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Crisis Communication and Celebrity Scandal: An Experiment on Response Strategies

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Crisis Communication and Celebrity Scandal: An Experiment on Response Strategies

by

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ABSTRACT

Recent allegations surrounding Bill Cosby presented an opportunity to combine, test, and extend situational crisis communication theory typology and image repair theory response strategies for celebrity use. Because Cosby did not respond to the numerous allegations against him, it presented an opportunity to experiment with new and existing typologies using a real case, as opposed to analyzing past response attempts or using a hypothetical case. This study used a 2 X 4 factorial design to test veracity of claims, a proposed concept, and response strategies via survey. Even though none of the hypotheses were supported, the present study opened up a number questions for future researchers to explore and further expand crisis communication theories and typologies.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Under certain circumstances, a crisis has the potential to profoundly change the

reputation of an organization or public figure. Defining a crisis is the first step toward

prescribing the best possible strategy for diffusing it and repairing the damage it left behind.

Coombs (2007) defines a crisis as a "sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an

organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat" (p. 164). For the

purposes of this study, which deals with celebrity Bill Cosby's recent scandal, a crisis can be

defined as any unexpected event that threatens to damage a public figure's reputation or ability

to find or perform work.

In late 2014, popular actor and comedian Bill Cosby's squeaky-clean, wholesome

reputation was called into question as woman after woman came forward to publicly accuse him

of drugging and sexual assault (Lusk, 2014b). Although Cosby's public relations team attempted

to distract the public immediately after the media frenzy began, the attempts ultimately

backfired. Over the course of several months, more than 30 women came forward to publicly

accuse Cosby of sexual assault, but Cosby has not made any public statement in reaction to the

crisis.

The purpose of this study was to combine, test, and extend situational crisis

communication theory and image repair theory response strategies in crisis situations involving

celebrities. Because previous research involving crisis communication has been predominantly

conducted in two ways: using hypothetical figures to experiment with response strategies or analyzing the past response strategies of politicians, celebrities, or organizations. This crisis involving Bill Cosby presented an opportunity to experiment with response strategies using a real life crisis instead of manipulated circumstances. After first examining the potential affects of news story on public perceptions of *source credibility* and guilt of Cosby, the study explores the effectiveness of crisis response strategies put forth by Benoit (1995) using existing research and Coombs' (2007) prescriptive typologies to craft appropriate responses. In addition, the study assesses the applicability of a new defense strategy proposed by Len-Ríos and colleagues to the crisis response strategy typologies that already have a strong foundation in the public relations field (Len-Rios, Finneman, Jung Han, Bhandari, & Perry, 2015). The study tested and analyzed the outcomes of four image repair strategies—*denial*, *mortification*, *defiance*, and *no response*—in order to investigate whether different message strategies affect audience perceptions more positively or negatively toward the accused figure.

Background: The Cosby Crisis

William H. "Bill" Cosby, Jr. is an American actor, stand-up comedian, activist, and author. Best known for his roles in "I Spy" (1960s) and "The Cosby Show" (1980s), Cosby has been a beloved figure in the American entertainment industry for 50 years. However, fellow African-American stand-up comedian Hannibal Buress called Cosby's squeaky-clean reputation into question on October16, 2014 during one of his routines (Lusk, 2014b).

Buress' routine referred to allegations dating back to January 2005 accusing Cosby of drugging and assaulting Andrea Constand, a staff member at his alma mater, Temple University (Lusk 2014b). Constand claimed that the sexual assault took place at Cosby's Philadelphia home

in 2004 (Lusk 2014b; Giles & Jones, 2015). In February 2005, Tamara Green, a California lawyer, came forward alleging a similar assault against herself by Cosby in the 1970s (Lusk 2014b). Although Constand filed a civil suit against Cosby in March 2005, with thirteen women prepared to serve as witnesses by offering up similar accusations against him, Cosby settled out of court in November 2006 (Giles & Jones, 2015). The terms of this settlement were never disclosed.

After a recording of Buress' references to the allegations went viral, a storm formed around Cosby. Though his public relations team attempted to earn back the public's favor with a campaign for fans to create memes of the comedian, it ultimately backfired and caused the rumors of assault to spread, as many Twitter users were using the meme generator to reference the rape claims (Lusk, 2014a; Giles & Jones, 2015). By the end of November 2014, the allegations surrounding Cosby were adding up, with more than 18 women stepping forward against the star. One accuser, Barbara Bowman, even published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* inspired by Buress' routine and the media that came from it (Giles & Jones, 2015). Although Cosby did not publicly speak out against the mounting accusations, his lawyers issued a statement informing the public that Cosby would remain silent regarding this issue (Giles & Jones, 2015).

Cosby's career took a serious hit as allegations were mounting against him. Netflix postponed launching "Bill Cosby 77," a special focusing on Cosby's recent stand-up routines; NBC pulled a sitcom that was in development, which would have showcased the comedian in a wholesome role similar to his role as a Huxtable; TVLand pulled re-runs of "The Cosby Show" from its lineup; and many venues indefinitely postponed scheduled performances for Cosby's stand-up tour (Lusk, 2014b). On December 1, 2014, Cosby resigned his post as a trustee of

Temple University, a position he held for 32 years prior to his resignation (Lusk, 2014b). Immediately following his decision to leave his post, the first legal charges filed against the comedian since 2005 were brought against him by a woman claiming to have been sexually abused by Cosby in 1974 at the Playboy mansion when she was only 15 years old (Lusk, 2014b). The Los Angeles police department looked into the allegations, and after an interview with the accuser, decided to move forward with an investigation (Lusk, 2014b).

Cosby's reputation continued to take hits as the storm around him grew. The Navy revoked an honorary title bestowed on the entertainer in 2011, which illustrates the negative effect the allegations were having on his life and career (Lusk, 2014b). After serving in the Navy between 1956-60, Cosby had been honorably discharged as a 3rd Class Petty Officer, which was honorarily bumped up to Chief Petty Officer in 2011 (Lusk, 2014b). Additionally, the Des Moines Civic Center in Iowa postponed Cosby's scheduled standup performance indefinitely, and Spelman College in Atlanta suspended Cosby's endowed professorship, a program that was meant to bring positive changes to the school (Lusk, 2014b).

December 15, 2014 marks an important date in the Cosby scandal, as it is the first date on which a member of the Cosby family spoke out about the string of allegations against him. Camille Cosby, Bill Cosby's wife, gave a statement to CBS News supporting her husband throughout the allegations and questioning the legitimacy of the accusations (Moraski, 2014). Immediately following Camille Cosby's statement, the couple's youngest daughter, Evin Cosby, posted a statement on Facebook not only to lovingly support her parents, but to also call the legitimacy of the accusations into question (Pallotta, 2014). From December 2014 to March 2015, 12 more women came forward with their own sexual assault stories against Cosby, which makes a total of 30 accusers by March 3, 2015 (Giles & Jones, 2015).

The next chapter focuses on the two theoretical frameworks guiding this study and how they can be applied to the methodology.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Image Repair Theory

Benoit's image restoration theory was developed in 1995 to guide public relations

professionals on restoring reputation or image after a crisis, however it was later renamed image

repair theory, as Benoit (1995; 2000) realized that after a crisis, full restoration is not always

possible even when the most appropriate strategies are used. The theory states that an

individual's image is at risk when an action has occurred that is considered offensive to the

public or to a specific demographic group or when the individual is considered responsible for

the offensive act that has occurred (Benoit, 1997a). One of the key concepts that should be

emphasized is the notion of perceived guilt; "it is not reasonable to form an unfavorable

impression of a firm unless that company is believed to be responsible for that act" (Benoit,

p.178, 1997a). For individuals as well as larger entities, public perception is often more powerful

than the reality or severity of the situation.

The focus of image repair theory is message strategy, offering five broad categories:

denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and *mortification*

(Benoit, 1997a).

Denial. There are two different *denial* strategies: shifting the blame and claiming another

party is responsible, or simply denying any responsibility in the offending act without offering a

scapegoat.

Evasion of Responsibility. This category contains four strategies all aimed at skirting responsibility for the crisis: provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. The key characteristic when claiming *provocation* is claiming the act was committed in response to another. In *defeasibility*, the individual or entity claims that there was insufficient information available in order to prevent the incident. The *accident* strategy simply means to claim that what occurred was unintentional and beyond the accused party's control. Taking the *good intentions* strategy means saying that the incident did occur but the accused party meant well in the process.

Reducing Offensiveness of Event. When a company is accused of wrongful actions, it can try to reduce the offensiveness of that act in the eyes of the public (Benoit, 1997a). There are six strategies in this category: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack the accuser, and compensation. *Bolstering* refers to an entity's attempts to emphasize its good traits in order to persuade the public to minimize the severity of the act in question in their minds. *Minimization* is the idea that by acting like the offending act was not as serious as it is being made out to be, that the perception of it in the public's mind will change accordingly. *Differentiation* means making an act look less offensive by comparing it to similarly offensive acts committed by other entities. The *transcendence* strategy seeks to diminish the offensiveness of the event by pointing to larger issues that are considered more important and should be getting the attention. *Attacking the accuser* refers to when the blamed party confronts the accusing party about the claims. The final strategy, *compensation*, takes place when the accused party tries to alleviate the situation and minimize its perceived severity by offering some payment to the victim.

Corrective Action. This is a simple strategy that involves communicating a plan that will solve the problem or prevent further damage.

Mortification. The final category is *mortification*, when the accused party accepts full responsibility and asks for forgiveness from the victims or offended publics.

Image Repair and Celebrities

While the roots of crisis communication—specifically, situational crisis communication theory— focused on organizational images, public figures and their public relations practitioners have adopted theoretical frameworks to salvage the reputations of celebrities, politicians, and athletes. However, image repair strategies differ between politicians, celebrities, sports figures, and corporations, so public relations researchers have extensively examined all facets in order to effectively prescribe appropriate tactics.

Image Repair and Hugh Grant. One of the first image repair case studies was Benoit's (1997b) qualitative analysis of Hugh Grant's image restoration attempts through television appearances after his arrest in 1995 for publicly engaging in sexual relations with a prostitute. However, within the research, Benoit (1997b) also briefly analyzes the corporate image repair efforts of Isuzu in 1996 after reports stated instability in safety when taking harp turns and the political efforts of former President Bill Clinton after cutting a drug-related policy program in 1996. In doing so, Benoit (1997b) is able to point out how strategies were interchangeable among the different facets of public relations and how the strategies can render ineffective or effective depending on the situation presented.

Because corporations are not people—outside of legal jurisdictions—they do not have private lives as entertainers, politicians, and athletes do.

"This is important for two reasons. First, the corporation can always replace its employees because they are separate from the corporation. Second, such action

may be unnecessary because the private life of a corporate official is distinct from

his official duties as a corporate employee" (Benoit, 1997b, p. 256).

The distinction between corporations and entertaining persons is critical to understanding how to

construct proper image restoration strategies. An entertainer, athlete or politician is a solo entity

and cannot "easily distance himself from his own acts" (Benoit, 1997b, p. 256). In some cases,

corporations can also face litigation when accused of wrongdoing, which is not common among

celebrity athletes, entertainers, or politicians (Benoit, p. 256). Benoit (1997b) also notes that

competition is present among politicians and corporations, who are subject to attacks from

competitors during crises. Celebrity entertainers and athletes can battle each other in some

instances; however, it is a less common occurrence. "Also, like politicians, corporate officials

make decisions with significant ramifications more often than most entertainers" (Benoit, 1997b,

p. 256). In other words, corporations and politicians often have stakeholders that can be directly

affected or harmed when misdeeds or accidents occur, which makes using certain strategies less

effective. While political and corporate crisis communication have different stakes guiding repair

efforts, they are no more or less important to understand than celebrity communication. As

Benoit (2000) points out, there are countless audiences with countless interests in what

individual or entity is involved in a crisis. Although many of the struggles and obstacles of

corporate or political image repair do not commonly apply to celebrity image repair, there are

challenges that will apply.

According to Benoit (1997b), Hugh Grant used *mortification*, *bolstering, denial,* and

attacking accusers through numerous television appearances Grant used the *mortification*

strategy by admitting to his behavior and apologizing for it without attempting to diminish the

offensiveness of the incident (p.257). In the case of Hugh Grant, Benoit deemed the use of

mortification effective. "First, our willingness to forgive someone who engages in *mortification* is not assured. Forgiveness is surely influenced by the nature of the act and the apparent sincerity of the rhetor" (Benoit, 1997b, p. 260). Because many do not admit when they are wrong, Benoit suggests the public can find admiration in those with the courage to accept responsibility (p. 262).

Another key point Benoit makes in his analysis is "that when one commits an offensive act, it is often best to employ *mortification*," presuming the party in question is actually guilty (Benoit, 1997b, p. 263). He cited Nixon's *denial* of the Watergate break-in and cover-up, as well as Reagan's *denial* of his decision to send arms into Iran as examples, noting that had the guilty parties been more willing to admit to their offensive acts immediately, the fall-out might not have been as detrimental to public opinion, proving that *mortification* is the best strategy when an individual is at fault.

Although it may seem counterintuitive to some to use *mortification* and *denial* for the same incident, Benoit deemed its use in Grant's case to be appropriate. "The strategy of *denial* was useful in limiting the scope of the charges against him. His use of *mortification* meant that he did not issue a blanket *denial*, and the fact that his *denial* was limited to certain accusations may have made it sound truthful" (Benoit, 1997b, p. 262). He did not deny having committed the act, nor did he try to minimize it, but he did deny many of the media-printed rumors. In other words, he did not deny committing the acts, but denied the alleged effects of the acts as presented in the media (p.259). "In fact, it seems likely that this particular *denial* would have been ineffective without using *mortification*" (Benoit, 1997b, p. 262). In conjunction with Grant's use of *mortification*, the *denial* strategy helped to limit the charges against him, according to Benoit (p.264). "Grant's use of *mortification*, which again may have been easier to

use because he is an entertainer, probably made his partial *denial* more persuasive" (Benoit, 1997b, p. 264).

Similarly to his use of the *denial* strategy, in using the attack the accusers strategy, Grant did not attack those who accused him of the acts, but rather he attacked the media for dragging both Elizabeth Hurley and his father into the controversy of his behavior, though according to Benoit (1997b), this could have "undermined his attempt at bolstering" if not done carefully (p. 259).

"Attacking one's accusers can be inconsistent with *mortification*, but in this case Grant wasn't attacking the media in an attempt to dismiss the accusations against him, but in an attempt to garner sympathy for his family, girlfriend, and himself. In fact, attacking accusers probably would not have helped much if he hadn't used *mortification*. Nor did he attack in a shrill fashion, which might have undermined his defense" (Benoit, 1997b, p, 259).

Grant's use of this strategy created sympathy for his family and for himself without risking offending audiences or followers.

Bolstering was used in two ways to support the attack the accuser strategy: Grant used his demeanor to bolster his positive personality attributions, and he made honest confessions and admissions in order to be perceived as genuine by the public (p.258). Part of this included expressing concern and regret in relation to his girlfriend at the time, Elizabeth Hurley. "It was wise to express concern for how the media had adversely affected his family and his girlfriend" (Benoit, 1997b, p. 262). Benoit deemed Grant's use of bolstering to be successful toward reputation rebuilding. "His discourse associated him with sentiments considered positive by the audience: he appeared to be honest, self- effacing, repentant, concerned with his family's and

girlfriend's well-being, all tempered with a boyish dry wit—linking him with sentiments valued by his audience, and consistent with their impression of him prior to the offensive act" (Benoit, 1997b, p. 264).

Image Repair and David Letterman. In 2011, Josh Compton and Brett Miller conducted an analysis of image repair strategies used by David Letterman during the summer 2009 controversy involving a joke made about Sarah Palin's daughter. The joke mentioned Palin's and her 14-year-old daughter's visit to New York City, and it comedically referenced their attendance of a New York Yankees game and Alex Rodriguez "knocking up" Palin's daughter. "Later, Letterman would explain that he intended to joke about Palin's oldest daughter, Bristol, an 18-year-old single mother," (Compton & Miller, 2011, p. 415). Compton and Miller (2011) also point to Benoit (1997b)'s study of Hugh Grant in setting up their analysis of the Letterman-Palin controversy, noting that while Benoit's research shows that entertainment and political image repair strategies do not always match, the Letterman-Palin controversy involves both political and entertainment figures (Compton & Miller, 2011, p. 416; Benoit, 1997b).

The researchers, additionally, posited that the crisis adds to image repair theory because of the level of humor involved in the situation. "Humor offers a light-hearted approach that may not always fit with the severity of the offensiveness of the act or the sincerity of the image repair strategy" (Compton & Letterman, 2011, p. 417). In Letterman's first attempt to diffuse the controversy, he attempted to reduce the offensiveness of the act through a comedic response using "*denial* mixed with mild differentiation" (Compton & Miller, 2011, p. 417). "Part of Letterman's strategy suggests differentiation, of separating his joke from a much more offensive type of joke" (Compton & Miller, 2011, p. 417). Though Letterman did apologize, it was not using the *mortification* strategy in which the accused figure accepts responsibility and concern

for the victim(s), and therefore, it was deemed insincere and ineffective (Compton & Miller, 2011).

The researchers deemed Letterman's second attempt to be more successful than the first. "In the opening statements, Letterman shifts from *denial* to a more complex strategy, introducing arguments of clear differentiation and defeasibility. We also see an argument of bolstering. Letterman recounts how he engaged in fact checking before the show to confirm that the target of the joke was an adult" (Compton & Miller, 2011, p. 418). He then goes on to counter his previous use of reducing the offensiveness and *denial*, and instead, he uses the *mortification* strategy, taking responsibility for the offending joke and its misinterpretation, apologizing to the Palin family, and committing to corrective action (Compton & Miller, 2011, p. 428). Compton and Miller (2011) argue that Letterman's tactics go against what many celebrities use, citing Benoit's (1997b) study of Hugh Grant as an opposing course of action. Unlike Hugh Grant, Letterman offered corrective action, battled with opposition—Sarah Palin—which is something Benoit (1997b) posited that celebrities don't deal with often, and restrained from attacking his accusers (Compton & Miller, 2011, p. 419).

This study showed that the use of humor in response strategy can both help and hinder the image repair efforts; "Letterman seemed to successfully incorporate a few mild jokes in his second response to the joke controversy" (Compton & Miller, 2011, p. 419). Although the researchers point to a lot of criticism of the way the situation was handled, much of which says his use of humor was inappropriate, the researchers still argue that "by focusing more of his defense on reducing offensiveness, *mortification*, and corrective action, rather than evading responsibility, he completed a program of defense that was at least moderately successful"

(Compton & Miller, 2011, p. 420). The researchers also note that the long-term effects of his

apology using *mortification* and corrective action are unclear (Compton & Miller, 2011).

   Image Repair, Paula Deen, and Defiance: A New Component. Len-Ríos et al (2015)

attempted to expand image repair theory by examining the crisis response methods used by Paula

Deen after she was publicly condemned for making racially insensitive comments. The multi-

method study qualitatively analyzed Deen's response strategy and then performed an experiment

to test the ways in which certain defense strategies were received by audiences. The study

introduced a new response strategy called *defiance*, which is presented as a race-specific

concept. "This message strategy is conceptualized as a combination of *denial* and minimization,

a category of reducing offensiveness" (Len-Ríos et al, 2015, p. 150). The researchers argued that

the theory is grounded in political correctness, or as stated by the researchers, "colorblindness"

(2007, p. 150), meaning that decision-making is not racially charged.

> "From a public relations perspective, the use of colorblind ideology, through the
>
> expression of a *defiance* strategy—denying and minimizing race as an issue—can
>
> be used by public figures to be perceived as taking the high ground. The *defiance*
>
> strategy, in effect, claims that putting "race" into the equation is unfair, that it
>
> absolves public figures of having to address the complexity of racial inequality by
>
> arguing that if they did address race, it would lead to a biased, unfair outcome."
>
> (Len-Ríos et al., 2015, p.151).

The study took two different experimental approaches when looking at *defiance* as an

image repair strategy: the celebrity recognized that it was a sensitive topic and attempted

to start a discourse, while the politician recognized the sensitivity of racial conversation

and avoided it. Len-Ríos et. al (2015) identified that opening up the sensitive topic for

public discussion resonated more with publics, however, this notion grossly contradicts *defiance* by definition.

According to Dictionary.com, *defiance* is an open resistance or bold disobedience. Merriam Webster's dictionary defines the term similarly—as a disposition to resistance or willingness to contend or fight. Len-Ríos et. al (2015) does not honor the term's most basic definition in their experiment and findings. They found that audiences resonated with a celebrity's use of the *defiance* strategy more so than the politician's use, but the two strategies were opposing and deserve separate categorization. The celebrity welcomed a racial discussion, whereas the politician avoided it. It can be argued that the hypothetical politician *defiance* response used in the Len-Ríos study is the most appropriate for staying true to the definition of *defiance,* and the celebrity response strategy of welcoming a discussion should be categorized separately. A *defiance* crisis response strategy should, therefore, be described as an unwillingness to discuss a sensitive topic or avoidance of addressing an uncomfortable issue or situation.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

While much of Coombs' (2007) situational crisis communication theory is derived from Benoit's typology, he also builds upon attribution theory, linking the crisis situation with the crisis responsibility to shape the appropriate responses. Coombs (2007) tends to refer to organizations in his theory, but it is important to recognize that the same principles apply to individuals, such as public figures, in crisis. Situational crisis communication theory poses that each crisis situation requires a different level of response; level of responsibility plays a huge part in what type of response is necessary for the organization or individual in crisis to take.

Coombs (2007) provides a framework for organizations dealing with crisis, detailing how to most appropriately respond based on the appropriate responsibility level.

SCCT categorizes crisis types into three major clusters based on appropriate attribution: the victim cluster (low attribution), accidental cluster (medium attribution) and preventable cluster (high attribution) (Coombs, 2007, p. 167).

Victim Cluster. In the lowest attribution crisis type, the victim cluster, the organization or individual can be considered just as much of a victim as its stakeholders. Natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence incidents, and malevolence all fall under the victim cluster. In times of natural disaster, the organization or individual is affected just as publics are, which means there is only a minor reputational threat. Rumors involve the spreading of false or damaging information that is beyond an entity's control. Workplace violence takes place when a current or former employee attacks the current employees onsite. Malevolence or product tampering occurs when an external agent tampers with or damages the organization or individual in some way. Each of these examples shows a way in which both stakeholders and the entity in question are damaged by the occurrence.

Accidental Cluster. The accidental cluster encompasses technical error accidents, such as equipment or technology failures that result in an accident or a product recall. While there is little responsibility for the crisis, there is a moderate threat to the reputation because of the damage that happened as a result of the accident. These situations provide additional challenges, as many times publics believe there is wrongdoing or improper operation that could have led to the accident.

Preventable Cluster. In the highest attribution crisis type, the entity is highly at fault for the incident. When a crisis is categorized in this cluster, it means the organization or individual

knowingly put people at risk or committed violations that led to something dangerous or offending. Unlike technical errors, which are considered accidental, it is considered preventable when human error leads to an industrial accident, product harm, or offending actions. Organizational or individual misconduct, negligence, or deception that goes unaddressed also falls under the preventable category.

"By identifying the crisis type, the crisis manager can anticipate how much crisis responsibility stakeholders will attribute to the organization at the onset of the crisis thereby establishing the initial crisis responsibility level," (Coombs, 2007, p. 168). When an individual is in crisis, a public relations practitioner can assess the level of guilt that is assumed appropriately determining the best response strategy. Coombs' theory builds response strategies around assumed crisis responsibility, much like Benoit, but unlike his predecessor, he provides the framework to assessing the crisis before deciding that there is assumed guilt and, therefore, developing the appropriate response strategy.

"Crisis response strategies are used to repair the reputation, to reduce negative affect and to prevent negative behavioral intentions" (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). By determining crisis responsibility, there is a conceptual link between reputational threat and response strategies (p. 170). Coombs organizes response strategies into three postures: deny, diminish, and deal.

Deny. In this posture, the three response strategies—attack the accuser, *denial*, and scapegoat— either claim that there is no crisis or that the accused party is not responsible for the crisis. Attacking the accuser is when the individual confronts the group or individual that claimed there was wrongdoing. Using *denial* means claiming there was never any crisis or misconduct. The scapegoat response approach places blame on another person or organization.

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Diminish. Strategies within the diminish posture—excuse and justification—attempt to make light of the situation or change the way the public or victims perceive the situation. In some cases, crisis managers may use these strategies to try to distance themselves from the crisis and reduce responsibility. When the crisis manager or individual claims that the situation was out of his control, he is using the excuse strategy. The justification strategy is when the entity attempts to minimize the perception of damage caused by the crisis.

Deal. Using the strategies in the deal posture—ingratiation, concern, compensation, regret, and apology—aims to improve or rebuild the tarnished reputation. Ingratiation strategies not only seek to remind stakeholders of past good work, but they also praise stakeholders. Concern response strategies express worry and care for those hurt or offended by the incident. In some cases, those handling the crisis may choose to offer money or gifts to those victimized by the event, which is the compensation strategy. Using the regret strategy, the organization or individual expresses remorse for what has occurred, without necessarily taking responsibility. Alternatively, the apology strategy means taking full responsibility and asking for forgiveness from those harmed.

"Crisis response strategies have three objectives relative to protecting reputations: (1) shape attributions of the crisis, (2) change perceptions of the organization in crisis and (3) reduce the negative effect generated by the crisis" (Coombs, 2007, p. 171; Coombs, 1995). As such, Coombs prescribes specific tactics based on categorizing the crisis into one of the three clusters, as shown in Table 1 (See page 18). "SCCT maintains that as attributions of crisis responsibility and/or the threat of reputational damage increases, crisis managers must use crisis response strategies that reflect a greater concern for the victims and take more responsibility for the crisis"

(Coombs, p. 269, 2008). While not all crises require the concern strategy, it is important to note that Coombs recommends including a concern response when victims are involved (2008).

TABLE 1: List of Coombs' Crisis Response Recommendations (2007, p. 173)	
Victim Cluster	• Informing and adjusting information alone can be enough when crises have minimal attributions of crisis responsibility no history of similar crises and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation. • Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation. • The deny posture crisis response strategies should be used for rumor and challenge crises when possible.
Accidental Cluster	• Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility, which have no history of similar crises, and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation. • Deal crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility, coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation.
Preventable Cluster	• Deal crisis response strategies should be used for crises with strong attributions of crisis responsibility regardless of crisis history or prior relationship reputation.

As Table 1 illustrates, categorizing crises into the three major clutters should provide the optimum response strategy to minimize harm and rebuild reputation. One important thing Coombs notes is that overusing strategies past what the model prescribes can actually do more harm than good, as aggressive approaches can give publics the illusion that the crisis is worse than they previously perceived (2007).

Application of Theories

Situational crisis communication theory focuses on organizational crises, so finding relevant literature pertaining to public figures and SCCT was particularly difficult. However, because image repair theory and situational crisis communication theory are nearly identical in response strategies, merging the two theories is the best course of action for this study because although SCCT is primarily focused on corporate communication, it adds prescriptive typology that image repair lacks. Response strategies should not be chosen at random, but they should be categorized in a prescriptive nature as seen in SCCT. In addition, this study will test the effectiveness of the new *defiance* category put forth by Len-Ríos et. al. To determine which response strategies should be tested, it is important to first categorize the Bill Cosby crisis using

Coombs' cluster typology. This crisis fits into both the victim cluster and the preventable cluster. Because it is not known whether the accusers' stories are factual, this crisis could be considered a rumor, which falls into the victim cluster. Alternatively, if the public perceives the accused, Cosby, as guilty of blatant misconduct, it could be categorized within the preventable cluster.

As prescribed by Coombs (2007), the deny posture strategies should be applied during victim cluster crises, and the deal posture strategies should be applied in high attribution situations falling into the preventable crisis cluster. More specifically, *denial* should be used to combat rumors, and apology, or *mortification* as Benoit refers to it, should be used after unnecessary misconduct.

Len-Ríos et. al (2015) linked *defiance* with image repair, meaning it has not yet been categorized into a cluster category. As previously noted, researchers linked this concept directly with racial crises. However, redefining the strategy as a deliberate avoidance of discussing sensitive issues could place it in the deal category, as it may be an appropriate response for preventable crises. This study may further expand the new response strategy by categorizing *defiance* into existing typology, as well as test its effectiveness.

Purpose and Hypotheses

The purpose of the study was to combine, test, and extend situational crisis communication theory and image repair theory response strategies in crisis situations involving celebrities.

The strongest theories in place for responding to a crisis, image repair and situational crisis communication theory, neglect an important piece in analyzing and categorizing crises: veracity of claims. Conceptually, veracity of claims refers to how strong the argument against the

accused party is. The argument is that there is strength in numbers—one accuser will have less influence on the public than 10, 20, or 50 accusers would, especially when the accusations are consistent. This study will test the veracity of claims to determine how they affect *perceptions of guilt* of the accused party, attitude toward the accused party, and *source credibility* of the accused party. It posits the following hypotheses:

H1: In crisis cases involving public figures, the number of accusers and consistency of claims against an individual will have a negative influence on the *source credibility* of the accused individual.

H2: In crisis cases involving public figures, the number of accusers and consistency of claims against an individual will have a negative influence on *perceptions of guilt* of the accused figure.

Determining how the strength of the claims affect public perceptions should provide more insight into how to craft more appropriate crisis responses using Coombs' typology to categorize the crisis and Benoit's frameworks to respond to it. Along with Coombs' prescription based on category type, previous literature denotes the strategies that have had success in the past in celebrity crises.

H3: The *mortification* strategy will influence *source credibility* more positively relative to other strategies.

H4: The *mortification* strategy will lower public *perceptions of guilt* relative to other strategies.

H5: The *mortification* strategy will produce higher ratings for *response effectiveness* relative to the other strategies.

H6: In crisis cases among public figures, any response strategy is better than *no response* strategy in terms of image restoration.

The next chapter outlines the experimentation method, detailing experimental design, participant recruitment, and the survey process.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

The purpose of this study was to combine, test, and extend situational crisis communication theory and image repair theory response strategies in crisis situations involving celebrities.

Design

This study sought to examine how response strategies affect public perceptions of a celebrity using a two-by-four factorial experimental design (two informative news stories and four crisis response strategies). The two independent variables are (1) veracity of claims and (2) response strategies. The first independent variable tested whether the number of accusers and consistency of the accusations had an effect on the two dependent variables: (1) *source credibility* of the accused and (2) *perceptions of guilt*. The second independent variable, response strategy, tested the effectiveness of four message strategies—(1) *Mortification*/Apology (2) *Defiance* (3) *Denial* (4) *No Response*— to determine whether different messages affected the dependent variables, *source credibility* and perception of guilt, in addition to a third dependent variable gaging the public's perception of *response effectiveness*.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were initially recruited using the University of South Florida's Zimmerman School of Advertising and Mass Communications database, which allowed all undergraduates in

that program to be reached via email. Unfortunately, this recruitment method proved to be unsuccessful, recruiting only 89 participants, so Amazon's Mechanical Turk was then used to recruit an additional 100 participants. These participants were offered .50 cents each to take the survey and enter a code as proof of completion. Ideally, the survey would have yielded results from 200 or more participants, however, low response rates were not anticipated early on, and therefore time constraints limited ability to recruit additional participants.

Procedure

The survey used in this study was designed on Qualtrics—a website that allows for survey creation and facilitates online data collection. Participants who clicked on the survey link first saw an informed consent statement and were asked for consent to continue with the survey; all those who consented to participation then moved to the survey process. Initially, participants were asked three questions gaging *prior knowledge* of Bill Cosby, his presence in the media, and the recent news events involving him. This was not meant to weed out any participants; the sole purpose of these questions was to determine whether *prior knowledge* affected answers of participants when the results were analyzed.

After the screener questions were asked, the first part of the survey began. Qualtrics was set up to evenly distribute the first treatment measure between participants. Participants were shown one of two news stories to inform them about the crisis at hand—necessary for anyone without *prior knowledge*—and to test the veracity of the claims made—one unknown accuser vs. total number of accusers. The news stories were created using InDesign to mimic what someone might see on popular news and entertainment website, *BuzzFeed*. *BuzzFeed* was chosen because of its popularity among young people today. Because more and more people are getting their

information online, *BuzzFeed* was used as a nongeographic specific and credible information source. The information in the news stories was also pulled from a number of *BuzzFeed* news stories, and the content was manipulated for the purpose of this experiment. After seeing one fo the two news stories, participants were asked a series of questions to measure the two dependent variables, *source credibility* of Cosby and perception of guilt of Cosby.

Next, participants were shown a news story corresponding to three of the four response strategies being tested: *mortification*/apology, *defiance*, or *denial*. A fourth group of participants acted as a control group and did not see a response in order to gauge how important a response is to crisis management over not responding at all. The *mortification*/apology and *denial* response strategies were crafted based on the frameworks set forth by Benoit (1995) and Coombs (2007). The *defiance* strategy was crafted based on the work done by Len-Ríos et. al (2015) as well as the redefinition proposed earlier in this study. Qulatrics was set up to evenly designate what response strategy participants saw: *mortification*/apology, *defiance*, *denial*, or *no response*. Finally, participants were asked to respond to identical questions measuring *source credibility* and *perceptions of guilt*, as well as three questions gaging their perceptions of response appropriateness and effectiveness. The purpose is to gage changes in response from *prior knowledge* and news story exposure to the response strategy used.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Participants

A total of 199 people consented to participation, but only 189 completed the survey; therefore, ten participant responses were thrown out during the data cleaning process. Participants were recruited using the Zimmerman School of Advertising and Mass Communications database as well as Amazon's Mechanical Turk, in which participants were paid .50 cents for taking the survey. Student participants were not offered compensation. The average survey completion time was 6 minutes. Of the 189 participants, 39% identified as 18-24 years of age (n = 74), 21% identified as 25-30 years of age (n=39), 16% identified as 31-40 years of age (n=31), 8% identified as 41-50 years of age (n=15), 10% identified as 51-60 years of age (n=18), and 6% identified as over 60 years of age (n=12). Regarding gender, participants were 67% female (n=126), 33% male (n=62), with 1% identifying as other gender (n=1). In terms of racial identity, 77% identified as White/Caucasian (n=146), 9% as African American/Black (n=17), 7% as Hispanic (n=13), 3% as Asian (n=5), 1% as Native American (n=1), 1% as Pacific Islander (n=1), and 3% did not identify with a provided option (n=6).

Measures

Because this survey relied heavily on Likert and semantic differential scales, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine if the scales worked together for optimal reliability. After examining the reliability estimate for the three questions gaging *prior knowledge of*

participants, the initial alpha was low, at only a .54. By deleting the first of the three questions, the alpha was raised to a .70. Although the estimate could ideally be higher, this was deemed satisfactory.

The Cronbach's alpha reliability statistics for the remaining measures were high: *source credibility* after the first exposure to news story treatments was at a .96; *perceptions of guilt* after the first exposure to news story treatments was at a .90; *source credibility* after the second exposure to *response strategy* treatments was at a .97; *response effectiveness* after the exposure to response strategy treatments was at a .77; and *perceptions of guilt* after the second exposure to response strategy treatments was at an .85.

TABLE 2: Reliability Measures				
	Mean	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**Standard Deviation**	**Number of Items**
Prior Knowledge	11.12	0.7	2.616	2
Source Credibility 1	16.6402	0.96	9.20035	6
Perceptions of Guilt 1	14.7672	0.9	4.39521	3
Source Credibility 2	16.5661	0.97	9.58734	6
Response Effectiveness	10.0688	0.77	4.18718	3
Perceptions of Guilt 2	15.1164	0.85	4.29834	3

Analysis

All hypotheses were tested within a two (News Article) by four (Response Strategy) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with *source credibility, perceptions of guilt*, and *response effectiveness* as dependent variables. *Prior knowledge* and the corresponding first treatment method served as the covariates for each analysis.

TABLE 3: ANCOVA																		
	NEWS ARTICLE						RESPONSE STRATEGY											
	One Accuser			Many Accusers			Mortification			Defiance			Denial			No Response		
	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Source Credibility	96	2.854	1.542	93	2.664	1.656	47	2.588	1.338	47	2.797	1.52	50	2.89	1.802	45	2.7593	1.71
Perceptions of Guilt		4.975	1.357		5.103	1.511		5.375	1.193		5.085	1.33		4.72	1.545		4.992	1.591
Response Effectiveness		3.461	1.345		3.247	1.444		3.553	1.07		3.191	1.523		3.58	1.604		3.074	1.273

Hypotheses 1-5

Hypothesis 1 predicted that in crisis cases among public figures, the number of accusers and consistency of claims against an individual would have a negative influence on the *source credibility*. Hypothesis 2 predicted that in crisis cases among public figures, the number of accusers and consistency of claims against an individual would have a negative influence on *perceptions of guilt* of the accused figure. Hypothesis 3-5 predicted that the *mortification* strategy will influence *source credibility* more positively, lower public *perceptions of guilt*, and produce higher ratings for *response effectiveness* relative to the other strategies. The analyses showed that the covariate of *prior knowledge* was not a significant predictor, $F(1,189)=.013$, $p = .908$, power = .052. However, the covariate corresponding to *source credibility* after first treatment exposure was significant, $F(1,189)=401.280$, $p < .001$, partial-$\eta^2=.692$. The results of the ANCoVA failed to detect a main effect for news article on *source credibility*, $F(1,189)=.157$, $p = .693$, power = .068. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was not supported on source credibility. The main effect for response strategy did emerge, $F(3,189)=5.460$, $p = .001$, partial-$\eta^2 =.084$. Post-hoc tests conducted on *source credibility* indicated the *mortification* strategy differed significantly from the three remaining strategies, *defiance* ($p=.001$), *denial* ($p =001$), and *no response* ($p =.020$). However as shown in Table 3 (See page 27), the means were in the opposite direction from the prediction, and showed *mortification* to be the least successful strategy. The remaining strategies were not significantly different from each other. Thus, hypotheses 3 was not supported. The two-way news article by response strategy interaction was also not significant $F(3,189)=2.535$, $p = .058$, power = .619.

For *perceptions of guilt*, the analyses showed that the covariate of *prior knowledge* was a significant predictor, $F(1,189)=.5.952$, $p = .016$, partial-$\eta^2=.032$. The covariate corresponding to *perceptions of guilt* after first treatment exposure was also significant, $F(1,189)=352.541$, $p = .000$, partial-$\eta^2=.663$. In the analysis of data for the perception of guilt, the ANCoVA analysis did not indicate a main effect for the news article, $F(1,189)=.334$, $p=.564$, power $=.089$. Hypothesis 2 was not supported. However, a main effect for response strategy was present, $F(3,189)=6.421$, $p<.001$, partial-$\eta^2 =.097$. In terms of *perceptions of guilt*, the analysis showed the *mortification* significantly differed from *defiance* ($p=.001$), *denial* ($p=001$), and *no response* ($p=.004$). Again, *mortification* was actually shown to be the least successful of the strategies; as shown in Table 3, *mortification* produced the highest means for *perceptions of guilt*. Thus, hypothesis 4 was not supported. The two-way news article by response strategy interaction was not significant $F(3,189)=2.504$, $p = .016$, power $= .613$. The remaining strategies were not significantly different from each other.

The analysis for *response effectiveness* showed that the covariate of *prior knowledge* was a significant predictor, $F(1,189)=.13.483$, $p < .001$, partial-$\eta^2=.070$. The ANCoVA analysis did not detect a main effect for response strategy, $F(3,189)=1.263$, $p=.289$, power $=.334$. Alternatively, The post-hoc test did not show a significant difference in perceptions of *response effectiveness* between response strategies, *defiance* ($p = .373$), *denial* ($p = .507$), and *no response* ($p = .334$). Additionally, the three strategies (*defiance*, *denial*, and *no response*) did not differ significantly from each other, as you can see in the means reported in Table 3. The two-way news article by response strategy interaction was not significant $F(3,189)=.540$, $p = .656$, power $= .159$. Thus, hypothesis 5 was not supported.

Hypotheses 6

The hypothesis predicted that in crisis cases among public figures, any response strategy is better than *no response* strategy in terms of image restoration. Hypothesis 6 was tested using planned contrasts comparing *mortification* (coded "1"), *denial* (coded "1"), and *defiance* (coded "1,") with *no response* (coded= "-3"). On each dependent variable, the results indicated none of the contrasts were significant: *source credibility*, $t(185)=-.002$, $p=.999$; *perceptions of guilt*, $t(185)=-.278$, $p=.781$; and *response effectiveness*, $t(185)=-.1.549$, $p=.123$. Thus, hypothesis 6 was not supported.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

In late 2014, comedian and actor Bill Cosby suffered a major crisis after more than 30 women publically accused him of drugging and sexually assault, causing him to lose work and suffer a massive hit to his reputation. Because Cosby did not respond to the crisis, an opportunity for unique research was presented. The purpose of study was to combine, test, and extend situational crisis communication theory and image repair theory response strategies in crisis situations involving celebrities. Much research involving crisis communication is done in two ways: experimenting with hypothetical crisis situations or analyzing response tactics of politicians, celebrities, or organizations. This crisis was an opportunity to test response strategies using a real life crisis, as opposed to a manipulated circumstance. Additionally, literature does not discuss the implications of the veracity of claims against the accusers; in other words, does the number of accusers and consistency of claims influence public perceptions of *source credibility* and guilt of the accused? A survey experiment was conducted using a 2 X 4 factorial design in order to test whether the veracity of the claims against Cosby influenced public perceptions of *source credibility* and/or guilt, and which response strategy or strategies would be most effective for Cosby.

Although image repair theory is the predominant framework in celebrity crisis response management, situational crisis communication theory's typology is more prescriptive, which is important in crisis situations. An individual cannot effectively combat a crisis without sufficiently categorizing the crisis. As Coombs (2007) prescribes, the *denial* strategy should be

used during a rumor crisis. Because Cosby's role in this crisis is still unknown—whether it is a rumor or an act of misconduct—it had to be categorized in both categories in order to properly test crisis response strategies. However, in categorizing a rumor crisis, it is important to know how much influence the rumor will have over public perceptions, which is why testing veracity of claims should be incorporated into crisis communication.

The biggest takeaway of this study was the influence of response strategy on public perceptions, particularly the way the results contradict previous research. The experiment tested the notion that any response strategy would provide more favorable perceptions than not releasing any statement at all based on research presented by Len-Ríos and colleagues (2015). Len-Ríos et. al (2015) found that in Paula Deen's racial crisis, any response strategy was more effective at producing favorable results than remaining silent. Her results indicated that providing any response strategy was rated more positively than not providing a response at all (Len-Ríos et. al, 2015). However, research showed that in the present study this was not true; the contrast was not significant between not responding versus using the response strategies of *mortification*, *denial*, or *defiance*.

As situational crisis communication theory prescribes, categorizing an avoidable crisis, which would be misconduct of this nature, apology is one of the best strategies to employ. As mentioned previously, it is unknown whether Cosby has committed any of the acts he has been accused of, which means it could fall into one of two category types" rumor or act of misconduct. Image repair literature points to *mortification* as the most important crisis response strategy in celebrities who are guilty, which aligns with Coombs' (2007) recommendation, so *mortification* (apology) was used as one response strategy. The data showed that in this case, *mortification* as significantly different from the other crisis response strategies used, as it was the

least successful, directly contradicting previous research. The analysis shows that *mortification* resulted in lower *source credibility* and higher *perceptions of guilt*, making it the least effective tactic in a crisis such as Cosby's.

One potential reason why the *mortification* strategy was found to be unsuccessful in this case can be found in Benoit's (1997b) study of Hugh Grant. Even though he highly recommended *mortification* for any celebrity at fault of the crisis situation, he also noted ways in which future cases should be wary of using this strategy and expecting dramatic image restoration, as some acts are not as easily forgivable in the eyes of the public.

Of course, as suggested earlier, *mortification* cannot be guaranteed to improve one's image. One must appear sincere. We are willing to forgive some offenses more readily than others. The contrast between political (and corporate) and entertainment image repair suggests that it is probably more risky for some rhetors (politicians, corporate officials) to engage in *mortification*. Still, *mortification* is a potentially effective strategy, even if most people are reluctant to use it (of course, some offenses may not be forgivable; compare Rob Lowe or allegations that Michael Jackson abused children)" (Benoit, 1997b, p. 264).

This suggests that those who are guilty of more offensive acts should use *mortification*, but that they should not expect that an admission of guilt will boost public perceptions; in fact, it may do the opposite in the short-term, as people now have confirmation of the guilt. In the case of this study regarding Bill Cosby, it is possible that even though *mortification* is unsuccessful in the short term, it could prove better for long-term image repair, as is the case with Rob Lowe, who is highlighted in Benoit's (1997b) analysis. Twenty years ago the scandal involving Rob Lowe's sexual relations with an underage girl seemed unforgivable and seemed to be a detriment to his

career, as Benoit (1997b) pointed out, but approximately two decades later, his career has been revitalized and his reputation successfully restored among the majority of the public. Had the case of Bill Cosby been studied for long-term strategy effects, it is possible that a sincere, honest apology would hurt him in the short term but ultimately help rebuild his career and reputation in the future.

Additionally, the data did not support the argument that the number of accusers or consistency of claims had a significant impact over public *perceptions of guilt* or *source credibility*. Although the analysis removed the effect of *prior knowledge*, it was a significant predictor for *perceptions of guilt*. While it had little influence on public perceptions of *source credibility*, *prior knowledge* influenced *perceptions of guilt* too much for the news story to make a significant impact.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study have a number of limitations that should be considered for future research. One of the most glaring limitations is participant numbers, which may have been too low to get the most accurate results. In a few cases, the data was just shy of being significant, but boosted numbers could have made these tests more powerful. A larger group of participants would may have also presented results regarding how differences in race, gender, and age influence he way Cosby is viewed. Additionally, pretests were not conducted to test the survey for reliabilities and category correlations. A pretest could have determined which questions to leave out in the beginning in order to formulate a clearer, more concise survey.

Despite its limitations, there are a number of ways in which future research can use the present study to expand crisis communication theory and research. While the data did not show

any significance between how the veracity of the claims influenced public opinion, it is worth further study in order to expand theory and more accurately prescribe response strategies based on how guilty or credible the public finds the accused to be. Although as previously stated, Cosby presented a unique case in which to look at a real situation rather than a hypothetical, *prior knowledge* did play a role in some of the results. The news of Cosby's alleged abuse against women has been predominant in the news since it initially came to light in October 2014, so participants who read the news story representing one single unknown accuser may have also been aware of the additional accusers, which would have influenced the responses. *Prior knowledge* questions were not strong enough to adequately remove the effect on respondents' answers. An experiment using hypothetical figures would be the best way to further test the veracity of claims concept. In such an experiment, research could examine *perceptions of guilt* and *source credibility* of a celebrity when one person accuses him/her of misconduct versus thirty people accusing him/her of misconduct. Also, studying response strategy effects over a period of time may prove more informative than a brief, one-time survey. As noted above, celebrities have been able to recover from damaging scandals over time, so it would be important for public relations practitioners to understand the strategies best for long-term success.

Additionally, this research showed that any response was not more effective than lack of response, which could perhaps be attributed to not using the most appropriate strategies for this type of crisis situation; literature was unclear as to what strategies would be most effective in Cosby's case. One way that future research could potentially test strategies more effectively for clearer results is to design a more complex, multi-strategy experiment in which each response strategy would be crafted in two or three ways. Some people respond to different types of apologies: statements, press conferences, video statements, etc. By implementing a design with

more levels, research can better examine how each strategy compares against one another using various tactics. It may be that in a more complex design, response strategies of distinct types would emerge as more successful than *no response* strategy.

Determining the egregiousness of the offense would also be an important measure for understanding public perception in cases like Cosby's. For example, there is likely going to be a difference in *response effectiveness* for someone like Hugh Grant, who was caught in public with a prostitute, versus someone like Cosby, who has been accused of drugging and sexually assaulting women. Future research could ask each participant to rate various acts based on perceived level of offensiveness. Does a celebrity accused of shoplifting—i.e. Winona Rider— have a different responsibility when it comes to response strategies than someone accused of sexual assault—i.e. Cosby? In addition, knowing how likely the public is to forgive and move on after certain acts have been committed is important as well.

Additionally, it would be interesting to measure image congruence—in other words, do people feel betrayed by the allegations because of a publically portrayed persona. In the case of Cosby, it would be worthwhile to find out whether public perceptions of *source credibility* changed because of the accusations against Cosby or because the accusations directly betray his brand as an entertainer. This could have a significant impact on the way in which celebrities respond to crisis situations. If the public feels as if it has been deceived, it may be harder to win back favorable opinions.

Finally, long-term effects are important in crisis cases involving celebrities. As previously noted, other celebrities, such as Rob Lowe, have had long-term success after being the focus of a scandal. Future research studying short-term versus long-term response strategy effects would greatly contribute to the field, as most practitioners want to utilize strategies with

the best possible long-term outcomes, rather than only focus on appeasing publics in the short-term.

Although the hypotheses presented were not supported, the study opens a number of questions for future researchers to ask. By testing the existing typology for crisis communication, the doors have been opened to change the way public relations professionals approach celebrity scandals. Previous research does factor in the veracity of claims, image congruence, and timespan. Rather than rely on existing research and mimic tactics, future practitioners should be able to properly categorize a crisis and use the best tactics for long-term image repair. In order to do that, research must continue on these topics in order to properly extend crisis communication theories.

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Appendix A: News Story—One Accuser

BuzzFeed**NEWS**

Woman Says Bill Cosby Drugged and Raped Her

Therese Serignese, now a nurse in Florida, said Cosby raped her in 1972 when she was 19.

A 57-year-old woman said Bill Cosby drugged and raped her when she was a teenag - er.

The Associated Press reported that Therese Serignese, now a nurse in Florida, met Cosby in Las Vegas when she was 19. He invited her to a show, and afterward, she met him backstage.

Serignese said Cosby told her to take two pills with a glass of water.

"My next memory is clearly feeling drugged, being without my clothes, standing up," she told the AP. "Bill Cosby was behind me, having sex with me."

In an interview with the Huffinton Post, Serignese said her mother encouraged her to call Cosby after she told her about the assault.

She then stayed with him in Vegas until a pregnancy scare, the AP reported. The two maintained some contact until 1996, when she was in a car accident. Serignese said her sister reached out to the comedian for finncial support, and she received $10,000 from Cosby as well as $5,000 from his talent agent.

She said she tried to forget the rape because she didn't think anyone would believe her.

"You can bury it," she told the Huffinton Post. "But all of these times when this stuff comes up, it does make me angry."

BuzzFeed NEWS
Cosby Accusers Now Exceed 30 Women

Bill Cosby has been accused of drugging sexual assault in a series of recent allegations by more than 30 women.

Bill Cosby has been publicly accused of raping, drugging, coercing or sexually assaulting more than 30 different women since 1965, and many of them have only started to come forward in recent months.

The rape allegations against the 77-year-old comedian date back to 2005, when Andrea Constand filed a five-count lawsuit against Cosby claiming that he had drugged and molested her. Thirteen other women were listed in the lawsuit as Jane Doe witnesses, however the suit was settled before it could go to trial.

Those allegedly victimized by the entertainment icon's alleged crimes vary in age, vocation and ethnicity, but their tales of assault bear similarities. Most women who came forward, for instance, claimed Cosby either offered them pills or drugged them by spiking their drink.

One accuser, Therese Serignese, 57, now a nurse in Florida, met Cosby in Las Vegas when she was 19. He invited her to a show, and afterward, she met him backstage.

Serignese said Cosby told her to take two pills with a glass of water.

"My next memory is clearly feeling drugged, being without my clothes, standing up," she told the AP. "Bill Cosby was behind me, having sex with me."

In an interview with the Huffington Post, Serignese said her mother encouraged her to call Cosby after she told her about the assault.

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She said she tried to forget the rape because she didn't think anyone would believe her.

"You can bury it," she told the Huffington Post. "But all of these times when this stuff comes up, it does make me angry."

BuzzFeedNEWS

Cosby Releases Statement Denying All Accusations

In a statement released Monday, Bill Cosby denies any wrongdoing.

Bill Cosby broke his silence Monday as he spoke out about the accusations of drug - ging and sexual assault that have been accumulating in recent months.

In his statement, the comedian denied all the accusations against him and called out both the accusers and the media for defaming his character:

> Over the past few months, a number of women have come forward to tell their stories about alleged past encounters with me. While I did not want to address this, I think it is time that I speak out.
>
> These accounts are completely false, and it pains me that these falsifie stories have run rampant. I think media outlets should be ashamed for publishing stories based on false facts--ones that have brought pain to myself, my wife and my children.
>
> I have been nothing but faithful to my wife and family over the years, and it is unfair that these women are attacking my character and reputation. All I am guilty of is taking young, aspiring actresses under my wing over the years. I never touched any of them in an unwanted sexual manner, nor did I give any of them drugs against their will.
>
> I hope my loyal fans who have followed both my career and personal life can see the truth and continue to send love and support for myself and my family to take comfort in.

BuzzFeeDNEWS

Cosby Releases Statement, Admits to Allegations and Apologizes

In a statement released Monday, Bill Cosby admits to wrongdoing and asks for forgiveness from victims and the public.

Bill Cosby broke his silence Monday as he spoke out about the accusations of drug - ging and sexual assault that have been accumulating in recent months.

In his statement, the comedian admitted to wrongdoing and asked forgiveness from both the victims of his actions and the public:

> Over the past few months, a number of women have come forward to tell their stories about past encounters with me. It pains me to admit that the accusations made against me are in fact true. Throughout my career, I have made a lot of mistakes, and I regretfully must confir that my actions against these women were a mistake that I cannot take back.
>
> I want to extend my deepest apologies to the women I have hurt over the years. My actions were inexcusable, and I can only say how sorry I am to those who were affected by them.
>
> I would also like to apologize to my fans--those whom have remained dedicated and those whom I have lost throughout this ordeal. As a public figr e, I had a responsibility to act as a role model for young fans and live up to the standards my followers have held me to over the years. I only hope that someday you can all fin it in your hearts to forgive me.

BuzzFeedNEWS

Cosby Refuses to Comment on Multiplying Accusations

In a statement released Monday, Bill Cosby openly refused to discuss the accusations against him.

Bill Cosby broke his silence Monday as he spoke out about the accusations of drug - ging and sexual assault that have been accumulating in recent months. However , he did so only to let the public know that he would not confir or deny the allegations against him.

In his statement, the comedian told the public that he was not comfortable commenting on the accusations due to the sensitivity of their nature:

> Over the past few months, a number of women have come forward to tell their stories about alleged past encounters with me. I am not comfortable commenting on these ac - cusations, as they are of an extremely sensitive nature. I believe it is my duty to handle the situation quietly with my family. I would appreciate some privacy during this time and appreciate the continued support from my dedicated fans.

Appendix F: Response Strategy—No Response

Bill Cosby has not commented on the accusations against him.

Appendix G: Informed Consent Statement

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Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

Pro # 00022349

Researchers at the University of South Florida (USF) study many topics. To do this, we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study. This form tells you about this research study. We are asking you to take part in a research study that is called Crisis Communication and Celebrity Scandal: An Experiment on Response Strategies. The person who is in charge of this research study is Leah Champion. This person is called the Principal Investigator.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to test and extend crisis communication theories by determining accusations and response strategies influence public perceptions. The research will be carried out through treatments and survey questions using the online data collection server, Qualtrics.

Why are you being asked to take part?

We are asking you to take part in this research study because you are a student in the mass communications department in which the study is being conducted.

Study Procedures

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to answer a few screener questions, then view treatments and respond to them via a series of survey questions. Your answers will be collected using Qualtrics, an online data collection service. Should you choose to participate, you can do so at your own convenience. All data collected will be anonymous, so none of your answers can be linked back to your identity.

Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You have the alternative to choose not to participate in this research study.

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer; you are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your student status or course in any way.

Benefits and Risks

You will receive no personal, academic, or professional benefit from this study.

This research is considered to be minimal risk.

Compensation

We will not pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Privacy and Confidentiality

We must keep your study records as confidential as possible. It is possible, although unlikely,

that unauthorized individuals could gain access to your responses. Confidentiality will be

maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. No guarantees can be made

regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet. However, your participation in this

online survey involves risks similar to a person's everyday use of the Internet. If you complete

and submit an anonymous survey and later request your data be withdrawn, this may or may not

be possible as the researcher may be unable to extract anonymous data from the database.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the USF IRB

at 974-5638. If you have questions regarding the research, please contact the Principal

Investigator, Leah M. Champion by email at leahchampion@mail.usf.edu or by phone at (781)

439-0862.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not let anyone know your name. We will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are. You can print a copy of this consent form for your records.

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by proceeding with this survey that I am agreeing to take part in research and confirming that I am 18 years of age or older.

Please follow the link to the survey.

https://qtrial2015az1.az1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_0ro3ZtFzZWQhfk9

Appendix H: Survey

Screener Questions

Using the scale below please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

__1__	__2__	__3__	__4__	__5__	__6__	__7__
Strongly	Disagree	Slightly	Undecided	Slightly	Agree	Strongly

___1. I have heard of Bill Cosby.

___2. I often see Bill Cosby in the media.

___3. I am familiar with the recent news events related to Bill Cosby.

Second Survey Measuring Veracity of Claims' Effect

Please read the following news story, and answer questions based on that news story.

ATTITUDE:

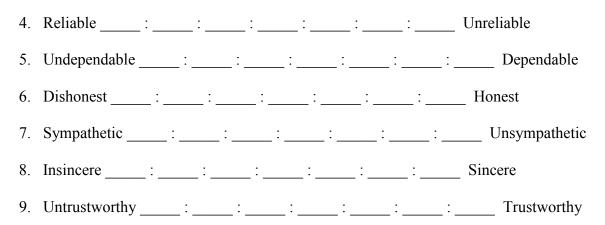*My attitude toward Bill Cosby is:*

1. Negative _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Positive

2. Bad _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Good

3. Unfavorable _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Favorable

SOURCE CREDIBILITY

In my opinion, Bill Cosby is:

4. Reliable _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Unreliable

5. Undependable _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Dependable

6. Dishonest _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Honest

7. Sympathetic _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Unsympathetic

8. Insincere _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Sincere

9. Untrustworthy _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Trustworthy

Using the scale below please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements by writing the appropriate number in the blank provided.

__1__	__2__	__3__	__4__	__5__	__6__	__7__
Strongly	Disagree	Slightly	Undecided	Slightly	Agree	Strongly

PERCEPTIONS OF GUILT

___10. I believe Bill Cosby is guilty of this crime.

___11. I believe Bill Cosby has been falsely accused.

___12. I believe that the information presented in this news story is true.

Final Survey Response Strategy Effectiveness

Please read the following news story, and answer questions based on that news story.

SOURCE CREDIBILITY

In my opinion, Bill Cosby is:

1. Reliable _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Unreliable

2. Undependable _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Dependable

3. Dishonest _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Honest

4. Sympathetic _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Unsympathetic

5. Insincere _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Sincere

6. Untrustworthy _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Trustworthy

ATTITUDE

My attitude toward Bill Cosby is:

7. Negative _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Positive

8. Bad _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Good

9. Unfavorable _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ Favorable

Using the scale below please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements by writing the appropriate number in the blank provided.

__1__	__2__	__3__	__4__	__5__	__6__	__7__
Strongly	Disagree	Slightly	Undecided	Slightly	Agree	Strongly

RESPONSE EFFECTIVENESS

___10. I believe Bill Cosby's response to this situation was appropriate.

___11. I believe Bill Cosby's response to this situation was effective.

___12. I believe Bill Cosby will get past this crisis and continue his career as an entertainer for

years to come.

PERCEPTIONS OF GUILT

___13. I believe Bill Cosby is guilty of this crime.

___14. I believe Bill Cosby has been falsely accused.

___15. I believe that the information presented in this news story is true.

Demographics

16. What is your age?

    a. 18-24

    b. 25-30

    c. 31-40

    d. 41-50

    e. 51-60

    f. Over 60

17. What is your gender?

a. Male

b. Female

c. Other

18. What is your race?

    a. Caucasian

    b. Hispanic

    c. African-American

    d. Asian

    e. Native American

    f. Pacific Islander

    g. Other

APPENDIX I: Data Removal

Thank you for participating in this study. The objective of this research project is to test and extend crisis communication frameworks by determining how accusations against a party affect public *perceptions of guilt*, attitude toward the individual, and *source credibility* of the individual and how those public opinions influence response strategies.

The subjects in this research will view different combinations of media materials in order to test both the veracity of claims and the response strategy effectiveness.

It is important to know that the news articles shown in reference to the allegations against Bill Cosby were based on real news stories and accusations that were publicized. Quotes, facts, and names represented were directly from published news stories.

In contrast, any responses presented were fictional. Bill Cosby is not affiliated with this study in any way and did not release any of the statements used in this study.

If you would like to remove your answers from our database, you have the right to do so now. Once you go beyond this point and exit the survey, you will no longer be able to withdraw your answers.

Would you like to submit your answers?

Appendix J: IRB Approval Letter

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RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 ● Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638 ● FAX (813) 974-7091

June 1, 2015

Leah Champion
Mass Communication
Tampa, FL   33617

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**
IRB#: Pro00022349
Title: Crisis Communication and Celebrity Scandal: An Experiment on Response Strategies

Study Approval Period: 6/1/2015 to 6/1/2016

Dear Ms. Champion:

On 6/1/2015, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
Leah Champion IRB Protocol

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
Leah Champion Informed Consent Statement **Granted a waiver

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s). **Waivers are not stamped.

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the documentation of informed consent as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.117(c) which states that an IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it finds either: (1) That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern; or (2) That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board