at Anderson, costing Gobert a one-game suspension (Helin, 2023). For many, this brought up memories of a past relationship that went sour, with Utah teammate Donovan Mitchell (Bagley, 2020). For anyone looking to blame Utah’s past chemistry issues on Gobert, this was ammunition that they could use against him. Gobert once again was in a position that warranted an image repair statement. This time, Gobert relied solely on mortification, saying, “Emotions got the best of me today. I should not have reacted the way I did regardless of what was said. I wanna apologize to the fans, the organisation and particularly to Kyle, who is someone that I truly love and respect as a teammate” (Gobert, 2023, tweet). Luckily for Gobert, Minnesota would win the next game despite his absence, preventing what would have been a devastating season-ending loss as a result of his punch. Regardless, Gobert’s image in the eyes of many was tanking quickly. There were some apologists for Gobert after the punch, and it could be for several reasons. First, his apology did seem sincere, but also, it was revealed that Anderson had been using expletives to criticize Anderson, and head coach Chris Finch referred to Anderson’s leadership style as “blunt” (Helin, 2023).

About a week after the punch, Gobert met with reporters to clear the air surrounding the punch (Scott, 2023). One of the first things Gobert said was that he and Anderson had “both apologized to each other, and you move on.” He also said

he loves Kyle, and called him his little brother. He continued the family comparison by saying, “I tell people sometimes you fight with your family. Sometimes you fight with people that you have a lot of love and respect for.” Finally, he ended by saying that “We’re teammates at the end of the day. I don’t want it to be a Kyle vs. Rudy thing. That’s never the case. Gobert taps into several strategies here, but perhaps the strongest is once again transcendence. By recontextualizing the event as something that happens between people that you love and have respect for, an attempt is made to redefine the punch as a simple quarrel between two friends and not an aggressive act of violence. Again, transcendence is not a tactic with much documented success, and probably didn’t change many viewers’ minds about the center. He would have been better off sticking to the mortification strategy that he tweeted initially.

Conclusion

There is no shortage of image repair case studies, and an argument has been made that because so many have been published, that it is becoming rare that a simple application of image repair theory provides a meaningful contribution to the field of communication (Stein & Barton, 2023). However, Rudy Gobert does provide some novelty, as his situation is rather different from other sports figures who have been looked at through this lens. For example, the events surrounding Tiger Woods that have been studied (Benoit, 2013; Husselbee & Stein, 2012) are seen by most as objectively bad and also quite severe. Gobert, on the other hand, has endured events where his conduct was relatively much less severe. His rap sheet includes touching microphones, catching COVID-19, being traded, and throwing a punch at a teammate. And yet, Gobert is often grouped among the most disliked NBA players (Bitar, 2021).

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