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A qualitative meta-analysis of apologia, image repair, and crisis communication: Implications for theory and practice

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative meta-analysis examines thirty years of the *apologia*, image repair and crisis communication literature. We analyzed 110 articles across 51 peer-reviewed journals from 1986 to 2016 to determine any themes or patterns in the strategies used by organizations and/or individuals facing crises or threatened reputations. Our analysis found that corrective action is the most successful and third most common strategy, particularly when paired with another strategy, such as reducing the offensiveness or bolstering. Denial, in contrast, is the least successful strategy, particularly when paired with evasion of responsibility, or reducing the offensiveness. Yet denial was the most frequently used strategy. Our analysis also uncovered mitigating factors that help shape success or failure, including one's guilt or innocence, remaining silent, potential legal action, the scope of the crisis, and promptness in responding. Theoretical implications include a broader understanding of strategies people choose as well as intersecting contexts and factors that determine success or failure. Practical implications center on helping practitioners better utilize image repair strategies.

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1. Introduction

Studies examining how individuals and organizations respond during scandals or crises in order to minimize damage and either maintain or restore their reputations have long been a staple of public relations research. Thus we embarked on a meta-analysis of 110 peer-reviewed journal articles spanning the previous thirty years in order to shed light on broad patterns within the literature on *apologia*, crisis communication, and image repair. The ultimate goal of this meta-analysis is to extend theory within this branch of public relations as well as to provide practitioners with a more comprehensive and accurate picture of what strategies they should rely on or avoid when faced with their own crises.

2. Literature review

2.1. Apologetic rhetoric

Apologetic rhetoric consists of messages designed to repair and restore the image, credibility, and legitimacy of a person or an organization. Apology in apologetic rhetoric refers to a defense, rather than the contemporary connotation meaning

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"I'm sorry." Kruse (1981) defines *apologia* not as a speech but rather as a "specific mode of discourse which is generated in response to a certain exigence" (p. 291), with this discourse being in defense of a person's own actions. Downey (1993) likewise defines *apologia* as speech of self-defense and adds that *apologia* is character-defense rather than the defense of one's policies and ideas. She adds that *apologias* "manifest a variety of styles including appeals to traditional cultural values, invective, references to a greater divinity, reliance upon legitimate bases of power, factual accounts of an issue, and inductively reasoned organization" (Downey, 1993, p. 43). Apologetic rhetoric has evolved over time to include the defense of not just individuals, but organizations as well. Also, apologetic rhetoric has evolved from one instance of apologetic rhetoric such as one speech to a series of statements, or a campaign, of apologetic rhetoric strategically planned and employed to restore the image of a person or organization.

Ware and Linkugel (1973) identify four strategies commonly found in apologetic rhetoric: denial, bolstering, differentiation and transcendence. Regarding these four common strategies, the first two, denial and bolstering, are reformative in the sense that neither attempts "to change the audience's meaning or affect for whatever is in question" (p. 276). Denial can be broken down into four levels of denial. Simple denial means denying any participation in the matter at hand. The rhetor denies any wrongdoing. Another way to deny the charges is to deny any relationship to the matter at hand. A third form of denial is to argue that one has no positive sentiment toward the matter. Here, the accused argues that not only did he or she not act inappropriately, but the accused actually detests "whatever it is that repels the audience" (p. 276). The fourth form of denial is to deny any intent in the matter.

Bolstering, the other reformative strategy, is the opposite of denial. While denial is "an instrument of negation; bolstering is a source of identification" (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 278). Bolstering refers to "any rhetorical strategy which reinforces the existence of a fact, sentiment, object, or relationship. When he [sic] bolsters, a speaker attempts to identify himself with something viewed favorably by the audience" (p. 277). Not all bolstering is identification with the audience. Including facts, data, forensic evidence, or anything that supports the plea of innocence is considered bolstering.

The third and fourth common strategies, differentiation and transcendence, are considered transformative strategies because, unlike denial and bolstering that cannot change the meaning of the cognitive elements involved (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 278), differentiation and transcendence can alter the audience's meanings. According to Ware and Linkugel (1973), differentiation attempts to separate some "fact, sentiment, object, or relationship from some larger context within which the audience presently views that attribute" (p. 278). Subsequently, the audience's meanings of the elements are transformed.

Just as denial and bolstering are opposites, so too is transcendence the opposite of differentiation. According to Ware and Linkugel (1973), transcendental strategies "psychologically move the audience away from the particulars of the charge at hand in a direction toward some more abstract, general view of his character" (p. 280). This strategy joins "some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship with some larger context within which the audience does not presently view that attribute" (p. 280).

In summary, these four common strategies—denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence—can be used separately, in combination, or with a number of lesser known strategies in order to create a successful, persuasive message. At issue is the nature and definition of success in different crisis, risk, and organizational studies and from whose perspective success is attained.

2.1.1. Determining success of the strategies

In *apologia* literature, success is judged according to the motives or goals of the accused, and should also be judged based on the circumstances such as the period in which the accused lived. Success can also be measured in short and long term effects. Therefore, it might take years to determine if the *apologia* efforts are a success or failure. However, because success is often measured in relation to the goals established by those engaging in *apologia*—goals that may not always be made public—the success or failure of such rhetorical strategies may never be measured accurately.

2.2. Image repair and restoration

Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2007) note that some public relations practitioners recommend that leaders use a carefully planned strategy to shift the blame, reduce responsibility, and avoid damage to the company's reputation in response to a crisis, efforts often termed as image restoration strategies. *Apologia* has generated elaborate taxonomies of post-crisis responses (Sellnow & Seeger, 1997). Two of these taxonomies are Benoit's (1995) image restoration strategies and Coombs' (1999) crisis response strategies. The two complementary typologies can help reduce the harm to an organization and help move past a crisis as quickly as possible. While *apologia* can be used for individual or organizational scandals or crises, Benoit's and Coombs' typologies provide strategies specifically for overcoming crisis events, which does not necessarily include individual scandals.

³ While Benoit initially referred to his typology as strategies for *image restoration*, his later work uses the term *image repair*. As such, we use the term *image repair* more frequently than *image restoration*, though we use them interchangeably throughout.

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