Analyzing Trevor Bauer's Image Repair Strategies in the Wake of Misconduct Allegations

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Abstract
This study examines the application of Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT) to the case of Trevor Bauer, a professional baseball player whose career was impacted by allegations of sexual misconduct. In 2021, Bauer was suspended from Major League Baseball (MLB) due to these allegations and later played in Japan. The research focuses on Bauer's rhetorical strategies during two Fox News interviews in January 2024, after his legal issues were resolved. Key IRT strategies identified include mortification, bolstering, corrective action, denial, minimization, and transcendence. Bauer prominently used mortification by admitting mistakes and expressing remorse, while bolstering and transcendence shifted focus to his personal growth and aspirations in baseball. However, strategies like denial and minimization were less effective. The study concludes that Bauer's attempts at image repair have yielded mixed results, with his future in MLB still uncertain. The findings emphasize the complexity of repairing one's image in professional sports and the importance of strategic crisis communication. This research contributes to the understanding of IRT in sports scandals and suggests that future studies should examine additional media platforms and the long-term effects of image repair strategies on athletes' careers.
Keywords: Image Repair Theory, Trevor Bauer, Crisis communication, Professional sports scandals

Professional athletes often find themselves navigating the complex intersection of career management, moral conduct, and public image, given their significant public platforms. The scrutiny they face is amplified by the media's relentless focus on their actions, especially when allegations of misconduct, such as drug use or sexual misconduct, arise. This study explores the image repair strategies employed in the case of Trevor Bauer, the 2020 National League Cy Young Award winner, who became a polarizing figure in baseball even before facing serious sexual assault allegations. Bauer's contentious personality and actions, both on and off the field, including his infamous social media confrontations and in-game antics, made him a frequent subject of controversy and media attention.

In 2021, Bauer's career was further jeopardized by sexual assault allegations, leading to his suspension from Major League Baseball and a subsequent stint playing in Japan. The allegations and ensuing legal battles, including

defamation lawsuits and counterclaims, complicated his efforts to maintain his public image and professional reputation. This research examines the specific image repair strategies Bauer employed, particularly through his public statements and media appearances, to mitigate the damage to his career and personal brand. Utilizing Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT), the study analyzes Bauer's communication tactics, focusing on two key Fox News interviews from January 2024. This analysis aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of these strategies and contribute to the broader understanding of image repair in professional sports, especially concerning athletes accused of serious misconduct.

Literature Review

William Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT), established in 1995, details strategies for managing reputational damage through tactics such as denial, evasion of responsibility, and mortification, applicable across diverse texts like politics and sports (Benoit, 1995). Benoit (1997) expanded on IRT with a typology that provides a structured approach to crisis communication, accommodating a broad range of situational responses and emphasizing the strategic combination of these tactics based on the crisis context (Benoit, 1997). These strategies, from simple denial to complex mortification, form a comprehensive guide for navigating image repair's intricacies.

Arendt et al. (2017) built upon Benoit's foundation by identifying corrective action as the most effective strategy when combined with other tactics, such as reducing offensiveness while noting that denial, particularly when coupled with evasion of responsibility, is ineffective (Arendt et al, 2017). This ongoing evaluation of IRT's various strategies underscores the importance of adapting and assessing these principles to inform the choices of practitioners in the field of crisis communication (Gribas et al., 2015). From the beginning stages of a crisis, it is vitally important for an organization to analyze the crisis, determine the type of crisis, and then reduce the effect the audience may see or feel by tailoring the response. Further, it is worth pointing out that different audiences will be impacted differently by a crisis and need to be approached differently (Coombs, 2007). Additionally, it is not a guarantee that an organization will always respond to an attack or scandal. The response level depends on whether the organization feels the threat level is high enough that its image may be in peril and if so, determine which resources or crisis communication strategies to implement (Coombs, 2006).

These findings highlight the dynamic nature of IRT in practice, indicating that while the theory provides a framework for reputational repair, its successful application requires a nuanced understanding of the strategies and their contextual appropriateness. The adaptability of IRT to the unique demands of each crisis makes it an essential tool for both scholars and practitioners aiming to mitigate damage and restore public perception following a crisis. To try to mitigate damage, it is important to understand that sports at any level can be extremely competitive. As an athlete, many are looked up to as role models and heroes who are attacked or accused of alleged cheating, mediocre performance, or unbecoming conduct while participating in sport. When such allegations occur either fairly or unfairly, athletes need to turn to image repair (Benoit, 2018). To put into perspective how popular sport is, according to one report in 2016, over 210 million people participated in sport with over one billion who watched (Benoit, 2018).

Crisis & Scandal

A crisis is characterized as an unexpected and non-routine event that creates high uncertainty and threatens an organization's core objectives, requiring immediate response (Ulmer et al., 2022). While definitions may vary, a common understanding among scholars is that a crisis is unpredictable and poses a threat to an organization's image. A scandal, distinct from a crisis, involves actions considered legally or morally wrong, often violating social norms and attracting media attention, which amplifies public outrage (Nicholson et al., 2015). In the sports context, scandals are categorized as on-field, involving unethical behavior related to sports performance, or off-field, involving athletes' private misconduct such as sexual misconduct or drug abuse (Hwang, 2017).

The role of media in both crises and scandals is significant, particularly in sports, where coverage can enhance the perceived severity and impact of the event. The growing economic and political importance of sports, alongside the rise of social media, underscores the need for effective crisis communication strategies. Such strategies can help manage and mitigate the damage to an athlete's or organization's reputation. For example, sports organizations might use diversion tactics to shift focus away from negative events, thereby protecting the overall image of the sport (Bruce & Tini, 2008). As sports scandals become more frequent and widely reported, it is crucial for organizations to learn from these events and develop robust response strategies to handle future crises (Lordan, 2014).

Pro Sports Image Repair

Benoit (2013) highlighted the case of Tiger Woods, who faced a significant image crisis in 2009 due to multiple affairs. Woods' image repair efforts included mortification, transcendence, and corrective action, with a focus on privacy rights. Despite the severity of his actions, these strategies were generally considered effective in managing his public image. Similarly, Brazeal (2008) examined the case of NFL player Terrell Owens, noting the ineffectiveness of his image repair strategies, particularly due to the lack of corrective action.

In contrast, Utsler & Epp (2013) found that athletes like Mark McGwire and Alex Rodriguez effectively used television interviews to repair their images after steroid use allegations. These athletes employed strategies such as bolstering, mortification, and blame shifting, with varying success depending on their team's performance and public perception. Hambrick et al. (2015) explored Lance Armstrong's use of image repair strategies across traditional and social media, noting that his multifaceted approach, including mortification and attacking accusers, sometimes backfired due to competing media narratives.

Smith & Keeven (2019) analyzed NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell's response to the Ray Rice domestic violence incident. Goodell employed a separation strategy, acknowledging the NFL's issues with domestic violence and implementing strict new policies. Despite facing significant public backlash, Goodell's strategies focused on shifting blame to Rice and mitigating damage to the NFL's reputation. Similarly, Michael Vick's image repair journey after his dogfighting conviction involved strategic apologies and attempts at redemption, culminating in a successful return to the NFL with the Philadelphia Eagles (Cruz, 2019).

Floyd Landis's efforts to repair his image following the 2006 Tour de France doping scandal were largely unsuccessful. Glantz (2010) noted that Landis's use of contradictory strategies, such as denial and differentiation, led to a perception of inconsistency and confusion. The analysis underscored the importance of a coherent and straightforward approach to image repair. In another case, Manti Te'o faced public scrutiny over a hoax involving a fake girlfriend. Frederick et al. (2014) analyzed Te'o's image repair strategies, including defeasibility, victimization, and shifting blame. While some tactics were appropriate, the overuse of stonewalling and victimization was less effective in changing public perception.

These cases illustrate the complexity of image repair in professional sports. The effectiveness of these strategies varies depending on the nature of the scandal, the athlete's response, and public perception. Successful image repair often requires a delicate balance of acknowledging wrongdoing, offering corrective action, and managing public communication. As sports scandals continue to attract media attention, the need for effective crisis communication strategies becomes increasingly critical for athletes and organizations alike.

While image repair theory has frequently been applied to crisis communication strategies for organizations, there is still limited information on crisis communication strategies related to news interviews in the professional sports world. This research will aim to explore the following:

> *RQ1: Which image repair strategies were used by Trevor Bauer in his two January 2024 Fox News interviews in response to the allegations?*
>
> *RQ2: Were the image repair strategies Trevor Bauer used effective for him in giving him a potential second chance in the MLB?*

Method

This study utilizes rhetorical analysis to examine two pivotal Fox News interviews with Trevor Bauer conducted in January 2024. These interviews are critical as they showcase Bauer's attempts to repair his public image and assert his readiness to return to Major League Baseball (MLB) following allegations of misconduct. Rhetorical analysis was selected for its ability to delve into media framing and the subtleties of the conveyed messages, including the intentions behind Bauer's communication, the targeted audience, and the context of the interviews.

William Benoit's Image Repair Theory is employed to categorize and analyze the specific rhetorical strategies used by Bauer in these interviews. The theory outlines five main strategies—denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, mortification, and corrective action—each with specific tactics tailored to address different aspects of image damage. The choice of rhetorical analysis over methods like case studies or quantitative content analysis allows for a nuanced exploration of the persuasive elements and effectiveness of Bauer's communication strategies. This approach provides valuable insights into how these strategies function in the highly scrutinized arena of professional sports, particularly in managing public perception during a crisis.

Results

A rhetorical analysis was conducted on the two interviews of Trevor Bauer's first major appearance in the news. The analysis looked for instances of image repair strategies according to Benoit's image repair theory. Therefore, the conclusion of this research will show the results of the image repair. Bauer's current image measured by his current success after this study will serve as the results of Bauer's image repair efforts. Furthermore, the results will also show the validity of Benoit's image repair theory as an important and useful tool for all individuals and organizations' reputations in times of crises and scandals.

First Interview: Image Repair Discourse

In the January 4, 2024, interview, Trevor Bauer employed several of Benoit's (1995) image repair strategies, including mortification, bolstering, corrective action, provocation, and transcendence. The most prominently used strategy was mortification, where Bauer repeatedly acknowledged his mistakes that led to the sexual assault investigation. He admitted that these errors impacted not only his personal life but also his teammates and the Los Angeles Dodgers organization. Bauer began by stating, "I know I've made mistakes," and emphasized that to grow from these experiences, he needed to learn from them. Throughout the interview, Bauer openly admitted to his wrongdoings, including engaging in social media arguments and being reckless in his interactions, which made situations difficult for the MLB and his team. By taking responsibility and showing remorse, Bauer aimed to demonstrate his readiness to move forward and seek a second chance in Major League Baseball.

Bolstering is another strategy that Trevor Bauer used in his first interview with Fox News. This strategy is used in two instances, once after he admits and acknowledges his mistakes. The first statement where Bauer bolsters his image is when he states, "I'm really detail-oriented when it comes to baseball and my training, but I didn't apply the same level of scrutiny to my personal life." Here he is trying to assure not only the public but also any potential MLB teams that he is a proven and successful baseball player because of his attributes. This bolsters his appeal to potential teams. Another statement where Bauer bolsters his image is when he speaks about his growth through the crisis by stating, "I've grown up a lot, for sure. My viewpoints now are drastically different than they were five years ago, 10 years ago. Different things are important to me." Again, this bolsters Bauer's public and professional image by showing the lessons he has learned throughout the entire legal process he has endured.

In the interview, Bauer also employed the strategy of corrective action, stating that he has made significant changes in his life to prevent future issues. He specifically mentioned ending casual sexual relationships as part of his efforts to repair his image and avoid further damage. This indicates a commitment to personal growth and a desire to rejoin Major League Baseball, demonstrating his readiness to highlight his talent on the mound once again.

Bauer utilized provocation by acknowledging his immature responses to media criticisms, attributing these actions to his past experiences and immaturity. He reflected on how his need to defend himself often led to confrontations, indicating a recognition of past mistakes and a shift in perspective. Additionally, Bauer employed transcendence by expressing his passion for baseball and desire to compete at the highest level, while also emphasizing his commitment to helping others and being a positive influence. He acknowledged the damage done in the first half of his career and expressed a desire for a second chance to prove his capabilities as one of the best pitchers. This appeal to transcendence aimed to shift the narrative towards his potential future contributions both on and off the field.

Second Interview: Image Repair Discourse

Shortly after appearing on Fox News America's Newsroom to do the first interview on January 4, 2024, Trevor Bauer did another interview with Fox News Digital on January 6, 2024 (Morik, 2024). Here he took on and spoke more in detail about the sexual assault allegations and how he has some "burned bridges that he would like to rebuild." Throughout this interview, the three image repair strategies that were employed more than once were transcendence, provocation, and mortification. Once again, Bauer acknowledges his past behaviors by noting, "I wish I would have handled things differently. As everyone grows, you make mistakes, you learn from them hopefully, and you're better in the future for them. I've certainly made a lot of mistakes, and I've made a lot of changes in my life to try to repair some of the wrongs that I've done and not make the same mistakes." Making mistakes is a theme throughout both interviews and by Bauer underscoring how he has made many mistakes it has provided a framework for him to be a better person with a new perspective on life and baseball.

Another image repair strategy that appeared more than once Bauer used was provocation during this interview. Bauer stated how he was "completely undisciplined in his personal life. I let people come into my life, no questions asked immediately upon a direct message on social media." This shows Bauer's vulnerabilities in

life and how they affected both his personal and professional life. A professional athlete should always be mindful of their surroundings regardless of popularity because of the potential allegations and misconduct that can result from their decisions. Bauer further states, "having casual sexual relationships and just not paying attention to the things I was doing in my personal life. Obviously, that puts you in a position where stuff like this can happen. It's reckless, for sure." This statement speaks for itself by highlighting the importance of discipline in life. Bauer now accepts the consequences that came from his past decisions and wants to show it is possible to become the best again if given the opportunity.

Additionally, Bauer employed the image repair strategy of mortification. Similarly, as Bauer did in his first interview, he used mortification during this interview to show how he wants to be better. He states, "I can't imagine what I would do if an employee came out and said the things about me publicly that I said about Rob, especially without having those conversations with me privately first. So, I look back on those comments with a lot of embarrassment and regret." Here, Bauer makes his apology for doing the things he did to people without first acknowledging what the consequences might be. However, he further employs mortification at the closing of this interview by underscoring his appeal to "anyone who's willing to listen I want to make things right and do things better. Whether it's MLB teams or media members or members of MLB, whoever. I've had a lot of time to reflect on the last two and a half years. There's a lot of things I would like to do better, a lot of severed and damaged relationships I'd like to repair."

Next, denial is another image repair strategy Bauer employed during this interview. He states, "I've never done anything "from a criminal" standpoint." However, that does not mean he never did anything wrong at all. Furthermore, he states, "I never sexually assaulted anyone – that's the first thing I have to say. But I did put myself in precarious positions where something like this could happen." This strategy approach may seem like a departure from his previous image repair statements, but it is important to note it is natural for anyone to deny any form of allegation regardless of where this part of the statement may appear in the interview.

Next, Bauer used differentiation as an image repair strategy to show how he was not "trying to downplay the severity of the allegations. If they happen, they should absolutely be investigated. They're very serious." Further, he continues by stating "Having a contentious relationship with the media certainly blew things up. It didn't make things better for me, or the Dodgers organization, for my teammates, for Major League Baseball, and that caused a lot of collateral damage." Here, Bauer is trying to portray that if the media had not been involved in this crisis, things would have been different because the publicity of the allegations would have not brought contention among those, he associated with either on or off the baseball field.

Lastly, minimization was an image repair strategy that Bauer used to try and limit the public's opinion about what he was accused of. Bauer notes "I think my viewpoint on it at the time was that I was defending myself. I was bullied a lot as a kid, and my life got a lot better when I started standing up for myself. But in reflection of the past couple of years, I should have just had a professional conversation, man-to-man, woman-to-man, conversation to understand perspectives. Probably, would've made the situation a lot better over the years." By trying to minimize the damage due to past experiences he went through in his youth, Bauer is also trying to underscore the importance of professionalism and the power of communication.

Three of the five main strategies of Benoit's (1995) image repair strategies are used within both of Trevor Bauer's Fox News interviews on January 4, 2024, and January 6, 2024. Mortification was the most prominent strategy used, followed by reducing offensiveness. Reducing offensiveness was employed in the following ways: bolstering, transcendence, minimization, and differentiation. Evading responsibility was also employed in one form which was provocation. Further, corrective action was employed in two ways, which were offers to repair and steps to repair and prevent. Lastly, as Bauer acknowledged and took responsibility for his words and actions, denial was used minimally but only in the form of simple denial never shifting the blame.

Discussion

The image repair strategies identified in Trevor Bauer's Fox News interviews, based on Benoit's (1995) framework, include bolstering, mortification, provocation, corrective action, transcendence, denial, minimization, and differentiation. Understanding the implications and effectiveness of these strategies is crucial in crisis communication. To accurately evaluate their impact, it is essential to consider Bauer's targeted audience during the interviews. He addressed the general public, his fans, family, friends, and, most notably, potential MLB teams. Additionally, Bauer aimed to reach those affected by his past actions. These interviews marked his first significant public statements following

a long absence from media exposure, making it important to assess how his rhetoric was designed to appeal to these varied audiences, showcasing his recovery and determination to return to professional baseball.

On January 4, 2024, and January 6, 2024, bolstering, mortification, provocation, transcendence, minimization, differentiation, denial, and corrective action were strategically used in an attempt to repair Bauer's image after he settled a high-profile legal dispute with a woman who accused him of beating and sexually assaulting her in 2021. One strategy was used more effectively than the others, whereas some of the other strategies were minimally effective. First, Bauer uses mortification to admit that he has made many mistakes in the past and recently apologizes to those who have been victims of his mistakes. A majority of the public, particularly those who follow the MLB already knew about the allegations Bauer was accused of, so for him to accept responsibility for his behavior was not necessarily a surprise. While many in the public understood the seriousness of the allegations which kept Bauer from speaking in public until resolved, most of the public was not expecting him to appear on a major news channel to give his first comments to the world. Bauer used mortification to his benefit to be the most effective in his messaging.

Trevor Bauer employed four strategies to reduce the offensiveness of his actions, focusing on bolstering and transcendence. Instead of boasting about his athletic achievements, Bauer highlighted his personal and professional growth, emphasizing how his experiences have made him a better person. This approach was significant given that it was one of his first TV appearances since the allegations. His statements centered on his learning process and how he has applied lessons during this challenging period. By using bolstering, Bauer sought to shift the audience's focus to his positive attributes and growth. Complementing this, he employed transcendence, acknowledging the damage he caused in the first half of his career and expressing a desire for a second chance to prove he has changed. This narrative was intended to reframe his past actions and present himself as someone who has learned and evolved. Additionally, Bauer used differentiation by not downplaying the seriousness of similar allegations against others, acknowledging the complexities faced by high-profile athletes. In one instance, he attempted minimization by referencing his past experiences with bullying, suggesting that standing up for himself was a learned behavior. However, he framed this not as an excuse but as a lesson in better communication during crises. Bauer's strategic use of these approaches aimed to repair his public image and demonstrate his readiness to return to Major League Baseball.

Another image repair strategy under evading responsibility used by Trevor Bauer in his public apologia was provocation. There were two instances where Bauer employed this strategy, once in each of his interviews. Provocation argues that the accused performed the offensive act because someone harmed him, provoking the offensive act in question (Benoit, 2018). For example, as Bauer states "I also made a lot of people in the media mad. I should have just had a private, adult conversation with someone." Bauer also stated, "I'm not doing anything wrong, so what can go wrong." This was effective in his image repair because immediately after he went into how he has changed in positive ways, reaffirming to the audience he is back speaking publicly and wanting to be the example he once was before.

Additionally, Trevor Bauer used corrective action as another image repair strategy during his apologia. He used the strategy of corrective action in each interview to not only help repair his image but also to take steps to prevent any potential future crises. There has always been a public interest in the situation Bauer found himself in, specifically those in the public who are or were faithful fans and followers. The audience was waiting for Bauer to speak publicly once again and 2024 was the year it happened. Corrective action was effective in his image repair because as he reflected on his past, it allowed him to give the audience verbal affirmation that he is ready for a second chance by not participating in past behaviors and scrutinizing who he allows in his circle now compared to before. Bauer stated that he is not having casual sexual relationships anymore and he is keeping his circle small to only include those in his life who will help him live life better and be a better person overall

Lastly, Bauer employed a minor instance of denial during his January 6, 2024, interview, stating, "I never sexually assaulted anyone," while acknowledging he put himself in precarious positions. He highlighted his efforts to mend relationships, particularly with women, as part of his image repair. However, this single instance of denial was largely overshadowed by the audience's focus on his steps toward personal growth and recovery. By acknowledging his mistakes and expressing a desire for change, Bauer aimed to present himself as someone ready for a fresh start in Major League Baseball.

Effectiveness of Image Repair Discourse
In 2023, Trevor Bauer pitched for the Yokohama DeNA Bay Stars in Japan, achieving an 11-4 record in 24 appearances, with 160 strikeouts

and a 2.59 ERA. Despite his recent efforts to address past controversies, Bauer has not yet secured a second chance with an MLB team but remains hopeful for the 2024 season. As a free agent, he has expressed interest in joining the Baltimore Orioles, highlighting his readiness to accept a lower salary. While his recent public interactions and statements demonstrate his commitment to image repair, MLB teams are cautious about the potential media attention associated with signing him. Bauer's assertion that he remains "one of the best pitchers in the world" reflects his confidence in his abilities, though whether this will translate into an MLB opportunity remains uncertain.

Conclusion

While many professional athletes have been analyzed using similar research methods and frameworks, Trevor Bauer's case is relatively new in the realm of image repair research. This study focused on Bauer's use of image repair strategies in two Fox News interviews following serious allegations of sexual misconduct. The primary medium for this analysis was news interviews; however, examining multiple platforms, including social media and online publications, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of these strategies. The study's limitation lies in its focus on only two interviews, suggesting future research should incorporate a broader range of media to fully assess the effectiveness of Bauer's image repair efforts.

This research is among the first to specifically examine Trevor Bauer's attempts at image repair following the allegations. Although Bauer has made significant progress in his public image recovery, it remains uncertain whether these strategies will ultimately result in his return to Major League Baseball. This study's findings align with previous research on similar cases in professional sports, where strategies from Benoit's image repair theory have been employed with varying degrees of success. The contribution of this study lies in expanding the application of image repair theory to new cases, offering insights into the nuances of managing public perception in the wake of scandals, and providing a foundation for future research in this area.

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