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**Differentiation Versus Denial: Impact of Messaging About Player Transactions On
Team Reputation, Ticket Sales, and Sports Channel Subscriptions**

Abstract

Part of a concerted effort to quantitatively test claims made throughout image repair research, this study provides a greater understanding of the effectiveness of the differentiation strategy over simple denial and provides further clarification for related claims made in image repair research. Sports teams who differentiate major roster changes from a team rebuild score higher on measures of reputation, intent to purchase tickets, and intent to subscribe to premium sports channels. On behalf of practitioners, scholars should consider the conditions under which the ability to claim differentiation is plausible with a loyal clientele or customer base.

Introduction

Most fans of any professional sport are familiar with the scenario. A team with a good, but not great, season record must decide at some point during the season whether it will attempt to acquire additional talent on the available market in order to strive for postseason play *or* trade away current top performers in order to acquire players who can contribute to future championship runs. Invariably, this requires judgment calls on the part of team management: (1) can the current team's season and situation be fairly assessed as unpromising?; (2) can current productive players be retained for the next season within financial constraints?; (3) are other teams in the league willing to part with promising prospects in exchange for team talent?; and (4) do the available prospects with other teams in the league fill a need which might make the team more competitive in the future? In sum, the professional sports team has a limited amount of resources for fielding a team and must choose the best course for acquiring and divesting of player assets.

Of course, sports fans have limited resources as well. Their assignment of financial resources necessarily involves internal cost-benefit ratios. Key to these considerations is the question of whether the value being provided to them by a team merits the expenditures incurred. This study will illuminate attitudes about those expenditures and advance our understanding of the *differentiation* strategy as one option within image restoration theory (IRT), now known more appropriately as image repair theory owing to the fact that reputations ordinarily cannot be restored to perfection, merely repaired as much as possible. Using the quintessential "mid-season sell-off" of the

Chicago Cubs in 2021, we'll test the impact of team statements on team reputation, fan intent to purchase tickets, and fan intent to subscribe to premium sports television.

This chapter will provide a short synopsis of the Chicago Cubs' 2021 mid-season player transactions and fan reaction thereto. This will include our observation that Cubs management chose to differentiate the current sets of trades from the trades which occurred in 2012 (which preceded a disastrous season). However, we offer no opinions on the wisdom of the player transactions as that subject is outside our scope of interest and expertise. We will offer a review of knowledge about image repair in sports while explaining the deficit of our understanding of the differentiation strategy. Finally, we will propose three hypotheses based on existing knowledge, explicate our method and procedures, produce results, and discuss their relevance to communication practitioners and theorists.

Image Restoration and the Athlete

Benoit's (1995) typology of image repair strategies has been the standard for understanding the nature and function of strategically defensive messages. It has been applied extensively to political, corporate, religious, and entertainment figures, but space limitations require that this section address only sports.

The image repair of athletes can be seen as early as Nelson's (1984) study of Billie Jean King following revelations of an affair with her personal assistant. She relied on the strategies of bolstering about her family life and differentiation of the indiscretion she had from a presumably unacceptable lesbian lifestyle (which was still frowned upon by many in the early 1980s). Her responses were generally well-received and Nelson's assessment was that surrogates (e.g., fellow tennis players, friends, sports media) offered

support that helped her repair her reputation. This case drew upon earlier examples of *apologia*, prior to the image restoration typology offered by Benoit (1995) in *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*.

The first application of this more detailed typology was Benoit and Hanczor's (1994) case study of the Tonya Harding controversy. Harding was credibly accused of colluding with acquaintances in a physical attack (striking her knee with a metal baton) on U.S. Olympic Figure Skating rival Nancy Kerrigan which left the skater temporarily unable to practice prior to the 1994 Olympic Games. The study found that Harding primarily used strategies of bolstering, denial, and attacking her accuser but that her discourse on *Eye-to-Eye with Connie Chung* was not effective because her credibility leading up to the interview had been tarnished by changes in her explanations and contradictory statements from others familiar with the people involved. She also failed to challenge damning evidence. Public opinion polling supported this assessment as Harding's image never recovered and she was banned from the sport for life.

Fortunato (2008) used the typology to study the Duke University lacrosse scandal, wherein three players were accused of sexually assaulting a dancer who had been hired for a wild party where much alcohol was being consumed. This application noted that university officials used mortification, bolstering, and corrective action. Looking at the same crisis, a Len-Rios (2010) application of the case found deployment of denial of the players' assault, admissions of malfeasance (mortification) insofar as the team's reputation for drunk and disorderly parties, and ultimately the promising of replacement (a pledge to replace the coach as a form of blame-shifting and corrective action). This

study found that these efforts tended to help repair the team's reputation with the local audience but did not repair a damaged national image.

Blaney et al. (2013) offered an edition with 20 image restoration studies covering a diversity of sports, genders, races, countries, and misdeeds. These studies all serve as additional examples of image repair applied to sports. Among others, Twork and Blaney (2013) called for new directions when they advocated for a turn to empirically testing image repair strategies to better assess some of the claims made in the many image repair case studies. For instance, Blaney and Benoit (2002) concluded that mortification would be more effective when combined with corrective action. However, Twork and Blaney's study found that an athlete accused of inappropriate on-field aggression who apologized *and* committed to attend anger management counseling (mortification plus corrective action) experienced no better reputation measure than the athlete who merely apologized (mortification only). Pace et al. (2010) made similar calls for the testing of claims generated by the IRT case studies.

Some scholars had been moving toward more generalizable work all along. Jerome (2008) advanced image repair as a "rhetoric of atonement," in the case of NASCAR driver Tony Stewart's assault on a newspaper photographer after a poor race outing. In particular, she examined the situation whereby a communicator could not use denial, justification, or transcendence. This work likewise pushed the field to use quantitative approaches which test the utility of the image restoration typology. Brown et al. (2012) discovered mortification was a more appropriate strategy for LeBron James than shifting the blame or bolstering following the image crisis following his departure from the Cleveland Cavaliers for the Miami Heat. Similarly, Brown et al. (2016)

discovered further support for the use of mortification over reducing offensiveness and evading responsibility strategies with the additional discovery that a white athlete (compared with Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern equivalents) achieved less image repair across all three of those responses. Brown et al. (2015) again pointed to both the effectiveness of mortification as an image repair choice and the unexpected higher ratings of black athletes. Most recently, Brown et al. (2018) found that the more respondents accepted NHL goalie Jordan Weal's responses to accusations of assault, the more respondents liked him and thought he could avoid repeating the transgression. Additionally, those less likely to report genuinely liking Weal were more likely to believe that repeating the misdeed was possible.

Blaney (2018) raised the specter of sports teams self-inflicting damage to reputation when they announce ticket price increases. Specifically, he noted that winning and rebuilding teams can explain the need to increase revenues without experiencing reputational damage while losing teams cannot.

The present study is one more attempt at normalizing the study of the effects of individual image repair choices quantitatively. While the rhetorical-critical approaches to image repair certainly continue (see McDormand's (2018) examination of Pete Rose, and Isaacson's (2018) analysis of the 2017 Chicago White Sox) to provide cases for potential transferability, image repair research will only grow by testing the claims made in the ubiquitous case studies.

Consumer Intent and the Sports Fan

This chapter addresses the topic of what a perceived sell-off of the core of a professional sports team can do to team reputation and its ability to sell tickets and attract

television revenue. As revenues dictate virtually all activities of an organization's expenditures, it is very important to have an acute understanding of threats to that revenue. However, like much communication research, we rely on the wisdom gained from other disciplines. Specifically, marketing findings about purchase intent must be explained.

Spears and Singh's (2004) study merged orientation toward brand and purchase intentions. Borrowing from the work of Mitchell and Olson (1981), they established reliable scales of attitude toward brand, with three characteristics: (a) attitude is held toward an object/brand, (b) attitude accompanies evaluation in terms of goodness or badness, and (c) that attitude is an internal state of mind, ultimately subject to adjustment/change and reliably self-reported by human subjects. Spears and Singh (2004) posit that from these attitudes, particular consumer behaviors will naturally follow. This is where intent to purchase becomes most central. That consumers orient their purchasing power at least partially based on attitude about the brand makes tremendous common sense and underscores the reality for most businesses that brand strength impacts revenues.

Spears and Singh (2004) conceptualize intent to purchase as personal action tendencies involving the brand. This differs from attitude to the extent that intent to purchase assumes motivation to engage in the act of commerce whereas attitude toward brand merely notes sentiment toward the brand. It is this connection between brand attitude and purchase intent that made Spears and Singh's findings so helpful as well as their offering of a reliable measure of intent to purchase. Its adaptability to live and mediated sports purchasing decisions becomes more relevant later in this study.

The Chicago Cubs 2021 Sell-Off: Rebuilding or Not?

Bastian (July 30, 2021) summarized Chicago Cubs player transactions ahead of the July 30 Major League Baseball deadline: “This will go down, without question, as one of the most important 24 hours in the long, storied history of the Chicago Cubs.” This was not hyperbole. During that period the Cubs parted company with: (1) first baseman Anthony Rizzo, (2) shortstop Javier Baez, (3) third baseman Kris Bryant, and (4) closing relief pitcher Craig Kimbrel. As if these fan favorites were not enough to part with, they also traded away starting pitcher Trevor Williams, relievers Ryan Tepera and Andrew Chafin, and outfielders Joc Peterson and Jake Marisnick. While the reasoning behind these trades certainly merit an interesting discussion, it is beyond dispute that the Cubs transactions during this period constituted no less than a disassembly of the team roster as known by fans and observers.

Blaney (2018) found that the status of a team as being “winning,” “losing,” or “rebuilding” significantly impacted measures of organizational reputation and intent to purchase tickets after announcing ticket price increases. Specifically, teams which are perceived as losing (as opposed to winning or rebuilding) receive the least forgiveness for such damage inflicted on fans.

However, what can be learned about the impact of a planned devaluation of the team roster (i.e., trading/selling away the team core) on such measures? The summer 2021 sell-off by the Chicago Cubs provides a quintessential case ripe for study. Specifically, could the team plausibly deflect negative fallout by differentiating the current roster moves from the pain which followed the 2012 sell-off? *Differentiation* involves a communicator describing a deed as something different than a deed for which

the communicator has been accused. For instance, when President George H. W. Bush was attacked for violating his pledge not to raise taxes, he differentiated them by saying that boosting income by “closing loopholes” was not a tax increase. As will be noted later, Chicago Cubs president of baseball operations differentiated his 2021 player transactions from the painful 2012 team rebuild by claiming that the new lineup had sufficient talent that it was not akin to rebuilding the team.

While image repair studies (most notably Benoit, 1995; Blaney and Benoit, 2001; and Benoit, 2017) have provided enough background about differentiation’s effectiveness to justify predictions, quantitative tests of such have not yet taken place. Consequently, this study offers the following hypothesis about differentiation and reputation:

H1: Sports organizations who differentiate roster changes from a team rebuild will score higher on a measure of reputation than teams who simply deny a rebuild.

Likewise, as ticket sales are the lifeblood of the professional sports team, we predict the following about differentiation and intent to purchase ticket sales:

H2: Sports organizations who differentiate roster changes from a team rebuild will score higher on a measure of intent to purchase tickets than teams who simply deny a rebuild.

Finally, as television viewing is another important revenue stream and contributor to market value, we predict the following about differentiation and intent to subscribe to a premium sports channel:

H3: Sports organizations who differentiate roster changes from a team rebuild will score higher on a measure of intent to subscribe to a premium sports channel than teams who simply deny a rebuild.

Method

Design

Testing these hypotheses required two experimental conditions: (1) an organizational response which differentiates player transactions from a team rebuild and (2) an organizational response which simply denies that the player transactions constitute a rebuild. Taking the form of a news story which quotes Chicago Cubs president of baseball operations Jed Hoyer, these responses are detailed in Appendices A and B. Using experimental stimuli from news media is appropriate as news and sports media outlets, broadly defined, are the primary source of information about sports. This true of teams and athletes from the high school level all the way to major market professional sports.

Subjects were assigned to one of the two conditions in Qualtrics survey software, asked basic demographic information, and then asked to respond to the story they read with answers assessing the dependent variables of organizational reputation (of the Chicago Cubs), intent to purchase tickets (for Chicago Cubs games), and intent to subscribe to a premium sports channel (the Marquee Sports network, owned and operated by the Chicago Cubs).

Sample

Social media snowballing was deployed to solicit survey respondents who classified themselves as Cubs fans and were 18 years of age or older. This returned 321 useable responses with 157 in the differentiation condition and 164 in the simple denial condition. Demographically, the subjects were 52.1% men and 47.6% women (one participant selected “other”); 9.8% reported income under \$35,000 per year, 26.7% reported an annual income of \$35,000 to 69,999, 18.2% reported an annual income of \$70,000-99,999, 17.3% reported an annual income of \$100,000-150,000, 17.6% indicated their annual income was over \$150,000, and 10.4% preferred not to answer.

A strong majority (74%) indicated attendance at Cubs games while only 26% indicated rarely or never attending games. A majority of those surveyed (57.7%) indicated that they pay for a premium service in order to receive the Chicago Cubs Marquee Sports Network. In short, this sample was largely composed of people who regularly spend money on Chicago Cubs enterprises.

Measures

Following exposure to the experimental condition, each participant answered a short survey using five-point (Likert-type, 1 to 5 with 5 as the strongest) adaptations of Coombs and Holladay’s (1996) Organizational Reputational scale (five items with Cronbach’s alpha = .81 in this study), Spears and Singh’s (2004) Intent to Purchase scale (four items with Cronbach’s alpha = .82 in this study), and Intent to Subscribe also as adapted from Spears and Singh (2004) (four items with alpha = .83 in this study). Item scores were reversed-recoded as necessary. Data collected from the survey were exported into SPSS in order to run tests appropriate to the hypotheses.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that sports organizations who differentiate roster changes from a team rebuild would score higher on a measure of reputation than teams who simply deny a rebuild. An independent samples *t*-test provided support for this hypothesis as the differentiation strategy produced higher reputation means than the denial strategy, $t(319) = 4.51, p < .001$. Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics for all dependent variables can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

[Tables 1 and 2 About Here]

The second hypothesis predicted that sports organizations who differentiate roster changes from a team rebuild would score higher on a measure of intent to purchase. An independent samples *t*-test provided support for this hypothesis as the differentiation strategy produced higher intent to purchase means than the denial strategy, $t(319) = 8.15, p < .001$.

The third hypothesis predicted that sports organizations who differentiate roster changes from a team rebuild would score higher on a measure of intent to subscribe than teams who simply deny a rebuild. Again, results of an independent samples *t*-test supported this hypothesis as the differentiation strategy produced higher intent to subscribe means than the denial strategy, $t(319) = 7.31, p < .05$.

Beyond the hypotheses, we employed *t*-tests to determine if the demographic variables we measured influenced the dependent variables. Initially, looking at participants in the differentiation condition, we found no statistically significant differences based on sex for reputation, $t(152) = 3.12, p > .05$; intent to purchase, $t(152) = 1.17, p > .05$; or intent to subscribe, $t(152) = .38, p > .05$. A similar pattern was

repeated in the denial condition as there were no differences based on sex for reputation, $t(150) = 2.58, p > .05$ or intent to subscribe, $t(150) = .55, p > .05$. However, we did find differences based on sex for intent to purchase in the denial group as males reported significantly higher means than females, $t(150) = .28, p < .05$. Means and standard deviations for sex by condition are reported in Table 3.

[Table 3 About Here]

We also found differences between the groups based on reported income. Initially, looking at participants in the differentiation condition, we found no statistically significant differences between those reporting annual incomes of \$100,000 or over (high income) and those reporting incomes of \$100,000 or under (low income) reputation, $t(133) = -.25, p > .05$; intent to purchase, $t(133) = -1.25, p > .05$; or intent to subscribe, $t(133) = 1.24, p > .05$. A similar pattern was repeated in the denial condition as there were no differences based on income for reputation, $t(138) = -2.49, p > .05$ or intent to purchase, $t(138) = -2.87, p > .05$. However, we did find differences based on income for intent to subscribe in the denial group as those reporting lower incomes scored higher than those reporting higher incomes, $t(138) = -.30, p < .05$. Means and standard deviations for income by condition are reported in Table 4.

[Table 4 About Here]

Discussion

This study has provided important results for both the advancement of image repair theory and sports executives who are faced with decisions about communicating major roster changes to various team stakeholders. Specifically, all three hypotheses were supported allowing us to claim that differentiating major roster changes from the simple

denial of a roster “rebuild” will help sporting organizations improve their reputations, augment ticket sales, and increase likelihood of success for media partners.

The finding that differentiation is more effective than denial in protecting reputation not only advances image repair research, but it very likely portends relevance to the other two measures studied here: intent to purchase and intent to subscribe. To the extent that organizational reputation is closely tied to the perceived integrity of a product, the connection between reputation and revenues necessary for commercial viability must be made.

Consider also the finding that differentiation is more effective than simple denial in protecting ticket sales. Brown (2020) reported that in pre-pandemic 2019 Major League Baseball (MLB) revenues reached \$10.7 billion. Thirty percent of that figure, \$3.21 billion, is attributable to ticket sales. While the remaining revenues attributable to media rights and other corporate partnerships certainly merit future study, the heart of any team’s financial value is the fandom whose eyes, ears, and discretionary household funds make revenue possible. In this regard, the sports organization must communicate effectively with its core audience: ticket buyers. This dynamic only increases in importance as a “post-pandemic” mindset emerges.

Likewise, the finding that differentiation is more effective than denial in protecting subscriptions to premium sports content begs to be noticed both by teams with their own proprietary carriers (such as the Chicago Cubs’ Marquee Sports Network) and all those seeking compensation for broadcast/streaming rights. Statista (2022) reported that in the United States alone 57.5 million viewers watched digital live sports at least once per month in 2021. That figure is projected to reach 90.7 million viewers by 2025.

As such, the organization wanting a maximum share of revenue would do well to cultivate and protect sports fan intent to subscribe.

Another significant finding was that subjects with lower incomes (under \$100,000 annually) scored higher on intent to subscribe to a premium sports channel than those subjects with incomes over \$100,000. One might surmise that those with higher income would have greater financial means to purchase tickets and those with lower income lesser means to do so. This may leave the team fan wanting to watch play via media as central to organizational revenues derived from broadcast rights. A more qualitative approach to sports fans via open-ended interviews and focus groups may help clarify the reasons behind the difference which upon first glance may seem counterintuitive.

The other curious finding was that of those in the denial condition men scored higher on intent to purchase tickets than women. We lack data to surmise why this may be, but it may provide heuristic value for the study of sex differences where the denial strategy is deployed.

Beyond the significant differences found, the study offers a new reliable measure for assessing an audience's intent to subscribe to premium sports offerings. This offers potential for studying media content subscriptions writ large, not just the sports media genre.

The present study is limited by the fact that many fans consume sports information via audio-visual means. As such, the text-based messaging studied here ought to be expanded to audio and video platforms. The very nature of aural and visual processing drives media writers to compose their messages differently, indeed, because the content is consumed differently. Text lends itself to consumption of messages at the

consumer's pace as returning to text (e.g., print, online text, etc.) is possible. Audio and video content (even when available for reply) is written for the eye and ear so as to maximize understanding of the content when consumed once and perhaps somewhat inattentively in the audio-video (radio, television, multimedia) environment.

Conclusion

The study provides a greater understanding of the effectiveness of the differentiation strategy and provides further clarification for related claims made in image restoration research. Sports teams who differentiate major roster changes from a team rebuild score higher on measures of reputation, intent to purchase tickets, and intent to subscribe to premium sports channels. On behalf of sports executives, scholars should consider the conditions under which the ability to claim differentiation is plausible with the fan base.

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Appendix A

Differentiation Condition

Subjects were exposed to the following announcement:

Read the news account below then answer the questions which follow.

CUBS DEAL SEVERAL PLAYERS BEFORE TRADE DEADLINE

Chicago-The Chicago Cubs parted with key players in the week leading up to the July 30th trade deadline. First baseman Anthony Rizzo was sent to the New York Yankees for an outfield prospect and pitching prospect. Third baseman Kris Bryant was traded for two San Francisco Giants prospects. Shortstop Javier Baez and right handed pitcher Trevor Williams were sent to the New York Mets in exchange for the highly touted outfield prospect Pete Crow-Armstrong. Finally, closer Craig Kimbrel and set-up reliever Ryan Tepera were traded to the Chicago White Sox for second baseman Nick Madrigal and pitcher Codi Heuer. These trades were on top of those sending Joc Peterson, Jake Marsinick, and Andrew Chafin to other teams as well.

Cubs president of baseball operations Jed Hoyer explained that these trades did not create a rebuild similar to the one that Cubs fan suffered through in 2012: "When we walked in, in 2012, we realized that this was going to be a really long process to get good. We didn't feel like we had the right pieces together. Now I think with the players we have I don't see any reason why this needs to be a long process."

Appendix B

Denial Condition

Subjects were exposed to the following announcement:

Read the news account below then answer the questions which follow.

CUBS DEAL SEVERAL PLAYERS BEFORE TRADE DEADLINE

Chicago-The Chicago Cubs parted with key players in the week leading up to the July 30th trade deadline. First baseman Anthony Rizzo was sent to the New York Yankees for an outfield prospect and pitching prospect. Third baseman Kris Bryant was traded for two San Francisco Giants prospects. Shortstop Javier Baez and right-handed pitcher Trevor Williams were sent to the New York Mets in exchange for the highly touted outfield prospect Pete Crow-Armstrong. Finally, closer Craig Kimbrel and set-up reliever Ryan Tepera were traded to the Chicago White Sox for second baseman Nick Madrigal and pitcher Codi Heuer. These trades were on top of those sending Joc Peterson, Jake Marsinick, and Andrew Chafin to other teams as well.

Cubs president of baseball operations Jed Hoyer explained that these trades did not create a rebuild similar to the one that Cubs fan suffered through in 2012.

Table 1*Bivariate Correlations for All Dependent Variables (N = 321)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Reputation	3.22	.86	---		
2. Intent to Purchase	3.71	1.05	.54**	---	
3. Intent to Subscribe	2.53	1.15	.34**	.41**	---

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables by Condition*

	Differentiation			Denial		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Reputation	3.43 _a	.74	157	3.01 _a	.92	164
Intent to Purchase	4.15 _b	.81	157	3.28 _b	1.08	164
Intent to Subscribe	2.97 _c	1.20	157	2.10 _c	.92	164

Note. Means with the same subscript are significantly different, $p < .05$.

Table 3*Descriptive Statistics for Sex by Condition*

	Male			Female		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Differentiation Condition						
Reputation	3.69	.73	53	3.31	.72	101
Intent to Purchase	4.25	.79	53	4.09	.82	101
Intent to Subscribe	3.00	1.22	53	2.93	1.91	101
Denial Condition						
Reputation	3.10	.94	107	2.69	.83	45
Intent to Purchase	3.29 _a	1.16	107	3.24 _a	.98	45
Intent to Subscribe	2.14	.94	107	2.04	.89	45

Note. Means with the same subscript are significantly different, $p < .05$.

Table 4*Descriptive Statistics for Income by Condition*

	High Income			Low Income		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Differentiation Condition						
Reputation	3.44	.77	51	3.47	.71	84
Intent to Purchase	4.05	.83	51	4.23	.79	84
Intent to Subscribe	3.09	1.14	51	2.83	1.24	84
Denial Condition						
Reputation	2.78	.89	56	3.17	.91	84
Intent to Purchase	2.99	.97	56	3.52	1.14	84
Intent to Subscribe	2.08 _a	1.05	56	2.13 _a	.86	84

Note. Means with the same subscript are significantly different, $p < .05$.