

Transcending Controversy: The Heisman Trophy Trust's Image Repair Strategies Following OJ Simpson's Passing

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Abstract

This brief report examines the Heisman Trophy Trust's image repair strategies following the controversial statement made after O.J. Simpson's passing on April 11, 2024. The Trust's condolence tweet sparked widespread backlash on social media due to Simpson's legal history, with users comparing his treatment to that of Reggie Bush, who had previously forfeited his Heisman Trophy. The Trust's subsequent decision to reinstate Bush's trophy was viewed as a strategic response to the controversy. Using William Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT), this report analyzes how the Trust employed transcendence, a strategy aimed at shifting the narrative from negative associations to positive achievements. The Trust's actions not only addressed the backlash but also underscored evolving public sentiment around NCAA regulations and athlete recognition. This study provides insights into crisis management and reputation repair within sports organizations and highlights the complex interplay between media, public perception, and institutional response.

Keywords: Image repair, Heisman Trophy Trust, O.J. Simpson, Reggie Bush, Social media, Crisis communication

On April 11, 2024, the Heisman Trophy Trust issued a statement over X (formerly Twitter) that read, “The Heisman Trophy Trust mourns the passing of the 1968 Heisman Trophy winner OJ Simpson. We extend our sympathy to his family.” A wave of comments immediately followed, with social media users commenting on everything from Simpson’s criminal history to the death of Nicole Brown and Ron Goldman. OJ Simpson, born Orenthal James Simpson, was a football player, broadcaster, actor, and convicted felon. As a professional, he gained fame in the 1970s with the Buffalo Bills, where he was known for his exceptional speed and agility. But before his professional career, Simpson had a standout college football career at the University of Southern California (USC), where he won the Heisman Trophy in 1968. Simpson was the first NFL player to rush for more than 2,000 yards in a season and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1985.

In addition to his sports career, Simpson became a well-known television and film personality. However, his reputation dramatically changed in 1994 when he was charged with the murders of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend, Ron Goldman. The subsequent trial was highly publicized and ended with Simpson being acquitted of the charges in 1995. Despite the acquittal, he was later found liable for the wrongful deaths in a civil trial and ordered to pay damages.

In 2007, Simpson was involved in a separate criminal case in Las Vegas, where he was charged with armed robbery and kidnapping. He was found guilty in 2008 and sentenced to 33 years in prison, with the possibility of parole after nine years. Simpson was granted parole and released in 2017. OJ Simpson passed away on April 10, 2024, after a private battle with prostate cancer.

A controversial and polarizing figure, the Heisman Trophy Trust’s statement was heavily scrutinized by the general public. The top reply to the tweet read, “Why don’t you take a stab at extending your sympathies to the Brown and Goldman families?” Another echoed this sentiment, stating, “I mourn for the Browns and Goldmans and send them my sympathy. But you do you.” The comments didn’t stop there, however, as another unexpected trend began to emerge. The public began to bring Reggie Bush into the discussion.

Reggie Bush is a former professional American football player and current sports analyst. Much like Simpson, Bush also rose to prominence as a standout running back at USC. His exceptional performance on the field earned him numerous accolades, including the Heisman Trophy in

2005. However, Bush’s college career was later marred by controversy. In 2010, the NCAA conducted an investigation and found that Bush and his family had received improper benefits from sports marketers while he was at USC, including cash, travel expenses, and a home in the San Diego area where his family lived rent-free. These benefits were in violation of NCAA rules, which prohibit student-athletes from receiving extra benefits beyond their scholarship. As a result of these findings, the NCAA imposed severe sanctions on USC, including the forfeiture of victories from the 2004 and 2005 seasons, a two-year bowl ban, and a reduction in scholarships. In response to the NCAA’s findings, Bush voluntarily forfeited the Heisman Trophy, becoming the first player in the history of the award to do so.

One comment read, “When will Reggie Bush get his back?” Another said, “So OJ is cool but Reggie Bush and Jameis Winston aren’t... wild times.” Finally, the single response with the most likes stated, “Reggie didn’t kill anyone and he still doesn’t have his trophy.”

The Heisman Trophy Trust didn’t directly respond to any of the controversy surrounding its tweet. Over the ensuing week, the Trust posted only the occasional birthday post to former Heisman Trophy winners. But on April 24, 2024, the Heisman Trophy Trust announced that it would be reinstating Reggie Bush and returning his Heisman Trophy. The post read, “Welcome Home! We are reinstating the 2005 Heisman Trophy to the University of Southern California’s @ReggieBush! In 2005, Bush gained more than 2000 yards from scrimmage and scored 18 touchdowns. He received 784 first-place votes, the fifth-most in Heisman Trophy history, while leading @uscfb to a national title berth. Welcome back to the Heisman Family, Reggie! #Heisman #MoreThanATrophy #HeismanTrophyTrust.”

While the initial reaction was praising and congratulating Bush, once again the conversation shifted to the Trust’s post about OJ Simpson. A top comment read, “So you waited until OJ died?” One user responded to the post with a screenshot of the OJ Simpson post, with the caption, “We really cyberbullied y’all into doing it, huh?” Another user also responded with a screenshot of the Simpson post and the caption, “The tweet that got Reggie his Heisman back.” This mediated dialogue led to the formation of this study. The Heisman Trophy Trust’s statement about OJ Simpson and its ensuing behavior will be examined through the theoretical lens of image repair. The study will be presented in the form of a brief report, with a more thorough and rigorous study being conducted later. A brief report is a

concise document presenting key findings and implications of a study without extensive background or detailed methodology (Bagley, 2023).

Literature Review

William Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT), established in 1995, outlines strategies for managing reputational damage. Benoit expanded IRT with a typology that offers a structured approach to crisis communication, allowing for a strategic combination of these tactics based on the crisis context (Benoit, 1995). IRT's adaptability to different crises highlights its value in both academic and practical applications, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of its strategies. The theory provides a crucial framework for reputational repair, but its successful application depends on the specific context of the crisis and the unique demands it presents. This adaptability is essential for addressing the complexities of public perception, especially in high-stakes environments like sports, where athletes often face scrutiny and need to maintain their public image amidst allegations or controversies (Benoit, 2013).

Sports Image Repair

Sports image repair is an essential aspect of crisis management, especially when athletes or organizations face scandals that threaten their reputations. IRT provides a framework for understanding the range of strategies available, including denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1995). The choice and application of these strategies depend on the nature of the scandal and public expectations, as seen in high-profile cases like Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong. Woods, dealing with the fallout from revelations of extramarital affairs, used mortification and corrective action by publicly apologizing and seeking treatment, which helped mitigate some of the damage (Benoit, 2013). Similarly, Armstrong's response to doping allegations included a mix of denial, mortification, and blame shifting, highlighting the complexity of managing public perception during a crisis (Hambrick et al., 2015).

Not all attempts at image repair are successful. For instance, Terrell Owens and Floyd Landis struggled due to inconsistent messaging and the ineffective use of denial and differentiation, which made their efforts seem disorganized and insincere (Allison et al., 2019; Brazeal, 2008; Glantz, 2010). In contrast, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell's handling of the Ray Rice domestic violence incident involved acknowledging the issue, shifting blame, and using mortification to protect the NFL's image,

though this approach faced criticism (Smith & Keeven, 2019). These cases underscore the importance of coherent and well-executed strategies in repairing damaged reputations.

The role of media, especially social media, is crucial in shaping public perception during these crises (Alison et al., 2019). The success of image repair efforts often depends on the appropriateness and execution of the chosen tactics. The evolving nature of media and public expectations further complicates these efforts, highlighting the need for a nuanced and adaptable approach in the sports industry to maintain public trust and credibility.

Initial Results

A prominent strategy of IRT is "reducing offensiveness." This strategy involves techniques to lessen the perceived severity or negative impact of an offense. This can include bolstering, where the accused highlights positive attributes or past good deeds to overshadow the negative incident. Minimization is another tactic, aimed at downplaying the seriousness of the offense or suggesting it has been exaggerated. Differentiation involves distinguishing the act from more serious offenses, while transcendence places the incident in a broader, more positive context to suggest a greater good. The accused might also attack the accuser to undermine their credibility or motives, thus shifting some blame. Lastly, compensation involves offering restitution, such as apologies or corrective actions, to those affected. These approaches collectively work to soften public perception and reduce the reputational damage caused by the offense.

When the Heisman Trophy Trust returned Reggie Bush's Heisman Trophy instead of issuing an apology for tweeting about OJ Simpson's passing, they primarily utilized the image repair strategy of transcendence. By returning the trophy, the Trust acknowledged Bush's exceptional on-field accomplishments, which had originally earned him the award. This action emphasized the importance of recognizing athletic excellence and the historical significance of Bush's performance in college football. The Trust aimed to transcend the negative context of the improper benefits scandal by highlighting Bush's legitimate sports achievements and the positive impact he had on the game. This approach seeks to shift public discourse away from the specifics of the violations and instead celebrate the broader contributions of Bush as a player.

Additionally, the decision to return the trophy was likely intended to address and transcend the controversy stemming from the Trust's

previous tweet expressing condolences for OJ Simpson, a controversial figure due to his legal issues. By taking a significant action such as reinstating Bush's Heisman, the Trust redirected attention away from the criticism it faced for the tweet. This strategy also serves to distance the organization from past negative associations and align it more closely with values of fairness, recognition of merit, and redemption.

In essence, the use of transcendence in this context allowed the Heisman Trophy Trust to reframe the narrative, shifting focus from past controversies to a celebration of athletic excellence and a commitment to fairness. This strategy helps to rebuild the Trust's image by associating it with positive values and principles, thus mitigating the negative impact of the scandals involved.

Future Studies

In future studies on the Heisman Trophy Trust's image restoration tactics, we will focus on several key categories to explore the effectiveness of transcendence as an image repair strategy. This strategy emerged as particularly effective for the Trust in the context of Reggie Bush's reinstated Heisman Trophy and the public discussion around OJ Simpson. First, we will examine how the Trust used transcendence to refocus the narrative on Bush's positive achievements. By emphasizing his on-field accomplishments and the historic significance of his performance, the Trust redirected public attention from the controversies and highlighted the legacy of Bush's football career.

Second, we will explore how the Trust addressed multiple issues simultaneously. The strategy of transcendence allowed the Trust to navigate criticism related to NCAA violations and their controversial tweet about OJ Simpson by shifting the focus to broader principles such as fairness and merit. This approach mitigated criticism by placing the decision within a context of positive values rather than focusing on specific past actions.

Third, future studies will consider the Trust's alignment with evolving public sentiment regarding NCAA rules and the treatment of student-athletes. The use of transcendence allowed the Trust to resonate with changing attitudes that view strict rules on amateurism and benefits as outdated, thus garnering public support and sympathy. We will also analyze how transcendence helped the Trust avoid further controversy. By not directly addressing every contentious issue, such as the controversy surrounding OJ Simpson, the Trust avoided reigniting debates or drawing additional scrutiny.

Lastly, the long-term implications of transcendence for reputational management will be examined. The Trust's use of this strategy not only addressed immediate concerns but also reinforced its broader commitment to honoring athletic excellence and fairness. This strategic positioning helped build a narrative of the Trust as an evolving and fair-minded institution. These categories will provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of transcendence in image repair and its effectiveness in navigating complex situations while reinforcing positive institutional values.

Conclusion

This study explores the Heisman Trophy Trust's response to the backlash following their tweet mourning OJ Simpson's passing, focusing on the decision to reinstate Reggie Bush's Heisman Trophy. The Trust employed the image repair strategy of transcendence, redirecting public attention from the controversies surrounding Bush's NCAA violations and Simpson's criminal history to highlight Bush's athletic achievements and the historical significance of his performance. This approach emphasized positive contributions, distancing the Trust from negative associations and aligning with broader principles of fairness and merit.

The effectiveness of transcendence was further demonstrated by the Trust's ability to address multiple issues simultaneously without deepening controversies. By focusing on Bush's sports legacy and avoiding direct engagement with potentially divisive topics, the Trust mitigated criticism and resonated with evolving public sentiments regarding NCAA rules and athlete treatment. This strategic use of transcendence not only helped the Trust navigate a complex situation but also reinforced its commitment to fairness and athletic excellence. Future studies will further analyze the long-term implications of this approach for managing public perception and institutional reputation.

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