

Evaluating Image Repair Strategies following plagiarism allegation: A case of a South Asian University

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Abstract: This scholarly work investigates a case of plagiarism involving a prominent Southeast Asian university professor. Despite facing institutional penalties and widespread criticism in public and social media, the professor utilized Benoit's Image Restoration Theory [3] to repair their reputation. Employing qualitative content analysis, this study explores the professor's use of strategies such as denial, evading responsibility, and reducing offensiveness to mitigate the image damage from the allegations. The findings underscore the professor's frequent adoption of these strategies to gradually restore their image. This research is notable as it represents the first study in Southeast Asia to scrutinize image restoration within the context of plagiarism accusations, thereby offering significant insights for the regional academic community and setting a precedent for future research in crisis communication scholarship.

Keywords — Denial, image repair, plagiarism, social media.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the reputation of a prestigious South Asian university has been significantly tarnished by multiple plagiarism allegations against its faculty members. Out of eleven accused faculty members, only three have been disciplined. Among these, the most notable case involved a professor who was also a prominent television personality. This incident occurred in 2017 and highlighted the critical need for educational institutions globally to uphold strict academic standards and the severe repercussions of failing to do so.

The plagiarism allegations surfaced at the height of her career in 2017 when an administrative assistant at the *Chicago Journal* reported her for plagiarizing content in a published article, leading to an investigation. In September 2019, the investigation concluded that she was guilty. As a result, in early 2021, she was demoted from Associate Professor to Assistant

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Professor. However, the alleged professor denied the allegations, attributing them to malice from her colleagues. She successfully challenged her demotion in court, and the High Court questioned the legality of the demotion on grounds of alleged plagiarism. She also actively engaged with the media and used social media, press conferences, and interviews to present herself as a victim of a targeted campaign by envious colleagues.

Our case study provided a detailed analysis of the professor's public responses and strategies based on Benoit's (1995) image repair theory. This research is crucial for the academic community in Southeast Asia as it explores the specific tactics used by an individual to counter plagiarism accusations and restore their reputation. The findings offer valuable insights into crisis management and reputation repair, which can aid public relations professionals and academic administrators in similar situations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The reputation of individuals and organizations can be harmed when they are accused of unacceptable and unethical actions and behaviors. In such cases, image restoration tactics can be beneficial in rectifying those claims or suspicions of impropriety [1]. The image repair theory (IRT) was developed by William Benoit in 1995 and is one of the most extensively utilized theories in crisis communication research. According to this theory, any attack having two dimensions—offensive activity and claims of culpability for the action—has the potential to undermine an individual's or an organization's image and reputation [2]. However, Benoit's Image Repair Typology [3] operates on two fundamental ideas – communication is purposeful, and maintaining a positive image is one such purpose. This theory is built upon earlier research on apologia and self-defense rhetoric. Benoit identified five main strategies used when an individual's or organization's reputation is challenged – (a) denial, (b) evading responsibility, (c) reducing the severity of the event, (d) taking corrective action, and (e) showing remorse or mortification [3]. Additionally, he extends the first three strategies into more specific tactics. Table 1 explains the details of all these image repair strategies. When faced with a crisis, Benoit [2] believes that organizations or individuals can employ these five self-defense tactics to maintain, rebuild, or restore their reputations.

To repair an image, the first approach can be a *denial*, where an accused individual never accepts that an offending act ever took place. In the category of denial, there are two sub-categories. Simple denial is something where an accused person denies conducting an unlawful act or denies that the deed occurred at all. During a critical period in his career, Lance Armstrong, a prominent US road racing cyclist, staunchly denied doping allegations before eventually admitting to them, maintaining his innocence, particularly during his comeback, despite contradictory evidence [4]. In addition, shifting blame is similar to scapegoating, where an accused person claims that another party is accountable for the wrongful act [2]. Benoit [3] argues that shifting blame, by confronting a negative belief and offering an alternative target, is often more effective than mere denial, which may leave the audience without an outlet for their negative emotions. In cases where the alleged individual is unable to refute the act, the method of *evasion of responsibility* is employed to avoid or lessen accountability for the act. This technique is broken down into subcategories. In some cases, one can assert provocation, asserting that the unlawful act was a fair response to an earlier offensive act committed by the victim. Terrell Owens, a former American footballer, employed a provocation strategy, framing his contentious behavior as a reaction to the Philadelphia Eagles' refusal to renegotiate his contract, thus portraying himself as provoked by the team's decisions and treatment [5]. It is also possible to be defensible if individuals believe that they do not have sufficient information or control over critical components of a situation [3]. An accident is a legal declaration that bad conduct was not undertaken with the intent of harming someone. For instance, scholars [6], found that Milos Raonic, a tennis player, used the accident strategy by candidly acknowledging a specific mistake during a crucial moment in a match, thereby attributing part of his loss to a clear and identifiable error in his part. Another study [7] noted that celebrities often employed phrases such as “That was not my intent” or “I didn’t intend to” as a way to diminish the impact of their statements that appeared racist (p. 11). These phrases indicate the accident strategy applied by celebrities to regain their lost image. The final method of avoiding responsibility is to argue that the act was undertaken with good intentions, even though it turned out badly for the offender [8].

The third strategy, which comprises six sub-strategies, is *reducing offensiveness*. Bolstering is one of the sub-strategies used to draw attention to the positive characteristics and noteworthy past actions of the accused individual. Brazeal [5] described that in a press conference, Drew Rosenhaus, athlete Terrell Owens' agent, employed a bolstering strategy by highlighting Owens' sincere character and competitive spirit aimed at Superbowl success. Minimization strives to present the wrongdoing as insignificant, whereas differentiation asserts that an offensive act should be distinguished from other similarly offensive acts that are more offensive. For instance, Floyd Mayweather, a professional boxer, used minimization in his apology by trivializing his comments as merely being in fun, not seriously intended, and not meant to be harmful, thus attempting to lessen their perceived impact [7]. Through transcendence, an individual's sin is attempted to be seen as part of a greater framework in which more essential ideas would permeate the circumstance. Attacking one's accuser is an attempt to diminish the credibility of the accuser, so diminishing the offensiveness and/or believability of the claim. For instance, journalist Juan Williams, after being fired from NPR for commenting on Muslims on airplanes, used an attacking strategy to claim that National Public Radio (NPR) in the US was wrong to terminate his employment. In addition, the Compensation provision provides compensation or reparation to the victim of the offensive act [2, 8].

The fourth strategy - *corrective action* in image repair involves a promise to fix a problem or prevent its recurrence, enhancing their reputation by addressing the issue directly rather than merely compensating for it. According to Benoit [3],

while adopting this strategy, the accused strives to rectify the situation by undertaking efforts to prevent misconduct from occurring again. As an example, President Jenkins of Notre Dame University contracted COVID-19 after attending a White House event, disregarding advocated health protocols. He subsequently issued a formal apology, acknowledging his breach. Additionally, during a speech at Notre Dame University on August 18, 2020, the focus shifted towards corrective actions, including the implementation of health protocols, enforcement of disciplinary measures, issuing punitive threats, and enhancing student-student surveillance [9]. And finally, *mortification* is a public statement of sorrow or regret for one's wrongdoings [8]. This should be done in the form of a genuine apology. It is necessary for an individual to first admit and accept responsibility for their acts to perform mortification. A previous study analyzed a case study of a journalist – Brian Williams, who faced public criticism for dishonesty regarding his reporting experiences. Despite attempting to employ the mortification strategy, his apology only admitted to making a mistake rather than confessing to his lies [10]. However, scholars found that Williams' inadequate execution of mortification ultimately worsened the public's perception of him. Thus, Benoit [3] noted that a sincere apology, although it is difficult to execute, leads to a more compassionate response from the audience toward the wrongdoer.

Taken together, this literature review reveals various tactics employed by individuals and organizations for apology and image restoration during and post-crisis situations. However, there is a dearth of studies specifically addressing how academicians, when confronted with plagiarism allegations, utilize these tactics to rehabilitate their image. This gap in research underscores the importance of our investigation. Accordingly, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent Benoit's strategies for image repair were implemented by the professor at a renowned South Asian university?

RQ2: How effective were Benoit's image repair strategies in restoring the professor's reputation?

METHOD

The research methodology involved an exhaustive qualitative content analysis of news stories from mainstream newspapers and news agencies in the South Asian country where the university is located. The study's dataset consisted of 87 news articles, covering the period from September 2020 to August 2022. This timeframe was strategically chosen, beginning with the date the university's investigative committee first publicly confirmed the charges against the professor and concluding with the last date relevant information was available in mainstream news outlets and news agencies.

To compile the dataset, researchers initially utilized LexisNexis, a leading global content provider. The name of the alleged professor served as the primary keyword, and the search was refined to include news from 2017 to 2022, focusing on Asia, and selecting newspapers, newswires, and press releases as the publication types. This search yielded 73 samples from three mainstream newspapers and one major news agency – which included 31 news reports from The New Nation, 16 articles from The Financial Express, and 26 stories from United News of Bangladesh (UNB), a major news agency in the country. Further, a purposive search was conducted on the website of The Daily Star, a premier English-language newspaper in the country, using the professor's first and last name, resulting in an additional 14 news stories relevant to the case study. For data analysis, a spreadsheet was utilized, with five columns assigned for each of the strategies in Benoit's image repair typology [1, 2]. This allowed for a nuanced understanding of the extent to which the typologies were used, from the most to the least, by the accused professor. The study also scrutinized which strategies were used moderately or not at all, providing a comprehensive view of the professor's approach to image restoration throughout the evolution of the case. This dataset, therefore, offered rich insights into the progression of the case over time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first research question of this study aimed to investigate the image restoration strategies that the professor employed during her crisis period. An examination of media reports and Facebook posts revealed that the professor utilized several image restoration tactics recommended by Benoit's [2] typology of image restoration strategies. She primarily relied on strategies of denial and evading responsibility, occasionally used tactics to minimize the offensiveness of the event, but never employed corrective action or mortification throughout the crisis period. We observed a heavy use of denial strategies by the professor. Following her demotion, the professor announced her intention to contest the university's decision in court. She proclaimed her innocence and described herself as a scapegoat and victim of internal politics within the institution, as stated in a news conference on March 1, 2021. This exemplifies the simple denial tactic where she disassociated herself from any wrongdoing [2, 3, 8]. On several occasions, the professor denied any illegal activity, instead suggesting that she was victimized and framed by others' conspiracies. She accused several colleagues of trying to discredit her through propaganda, asserting in a Facebook post on March 1, 2021, that one unnamed female colleague was orchestrating the conspiracies against her. These actions are clear examples of shifting blame. In addition, evading responsibility was employed in moderation. The professor claimed she did not author the disputed article, stating that the article in question was not her original work. As a mentor, she provided the student with several ideas. His student authored the article incorporating some of those ideas and included the professor's name in it. Subsequently, her student submitted the article to the Social Science Review Journal without the professor's knowledge. This statement illustrates a provocation strategy, where she shifts responsibility onto her student. Our findings also reveal that the professor infrequently used strategies to reduce the offensiveness of the event. In interviews, she spoke about her prior good deeds and how she was being unfairly treated as a victim, a tactic known as

bolstering. This strategy was aimed at reinforcing her positive characteristics to counterbalance the negative perceptions created by the allegations. Interestingly, corrective action and mortification have never been used, rather the professor repeatedly presented herself as a victim of a conspiracy perpetrated by her colleagues.

However, the second research question concerned the effectiveness of the techniques the professor employed to rebuild her public image and reputation after her demotion. Throughout the crisis period, the accused professor maintained a high level of consistency in her efforts to identify herself as a victim, and she never wavered in her decisions regarding her actions to support her position. To some extent, that strategy assisted the professor in regaining her reputation. She filed all the proper paperwork with the court to support and validate her claims, and the court accepted them. Consequently, the High Court has also taken up the case and has called into question a decision made by the university administration regarding her demotion. Nevertheless, the professor might have salvaged her tarnished reputation by employing strategies such as simple denial, shifting blame, provocation, good intentions, accident, and bolstering during this crisis period. When analyzing the news events and social media posts, it was found that the professor made poor use of shifting blame and provocation techniques. Because she was the first author of that article, this study believes that the professor could have utilized the mortification strategy instead of blaming her co-author. One of the most effective ways she could have restored her reputation swiftly was to express her regret and apologize for not being more attentive and responsible for what her co-author was writing and publishing. The study found her image restoration strategies weak enough not to consider this strategy to regain her image and reputation that had been harmed in this very crisis.

CONCLUSION

The study conducted a critical exploration of image restoration strategies within the academic sector, particularly through the lens of a plagiarism scandal. By analyzing the application and efficacy of Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT) in this context, the study not only addressed a gap in crisis communication literature but also provided practical insights for educators, administrators, and public relations professionals on managing reputations during crises. This case study thus broadened the application of IRT from corporate and public figures to academic figures, enriching our understanding of strategic communication in diverse arenas. Future research could expand on this study by conducting longitudinal analyses to track the long-term effectiveness of image restoration strategies in academic settings. Additionally, comparative studies across various cultural contexts or academic disciplines would provide deeper insights into the adaptability and effectiveness of these strategies globally. Exploring the integration of digital media strategies in image restoration could also offer valuable perspectives on managing modern crisis communication effectively.

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