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# Repairing an organization's image in times of crises: What strategies to use when?

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## Citation

# Repairing an Organization's Image in times of Crises

## What Strategies to Use When?

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*The image repair theory has been described as the "dominant paradigm for examining corporate communication in times of crises" (Dardis & Haigh, 2009, p. 101). While the theory, which posits five major strategies and 14 sub-strategies, has been applied extensively, a fundamental question remains: What strategies should be used when? Through meta-analysis of the image repair studies, we examine the persuasiveness/effectiveness in the use of different strategies. This study addresses the call by Haigh and Brubaker (2010) to conduct more studies to understand the use of strategies across different crisis types with a view to providing a template to equip practitioners on what strategies to use during crises.*

A crisis can affect an organization's "good name" (Fearn-Banks, 2002, p. 2). As crises, defined as unpredictable events that threaten the expectancies of stakeholders and impact the organizations' performance (Coombs, 2012), are occurring with greater frequency and with increasing complexity (Mitroff, 2005), organizations' vulnerability to crises are also increasing (Stocker, 1997). One of the objectives of crisis management is to maintain an organization's image (Coombs, 1995; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). The other objectives include lessening the negative outcomes on the organization and to protect stakeholders (Coombs, 2010; Stocker, 1997). Crisis management should thus seek to restore organizational normalcy and influence public perception. The strategies used should be "designed to minimize damage to the image of the organization" (p. 2), argued Fearn-Banks (2002). A good corporate image is thus important to organizations (Benoit & Pang, 2008).

During crises, the image, face, and reputation of the organization are often threatened, argued Benoit and Pang (2008) when,

1. An offensive act has occurred;
2. The accused is responsible for the act.

These are times when organizational responses are called for. When face is threatened, face work must be performed (Benoit & Brinson, 1994). Since communication is a goal-directed activity (Benoit, 1995), response strategies help maintain a healthy self-image. Organizations are called to offer explanations, defenses, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, and excuses when one is called to account for allegations of misdeeds, negligence, or failure.

The image repair theory, which is an extension of apologia (Coombs, Holladay, Frandsen, & Johansen, 2010), asserts that an organization's credibility depends on its image to a very large extent. Threats to this image often necessitate massive efforts to repair it (Benoit & Brinson, 1999). The image repair theory, which is part of the rhetorical stream in crisis research

(Coombs, 2008), provides message options for organizations to use in times of crises. Since the first book on image repair was published in 1995, Benoit and his colleagues have applied the theory to analyze how organizations (see Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Benoit & Pang 2008; Cowden & Sellnow, 2002), prominent individuals (see Benoit, 1997; Benoit & Brinson, 1999), and politicians (see Benoit 2004), nations and governments (see Cai, Lee & Pang, 2009; Low, Varughese, & Pang, 2011; Zhang & Benoit, 2004) repaired their images, amongst the huge stable of studies. These studies have been published in communication journals as well as non-communication journals. It has been described as the "dominant paradigm for examining corporate communication in times of crises" (Dardis & Haigh, 2009, p. 101).

Coombs (2008), however, described image repair theory's focus and application on case studies as "problematic" because the studies shed "precious little light on how stakeholders react to crises" (p. 1056). Current studies are more descriptive and retrospectively sense-making and short on prescription, prediction and drawing inferences (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000; Dardis & Haigh, 2009). Image repair studies texts, but in times of crisis, context is equally important, like prior reputation (Coombs, 2008; Lyon & Cameron, 2004); organization-stakeholder relationships (Coombs, 2008; Haigh & Brubaker, 2010); crisis type (Coombs, 2008); source credibility (Haigh & Brubaker, 2010); crisis situation and stage of crisis (Benoit, 1997), the channels of communication (Caldiero, Taylor, & Ungureanu, 2009) and timing of response (Pang, Lwin, Ho, Cheng, Lau, & Malik, 2012). Coombs (2008) also argued that such applications of image repair theory using case studies do not yield meaningful results.

Yet, for all its limitations, the effectiveness of rhetorical responses cannot be undermined. For instance, the response of apology has been found to be the most effective crisis strategy (Kim, Avergy, & Lariscy, 2009) even though Coombs and Holladay (2008) countered that it has been over-promoted as 'the" response (p. 252). Choi and Lin (2009) argued sympathy and compensation are equally effective responses. Apologies accompanied by affirmative statements such as those accepting responsibility (Pace, Fediuk, & Botero, 2010) and corrective action (Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002) help organizations atone for the transgression.

*Rhetorical exigencies in times of crises*

Additionally, three phenomena during crises underline the criticality and continuing relevance of rhetorical responses. First, there is the triggering of information vacuum (Pang, 2010). In a crisis, an information vacuum is immediately generated in the media (Coombs, 2007; Heath, 2006). Information vacuum (Kauffman, 2005, p. 266), also known as "information void" (Coombs, 2007, p. 129) or "reporting vacuum" (Heath, 2006, p. 247) is created by the crisis and as a result of the crisis: People want to know what happens when bad things happen – and people need to know what happens after bad things happen. This insatiable thirst for information is driven not just by primary stakeholders who "have grown up with inquiring minds fed by an abundance of communication tools" (Fearn-Banks, 2001, p. 479). More prominently, it is driven by the media that demand for "*immediate* (italics in text) information and answers during a crisis (Marra, 2004, p. 311). It becomes a vicious cycle: The media are hot at the heels of the news, and stakeholders regard the media as their "primary" source of information (Coombs, 2007, p. 129), which in turn fuel the media to meet this demand. Little wonder that Garnett and Kouzmin (2007) described crises as "media events" (p. 175). In describing how organizations should always respond promptly in a crisis, crisis scholars have alluded to the need to fill this vacuum (Coombs, 2007). Otherwise, the vacuum, which has an immense but undiscerning appetite to swallow every conceivable nugget of information, would be consumed by less credible, accurate, and useful information – to the detriment of the organization. Marra (2004), citing a practitioner, captured it

best, "In the absence of information, misinformation becomes news" (p. 312). Bradford and Garrett (1995) suggested that practitioners should focus on *how* to respond instead of deciding on whether or not to respond to the accusations of unethical behaviour in the first place. When practitioners remain silent, stakeholders are likely to attribute culpability and lower their perceived image of the organization. Silence, or failure to fill the vacuum, reflects "uncertainty and passivity, the exact opposite" of what an organization should be conveying in times of crises (Coombs, 2007, p. 129). Silence suggests the organization is "not in control", and silence allows others to "take control" (p. 129). Silence or no-comment answers signal to the media that there might be guilt and there is something to hide (Richards, 1998). Thus, a crisis creates a "rhetorical exigency" for the organization to enact control in the "face of uncertainty" so as to assure and win stakeholders' confidence (Heath, 2004, p. 167).

Pang (2010) suggested two ways to do so. First, set the agenda by telling one's own side of the story. One enacts control by communicating and constructing one's version of the crisis that is "factually accurate, coherent, and probable account for the event and its proper resolution" (Heath, 2004, p. 168). Heath (2006) argued that crisis presents the organization with the "strategic opportunity" to provide information to stakeholders (p. 246), and one way to do so is by "telling of a story" (Heath, 2004, p. 169) as crisis response is a narrative (Heath, 2006). Secondly, build the agenda by framing one's own story. Kiosis and Wu (2008) argued that practitioners can help to "filter and frame messages" (p. 72) that appear in the media and influence public opinion. Framing is based on the idea that the way an issue is portrayed in the news can affect audience's understanding of it (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Entman (1993) argued that "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived realty and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). Hallahan (1999) suggested that practitioners can operate as "frame strategists, who strive to determine how situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues and responsibility should be posed to achieve favorable objectives, all of which necessitate rhetorical responses.

The second phenomenon relates to image vacuum (Noraizah & Pang, 2012). A good corporate image and reputation, which are used interchangeably in image repair, are widely-accepted as an important corporate asset (Benoit & Pang, 2008). The literature alludes to the effects of corporate image on business sustainability and competitive advantage (see Cheverton, 2006; Cornelissen, 2011) business legitimacy (Cornelissen, 2011; Massey, 2004) and consumer buying behaviour (see Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998). Given the long-standing history and well-established status of corporate image, it is therefore intriguing that some organizations may exist without one. Bernstein (1984 & 1989) alluded to the notion of a corporate void; a situation in which the organization image is neither good nor bad, but that it has no image whatsoever. Walker (2010) too suggested the possibility of an organization not having a corporate image. A corporate image vacuum can arise under two circumstances. The first is the lack of conscious effort in creating, cultivating and communicating the corporate image. The second is when an organization either refuses or is unable to fill the corporate void. To counter that, Noraizah and Pang (2012) recommended an active cultivation, management, matching of organizational image, all of which necessitate rhetorical responses.

The third phenomenon relates to the advantage of pre-empting the potential negative impact of the crisis by sounding it out first. This pertains to the concept of stealing thunder, which means admitting one's weaknesses and faults before that become public. Arpan and Pompper (2003) argued that for an organization to steal thunder, "it must break the news about its own crisis, rather than waiting to respond to inquiries from the media or other key publics" (p. 295). This has several advantages. One, it increases credibility for the organization with the journalists

who regard this as a welcome change from the usual stonewalling of information. Two, the organization is in a position to change the meaning of the crisis, thus lessening the severity of the crisis and leading the impact to be downplayed. It is a "proactive self-disclosure strategy" (Wigley, 2011, p. 51) that propels the organization to initiate conversation with the stakeholders and the media. Wigley (2011) found that the source who stole thunder received considerably less news coverage than the source that did not. The stories reported were also more positively framed. Journalists were less likely to follow up on stories when organizations broke them first (Ondrus, 1998, cited in Wigley, 2011). For stealing thunder to take place, it necessitates rhetorical responses.

Based on the above discussion, if rhetorical responses are critical, this study is significant on four fronts. First, it addresses the call by Haigh and Brubaker (2010) to conduct more studies to understand the use of strategies across different crisis types. Haigh and Brubaker's (2010) testing of strategies had been narrowly applied to a product recall crisis, thus could not be generalized across crisis types. This study therefore extends the examination of the use of strategies across crisis types. Second, beyond crisis type and prior relationship, the reality in a crisis is that words can hurt. Sheldon and Sallot's (2009) study examined how the 45-word racist remarks uttered by then Mississippi Senator Trent Lott in 2002 sparked a crisis. The authors argued for the use of "appropriate response strategies" to ensure image and reputation are restored. Third, beyond individual strategies, Sheldon and Sallot (2009) called for the examination of interactions among response strategies, i.e. which strategies work well together, and which do not. This study aims to do that. Four, despite being an established theory, besides application of theory, little attempt has been made to extend the theory. This paper aims to do so by distilling principles from the strategies, examining their relevance, and uncovering ways in which the theory can be built further.

## Literature Review

*What strategies can be used: What is said?*

The image repair theory is divided into five major typologies (Benoit & Pang, 2008).

Denial has two variants: simple denial or shifting the blame to another party. The purpose of the latter strategy is to position the accuser as victim.

Evasion of responsibility. The second major typology is evasion of responsibility. The first variant is provocation; where a nation reacts by responding it was egged on to do so. The second is defeasibility, when a nation argues its case on the basis of lack of information and control. The third is accident, where the 'accused' states that the accident happened unintentionally. Last is good intention, where a nation argues that the offensive act was done with good intentions.

Reducing offensiveness. The third major typology is reducing offensiveness. One can do so by bolstering, which seeks to highlight one's positive traits. Minimization strategies can also be used to reduce the severity of the situation. Differentiation strategies seek to reduce offensiveness by suggesting that the act was less offensive than perceived. Transcendence strategies seek to place the situation at a higher level, with more important concerns. Attacking the accuser seeks to reduce the credibility of the accusations. Compensation strategy is where those responsible decide to offer something of value to the victims.

Corrective action. The fourth major typology is corrective action, which aims to reassure stakeholders that such crisis situations would not reoccur.

Mortification. The final major typology is mortification, when one admits its mistake and seeks forgiveness.

*How the strategies are used: How it is said?*

Hearit and Borden (2006) proposed an Apologetic Ethics Framework model to assess how a true, or "ethically ideal" (p. 69) apology, should be conducted. There are two components to this model: the manner of apology and the apology's content. Even though this framework was focussed on the utterance of apology, it is instructive for how the other strategies are spoken.

Manner of apology. The authors argued 'apologies' should comprise six elements. First, truthfulness referring to a full "disclosure of useful information and not omit key facts (p. 64). Though this allows some leeway to "strategically name" (p. 64) the wrongdoings, this must relate to facts and reality of the case. Second, the transgressor must communicate sincere expressions of regret. Three criteria are used to measure sincerity: has the apologist demonstrated "good-faith effort to achieve reconciliation"? (p. 66); second, even as the apologist promised the error would not occur again, did the apologist communicate it; and third, did the apologist demonstrate "true desire to reconcile" or was the apologist just trying to "escape from the media glare"? (p. 66). Third, apology must be timely. In fact, it should be articulated as soon as an organization recognizes its transgression. If an apology is only articulated after stakeholders continually called for it, the strength of the apology would be diminished and the apologist would be perceived as "not want or to resist reconciliation, and thus have a tin ear" (p. 66). On the contrary, if apologies are too swift, they may be seen as the apologist being too earnest to "get it over with quickly" (p. 67). Ultimately, timing is of paramount importance. Fourth, apologies must be voluntary. They should not be seen as articulated out of compulsion, coercion, or damage control. Instead, a sincere utterance, matched by a remorseful tone, would be well-accepted by stakeholders. Fifth, apologies must address all stakeholders including anyone affected and offended by the apologist, not just specific stakeholders. Finally, apologies must be appropriate in context. This concerns the site, location and medium of communication selected to communicate the apology.

Content of apology. The manner in which the apology is conducted would be compromised if the content of the apology was insufficient. Thus, what is said is equally important to how the apology is said. Essentially, Hearit and Borden's (2006) conceptualization of apology emphasizes the apologist's effort to atone for the transgression. Thus, apologies must explicitly acknowledge wrongdoing, making "no bones about the fact that an offence has been committed" (p. 67) and without pointing fingers at others, dissociating or distancing from the transgression. The apologist must express regret—conveying dismay at causing harm. Further, the apologist must identify with injured stakeholders by demonstrating empathy for the way in which stakeholders have been hurt and making attempts to comprehend "the depth and effect of the offense in a way that honors the experience of those who have been wronged" (p. 70). Additionally, the content of the apology must ask for forgiveness. This shows the apologist genuinely values its stakeholders' opinions even though the prospects for forgiveness may be slim. Once they ask for forgiveness, the apologist must seek reconciliation; pleading with stakeholders to restore the relationship as much as possible to its previous level before the offence occurred. Further, the apologist must fully disclose information related to the offense. They must also provide explanations that address

legitimate expectations of the stakeholders. This element "simply encourages the apologist to organize the apology within a framework that is meaningful to the injured parties" (p. 72). Yet it is not enough to merely apologize, the content of the apology must also provide assurances that the offense will not be committed again and demonstrate a commitment to voluntarily provide appropriate compensation for those affected.

Frandsen and Johansen (2010) described Hearit and Borden's (2006) framework as a "more practically oriented model which puts forward a normative standard for ethically correct crisis communication..." (p. 353). Thus, this study posits the following research questions:

*RQ1: What strategies are appropriate to be used in the given circumstances? What strategies work well together, what strategies do not?*
*RQ2: How persuasive are these strategies?*
*RQ3: What other strategies can be built into image repair theory?*

**Method**

This study is conducted by meta-analysis of literature on image repair. The meta-analysis method is useful to combine different data in various studies of one topic, in this case, of insights from one theory, into one comprehensive study (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). Since this is an exploratory study, meta-analyzing the comprehensive studies using image repair as its theoretical lens would yield further understanding of its development and identify future areas of research. Coombs and Schmidt (2000) argued that using "a series of case studies would allow the researcher to find patterns" (p. 164) of strategies. Wimmer and Dominick (1997) asserted that in-depth study of cases were time-tested means of evaluating business practices. Stake (1995) argued that case studies enabled researchers to understand the embedded-ness and interactions these processes had with their larger contexts. Case studies, in the context of organizational studies, are in-depth studies of people, processes, and protocol (Stacks, 2002). The essence of case study is, thus, to "illuminate a set of decisions, why they were taken and how they were implemented, and to what result," argued Yin (2003, p. 12).

*Data Collection*

It was important to study as many case studies as possible. A comprehensive collection of image repair literature was accessed and compiled. These ranged from as early as 1994 to 2012. The studies were published in a variety of journals, including *Communication Studies*, *Communication Reports*, *Communication Quarterly*, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *Business Communication Quarterly*, *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Business Communication*, and *Journal of Communication Management*, amongst others. These studies were conducted by Benoit in collaboration with his colleagues, as well as other researchers like Liu (2007), King (2006), Kauffman (2008), Cowden and Sellnow (2002), Caldiero, Taylor and Ungureanu (2009), Hearit and Brown (2004), amongst others, and applied to a variety of crises involving celebrities and political figures, corporate fraud, international conflict, religious bodies, and across cultures. In all, 43 articles were examined.

*Data Analysis*

Analyzing context and strategies. Journal articles with image repair strategies used as a framework provided ready resource into the insights of the thinking and strategies of the organizations at that time. This study, then, examined the "contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Yin, 1993, p. 59). Each case was analyzed for their intrinsic value (Stake, 1998), in detail and in their unique contexts.

The next stage is to draw inferences, to go beyond the descriptive and to distil principles for them to be more prescriptive.

**Findings and Discussion**

The findings from the meta-analysis are organized according to Pang's (2006) categorization of response strategies along an advocacy-accommodative continuum. Pang (2006) posited that some strategies such as denial and evading responsibility belonged more to advocacy in nature, while others like mortification were more accommodative. Yet, there were others that were in the middle range between advocacy and accommodation, such as reducing offensiveness strategies. The strategies at the advocacy end seek to protect the organization whereas the strategies at the accommodative end seek to address the stakeholders' concerns. In addition, it is plausible for organizations to adopt mixed strategies or stances in responding to their stakeholders. Benoit and Hirson (2001) argued that image repair strategies should be "collectively as well as individually appropriate" (p. 290).

Research question one examined what strategies were appropriate to be used in the given circumstances and what strategies work well together, what strategies do not? The second research question examined how persuasive these strategies were. These questions would be examined conjointly. To answer them in a coherent manner, the questions would be examined by first categorizing the nature of the accusation, the tools used, exemplar of the rhetoric used, and the persuasiveness. To enable easier reading, the strategies used would be in bold.

*Advocacy Strategies: Denial and Evasion of Responsibility*

Nature of accusation. These were most commonly used in an accident and/or challenge crisis type and when the accused is under heavy criticism and there is a need to address this criticism but avoid taking responsibility for it. President Bush used this, for example, in defending himself against Democratic contenders, who repeatedly criticized him for US' economic problems and the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq after its invasion. The defensive strategy was also employed by Merrill Lynch when it was accused of recommending sale of poor-performing stocks to individual investors.

Channels of communication. Television interview (Benoit, 2006) or press releases.

Exemplar of rhetoric. In response to the economic accusations, Bush used **defeasibility**: "I think that's important for the people who watch the expenditure side of the equation to understand we're at war. And any time you commit your troops into harm's way, they must have the best equipment, the best training, the best possible pay. We owe it to their loved ones" (Benoit, 2006, p. 298). In response to allegations of unethical practises, Merrill Lynch used **denial**: "There is no basis for the allegations made today by the New York Attorney General. His conclusions are just

plain wrong. We are outraged that we were not given the opportunity to contest these allegations in court." (p. 462).

Persuasiveness. King (2006) argued that characteristics associated with the wrongdoing will "influence the type of response strategy" (p.135) the organization engages in; hence allegations of a serious wrongdoing will elicit a defensive response strategy. A defensive response strategy attempts to "eliminate and doubts about the legitimacy of the organization" (p. 135), and to protect its image, provided the allegations are false (King, 2006), such as when Brown and Williamson responded to allegations of "organizational misconduct and inappropriate behavior by senior officials" (p. 132). Similarly, Benoit and Brinson (1999) found that in these situations, **denial** is essential to the accused. Hindman (2005) suggested that **shifting the blame** and **defeasibility** can distance the organization from the wayward act, for example, when *The New York Times* tried to "separate itself from a wayward journalist" who had plagiarized and fabricated information (p. 239). Benoit (2006) found the strategy of **defeasibility** used by President Bush a "risky strategy for the incumbent" (p. 303). **Defeasibility**, if accepted by the audience, "exonerates the accused from blame, but does not portray him or her as in charge of the situation…" (p.299). It appears there is a trade-off between responsibility and competence.

*Middle Range Strategies (Evading responsibility)*

Nature of accusation. The strategy of reducing offensiveness is most commonly used in an accident and/or challenge crisis type, the crisis context being a product-harm situation. Dardis and Haigh (2008) found that "this strategy seems to be well suited for instances of "middle ground" crises in which organizational responsibility is not automatically obvious and in which organizations are relatively low-profile" (p. 112). Blaney and Benoit (1997) suggested that when one cannot deny having said or done something but had to address the accusation, **transcendence** is appropriate.

Channels of communication. Press releases (Dardis & Haigh, 2008) which are disseminated in news reports (Haigh & Brubaker, 2010).

Exemplar of rhetoric. Quotes from a press release concerning product recall in experimental study: "Consumers have not reported problems. Most of the water has already been pulled from distribution channels. We are making the recall known to consumers as well as vendors to promote open lines of communication with consumers. This is only the 2nd product recall in our 40-year history. We are dedicated to making quality products" (Haigh & Brubaker, 2010, p. 459).

Persuasiveness: Dardis and Haigh (2008) found the strategy of reducing offensiveness "allows the company to deflect threats to its credibility on one hand, while affording the company the chance to strategically minimize perceptions of the severity of the situation on the other hand" (p. 141). In addition, the experimental study found reducing offensiveness the most effective among other image repair strategies in terms of restoring positive attitudes towards organization, reputation, corporate ability, corporate credibility and corporate positioning. Similarly Haigh and Brubaker (2010) found it most effective in protecting the trust and commitment dimensions of organization public relations and most effective in protecting the image, reputation, and credibility dimensions of corporate social responsibility. Blaney and Benoit (1997) argued that **transcendence** could be an especially apt strategy for those who defend theological doctrines.

*Accommodative Strategies (Corrective Action and Mortification)*

<u>Nature of accusation.</u> The strategy of **mortification** was most commonly used in a preventable crisis, where the organization misdeed is apparent, and due to management misconduct, such as when the Roman Catholic Church "sparked the biggest crisis in history of the American Catholic Church" (Kauffman, 2008, p. 258) in its sexual abuse charges, and knowledge of that misdeed was known by management; Archbishop Bernard Law had known of the abuse, but "he reassigned Geoghan, to different parishes, where Geoghan continued to abuse minors" (p. 258).

<u>Channels of communication.</u> Press conference (Kauffman, 2008).

<u>Exemplar of rhetoric.</u> In response to the sex abuse cases by Catholic priests in Boston, Archbishop Bernard Law apologized: "With all my heart, I wish to apologize once again for the harm done to the victims of sexual abuse by priests" (Kauffman, 2008, p. 260).

<u>Persuasiveness.</u> Benoit (1997) suggested that "when one commits an offensive act, it is often best to employ **mortification**" (p. 263) and that "**mortification** can help to repair a damaged reputation" (p. 264). Kauffman (2008) found the strategy of **mortification** used by Archbishop Bernard Law persuasive in such crisis situations as the papers gave positive coverage and described the apology as "extraordinary, dramatic, contrite and sincere" (p. 261). Brinson and Benoit (1999) found that the use of both **corrective action** and **mortification** strategies "was effective in reconstructing Texaco's positive image" (p. 504) after allegations of racism towards its African American employees. Benoit (1988) argued that the strategy of **mortification** quells attacks from accusers because "when an apology is seen as sincere by the audience further condemnation can only be seen as revenge" (p. 190).

However, Benoit (1997) warned that "**mortification** means admitting guilt, which may help the company's image but impair its ability to win lawsuit" (p. 265). Blaney, Benoit and Brazeal (2002) suggested that **corrective action** "must be perceived as correcting the problem" (p.389).

*Mixed strategies 1: Accommodative-Middle Range Strategies*

<u>Nature of accusation.</u> The mixed strategy of using a combination of accommodative and middle range strategies was most commonly used in three types of crisis: 1) a preventable crisis, where the organization management misdeed is apparent, such as when allegations surfaced within the Christian and Missionary Alliance that over 30 children had suffered abuse at the hands of staff, 2) in an accidental crisis, where a technical error results in a defect or potentially harmful product, as in the example of Dow Corning being accused of manufacturing unsafe silicone breast implants, or 3) in a challenge crisis type, where the organization is confronted with claims by discontented stakeholders, such as in the case of Phillip Morris defending its image "as a respectable, responsible, and legitimate company" (Metzler, 2001, p. 367) in the tobacco industry, which is being questioned for its trustworthiness to "act in a manner that doesn't cause undo harm to public health" (p. 371).

Brinson and Benoit (1996) found this to be appropriate when "there is clear evidence of wrongdoing and blame cannot be shifted elsewhere" (p. 39). However, Benoit and Henson (2008) also found this could be used in a natural disaster crisis, and when culpability could not be directly attributed to the government involved, as in the example of Hurricane Katrina in the US. Furthermore, in the circumstances where there were threats of widespread media attention, like in

the abovementioned cases, this strategy was appropriate (Brinson & Benoit, 1996; Courtright & Hearit, 2002).

Channels of communication: Press releases (Brinson & Benoit, 1996), press conferences (Drumheller & Benoit, 2004), television advertisements and organization website (Metzler, 2001), and personal communication to the victims in the form of letters and a retreat (Courtright & Hearit, 2002).

Exemplar of rhetoric. Dow Corning (Brinson & Benoit, 1996), in response to allegations that their products were unsafe, **bolstered** their image: "Our overriding responsibility is to the women using silicone mammary implants made by Dow Corning" (p. 37), and employed **mortification**: "We have made errors. But if we haven't done it right up to now, we are sure going to try to do it now" (p. 36).

Persuasiveness. Brinson and Benoit (1996) found that the combination of **mortification, corrective action** and **bolstering**, "worked well together despite the company continuing to insist that their product is safe" (p. 39). It was also found that "dropping the defensive tone and assumption of responsibility improved its image" (p. 39). Drumheller and Benoit (2004) further argued that it is a useful tool for conveying sincerity. In addition to accepting responsibility, **compensation** and **corrective action** would also help to deal with victims, because the stakeholders expect it (Courtright & Hearit, 2002). Furthermore, Courtright and Hearit (2002) asserted that in the Christian and Missionary Alliance sex abuse case, **compensation** appears as a form of "proportional humiliation designed to deal with the consequences of guilt" (p. 355). Metzler (2001) found that **corrective action** lends support **to bolstering** and **transcendence** tactics, and that without it, the **bolstering and transcendence** tactics "seem clearly designed to divert attention away from tobacco issues and lead the audience down a garden path of good deeds" (p. 378). Therefore accommodative strategies support certain middle range strategies.

However, Metzler (2001) cautioned that the organization needs to "commit to real change through **corrective action**" (p. 378), especially when the audience is "not that gullible" to accept readily the "misdirection of attention" (p. 378).

*Mixed strategies 2: Defensive - Middle Range Strategies*

Nature of accusation. The mixed strategy of using a combination of defensive and middle range strategies was commonly used in a challenge crisis type where the organization is confronted by stakeholders with claims of organizational misconduct, in response to the allegations of wrongdoing. For example, in the case of Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company defending itself against accusations of "inappropriate behavior by senior officials in their manufacturing of tobacco products" (p. 132). Caution should be used in employing a defensive strategy when allegations are true, as it "risks damage to the image and reputation of the organization" (King, 2006, p. 135).

Channels of communication. Press conferences (Benoit, 2006; Benoit & Mill, 1998; Benoit & Wells, 1998; Zhang & Benoit, 2009)), public testimony (Benoit & Mill, 1998), public address (Benoit & Brinson, 1999), TV interviews (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Benoit & Nill, 1998b; Len-Ríos & Benoit, 2004), news articles, letters to newspapers, speech, TV interviews and a book publication (Benoit & Nill, 1998a), advertisements (Benoit & Wells, 1998; Zhang & Benoit, 2004), and press statements (Brinson & Benoit, 1996).

Exemplar of rhetoric. In response to the allegation that Mrs. Clinton had received preferential treatment in profitable investment advice: "There's really no evidence of that." (Benoit & Wells, 1998, p. 27). Saudi Arabia denied that it supports terrorism: "There is no proof [that Saudi money went to the Taliban]." (Zhang & Benoit, 2004, p. 164), and argued why it did not support the U.S. plan to attack Iraq: "Our view is that… it [to attack Iraq] would not serve America's interests, or the interests of the region." (Zhang & Benoit, 2004, p. 165).

Persuasiveness. Benoit and Nill (1998b) found that **bolstering** can reinforce **denial** provided the **bolstering** is consistent with the **denial**. This was further asserted by Benoit and Brinson (1999), that **bolstering** "strengthened the **denial** through displaying the Royal Family's heartfelt emotions, selfless motives, and gratitude" (p. 151) when the Queen was faced with claims that she failed to acknowledge her subjects' grief over Princess Diana's death. Benoit and Nill (1998a) also found that the use of third-party defence, as a form of **bolstering**, in addition to self-defence, helped to increase the persuasiveness of the image restoration strategy. The authors argued that film director Oliver Stone's defence of his sources in his documentary, *JFK*, "appeared somewhat more objective and more persuasive than if he were defending himself directly" (p. 137). This was also found viable in political communication (Benoit & Well, 1998) as it gave "more objectivity than is possible with self-defence" (p. 34). Similarly, Benoit and Hanczor (1994) argued that the development of Tonya Harding's defence against accusations of her involvement in the deliberate injury of a rival was generally weak, when "virtually all of Harding's defence rested only on her words" (p. 426).

However, when an organization faces growing evidence that the allegations are anything but false, continued **denial** would diminish the credibility of the organization (Brinson & Benoit, 1996). Benoit (2006) found further evidence of the ineffectiveness in using **denial** in this circumstance when "most probably did not believe [Saddam] Hussein had Weapons of Mass Destruction when [President] Bush invaded Iraq" yet Bush refused to admit his mistake (p. 142). The lack of **mortification** and any real admission of wrongdoing and remorse would be "egregious mistakes" (Len-Ríos & Benoit, 2004, p. 103). Zhang and Benoit (2009) also found that the defensive strategies used in image repair efforts were unsuccessful when there was "much self-contradiction" (p. 244) when challenges were raised to an organization's statement of **denials**, such as in China's Former Health Minister Zhang Wenkang's weak discourse in repairing the image of the Chinese during the SARS epidemic. In adopting a strategy of **denial**, evidence that is contrary to the allegations should be given to increase the persuasiveness of the **denial**, instead of using middle-range strategies such as **defeasibility**. Zhang and Benoit (2004) found that a response was noticeably weaker when "no evidence supported the claim that funding (from Saudi Arabia) had not supported the Palestinian suicide bombers", and pleading **defeasibility** would "help only a little" (p. 166), rendering the combination of strategies partially effective.

*Mixed strategies 3: Defensive - Accommodative Strategies*

Nature of accusation. The mixed strategy of using a combination of defensive and accommodative strategies was most commonly found in challenge and preventable crises, for instance, when New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer accused investment firm Merrill Lynch of "recommending the purchase of poorly performing stocks to individual investors which enabled Merrill Lynch to win or retain lucrative investment banking fees for those same companies" (Hearit & Brown, 2004, p. 460). Hearit and Brown (2004) argued that such a response was "paradigmatic of the problem inherent in modern apologetic speech, in that, when

presented with clear evidence of wrongdoings the [accused] initially responded with a denial and counter-attack; and once it become clear that the allegations would not go away, it then completed a settlement with its accusers in which it offered a weak statement of regret followed by a payment of a large fine" (p. 460).

Channels of communication. News accounts (Hearit & Brown, 2004), brochures in response to the attacks (Benoit & Hirson, 2001) and advertising campaigns (Hearit & Brown, 2004).

Exemplar of rhetoric. Merrill Lynch's response to allegations of fraud: "There is no basis for the allegations made today by the New York Attorney General. His conclusions are just plain wrong. We are outraged that we were not given the opportunity to contest these allegations in court… The allegations reveal a fundamental lack of understanding of how securities research works within overall capital-raising process." (Hearit & Brown, 2004, p. 462). Subsequently, Merrill Lynch took a more conciliatory approach: "The emails that have come to light are very distressing and disappointing to us. They fall far short of our professional standards and some are inconsistent with our policies." (p. 463). CEO Komansky promised that the firm would "take meaningful and significant actions to restore investor confidence" (p. 463).

Persuasiveness. Benoit and Hirson (2001) argued that combining **denial** with **corrective action**, for instance in the Tobacco Institute's response to the *Doonesbury* cartoons' repeated attacks against the tobacco industry was a mistake: "If the industry's denial is to be believed, then there would be no point in implementing corrective action… The fact that the industry changed its marketing practices is evidence that those marketing practices were wrong" (p. 270). Similarly, previous literature (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Benoit & McHale, 1999; Blaney, Benoit & Brazeal, 2002) suggests that accommodative strategies (**mortification** and **correction action**) were undermined by the use of defensive strategies (**denial** and **shifting the blame**). Hearit and Brown (2004) suggested that the reason for the late and weak apology by Merrill Lynch could be concerns about liability from admission. The authors also posit "due to liability concerns, in its current form in contemporary apologetic speech, the acknowledgement of wrongdoings lies not in the apology but in the compensation" (p. 465). Benoit and Hirson (2001) also argued that **denial** and **corrective action** could be used effectively if the organization successfully **shifts the blame** to plausible or persuasive scapegoats, for instance when Tylenol shifted the blame for contaminated capsules to a madman (Benoit & Lindsey, 1987).

*Mixed strategies 4: Defensive - Middle range – Accommodative Strategies*

Nature of accusation. The combination of defensive, middle range and accommodative strategies is commonly found in accidents and preventable type crises where organizations or individuals are under heavy criticism and repeated attacks for their misdeeds from 1) the media and the public (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Brinson & Benoit, 1999; Hindman, 2005; Liu, 2007), for instance, when the New York Times attacked US Airways' safety record after the crash of one of its aircraft, and when actor Hugh Grant faced scrutiny after he was arrested for lewd behavior with a prostitute, 2) from authorities (Blaney, Benoit & Brazeal, 2002; Brazael, 2008), as in the case when a federal investigation blamed Firestone for tread separation in its tires that caused over 100 deaths, or 3) from individuals (Benoit & McHale, 1999), such as when Kenneth Starr was attacked for his investigation into President Clinton's impeachable offenses.

Channels of communication. News releases (Brinson & Benoit, 1999; Hindman, 2005), video address (Benoit, 1997; Benoit & McHale, 1999; Brinson & Benoit, 1999) and newspaper advertisements (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997) press conferences (Brazael, 2008; Liu, 2007) and press statements.

Exemplar of rhetoric. When Hugh Grant was arrested for lewd behaviour with a prostitute, he appeared on five talk shows to defend his image (Benoit, 1997). He **admitted his misdeed**: "People gave me tons of ideas … you know, that I was under pressure, I was over-tired, or I was lonely, or I fell down the stairs when I was a child or whatever. But … I think that would be bollocks to hide behind something like that … you know in life pretty much what's a good thing to do and what's a bad thing, and I did a bad thing, and there you have it." (p.257), **bolstered** his image by showing concern for his girlfriend: "The thing is that I'm not the one who really deserves the sympathy; it really is my girlfriend and people like that" (p. 258), and **denied** some accusations: "I don't frequent topless bars… my brother did take me once, but that's the only time I've ever" (p. 259) and attack his accusers: "To get me to come out of the house… called an ambulance to the house. And I guess they wanted their pictures but there could have been someone dying in the street who needed the ambulance". (p. 259).

Persuasiveness. Hindman (2005) argued that while defensive strategies were useful in distancing the organization from the wayward behaviour it could raise questions about how it happened in the first place. Therefore the combination of middle range and accommodative strategies (**bolstering, transcendence, corrective action** and **mortification**), which was used by the New York Times to separate itself from a wayward journalist and pledging to "change its culture" (Hindman, 2005, p. 235), would make an organization's response more persuasive by signalling the possibility of real change, suggesting that the violation was an anomaly rather than a failure in the fundamentals of the organization. Similarly Brinson and Benoit (1999) labelled this form of **shifting the blame** "separation" (p. 504) and which argues that "the company is innocent of wrongdoing and identifies a target of blame" that is "part of the entity that is claiming innocence (p.505). Such a strategy benefits from the use of **bolstering**, **corrective action** and **mortification**, which protects and emphasizes the remaining good part of the organization.

Benoit (1997) found that the use of **denial** by Hugh Grant "was useful in limiting the scope of charges" and "that the fact that **denial** was limited to certain accusations may have made it sound truthful" (p. 262). He also argued that in such situations, **denial** would have been ineffective without using **mortification**. However, on the flip side, the combination of defensive, middle range and accommodative strategies could also undermine the overall persuasiveness of these strategies. Liu (2007) found that the pairing of **evasion of responsibility** and **mortification** in President Bush's post-Katrina speeches about the inadequate federal response was contradictory and unpersuasive especially when the organization was responsible for accusations and the public expects the organization to take responsibility. Brazeal (2008) found that the strategy of **mortification** without **corrective action**, paired with **attacking the accuser** and **bolstering**, as used by Terrell Owens after he sabotaged his own image during his contract dispute with the Philadelphia Eagles, would destroy any goodwill earned by the accommodative strategy.

Benoit and Henson (2008) argued that **defeasibility** and **bolstering** do not work well with **corrective action**, even though "corrective action is often a desirable choice for image repair" (p. 44) because giving excuses for offensive actions "emphasizes the [accused's] inability to cope with problems" (p. 44). This is especially when the organization or government faces heavy

criticism from the public and the media for "a sluggish initial response" (p. 41) in the wake of a natural disaster.

From the above discussion, what we can surmise are:

1) Defensive strategies are more appropriate when the accused is under heavy criticism and culpability is not obvious or can be redirected. Comparatively accommodative strategies are more appropriate when the organization's misdeed is apparent and blame cannot be shifted elsewhere.

2) The middle range strategy of reducing offensiveness was more effective in protecting the current reputation/trust/commitment of the organization among all other strategies in "middle ground" crisis in which organizational responsibility is not automatically obvious and in which organizations are relatively low-profile. However, in deciding the persuasiveness of image repair strategy and the reason for its appropriateness, there are several factors which an organization should consider.

3) Use of whatever means of channels of communication available as long as the message gets out.

*Finesse*

In some instances, the organization's image repair efforts suffered not because of the choice of strategy but rather due to how it was implemented. For instance, when an organization issues defensive statements (**denial, evasion of responsibility**), these statements should not be based on lies or inaccurate data (Zhang & Benoit, 2009). Similarly, continued insistence on **denial** when evidence to the contrary continues to surface would greatly reduce the organization's credibility (Brinson & Benoit, 1996).

When **attacking the accuser**, it is important to choose the right target. For instance, attacking the authorities (Brinson & Benoit, 1996) while under investigation made the organization look irresponsible. Comparatively, when **attacking the accuser** is not perceived as an attempt to dismiss one's accusation but to protect other innocent parties, such as when Hugh Grant attacked the media for harassing his girlfriend and family (Benoit, 1997), it seems to perform better.

When **shifting the blame**, it is also pertinent to choose the right target. **Shifting the blame** to someone within the organization draws criticism to the management (Hindman, 2005) while blaming the victims only draws more anger towards the organization (Benoit & Hirson, 2001). When an organization's misdeed is obvious and undisputable, it is important for the organization to show evidence of fixing the problem.

Middle range strategies (**bolstering, transcendence, minimization, differentiation**) can be seen as "misdirection of attention" (Metzler, 2001, p.378) especially when the audience are critical of the organization. In addition, these strategies could be more persuasive when delivered by neutral third-parties rather than the organization itself (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997).

**Corrective action** should also be perceived as fixing the problem rather than just the symptoms (Blaney, Benoit & Brazeal, 2002) and therefore steps towards correction should be outlined (Hearit & Brown, 2004) and commitment to real change should be demonstrated. (Hindman, 2008).

*Consistency*

Strategies should be consistently applied across the crisis timeline for an organization's response to be taken as credible. Therefore organizations should avoid corporate doublespeak, i.e.

strategies that convey a contradictory stand from the organization should not be used together, such as the paring of **denial** and **corrective action** and/or **mortification** (Low, Varughese & Pang, 2011) as it diminishes any effectual goodwill earned and presents rhetorical inconsistency which draws flak for further challenges to the organization's culpability (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Benoit & Hirson, 2001; Blaney, Benoit & Brazeal, 2002).

Drumheller and Benoit (2004) called for the importance in consistency in strategies used, not just in their combinations. Therefore, organizations should first carefully evaluate the appropriateness of certain strategies in supporting the organizational stance (ranging from accommodative to defensive) and commit to them throughout the crisis. When the wrong set of strategies is used on the onset, subsequent image repair efforts would have a harder time garnering goodwill from its stakeholders (Yvonne, Jeni & Pang, 2011). Likewise, when the right set of strategies is used on the onset, but the organization fails to be consistent in managing that stance, persuasiveness of the initial set of strategies would be undermined (Blaney, Benoit & Brazeal, 2002; Brazeal, 2008). Inconsistency betrays the lack of certainty and/or honesty of the organization when it comes to communicating their stance towards their stakeholders.

*History*

In a crisis, organizations and individuals cannot isolate themselves from their prior reputation and relational history with their stakeholders. Therefore, strategies used should be consistent with the stakeholders' impressions of the organization/individual. Benoit (1997) found that when middle range strategies, such as **bolstering**, leverage on previous positive impressions of the accused the instances of bolstering were more compelling.

Conversely, organizations with an unfavourable image would begin at a serious disadvantage. Such negative impressions could surround entire industries in some cases, such as the Tobacco industry. When stakeholders do not trust the organization to start with, credibility of the strategies communicated would be threatened, which necessitates further deliberation towards the selection and development of image repair strategies. Therefore, "organizations, groups, and individuals must thoroughly understand the nature of their public image before they try to repair it" (Benoit & Hirson, 2001, p. 290). The paper further argues that organizations should be committed to real change if prior image/reputation does not support choice of strategy used and demonstrate it adequately in their communication efforts (Hindman, 2005).

*Emotions*

Whatever strategies are used, it is critical to first address the emotions of the stakeholders. A qualified rhetoric-mixed stance of assuring stakeholders has been found to be more useful than promising them immediate rectification (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2010). Understanding emotional upheavals of stakeholders is argued to be the next frontier of crisis research (Jin & Pang, 2010).

*Building on image repair theory*

Research question three examined what other strategies can be built into image repair theory. The question remains if the strategies in image repair theory are relevant and sufficient to assuage increasingly demanding stakeholders impatient for immediate results and resolution of the crisis. If image repair can be construed as good defence mechanism, its shortcoming may lie in its inability to provide sufficient cover offensively. Particularly, beyond apologizing, are the

strategies of corrective action and compensation enough? More elucidation needs to be enacted on how the organization is going to move forward.

If Brand's (2012) argument that the strategies for success in crisis communication include addressing safety concerns and renewal, then two possible strategies should be included. First, drawing on insights from Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2006/2007), one possible strategy that can be included is the strategy of co-operation. Co-operation takes place beyond promising to correct the problem and offering compensation. Its motivation is reconciliatory. Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2006) defined co-operation as "making overtures to reach out to the other party with the goal of resolving the problem" (p. 92).

Another possible strategy is drawn from insights from renewal, that is, the commitment to change – for the betterment of stakeholders. Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2007) defined renewal as "a fresh sense of purpose and direction an organization discovers after it emerges from a crisis" (p. 177). Ulmer and Sellnow (2002) argued that renewal involves a "rebuilding of confidence" (p. 362). Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2007) argued renewal can take place on three levels: Commitment to stakeholders; commitment to correcting the problem that caused the crisis; commitment to core values. Commitment to change takes place even before the three levels of renewal take place.

## Conclusion and Limitation

This study has examined the image repair strategies and their persuasiveness. It has also examined how the theory can be extended further, namely incorporating two other strategies in co-operation and commitment to change.

Beyond that, the bigger question remains how to enhance the rigor of the theory across cultural contexts. Increasingly, scholars in Asia are questioning the relevance of applying Western-centric communication theories for research studies in Asia, arguing for the adoption of a de-Westernised, cultural specific approach (Wang, 2011). Wang (2011) had earlier posited that Euro-centrism is emerging as one of the primary factors leading to a serious imbalance in knowledge production, particularly in the arena of communication studies. The concept of 'de-Westernisation' goes beyond the simplistic definition of removing elements that are Western but rather it is to enrich the value of Western methods and theories (Wang, 2011; Wang & Kuo, 2010, p.154).

Therefore, as Wang & Kuo (2010) suggest, Western-centric biases and problems in communication studies must first be indigenised to take into account cultural specific influences in terms of the historical, social, cultural and sub-cultural context. However, Wang & Kuo (2010) cautioned against "complete fragmentation of the field", instead advocating for a "pluri-universality" (Wang & Kuo, 2010, p.161) approach. One of the reasons for doing so is that there is a "growing tendency of transcultural adaptation as a result of modernisation and globalisation" (Wang & Kuo, 2010, p. 156).

Huang, Lin, and Su (2005), for instance, applied the strategies to Asian contexts and found that while most strategies are applicable, they detected the strategy of diversion not present in Western contexts. Diversion includes strategies that seek to "put the issue 'to rest' or distract public or media attention by creating a different issue or temporarily ease public anger by showing regards (while not apologizing)" (Huang, Lin, Su, 2005, p. 235). The sub-strategies are showing regards/sympathy, building a new agenda, and differentiating.

As an exploratory paper, this paper has sought to extend our current understanding in the use of strategies. One limitation is that it remains conceptual and lacks empirical foundations. Further tests need to be carried out to exhaustively examine the rigor of the strategies. Ultimately,

the key question this study seeks to answer is the one posed by Benoit (1997): When faced with a crisis, what can an organization say?

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