Chapter 1

Image Repair Theory Extended

This chapter takes up seven topics. First, I argue that one's image or reputation is very important. Second, I describe the nature of "image." Then I address the question of why complaints and attacks are common occurrences in society. Next I explain the Theory of Persuasive Attack: attacks often precipitate defenses. This leads to a discussion of the Image Repair Theory, where I identify two new image repair strategies. Sixth, I offer advice for developing contingency plans, anticipating potential threats to reputation before they arise. Finally, I explain the process of developing an image repair effort.

Image Is Important in Human Affairs

Image, face, or reputation is very important in human affairs. "Image" is the public persona or apparent character of a person or organization—including corporations/businesses, groups, and governments. Accusations or suspicions of wrongdoing can be serious threats to image. People can suffer embarrassment when their alleged offenses become known to others. Some misdeeds can also result in potential criminal and/or civil penalties. For some purposes, corporations are legally considered to be people, but of course companies do not experience feelings such as embarrassment. Still, a company's employees and other stakeholders can feel embarrassed by corporate behavior.

When actual or apparent wrongdoing becomes known, these revelations can damage the alleged offender's credibility and hinder future dealings with others. Other people, groups, and organizations may

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ostracize and revile offenders. People can lose friends or be shunned by others, and companies can lose business (both suppliers and customers could abandon a company) over wrongdoing. Individual companies (e.g., Nestle), industries (e.g., plastics), types of food (meat), and countries have all been subjected to boycotts (Hunt 2021). The invasion of Ukraine, for example, prompted over one hundred companies to take actions to punish Russia; furthermore, many countries have imposed sanctions against Russia over this invasion (Funakoshi, Lawson, and Deka 2022). Boris Johnson was forced to resign as prime minister in 2022 after a series of scandals, another example of serious consequences from image problems. A variety of potential unpleasant outcomes can ensue from actual or perceived wrongdoing. Being innocent of accusations is an important potential defense, but both actual and alleged misdeeds can damage an image before the defense emerges—and some in the audience may not believe claims of innocence even if the accused did not, in fact, commit wrongdoing. For these reasons, image or reputation is a vital aspect of human affairs.

The Nature of Image

Image is the public persona of a person, group, or organization; it is constructed by each audience member based on their attitudes toward the target. People who have enough in common—such as a particular audience—often develop overlapping attitudes toward a person, group, or organization. Benoit and Benoit (2008, 10) explain that "an attitude is a cognition (a thought, a mental construct)." They state that "attitudes have two key parts: beliefs and values. A belief is a description of the world and of the people, places, things, and relationships in it. Roughly, a belief is a fact, something that is either true or false" (10; see Fishbein and Ajzen 2010; Benoit 2013); Ziegelmueller and Kay (1997, 40) observe that a belief is a "potentially verifiable" statement. However, unlike "facts," beliefs can be mistaken or false. These are examples of beliefs:

> The capital of Ohio is Columbus. (true)
> Washington, DC, is just like a state and has two senators. (false)
> A cow jumped over the moon. (false)
> Mitch McConnell is a Republican. (true)
> Chuck Schumer is a Democrat. (true)
> Russia invaded Ukraine. (true)
> South Dakota invaded Utah. (false)

So beliefs are descriptions of the attributes and actions of people, groups, and organizations. Beliefs can be either true or false; however, some statements are indeterminate, such as statements of opinion.

Benoit and Benoit (2008, 11) write that "Values are judgments of worth. Because they are judgments, they are subjective and neither true nor false" (see also Ziegelmueller and Kay 1997). Examples of values include these statements:

> The Democratic Party is better than the Republican Party.
> The Republican Party is better than the Democratic Party.
> Immigrants are undesirable for America.
> Rubies are more beautiful than emeralds.
> Taxes are always bad.
> Strawberries are more yummy than raspberries.
> Van Gogh's paintings are better than Rembrandt's paintings.

Some people hold their values so strongly that they consider them to be true. Despite what these people think, values are neither true nor false (Benoit and Benoit 2008). Values incline us to have favorable or unfavorable impressions of the target.

A belief must be connected to a pertinent value before either can influence our attitudes or behavior. For example, knowing that Mitch McConnell is a Republican (a belief that happens to be true) or that Chuck Schumer is a Democrat (a separate belief that also happens to be true) does not by itself create a favorable or unfavorable attitude. However, if a person has a preference for one party over the other, that value can combine with either of these two beliefs (or both of them) to create an attitude or attitudes toward one or both of these politicians based on these beliefs and values. Together, beliefs and associated values create attitudes, and images consist of related attitudes. In this book, images are considered to be groups of attitudes (and their constituent beliefs and values) that *concern a person, group, or organization*. People can also have attitudes toward things, such as flowers or paintings or places; however, impressions of things are not considered "images" in this analysis of image repair.

Different people often have different sets of beliefs and values about a target. This means that attitudes about and images of a target vary from person to person. If some people have enough attitudes in common (it is not possible to quantify an exact number that is "enough"), different people may have similar attitudes toward, and images of, a specific person, organization, or group. However, at times people have conflicting attitudes.

For example, America has become increasingly politically polarized in recent years. Abramowitz and Webster (2016, 21) reported that "a growing proportion of Americans dislike the opposing party more than they like their own party" (see also Abramowitz and Webster 2018). Former president Donald Trump embodied the huge division between Democrats and Republicans. A poll taken in October 2020 found that "just 3 percent of Democrats but a whopping 95 percent of Republicans approve of the job President Trump has done so far" (Bowden 2020). Clearly, the attitudes of people can vary widely in some cases. Image repair messages can persuade some people at the same time they repel others with different attitudes.

Attacks Are Common in Society

Accusations of wrongdoing, which can damage an image, are common occurrences in society. Benoit (2015, 1–2) offers four reasons to explain why attacks are ubiquitous:

> First, the world in which we live and work has limited resources: There is only so much money, equipment, resources, office space, or time. . . . We often compete fiercely for these tangible and intangible goods, which means the allocation of these scarce resources often provokes the ire of those who wanted these resources distributed differently. Second, circumstances beyond our control sometimes prevent us from meeting our obligations. . . . Our behavior is significantly influenced by the people, events, and environment around us, and frequently these factors create problems for us and those who depend on us. Third, human beings are not perfect and at times we commit wrong-doing, some of which are honest errors, whereas other actions are guided too much by our self-interests. . . . Finally, the fact that human beings are individuals with different sets of priorities fosters conflict among those with competing goals. . . . So, four factors combine to ensure that actual or perceived wrong-doing is a recurrent feature of human activity.

So, criticisms of image—persuasive attacks—are inevitable in our society (see also Benoit and Glantz 2017; Benoit, Stein, and Barton, forthcoming).

Threats to image can motivate image repair, so understanding the nature of attack can be important to understanding defense (see Ryan, 1982, 1988). Pomerantz (1978) identified the two key elements of a complaint:

1. An act occurred which is offensive.

2. The accused is responsible for that act.

Both conditions must be thought to be true by the audience for reputation to be at risk. A threat to face requires that a misdeed occurred or at least is believed by some to have occurred. If what happened, or is thought to have happened, is not considered offensive by the audience, then the image is not at risk. Second, the accused must be believed to be responsible for that act. Notice that these two elements of an attack correspond to values (offensive) and beliefs (responsibility).

"Acts" must be understood broadly here, to include words as well as deeds, inaction as well as action. Furthermore, responsibility for an act can take several forms. One may have performed an action, permitted others to commit an act, encouraged others to perform an act, or facilitated others to act for an image to be threatened. Perceptions are what matters here: Does the audience consider the act to be offensive? Does the audience believe the accused is to blame for the act?

Benoit and his associates developed the Theory of Persuasive Attack to understand messages that criticize other people and groups (Benoit 2017a, 2020a; Benoit and Dorries 1996; Benoit and Glantz 2017a; Benoit and Harthcock 1999; Delbert and Benoit 2014). Attacks can address actions or character, and each type of attack has two elements: a belief and a value. For example, when Donald Trump referred to Ted Cruz as "Lyin' Ted" ("List of Nicknames" 2022), he was asserting a belief about Cruz (that he lies). If people who heard or read Trump's statement and accepted as true that lying is bad (a value), then this belief and value combine to foster an unfavorable attitude toward their image of Cruz. An image is influenced by all of the belief/value pairs an audience holds about the target. One unfavorable belief/value pair may not result in a negative image overall, but it is likely to degrade that image to some extent. People who are not exposed to this characterization of Cruz ("Lyin' Ted") cannot be influenced by this insult—they lack the belief that he is a liar. Similarly, if a member of the audience rejects Trump's insulting nickname as false, values about lying do not come into play.

Image Repair Theory Extended

Because image is so important, people, groups, and organizations routinely attempt to project a desired image; of course, some people in the intended audience may not accept such self-promotion. The fact that image is so important means that when a person or organization is attacked, the target has motivation to offer a defense, that is, to use image repair. The prevalence of criticism in society means opportunities for image repair abound. Benoit and his associates developed Image Repair Theory to understand persuasive defense (see, e.g., Benoit 1995a, 1995b, 1997b, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2013a, 2013b, 2015a, 2015c, 2015c, 2017c, 2020b; earlier work includes Benoit 1982, 1988; Benoit, Gullifor, and Panici 1991).

This theory has been applied frequently to understand image repair discourse. Avery, Lariscy, Kim, and Hocke (2010) noted that Image Repair Theory was the most commonly used theory in public relations articles on crisis communication between 1991 and 2009. Similarly, Nekmet, Gower, and Ye (2014, 289) reported that the "prevalent theory" on image management in public relation journals between 1991 and 2011 was Benoit's Image Repair Theory. Ha and Boynton (2014) noted that Image Repair Theory was the most frequently cited crisis communication theory in communication journals between 1991 and 2011. Harker and Saffer (2018) analyzed a quarter of a century's research on sports crisis communication in twenty-five journals, concluding that Image Repair Theory "is undoubtedly the most central theory in this subfield's network" (386). Image Repair Theory is an important approach to understanding crisis communication.

The situation in which image repair discourse typically arises is straightforward: A person, group, or organization is accused or suspected of wrongdoing, and this state of affairs impels the accused to develop a defense to try to repair that image. This situation can become more complicated in different ways. Usually, the victim of a misdeed launches a complaint against the alleged wrongdoer. Sometimes, in contrast, the alleged victim is not attacker but someone else. For instance, Benoit and Harthcock (1999) analyzed newspaper advertisements paid for by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids that attacked the tobacco industry for marketing an addictive and deadly product to children. So in this case, children who smoked cigarettes were the victims, but it was an organization (the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids) that attacked the wrongdoers.

The situation in image repair can become more complicated when multiple alleged offenders are involved. After he retired as a Penn State

University, football coach Jerry Sandusky was convicted of sexual abuse. Penn State fired Coach Joe Paterno and President Graham Spanier; Athletic Director Tim Curley and Vice President Gary Shultz resigned over the scandal (Chappell 2012). Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal (2002) investigate how the two companies Ford and Firestone handled reports of deaths from blowouts of Firestone tires used on Ford Explorers. Suspicions and accusations of wrongdoing can affect several individuals and groups or organizations.

Another kind of situation arises when one person (group or organization) defends another from alleged wrongdoing. This state of affairs is called third-party image repair; the victim is the first party, and the accused is the second party. For example, Nelson (1984) studied image repair of tennis star Billie Jean King that was carried out by other tennis players. In 2010, British Prime Minister David Cameron gave a speech apologizing for the massacre on Sunday, January 30, 1972, when British troops killed twenty-six unarmed protesters and bystanders in a protest in Northern Ireland, even though it took place decades before he was prime minister (Benoit 2015). President George W. Bush was subjected to widespread criticism on various grounds. His secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, and his wife, Laura Bush, gave televised interviews to repair President Bush's image (Benoit 2015). These case studies illustrate how one person, group, or organization can defend another.

Assumptions of Image Repair Theory

Benoit (2015) advances two important assumptions as the foundation for this theory. First, communication should be understood as an activity that is intended to accomplish the communicator's goals. Unlike art, which is sometimes created as self-expression, communication is not ordinarily produced for self-expression. Second, one of the most important goals of communication is maintaining a positive reputation. Each of these two assumptions will be addressed separately.

Communication Is a Goal-Directed Activity

Image Repair Theory assumes that communication is a goal-directed activity, a means to an end. Most rhetorical theorists consider rhetoric to be the art of persuasion; this definition is usually accompanied by the

assumption that rhetoric is purposeful (see, e.g., Arnold and Frandsen 1984; Bitzer 1968; Scott 1980). This presumption that discourse is goal-directed also occurs in the literature on communication (see, e.g., Clark and Clark 1977; Craig 1986; Halliday 1973). So rhetoric or communication is a goal-driven activity. Messages are intended to attain goals sought by those who create discourse.

Maintaining a Favorable Reputation Is a Key Goal of Communication

The second basic assumption of Image Repair Theory is that one important goal of communication is maintaining a favorable image. Clark and Delia (1979, 200) have explained that there are three

> issues or objectives explicitly or implicitly present for overt or tacit negotiation in every communicative transaction: (1) overtly instrumental objectives, in which a response is required from one's listener(s) related to a specific obstacle or problem defining the task of the communicative situation, (2) interpersonal objectives, involving the establishment or maintenance of a relationship with the other(s), and (3) identity objectives, in which there is management of the communicative situation to the end of presenting a desired self image for the speaker and maintaining a particular sense of self for the other(s).

Image repair is related to the third objective, identity. Fisher (1970) identified four goals in communication about identity: There are "four motives, or kinds of rhetorical situations: . . . affirmation, concerned with giving birth to an image; reaffirmation, concerned with revitalizing an image, purification, concerned with correcting an image, and subversion, concerned with undermining an image" (132). Persuasive attacks, which often prompt image repair, concern subversion, messages intended to damage an image. Image repair discourse is an effort at purification, messages attempting to repair a damaged image.

Image Repair Strategies

Image Repair Theory organizes defensive strategies into five broad categories, three of which have variants or subcategories: denial, evading

responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification or apology. Two new forms of denial are proposed here. Denial and evading responsibility address the belief component of attacks. Reducing offensiveness concerns the value involved in an attack. Corrective action and mortification attempt to create new beliefs to repair the image.

Denial

A defender may deny performing the wrongful act (Ware and Linkugel 1973); if accepted by the audience, denial can improve an image. Simple denial addresses blame, rejecting the belief that the accused is responsible for the act. When Representative Matt Gaetz (R-FL) was accused of having sexual relations with an underage girl, he stated that "the allegations against me . . . are false" (Wise and Swasey 2021). We do not know whether this accusation or his denial are true, but this is a clear illustration of simple denial.

A second option for denying the accusation is shifting the blame (called scapegoating by Burke 1970). This strategy creates a new belief to direct blame to another person, group, or organization. If someone else committed the act in question, the accused should not be held responsible. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) came under fire for social media posts. She tried to shift the blame to some of her employees, saying there were "many people" who managed her social media activity. Therefore, she was not to blame for statements made on her social media (Skolnik 2022). This is not a very effective instance of shifting blame—even if it is true that an underling made the offensive posts, that does not necessarily mean that Greene did not know of or approve of the posts—but it is an example of this concept, nonetheless. In 2023, China denied that the balloon floating across the United States was spying, claiming it was a civilian balloon (Hansler et al. 2023). This claim seems unlikely, but it is an example of denial.

Examining the texts for this analysis uncovered two other strategies that relate to denial. First, the accused may attempt to deflect attention away from the accusation. This approach is also referred to as "whataboutism," for "what about X?" This strategy has long been a staple of responses by the Russian government to attacks on its policies or actions (see Bershidsky 2016; Harding 2013). *The Economist* explained, " 'Whataboutism' was a favorite tactic of Soviet propagandists during the old Cold War. Any criticism of the Soviet Union's internal repression or external aggression was met by asking 'what about' some crime of the West" ("Power, Money

and Principle" 2008; see also "Whataboutism" 2008). Television personality John Oliver offered examples of this strategy attributed to Fox News: "The mainstream media focused on the Trump campaign and allegations of collusion with the Russians. But what about the Democrats' possible ties to Moscow? Former National Security Advisor General Michael Flynn was investigated for his private meeting with Russia, but what about Hillary Clinton? The media wants to call into question the credibility and trust-worthiness of this [Trump's] administration—but what about Benghazi? What about the blatant lies that the Obama Administration told us?" (Werner 2017). These attacks work to deflect attention away from the allegation that the Trump campaign colluded with Russia; none of these questions concern the accusation of collusion. They shout, "Hey, don't look here! Look over there!" This is reminiscent of the movie *Up*, in which dogs were distracted by the cry of "Squirrel!" This strategy attempts to create or remind the audience of a belief that another person, group, or organization performed an offensive act.

President John F. Kennedy used deflect attention in a speech on the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Kennedy anticipated an attack by Fidel Castro—which did happen. However, Russia's First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev had not yet made an attack on the United States related to the Bay of Pigs when Kennedy used this strategy. Kennedy pointed to Russia and its use of tanks in other countries, alluding to Russian invasions of Hungary, Poland, and the Baltic States (Benoit 2022).

"Whataboutism" is a variant of the "dead cat" strategy, which tries to divert attention away from an undesirable topic of discussion. Boris Johnson, prime minister of the United Kingdom, used Lynton Crosby as a campaign consultant. Johnson quoted Crosby as saying:

> There is one thing that is absolutely certain about throwing a dead cat on the dining room table—and I don't mean that people will be outraged, alarmed, disgusted. That is true, but irrelevant. The key point, says my Australian friend, is that everyone will shout, "Jeez, mate, there's a dead cat on the table!" In other words, they will be talking about the dead cat—the thing you want them to talk about—and they will not be talking about the issue that has been causing you so much grief. ("Dead Cat Strategy" 2021)

Such statements can be used to change the topic away from uncomfort-able or damaging topics. This is the basic idea of the "red herring" tactic:

"something that distracts attention from the real issue" ("Red Herring" 2022).

A more recent example of "whataboutism" occurred in May 2022, after a draft of the Supreme Court case that overturned *Roe v. Wade* leaked to the public. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell held a press conference where this issue came up. Rather than discuss abortion, McConnell admonished reporters to "concentrate on what the news is today. Not a leaked draft, but the fact that the draft was leaked" (Benen 2022). Let us ignore the question of whether we should overturn a legal precedent: What about the *leak*? Another example of this strategy was provided by Texas Governor Greg Abbott after the elementary school killings in Uvalde, Texas: "There are, quote, real gun laws in Chicago. There are, quote, real gun laws in New York. There are real gun laws in California. I hate to say this but there are more people who are shot every weekend in Chicago than there are in schools in Texas" ("Texas Gov." 2022). In other words, don't look at, or think about, the killing of children here; look at other killings over there. This also ignores the question of how the total number of killings in a *large city* is relevant to killings in *elementary schools*. Deflect attention tries to redirect the audience's focus away from accusations against the defender.

This strategy is enabled by the fact that people have limited cognitive capacity (Benoit and Holbert 2010). People can only think about, or process information in short-term memory, a few ideas at one time (Miller 1956). The strategy of deflect attention is to direct the audience's thoughts away from the criticism and onto a new idea ("But whatabout X?"). The basic flaw in "whataboutism" is that two wrongs do not make a right. Pointing to an allegedly bad act by someone else does not in any way exonerate the accused of wrongdoing. As Oliver explained, "A defense attorney could not stand up in court and say, 'Maybe my client did murder those people. But I ask you this: What about Jeffrey Dahmer? What about Al Capone? What about the guy from *Silence of the Lambs*?'" (Werner 2017). Deflecting attention attempts to shift the audience's attention away from accusations without actually addressing those charges.

The strategy of deflect attention is similar to attack accuser, but these two strategies are conceptually distinct. Attack accuser is directed toward the person making the attack. So if Steve, a Republican, accuses a Democratic opponent, Sally, of wrongdoing, Sally uses attack accuser when she responds to the attack by criticizing Steve.

A fourth variant of denial is the straw denial, a fallacy. This strategy used to be known as a "strawman" argument, but that label is not appro-

priate today because it has sexist overtones. Straw denial characterizes an attack as more extreme than it really is—thereby making it easier to refute. Walton (2008) explains that "the straw man fallacy occurs when an arguer's position is misrepresented by being misquoted, exaggerated, or otherwise distorted" (21). This false characterization makes the attack seem "implausible or weaker than it really is" (22). For example, opponents of the theory of evolution loudly decried the idea that humans are descended from monkeys. However, proponents of the theory never made the claim that humans are descended from monkeys; rather, this theory argued that humans and monkeys share a common ancestor (Kwan 2021). Accordingly, this claim is a fallacious defense against the theory of evolution; it denies statements never made by evolution theorists. Straw denial appears to deny the accusation, but in fact it ignores the allegation, denying a different claim to foster the false impression that the attack had been disputed.

Dr. Sean Conley, the White House physician, provided an illustration of a straw denial in 2020 when he took questions after President Donald Trump was taken by helicopter to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center to treat his COVID-19 infection. Reporters pressed Dr. Conley about whether the president had been given oxygen:

> "He has not received any supplemental oxygen?" a reporter asked.
>
> "He is not on oxygen right now. That's right," Dr. Conley replied.
>
> "He's not received any at all?" the reporter pressed.
>
> "He has not needed any, uh, this morning, today at all. That's right," Dr. Conley said. "At the moment, all indicators are that he will remain off oxygen going forward."
>
> "Can we please [clear up] one thing. Has he ever been on supplemental oxygen?" one of them asked.
>
> "He—right now, he is not on oxygen," Dr. Conley told them. (Clench 2020)

The physician appears to deny that the president was given oxygen, but further questions make it clear that he actually denies a much more narrow claim: President Trump was not on oxygen "right now," illustrating a straw denial.

Similarly, Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers seemed to try to deceive people about whether he had been vaccinated against

COVID-19. When he was asked whether he had been vaccinated, he insinuated that he had not been vaccinated: "Yeah, I'm immunized. You know, there's a lot of—a lot conversation around it, around the League, and a lot of guys who have made statements, and not made statements, owners who made statements. You know, there's guys on the team who haven't been vaccinated. I think it's a personal decision. I'm not gonna judge those guys" (Lash 2021). Rodgers said that he was immunized to make it appear that he denied the implied accusation that he was unvaccinated. This false impression was reinforced by the statement that "there's guys on the team who haven't been vaccinated." His statement does not acknowledge that he was one of the players who had not been vaccinated. Rodgers also said his immunization was a "long-term immunization protocol," but failed to explain the nature of this procedure (Lash 2021). This statement again illustrates the idea that a person can try to create the false impression that he or she denied an accusation (in this case, that Rodgers had not been vaccinated).

Evade Responsibility

Those who are unable to deny performing the act may be able to evade or reduce their apparent responsibility for it. Four versions of this strategy can be identified. Scott and Lyman's (1968) concept of scapegoating—renamed provocation in Image Repair Theory to avoid confusion with shifting blame—indicates that the accused committed the act in response to a previous wrongful act committed by the target. This strategy tries to create a new belief: provocation is claimed as justification for the offensive act. For instance, a person might say, "Yes, I slapped her, but only because she insulted me first." Striking another person is wrong, but he might be viewed as less responsible if this act had been provoked by the victim.

Defeasibility is another kind of utterance that can try to evade responsibility (Scott and Lyman 1968), positing a lack of information about or control over the situation. For instance, a person who is late arriving at a meeting could provide an excuse by explaining, "My car battery was dead. I had to call a tow truck to get a jump." The accused had missed the meeting, but a dead battery might partially excuse this misdeed. China excused the incursion of its balloon over United States airspace as an uncontrollable event because of an act of nature ("force majeure"; Hansler 2023). This excuse seems unlikely, but it still illustrates this strategy. Criticized after the February 2023 earthquake that struck

Turkey and India, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan used defeasibility: "Of course, there are shortcomings. The conditions are clear to see. It's not possible to be ready for a disaster like this" (Henley 2023).

Third, defenders can offer an excuse based on accidents (Scott and Lyman 1968). For example, an automobile accident on a slippery road may be forgiven as an accident. This defense relies on a belief about road conditions. A fourth possibility is to justify the act on the basis of good intentions (Ware and Linkugel 1973). I once tried to help a person in a wheelchair get across a street; in doing so, I accidentally pulled an arm off the chair (the arm went back on). A person who inadvertently does a bad thing while trying to do something good is usually not blamed as much as those who intend to do bad. These defenses do not completely deny responsibility for the offensive act but attempt to reduce blame for it.

REDUCE OFFENSIVENESS

A person, group, or organization accused of misbehavior may also attempt to reduce the perceived offensiveness of the act. Bolstering (Ware and Linkugel 1973) attempts to offset the offensive act by strengthening the audience's positive feelings for the defender by informing/reminding the audience of a (different) act perceived positively by the audience: "Look at all the good I've done for you." Hopefully beliefs about one's past good deeds help mitigate the offensive act.

Second, one accused of wrongdoing can try to minimize the offensiveness of the act in question (Scott and Lyman 1968). For example, Wisconsin senator Ron Johnson attempted to give a list of false electors to Vice President Mike Pence during certification of the 2020 election results. When confronted about this incident, Johnson protested that his involvement in the plot to overthrow the election only "lasted seconds" (Meyer 2022), adding a new belief. Similarly, Marjorie Taylor Greene minimized the January 6, 2021, insurrection because it happened only "one time" (Harvey 2022). These attempts at minimization are about as persuasive as if a murder declared, "I only held the knife I used to murder the victim for a few seconds." This statement is ridiculous, but it still illustrates minimization.

A third way to reduce offensiveness is differentiation (Ware and Linkugel 1973), which attempts to distinguish the act performed by the accused from other similar but less desirable actions (a less offensive act). "I didn't *steal* your bicycle; I borrowed it without asking first." The idea

is that redefining the act in question as less offensive (relying on a value) than it first seems could help repair the image. Next, the accused can use transcendence (Ware and Linkugel 1973). This strategy places the act in a different and more favorable context (Scott and Lyman 1968), stressing a different and more important value. "Yes, I grabbed my child's arm. But I did it to keep him away from the hot stove." Saving the child from a burn is more important than yanking the child's arm.

At times those accused of wrongdoing attack their accusers (Scott and Lyman 1968; Semin and Manstead 1983). Reducing the credibility of the source of accusations can lessen the damage to image from those accusations. Furthermore, if the accuser is also the victim of the alleged act, this strategy could suggest that the victim deserved what befell him or her, lessening the offensiveness of the act. After the FBI raided Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy criticized the Department of Justice, declaring that this institution "has reached an intolerable state of weaponized politicization" (Rogers and Zanona 2022).

Compensation is the last possible strategy for reducing the offensiveness of an action (Schonbach 1980). Here the accused offers to remunerate the victim (providing money, goods, or services) to help offset the damage and negative feeling arising from the wrongful act. This strategy adds a new belief (the accused provides something of value to the victim). United Airlines, for example, has an official policy declaring that passengers deserve compensation when their flight is delayed, cancelled, or overbooked (United 2016).

Corrective Action

In this image repair strategy, the accused promises to fix the problem. These commitments are beliefs about future actions by the accused. Corrective action can attempt to (1) restore the situation to the condition it was in before the offensive act or (2) make changes to prevent the recurrence of the undesirable act (see Goffman 1971; Benoit and Lindsey 1987). For example, after Amazon acquired ComiXology, an app for distributing digital versions of comic books, Amazon addressed customer complaints about a variety of problems with the app (e.g., books purchased, books preordered, and books archived had all disappeared) by sending tweets promising to fix "some of the more prominent issues that have plagued the digital comic service" (Bonifacic 2022). The difference between this strategy

and compensation is that corrective action addresses the actual source of injury (offering to rectify past damage and/or prevent its recurrence), whereas compensation is essentially a gift designed to counterbalance, rather than correct, the injury.

Mortification

The accused can also admit performing the wrongful act and ask for forgiveness, engaging in mortification (Burke 1970; Burke 1974). This strategy is an attempt to create the impression (belief) that the accused is remorseful. If the audience believes that the apology is sincere, they might pardon the wrongful act (Schonbach 1980). Mortification is a particularly complex image repair strategy. Stein and Barton (2018) identify five different strategies for enacting mortification: taking responsibility, emphasizing harms caused, asking forgiveness, admitting a lack of excuse/justification, and confessing feelings of shame. When actress Ryan Kiera Armstrong was nominated for a Razzie (short for Golden Raspberry Award, which are intended to ridicule bad film performances) for her work in *Firestarter*, a fierce backlash happened because Armstrong was only twelve years old. John B. Wilson, cofounder of the Golden Raspberries, apologized, saying, "Sometimes you do things without thinking. . . . The recent valid criticism of our choice of . . . Armstrong brought our attention to how insensitive we've been. . . . We have removed Armstrong's name from the Final Ballot" (France 2023). This is a clear example of an appropriate use of mortification.

It is important to understand that saying "I'm sorry" does not necessarily signal the use of mortification. Some people use the sentence "I'm sorry" to express sympathy for a victim without admitting any culpability in the offense. This sentence can also be used in other, nonapologetic ways. For instance, in an episode of *The Closer* television show, Assistant Chief Will Pope of the Los Angeles Police Department asked Deputy Chief Brenda Leigh Johnson to apologize for her treatment of Deputy DA Janet Powell, FBI Agent Jackson, and LAPD Captain Russell Taylor. Johnson said:

> I'd like to start with you, Ms. Powell. I'd like to say how sorry I am that I was unable to ignore your general level of incompetence in the wrongly obtained conviction in the case of Bill Croelick. And I'm sorry if you felt hurt and defensive about putting a man on death row for the wrong crime and I certainly

hope that that will never ever happen again. Agent Jackson, I deeply regret that the FBI handed over two million dollars to a man on a terrorist watch list without the capacity to trace it, or managed to follow him for months without knowing his wife was having an affair with the doctor. And I hope you do much better in the future. Captain Taylor, I suppose I should apologize to you for not having been born in Los Angeles, but, having seen your work up close now for several months, I can honestly say that, try as I might, I can't think of *any* fair and reasonable system on Earth where I wouldn't outrank you. (Robin 2005)

It is clear here that Deputy Chief Johnson did not admit any wrongdoing in her treatment of these three people. She also sneaks in some apparent corrective action when she says, "I certainly hope that that [putting a person on death row for the wrong crime] will never ever happen again." This is not an example of a person promising to correct their own misdeeds. Brenda Leigh Johnson was clearly not apologizing. This passage illustrates the idea that saying "I'm sorry" is not necessarily an apology.

Table 1.1 offers definitions and examples of image repair strategies (other examples can be found in Benoit, 2006, 2015, 2017, 2019; Benoit and Nill 1998; Blaney and Benoit 2001; Zhang and Benoit 2009). This typology will be employed to critically analyze and evaluate image repair messages in later chapters.

Research has investigated the effects of image repair strategies. Benoit and Drew (1997) studied the perceived appropriateness and effectiveness of the original fourteen image repair strategies. Mortification and corrective action were rated as more appropriate and more effective than other strategies; denial, bolstering, minimization, and provocation were seen as less effective and appropriate than other options. A meta-analysis of forms of accounts found that mortification achieved the smallest recommendation for punishment, highest ratings of credibility of the source, greater acceptance of the message, least amount of anger or blame, and the highest evaluation of the morality of the source (Benoit et al. 2014). Benoit (2016b) found significant differences between the fourteen image repair strategies on several outcome variables: acceptability of utterance, liking for source of utterance, blame for offensive act, offensiveness of the act, likelihood that the source would repeat the offense, and amount of punishment deserved. He also investigated the relationships between

Table 1.1. Image Repair Strategies

Strategy	Key Characteristic	Example
Denial		
Simple denial	did not perform act	January 6 participant did not commit insurrection
Shift the blame	another performed act	Australian PM John Howard: exporter misled me about Iran oil-for-food scandal
Deflect attention	stress unrelated criticism	Trump: What about Hillary's emails?
Straw denial	deny similar attack	Why don't you (Trump) support a mask mandate? Trump: I sometimes wear a mask
Evade Responsibility		
Provocation	responded to act of another	I started a negative campaign after my opponent attacked me first
Defeasibility	lack of info. or ability	President Bush: Katrina was an immense storm
Accident	mishap	Car wreck caused by slippery road
Good Intentions	meant well	Reagan (Iran-Contra): My heart tells me I did not trade arms for hostages
Reduce Offensiveness		
Bolstering stress	good traits	Trump: I have accomplished great things
Minimization	act not serious	Trump: only 15 cases of COVID-19
Differentiation	act less offensive than	Reagan: we sold Iran defensive, not offensive weapons similar acts
Transcendence	more important values	Clinton: more important to run the country than focus on Monica Lewinsky
Attack accuser	reduce accuser's credibility	Attacks on Trump are partisan witch hunt

Strategy	Key Characteristic	Example
Compensation	goods or services to victim	I will fix your car after fender bender
Corrective Action	plan to solve/prevent	Bush touts actions to clean up, help recurrence of problem victims of Hurricane Katrina
Mortification	apologize; express remorse	Clinton apologized for affair with Lewinsky

Author provided. Adapted from Benoit 1995a, 2015.

these dependent variables. For example, as might be expected, the greater the blame perceived to be merited by the source (and the greater the offensiveness the source's action) the greater the punishment the audience perceived to be deserved.

Image Repair Theory does not assume that any particular strategy is always best or always works. For example, an accused who is innocent could be helped by the use of simple denial—although some audiences might not accept a denial even if it is true. Furthermore, this theory does not condone the use of denial by someone who is guilty. False denial might help repair an image, but it is clearly unethical. Nor does this theory assume that using more strategies is automatically better than relying on fewer strategies. A single strategy, or a few strategies, might be more effective than a shotgun defense. Still, these studies clearly demonstrate that different strategies can have different effects. The effectiveness of image repair efforts is dependent on both the image repair messages (which strategies are chosen as well as how those strategies are implemented in the message) and the beliefs and values of the target audience. It is also important to keep in mind that different audience members may not have identical sets of beliefs and values. A defense that persuades some of the audience may fail or even backfire with others.

Contingency Plans for Crises

Two other topics merit attention here. First, it is a good idea for many people, groups, and organizations to prepare crisis plans before problems

arise. All too often crises occur unexpectedly and, when they do, an immediate image repair response can be necessary. One can wait until the crisis occurs before developing a response, but a hastily cobbled-together defense may be incomplete or ill-advised. Therefore, those at risk of accusations should prepare a crisis response plan before it is needed. A crisis response plan, as conceptualized here, is a contingency plan. It should prepare image repair responses before the crisis erupts, so they can be deployed without the stress and time pressure that exist in a crisis. Of course, such contingency plans must be adapted to the specific situation and implemented thoughtfully, not followed blindly. Response plans should be reviewed periodically and updated as needed.

A person or organization probably will not know *when* accusations of wrongdoing will emerge or every image threat they will face. Crises frequently erupt unexpectedly. Some offensive acts occur through carelessness and are not predictable. Still, many potential threats to image can be anticipated. For example, a restaurant can prepare for accusations of food poisoning; hopefully, the restaurant will work to prevent such illnesses, but it can prepare a defense if it keeps in mind that food poisoning does happen. Passenger airline companies should strive for safety, but they can also prepare responses in case a plane crashes. Airlines should also strive to complete all flights as scheduled, but they should anticipate both delays and cancellations and prepare contingencies for these potential image threats. Reflection on the activities an organization (or a person) pursues allows some contingency plans to be developed. If multiple potential problems are identified, they should be prioritized by likelihood and severity to develop responses.

Contingency plans (an organization could have different plans for different potential problems) should answer a number of questions:

1. What actions, if any, should be taken (e.g., shut down production, ground planes)?

2. Who in the organization needs to be informed, and what information and direction will they need?

3. Who outside the organization needs to be informed, and what should they be told?

4. Who will be the organization's spokesperson?

5. Who designs or edits (and who approves) image repair messages?