

Responding to doping rumors and accusations in sports communication: Rafael Nadal's use of image repair strategies

Respuesta a rumores de dopaje y acusaciones en el ámbito de la comunicación deportiva: La utilización de estrategias de reparación de la imagen por parte de Rafael Nadal

Respondendo aos rumores e acusações de doping no campo da comunicação esportes: O uso da imagem estratégias de reparo de por Rafael Nadal

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Abstract

The rumors derived from false or unproven accusations carry relatively small attention in the research on crisis communication. Most times the literature on this topic focuses on how to react to serious incidents or, if anything, to rumours derived from these events. However, rumors founded or unfounded, true or false, can have a big impact on the quality of the relationships that an organization or individual (in the case of sports) has with its stakeholders. In particular, especially in the sport of elite, rumors affect the legitimacy or the perceived congruency between the athlete's behavior and the social norms. Obviously, the accommodative strategies have no place when accusations are based on assumptions which have not been proved. But neither the mere denial that keeps

alive the controversy. The case of doping accusations to Rafael Nadal is a demonstration of that. Only when Nadal's team moved from denial and bolstering to implement corrective actions in an effort to create transparency, media controversy stopped. This case demonstrates that, in a digital era of full disclosure, single elite athletes should advocate for maximum transparency, beyond legal standards, in order to protect the legitimacy of their achievements.

Key words: Sports, tennis, image repair, doping, Rafael Nadal, legitimacy

Resumen

La investigación en el ámbito de la comunicación de crisis ha dedicado escasa atención a los rumores derivados de acusaciones falsas o no probadas. En la mayor parte de los casos la literatura acerca de este tema se centra en como reaccionar a incidentes graves o, en todo caso, a los rumores derivados de los propios incidentes. Sin embargo, los rumores, ya sean fundados o infundados, verdaderos o falsos, pueden tener un gran impacto en la calidad de las relaciones que una organización o individuo (en el caso de los deportes) tiene con sus públicos. En particular, y especialmente en el mundo del deporte de élite, los rumores afectan la legitimidad o la congruencia percibida entre el comportamiento del atleta y las normas sociales. Obviamente, las estrategias acomodaticias no tienen sentido cuando las acusaciones están basadas en asunciones que no pueden ser probadas. El caso de las acusaciones de dopaje a Rafael Nadal es un ejemplo de ello. Únicamente cuando el equipo de Nadal pasó de la negación y la autoafirmación a implementar acciones correctoras en un esfuerzo por crear transparencia, la controversia mediática se detuvo. Este caso demuestra que, en esta era digital y de plena accesibilidad a las informaciones, los deportistas de élite deberían abogar por la máxima transparencia, más allá de las normas establecidas, con el objetivo de proteger la legitimidad de sus logros.

Palabras clave: Deportes, tenis, reparación de la imagen, dopaje, Rafael Nadal, legitimidad

Resumo

Investigação no campo da comunicação de crise tem dedicado pouca atenção aos rumores decorrentes de alegações falsas ou não comprovadas. Na maioria dos casos, a literatura sobre o tema se concentra em como reagir a incidentes graves ou, em qualquer caso, rumores decorrentes dos próprios incidentes. No entanto, rumores, seja fundada ou infundada e, verdadeiro ou falso, pode ter um grande impacto sobre a qualidade de relacionamentos que uma organização ou indivíduo (para esportes) têm com os seus públicos-alvo. Em particular, e especialmente no mundo do desporto de elite, rumores afetar a legitimidade ou congruência percebida entre comportamento e normas atleta social. Obviamente estratégias acomodáticas são sem sentido quando as acusações são baseadas em suposições que não podem ser testadas. O caso de doping cobra Rafael Nadal

é um exemplo. Só quando a equipe Nadal passou de negação e auto-afirmação para implementar ações corretivas em um esforço para criar a transparência, a controvérsia mídia parou. Este caso mostra que neste acesso digital e completo para a era da informação, os atletas de elite devem defender a máxima transparência, além dos padrões estabelecidos, a fim de proteger a legitimidade de suas realizações.

Palavras chave: Desportes, tenis, reparação de imagem, dopagem, Rafael Nadal, legitimidade

Introduction

Rafael Nadal is a legend in the world of tennis. With his 14 Grand Slam and 28 Master 1000 titles, only Roger Federer, consider the best player of all times, can boast a better record (17 Grand Slams). Nadal was ranked number one in the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) list for 141 weeks. The most important part of his legend has been forged on clay court surfaces, having won 9 French Open titles. He is admired for his sport successes but also because of his values: Bravery, hard work, loyalty and humility, among others (Nadal & Carlin, 2011).

Nadal, like all sport elite legends, is deeply scrutinized. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the sport of tennis has some issues itself. Tennis is a magnet for gambling because of the nature of the game, and its lopsided economic structure is second in popularity among bettors only to soccer (Steinberger, 2016). But, even more important, doping allegations have been constant in recent years. Due to the use of new materials and the dominance of hard surface courts, tennis is more than ever about power and endurance, which enhances the physical factor. An additional problem is that a number of lower ranked players have been suspended for the use of steroids, including Marin Cilic, who won the US Open in 2014. The International Tennis Federation (ITF) does not seem to have done enough to avoid rumors. While most top-ranked players were tested frequently in competition, since if they win more matches they are more likely to be randomly selected for blood and urine analysis, tests are still relatively scarce. For example, in 2011 only 21 out-of-competition blood tests were conducted (Bryant, 2013). Juan Martin del Potro and Jelena Jankovic, notably top-ten players in masculine and feminine tennis respectively, had zero out-of-competition blood tests, considered the best way to detect for enhancing-performance drugs, in 2013 (Robson, 2014).

Some critics have pointed out that while prizes have increased considerably in recent times, the budget for doping programs has remained stagnant. Tennis spends \$300 million in prize money yet budgets for doping programs are \$2 million, and the EPO test (Bryant, 2013), considered the one test tennis needs the most because it helps increase endurance and recovery, was cut back because of high costs. Moreover, there is evidence

tennis officials have been more interested in protecting the sport's image than watching out for steroid use, particularly among stars. In his autobiography, *Open*, Andre Agassi unveiled he tested positive for crystal methamphetamine in 1997 and that the ATP kept the test result secret and accepted his claim he had taken the drug by accident (Agassi, 2009).

Furthermore, Spain, Nadal's country of origin, has a reputation of being soft on doping, with legislation, judges and even politicians not addressing the problem appropriately (Macur, 2013). For example, when the 2010 doping case of the Tour of France winner Alberto Contador happened, the Spanish cycling federation cleared him of all charges and even Spain's Prime Minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, publicly pressured the cycling federation to drop charges against Contador.

The French media have begun to shine a spotlight on Spanish athletes because of Contador's victories and 2010 doping case in the Tour of France as well as Nadal's record of wins in the French Open, these being the two main international platforms for French sports. The hegemony of the Spanish soccer team in the 2008 and 2012 Euro Cup and 2010 World Cup only added to the mix. One controversial media portrayal came on a popular puppet show (*les guignols*) on Canal Plus France that showed Nadal urinating in a car's gas tank to make it go faster, then getting stopped by French authorities for speeding at 200 mph. The words "Spanish athletes – they do not win by chance" were then flashed across the screen (Bobby, 2012). In another sketch, several Spanish athletes, among them Rafael Nadal, are using needles to sign a manifesto in support of Alberto Contador (Vul, 2012).

Prior to the *guignols*, former French tennis champion Yannick Noah, offering no other proof, said the reason Spanish athletes were consistently beefier than French ones was because of doping. He suggested Spanish athletes took "a magic potion" (Associated Press, 2011).

After a few years of relative calm, in 2016, the week after Maria Sharapova revealed her positive test for the recently banned substance meldonium, Rafael Nadal had to face doping allegations. On the French show "Le Grand 8," Roselyne Bachelot, the former French Minister of Health and Sport, accused Rafael Nadal of simulating an injury that kept him off the courts for seven months in order to cover a positive test (Rothenberg, 2016). Nadal denied the accusations and announced he would sue the former French minister.

Analysis of how Nadal and his team managed these accusations and rumors suggests several theoretical and practical implications. First, image restoration strategies are needed not only when human beings commit acts that may be questioned by others (Benoit, 1995) but also when there are rumors or unproven accusations that can damage the legitimacy of the accused, especially in the case of an individual person. Second, the

use of denial, bolstering and particularly attacking the accuser *per se* does not enhance the credibility of the accused, even in the absence of proof. Finally, only the implementation of corrective actions to pursue transparency increases the credibility and legitimacy of the athletes.

Rumors, legitimacy and theory of image repair discourse

Despite having been formulated more than 20 years ago for the first time, William Benoit's image restoration theory (1995, 2005) is still the most popular theory among scholars for image repair discourse purposes. In order to be implemented, this theory has two premises. First, an act must have occurred that is considered undesirable or condemnable. Second, an actor is held responsible for an action.

The actors would have to defend themselves by opting among five strategies: denial, when an organization or individual denies the act occurred; evasion of responsibility, or a search for external justifications; reduction of the offensiveness of the act; implementation of corrective actions, or a promise to correct the problem; and mortification, when the actors take responsibility and ask for forgiveness.

But, what if the act has not occurred or at least has not been proved? Interestingly, although Benoit (1997) argues "perceptions are more important than reality" (p. 178), his theory does not seem to contemplate unproven rumors or hypothetical acts but, in the best scenario, stakeholders' speculations as a consequence of the existence of a more or less serious offensive act.

Risk communication and crisis management theory are more rotund, stating that the role of perceptions has more to do with the position of the stakeholders than with the commission of acts. For Holladay and Coombs (2013), "although managers may not believe an event or action constitutes a risk or crisis, if enough stakeholders develop a shared perspective, become concerned about the event, and communicate about it *as if* it is a crisis or risk, even a minor threat may evolve into a crisis" (p. 451). Communication between publics creates these shared perspectives. Rumors typically arise in situations characterized by personal relevance and where there is a lack of transparency (Difonzo & Bordia, 1998, 2000). Rumors, accurate or not, often can create exigencies that demand a response especially when they affect the legitimacy of the organization.

Legitimacy is a central concept to the practice of public relations and crisis communications (Bridges, 2004; Heath, 2006; Meisenbach & Mc Millan, 2006). Cheney and Christensen (2001) emphasize the ethical component of this concept. It is a concept applied to organizations but also to individuals, including records such as in the case of Barry Bonds (Boyd, 2009).

It can be described as the congruency between organizational, or individual, actions with social norms (Epstein & Votaw, 1978; Francesconi, 1982). Organizations that want to be perceived as legitimate must be engaged in activities that are useful for the community in a responsible way (Epstein, 1972; Boyd, 2000). It is indeed “the foundation of all effective communication with publics” (Boyd, 2009, p. 157). Legitimacy can be lost when the organization/individual changes the way they operate or if society changes its rules. Good, solid public relations requires maintaining legitimacy, and rumors erode this especially by comparison with other organizations/individuals that don’t have to deal with those rumors.

It is not clear how publics confer legitimacy, but they are the ones who do it. Seeger (1986) argues legitimacy depends on the quality of the relationships with the publics, while Heath (2006) highlights that legitimacy has to be achieved by “being proactive and responsive to others' communication and opinion needs” (p. 100).

Athletes who are found guilty of doping are often dispossessed of their records, such as the recent examples of Armstrong and Landis in the biking world, as a consequence of the illegitimacy of their achievements. Nonetheless, there is no evidence rumors need be demonstrated to avoid a legitimacy crisis if there are enough doubts created about the athletes’ merits and records. And a loss of legitimacy may lead to a loss of fans because of a perceived lack of responsibility, particularly in an individual sport such as tennis, and, therefore, to a loss of sponsorships. In this case, an unchecked rumor crisis forced Nadal’s team to articulate a series of image restoration strategies in order to suffocate a legitimacy crisis.

Method

This article first describes the approach of the crisis management field in general and the image restoration strategies theory in particular with regard to the impact of rumors on corporate and individual reputations. Second, it analyzes the quality of the response of Rafael Nadal’s team to the accusations of doping through the analysis of representative international media coverage on tennis and using as a framework the image restoration theory. Third, it makes an assessment of challenges, do’s and don’t’s in similar cases to Nadal’s.

Analysis of Nadal’s image repair strategies

Rafael Nadal and his team used four strategies in an attempt to fight against the accusations and rumors. These strategies included denial, attack of the accuser, bolstering and implementation of corrective actions.

Denial

The first accusation came from French tennis legend Yannick Noah, who retired from tennis in 1996. He told French newspaper *Le Monde* that Spain's sporting success was due to doping.

Indeed, in 2011, Spanish athletic successes were at their peak. Spain's football team were World Cup and European Champion holders, while cyclist Alberto Contador had won the Tour of France in three of the previous five years. Spain's basketball team had won a World Championship, two European titles and an Olympic silver medal over the previous six years.

Noah noted that French athletes "look like dwarves" (Ornstein, 2011) by comparison to the Spaniards: "Did we miss something? Did they discover some avant-garde techniques or training facilities that nobody before them had imagined?" (2011).

Nadal denied the accusations. He responded to Noah's comments by arguing that drug testing procedures show the claims lacked foundation. "He knows better than anybody that to say that today is a totally stupid thing because you know how many anti-doping controls we have during the season, year by year," Nadal said (2011).

Nadal found support in the French Tennis Federation that "expressed its disagreement with Yannick Noah's comments made in *Le Monde* newspaper" (2011). Fellow Spanish tennis player, David Ferrer, and the Barcelona soccer team's then-coach Pep Guardiola and the French Minister for Sports, David Douillet, supported Nadal as well (Espan, 2011).

Nadal denied the rumors propagated by the Canal Plus' guignols puppets as well. The Spanish tennis player insisted he was completely clean of drugs. "There is no question of pills or syringes or anything like that, I can assure you," Nadal told the press (Allen, 2012).

Toni Nadal, coach and uncle of Rafael Nadal, opted against any type of legal action against Canal Plus but firmly denied the insinuations: "French people can wait all their lives for a positive doping of Rafa Nadal. There is no chance, the possibility is zero. Everybody is free to think what they want" (Garcés, 2012).

Nadal's team had the support of important political bodies in Spanish sports and politics. The Spanish tennis federation announced it would initiate legal actions against Canal Plus France due to the slanderous accusations and illegal use of its logo (Allen, 2012). Yet in four years no outcome concerning these legal actions has been known, so probably there was no action taken. Likewise, the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs denied the lack of ethics, bad taste and false information contained in the videos produced by the French "to denigrate Spanish sport" (2012).

And last, but not least, Nadal had to respond to the former French sports minister's accusations after Sharapova's high-profile confession. Roselyne Bachelot said on French TV, "We know that Nadal's famous seven-month injury was without a doubt due to a positive [drug test]. When you see a tennis player who stops playing for long months, it is because he has tested positive and because they are covering it up. It is not something that always happens, but, yes, it happens more than you think" (Mitchell, 2016).

That same day, Nadal stated he was "very far from doping" and insisted, "when I injured myself, I am injured, I never take anything illegal to come back sooner. I never hid anything of what I did" (Mundo Deportivo, 2016a). The following day, Real Madrid, Nadal's favorite soccer team, sent a press release supporting Rafael Nadal because he "represents fundamental sport values" (Real Madrid, 2016).

There were more accusations coming from other sources, such as Austrian tennis player Daniel Koellerer, who was given a lifetime ban by the ATP Tour in 2011 when he was found guilty of match-fixing multiple times. In 2013, Koellerer said he had been used as a scapegoat although other prominent players such as Nadal were not clean because "after having been seven months without competing because of injuries it is not possible to come back and win 10 out of 13 tournaments... That is impossible. Impossible!" (Rama, 2013). Toni Nadal did not even bother to deny the accusations and responded briefly: "He has no credibility" (Rama, 2013). Brevity or denial was certainly Nadal's team's strategy these years in trying to reduce the importance and relevance of the accusations and rumors.

Bolstering

Nadal also tried to reduce the offensiveness of the accusations by emphasizing aspects such as sacrifice and work ethic. He did it mainly following Bachelot's accusations. "I have been working so much since I [was] five years old, all my career, to have the success that I had. And always with the right way, always practicing with passion, with intensity, with love for the game" (Tandon, 2016).

Indeed, Nadal's reputation and public profile is a monument to personal integrity and work ethic. Numerous articles and particularly his best selling autobiography, *Rafa* (2011), are an account of anecdotes and situations, bordering on cruelty, where his uncle Toni tested Nadal in order to make him tougher and stronger. In Spain, the expression "Nadalizar España" (Jiménez, 2016), meaning to use Nadal as an ethical model for Spaniards, has become increasingly popular.

Asked for his reaction to Maria Sharapova's failed test, Nadal said, "I believe in the sport and the values of the sport. It is an example for the kids and if I am doing something that goes against that, I will be lying to myself, not lying to my opponents" (BBC.com, 2016).

Attack the accuser

There have been a number of times where Nadal and his uncle have attacked the accusers. Despite being the younger of the two, Rafael Nadal tends to act in a calmer, more educated way. Toni Nadal's style, although reflective at times, is frequently more visceral and aggressive. Both, however, have insulted the accusers at some point.

Rafael Nadal made particularly derogatory remarks after Yannick Noah's article in *Le Monde*. "What he said is completely stupid. This guy does not deserve to write in newspapers anymore... The article that he wrote was from a kid and when a kid says something it's not painful for us," Nadal said in what was perhaps his toughest response of all.

Toni Nadal's response to the accusations of Belgian player Oliver Rochus, who considered it impossible that players like Nadal could play for five hours in hot temperatures and "still run like a rabbit" (Huffington Post, 2013) the next day, was more verbally aggressive. Toni Nadal said Rochus was "a real imbecil because if you knew something, I think it would be right to say it. I find it incredible that an idiot like this can say what he said" (2013). Andy Murray, another top tennis player, called Rochus' opinions "far from the truth" (2013).

Despite the virulence of Nadal's comments, what really contributed to strengthening the credibility of Nadal regarding this issue was his decision to take Roselyne Bachelot to the court of justice. No other public statements or accusations have been heard or found after he made that announcement and all the information on relevant media has since focused on his season performance.

Implementing corrective actions

Despite the fact that the accusations have been based on unproved facts, Nadal and his team have admitted somewhat that there is perception problem that affects tennis in general due to a lack of transparency. Nadal told the press about his request made to the President of the International Tennis Federation, David Haggerty, to release all his history in antidoping controls. In his petition, Nadal wrote, "please, make public my biological passport and my complete history of controls and antidoping tests. From now on, I will ask you to release all the results of each test as soon as possible when they are ready" (Ciriza, 2016).

When asked about this topic after a Spanish judge ordered the destruction of proof of other Spanish athletes accused of doping, Nadal criticized as well the lack of transparency in Spain:

“When things happen, as in Spain, where it seems evidence can be destroyed, it is terrible news. It would be better for all if those who do bad things have to pay for it and those who do well look clean; if not, everything becomes an unnecessary speculation that damages the sport and the image of the sportsmen. The transparency has to be total” (Ciriza, 2016).

These petitions and reflections, where Nadal questions the behavior of the federation and judges, could be taken as well as an evasion of responsibility at least regarding the existence of negative perceptions about professional sport in general, and tennis in particular.

Nadal used Sharapova’s situation to show his convictions in favor of more transparency and player accountability in the tennis world. When asked his opinion about the confession of doping by Sharapova, Nadal was clear: “I want to believe it is a mistake by Maria. She did not want to do it. But, obviously, she was negligent. She should pay for it” (Mundo Deportivo, 2016b). This was a strong statement in which Nadal, taking into consideration that Sharapova said to have used meldonium to treat diabetes but not to enhance her performance, advocated for not using mistakes as excuses. Nadal’s underlying message was ‘I should be punished if I doped myself, even by mistake, but I know for sure that is not going to happen.’

But perhaps the most conclusive corrective action was when Nadal announced he would sue Bachelot and anyone else who made similar accusations in the future: “I am tired about these things. I let it go a few times in the past. No more” (Rothenberg, 2016). In fact, the way he articulated his response sounded almost as an act of legitimate defense that conferred him legitimacy and credibility, when he pronounced, “the plague of doping in sport, baseless accusations and provocative comments are inappropriate, and the worst attitude would be to give up” (2016). As an additional proof of the nobility of his intentions, Nadal pledged to donate any money won from the case to a non-governmental organization or foundation in France.

Discussion

Doping accusations against Nadal started in 2011 and they continued in 2016 when this article was written. This is a long period of time under public focus and acknowledges that mere denial of accusations and rumors was not fully effective. Insulting the accusers or bolstering did not help that much either. Although Nadal and his team considered that their accusers -- a frivolous TV show and a number of retired, semi-retired or relatively unknown players in the professional tennis circuit -- did not have enough credibility, the media and the tennis blogosphere still echoed their words. Having received the support of powerful institutions such as Real Madrid, the ITF or other tennis stars such as Andy Murray did not put a stop to the continued rumors.

Only when, almost simultaneously, another tennis star, Maria Sharapova, admitted publicly to having tested positively, and a top politician accused Nadal on a popular program on French TV, did Nadal's team take on a different approach. Going to court when rumors cannot be demonstrated conveys a great amount of credibility for the accused. It generates credibility as well to advocate for greater transparency in the world of tennis.

Despite the momentary positive results of silencing rumors thanks to the legal actions, their outcome, even if it is favorable for Nadal, will not put an end to this issue. The court of public opinion is not equivalent to the court of justice and doubts about the legitimacy of his career (particularly his Roland Garros record) may continue.

It should not be the goal that absolutely everybody be persuaded about Nadal's cleanliness. Furthermore, legitimacy can exist in varying degrees, or in other words, not everybody has to be in agreement for legitimacy to exist (Boyd, 2000). If there are enough stakeholders who believe in the integrity and work ethic of Nadal, his records will be respected and honored. That is still the case despite the accusations and rumors. Nadal is still more liked by tennis fans than the now third-year number one player Novak Djokovic (Shaftel, 2015) and he has more Facebook followers than Roger Federer, the most admired tennis player of the last 12 years.

Nadal's strong reputation before rumors started has helped protect him. Nadal's behavior has always appeared ethical, giving him a starting point of legitimacy. His public image is that of a role model, good example for kids, respectful with other players and his fans, humble and a hard-worker (Crouse, 2010). The number of anecdotes and articles about Nadal and his uncle's teachings further demonstrate these attributes.

However, to maintain one's legitimacy, especially in the case of public individuals, requires vigilance and a performing of appropriate and responsible actions that engender the public's confidence (Brummer, 1991). In one word, it requires maximum transparency.

A corporation or persona always has to meet the era's expectations. The expectations of stakeholders (fans, sponsors, players, etc.) in the world of sports and tennis have changed. The environment of professional tennis, where the ITF did not reveal doping results and where a number of relevant players, such as Agassi or Sharapova, tested positive in their careers, has not helped. The attitude of Spanish courts or other sports federations has not helped either. The level of scrutiny and awareness of public opinion is so high that even if Nadal wins his legal case, and although from a communication management perspective he did the right thing, there will always be an asterisk (although minor) concerning his record of achievements.

Conclusion

This analysis suggests two key lessons can be extracted from Nadal's use of image repair strategies. First, maintaining a strong reputation and legitimacy in a world as highly scrutinized and sensitive to rumors as sports requires maximum transparency beyond the legal standards, not only by the players but by the federations and sport organizations. One without the other does not fully work and that makes athletes much more dependable and vulnerable than, for example, corporations. Image repair strategies such as denials or even endorsements do not fight rumors convincingly enough, especially if the endorsers have something at stake, such as Spain's government (country reputation in the world of sports), Real Madrid (Nadal is one of its most prominent fans) or Murray and Ferrer (other top professional tennis players interested in reducing doubts about doping in tennis).

Nadal's case, as well as other recent cases of athletes competing in individual sports such as Floyd Landis (Glantz, 2010) or Lance Armstrong (Hambrick, Frederick & Sanderson, 2015), also shows athletes do not necessarily have the skills or training necessary to defend themselves in public. Nadal's team, including a traditional press agent, Benito Pérez Barbadillo (Rafaholics, 2011), and his uncle, lacked the skills or training in crisis management beyond common sense.

Future studies may examine the ramifications of individual athletes who face unproven rumors. In most current studies, athletes take responsibility for the act, but rumorology is becoming more commonplace in the world of sports. Maximum transparency is hopefully the response, but perhaps due to the inherent nature of the digital world, sport celebrities need to get accustomed to living with unproven rumors.

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