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From Apologia to Benoit: An Empirical Test of Image Restoration Strategies

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From Apologia to Benoit: An Empirical Test of Image Restoration Strategies

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FROM APOLOGIA TO BENOIT:
AN EMPIRICAL TEST OF IMAGE RESTORATION STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This study looked at the effectiveness of William Benoit's image restoration strategies by using a post-test only experiment which featured four treatments. It compared consumers' feelings following responses made by a company after an image threat. Each response consisted of a combination of image restoration strategies, and while not all of Benoit's strategies were tested, the ones which seemed to be most commonly used were chosen. The present study showed two strategies, mortification and corrective action, were more effective than others tested. In addition, there were outside factors, such as perceived sincerity, which also had a role in the effectiveness of the restoration attempts.

Keywords: image restoration, apologia, William Benoit, empirical

From Apologia to Benoit: An Empirical Test of Image Restoration Strategies

When a company needs to apologize for an action, what do they do? The first place to start would be William Benoit's book, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies* (1995), which outlines several tactics public figures and businesses use when their images require repair. Benoit defines image restoration theory as strategies used to mitigate image damage following a threat to a reputation (organizational or personal). However, as helpful as these may be, there are other things, besides tactics, to take into consideration. First, when image restoration involves a public figure or business which must apologize to a large audience, it is very difficult to determine how effective the reparation was. Secondly, it can be hard for a speaker to overcome preconceived notions and beliefs held by the audience, which makes them more or less likely to accept one's repair, regardless of how well it was delivered. Lastly, the speaker must take into account how persuasion functions in a certain situation; after all, the key to any successful image repair is the ability to persuade the audience (Phillipson, 1981).

There have been several studies conducted on image restoration; however, the main method used was content analysis (e.g., Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Furgeson & Benoit, 2013; Oles, 2010; Taujin, 2011; and Wilson, 1976). While these studies help identify which restoration strategies are most commonly used, they did not provide any information as to how effective the strategy was. Utilization of a post-test only experimental method will allow complete control over the responses to the threat, eliminate any preconceived biases towards the organization, and provide instant feedback about the effectiveness of the strategies. This study went beyond monitoring how the audience reacts to one strategy when compared to another; it also sought to

establish if one strategy, or combination of strategies, was superior. Even though one strategy, or combination of strategies, will never be effective in all situations, by narrowing the number of possible options from eleven to four will be a tremendous improvement.

This study learned from prior research and expanded into an area rarely explored in image restoration. It was largely laboratorial in that it removed all outside factors any organization would encounter, such as preconceived notions, or a prior history of similar instances. The goal was to take the organization out of image restoration, and look only at the strategies themselves. Content analysis cannot do this, and while the present study may seem unrealistic without outside factors, which every company has, it could be argued content analysis studies only focus on one company, and those results can only be applied to that company. Over the past months, image restoration has become a borderline obsession; this study was intended to do something which had not been done before, and though the results may only be applicable to the sample at hand, the knowledge gained is not without its merits.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

Historical Perspective

Image restoration is a rather new title; however, the idea of defending one's self can be seen as far back as Socrates' Apology, as written by Plato. Image restoration strategies will be fully developed shortly; however, it is important to lay the ground work by showing one of the earliest documented examples. In Socrates' Apology, in front of the Athenians, Socrates makes a few statements that demonstrate image restoration. The first statement, "Let the event be as god wills" (Plato), appears to be an attempt at using transcendence, or putting the event into the larger context of the situation. Socrates goes on to say "Well, although I do not suppose that

either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is–for he knows

nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know" (Plato). According to

Benoit, attacking your accusers is one way of reducing offensiveness. There are several other

examples to pull from this speech, although the aim is to just give a slight historical insight into

apologia, which was the precursor for image restoration.

William Benoit's strategies for image restoration are similar to, and arguably based off

of, Ware and Linkugel's identification of the major "apologia" strategies in their 1973 essay,

"They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia." These

strategies are broken down into reformative strategies, denial and bolstering, neither of which

changes the audience's definition of the situation; and transformative strategies, differentiation

and transcendence, which attempt to redefine the audience's meaning of the situation (Ware and

Linkugel, 1973, p. 276). These four strategies are accompanied by four stances, which are a

combination of two different strategies. Absoultive and vindictive stances are a combination of

denial and differentiation strategies (p. 283), explanative is a combination of bolstering and

differentiation (p. 283), and justificative combines bolstering and transcendence (p. 283).

Benoit's theory of image restoration consists of five main strategies, the first of which is

denial (Benoit, 1995). Denial can take two forms, the "accused denies that the offensive actually

occurred or denies he or she performed it" (p. 75). A recent study completed by Furgeson and

Benoit (2013), examined Rush Limbaugh's attempt to repair his image following the Sandra

Fluke controversy, in which Limbaugh called her a slut, among other things. One of the first

strategies Limbaugh used was denial. Since his words were heard on the radio, he could not

deny he said them, but rather, denied he was trying to be rude, instead using "absurdist humor"

(p. 282). Denial can be effective; however, if definitive proof becomes available proving your responsibility, it can make the situation much worse.

The second main strategy is evading responsibility for an act, which has four different variations (Benoit, 1995). The first variation is scapegoating, or provocation, which is when "the actor may claim the act in question was performed in response to another wrongful act which understandably provoked the offensive act in question" (p. 76). Second is defeasibility, "pleading lack of information about or control over important factors in the situation" (p. 76). The third variation is unforeseeable or unintentional outcome; for example, if someone arrives late to work because of a major traffic accident, that otherwise would have been on time, it is easier to excuse that individual than someone who overslept. Lastly, motives or intent of decisions were made in the overall best interest; "the wrongful act is not denied, yet the audience is asked not to hold the actor fully responsible because it was done with good, rather than evil, intentions" (p. 76). In 1998, Northwest Airlines was faced with a crisis when their pilots decided to strike; they used several strategies, but relied heavily on scapegoating, placing responsibility onto the pilots. It was found that this was more subtle in the early stages than it was in the later ads. It wasn't fully apparent until week seven, when they blatantly attacked the pilots and put the full responsibility of the strike onto them by saying they were "unnecessarily damaging the nation's economy" (p. 205). This statement also lends itself to transcendence, by shifting the focus to the nation's economy, instead of their personal profits.

In 1996, Oprah Winfrey made a comment in reference to the mad cow disease outbreak, and stated "it has just stopped me cold from eating another hamburger" (Oles, 2010). Oprah used a combination of unforeseeable or unintentional outcome, and denial of intent. Following

the initial statements, Oprah made sure her audience knew she was not an informed expert on the

subject, but rather was an informed witness (Cloud, 1996). By distinguishing herself in this way

she was trying to convince the audience she had not intended for her actions to have caused such

a drastic decrease in cattle stock values, and evade responsibility. The comments made by Oprah

also showed elements of defeasibility, which is when the accused claims to have a lack of

information about the act or control over certain aspects of the situation. She had no way of

knowing her words could cause such a drastic change in the cattle market.

  The third strategy is reducing the offensiveness of the act, which has six different

variations (Benoit, 1995). The first variation is bolstering, when the accused "relate positive

attributes they possess or positive actions they have performed in the past" (p. 77) as an attempt

to limit the damage done following a threat. Second is minimization, when the accused

"minimize[s] the amount of negative affect associated with the offensive act" (p. 77). Third is

differentiation, when "the rhetor attempts to distinguish the act performed from other similar but

less desirable actions" (p. 77) thus "the act may appear less offensive" (p. 77). The fourth,

transcendence, is when the accused attempts to put the situation into the broader context or

"different frame of reference" (p. 78). Fifth is attacking the accusers, because "if the credibility

of the source of accusations can be reduced, the damage to one's image from those accusations

may be diminished" (p. 78). The final way to reduce offensiveness is through compensation

which "may take the form of valued goods or services as well as monetary reimbursement" (p.

78).

  Two of the aforementioned variations were used by Samsung following allegations of the

creation of a slush fund, bribery of officials, and the illegal transfer of managerial rights to the

son of one of the chairmen (Taejin, Graeff, & Shim, 2011). Samsung, one of the largest

companies in the world, provides 250,000 jobs, and works with 59 different companies. At the

time Samsung was also responsible for a fifth of South Korea's gross domestic product. By

stressing their importance to the country as a whole they were able to shift the focus away from

the alleged criminal acts, and reduce the effectiveness of their actions. They used transcendence

to associate themselves with the entire country of South Korea, specifically how a special

investigation into their business would look bad globally. Furthermore, in the restoration

statement they mentioned the far reaching economic damage of an investigation because of the

large number of smaller companies' which rely on making products for Samsung that would also

be forced to shut down.

The fourth strategy is corrective action, either returning the situation to how it was prior

to the crisis, and or taking steps to prevent a similar crisis from happening in the future (Benoit,

1995). One of the most notable image threats in recent years was the massive oil leak by British

Petroleum (BP) in April of 2010. One of the main strategies used by BP was corrective action;

out of 128 articles studied, 67 (54%), mentioned corrective action (Harlow & Harlow, 2013). It

is not surprising that BP relied heavily on corrective action, since their ultimate goal was to

continue drilling in the gulf; they needed to re-establish trust by providing details on how they

would prevent a similar situation from reoccurring.

The final strategy is mortification, which is an honest and sincere admission of guilt and

asking for forgiveness (Benoit, 1995). This is when a person accepts responsibility for an action,

and makes a sincere apology, so we may forgive them (Burke, 1970). Rush Limbaugh used

several tactics during his Sandra Fluke controversy, and ended his statement with ''I sincerely

apologize to Ms. Fluke for the insulting word choices'' (McGuire, 2012, p. 212). The

effectiveness of his apology might have been hampered by his use of other strategies prior to it.

In the first part of his statement he attempted to justify what he said, and then apologized, which

is why certain strategies should not be used together because they can detract from each other.

Prior to employing any image restoration strategy, a company must consider a few other

elements essential to reparation: the role of persuasion, source credibility, corporate social

responsibility, and crisis communication.

Persuasion

According to Aristotle, persuasion consists of three proofs: logos, the appeal to reason;

pathos, the appeal to emotion; and ethos, the persuasive appeal of a speaker's character

(Rhetoricae). Similar to logos and pathos, persuasion can also be when "The speaker…gains

audience assent precisely when an audience hears his statement as a conclusion drawn from

premises which they hold" (Phillipson, 1981, p. 39). In this way the orator attempts to speak to

the audience; the orator then bases the response in a way which will appeal to the audience.

Another aspect of persuasion, which mirrors ethos, is credibility of the speaker, or source

credibility.

Source Credibility

Source credibility goes hand in hand with perceived sincerity in that they are both

judgments that can be based on the individual who is relaying the message. There are many

other factors that contribute to the perceived sincerity; the credibility of the speaker certainly

plays a role in the audience perception of the organization as a whole. There are a few different

opinions on what defines source credibility, and at the micro level could differ based on each

individual. According to Kenton (1989) the main attributes of source credibility are expertise,

prestige, and image/self-presentation. Meyer (1988) took it a step further and developed a way

to measure source credibility through a five-item credibility scale that included "Fair, unbiased,

tells the whole story, accurate and can be trusted" (p. 574). Meyer believes while these items

may seem redundant, when "added or averaged, the result could be a continuous measurement

which opens up more possibilities for analysis than a single nominal or ordinal variable" (p.

574). These studies seem to indicate it is not only the strategies used, but, perhaps more

importantly, how the audience perceives them. Any one person or organization cannot account

for these elements. Further investigation needs to be completed to determine if there is a way for

a company to assess the perception of them in the public eye, and then use it in combination with

image repair strategies.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Similar to credibility is a company's corporate social responsibility (CSR), which some

scholars believe to be synonymous with public relations, or how the company interacts with the

public, and maintains a positive image of themselves (Kim & Reber, 2009). Others believe it

goes beyond public relations and is the core of their corporate identity (David, Kline, & Dai,

2005). A main area of focus in CSR research is why two, seemingly similar companies, can

employ similar CSR actions, and one will be met with success and the other met with criticism.

One study maintains the reason for this fickle public response can be tied to public skepticism

and perceived sincerity (Hyo-Sook, 2011). In this study, a cigarette company that financially

contributes to an anti-teen smoking campaign was considered disingenuous in comparison to the

same donation from the American Cancer Society. It was also discovered that reputation played

a role in how the public responds to an act. The findings in regards to reputation are similar to

biases, or preconceived notions, which are beyond control of the organization, which is why they

were excluded from this study. On the other hand, the findings regarding perceived sincerity,

which the company cannot control, will be one focus of this study.

Crisis Communication

Another similar, yet slightly different area of research has to do with crisis

communication, which is any response from a company following image threat. One study

found the more responsibility the public can place on the organization will result in a greater hit

to the reputation (Combs & Holladay, 1996). They also found support indicating certain crisis

situations require specific crisis responses, which is the same for image restoration. Also, a

company perceived to be able to prevent a crisis will endure a greater threat to their reputation.

Crisis communication is a broader category that image restoration strategies fall in to. Many

crisis situation studies find results similar to what would be found in image restoration strategies,

and though the topic of this study is image restoration, it is very similar to crisis communication.

The previous research provides a basic understanding of the type of environment for this

study. The focus is image restoration; however, there is much more to it than simply the

strategies. It must be understood how the processes work within the audience, which is why the

art of persuasion must be carefully considered. It is important for companies to understand how

they differ from individuals in terms of their social responsibility, and what the consumer-

audience expects of them. Also, it is important to understand how principles of crisis

communication help broaden the definition beyond simply image restoration. To help

understand why certain strategies were chosen, and what the other possible options would be, it

was necessary to outline all of Benoit's strategies. It was also necessary to show how image

restoration evolved from apologia, since most strategies we use today are adaptations of previous

research.

Research Questions

RQ1: *How do company responses to a crisis situation relate to a consumer's feelings*

towards that company?

As demonstrated in the previous section, the most important aspect of any image repair

attempt is how well the image is repaired, and how a company can quantify the level of repair.

The first step is to look at consumer feelings, which can be done through future purchasing

intent, or recommendation of products to friends. An overall "feelings" variable needs to be

created, and while this study features a hypothetical company, a real situation would require a

pre and post-test to test the level of change. In this instance it can be assumed the consumers

were all neutral prior to reading the story. The main intent of this entire project is to determine

how image restoration strategies relate to consumer feelings following a threat.

RQ2: *Will a higher exposure to news coverage impact a consumer's feelings towards a*

company following an image crisis response?

The main method for receiving any form of image restoration attempt is through a news

outlet. Therefore, it could be speculated that one who has increased exposure to these image

restoration attempts may become jaded, or skeptical of the sincerity or motives of the company.

Though not discussed in the literature review, the second research question originated out of

curiosity, and is a rarely studied aspect of image restoration. Furthermore, respondents were also

asked about their non-news exposure to differentiate between those who had low overall media

consumption, and those with just low news consumption. For example, a respondent who

identifies as less than three hours a week of both news and non-news exposure could be labeled a

low media consumer, whereas a respondent with less than three hours of news per week, but

more than twenty hours of non-news programming could be labeled as a non-news consumer.

RQ3: *Does sincerity of response relate to a consumer's feelings towards a company*

following an image crisis response?

The final aspect of image restoration studied was the perceived sincerity of a company

following a response. Research question three was derived from the study on corporate social

responsibility, and how the cigarette company was seen as being insincere, as opposed to the

American Cancer Society. Similarly, if a company is a repeat offender, an attempt to apologize

and fix the situation may be seen as less sincere since they were not able to properly handle the

situation the previous time. This question may seem somewhat redundant in that sincerity is a

consumer feeling; therefore, if perceived sincerity is low, the consumer feelings should also be

low. The goal is to separate sincerity from feelings. Since there are several aspects which

determine consumer feelings, sincerity is a highly important variable; it deserves to be tested on

its own merits, in comparison to the overall variable of "feelings."

Methodology

In order to best analyze consumer feelings, perceived sincerity, and the effect of news

exposure, data was collected using a post-test only experiment which featured four different

treatments. Treatments differed based on the response from a hypothetical or invented company

following numerous health code violations. After reading the story, which included one of the

four responses by the company, participants filled out a survey designed to test for consumer

feelings, sincerity, and trustworthiness, following the company violations. The survey used

questions about future purchasing, recommendation of these products, what they would have

rather heard from the company, and asked about news and non-news media consumption.

Respondents participated in two ways: online or using paper/pencil in a classroom.

Participants

All of the participants were students at a private college in the Northeast. There were a

total of 245 respondents, with more males (141) than females (101). The age range was 17 years

to 55 years with a mean of 21.83 years ($SD = 5.09$). More paper/pencil surveys (206) than online

(39) were collected.

Procedure

After obtaining permission from the Institutional Review Board, data was collected over

three months in the summer and fall of 2013. In order to ensure random assignment online, a

centralized website was created with an HTML code allowing respondents to click "Take

Survey" and be randomly directed to one of the four surveys on a different site. The paper/pencil

surveys were printed and assembled by treatment, and then were randomly shuffled together to

ensure each respondent had an equal opportunity to receive any of the four treatments. The

paper/pencil surveys also differed as students were given a brief synopsis of the study in-person,

whereas, online participants received the information via written format.

Design

The survey featured a hypothetical or invented company, which had to make a statement

following an image threat, and was designed to mimic a real news story. A hypothetical

company was created to remove any preconceived notions about an existing company, which

could have skewed the results. There were four versions, or treatments, of the survey, and the

only difference was the response from the company (see the news story in Appendix B).

Responses were variations of six of the eleven image restoration strategies as defined by

William Benoit. Of the eleven strategies, six have been most commonly used (Benoit &

Czerwinski, 1997; Furgeson & Benoit, 2013; Harlow & Harlow, 2013) by companies in restoring

their image. It is also customary for organizations to use a multiple strategy response process

(Cloud, 1996; Fortunato, 2008; Taejin, Graeff, & Shim, 2011). Previous research has also

examined the specific pairings used for image restoration (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Cloud,

1996; Furgeson & Benoit, 2013; Oles, 2010; Taejin, Graeff, & Shim, 2011). Based on the

previous research, and for generalizability purposes, this study chose to group image strategies as

follows: mortification and corrective action, mortification and bolstering, minimization and

transcendence, and scapegoating and corrective action.

Measures

The first set of items measured participants' feelings toward the company following an

image crisis. These feelings were measured with eight items, and the internal consistency of

these was found to be reliable ($\alpha = .82$). These items included likelihood of "purchasing Hunger

Defender products in the future" from 1 (*definitely purchase*) to 5 (*definitely not purchase*). The

other feelings items used a similar response scale from 1 (*very likely*) to 5 (*very unlikely*) with

different options: "Would you recommend Hunger Defender to a friend," "Hunger Defender is

concerned with my well-being," "I will trust Hunger Defender in the future," and "Hunger

Defender understands their mistakes." In addition to the eight items, an open-ended question

asked respondents what they would rather have heard from the companies instead of the response

they were exposed to. After reading each, responses were categorized based on the main point of their response; there were 16 categories in total.

The second variable, perceived sincerity of the response from the company, was initially problematic to quantify. Some items from McCroskey's (1966) scale of source credibility were used such as: "concerned with my well-being", and "trustworthy." Six items ($\alpha = .73$) with response scales ranging from 1(*very likely*) to 5 (*very unlikely*) were used. Statements, such as "Hunger Defender is being genuine in their response" and "Hunger Defender is more concerned with repairing their reputation than preventing similar incidents from happening in the future," specifically looked at the perceived sincerity and motives behind the company response. Two additional questions were used to measure the character of the speaker, which is an extension of the company. These items were "the Hunger Defender representative is a nice person," and "the Hunger Defender representative is a friendly person," with 1 (*very likely*) to 5 (*very unlikely*) as response options. Similar to sincerity, trustworthiness was also examined by using items such as "I will trust Hunger Defender in the future," "Would you purchase Hunger Defender in the future," and "Would you recommend Hunger Defender to your friend?" However, trustworthiness was not studied as a standalone variable, but elements of it were included in the feelings and sincerity variables.

The remaining items were included to ascertain media use and demographics of the respondents. Specifically, participants were asked about the average number of hours they spend watching news programming, and non-news programming for comparison. Lastly, respondents were asked to indentify their age and gender for comparison (see the full questionnaire in Appendix B).

Results

Relationship of Company Response on Consumer Feelings

Research question one asked about consumer feelings following an image crisis based on varying company responses. The means of all the responses were calculated and then compared based on response from the company. The lower the mean score correlated to a higher level of effectiveness at repairing their image, based on consumer feelings. The entire study showed consumer feelings as slightly more positive than not ($M = 2.82$, $SD = .64$). A one-way ANOVA was computed comparing feelings of participants who were exposed to each of the treatments. A significant difference was found among the treatments, $F(3, 236) = 4.83$, $p < .05$). Tukey's HSD was used to determine the nature of the differences between treatments. This analysis showed participants exposed to mortification and corrective action had more positive feelings ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .61$) than those exposed to minimization and transcendence ($M = 3.08$, $SD = .67$). Similarly, participants exposed to mortification and bolstering ($M = 2.74$, $SD = .65$), also showed significantly better feelings than minimization and transcendence. Participants exposed to scapegoating and corrective action ($M = 2.82$, $SD = .56$) were not significantly different from any of the other three treatments. The open-ended question found that corrective action was mentioned more than any other strategy, and appeared in 53% ($n = 112$) of all responses; 18% ($n = 37$) responded with a solution which did not fit any of the previously mentioned eleven image restoration strategies, 10% ($n = 21$) accepted the response from the company, and 10% ($n = 21$) wanted more information about the initial violations.

Relationship of News Exposure on Consumer Feelings Following Image Crisis

Research question two asked whether there was a relationship between the amount of news programming watched by the respondent and their feelings following an image crisis. A Pearson correlation was calculated examining the relationship between respondents' news exposure and feelings. A weak correlation, one that was not significant, was found, $r(236) =$ - .017, $p > .05$. In addition to testing for a correlation, the means of respondents were compared based on news exposure and feelings using a one-way ANOVA. No significant difference was found, $F(5, 237) = 1.48$, $p > .05$. The respondents with different levels of news exposure did not differ significantly in terms of feelings.

Relationship of Sincerity on Consumer Feelings Following Image Crisis

Research question three asked if the perceived sincerity of the company's response would affect consumer feelings following an image crisis. A Spearman's *rho* correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between respondents' feelings and perceived sincerity of response. A strong positive correlation was found, $r(237) = .848$, $p < .001$, indicating a significant relationship between the feelings and perceived sincerity. The more sincere the company was perceived to be by a consumer-audience, the better feelings they had towards the company. A Spearman *rho* correlation coefficient was also calculated for the feelings and perceived sincerity, examining for each treatment: mortification and corrective action, $r(59) =$ .889, $p < .001$); minimization and transcendence, $r(55) = .867$, $p < .001$); mortification and bolstering , $r(65) = .848$, $p < .001$); and scapegoating and corrective action , $r(52) = .748$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

Research into image restoration often utilizes content analysis, which is great at identifying the most commonly used strategies, but does not address the effectiveness of the strategies. With that being said, content analysis was the basis for the concept of the present study; without these studies, Taejin, Graeff, and Shim (2011); Cowden and Sellnow (2002), Fortunato (2008), Cloud (1996), and others, there would be no way to determine which strategies are most commonly paired together. The present study was intended to show that one strategy, or a combination of two, may be superior to the others.

The present study looked into the feelings of the consumers following an image threat. Two strategies seemed to be more effective than the others; first was mortification. Mortification, when combined with either bolstering or corrective action, showed a positive correlation to positive respondent feelings when compared to scapegoating and corrective action, or minimization and transcendence. Also, a one-way ANOVA showed a significant difference in feelings of respondents who were exposed to mortification and corrective action instead of minimization and transcendence. Similarly, participants exposed to mortification had significantly better feelings than those exposed to minimization and transcendence. Furthermore, the open-ended question showed 13.74% ($n = 29$) of all respondents, and 33.3% ($n = 17$) of those exposed to minimization and transcendence, would have rather heard the company make an apology. This result, coupled with the fact that minimization and transcendence had the worst score in terms of consumer feelings, shows mortification as a highly effective technique.

The other strategy shown to be very effective was corrective action. When combined with mortification it was the most effective strategy; however, when combined with

scapegoating, it ranked third out of four strategies. This may not seem to be conclusive; however, the open-ended question is what made corrective action stand out as a consumer favorite. Out of all of the respondents, 53.08% ($n = 112$) stated they would have liked some form of corrective action; even under the treatments where corrective action was used, respondents still wanted either more corrective action, or they would have preferred it to be combined with a different strategy. One respondent, exposed to minimization and transcendence, stated, "They could have mentioned how they were going to work to limit or get rid of all violations in the future rather than say it happens and that's it." That response was classified as transcendence fail instead of corrective action. Another respondent who was exposed to mortification and corrective action, stated, "They should have said how this might have happened along with how they would fix it. Also, they should explain in detail how they would prevent this from happening again." The previous statement was coded as in-depth corrective action, which made up 15.2% ($n = 32$) of all responses. A respondent who was exposed to mortification and bolstering suggested that they use mortification and corrective action instead, "We would like to send our deepest apologies for the violations and we will do what we can to prevent this in the future." Lastly, a respondent exposed to scapegoating and corrective action stated, "They shouldn't blame the issue on a few employees. They should have said they were able to track the start of the issue and are working to make sure it does not happen again." This response was coded as scapegoating fail, instead of corrective action. As mentioned before, there were a total of 16 categories for the open-ended questions, nine of which included corrective action in some form.

Combs and Holladay (1996) showed that the more responsibility the public can place on a company following an image threat resulted in a larger hit to their reputation.   The present study would seem to contradict those findings and that the more responsibility the company takes after the image threat (mortification) and outlines plans to prevent it the future (corrective action), the more effective their image reparation was. However, the present study was designed to test image reparation, and did not account for the magnitude of the damage done following the initial threat, only how much damage was left following the image repair attempt. When combined these results spark an interesting question: if taking responsibility following an image threat results in a larger hit to their reputation, but also results in a more effective image repair, does the former cancel out the latter? Based on respondent reactions to the other strategies, and studies on consumers' feelings of honesty from a company (Abendroth & Heyman, 2013; Morris, 2008; Unernman, 2012), honesty is very important. Therefore, evading responsibility for the threat may result in a lesser initial hit to reputation, but if contradictory information becomes available, and it appears the company was dishonest, they will suffer more in the long term.

This study also sought to determine if exposure to news coverage would impact consumer feelings following an image threat. Perhaps with more news exposure, the more jaded respondents would become to image repair strategies (as most major stories involving an image threat feature someone using one of the strategies). However, there was a weak, non-significant correlation between news exposure and feelings following an image threat. A one-way ANOVA was also run, which showed no significant difference in news exposure and feelings. Similarly, a weak, non-significant correlation was found in non-news programming exposure.

The final goal of this study was to determine if perceived sincerity of response from the company had a positive impact on feelings. Two tests of relationship were conducted, both of which showed a significant positive relationship between feelings and perceived sincerity. Not surprisingly, the strongest relationship existed with those who were exposed to the mortification and corrective action treatment. A one-way ANOVA showed a significant difference in perceived sincerity score and feelings towards the company.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has a few limitations which should be noted. First, the sample was not random. Thus, none of the findings can be extrapolated, and no assumptions can be made about the general public. Second, the idea to test image restoration strategies alone without any biases or outside factors is unnatural; however, this was the intent to see how these strategies work in a perfect situation, though it rarely exists. Third, this study only investigates six of Benoit's eleven strategies; a more accurate study would test all eleven. That said, such a comprehensive study would be much larger, and that is why the six were chosen based on frequency of use in prior studies. Also, since this study was designed to test pairs of strategies, some of the strategies are not easily paired and would not have been ideal to test. Lastly, the use of a food company may provide different responses than a crisis by a company in a different industry; presumably, consumers hold food companies to a higher standard than a clothing manufacturer or a service related industry.

There was one blatant flaw in the research instrument which is not a limitation, but a mistake. Survey question response options should always be mutually exclusive, and exhaustive. The questions asking about news consumption had overlapping response options: (A) Less than

3 hours a week, (B) 4 – 7 hours, (C) 7 – 10 hours, (D) 10 – 13 hours, (E) 13 – 16 hours, and (F)

more than 16 hours. The respondents affected by this mistake were those who identified

themselves as consuming 3, 7, 10, 13, or 16 hours of news, or non-news programming per week.

This mistake was pointed out by an advisor prior to data collection and was corrected. Two sets

of surveys were constructed, using different spacing and formatting, and the error was corrected

on the version which was not used in the final printing.

      The future of research in this area would be to conduct a similar study using a random

sample, on a larger scale. Also, future studies should simulate biases towards companies, or if

possible, use real companies following an image threat, and create different responses. Future

research could also compare companies in different segments of the market, and determine if a

different strategy may be more effective for one industry than another.

<div align="center">**Conclusion**</div>

      This study showed two strategies, mortification and corrective action, as being more

effective than scapegoating, transcendence, bolstering, and minimization at restoring a

company's image. This conclusion would not have been possible without previous content

analysis research to determine which strategies were most commonly used and how they were

used. In the early stages, this study appeared to be mainly rhetorical; however, it evolved to

include crisis communication, corporate social responsibility, apologia, public relations, and

marketing.

      After much thought and reflection, it must be noted this study was idealistic in that there

will never be two identical image threats. If one company faces the same situation twice, it still

is not the same situation, because they did not properly handle the situation the first time, thus

their second repair must be constructed differently than the first. Similarly, if two companies

face the same threat, their histories and reputations will have a large impact on their selection of

repair strategies. This is not to say this study is without merit, clearly the population sampled

preferred to hear two strategies over the others; however, much more is required to determine

what strategies should be utilized following a threat.

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Appendix A

Sources Searched

The initial research started with William Benoit's book Accounts, excuses and apologies: A

theory of image restoration strategies.

The following databases were used:

    A. Communications and Mass Media Complete

    B. ERIC

    C. Business Source Elite.

All of the searches in these databases were limited to those which had full text, and where

scholarly/peer reviewed journals. The references from any articles were also mined to find other

useful sources. If those sources were not in the databases, Google Scholar was used.

Search terms:

    A. Image Restoration

    B. Crisis Communication

    C. Persuasive communication

    D. Source Credibility

    E. Brand Management

    F. Apologia

The time frame for my research was not limited to any particular scope, however the earliest

article used for this paper was from 1966, with the exception of Plato's account of Socrates

apology. There may have been relevant research prior to 1966; however, I was unable to find it

with my search methods.

Appendix B

Survey Instrument

(The following statement will appear on the cover of the book which contains the survey.) Inside

you will find a short news story, followed by questions. Please answer honestly, this study is

meant to judge the effectiveness of the news story; therefore, there are no wrong answers. Any

additional comments or concerns can be addressed on the back of the survey.

1. The Hunger Defender Food Company, which is typically in strife with hunger, now must

battle allegations of numerous health code violations. The violations, which were brought to the

attention of the media by an anonymous whistle blower, are the first in Hunger Defenders 55

years of operation. There were no reported illnesses due to these violations, and all of the tainted

products have been pulled from the shelves. The company has also issued a list of products,

which might be possibly contaminated, anyone who has one of these products is encouraged to

throw it away, and call the Hunger Defender hotline for a full refund. The owner of the

company, James Singleton, made the following statement: "On behalf of everyone here at

Hunger Defender, I would like to extend our deepest apologies for these violations. We will be

instituting random weekly safety checks, to insure an incident like this never happens again."

We will keep you updated if any new developments become available in this case, and as always,

keep it tuned to WKZR your home, for news.

<div align="center">-OR-</div>

2. The Hunger Defender Food Company, which is typically in strife with hunger, now must

battle allegations of numerous health code violations. The violations, which were brought to the

attention of the media by an anonymous whistle blower, are the first in Hunger Defenders 55

years of operation. There were no reported illnesses due to these violations, and all of the tainted

products have been pulled from the shelves. The company has also issued a list of products,

which might be possibly contaminated, any one who has one of these products is encouraged to

throw it away, and call the Hunger Defender hotline for a full refund. The owner of the

company, James Singleton, made the following statement: "On behalf of everyone here at

Hunger Defender, I would like to extend our deepest apologies for these violations. We would

like to stress our perfect record with the Food and Drug Administration prior to this event, which

is something we have prided ourselves on ever since we started as a family run business over

fifty years ago." We will keep you updated if any new developments become available in this

case, and as always, keep it tuned to WKZR your home, for news.

<div align="center">-OR-</div>

3. The Hunger Defender Food Company, which is typically in strife with hunger, now must

battle allegations of numerous health code violations. The violations, which were brought to the

attention of the media by an anonymous whistle blower, are the first in Hunger Defenders 55

years of operation. There were no reported illnesses due to these violations, and all of the tainted

products have been pulled from the shelves. The company has also issued a list of products,

which might be possibly contaminated, any one who has one of these products is encouraged to

throw it away, and call the Hunger Defender hotline for a full refund. The owner of the

company, James Singleton, made the following statement: "Though our violations may have

been numerous, at no time were any customers in danger of becoming sick. We would also like

to stress that all food handling facilities experience minor violations from time to time, it is

inevitable in this industry." We will keep you updated if any new developments become

available in this case, and as always, keep it tuned to WKZR your home, for news.

<div align="center">-OR-</div>

4. The Hunger Defender Food Company, which is typically in strife with hunger, now must

battle allegations of numerous health code violations. The violations, which were brought to the

attention of the media by an anonymous whistle blower, are the first in Hunger Defenders 55

years of operation. There were no reported illnesses due to these violations, and all of the tainted

products have been pulled from the shelves. The company has also issued a list of products,

which might be possibly contaminated, any one who has one of these products is encouraged to

throw it away, and call the Hunger Defender hotline for a full refund. The owner of the

company, James Singleton, made the following statement: "These violations were the direct

result of a few misguided employees who are no longer a part of the Hunger Defender family.

As a result, we will be implementing additional training for all employees, and conducting

random weekly safety checks, to insure a similar incident does not occur again." We will keep

you updated if any new developments become available in this case, and as always, keep it tuned

to WKZR your home, for news.

Please answer the following questions:

1. After reading their response, would you? (Circle one)

     A. Definitely purchase Hunger Defender products
     B. Almost certainly purchase Hunger Defender products
     C. Be undecided about purchasing Hunger Defender products
     D. Almost certainly not purchase Hunger Defender products
     E. Definitely not purchase Hunger Defender products

2. If you had never purchased products from Hunger Defender, how likely would you be to purchase their products in the future?

    A. Definitely
    B. Yes, but only if it was cheaper than the competitors
    C. Only if no other accidents were reported in the following six months
    D. Uncertain
    E. Definitely not

3. How likely would you be to recommend Hunger Defender products to a friend? (Circle one)

    A. Very likely
    B. Likely
    C. Undecided
    D. Unlikely
    E. Very Unlikely

4. Hunger Defender is more concerned with repairing their reputation than preventing similar incidents from occurring in the future. (Circle one)

    A. Very likely
    B. Likely
    C. Undecided
    D. Unlikely
    E. Very Unlikely

5. Hunger Defender is concerned with my well being. (Circle one)

    A. Very likely
    B. Likely
    C. Undecided
    D. Unlikely
    E. Very Unlikely

6. Hunger Defender was being genuine in their response. (Circle one)

    A. Very likely
    B. Likely
    C. Undecided
    D. Unlikely
    E. Very Unlikely

7. Hunger Defender is being honest in their response. (Circle one)

    A. Very likely
    B. Likely
    C. Undecided
    D. Unlikely
    E. Very Unlikely

8. Hunger Defender is more concerned with preventing similar incidents from occurring in the future than repairing their reputation. (Circle one)

    A. Very likely
    B. Likely
    C. Undecided
    D. Unlikely
    E. Very Unlikely

9. Hunger Defender understands their mistakes. (Circle one)

    A. Very likely
    B. Likely
    C. Undecided
    D. Unlikely
    E. Very Unlikely

10. I will trust the Hunger Defender Company in the future. (Circle one)

    A. Very likely
    B. Likely
    C. Undecided
    D. Unlikely
    E. Very Unlikely

11. The Hunger Defender representative is a nice person. (Circle one)

    A. Very likely
    B. Likely
    C. Undecided
    D. Unlikely
    E. Very Unlikely

12. The Hunger Defender representative is a friendly person. (Circle one)

      A. Very likely
      B. Likely
      C. Undecided
      D. Unlikely
      E. Very Unlikely

13. In your own words, what should the company have said to make you more likely to purchase their products again?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

14. In an average week how much news programming do you consume? Take into consideration all types of news programming, including, but not limited to, the following forms: Television shows, News websites (Facebook and Twitter of news sites included), and Newspapers. (Circle one)

      A. Less than 3 hours a week
      B.   4 – 7 hours a week
      C. 7 – 10 hours a week
      D. 10 – 13 hours a week
      E. 13 – 16 hours a week
      F. More than 16 hours a week

15. In an average week how much non-news programming do you consume? (Circle one)

      A. Less than 3 hours a week
      B. 4 – 7 hours a week
      C. 7 – 10 hours a week
      D. 10 – 13 hours a week
      E. 13 – 16 hours a week
      F. 17 – 20 hours a week
      G. More than 20 hours a week

16. When you hear a news report about a company, which has to apologize for any type of wrong doing. Do you believe? (Circle all you feel are correct)

    A. They are being honest
    B. They will try to prevent similar instances in the future
    C. It is just to save their companies reputation
    D. They have to make some kind of comments to the news to re-establish trust in their brand
    E. I rarely believe statements made by companies following any wrong doing
    F. I do not listen to / watch the news
    G. No opinion

17. All companies make mistakes; therefore

    A. When the news reports it, I ignore it
    B. As long as it doesn't effect me personally, I am ok with it
    C. I would rather not know when companies make mistakes
    D.   Hearing news stories about companies mistakes does not impact my buying habits
    E. I do not listen to / watch the news
    F. No opinion

18. Your gender is? (Circle one)
    A. Male
    B. Female

19. How old are you?

    _____