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Protecting the Brees brand: How Drew Brees Said “Sorry” for his National Anthem

Protest Comments

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Abstract

This chapter analyzes the image repair narrative of NFL star Drew Brees following his controversial comments opposing national anthem protests in 2020. Coming in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd’s murder by a Minneapolis police officer, his remarks instigated an online backlash on Twitter. People criticized his lack of empathy for issues endured by Black citizens in the United States. Afterward, Brees released written and video apologies on social media to improve his image. This chapter applies Benoit’s image repair theory to demonstrate how Brees primarily used reducing offensiveness and mortification strategies to maintain the Brees brand.

Introduction

The video of George Floyd’s detainment, and subsequent murder, at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer went viral in May 2020, sparking worldwide anti-racist activism. The brutality of the White officer kneeling on Floyd’s neck for nine minutes, while the Black, unarmed individual cried out until his body went limp, shocked America in a manner that had not occurred since the civil rights era. As the world stood to attention, numerous athletes spoke out in support of protests and many joined them in person.

Images of both professional and amateur athletes kneeling during the American national anthem has been a consistent occurrence in sport since 2016, largely inspired by NFL's Colin Kaepernick who, some allege, sacrificed his football career as a result of protesting for the duration of the season (Jenkins, 2020). As the NFL geared up for the 2020 season amid a global pandemic, tensions across America seemed at a breaking point and many sports fans expected to witness players, once again, taking the knee during the national anthem to protest authoritarian tactics by law enforcement and the violent oppression of civil freedoms, particularly toward Black citizens.

During an interview with Yahoo Finance on June 3, 2020, nine days after Floyd's death, veteran NFL quarterback Drew Brees responded to a question about the on-field protests and his responsibility as a locker room leader during such politically fractured times. Brees, who was a vocal critic of Kaepernick in 2016, reiterated his perception that players should stand:

I will never agree with anybody disrespecting the flag of the United States of America or our country...I envision my two grandfathers, who fought for this country during World War II...both risking their lives to protect our country and to try to make our country and this world a better place. (Rosenberg, 2020, para. 3)

The quarterback courted controversy and condemnation from every corner of sport. Fans, athletes, teammates, and the media openly took issue with Brees's stance, including NBA's LeBron James who tweeted, "You literally still don't understand" (Just, 2020a), then-San Francisco 49ers player Richard Sherman called Brees, "beyond lost" (Shapiro, 2020) and Brees's own teammate and long-time friend, Malcolm Jenkins said, "You're part of the problem" (Canova, 2020). Brees, a mainstay on the annual *Forbes* World's Highest Paid

Athletes list, was now a controversial footballer who quickly sought to rectify his position through two public apologies posted on his social media accounts. This case study examines the steps Brees took to re-establish his views on racial inequality through Benoit's image repair theory (IRT).

Background

The Drew Brees Brand

The majority of subjective discussions on the greatest NFL quarterbacks of all time include Drew Brees in the debate. Although more obvious suggestions often point to the likes of Tom Brady, Joe Montana, or Peyton Manning, Brees's consistency at the top level is impossible to refute. Spending the majority of his 20-year professional football career with the New Orleans Saints, Brees may have been a Super Bowl champion only once, nonetheless, at the time of his retirement in 2021 he held records for most career pass completions, most career passing yards, most consecutive games with a touchdown pass, most pass completions in a single season, and tied for the most touchdown passes in a game (Swenson, 2021).

Brees's endeavours off the gridiron are equally impressive. According to *Forbes* (2020), the \$15 million he accrued annually in endorsements leads all NFL players through his sponsorship deals with the likes of Nike, Verizon, and AdvoCare. Described in *Sports Illustrated* as "an athlete as adored and appreciated as any in an American city today" (King, 2010, para. 4) for his leadership within New Orleans in the aftermath of devastating Hurricane Katrina, Brees created and cultivated a brand which produced adulation among Saints' supporters. Shortly after arriving in New Orleans, his charity activity included

financing a local school's weights room, helping to build the Brees Family Field, which became a symbol of restoration for the area following the hurricane, and raising \$2 million, including a \$250,000 personal donation, to help rebuild schools, parks, and playgrounds in his adopted hometown (Germer, 2021).

Sustained charity work led to the formation of the Brees Dream Foundation in 2013, which has contributed more than \$45 million to causes globally (The Brees Dream Foundation, 2021). For many, Brees's philanthropical pursuits are more impactful than his on-field accomplishments. This was a White athlete who sat in a predominantly Black locker room and was lauded for his work within the community. Yet, an imbroglio erupted which centered around his perceived tone-deaf views related to the motivation behind national anthem protests. This put Brees at the heart of a national furore, making him a target for athletes, politicians, and sports fans across the country.

Why was there a need for image repair?

First, the timing provides important contextual insight into the social and cultural backdrop of America. Simply put, in regard to cultural moments 2020 was very different from 2016. Colin Kaepernick was widely condemned when he first knelt during the national anthem in 2016, and while Brees stressed he had no issue with Kaepernick's desire to speak out about racial injustice, he took umbrage with Kaepernick's method. "I wholeheartedly disagree," Brees told ESPN, describing the American flag as "sacred" (Triplett, 2016, para. 2). In 2016, Brees's view was consistent with many around the country, including, importantly, the NFL. Conversely, Kaepernick received limited support for his cause among sports writers, players,

and politicians. Kaepernick's desire to bring the issue of police brutality to White America's attention was largely rejected and subsequently the protest was twisted and co-opted into a debate around patriotism and the military (Doehler, 2021).

Fast forward four years and America was a far more splintered environment. For many, it took the murder of George Floyd, and others, to grasp the vivid reality of police officers killing defenseless Black citizens. The NFL, which had been quick to criticise those who protested during the national anthem in previous years, now engaged in a new sentiment: unity. Demonstrating a ubiquitous attitude of solidarity and intolerance toward racism, the league and most of its teams released statements and public support to the Black Lives Matter movement. An issue the NFL had brushed away with indignation in 2016, when many team owners threatened players who knelt with disciplinary action, was considered essential to support, if not unequivocally embraced, by 2020.

Despite the intervening four years where Brees had several opportunities to watch other athletes, including his own teammates, support Kaepernick by kneeling themselves, or read about the deaths of Philando Castile, Eric Garner, and Daunte Wright among others at the hands of police officers, it appeared as though Brees's stance remained unchanged. He was condemned as "wilfully ignorant" (Armour, 2020a, para. 1) and "dangerous" (Jacobs, 2020a, para. 8) by sports columnists and journalists. The same journalists who labelled Kaepernick in 2016 as a traitor and a renegade, were now tackling Brees for being out of touch.

The situation highlighted the changing political, social, and cultural environments within America. Politically, the country had rarely been more fractured than during Donald Trump's presidency, which saw social justice and social issues at the forefront of many conflicts. Culturally, after his comments, Brees's connection to his club and city were threatened. Brees operated on a field surrounded by Black teammates, many with personal experiences of racial discrimination and who lived in New Orleans, a city with a long history of police corruption, where over 60% of the population is Black (Jacobs, 2020).

While many White athletes carefully reflected on the systemic racism that remains prevalent across the United States, Brees doubled down on his viewpoint by perpetuating the notion that Kaepernick's action was about patriotism and not police brutality. In so doing, Brees became to many a symbol of White privilege. *Sports Illustrated* writer Michael Rosenberg suggested "Drew Brees has not learned that his American experience is not everyone's," (2020, para. 8) while Rod Walker, columnist for *The Times-Picayune*, the local newspaper for Brees's club, wrote, "Surely, he didn't say this today, I thought to myself. Surely, he gets it after watching that video of George Floyd's death" (2020, para. 3).

The Case

Image Repair Theory

Image refers to "perceptions of the source held by the audience, shaped by the words and deeds of that source, as well as by the actions of other relevant actors" (Meng & Pan, 2016, p. 89). Benoit (1995) suggested that when a person or organization is accused of wrongdoing,

the accused produces a message that attempts to repair their image. Despite being adapted and expanded upon in recent years, Benoit's IRT is consistently utilized by academics when evaluating crisis communication responses (see Frederick, Burch, Sanderson & Hambrick, 2014; Legg, 2009; Sanderson, 2008).

In professional sport, image plays a vital role in determining an athlete's worth, social and community standing, financial status, and performance and promotional prospects (Allison, Pegoraro, Frederick & Thompson, 2020). Consequently, the risks associated with a damaged image are vast and, therefore, when an athlete faces a perceived negative response to an event, they engage in image restoration work to repair their public persona.

Benoit's (2015) typology of image repair is broadly organized into five primary strategies, with each subcategorized into numerous communication tactics: denial (a disavowal or shifting of blame), evading responsibility (provocation, defeasibility, excuse making and justification through good intentions), reducing offensiveness (bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking their accuser and offering compensation), corrective action (vowing to fix the problem), and mortification (admitting the wrongful act and asking for forgiveness). This typology has been used by scholars to examine the image repair of elite athletes such as Abby Wambach and Maria Sharapova (Allison et al., 2020), Lance Armstrong (Hambrick, Frederick & Sanderson, 2013), Ryan Lochte (Hull & Boling, 2018), Tiger Woods, Kobe Bryant, and Ben Roethlisberger (Meng & Pan, 2016). Within these seven examples, all five strategies were present in some capacity: denial (Armstrong), evading responsibility (Sharapova, Bryant), reducing offensiveness (Bryant and Roethlisberger),

corrective action (Wambach, Woods, Bryant, and Roethlisberger), and mortification (all athletes except Sharapova). This case study lends support to research into athlete image repair strategies by examining the communication strategies employed by Brees following his comments which generated an “all-out blitz of criticism” (Rhoden, 2020, para. 1).

Social media apologies

On June 4, 2020, the day following his interview, a short apology was posted on Brees’s social media accounts, accompanied by a stock image of an interlinked Black and White hand (the statement’s text can be found in Appendix A). Shortly after his written apology, Brees issued one in video form (the transcript of which can be found in Appendix B), although the video itself has since been deleted from his social media pages).

Initially, a deductive approach was utilized for both statements by the author in order to determine whether the individual apologies could be categorized according to Benoit’s typology. Although neither statement was overly long, each individual sentence was examined and there were occasions when multiple image repair strategies were used within one sentence. Both statements were initially read to familiarize the author with the data and coded into one of Benoit’s five typologies. Further scrutiny placed each unit of analysis into one of the 14 tactics outlined within the IRT, and supplemented by the introduction of an additional tactic, ‘shared accountability.’ This tactic is a concept derived from the author as opposed to Benoit’s typology and highlights how an individual might draw others’ actions into their apology as a means to deflect ill feeling towards the individual and encourage others to reflect on their own culpability within the subject.

For the written statement, a total of 336 words were analyzed and all but eight words were coded to a strategy and subsequent tactic. Within this apology Brees primarily used the strategy of reducing offensiveness, in which the accused attempts to reduce the degree of ill feeling experienced by the audience. Almost one third (32.7%) of Brees's apology fell into this category, with several tactics being employed. Brees used bolstering throughout the apology with statements such as, "I stand with the Black community," "I have ALWAYS been an ally," and "I recognize that I am part of the solution and can be a leader for the Black community in this movement." Here, Brees reinforces his positive attributes in an attempt to offset negative feelings toward his initial claims. The tactic of transcendence was also present within this strategy whereby Brees would refer to the broader context of racial inequality, (e.g., "I condemn the years of oppression that have taken place throughout our Black communities and still exists today"). This approach directs attention away from the accused's wrongdoing and directs the audience's attention to a higher issue.

The second-most frequently demonstrated strategy was Brees's mortification (24.7%). This is generally used when the accused admits a wrongful act and seeks forgiveness. "It breaks my heart to know the pain I have caused," and "I am very sorry and I ask your forgiveness," are two examples of this strategy. However, in this apology much of Brees's mortification centers around the perception of his comments, rather than apologizing for the comments themselves. This is clearly highlighted when he states, "I am sick about the way my comments were perceived yesterday." Evading responsibility was present within 13.4% of his statement as Brees attempted to reduce his culpability for offending the audience. When Brees wrote, "In an attempt to talk about respect, unity, and solidarity centered around the

American flag and the national anthem...” he suggested his comments were based on good intentions. Elements of defeasibility were also present within this strategy when Brees pleaded a lack of information over important factors in the situation, (e.g., “I will never know what it’s like to be a Black man or raise Black children in America”). Brees used corrective action strategies more sparingly (11%) by declaring he would “work every day to put myself in those shoes and fight for what is right.” Benoit (2015) suggests it is wise to couple corrective action with mortification, which Brees does toward the end of his apology when he writes, “I take full responsibility and accountability [mortification]. I recognize that I should do less talking and more listening [corrective action].”

Brees employed an interesting and unique approach in his apology, which constituted 10.1% of his overall message. This approach failed to situate itself into one of Benoit’s tactics and, thus, the author proposes an additional tactic be added to the evading responsibility strategy, *shared accountability*. Shared accountability is present when the accused evades sole responsibility for their actions, preferring instead to focus attention on where they and others have collective accountability for the situation or wider context. In Brees’s case this was present in the statements, “I acknowledge that we as Americans, including myself, have not done enough to fight for that equality or to truly understand the struggles and plight of the Black community” and “We all need to listen.” This proposed tactic differs from a variant within the denial strategy, shifting the blame. In Brees’s case, he did not directly deny the act and therefore this newly suggested tactic feels more appropriate due to his inclusive use of ‘we.’ The remaining strategy, denial, was used by Brees in just 5.7% of his apology. However, this strategy was not utilized to deny the statements he made within the interview.

Rather, he denied the perception his words had "...mised people into believing that somehow, I am an enemy. This could not be further from the truth."

Later the same day Brees uploaded a video apology to his Instagram account, totalling 147 words and only three words were not coded to a strategy. As with the written apology, reducing offensiveness (39.5%) and mortification (35.4%) were the primary strategies employed. The transcendence tactic was once again present as Brees placed his apology in the wider context of racial inequality, namechecking both George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and stating, "The years and years of social injustice, police brutality, and the need for so much reform and change in regards to legislation. So many other things to bring equality to our Black communities." In repetition from his written apology, Brees reinforced his status as an ally to bolster his reputation through offering support to the marginalized demographic. Within the mortification strategy, Brees reiterated that he was sorry, explaining that he wanted people "to see in my eyes." In a departure from his written apology where he appeared contrite for the perception of his remarks, Brees directly apologized for making them in the video version, "...how sorry I am for comments that I made yesterday." Evading responsibility was present to a similar extent as in the previous apology accounting for 11.6%, as evidenced by saying, "I know there's not much that I can say that would make things any better right now." Here Brees enacts the tactic of defeasibility by pleading a lack of control over the situation. Paradoxically, he used this statement to begin the video and yet spends the remainder of his apology attempting to 'make things better.'

The two remaining strategies used by Brees appeared in less than 10% of the video apology. In the video he echoes the written apology that he must play a role in the solution (corrective action, 8.2%), “I will do better and I will be part of the solution” and continues using denial as a tool to highlight how his words are incorrectly perceived, “That was never my intention” (to hurt others). Where the video apology clearly differs from his earlier one, is that there is no evidence of shared accountability; the general tone of Brees’s video apology appears more personal regarding the impact of his comments.

You Make the Call

Like the times, Americans’ reactions to Drew Brees’s two apologies were polarized. The messages were derided by some, deemed not “good enough,” (Armour, 2020b, para. 14) and “hollow” by others (Florio, 2020, para. 7), while ESPN commentator Michael Wilbon suggested that Brees failed to properly address the wider issue of White Americans who question the patriotism of players who kneel in protest of racial injustice (ESPN, 2020). Meanwhile, for others, including Brees’s teammate Michael Thomas, who had criticized Brees following the initial interview, Brees’s recompense was enough. “He apologized & I accept it because that's what we are taught to do as Christians,” Thomas tweeted (Thomas, 2020). Another teammate, Demario Davis suggested, “For him to admit he was wrong, that is leadership at its finest” (Whitfield, 2020, para. 2). It is, perhaps, predictable that Brees’s own New Orleans Saints’ teammates would display a more forgiving tone. Publicly, at least.

In the days that followed his apologies Brees displayed a changed stance, directing a clear message to President Trump after the president criticized Brees for apologizing. He tweeted:

To Donald Trump, through my ongoing conversations with friends, teammates, and leaders in the Black community, I realize this is not an issue about the American flag. It has never been. We can no longer use the flag to turn people away or distract them from the real issues that face our Black communities. (Brees, 2020a)

In the wake of this image restoration challenge, Brees went from “alienating nearly every Black professional athlete in America to being hailed as a hero for calling out the president of the United States” (Rhoden, 2020, para. 4). However, this sparked anger from conservative pundits who were upset that Brees had backtracked from his original stance (Bernstein, 2020). The national anthem protests have long provided fuel for conservative media outlets that believe a culture war exists in the United States between political correctness and traditions. Widely described as providing conservative political positions, Fox News spent the week decrying Brees’s about-turn as caving to a liberal agenda. Host Laura Ingraham, who had famously once told LeBron James to “shut up and dribble,” defended Brees’s initial views from the Yahoo Finance interview, claiming that critical responses to the quarterback were “totalitarian conduct” and “Stalinist” (Bieler, 2020). Brees stayed true to his primary image repair strategies of mortification and reducing offensiveness two months later during a training camp conference call with reporters, stating, “To think for a second that New Orleans or the state of Louisiana or the Black community would think I was not standing with them for social justice, that completely broke my heart. It was crushing. Never ever would I feel that way” (Just, 2020).

Ultimately, Brees’s image repair strategies appear to have been successful and support an assertion from Hambrick et al. (2013) who suggest that athletes who exhibit multifaceted image repair strategies can embolden identification and attachment with their followers.

Brees did not lose any sponsorship deals, nor did the controversy appear to inhibit what turned out to be his final season with the New Orleans Saints. Teammate Cam Jordan later recalled that the open dialogue resulting from Brees's interview led to a positive impact in the locker room:

The moment we heard it, it was instant text messages. Instant calls to Drew. Being your brother's keeper: *this is what I've gone through, what I've seen, what I've been through, how are you not able to relate?* It's that uncomfortable conversation that really led to our locker room being that much closer. (Tynes, 2021, para. 36)

Following his retirement, Brees remains in the football realm, joining NBC Sports as an analyst and continues his charitable endeavours through the Brees Dream Foundation.

Brees's status as a footballing icon remained largely unharmed following the initial controversy. However, a wider issue which focuses on the contrasting political and societal views between elite athletes and their supporters remains a challenging domain for everyone to navigate. Perhaps one reporter from *The New York Times*, and a New Orleans Saints fan, summarized it most eloquently, "I both hold unreserved joy over Brees's career and clearly understand the lingering ambivalence about his conservatism among progressive fans" (Smith, 2021, para. 6). Whether his teammates, Saints' fans, and others would have been so forgiving of Brees's stance had the level of his on-field performances not been so unbelievably high for a player approaching the end of his career remains hypothetical, but it nonetheless highlights the conundrum many sport consumers face when their heroes require image repair. Thus proving that, ultimately, compartmentalization needs to occasionally co-exist in fandom, even when all parties are uncomfortable with that accommodation.

Discussion Questions

1. How has the perception of national anthem protests changed between 2016 and today, and why might this be the case?
2. Take a look at the two apologies Brees published on June 4, 2020:
 - a. Why did he make a second statement (video) so soon after his first (written)?
 - b. Compare the consistency between the messages.
 - c. In what ways did they differ, if at all?
3. What socio-cultural factors may have impacted both how Brees responded to criticism following his interview and how his apologies were received?
4. Since Brees's statements, national anthem protests have continued within American sport. How have other star athletes navigated the challenging debate surrounding this action? What might they have learnt from the Brees situation?
5. Discuss any new developments in the ongoing issue relating to athlete activism itself and the response to such activism. What has occurred lately to impact the conversation?

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Appendix A

Drew Brees written apology

I would like to apologize to my friends, teammates, the City of New Orleans, the black community, NFL community and anyone I hurt with my comments yesterday. In speaking with some of you, it breaks my heart to know the pain I have caused. In an attempt to talk about respect, unity, and solidarity centered around the American flag and the national anthem, I made comments that were insensitive and completely missed the mark on the issues we are facing right now as a country. They lacked awareness and any type of compassion or empathy. Instead, those words have become divisive and hurtful and have misled people into believing that somehow, I am an enemy. This could not be further from the truth, and is not an accurate reflection of my heart or my character. This is where I stand:

I stand with the black community in the fight against systemic racial injustice and police brutality and support the creation of real policy change that will make a difference. I condemn the years of oppression that have taken place throughout our black communities and still exists today. I acknowledge that we as Americans, including myself, have not done enough to fight for that equality or to truly understand the struggles and plight of the black community. I recognize that I am part of the solution and can be a leader for the black community in this movement. I will never know what it's like to be a black man or raise black children in America but I will work every day to put myself in those shoes and fight for what is right. I have ALWAYS been an ally, never an enemy. I am sick about the way my comments were perceived yesterday, but I take full responsibility and accountability. I recognize that I should do less talking and more listening...and when the black community is talking about their pain, we all need to listen. For that, I am very sorry and I ask your forgiveness (Brees, 2020b).

Appendix B

Transcript from Drew Brees video apology

I know there's not much that I can say that would make things any better right now. But I just want you to see in my eyes how sorry I am for comments that I made yesterday. I know that it hurt many people, especially friends, teammates, former teammates, loved ones, people that I care and respect deeply. That was never my intention. I wish I would have laid out what was on my heart in regards to the George Floyd murder, Ahmaud Arbery, the years and years of social injustice, police brutality and the need for so much reform and change in regards to legislation, so many other things to bring equality to our black communities. I am sorry. And, I will do better. And, I will be part of the solution. And, I am your ally. And I know no words will do that justice. (Brees, 2020c)