

---

**“I MADE A MISTAKE. PLEASE FORGIVE ME!”  
IMPACT OF A DOPING DEFENSE ON TWITTER (preliminary  
results)**

Submitting author: Ms Katharina Poeppel  
University of Münster, Germany, Institute of Sport and Exercise Sciences  
Muenster, 48149  
Germany

All authors: Katharina Poeppel (corresp), Dennis Dreiskaemper, Arndt Heike

Type: Scientific

Category: C: Drugs in Sport - Current Issues and Challenges for Sport Management

**Abstract**

Aim of paper

Doping is a comprehensive problem that is often followed by a defense statement of the athlete involved. The publication of new doping cases leads to a loss of trust and a tarnished reputation concerning the athlete (as nonmaterial examples), but also to consequences for the sports system in total, like the termination of broadcasting or a waning interest of recipients (Solberg, Hanstad, & Thøring, 2010). Many athletes apply social media like Facebook or Twitter to address their recipients directly and without journalistic gatekeepers. Therefore the aim of this study was to investigate how an athlete's defense statement on Twitter influences the recipient's perception of trustworthiness and reputation of this athlete.

Theoretical background

Athletes apply so-called image repair-strategies, in order to regain trust and to restore their reputation (Coombs, 2007). We define trust as the willingness (of the recipient) to be vulnerable to the actions of the athlete, which is based on the expectation that the athlete will perform an action, which is important to the recipient (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712). According to this model the recipient trusts in an athlete's ability, integrity and/or benevolence, which leads to an overall evaluation of the athlete's trustworthiness. If a positive doping test becomes known a reevaluation of these antecedents of trustworthiness and of the athlete's reputation takes place. Within the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Coombs (2007) names altogether ten different strategies (e.g., denial, attack the accuser, or apology) an athlete might apply to influence the reevaluation. Apology occupies a special position, because it is either highlighted as most efficient strategy (e.g, Brown, Dickhaus, & Long, 2012), but also criticized as over-promoted (Coombs & Holladay, 2008).

## Methodology

We conducted an online experiment (between-subject design) using a case vignette of a fictitious doping case to evaluate the impact of four different image repair strategies (namely: attack the accuser, justification, denial, and apology) on the perceived trustworthiness and reputation (five-point Likert-scale). The doping case was introduced as a male German bobsleigh athlete, who failed a doping test due to an increased testosterone level. After this introduction a screenshot of a Twitter posting was presented, in which the athlete defends himself against the accusations by applying one of the aforementioned strategies. Additionally we surveyed a control group with a neutral statement. Altogether 148 people participated (52.7% male, 47.3% female). Their mean age was 26.68 years (SD = 8.25).

## Results

A univariate ANOVA (with Bonferoni post-hoc test) of the perceived trustworthiness identified differences between the strategies ( $F(4, 139) = 6.96, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$ ). Participants of the apology-condition evaluated the perceived trustworthiness less positive ( $M = 2.81, SD = .60$ ) than in the justification-condition ( $M = 3.56, SD = 0.56, p < .001$ ), and in the denial-condition ( $M = 3.30, SD = 0.63, p = .006$ ). The tweet also impacted the evaluation of the athletes reputation ( $F(4, 139) = 5.11, p = .001, \eta^2 = .13$ ). Participants of the control group evaluated the athlete's reputation more positive ( $M = 3.18, SD = 0.61$ ) than in the apology-condition ( $M = 2.47, SD = 0.75, p = .002$ ), and in the attack accuser-condition ( $M = 2.65, SD = 0.60, p = .067$ ). Additionally the denial-strategy ( $p = .023$ ) and the justification-strategy ( $p = .035$ ) lead to a more positive evaluation of reputation than an apology.

## Discussion

In contrast to Brown et al. (2012) apology lead to the worst evaluation of an athlete's reputation or trustworthiness, whereas justification appeared to be most efficient compared to the other image repair- strategies. Concerning reputation, the control group evaluated the athlete most positive, which means that even ignoring the doping issue might have more positive effects than a defense. All evaluations reached only an intermediate level of trustworthiness or reputation, which might be due to a negative reaction of the participants towards the positive doping test at all. Only in the apology-condition the athlete confessed his offence. It seems as long as the recipients had the chance to believe in alternate explanation, they were more willing to do so. Sport managers should advise athletes with caution. Even if an apology seems to be the worst choice, as long as the causes of a potential doping case are unclear, the knowledge that the athlete has really doped leads to the worst evaluation of trustworthiness and reputation.

---

## References

Brown, K. A., Dickhaus, J., & Long, M. C. (2012). LeBron James and "The Decision": An empirical examination of image repair in sports. *Journal of Sports Media* 7(1), 149-175. doi: 10.1353/jsm.2012.0010

Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163-176.

Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2008). Comparing apology to equivalent crisis response strategies: Clarifying apology's role and value in crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 34(3), 252-257. doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2008.04.001

Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., & Schoorman, F. D. (1995). An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust. *The Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 709-734. doi: 10.5465/AMR.1995.9508080335

Solberg, H. A., Hanstad, D. V., & Thøring, T. A. (2010). Doping in elite sport - do the fans care? Public opinion on the consequences of doping scandals. *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, 11(3), 185-199.