

Rhetorical Analysis of the NBA after Jontay Porter's Lifetime Ban

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Suggested Citation:

Blackburn, C. D. (2025). Rhetorical analysis of the NBA after Jontay Porter's lifetime ban. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 3(1), 69–75.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15312805>

Abstract

The National Basketball Association (NBA) faced a major crisis communication challenge following Jontay Porter's involvement in game-fixing and betting on his own team, the Toronto Raptors. Given the league's commitment to maintaining integrity and fair competition, the NBA swiftly imposed a lifetime ban on Porter. This study applies Image Repair Theory (IRT) to analyze the crisis communication strategies used by NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, Raptors President Masai Ujiri, and Porter himself. Through qualitative rhetorical analysis, the research examines official statements, media coverage, and social media reactions. Findings suggest that Silver employed corrective action, Ujiri shifted from denial to mortification, and Porter ultimately accepted responsibility through mortification. Fan responses were divided, with some criticizing the NBA's ties to sports betting companies. This study provides insights into effective crisis communication in professional sports.

Keywords: Image Repair Theory, crisis communication, NBA, sports betting, Jontay Porter

The National Basketball Association (NBA) faced a significant crisis communication challenge following revelations that Jontay Porter engaged in game-fixing and betting on his own team, the Toronto Raptors. Given that the integrity of competition is fundamental to professional sports, the NBA had to respond swiftly and decisively to restore public trust and reinforce its commitment to fair play. This paper examines how Image Repair Theory (IRT), a widely recognized framework in crisis communication, has been used in similar cases to mitigate reputational damage.

Understanding how leagues and organizations implement IRT strategies following player misconduct is essential in evaluating effective crisis management approaches. This study employs qualitative research methods, focusing on rhetorical analysis to assess how the NBA, Commissioner Adam Silver, Raptors President Masai Ujiri, and social media users framed their responses to the scandal. Qualitative research, which emphasizes interpretation and thematic

analysis, allows for an in-depth exploration of how these stakeholders navigated the crisis and shaped public perception (Matz, 2021).

By analyzing official statements, media coverage, and fan reactions, this study aims to determine which IRT strategies were employed, how effectively they addressed the controversy, and what lessons can be drawn for future crisis communication in professional sports. Through this analysis, the research will contribute to a broader understanding of how sports organizations handle reputation-threatening incidents and the role of strategic communication in maintaining institutional credibility.

Literature Review

Image repair theory (IRT) provides a crucial framework for analyzing the NBA's response to the Jontay Porter betting scandal. Billings (2017) identified two key findings in athlete image repair: mortification (apology) is generally

the most successful strategy, often resulting in positive media coverage, improved public perception, or higher image scale scores, while strategies aimed at reducing the offensiveness of an act tend to be ineffective. This study employs rhetorical analysis and content analysis to assess the effectiveness of IRT in the NBA's handling of the scandal. By examining the league's response alongside media and fan rhetoric, this research offers valuable insights for sports managers, teams, leagues, and athletes in managing crisis communication.

Benoit's (1995) five image repair strategies—denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification—serve as analytical constructs for assessing the NBA's crisis communication following Porter's scandal. Understanding these strategies and their effectiveness in past cases provides context for evaluating the NBA's response.

Denial is the first step in Benoit's IRT, in which the accused either denies the offensive act or shifts blame to another party (Benoit, 2011). Lance Armstrong's doping scandal exemplifies the denial strategy; he initially remained silent before outright rejecting the allegations despite mounting evidence (Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2015). Blame-shifting also occurs at the organizational level. For instance, Benoit (1995) noted that if the public perceives another party as responsible, an organization can mitigate reputational damage. A relevant sports example is the Philadelphia Eagles' contract dispute with Terrell Owens. Owens' new agent, known for aggressive negotiations, was partly blamed for the controversy, illustrating an attempt to deflect responsibility (Rivas Cruz, 2019).

The second strategy, evading responsibility, allows the accused to justify their actions without assuming full accountability. Benoit (1997) outlines four variations: provocation (claiming the act was a response to external factors), defeasibility (claiming lack of control or knowledge), accident (framing the act as unintentional), and good intentions. A notable example is Tennessee Titans player Taylor Lewan, who tested positive for performance-enhancing drugs and argued he was unaware of the banned substance in his supplements. Lewan even took a polygraph test to support his claim (Moraitis, 2021). In such cases, athletes attempt to absolve themselves of guilt while acknowledging the act itself.

Reducing offensiveness involves shifting focus away from the offensive act or minimizing its severity. This category includes bolstering (highlighting positive attributes), minimization

(downplaying harm), differentiation (comparing the act to something worse), transcendence (framing the act within a broader, less damaging context), attacking accusers, and compensation (offering restitution). Owens employed bolstering by emphasizing his dedication, reminding the public he played the 2004 Super Bowl on an injured leg to justify his contract demands (Brazeal, 2007). Minimization strategies are evident when athletes attempt to downplay controversial remarks. For example, Owens dismissed his criticism of Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb and coach Andy Reid as insignificant (Rivas Cruz, 2019). Attacking accusers can also serve as a defense mechanism, shifting scrutiny onto critics to undermine their credibility.

Corrective action is one of the most effective strategies in IRT, as it demonstrates tangible steps toward improvement and rectification. Benoit and Drew (1997) found that pairing mortification with corrective action leads to the most favorable audience response. A prominent case is Michael Vick's response to his dogfighting scandal. Vick initially remained silent but later expressed remorse and took steps to rehabilitate his image, including enrolling in a PETA course (Thompson, 2007). Meyer (2007) noted that Vick's measured public statements and subsequent actions reinforced his sincerity, which ultimately facilitated his rehabilitation in the public eye. Corrective action reassures stakeholders that the accused is actively working to prevent future transgressions.

Mortification, the final strategy in Benoit's framework, involves admitting guilt and seeking forgiveness. A successful mortification strategy requires complete responsibility and an expression of sincere remorse (Benoit, 1995). Without these elements, apologies often fail to restore credibility. Brazeal (2007) analyzed Owens' apology following his contract dispute, concluding that his reluctance to fully admit guilt undermined his sincerity. This underscores the importance of a carefully constructed apology in sports crisis communication. As Brazeal (2007) noted, mortification is most effective when coupled with corrective action, as audiences are more likely to forgive when clear steps toward reform are evident.

The literature on IRT in sports communication highlights the need for strategic responses to crises. When analyzing the NBA's handling of the Jontay Porter betting scandal, this study will address the following research questions:

RQ1: Which image repair strategies did Jontay Porter use in his official statement following the betting scandal?

RQ2: Which image repair strategies did the Toronto Raptors use in their official statement following the betting scandal?

RQ3: Which image repair strategies did Adam Silver and the NBA use in their official statement following the betting scandal?

By examining these responses through the lens of IRT, this research will contribute to understanding how professional sports organizations and athletes navigate reputational crises. The findings will offer insights into best practices for crisis communication in sports, emphasizing the importance of transparency, accountability, and strategic messaging in mitigating damage to individual and organizational reputations.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the crisis communication strategies used by key stakeholders in response to the Jontay Porter betting scandal. The research focuses on rhetorical analysis, which allows for a nuanced interpretation of language, framing, and strategic messaging in public statements (Greenhalgh & Coombs, 2023). By analyzing the responses of Jontay Porter, Toronto Raptors President Masai Ujiri, and NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, this study seeks to determine which image repair strategies were utilized and how effectively they addressed the controversy.

The first step in the analysis involves examining official statements from all three parties following the NBA's private investigation into allegations that Porter altered his performance to influence betting outcomes. Porter initially remained silent but later released a statement through his attorney before pleading guilty in court, where he expressed remorse for his actions. Ujiri, representing the Toronto Raptors, acknowledged the situation with shock and disappointment, while Silver had the most at stake, as he was responsible for protecting the league's reputation and ensuring the integrity of professional basketball.

To evaluate the effectiveness of these responses, the study applies Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT), specifically analyzing the presence of denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Compton & Compton, 2015). By categorizing statements within this framework, the research identifies patterns in crisis communication and determines the success of each response.

A crucial component of this study is the rhetorical analysis of media coverage and social

media discourse. Press conferences, interviews, and public statements will be examined to assess whether the NBA's crisis response aligned with effective reputation management practices. Additionally, sports journalists' narratives will be analyzed to determine how the NBA's messaging influenced media framing of the scandal.

Social media provides another key dimension to this research. Although direct access to comprehensive fan sentiment analysis is limited, qualitative data will be collected from public comments and social media discussions on NBA and Raptors' official accounts. Analyzing reposts, replies, and fan engagement trends will offer insight into how audiences perceived and responded to the league's communication strategy. This approach is informed by fan identification theory, which helps explain how audience loyalty and emotional investment influence reactions to sports-related crises (Greenhalgh & Coombs, 2023).

Through this multi-layered qualitative analysis, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how crisis communication strategies function in professional sports. By assessing the NBA's response through Image Repair Theory and rhetorical analysis, the research will offer valuable insights into effective public relations practices and reputation management within major sports organizations.

Content & Discussion

Analyzing the statements from Masai Ujiri, Adam Silver, and Jontay Porter, multiple types of Image Repair Theory (IRT) were used by each party involved. The varying degrees of responsibility required different crisis communication strategies to navigate the scandal effectively. Adam Silver, as the NBA Commissioner, had the most at stake in terms of damage control, as the league's integrity and credibility were directly challenged. Ujiri, as the president of the Toronto Raptors, responded with shock and limited commentary, emphasizing his lack of prior knowledge. Porter, the central figure in the controversy, largely remained silent until his guilty plea, at which point he employed mortification by taking responsibility and apologizing.

Beyond these official responses, fan reactions played a crucial role in shaping the public discourse surrounding the scandal. Some fans pointed out the hypocrisy of the NBA profiting from gambling sponsorships while issuing severe punishments for players who violate gambling rules. Others engaged in humor and memes, reflecting a desensitization to sports scandals in modern digital culture.

Adam Silver's Corrective Action and the NBA's Response

As Commissioner of the NBA, Adam Silver bore the greatest responsibility in managing the fallout from the betting scandal. The NBA has long emphasized fair competition, and sports betting threatens the league's credibility by introducing potential game manipulation. If fans or sponsors lose faith in the fairness of NBA games, the league could face serious reputational and financial consequences. Therefore, Silver had to ensure the situation was handled swiftly and decisively.

Silver's approach aligned with corrective action, one of the five primary strategies in Benoit's (1995) Image Repair Theory. Corrective action requires organizations or individuals to take measures to fix a crisis and prevent future occurrences. By issuing a lifetime ban on Porter, Silver reinforced the league's zero-tolerance stance on betting violations. During the NBA Board of Governors Press Conference, Silver framed Porter's actions as one of the worst offenses possible in professional basketball: "It's a cardinal sin of what he's accused of in the NBA" (Vorkunov, 2024).

Silver's strong language underscored the seriousness of the situation. By labeling gambling misconduct as a "cardinal sin," he positioned the NBA as an institution that upholds strict ethical standards. This rhetorical approach reassured fans, sponsors, and stakeholders that the NBA was committed to protecting the integrity of the game.

However, Silver also faced significant backlash for the NBA's deep involvement in the gambling industry. The league has numerous partnerships with sportsbooks, and advertisements for betting companies appear during NBA broadcasts, on social media, and in arenas. Critics argued that the NBA actively profits from sports betting, creating an environment where players may feel more tempted to participate.

Silver defended the league's gambling partnerships, arguing that legalizing and regulating sports betting allows for better monitoring and detection of illicit activities. In a recent interview, he explained, "I think, as I said at the time, with the advent of the internet, widely available sports betting online ... that we had to deal directly with technology and recognize that if we don't legalize sports betting, people are going to find ways to do it illegally" (Reynolds, 2024).

Silver's proactive approach reflects a strategic effort to manage the risks associated with sports betting. By integrating betting companies into the league's infrastructure, the NBA gains access

to data that can help detect suspicious gambling activity among players and officials.

Silver also took further corrective action by requesting that betting companies remove prop bets on two-way and 10-day contract players. Since these short-term and lower-salaried players are more vulnerable to financial struggles, they may be more likely to engage in betting-related misconduct. This decision—later adopted by multiple sportsbooks—demonstrates Silver's commitment to minimizing opportunities for betting violations (Maloney, 2024).

Masai Ujiri's Reaction: Denial and Mortification

Toronto Raptors President Masai Ujiri had a relatively limited role in handling the scandal, as the NBA took full control of the investigation. However, as the leader of Porter's team at the time, his response still mattered in shaping public perception. Ujiri's immediate reaction was one of shock and disbelief, demonstrating elements of denial, another key component of IRT. Denial is often used to distance individuals or organizations from blame, and in Ujiri's case, his statements reflected his lack of awareness regarding Porter's gambling activities.

In an interview, Ujiri stated, "You don't want this for the kid, you don't want this for our team, and we don't want this for our league, that's for sure. My first reaction is obviously surprise because none of us, I don't think anybody, saw this coming" (Li, 2024).

His emphasis on surprise suggests that the Raptors organization had no prior knowledge of Porter's gambling activities. By framing Porter as a "kid" rather than a deliberate rule-breaker, Ujiri softened the perception of Porter's wrongdoing. This aligns with mortification, another IRT strategy that involves expressing remorse and showing empathy toward the accused. Ultimately, Ujiri's response was short and restrained, reflecting his lack of direct involvement in the league's disciplinary process.

Jontay Porter's Silence and Mortification

Throughout the investigation process, Jontay Porter remained silent, which may have been a legal strategy advised by his attorney. In high-profile cases, public statements made before the conclusion of an investigation can often worsen legal and reputational consequences. However, once Porter pleaded guilty, he fully embraced mortification by admitting fault and expressing regret. In his statement to the court, he said, "I know what I did was wrong, unlawful, and I am deeply sorry" (Peltz, 2024).

This apology aligns with Benoit's (1995) mortification strategy, which involves

acknowledging wrongdoing and seeking forgiveness. Given the severity of his actions, Porter had no viable defense—his best option was to fully accept responsibility. However, his late admission of guilt may have diminished the sincerity of his remorse in the eyes of fans and analysts.

Fan Reactions: Hypocrisy, Humor, and Social Media Backlash

Perhaps the most unpredictable aspect of the scandal was the fan response. While some NBA fans supported Porter's punishment, others accused the league of hypocrisy, given its financial ties to sports betting companies. A viral comment from a Reddit user encapsulated this sentiment: "Investigating him while having them as corporate sponsors is exceedingly hypocritical" (Joseph, 2024).

Others took a more humorous approach, flooding social media with memes mocking Porter's actions. Many fans resurfaced old tweets from Porter and his family members, using them as fodder for jokes. This reaction reflects the modern digital culture, where scandals often become entertainment rather than serious ethical debates.

Conclusion & Analysis

The Jontay Porter betting scandal serves as a significant case study in the application of Image Repair Theory (IRT) within professional sports, highlighting the responses of key stakeholders—NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, Toronto Raptors President Masai Ujiri, and Porter himself. Each party acted in accordance with expectations, following the crisis communication strategies most aligned with their roles. The NBA, as an organization committed to maintaining the integrity of its games, had little choice but to conduct a thorough investigation and issue a severe punishment. Porter's actions—betting on games, deliberately underperforming to influence the outcome, and providing inside information—represented a clear violation of league policy and ethical sportsmanship. The lifetime ban imposed on him reflects the league's zero-tolerance approach toward gambling misconduct.

Silver's swift and decisive action aligns with the corrective action strategy from Benoit's IRT model. Corrective action involves demonstrating efforts to rectify the wrongdoing and prevent future occurrences. By banning Porter permanently, Silver reinforced the NBA's commitment to fair competition and sent a strong message to current and future players about the consequences of engaging in gambling-related misconduct. The commissioner also defended the league's partnership with

betting companies, arguing that legalizing and regulating sports gambling allows for better monitoring and detection of illicit betting activities among players. While some critics argue that the NBA's embrace of sports betting makes gambling more accessible to athletes, Silver maintains that strict enforcement mechanisms mitigate this risk. His decision to work with sportsbooks to remove prop bets on two-way and 10-day contract players further exemplifies corrective action by reducing potential vulnerabilities in the system.

Ujiri's response, though limited, followed a predictable pattern of initial denial followed by mortification. Given that the investigation was under the NBA's jurisdiction, the Raptors' organization had little influence over the situation. Ujiri's immediate reaction of disbelief is characteristic of denial, as he expressed shock that such an event occurred within his team. However, his later comments about Porter being a "good kid" suggest a degree of mortification, an acknowledgment that Porter's actions were regrettable but perhaps not entirely reflective of his character. This form of mortification may have been an attempt to soften the perception of the scandal while maintaining the Raptors' reputation.

Porter, on the other hand, remained silent throughout the investigation, likely on the advice of legal counsel. His eventual admission of guilt and expression of remorse during his court proceedings marked his adoption of the mortification strategy. He explicitly acknowledged his wrongdoing, stating, "I know what I did was wrong, unlawful, and I am deeply sorry" (Peltz, 2024). While his silence during the investigation might have fueled speculation and public scrutiny, his later admission aligns with Benoit's assertion that mortification—when coupled with corrective action—can be one of the most effective image repair strategies. However, in this case, given the severity of his actions, no amount of mortification could have prevented his lifetime ban from the NBA.

The reaction from fans adds an interesting layer to the discourse surrounding sports gambling. While some NBA fans engaged in humor and memes about the situation, others—particularly Raptors fans—expressed frustration with the league's stance. Many pointed out the perceived hypocrisy of the NBA punishing players for betting while simultaneously profiting from gambling sponsorships and advertisements. The widespread presence of sports betting promotions during NBA broadcasts and digital platforms has led some to argue that the league is complicit in creating an environment where gambling is normalized. From this perspective, Porter's actions, while clearly against the rules,

were partly facilitated by the league's increasing alignment with betting companies. This raises ethical questions about the role of professional sports organizations in promoting responsible gambling practices while ensuring that their athletes do not succumb to gambling-related temptations.

Looking beyond the NBA, this incident aligns with a broader trend of sports leagues cracking down on player betting violations. The National Football League (NFL) has dealt with multiple suspensions and bans for gambling-related offenses, particularly during the 2023 season. Notably, Indianapolis Colts defensive back Isaiah Rodgers Sr. was suspended indefinitely and subsequently released by his team after being found guilty of placing bets on NFL games. However, unlike Porter, Rodgers was later reinstated by the league and signed by the Philadelphia Eagles. This contrast highlights differences in how professional leagues enforce gambling policies and the factors that influence their disciplinary decisions. Similarly, Detroit Lions wide receiver Jameson Williams was suspended for eight games for placing bets while inside a team facility, despite not betting on NFL games. His case underscores the strict enforcement of betting regulations even when athletes wager on other sports.

These instances suggest that professional leagues are becoming increasingly vigilant in identifying and addressing gambling violations. The use of technology, data analytics, and partnerships with sportsbooks has enhanced their ability to detect suspicious betting patterns and player involvement. However, the challenge remains in balancing the financial benefits of legalized sports betting with the ethical responsibility of preventing gambling-related scandals. The NBA, NFL, and other leagues must continue refining their policies, ensuring that athletes receive adequate education on gambling regulations while maintaining a clear and consistent approach to enforcement.

Future research on this topic could explore how different sports leagues handle gambling violations and whether their disciplinary measures align with public perception and legal frameworks. Additionally, examining the effectiveness of gambling education programs for athletes could provide insights into preventive strategies. Given the increasing integration of sports betting into mainstream sports culture, it is crucial to assess whether current policies effectively deter gambling-related misconduct or if adjustments are needed to address emerging challenges.

In conclusion, the Jontay Porter betting scandal serves as a cautionary tale about the risks of

gambling within professional sports. Each party involved—Silver, Ujiri, and Porter—responded in ways consistent with their respective roles, following various strategies outlined in Benoit's Image Repair Theory. Silver's corrective action reinforced the league's commitment to integrity, Ujiri's response reflected initial denial followed by mortification, and Porter's eventual admission of guilt aligned with the mortification strategy. Meanwhile, fan reactions ranged from humor to criticism of the NBA's relationship with betting companies. As sports betting continues to expand, professional leagues must remain proactive in enforcing regulations while addressing concerns about the accessibility and influence of gambling. The broader conversation surrounding sports gambling will likely persist as more athletes face disciplinary action, making this an essential area of study for sports communication and ethics.

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