Michael Vick's Redemption Strategy

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Introduction

On August 27, 2007, Michael Vick, former Atlanta Falcon Starting Quarterback, and current Philadelphia Eagles backup Quarterback finally broke his silence on a federal indictment handed to him by the United States Government. "For most of my life I've been a football player, not a public speaker. You know, I really don't know how to say what I really want to say. You know, I understand its, its important, or not important as far as what you say, but how you say things. So, I take this opportunity just to speak from the heart. First, I want to apologize, you know, for all the things that, that I've done—and that I've allowed to happen… Once again, I offer my deepest apologies. I will redeem myself because I have to" (Vick 2007).

Vick was indicted on July 17, 2009, for his connection to an illegal dogfighting ring that was operated at a home he owned in Virginia. He remained silent on the issue at his legal team's request. His highly anticipated statement from above came from a highly touted professional

athlete who was at the apex of his career until a despicable aspect of his life was revealed to the public and federal prosecutors. The statement comes after his decision to plead guilty to the federal charges and before his jail sentence arraignment. The words above show a man who has been caught in an action that is not acceptable in his society by any means and also a man who realizes he must redeem himself no matter what it takes.

After pleading guilty on December 10, 2007, Michael Vick was sentenced to a 23-month jail sentence in Leavenworth, Kansas Federal Penitentiary. His sentence seemed to be much more stern than many people had anticipated, but U.S. District Judge Henry E. Hudson had solid reasoning for the lengthy sentence, "because he lied about his involvement when he was supposed to be coming clean to the judge who would decide his fate" (ESPNEWS 2007). Hudson's quote is in reference to the fact that Michael Vick was given the opportunity to come clean of his involvement with the dogfighting ring, but instead deliberately mislead investigators.

Michael Vick was born on June 26, 1980 in the state of Virginia. His parents were young teenagers living in a very poor area of the state that was ridden with crime and violence. This is something to keep in mind, as it can be influential to Vick's ultimate involvement with the illegal dogfighting ring he funded on his property. It is widely known by inhabitants of his hometown in Newport News, Virginia that one of the only

ways out of the rough life in his city was through being exceptional in athletics. This is why Michael and his younger brother Marcus focused on being the best athletes they could be. Recent reports and involvements of Michael show that sports did not allow him to leave behind all the negative aspects of his past.

The dogfighting indictment Vick faced for his bankrolling role and leadership was not the first time he has faced charges of failing to abide by the law or making a. Mr. Vick has, on more than one occasion, been linked to marijuana use. Oftentimes the people around him overlook this because of his abilities on the football field. In an ESPN.com article, "Vick Water Bottle Confiscated By Miami Airport Security", from January 19, 2009 it was reported that the Miami Police had to seize a water bottle from Vick at Miami International Airport. In the water bottle is said to have been marijuana smell and residue in a hidden compartment of the water bottle. The water bottle was taken to have tests run to see exactly what the smell and residue contained. Neither the Miami Police nor the NFL ever proceeded to lend a resolution of the situation to the public. Needless to say, Vick went basically unpunished for the incident—which is something that I believe plays a role in his involvement with questionable behaviors. Not only has he grown up looking at people get away with less than acceptable behavior, but he himself has taken part with little repercussions until the dogfighting indictment. Also noted in the same article is that Vick was fined two months earlier for flipping his middle

finger to fans while coming off the field. This time he was slapped on the wrist with a meaningless ten thousand dollar fine from the NFL.

These are just a few of the negative circumstances Vick has found himself over the years. It is worth noting that he has been involved in questionable behavior all of his life, but at times has tried to keep away from it all. Vick is obviously seen in a negative light because of the questionable decisions he has made, but it is important to recognize that he also tries to do good things as well. Some of the positive things Vick has brought to society are his involvement with charities and children. He also has helped show that African Americans can succeed when playing quarterback in the NFL, which has helped to shed the negative stereotype around the NFL.

In recent years many high profile athletes and celebrities have found themselves in very unwanted situations that call for them to apologize for a wrongful act they have committed. In an excerpt written by B.L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, found in Carl R. Burgchardt's Reading in Rhetorical Criticism, the speech that forms an apology or a "speech in self-defense" is called apologia (Ware and Linkugel 2005). For the use of this paper I will refer to athletes and celebrities as just celebrities or stars. It became interesting to me when I decided to look at how certain stars respond to charges, whether legal or societal, and what strategies they took. When a celebrity is caught in the wrong, were they quick to step up and admit their fault—or would they try and hide it? Would trying to hide a

wrongdoing make it better or would it ultimately make the situation worse for the person? It seems as if every week there is a new celebrity star stepping up and either admitting a wrongdoing or defending their position on something they did. I found this to be something that many people are interested in because it always spills into the mainstream news and the rhetorical situation usually requires a complex resolution.

Specific Instances

For the purpose of gaining relevance with the topic at hand I would like to touch on a few specific instances where other celebrities have found themselves in a rhetorical situation calling for discourse of apologia. In this section I will look at some high profile athletes and their way of dealing with the media and societal frenzy brought upon themselves by their questionable actions.

I would like to briefly touch on the event when New York Yankees Third-Baseman, Alex Rodriguez, finally admitted to using steroids. When Rodriguez was first asked if he used steroids he lied to all of America during a 60-minutes interview. This would be imploring the denial strategy according to Ware and Linkugel. Later information reported that Mr. Rodriguez had tested positive for steroids in 2003. A couple of quotes found in a report of his confession on popcrunch.com clearly display his strategy of self-defense. "Back then it was a different culture," Rodriguez said. "It was very loose. I was young. I was stupid. I was naive, and I

wanted to prove to everyone that, you know, I was worth, you know—and being one of the greatest players of all time. And although it was the culture back then and Major League Baseball overall was very—I just feel that—You know, I'm just sorry." This shows he is not truly taking responsibility for his actions. One would say he is blaming others for his lack of judgment and he never really admits what he did was wrong. This discourse does not seem to have enough factors of apologia to really redeem Mr. Rodriguez's public Image.

The next incident I would like to look towards is the Tiger Woods affair scandal that came to light in November of 2009. Tiger Woods, who just may go down as the greatest professional golfer of all-time, needs no introduction. He is an icon, not just in America, but all around the world. Needless to say, Tiger Woods let many, many people down—not just his wife and children.

Mr. Woods started his public apology saying this, "Good morning. And thank you for joining me. Many of you in the room are my friends. Many of you in this room know me. Many of you have cheered for me, or worked with me, or supported me, and now, every one of you has good reason to be critical of me. I want to say to each of you, simply, and directly, I am deeply sorry for my irresponsible and selfish behavior I engaged in" (Woods 2010). On paper this apology sounds great, but any one who watched and scrutinized the actual video of these words sees a whole different story. Further in Woods' apology he begins to change his

tune by calling out other people and blaming his actions on circumstances.

Tiger uses identification with certain aspects of life and situations to try and gain unity in his audience. His attempt to gain unity in his audience was apparent in his quote saying this, "I knew my actions were wrong. But I convinced myself that normal rules didn't apply. I never thought about who I was hurting. Instead, I thought only about myself. I ran straight through the boundaries that a married couple should live by. I thought I could get away with whatever I wanted to. I felt that I had worked hard my entire life and deserved to enjoy all the temptations around me. I felt I was entitled. Thanks to money and fame, I didn't have far -- didn't have to go far to find them" (Woods 2010). Here Mr. Woods is trying his best to explain why he cheated on his wife so many times, why he did what he did. Although his excuses in this section of his apology do make logical sense to the reader or listener he probably would have been better served not elaborating on the reasons.

Finally, Tiger uses his last line of excuses for why he has done what he has done. He says it is because of the money and the fame that made it attainable for him. It was due to the fact that he had "worked hard" his entire life and that he "deserved to enjoy all the temptations" around him; he felt entitled. This final explanation epitomizes exactly what Tiger is trying to do when giving all of these excuses. It is obvious he is taking the

technique of being solely responsible, but also blaming life's external factors as well. This is not the kind of apology for this type of situation.

Communication Theory and Research

Ware and Linkugel have a lot to say about what elements comprise a speech of self-defense. In their analysis of the apologia genre they categorize four main factors it is comprised of. The first factor is denial, "the simple disavowal by the speaker of any participation in, relationship to, or positive sentiment toward whatever it is that repels the audience". The second factor is bolstering which Ware and Linkugel describe as a situation where a speaker identifies himself with something his audience views favorably. The third factor, differentiation, "includes those strategies which serve the purpose of separating some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship from some larger context within which the audience presently views that attribute." The final factor is transcendence. Ware and Linkugel say that transcendence is when a rhetor takes "any strategy which cognitively joins some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship with some larger context within which the audience does not presently view that attribute." (Ware and Linkugel 2005)

William Benoit is another scholar who has spent time studying and adding expertise to apologia discourse specifically pertaining to image restoration. Benoit is linked with the Image Restoration Theory that focuses completely on the apologia genre and how people go about

restoring their image. The theory includes specific ways in which a person can go about trying to persuade people to view them in a positive light. This paper will focus on three specific strategies used in self-defense to form *redemption rhetoric*. This term of *redemption rhetoric* is what I am naming the defense strategy used by Michael Vick. The strategy is comprised of three main parts and has proven to be a successful way for him to begin painting himself as a good person in society who just happened to make a terrible mistake. Before jumping into the three strategies used by Mr. Vick, I will explain each strategy and tactic of Benoit's Image Restoration Theory.

Below is a table of the strategies and tactics from Benoit's theory:

STRATEGY	**TACTIC**
Denial	**Simple Denial** **Shift Blame**
Evade of Responsibility of Event	**Provocation** **Defeasibility** **Accident** **Good Intentions**
Reduce Offensiveness of Event	**Bolstering** **Minimization** **Differentiation** **Transcendence**

	Attack Accuser **Compensation**
Corrective Action	
Mortification	

The table and theory show the importance of the apologia genre to rhetorical critics, but in this paper I will show how it also pertains to celebrities in need of self-defense rhetoric. It is important for people who find themselves in situations that call for discourse of apologia to understand exactly what they are saying when trying to restore their image. In the following paragraphs each strategy will be explained along with the tactics that go along with it.

The first strategy of William Benoit's Image Restoration Theory is denial. A simple Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition will suffice for this one, "a psychological defense mechanism in which confrontation with a personal problem or with reality is avoided by denying the existence of the problem or reality. A simple denial according to Benoit is when "simply stating or denying charges". A perfect example of this occurred in the 60-Minutes interview, conducted by James Brown, with Alex Rodriguez, about his steroid allegations. In the interview when asked point-blank if he had ever used performance-enhancing drugs, Mr. Rodriguez, without hesitation, said no—which later was nullified and proven a lie by the

***Mitchell Report. The next tactic, shifting blame, is fairly straightforward. It is when the accused moves the blame from oneself to another person or thing.**

***The Mitchell Report was an investigation run by ex-Senator George Mitchell in order to gain insight on the extent of performance-enhancing drug usage in Major League Base- ball. This report 409-page report was released in December 2007 (Murphy 2010).**

The next strategy is evasion of responsibility and it has four different types according to Benoit. The first type: "A firm can say its act was merely a response to another's offensive act, and that the behavior can be seen as a reasonable reaction to that provocation… Another specific form of evading responsibility is defeasibility. Here, the business alleges a lack of information about or control over important elements of the situation. For instance, a busy executive who missed an important meeting could claim, "I was never told that the meeting had been moved up a day." If true, the lack of information excuses the absence. A third option is to claim the offensive action occurred by accident… Fourth, the business can suggest that the offensive behavior was performed with good intentions" (Benoit, 1997).

Next the offensiveness can try to be reduced by the following tactics:

Bolstering: pointing out the good aspects

Minimization: pleading the act was not as serious as it seems

Differentiation: pleading the act was not as offensive as it seems

Transcendence: pleading to a higher power; there are more important aspects to consider

Attack Accuser: usually by going after accuser's credibility

Compensation: to pay back the wrongdoing

The fourth strategy, corrective action, is probably one of the most integral when it comes to restoring one's image. This strategy has to do with actual actions a person can take or things one can say to help people recognize, or see in a tangible way, that change truly has occurred. This can go a long way in restoring the image of a man.

The final term needing to be defined is mortification. Benoit explains this term, that comes from Kenneth Burke, is when one confesses and asks for forgiveness. In a way this is like crucifying oneself and taking responsibility for what has taken place.

Method of Analysis and Context

To further investigate the restoration of one's image I will look at how Michael Vick implores three of the strategies of image restoration from Benoit's theory along with Ware and Linkugel's idea of differentiation, one of the four "modes of resolution". I will show how

these formulate his defense strategy that play a huge role in Vick's road to redemption and coin it as Vick's *Redemption Rhetoric*. The three strategies I will point out in Vick's discourse to redeem himself are: Evasion of Responsibility, Mortification, and Corrective Action. I will examine how Michael Vick uses these three strategies together to positively restore his image after pleading guilty to dogfighting charges and spending 23 months in federal prison.

In order to build the design of *redemption rhetoric* I will look at two transcripts from the speech of Michael Vick in response to his illegal dogfighting ring. The first transcript will come from Vick's first public address after being indicted on federal charges. The second transcript will be from a 60-Minutes interview held with CBS sports broadcaster, James Brown, just after Vick was released from prison in the summer of 2009. The words spoken in these two occasions are very important for the reconstruction of Michael Vick the person and are vital to helping him redeem his image.

Michael Vick is not known as a great public speaker—he is known for being a megastar athlete and he let his audience know this right from the start. When Vick went to jail he not only had to give up his entire life, but also his $130 million contract with the Atlanta Falcons. This contract was the largest contract in NFL history at the time, which made this situation shine even brighter in the media. Michael Vick went from being the highest paid NFL athlete to a man behind bars in a matter of weeks.

He even had to file for bankruptcy while serving his prison sentence. It is obvious that Vick's legal team not allowing him to speak on the issue for weeks crippled his discourse. They controlled when he spoke, but it is interesting to wonder if his team also controlled how he spoke and what he actually said. It seams to me that his rhetoric was very much planned before he spoke, but he did not take any notes to the stand during his first public address. Though he did not sound very confident, he did sound sincere in his apology and that will go very far in they eyes of his audience. This leads me to believe he was probably coached on how to say things, but not specifically on what to say.

Vick's discourse fell onto the ears of many people he probably thought he would never have to answer to for anything. He was used to answering to NFL media following games and practices, but not used to answering to people about a despicable act he committed and had the opportunity to stop. Mr. Vick had to answer, not only to his teammates, his coaches, his family, and his fans on this issue, but also to animal rights groups, the humane society, to children all over the world, and to all people who care about and love animals. This is a much larger group of people than Vick will ever have to answer to—this audience, will have a completely different view of who Michael Vick the person is than his other audiences. They will not view him as a privileged, high profile athlete, but instead as a murderer. This audience will view him as a man who had it all and needed to have more—this time his NFL stardom might even hurt him

because of the amount of attention it brings upon this completely negative situation. This audience, that Michael Vick faces now, will hopefully be the toughest one he will ever have to face. They already have their opinions of him and as a football player, but those opinions no longer matter because of the horrific acts he has committed.

The federal authorities alleged in court documents, that Virginia property owned by the Atlanta Falcons star Michael Vick, was used by an outfit named "Bad Newz Kennels" to stage area for housing and training the pit bills involved in the illegal dog fights (OGnews.com, 2007). To sum up the above, Michael Vick pleaded guilty to running and bankrolling the Bad Newz Kennels operation. This is the exigence of his discourse and the reason he had to say the right things to try and restore his image—to redeem himself through rhetoric.

In using the method of self-defense I am going to determine if Michael Vick's strategy was indeed the correct one to employ. I will use B.L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel's belief in Robert P. Abelson's theory that has to do with apologetic rhetoric and show what aspects of this Mr. Vick used. As part of the framework of the method I am going to also speak of the three ways Vick goes about defending himself.

Analysis

Now I will look at exactly how Michael Vick uses this strategy of *redemption rhetoric* and show just how it pertains to the use of

differentiation. First, I would like to touch on Vick's use of Evasion of Responsibility, which did not seem to sit well with the public upon the first release of his statements supporting his actions. During an interview with CBS's Jim Brown, Michael Vick was asked to explain a situation where two police officers drove up to a dofighting arena he was at as a child. Vick explains that he was eight years old and that the two officers saw exactly what was going on and got right back into their cars and drove off. Here is what Vick actually said when he was asked by Brown to explain to him this situation, "They got out the car, and seen that, you know, it was two dogs fighting, and they got back in the car and they rode, they left. So that right there made me feel like kind of, ok, this ain't as bad as it may seem. We didn't think it was bad at the time and that kind of put a stamp on it" (Vick 2009). This shows Michael Vick's attempt to try and justify what he did and make the two police officers his scapegoats.

Vick's logic is that since the law enforcement officials did not say anything was wrong with the actions taking place then why should he, as an eight-year-old child, know any better. This is a statement of Vick's that has been very controversial, but even those who completely disagree with it cannot fully do so when critically thinking about it. Children do what they learn from older people and an eight-year-old child cannot be held responsible to know that something like dogfighting is right or wrong. This was a pretty good tactic for Vick to use in order to excuse his actions as something he grew up doing, not really knowing it was wrong. This

excuse given by Mr. Vick also falls into the category of differentiation because it provides a different perspective for why he did what he did while not at all denying it. It follows the logic from Ware and Linkugel's article titled "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia" that essentially states, I did what I did, I do not deny that, but this is why I did it; therefore, my punishment should be lessened.

The next strategy we will investigate is Mr. Vick's use of mortification. Vick uses this strategy in a very intelligent way when explaining his situation to the public. He starts by apologizing and saying that he now knows and realizes what he did was wrong. He acknowledges what he did as a terrible act and is very saddened by the fact that he took part in such horrific events. When asked who he blames for this situation Vick emphatically exclaims, "I blame me." This is his first step towards using the mortification strategy. The next step comes when he explains what people should do and how to view his wrongdoing.

During a statement immediately following his guilty plea, Michael Vick had this to say, "I hope that every young kid out there looking at this case will use me as an example, to using better judgment, and making better decisions" (Vick, 2007). Here Vick offers up his situation and himself to be an example of what not to do. He is trying to make something positive out of a terrible, terrible situation.

Another way Vick mortifies himself, if you will, is by his admission of

finding God. He talks to Brown in the 60-Minutes interview about how he could not have changed by himself. He talks about how he was a terrible person and that really only God could change him because of the way he previously felt about his actions—feeling that he really was not doing anything wrong.

The third component of *redemption rhetoric*, corrective action, I believe is the most important aspect of the defense rhetoric portrayed by Michael Vick. Up to this point we have touched on all the things Mr. Vick has said about himself and the situation at hand. We have heard him as an apologetic man, a changed man, and a man born again through the Grace of his God. This third aspect is one that is very different than the first two and without it the defense strategy would not hold any staying power. Corrective action has to do with the things that Michael Vick has decided to actually do to help make people change their views about him and show he has genuinely changed.

The first way Michael Vick went about doing this was by giving over $1 million to help pay for rehabilitation classes for the tortured dogs at his home in Hampton, Virginia. This is a good step in the right direction, I believe, for Mr. Vick—even if the money was court mandated. It is important for someone to actually show how he or she has changed and not just talk about it. The next thing Michael Vick pledged to do was help out with the Humane Society. It is something that he has seemed to take

very seriously, that is before the 2009 NFL season started. It will be interesting to see if Vick actually follows through with what he said he would do.

The thing he has said he will do is travel around the U.S. and speak to children about the dangers and terrible aspects of dogfighting. President of the Humane Society, Wayne Pacelle, states how this issue is a big one in the U.S., but that many people do not really know the magnitude of the problem. "We knew it was a huge issue before Michael Vick was prosecuted, but the public didn't know. We estimate there are 40,000 professional dogfighters in the country and perhaps 100,000 street fighters. Were talking about something that is occurring in every part of the country, rural and urban, White, Black, Latino. It is an industry. People enjoy watching these animals compete and fight. They get excited by the bloodletting; they gamble on the outcome. The fights may last ten minutes, they may last for three hours" (Pacelle, 2009). This just shows the magnitude of what dogfighting actually is and also that it is something that needs someone to step up and help put an end to it. What better way to stop it than to have the most famous dogfighter of all time be the face to bring it down? This is the rhetoric that Michael Vick and his team of legal experts have so intelligently laid down. The question is, does any one else see this happening? Many people will wonder if Michael Vick will continue to do community service to help stop dogfighting with the Humane Society. President Pacelle has said he will make sure that Vick continues

to be involved with the Humane Society and that if he is not, the public will hear about it. Upon hearing this Vick has pledged his allegiance to the society and only time will tell if his promises are wholehearted.

Conclusion

The idea of *redemption rhetoric* is one that can truly bring someone back from public scrutiny—even someone like Michael Vick who was equated to the scum of the earth just a couple years ago. We have closely examined the life of a man who was at the top of his career in the NFL only to have it all taken away from him for his desire to have an adrenaline rush and fit in with his lifelong friends. If a man who makes a mistake as enormous as lying to a judge in court, his boss, coach, teammates, and family members can use this form of apologia to better his image, imagine how many other instances where it could successfully be used. Mr. Vick was caught in one of the biggest lies of this past decade in America and it appears that he is going to get his pass and be able to move on with his life.

He currently is playing for the Philadelphia Eagles as their back-up quarterback and wildcat quarterback. Wildcat quarterback means he comes in for the starting quarterback to run special plays that only a very agile quarterback can run. On Decmeber 6, 2009, Vick made his return to Atlanta for the first time to play an NFL game in front of his old fans, against his old team. If his play is any indicator of his rebound then things

are definitely looking up for this once NFL megastar. Vick ran and passed for his first touchdowns since rejoining the NFL this October after serving his 23-month jail sentence and 3-game suspension levied by NFL Commissioner, Roger Gooddell. After watching the highlights of the game and hearing NFL analysts talk about Vick one would never think of him as a man that was caught up in such a disgusting act just over two years ago.

After analyzing this style or technique in self-defense rhetoric it is apparent that people can truly come back from anything, especially here in America. I am not here to argue whether this is a good or bad thing. I am here to solely report what I have seen and believe to be true based in a logical manner. This new pairing of the three elements of *redemption rhetoric* have been proven to be successful through the writing of this paper and should be used much more by others in years to come. With the steady increase of celebrity scandals, liars, and cheats it would be irrational not to believe this to be true. The proper use of evasion of responsibility and mortification, coupled with a plausible avenue for corrective action can be one of the best ways to redeem oneself.

The Image Restoration Theory brought to us by William Benoit touches on many of the things this paper has brought to light in terms of how Michael Vick redeemed himself. The difference between this version of *redemption rhetoric* and Benoit's Image Restoration Theory is that this version is a specific way in which one can save his or her reputation. It

gives three fairly easy steps or guidelines in which to do so successfully. Benoit's theory, along with Kenneth Burke's work on mortification must be given much credit on the basis that all the pieces are borrowed from the two of them. The thing that sets this piece apart and contributes to rhetorical practice is that *redemption rhetoric* takes their ideas and puts them to work. It does not just say here it is this is what people do to save face. It takes elements and puts them together in order to add to how rhetoric in apologia can be done successfully.

It is important to keep in mind that because of the third component, corrective action, this apologia model can take a long time to actually carry out. That being said I would caution someone who needs to be forgiven in a small amount of time from using *redemption rhetoric* unless the corrective action can be done immediately. If the corrective action is going to be ongoing, like that of Mr. Vick, then you must be willing to put your time in. In Vick's case his ordeal is one with huge repercussions and seriousness, which makes the ongoing corrective action needed in order to show people he has truly changed and cares about animals. In stating this, do not just use these three elements together for every image-restoring situation.

The one problem with this approach that one might be asking is: How do I know someone like Michael Vick really has a changed heart? The answer to that question is that we can never truly know if someone

has changed based on what they say or do. On the flip side, we can also only judge people by what they say and what they do. In the case for Mr. Vick and any one else the best way to judge one's heart is to judge his or her actions based on what is said.

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