Gendered Image Repair: An Analysis of Gender's Interaction with Image Repair Strategies

Madison L. Wilson
Clemson University, madisonmonson@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses

Recommended Citation
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/3502

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.
GENDERED IMAGE REPAIR: AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER’S INTERACTION WITH IMAGE REPAIR STRATEGIES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication, Technology, and Society

by
Madison Wilson
May 2021

Accepted by:
Dr. Erin M. Ash, Committee Chair
Dr. Andrew S. Pyle
Dr. Joseph P. Mazer
ABSTRACT

This research was designed to examine how transgressor gender and image repair strategies interact to influence favorable perceptions of a transgressor after an image-related crisis. Drawing on the image repair theory, gender performance and double bind, and expectancy violations theory, four hypotheses were proposed. It was predicted that using an image repair strategy would be viewed more favorably (based on levels of acceptability, likability, perceived responsibility, likelihood of repeated offense, and deserved punishment) than not using an image repair strategy. It was also predicted that transgressing men would be viewed with more favorably than transgressing women. Additionally, it was predicted that following one’s gender norms with their image repair statement would be viewed more favorably than violating those norms.

A 2 (Transgressor Gender) x 3 (Image Repair Strategy) factorial experiment was conducted to test these hypotheses. Results from a series of two-way ANOVAs revealed that none of the hypotheses were supported. Contrary to what was predicted, transgressors benefited more from not saying anything at all than from employing a defeasibility statement. Additionally, no main effects for transgressor gender were revealed. It was also found that transgressing men who employed defeasibility were viewed as less responsible for their actions than other conditions, and transgressing women who employed bolstering were viewed as less responsible for their actions than other conditions. This study suggests that when studying IRT quantitatively, it is important to consider the external factors that could interact with the strategies’ effects.

Keywords: apologia, image repair, gender double bind
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the individuals who supported and encouraged me through my studies at Clemson University. First, I would like to thank Dr. Erin Ash for serving as my advisor for this thesis. Her methodology expertise and recommendations dramatically improved this project, and I learned so much about research from working with her. She has been so reassuring through this process, and I am so grateful for her positive perspective when I felt discouraged or frustrated. Outside of this thesis, I also appreciate everything she taught me as a professor and research advisor and her TV recommendations.

Next, thank you to Dr. Pyle and Dr. Mazer for serving on my thesis committee and offering valuable feedback and insights on all aspects of this project. I especially appreciate their enthusiasm for this research. Additionally, I also would like to thank the Love Fest cohort for their constant love and motivation. They made this master’s experience so fun, positive, and empowering, and I could not have imagined the past two years without them.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family for their confidence in my abilities through this program and thesis. Thank you to my parents for inspiring my love of education and acting as my sounding board for this project. Thank you to my husband, Taylor, for keeping me grounded through my master’s degree and believing in my every step of the way. Thank you to my Nana and the various grandparents, great grandparents, aunts, and uncles who set an example of pursuing higher education. It is an honor to follow in their footsteps and continue their legacy.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apologia</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image Repair and Crisis Communication</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benoit’s Image Repair Strategies</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender Performance and Expectations</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gendered Image Repair</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>METHODS</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Design and Procedure</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stimuli Materials</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Measures</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>RESULTS</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptability</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Likability</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Repeated Offense</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deserved Punishment</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary of Hypothesis Tests</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V. DISCUSSION</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Implications</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Future Directions</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. REFERENCES</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. APPENDICES</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table | Page
--- | ---
1. Bem Sex Role Index (BSRI) | 18
2. Acceptability: Gender X Strategy | 39
3. Likability: Gender X Strategy | 40
4. Responsibility: Gender X Strategy | 41
5. Repeated Offense: Gender X Strategy | 42
6. Deserved Punishment: Gender X Strategy | 43

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure | Page
--- | ---
1. IRT’S Relation to Communication and Crisis Communication | 8
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

On March 12, 2020, 50 individuals were charged in what U.S. Department of Justice officials called the largest college admissions scandal in U.S. history. ‘Operation Varsity Blues,’ the FBI’s name for the investigation, uncovered dozens of wealthy parents paying over $25 million to bribe coaches for admittance and forge ACT/SAT test scores (Axios, 2020). Ensuring their children’s acceptance to elite U.S. universities came at a great cost to these parents, including actresses Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin. Beyond their initial payments, their involvement has also cost their jobs, livelihoods, and reputations.

Unfortunately, situations like the college admissions scandal are not uncommon in modern society. Today’s political, economic, and social climates are volatile and full of crises, or events that are unexpected, threatening, disruptive, and require quick response to minimize harm (Seeger & Sellnow, 2019). Natural disasters, global pandemics, car accidents, and unemployment are often associated with the term ‘crisis,’ but situations that threaten one’s public image, like the college admissions scandal, can produce similar adverse outcomes.

In any crisis, regardless of its cause or condition, communication is vital to eliminating the threat, reducing uncertainty, and limiting harm (Seeger & Sellnow, 2019). In the crisis communication field, various practices have been developed and identified to effectively communicate before, during, and after a crisis occurs. Benoit’s (1997) image repair typology provides multiple response options after an individual or corporation is
accused and held responsible for an offensive action. He identifies denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification as available message options when responding to image attacks. Implementing these strategies enables entities to address a crisis and restore goodwill in their audience’s minds.

Image repair literature identifies how these strategies are used in a variety of situations, often through case study analysis (e.g., Benoit, 1997; Benoit, 2013; Benoit, 2015; Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Camille & Roberson, 2010; Moody; 2011; Oles-Acevedo, 2012). In recent years, scholars have also started studying the framework from an effects approach to examine each strategy’s effectiveness (e.g., Benoit, 2016; Brown et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2018; Cos et al., 2016). Additionally, patterns in strategy use by gender have been studied in previous work (e.g., Camille & Roberson, 2010; Moody, 2011), but little work has examined how these decisions influence the apologia’s effectiveness.

This study contributes to crisis communication scholarship by studying how gender interacts with image repair strategies. A gender double bind exists in discourse, meaning men and women can be judged differently for saying the exact same thing. Social science literature defines various language patterns as gendered, which has created societal expectations (Bem, 1974; Butler, 1988; Finley & Barry University Students, 2017; Jamieson, 1995; Kornfield & DeSantis, 2017; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Tannen, 1994; Tannen, 1995). Could following these norms influence an image repair situation more than the message itself? They shape public figures’ reputations, so it is not too dubious to expect them to also impact the image repair process.
Understanding gender’s influence on the image repair process allows public figures to make informed and effective decisions when developing responses to image crises. This research will use Benoit’s (1997) image repair strategies to analyze the relationship between an individual’s gender and the perceived effectiveness of their apologia. Using a 2 (transgressor gender) x 3 (repair strategy) factorial experiment, this study will examine how the social construction of gender influences the image repair process and evaluations of public misbehaviors.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Apologia

Misbehavior is an inescapable part of the human condition. Unfortunately, this misconduct is inevitable for multiple reasons. First, individuals and organizations are working with limited resources. Time, money, space, etc. are finite, controlled, and subject to competition. Second, circumstances beyond control sometimes prevent individuals and organizations from meeting their obligations. As Benoit (2015) explains, “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” (p. 1). Third, humans are imperfect beings who intentionally and unintentionally misbehave. Sometimes these actions are motivated by self-interest (e.g., submitting a fraudulent tax return), and sometimes they are honest errors (e.g., forgetting to submit a report on time). Fourth, differing priorities or goals can create conflict between individuals and organizations (Benoit, 2015).

According to Benoit (2015), these “four factors combine to ensure that actual or perceived wrongdoing is a recurrent feature of human activity” (p. 2). When these misbehaviors occur, the actors are often subject to complaints, criticism, and/or accusations for doing things wrong, doing too much, or not doing enough. Unfortunately, the implications are much worse when they occur in the public eye because a greater audience creates additional opportunities for scrutiny. If an accuser is able to successfully persuade an audience that 1) an undesirable act has occurred, and 2) the subject of the
accusation is perceived to be responsible for that act, these public criticisms can escalate toward attacks (Pomerantz, 1978; see also, Benoit, 1997).

These attacks threaten the individual or organization’s public image, which Benoit (2015) describes as a “valuable commodity” (p. i.). A favorable reputation is universally desired, as it benefits one’s relationships, opportunities, and so much more. Because a positive image is so prized, image-threatening attacks can be viewed and responded to as crises, or events that are unexpected, threatening, disruptive, and require quick response to minimize harm (Seeger & Sellnow, 2019). In any crisis, regardless of its cause or condition, communication is vital to eliminating the threat, reducing uncertainty, and limiting harm (Seeger & Sellnow, 2019). Public attacks usually elicit a response from the accused party, in which excuses, justifications, explanations, and apologies are offered. Benoit (2015) explains, “the communicative activity of excuse making… deserves serious study not only because it pervades social life but also because it serves an important function in our lives, by helping to repair our precious reputations” (p. i).

Social science scholars have recognized this phenomenon and spent decades developing framework based in rhetoric, cognition, psychology, and sociology to understand and fill the gaps between people’s words or actions and others’ expectations (e.g., Abelson, 1959; Pomerantz, 1978; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Ware & Linkugal, 1973). This “sociology of talk” sought to identify patterns and conceptualize various elements of image attacks and responses (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 273). Apologia, or “the speech of
self-defense” is the term scholars have adopted to describe how people and organizations respond to public image threats (Ware & Linkugal, 1973, p. 273).

Within this framework, Abelson (1959) presents four approaches to conflict resolution: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Denial occurs when one asserts the opposite of their cognitive situation (e.g., someone on a diet claiming that they never liked rich foods anyway). Bolstering occurs when one introduces additional relationships to a situation to minimize the negative claim at hand (e.g., a smoker who justifies the risk of lung cancer with the social benefits and stress relief). Differentiation occurs when one disassociates a negative aspect from the situation (e.g., differentiating ‘good’ politicians from ‘bad’ politicians). Transcendence occurs when one brings a situation to a greater context (e.g., rational individuals and spiritual individuals must cultivate together to succeed in society; Abelson, 1959).

In their seminal study, Ware and Linkugal (1973) expand Abelson’s four approaches to a public sphere, argue that these are the only rhetorical choices available in apologetic situations, and introduce various relationships and combinations between the strategies. They identify denial and bolstering as psychologically reformative approaches, because they “do not attempt to change the audience’s meaning or affect for whatever is in question” (Ware & Linkugal, 1973, pp. 275-276). Differentiation and transcendence are considered psychologically transformative because they aim to change the audience’s understanding or attention (Ware & Linkugal, 1973). William L. Benoit, the founder of image repair theory as the communication discipline recognizes it today, identifies Ware
and Linkugal’s (1973) basic strategies as foundational for his framework, despite his criticisms of their contradictory nature (Benoit, 2015).

**Image Repair and Crisis Communication**

Image repair theory (IRT) is “heavily indebted” to previous sociological work studying apologia (Benoit, 2015, p. 31). Building on that foundation, Benoit (1997) asserts that IRT is more exhaustive than earlier theories because it draws the strongest elements from previous literature. He identifies 14 distinct image repair strategies contained within five broader typologies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Effectively using one or more of these strategies in response to an image-based crisis can persuade an audience to change their attitudes about the accused party’s values, responsibility, and transgression (Benoit, 1997; 2015; 2016).

Despite its strong sociological roots, Benoit (2015) identifies IRT as a theory of communication, and more specifically crisis communication, because it focuses on the message options available when an individual or organization responds to a crisis (see Figure 1). Within this conceptualization, IRT is grounded in two communication-based assumptions: First, communication is a goal-driven activity; Second, one of communication’s central goals is to maintain a positive reputation (Benoit, 2015). Unlike other crisis communication theories, Benoit chooses to not operationalize ‘crisis’ or describe specific crisis situations to not limit IRT or pull focus away from the messages (Benoit, 1997).
When Benoit first developed IRT, he originally called it image restoration theory because the discourse’s initial goal was to restore a threatened public image. Over the past 25 years, IRT literature has blossomed and evolved. In that time, Benoit (2015) realized:

[The original] title might inadvertently imply that one can or should expect to be able to completely restore an image, obliterating any stigma in the image. In fact, in some situations, the best one can hope for is to partially restore or repair the image. A broken vase is not very useful. However, it may still hold water and flowers if it is glued back together (repaired). The cracks may show after applying the glue, so the vase is not completely restored to the condition it was before it was broken, but a repaired vase is much better than a heap of pottery shards. (p. i)
Identifying the theory as a means to repair a public image instead of to restore it does not discredit its persuasive ability. Instead, it provides a more realistic understanding of the strategies’ abilities and outcomes.

Additionally, IRT is used in two general contexts: organizational and individual. On an organizational level, IRT has been used to illustrate weaknesses in corporate communication (Benoit, 1997; 2013; 2015; Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Benoit & Dorries, 1996). Corporations typically have greater audience reach, resources, and liability than individuals, which necessitates a greater need for image repair after falling victim to a reputation attack (Benoit, 2015). On an individual level, IRT is commonly used in political case studies (e.g., Camille & Roberson, 2010; Oles-Acevedo, 2012), but has also been used to study athletes (e.g., Allison et al., 2020; Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Brown et al., 2015) and other public figures with threatened images. Having a niche audience and less access to resources creates different advantages and challenges for effective IRT implementation by public figures.

Though there are “obvious and important differences” in IRT’s relevant contexts, Benoit (2015) emphasizes that this is a general theory (p. ii). These strategies are available to any individual, group, or organization in any context to repair a threatened image (Benoit, 2015). This study examines gender’s effect on perceived apologia effectiveness, which requires IRT to be applied to an individual scale. For this purpose, each image repair strategy will be described and applied to individual-level contexts and case studies. Additionally, this study examines various message options available for responding to an image attack.
Benoit’s Image Repair Strategies

Denial

The first strategy to defend one’s self against an image attack is denial. As Ware and Linkugal (1973) explain, the accused party may negate alleged facts, relationships, sentiments, or intentions deemed wrongful in the public eye. Benoit (2015) adds that they can also choose to deny their participation in the offensive act or the existence of the act itself. Claims of incorrect information or lacking supportive evidence can supplement denial explanations. For example, an alibi given in a criminal trial denies the defendant’s involvement in a crime by providing evidence that they were elsewhere when the crime was committed (Benoit, 2015).

Sometimes, audiences are hesitant to accept a denial because they are still left with unanswered questions about who is responsible for the wrongdoing. Benoit (1997) identifies blame shifting, first labeled as victimage by Burke (1970), as a practice under denial. If the accused can prove that someone else is at fault, they can avoid a tarnished image. For example, during the Lewinsky scandal, Hillary Clinton repeatedly denied her husband’s affair and shifted blame to his rivals and the media for inaccurate reporting. Though her blame shifting denial claims were inaccurate, they planted a conspiracy seed that diverted the public’s attention away from the issue (Oces & Acevado, 2012).

Evade Responsibility

If one is unable to effectively deny their wrongdoing, they can try reducing responsibility for their actions. Scott and Lyman (1968) explain this as admitting that the act in question is inappropriate or wrong but only accepting partial responsibility. They
provide a few practices for this excusive behavior: scapegoating, defeasibility, and claiming accident. Scapegoating, which Benoit (1997; 2015) dubs “provocation,” refers to alleging that the misbehavior occurred in response to another’s behaviors or attitudes (Scott & Lyman, 1968). If audiences agree that the behavior was justifiably provoked, they will likely hold provocateur more responsible than the actor (Benoit, 2015).

Similarly, defeasibility entails asserting a lack of information, ability, volition, or control that resulted in the misbehavior. If someone else had ensured that these resources and opportunities were accessible, the situation’s resulted conduct and outcome would have been different (Scott & Lyman, 1968). For example, when someone is late to an event, they may be held less accountable for their tardiness if they were stuck in unanticipated traffic. If audiences understand the extent of the external forces’ control over the situation and the actor’s inability to counteract, they are more likely to forgive the actor for their misbehavior (Benoit, 2015).

Another practice is to claim that the misbehavior happened by accident. Scott and Lyman (1968) describe this method of mitigating responsibility as “pointing to the generally recognized hazards in the environment, the understandable inefficiency of the body, and the human incapacity to control all motor responses” (p. 47). These accidents include various crises and human error. When claiming accident, actors benefit from explaining their intentions. If audiences are able to observe how the offender’s misbehavior and/or its intended consequences were inadvertent, they will likely extend forgiveness (Benoit, 1997).
Reduce Offensiveness

Another image repair strategy is to reduce the audience’s ill will. Benoit (1997) explains six reduction practices: bolstering, minimizing negative feelings, employing differentiation, employing transcendence, attacking the accusers, and compensating victims. Bolstering, as Ware and Linkugal (1973) originally describe, involves the actor reinforces certain relationships, values, sentiment, or facts to strengthen their audience’s positive affect. For example, an individual might make a large donation to charity or highlight acts of service they performed in the past. When bolstering, the offender does not try to hide their wrongdoing or change the audience’s affect. The negative perceptions are not eliminated but are instead offset by positive feelings (Benoit, 2015).

One can also attempt to minimize the audience’s negative feelings by downplaying the problem and/or its associated damage (Benoit, 1997). For example, when Maria Sharapova failed a drug test at the 2016 Australian Open and was suspended from tennis, she tried minimizing the severity of the positive test by positioning meldonium as a drug she was taking for medicinal reasons (Allison et al., 2020). Minimization includes what Scott and Lyman (1968) call “condemnation of the condemners” (p. 51). In this practice, the actor asserts their misbehavior’s irrelevancy because others have committed much worse (p. 51). This device is especially effective when the actor can prove that those involved in more severe wrongdoings were not caught or punished (Scott & Lyman, 1968). If Sharapova had refuted the severity of her drug test by arguing that other players had gotten away with using more serious drugs, she would have practiced this kind of minimization.
One may also engage in differentiation to reduce their wrongdoing’s offensiveness. Differentiation, as explained by Ware and Linkugal (1973), is an attempt to separate the misbehavior from the context that the audience identifies it. By distinguishing the wrongdoing from other, less desirable actions, the act could seem less offensive in comparison. The phrase, “well, it could be worse,” communicates the idea of differentiation. In contrast, employing transcendence is placing the misbehavior in a broader context that the audience does not identify it with (Ware & Linkugal. 1973). Providing a different frame of reference creates opportunities for justifying the behavior. For example, Robin Hood’s theft is easier to forgive when the audience understands that his misbehaviors are intended to benefit the poor (Benoit, 2015).

As counterintuitive as it sounds, one can also reduce offensiveness by attacking their accusers. The goal of this practice is to diminish the accuser’s credibility, which in turn will lessen the public’s beliefs about the claims and minimize damage to the actor’s reputation. Additionally, this counterattack has potential to distract audiences from the original misbehavior, reducing damage to the actor’s reputation (Benoit, 2015). When Tonya Harding’s ex-husband faulted her for Nancy Kerrigan’s assault, she not only refuted his accusations by calling him a liar, but she also accused him of abusing her (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). Through her claims, she attempted to thwart his reliability and gain audience support. After all, who should believe a man who abused his wife? Is his accusation another attempt to hurt her? (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994).

The final practice for reducing offensiveness is compensation, or offering a requite to the victim to help offset negative feelings and/or consequences of the
wrongdoing (Benoit, 2015). Schönbach (1980) emphasizes that both offering restitutions for harm and acknowledging restitutions already performed can be reparative. Compensation is essentially bribery. If the victim accepts the offer and deems it effective, the compensation’s value can outweigh the misbehavior and improve the actor’s image (Benoit, 2015).

**Corrective Action**

Another strategy to repair one’s image is to ensure the problem will be fixed. This can happen by providing explanations, plans, and actions to correct the wrongdoing and its consequences and prevent future offenses (Benoit, 1997). Corrective action can take place with or without admitting fault (Benoit, 2015). When issues have high probability of reoccurrence, the actor’s image could greatly benefit from effective prevention. U.S. soccer star, Abby Wambach demonstrated corrective action in her statement after her 2016 DUI. In her apology on social media, she wrote, “I promise that I will do whatever it takes to ensure that my horrible mistake is never repeated” (Allison et al., 2020, p. 1041). Wambach pleaded guilty to the charges and has been sober since the night of her arrest, proving her actions truly were corrective (Associated Press, 2017).

**Mortification**

The final image repair strategy is to apologize, accept responsibility for the wrongdoing, and ask for forgiveness (Benoit, 1997). Burke (1970) first labeled mortification in a theological context as an act when a transgressor’s guilt is so strong that it feels like physical death. He identifies the practice as an act of sacrifice and self-discipline, and he praises those who find the integrity to extend a mortification response.
Likewise, audiences respect this accountability and lack of pride. If they perceive genuine remorse, they may choose to excuse the misbehavior. Benoit (2015) recommends adding corrective action explanations (see above), but they are not necessary with mortification.

This strategy is the most complex, as the definition of what constitutes an apology is ambiguous. No universally understanding of its required elements exists, so it can be difficult to determine what audiences will perceive as genuine and effective. Even the phrase, “I’m sorry,” is vague, as it can be interpreted as an admission of guilt or an expression of sympathy (Benoit, 2015). Because of this ambiguity, this strategy is also the most risky. Forgiveness is not guaranteed, and admitting blame could cause even more damage to one’s image. Often times, public figures capitalize on the language’s obscurity to minimize these risks (Benoit, 2015).

Benoit (2015) acknowledges that some individuals may choose to ignore accusations instead of providing an image repair response. He excludes ignorance and silence in IRT because response messages do not exist in these situations. Additionally, research shows that using one or more image repair strategies when responding to an image-related crisis is more effective than not using them (e.g., Benoit, 2016; Brown et al., 2018). “Effective,” though a broad term, is conceptualized in the literature as the extent to which an image repair message is accepted by the audience and reputation damage is minimized. This determination includes various elements like how well a statement aligns with a transgressor’s past reputation, the strength of empirical evidence against the transgressor, and the audience’s perception of genuineness (Allison et al.,
Based on IRT’s framework, I present the following hypothesis:

**H1:** *Audiences will exhibit more a) acceptability, b) likability, and less c) perceived responsibility, d) likelihood of repeated offense, and e) deserved punishment toward a transgressor who uses an image repair strategy compared to a control (no response).*

**Gender Performance and Expectations**

Judith Butler (1988) identifies gender as a constructed identity performed through a “stylized repetition of acts” (p. 519). Within this framework, sex and gender are operationalized differently: an individual’s sex is a distinct, biological facticity based on their anatomy, but their gender is an act created through their appearance, movements, language, and/or behavior (Butler, 1988; Finley & Barry University Students, 2017). For this study’s purpose, *men* and *women* will be used instead of *males* and *females* when referring to public transgressors. This decision intends to acknowledge gender’s learned performance and differentiate it from natural, biological patterns. As a social construction, appropriate gender conceptions for each sex have been socially determined. As such, people are held accountable for following and reinforcing these norms through their individual gender performances. These norms and associated stereotypes are both descriptive (i.e., reflecting current gendered patterns) and prescriptive (i.e. reflecting the status quo’s socially desired qualities; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Those who follow the status quo are rewarded, and those who perform
gender outside of society’s requirements are punished (Butler, 1988; Finley & Barry
University Students, 2017; Prentice & Carranza, 2002).

The expectation violations theory further explains the implications of social expectations. In any interaction, individuals subconsciously anticipate how the other will act and/or react. Reinforced expectations elicit favorable reactions, but violated expectations elicit negative reactions (Burgoon, 1993). In a gendered context, a love for children is recognized as a feminine characteristic (Bem, 1974; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Women who fulfill that social expectation are rewarded with favorable views from and interactions with others. Women who do not express that love or do not wish to be a mother violate that social expectation and are commonly subject to social criticism for being selfish and cold (Prentice & Carranza, 2002).

The BSRI is an index that separates masculinity and femininity as two distinct dimensions and classifies various behaviors and personality characteristics as masculine, feminine, or neutral. Bem (1974) explains the inventory’s origins:

[T]he BSRI was founded on a conception of the sex-typed person as someone who has internalized society’s sex-typed standards of desirable behavior for men and women, these personality characteristics were selected as masculine or feminine on the basis of sex-typed social desirability and not on the basis of differential endorsement by males and females as most other inventories have done. p. 155

In other words, male and female Americans view the listed masculine characteristics as more desirable for men to possess than women and vice versa. Over 200 personality
characteristics were presented to participants, who then classified them based on their own values. The 60 traits with the strongest association patterns were included in the index (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Bem Sex Role Index (Bem, 1974)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine Items</th>
<th>Feminine Items</th>
<th>Neutral Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acts as a leader</td>
<td>Affectionate</td>
<td>Adaptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>Cheerful</td>
<td>Conceited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious</td>
<td>Childlike</td>
<td>Conscientious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td>Conventional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>Does not use harsh language</td>
<td>Friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>Eager to soothe hurt feelings</td>
<td>Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>Helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defends own beliefs</td>
<td>Flatterable</td>
<td>Inefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>Gentle</td>
<td>Jealous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful</td>
<td>Gullible</td>
<td>Likable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has leadership abilities</td>
<td>Loves children</td>
<td>Moody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Loyal</td>
<td>Reliable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>Sensitive to the needs of others</td>
<td>Secretive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes decisions easily</td>
<td>Shy</td>
<td>Sincere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>Soft spoken</td>
<td>Solemn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reliant</td>
<td>Sympathetic</td>
<td>Tactful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sufficient</td>
<td>Tender</td>
<td>Theatrical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong personality</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Truthful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to take a stand</td>
<td>Warm</td>
<td>Unpredictable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to take risks</td>
<td>Yielding</td>
<td>Unsystematic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The classifications listed in the BSRI empirically represents society’s gender norms. Despite society’s progress and evolution over the past 45 years, meta-analyses show that the BSRI still relatively representative these gendered expectations (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017; Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017). Modern women value and self-identify with the BSRI’s feminine items less than they originally did, but their responses have shifted towards androgenous traits instead of masculine ones. Donnelly and Twenge (2017)
identify this trend as a “devaluation of traditional femininity,” as women feel pressure to simultaneously portray feminine and masculine traits (p. 556). On all levels, masculinity values have remained consistent through the years, upholding expectations for masculine gender performances.

**Gendered Language**

Gender and language shape each other (Kornfield & Desantis, 2017; Tannen, 1994; Tannen, 1995). Specifically, language is a learned social behavior that both constrains and reinforces gender norms (Tannen, 1995). Tannen (1994; 1995) argues that these societal expectations are learned in early childhood within same-sex peer groups. These learned language behaviors are comprised of two elements that work together to communicate ideas and negotiate relationships: genderlect and linguistic style. Bielenia-Grajewska (2009) defines genderlect as “a set of gender-related characteristics of one’s speaking” (p. 308). This is synonymous with one’s vocal register or style and includes adjective use, word choice, and tone. Women have learned to use a wider vocabulary when expressing emotion, uncertainty, and other activities generally undertaken by feminine gender norms (e.g., using “periwinkle” instead of “blue” when naming colors). They are conditioned to favor more personalized communication forms and use milder language when asking for things or cursing. In contrast, men have been taught to speak impersonally and use more direct, powerful terms (including profanity). A linguistic style is a set of characteristics that determine one’s speaking patterns (Bielenia-Grajewska, 2009; Tannen, 1995). Tannen (1995) further explains this as “a set of culturally learned signals by which we not only communicate what we mean but also interpret others’
meaning and evaluate one another as people” (p. 4). These characteristics and signals include features like pauses, directness, vocal quality, and body language. Young girls and boys learn to create rapport and negotiate status in different ways, which creates and reinforces differences in men and women’s linguistic styles (Tannen, 1995).

Importantly, as Tannen (1995) notes, “the lessons learned in childhood carry over into the workplace” (p. 7). These formative processes have decades-long effects, as both genders tend to judge others by their own norms. In the workplace, “people in powerful positions are likely to reward linguistic styles similar to their own” (Tannen, 1995, p. 25). Thus, language use creates expectations for what men and women are capable of achieving in various fields and roles. Society has chosen a gender more fitting for these, based on what aligns with prescribed norms. For example, nursing and teaching careers have long been identified with women, likely because they align with the feminine characteristics identified in the BSRI (e.g., compassionate, warm, loves children; Bem, 1974).

In contrast, doctors and lawyers have long been identified with men, likely because they align with the masculine characteristics identified in the BSRI (e.g., ambitious, competitive, act as a leader; Bem, 1974). Society’s expectations for masculine gender performances are shown through their continued overrepresentation in positions of power across societal domains. Consider, for example, the status difference between a doctor and a nurse. Both positions interact with patients and require a strong medical knowledge, but the masculine position dominates the social hierarchy and holds higher
esteem and salary. Similar differences exist in other fields, including between lawyers and paralegals and professors and teachers (Kornfield & DeSantis, 2017).

**The Double Bind**

A feminine gender performance does not fit into the masculine world of leadership. Unfortunately, engaging in masculine language practices is not enough for women to fit in that realm either. A “double bind” exists for women’s gender performances in leadership and public arenas, causing women to be viewed unfavorably in the corporate world if they are seen as either too feminine or too masculine (Camille & Roberson, 2010, p. 58). Women have to answer to both society’s feminine gender norms and the public sphere’s masculine expectations, which creates an impossible standard. Jamieson (1995) traces the phenomenon back to 1631, when women were placed in no-win situations during the Salem Witch Trials. If an accused “witch” drowned when submerged in a pond with stones tied to her ankles, her record would be cleared, and the community would accept her pure nature. If she survived, she would be burned at the stake and remembered as a satanic representative.

Centuries later, the double bind has manifested itself in various ways throughout Western Culture. For example, women running for office have difficulty succeeding in American politics because they cannot please the public with their gender performance (Camille & Roberson, 2010). Hillary Clinton has been studied extensively in terms of the double bind (e.g., Camille & Roberson, 2010; Cassese & Holman, 2018; Kornfield & DeSantis, 2017; Oles-Acevedo, 2012). She was polarizing as first lady because she entered the White House as a “well-educated, career oriented, independent, and by her
own admission, an outspoken first lady” (Oles-Acevedo, 2012, p. 34). Her gender performance in was too masculine for the traditional figure who represents femininity in America. As a presidential candidate, she was simultaneously criticized by her opponent for not having enough stamina to do the job (i.e., not being masculine enough) and lacking an empathetic instinct (i.e., not being feminine enough) (Cassese & Holman, 2018).

The double bind also exists within gendered language patterns. For example, society disparages women’s silence by often interpreting it as a sign of poor self-esteem (e.g., “She does not have the confidence to speak”) or inferiority (e.g., “She does not have anything worth saying”), but praises men’s silence by interpreting it as a sign of wisdom and self-control. Additionally, a woman who has a lot to say is criticized as a chatterbox, when a man with a lot to say is often praised for being charismatic and gregarious (Kornfield & DeSantis, 2017). These examples illustrate “how language and gender co-construct: the same type of language is valued differently when a man or woman uses it, and men and women are valued differently when they use language similarly” (Kornfield & DeSantis, 2017, p. 111). Based on an understanding of gender expectations in the public sphere and the double bind, I present the following hypothesis:

\[ H2: \text{Regardless of how apologia is used, audiences will exhibit more a) acceptability, b) likability, and less c) perceived responsibility, d) likelihood of repeated offense, and e) deserved punishment toward transgressing men than transgressing women.} \]
Gendered Image Repair

Through their gender performances, men and women differ in their apologetic language and behavior. Tannen (1995) illustrates feminine apologetic discourse:

Women tend to say *I'm sorry* more frequently than men, and often they intend it in this way – as a ritualized means of expressing concern. It’s one of the many learned elements of conversational style that girls often use to establish rapport.

Ritual apologies – like other conversational rituals – work well when both parties share the same assumptions about their use. (p. 14)

Litchfield (2018) further explains that when women apologize, their behavior commonly includes making an effort to look feminine and apologizing for actions that violate gender norms, especially when participating in a masculine context (e.g., sport, politics, business). Men tend to regard apologies differently and view people who give ritual apologies as weak, less confident, and more blameworthy (literally) (Tannen, 1995).

When men apologize, they tend to focus on the status implications of the exchange and only admit fault when they have to (Tannen, 1995). Schumann and Ross (2010) argue that men offer less apologies than women, but they also have a higher threshold for what constitutes offensive behavior. Their findings show that men are no less willing than women to apologize for their behavior when they identify it as offensive. As women are judged more harshly in the public eye, men’s transgressions may be seen as less severe, requiring less apologetic action (Allison et al., 2020).

Reducing offensiveness through bolstering is an image repair strategy that aligns with masculine language norms. In the 1970s, a wave of self-help books with titles like
*Woman Assert Yourself* gained popularity in the United States. They specifically targeted women and promoted assertiveness as a solution for overcoming stereotypes of “female passivity” (Crawford, 1995, p. 51). Women were expected to be submissive, polite, and compliant at the expense of their own feelings. Additionally, they were believed to have low self-confidence and deficient communication skills. In contrast, men were generally viewed as superior to women because of their assertiveness. By becoming more like men, women were promised greater opportunities for success (Crawford, 1995).

Assertiveness is conceptualized as a self-affirming expression of confidence (Humphrey, 2014). Crawford (1995) adds three “verbal techniques of assertion: “Speaking directly with straightforward language; focusing on one’s own feelings, beliefs, and desires; and giving refusals without apologies, excuses, or justifications (p. 54). These techniques align with Benoit’s (2015) operationalization of bolstering, including negotiating status in language exchanges, minimizing shortcomings to highlight certainty, and highlighting relationships or values to strengthen other people’s positive affect (Benoit, 2015; Tannen, 1995; Ware & Linkugal, 1973).

Contrary to popular belief, research reveals little evidence of a gendered difference in assertive behavior (Crawford, 1995; Harris, 1974; MacDonald, 1982; Moriarty, 1975). Men and women actually exhibit similar levels of assertiveness, but a socially constructed difference creates opposing perceptions based on gender norms. Assertive women are evaluated less favorably than assertive men because that kind of language and behavior is out-of-role (Crawford, 1995).
It is important to distinguish assertive behavior from aggressive behavior. Crawford (1995) defines aggression in terms of its form, intentions, or effects regarding dominance, humiliation, and/or blame of others. Humphrey (2014) also writes, “aggressiveness—which derives from the Latin word *aggressio*, meaning ‘attack’—literally means ‘going on the attack’” (p. 42). Assertive women are often misconstrued as aggressive. They are deemed confrontational, bossy, arrogant, and overbearing for bolstering and exhibiting other assertive behaviors (Humphrey, 2014; Tannen, 1995). Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Google, regularly asks audiences how often they have been accused of aggressive behavior in the workplace. She once explained that few men have raised their hands in response, but hundreds of hands have gone up when she asked the same question to women (Humphrey, 2014).

As Crawford (1995) explains, “the prototype of an assertive person is virtually synonymous with the stereotype of masculinity … masculine behavior in a woman is more polarized and more essentialized than similar behavior in a man” (p. 62-66). Based on this representation of the double bind, I predict:

**H3: Transgressor gender and image repair strategies will interact, such that audiences will exhibit more a) acceptability, b) likability, and less c) perceived responsibility, d) likelihood of repeated offense, and e) deserved punishment toward a man using bolstering than a woman using bolstering.**

Evading responsibility through defeasibility is an image repair strategy that aligns with feminine language norms. As explained above, women have been stereotyped with “female passivity” (Crawford, 1995, p. 51), which includes failing to express one’s true
thoughts, complying with others’ requests even when one does not want to, and allowing oneself to be dominated or humiliated by others. In the Bem Sex Role Index, mentioned earlier, the feminine items tend to be more passive than the masculine items, especially those referring directly to communication style (e.g., does not use harsh language, shy, soft-spoken).

Passive aggressiveness, which Crawford (1995) identifies as the flip side of the aggressiveness coin, is another common communicative behavior in this paradigm. This kind of behavior is tense, indirect, and often includes a rationalization (Crawford, 1995). Female passivity, and its association with passive aggression, equips women to offer excuses, deflect blame, and provide indirect justifications for their misbehavior. As a learned social behavior, female passivity encompasses defeasibility. Additionally, society encourages and accepts emotional expressions from women. Although this communication is commonly perceived as passive aggressive, they are able to more eloquently and reasonably illustrate where true responsibility lies and address a lack of control, information, or ability (Crawford, 1995; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Tannen, 1995).

Playing the “gender card” is a defense mechanism that employs defeasibility to acknowledge and blame gender-based disadvantages, and women in the public eye have been known to cite their gender as an excuse for their shortcomings or misbehavior (Camille & Roberson, 2010, p. 56). For example, when Hillary Clinton ran for the 2008 Democratic Presidential Nominee, the media said she ‘played the gender card’ when she spoke about how attending an all-female college prepared her to battle the old boys club in presidential politics (Camille & Roberson, 2010). Julia Gillard, Australia’s first female
Prime Minister, also ‘played the gender card’ when she accused a fellow politician of misogyny and sexism (Worth et al., 2016). GOP politicians similarly ‘played the gender card’ at Sarah Palin’s defense when she was slated by her opponent as the 2008 Republican Vice Presidential Candidate (Camille & Roberson, 2010). In masculine spheres like politics, sports, and business, women also usually bear responsibility for addressing and resolving gendered misunderstandings (Lakoff, 2003).

In this sense, defeasibility comes naturally to women as a learned behavior. In contrast, when a man offers excuses, his behavior is viewed as out-of-role and inappropriate (Bem, 1974). Passive men are misconstrued as weak, incompetent, and inferior, and these perceptions hurt their credibility. For men, “[d]efeasibility is a double-edged sword: If you cannot be blamed for problems because you lack needed information and/or power, that same lack of information and power may very well suggest that you cannot fix the problem” (Benoit, 2006, p. 300). Because of society’s expectations of masculine assertiveness and feminine passiveness, perceptions of limited control, authority and independence is more polarizing and harmful for men than women. Based on this representation of the double bind, I predict:

**H4: Transgressor gender and image repair strategies will interact, such that audiences will exhibit more a) acceptability, b) likability, and less c) perceived responsibility, d) likelihood of repeated offense, and e) deserved punishment toward a woman using defeasibility than a man using defeasibility.**
CHAPTER THREE
METHODS

Sample

Participants ($N = 149$) were recruited from undergraduate basic communication courses at Clemson University. In the sample, 27.59% identified as men ($n = 40$), 67.59% identified as women ($n = 98$), 0.69% identified as non-binary ($n = 1$), and 4.70% did not respond ($n = 7$). The sample was 87.59% ($n = 127$) white, 5.52% ($n = 8$), Black/African American, 4.14% ($n = 6$) Asian, 0.67% ($n = 1$) Hispanic/Latinx, 0.67% ($n = 1$) Native American, 0.67% ($n = 1$) Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, and 0.67% ($n = 1$) Middle Eastern. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 31 ($M = 19.36$, $SD = 1.37$).

Design and Procedure

Upon receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval, participants were recruited from basic communication courses for an experiment that advertised evaluating perceptions of news media. Participants entered the SONA digital platform and selected this study from the list of available research projects. They were then redirected to a Qualtrics survey, where they completed the study. Students were awarded 5 points of course credit for participating in this study.

This research utilized a 2 (transgressor gender) x 3 (image repair strategy) between-subjects factorial design. Upon opening the survey and after providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to read one of six experimental articles about an individual’s public response to their participation in the 2019 college admissions scandal. Roughly 16.78% ($n = 25$) of participants were randomly assigned to the
man/bolstering condition, 16.78% (n = 25) to the man/defeasibility condition, 16.78% (n = 25) to the man/control condition, 15.44% (n = 23) to the woman/bolstering condition, 17.45% (n = 26) to the woman/defeasibility condition, and 16.78% (n = 25) to the woman/control condition. After reading the article, participants answered various questions assessing their perceptions of the transgressor, their apologia, and their transgression. They then answered questions about their demographic background, gender-based attitudes, and how they are paying for school (see Appendix A for detailed measures and scales).

Stimuli Materials

Participants read one of six manipulated articles about an individual publicly addressing their participation in the 2019 college admissions scandal (see Appendix B for full stimuli materials). These articles were designed to look like stories from a generic online news source. All versions of the news article briefly explained the college admissions scandal and discussed an individual who faces charges for paying $50,000 in bribes to a University of Southern California athletics official to get his/her daughter into the school as a purported volleyball recruit. The manipulated articles were adapted from two ABC7 News articles, which cover local (California Bay Area) citizens’ involvement in the college admissions scandal, charges, and sentencing (ABC7 News 2019a; 2019b). All conditions included the following introduction:

SAN FRANCISCO (KGO) – More than a dozen Bay Area residents have been charged in the largest college admissions cheating scam ever prosecuted in the United States.
Authorities say the operation, dubbed “Operation Varsity Blues” uncovered 750 families described by U.S. Attorney Andrew Lelling as a “catalog of wealth and privilege” who collectively paid $25 million to bribe college officials, coaches, and college entrance exam administrators, who then helped students secure admissions “not on their merits but through fraud,” Lelling said.

Additionally, all conditions included the following explanations regarding the transgressor (male and female pronouns and identifiers are shown below, where each article only included one or the other):

Among those charged is prominent figure, Ted/Angie Blake, an entrepreneur and investor from San Francisco. He/she faces felony charges for paying $50,000 in bribes to a University of Southern California athletics official in May 2018 to get his/her daughter into the school as a purported volleyball recruit.

According to the charging documents, Mr./Mrs. Blake’s daughter didn’t know about her father’s/mother’s involvement in the scam. When Ted/Angie was talking to a cooperating witness about a possible IRS audit, he/she couldn’t even remember what sport they faked his/her daughter playing. Page 173 says it was asked if it was basketball. It was actually volleyball.

Mr./Mrs. Blake is set to appear in court on March 29 in San Francisco. If convicted, he/she could receive a sentence of up to six months in federal prison.
**Manipulations**

**Transgressor Gender.** The transgressor’s gender was conveyed by providing their name and gendered pronouns: Ted Blake and he/him pronouns represented the masculine condition, and Angie Blake and she/her pronouns represented the feminine condition. These names were selected from Newman et al.’s (2018) study, which measured participants’ perceptions of gender, age, warmth, and competency for 200 names. Ted and Angie were chosen for these stimuli because Newman et al. (2018) found each name to be clearly gendered, neutral in perceived warmth and competence, and with nearly identical values for each measurement. Because the vast majority of public figures in today’s society have a clear gender identification that shapes their public image, this study did not include a control for transgressor gender.

**Image Repair Strategy.** The individual’s response to their transgression was provided in a statement presented in the article. The statement was manipulated as a bolstering (reduce offensiveness) image repair strategy or a defeasibility (evade responsibility) image repair strategy. The bolstering statement said:

“*I have always tried to help the members of this community when they needed it. I hope people remember the thousands of dollars I donate to local charities every year instead of associating me with this situation. My reputation speaks louder than the claims against me, and I know that people around me see me as a generous, honest citizen.*”

Bolstering was chosen as the image repair strategy to represent this condition because it aligns with masculine language norms. Highlighting one’s values, relationships, and/or
accomplishments exhibits assertiveness (Benoit, 2015; Tannen, 1995; Ware & Linkugal, 1973). Because a gendered double bind exists with assertive behavior (i.e., assertive men are praised and assertive women are criticized for being aggressive), this statement allows for a clear comparison of gendered perceptions.

The defeasibility statement said:

“It did not have all of the information until it was too late. I cannot claim full accountability for my actions because I was under the impression that I was paying for my daughter to attend a volleyball camp at the University of Southern California. This misunderstanding was out of my control, and I know that people around me will recognize my intentions.”

Defeasibility was chosen as the image repair strategy to represent this condition because it aligns with feminine language norms. Speaking indirectly with rationalization for one’s behavior or misbehavior exhibits passivity (Crawford, 1995; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Tannen, 1995). Because a gendered double bind exists with passive behavior (i.e., passive women regularly employ defeasibility in a variety of contexts and passive men are criticized for being weak and incapable of leadership), this statement allows for clear comparison between gendered perceptions. Additionally, bolstering and defeasibility are also the most commonly studied strategies in IRT literature (Benoit, 2016). As a control for image repair strategy, the transgressor declined to provide a public statement.
Measures

*Dependent Variables*

Benoit (2016) identifies five dependent variables that are most frequently measured in image repair literature:

1. The statement’s acceptability
2. The accused’s likability
3. The accused’s responsibility for the act
4. The likelihood that the accused will repeat the offense in the future
5. The accused’s deserved punishment

He emphasizes that studying these dependent variables together enables a more complete understanding of an image repair strategy’s effectiveness than studying them separately (Benoit, 2016). To ensure maximum accuracy when interpreting findings, these five dependent variables were measured along the lines of previous IRT experimental research.

**Acceptability.** Apologia’s acceptability is conceptualized as its appropriateness and effectiveness, as perceived by the audience (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987). It was measured through a five-item, seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 7 = *Strongly Agree*) adapted from Canary and Spitzberg’s (1987) scale of appropriateness and effectiveness. Participants rated their agreement with the following statements:

1. This individual said things that seemed out of place in the conversation.
2. This individual was a smooth conversationalist.
3. Some of the things this individual said were in bad taste.
4. This individual did not violate any of my expectations.

5. This individual’s response was effective.

These five items comprised a reliable composite measure ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .96$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .65$).

**Likability.** The transgressor’s likability was measured through their reputation. This is conceptualized as the “perception of the [individual] held by the audience, shaped by the [individual’s] transgression, and the [individual’s] response to that transgression” (Brown et al., 2015, p. 494). It was measured on a five-item, seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 7 = *Strongly Agree*) adapted from Brown et al. (2015) and McCroskey’s (1966) credibility scale. Participants rated their agreement with the following statements:

1. I trust that this individual told the truth about their involvement in the college admissions scandal.

2. In this circumstance, I am likely to believe what this individual is saying.

3. I would prefer to not trust this individual’s statement about this incident.

4. This individual is being honest about their involvement in the scandal.

5. In light of this incident, this individual would still have a good reputation.

These five items comprised a reliable composite measure ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.09$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .83$).

**Responsibility.** A transgressor’s responsibility is operationalized as the extent to which audiences blame them for their transgressions. It was measured on a three-item, seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 7 = *Strongly Agree*) adapted from
Shields’s (1979) scale of responsibility. Participants rated their agreement with the following statements:

1. This individual should be expected to explain their behavior.
2. This individual should apologize for the incident.
3. This individual is responsible for their behavior regarding the incident.

These three items comprised a reliable composite measure ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.09$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .83$).

**Likelihood of Repeated Offense.** This is operationalized as the audience’s perceptions of how likely the transgressor is to repeat their transgression. This was measured on a three-item, seven-point Likert-type scale ($1 = $Strongly Disagree$, 7 = $Strongly Agree$) adapted from Brown et al.’s (2018) scale of likelihood to repeat the act, originally adapted from Benoit (2016). Participants rated their agreement with the following statements:

1. It is probable that this individual would be involved in another incident similar to this one.
2. It would surprise me if this individual became involved in another incident similar to this one.
3. I think this individual will be involved in another similar to this one in the future.

These three items comprised a reliable composite measure ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.22$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .77$).

**Deserved Punishment.** A transgressor’s deserved punishment is operationalized as the extent to which an audience believes they should be punished for their
transgression. This was measured on a three-item, seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 7 = *Strongly Agree*) adapted from Brown et al.’s (2018) scale of deserved punishment, originally adapted from Benoit (2016). Participants rated their agreement with the following statements:

1. This individual deserves a tough punishment from their employer.
2. This individual should be punished greatly for this incident.
3. This individual should be criticized by the media for this incident.

These three items comprised a reliable composite measure (\(M = 4.90, \ SD = 1.07\), Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .71\)).

**Additional Variables of Interest**

**Gender-Based Attitudes.** Participants’ gender-based attitudes were evaluated at the end of the survey and measured with five items adapted from Swim et al.’s (1995) modern sexism scale on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 7 = *Strongly Agree*). Participants rated their agreement with the following statements:

1. Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the United States.
2. Women often miss out on good jobs due to sexual discrimination.
3. It is rare to see women treated in a sexist manner on television.
4. On average, people in our society treat husbands and wives equally.
5. Society has reached the point where women and men have equal opportunities for achievement.

**Tuition Coverage.** At the end of the survey, participants were asked how they are paying for their education. This control variable was nominally operationalized.
Participants were given a condensed list of payment options from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (2020; Scholarships/Grants, Student Loans, Work Study/Assistantship, Veteran’s Education Benefits, Parents/Family Pay, Personal Income/Savings, Other – Please Specify) and asked to select which method covers the majority of their tuition.

When asked which financial source pays for the majority of their tuition, 55.87% of participants (n = 81) selected Parents/Family, 26.21% (n = 27) selected Scholarships/Grants, 11.72% (n = 17) selected Student Loans, 1.38% (n = 2) selected Veteran’s Education Benefits, .38% (n = 2) selected Personal Income/Savings, and 3.45% (n = 5) did not respond to the question. For analysis, a variable was constructed, such that Parents/Family Pay was one category and everything else was a separate category.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

A series of two-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine the main effects of transgressor gender and image repair strategy, as well as gender x strategy interaction effects on acceptability, likability, responsibility, likelihood of repeated offense, and deserved punishment. As hypotheses one and two predicted main effects and hypotheses three and four predicted interaction effects, a combination of the following analyses was used to draw conclusions about hypothesis support. A series of t-tests and chi-square tests were run for several variables of interest, specifically gender-based attitudes and tuition coverage, to ensure no covariates were included in the analysis. These procedures revealed no significant difference in sexism across conditions or between participants whose parents/family paid for the majority of their tuition and participants with other financial sources. These findings lead to the conclusion that random assignment was a successful control and no further control measures were implemented.

Acceptability

A 2 (transgressor gender) x 3 (image repair strategy) analysis of variance was conducted to examine statement acceptability. This analysis revealed no main effects for gender, $F(1, 143) = .030, p = .86$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$, or strategy, $F(2, 143) = 1.85, p = .16$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. Results also showed no significant gender x strategy interaction effect, $F(2, 143) = .557, p = .57$, partial $\eta^2 = .008$. Table 2 shows the means associated with the interaction and illustrates that acceptability did not differ as a function of gender or strategy.
Table 2

Acceptability: Gender X Strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bolstering</th>
<th>Defeasibility</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ F(2, 143) = .557, p = .57, \text{ partial } \eta^2 = .008 \]

Likability

A 2 (transgressor gender) x 3 (image repair strategy) analysis of variance was conducted to examine transgressor likability. This analysis revealed no main effects for gender, \( F(1, 143) = .066, p = .42 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .01 \), and a significant main effect for strategy, \( F(2, 143) = 6.65, p < .01 \) partial \( \eta^2 = .09 \). Results also showed no significant gender x strategy interaction effect, \( F(2, 143) = .458, p = .56 \) partial \( \eta^2 = .006 \). Results showed that likability was greatest for transgressors who did not make a statement (\( M = 2.86, SD = 1.11 \)), then for transgressors who employed bolstering (\( M = 2.85, SD = 1.00 \)), then for transgressors who employed defeasibility (\( M = 2.19, SD = 1.05 \)). No significant difference existed between the control and bolstering conditions (\( p = .96 \)), but a significant difference existed between the control and defeasibility conditions (\( p < .05 \)) and the bolstering and defeasibility conditions (\( p < .05 \)). Whereas ratings of likability did
not differ as a function of gender, defeasibility led to lower likability ratings than did bolstering or control. Table 3 shows the means associated with the interaction.

**Table 3**

*Likability: Gender X Strategy*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>Defeasibility</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ F (2, 143) = .458, p = .563 \text{ partial } \eta^2 = .006. \]

**Responsibility**

A 2 (transgressor gender) x 3 (image repair strategy) analysis of variance was conducted to examine transgressor responsibility. This analysis revealed no main effects for gender, \( F (1,143) = .46, p = .50 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .00 \), or strategy, \( F (2,143) = 1.25, p = .29 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .02 \). Results did show a significant gender x strategy interaction effect, \( F (2,143) = 3.86, p < .05 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .05 \). Table 4 shows the means associated with this interaction and illustrates whereas, for the woman, bolstering led to lower responsibility ratings than did defeasibility or the control, and for the man, defeasibility led to lower responsibility ratings than did bolstering or the control.
Table 4

Responsibility: Gender X Strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>Defeasibility</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>6.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>6.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$F (2,143) = 3.86, p < .05, \text{ partial } \eta^2 = .05$

Repeated Offense

A 2 (transgressor gender) x 3 (image repair strategy) analysis of variance was conducted to examine the likelihood of repeated offense. This analysis revealed no main effects for gender, $F (1,143) = .059, p = .81$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$, or strategy, $F (2,143) = .151, p = .86$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$. Results also showed no significant gender x strategy interaction effect, $F (2,143) = .120, p = .89$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$. Table 5 shows the means associated with the interaction and illustrates that repeated offense did not differ as a function of gender or strategy.
Table 5

Repeated Offense: Gender X Strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Braiding</th>
<th>Defeasibility</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>4.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ F (2,143) = .120, p = .89, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .00 \]

**Deserved Punishment**

A 2 (transgressor gender) x 3 (image repair strategy) analysis of variance was conducted to examine deserved punishment. This analysis revealed no main effects for gender, \[ F (1,143) = .089, p = .77, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .00 \], or strategy, \[ F (2,143) = .027, p = .96, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .00 \]. Results also showed no significant gender x strategy interaction effect, \[ F (2,143) = .181, p = .84, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .00 \]. Table 6 shows the means associated with the interaction and illustrates that deserved punishment did not differ as a function of gender or strategy.
Table 6

*Deserved Punishment: Gender X Strategy*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>Defeasibility</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>4.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>4.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ F (2,143) = .181, \ p = .84, \ \text{partial } \eta^2 = .00 \]

**Summary of Hypothesis Tests**

Hypothesis one proposed that audiences would exhibit more a) acceptability, b) likability, and less c) perceived responsibility, d) likelihood of repeated offense, and e) deserved punishment toward a transgressor who used an image repair strategy compared to a control (no response). Main effects analysis showed that audiences expressed significantly less likability towards defeasibility statements than bolstering or control statements \( (p < .01) \), but there were no significant differences between image repair strategy in acceptability \( (p = .16) \), responsibility \( (p = .29) \), repeated offense \( (p = .86) \), or deserved punishment \( (p = .96) \). Hypothesis one was not supported.

Hypothesis two proposed that regardless of how apologia was used, audiences would exhibit more a) acceptability, b) likability, and less c) perceived responsibility, d) likelihood of repeated offense, and e) deserved punishment toward transgressing men than transgressing women. Main effects analysis revealed no significant differences between transgressor gender in acceptability \( (p = .86) \), likability \( (p = .42) \), responsibility
(p = .50), repeated offense (p = .81), or deserved punishment (p = .77). Hypothesis two was not supported.

Hypothesis three proposed that transgressor gender and image repair strategies would interact, such that audiences would exhibit more a) acceptability, b) likability, and less c) perceived responsibility, d) likelihood of repeated offense, and e) deserved punishment toward a man using bolstering than a woman using bolstering. Interaction effects analysis showed that audiences exhibited significantly less perceived responsibility towards the woman who employed bolstering than the man who employed bolstering (p = <.05), but there were no significant differences in interaction effects for acceptability (p = .57), likability (p = .56), likelihood of repeated offense (p = .89), or deserved punishment (p = .84). Hypothesis three was not supported.

Hypothesis four proposed that transgressor gender and image repair strategies would interact, such that audiences would exhibit more a) acceptability, b) likability, and less c) perceived responsibility, d) likelihood of repeated offense, and e) deserved punishment toward a woman using defeasibility than a man using defeasibility. Interaction effects analysis showed that audiences exhibited significantly less perceived responsibility towards the man who employed defeasibility than the woman who employed defeasibility (p = <.05), but there were no significant differences in interaction effects for acceptability (p = .57), likability (p = .56), likelihood of repeated offense (p = .89), or deserved punishment (p = .84). Hypothesis four was not supported.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how the social construction of gender influences the image repair process and evaluations of public misbehaviors. Results failed to support the first hypothesis; transgressors who did not issue a response (control) were more effective than those employing defeasibility in their response. The second hypothesis was also not supported, as the transgressing man did not appear to be judged less harshly than the transgressing woman. Hypothesis three and four were also not supported. A man using feminine discourse (i.e., defeasibility) was perceived as less responsible for his actions than a woman making the same statement, and a woman using masculine discourse (i.e., bolstering) was perceived as less responsible for her actions than a man making the same statement. Further, it was found that gender-based attitudes nor primary financial sources for tuition payments significantly influenced any findings.

Theoretical Implications

The findings discussed above are contrary to the predicted results. The hypotheses were grounded in Benoit’s (1997) image repair theory, Butler’s (1998) gender performance theory, and Burgoon’s (1993) expectancy violations theory, leading to important implications for these frameworks. First, hypothesis one was grounded in image repair theory, as the image repair strategies exist with the purpose of repairing one’s image. Past research shows that using one or more strategy is more effective than not using a strategy (e.g., Benoit, 2016; Brown et al., 2018), leading to the prediction that the control conditions would be perceived as less effective than the bolstering or
defeasibility conditions. In reality, the only significant effect found for hypothesis one was that the defeasibility conditions produced significantly lower likability ratings than the bolstering or control conditions. In other words, transgressors were better off not saying anything at all than making excuses about their lack of information, ability, and/or control.

This result could possibly be explained by society’s current desire for accountability. Recent events in the United States, (e.g., the Trump presidency, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, etc.) have contributed to societal expectations for increased transparency and culpability, especially for those in leadership or public positions. Often misconstrued as “cancel culture,” this accountability culture requires those who misbehave or underperform to be held responsible for not only the consequences of their actions, but also for ensuring correct future actions. Defeasibility, while offering excuses and asserting limited information or ability, lacks accountability. Bolstering, while highlighting one’s accomplishments or values, does not try to refute the claim, but instead provides evidence of one’s reputation and capability of accountability. Additionally, while silence is often viewed with the assumption of guilt, excuses are often viewed as an admission of guilt, therefore drawing dislike from audiences.

This finding presents a situation that contradicts past research, bearing theoretical implications for the image repair theory. Instead of asking if using a strategy is more effective than no response, future investigation should look into which strategies are actually more or less effective than not issuing a response. The image repair typology includes 14 response options, and this study shows that some strategies (e.g.,}
defeasibility) may not have aged as well as others (e.g., bolstering). Cultural context may also be an important factor to consider, as society and culture have drastically changed since the strategies’ initial implementation. The image repair theory needs reevaluation to ensure that all strategies bear the same relevance and appropriateness as when they were first conceptualized. Along these lines, external response options may lead to more effective image repair than the currently included strategies, causing further reason for review. The concept of apologia has evolved over time with new breakthroughs and findings, and it is important that image repair theory do the same.

Hypothesis two was grounded in the notion that gender, as a social construction, both follows and reinforces social norms. Past research shows that women are often judged more harshly than men, especially in the public eye or leadership positions (e.g., Camille & Roberson, 2010; Jamieson, 1995), leading to the prediction that transgressing women would be perceived less positively than transgressing men. In reality, no significant differences existed between perceptions of transgressing men and women. This result could possibly be explained by increasing societal gender equity. Though women are still disadvantaged in many realms, strides are being made towards gender equality, especially in leadership roles. More women are present on corporate boards and in CEO roles than ever before, the United States is currently led by its first female vice president, and most higher education institutions have greater populations of female students than male students. Changes in beliefs and attitudes precede behavioral changes, and results indicate that future pushes for gender equality are coming with momentum.
Additionally, analyzing gender’s situational context could influence perceptions of gender norms. The transgressors in each manipulation were part of a feminine domain as parents (i.e., housework and childcare are responsibilities usually ascribed to women rather than men). Had the transgressors been CEOs, politicians, or other individuals in a more masculine domain, gendered expectations and perceptions may have produced different results. Future research would benefit from manipulating gendered contexts to examine how they influence perceptions and expectations of gender.

Gender and feminist theories still bear relevance today and will continue to do so until women’s societal contributions are valued and respected as much as men’s are. This finding has implications on the extent of that applicability and the need for these theories to develop and evolve with society. For example, the Bem Sex Role Index (BSRI) distinctly separates masculinity from femininity, but gender is conceptualized today with greater fluidity and overlap. The gender-defined roles today differ from those in the early 1970s when the BSRI was created, causing need for further evaluation and update. Future investigation should examine where and how to modernize gender theories and frameworks, especially the BSRI.

Hypotheses three and four were grounded in the theories of expectancy violation and the gender double bind. When social expectations are violated, they tend to elicit negative reactions. Because society bears such strong expectations for gendered behavior and language, a man and woman performing the same action could be judged differently because they are either upholding or disrupting gender norms. Research has supported this (e.g., Camille & Roberson, 2010; Cassese & Holman, 2018; Jamieson, 1995;
Kornfield & DeSantis, 2017), leading to the predictions that transgressors making a statement aligning with their gender norms would be perceived as more effective than transgressors making a statement violating their gender norms. In reality, men who used the defeasibility statement (i.e., violating gender norms) were perceived as less responsible for their actions than women who used the defeasibility statement (i.e., following gender norms), and women who used the bolstering statement (i.e., also violating gender norms) were perceived as less responsible for their actions than men who used the bolstering statement (i.e., following gender norms).

There is a lot to unpack with these findings. One possible explanation for this unexpected result is a different interpretation of the expectancy violations theory. The hypothesis was proposed on the notion that violated expectations result in harsh judgments. However, Burgoon (2015) explains that the theory “departs from traditional views of all violations as negative” (p. 5). Positive expectancy violations have been found to be more effective in achieving better communication outcomes than positive expectancy confirmations, which could have occurred in this study. These expectancy violations were effective in drawing the readers’ attention, which in turn produced less perceived responsibility, a positive outcome. Though the gender norm violations in this study were not anticipated to be positive, the findings reveal that they actually were.

Breaking societal norms has typically been viewed as negative, shameful behavior, but this study’s findings reveal that may not always be the case. These results have implications on the future of gender studies and in-group/out-group research. More attention is needed on not only the consequences of breaking the status quo, but why
consequences differ. It is especially crucial to understand when and how breaking them will result in positive consequences instead of negative ones. This focus will better illustrate inequalities in society, power dynamics, and directions for growth, especially if positive outcomes are not evenly distributed among different demographics.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Like all research, several limitations should be noted in this study. First, many sample-related elements limit the results’ generalizability. Due to the timeline of the SONA system rollout in the introductory communication courses, the response rate was lower than anticipated. Had time allowed for a greater sample size, results could have been more substantial. In the sample, white students (roughly 88% of the sample) and women (roughly 68% of the sample) are overrepresented compared to national averages (e.g., 55.5% of U.S. college students are women, and about 55.2% of U.S. college students are white; Miller, 2019). This potentially limits the results’ impact beyond the Clemson University student population. Future studies would benefit from a larger sample size that more closely resembles the general public, as accurate representation could create greater generalizability for findings and significance of results. Additionally, the sample was comprised of college students evaluating parents of other college students, thus lacking any “peer” evaluation. A more representative sample could change this dynamic and produce greater insights.

Second, this study operationalized and measured transgressor gender in binary terms that aligned with sex (i.e., woman/female vs. man/male). This decision was made for quantitative purposes, but this binary is limited in its ability to account for more fluid
gender identities. Though most public figures today have a clear gender identification that shapes their public image, gender minorities are gaining greater presence and acceptance in society and the public eye (e.g., Caitlyn Jenner, Elliot Page). Inclusion of additional gender identities is essential for more meaningful, generalizable findings. Future studies would benefit from including a gender-neutral control for transgressor gender and more gender-inclusive stimuli conditions.

Third, image repair theory is generally limited by a quantitative approach. As Benoit (2016) explains, “[e]xperimental research on the effects of verbal image repair strategies (accounts) is typically incomplete, testing only a few of these repair strategies” (p. 8). This research studied only two of the fourteen image repair strategies, which “inevitably yields a fragmented understanding of this important phenomenon” (Benoit, 2016, p. 8). Additionally, Benoit (2016) warns against assuming findings for a sub-strategy (e.g., bolstering) are generalizable for the broad strategy category (e.g., reducing offensiveness). Future studies would benefit from including more strategies for a comprehensive comparison or comparing sub-strategies against each other. Instead of merely studying which strategy is better than another, this approach could produce findings about what statement is objectively the best.

Fourth, the stimuli could have tainted participants’ perceptions of transgressors and their statements. The college admissions scandal is the largest and most famous of its kind. Additionally, because the scandal was engrossed in higher education and happened fairly recently, this event bears great relevance for the college population sampled in this study. Chances are most, if not all, of participants have heard about the scandal and have
already formed opinions of the people involved. Though tuition payment source did not
have any significant impact on participants’ responses, there is no way to know if their
predispositions subconsciously influenced their perceptions of the transgressors and
statements in the stimuli. In hindsight, this study could have accounted for this by asking
participants to record their familiarity with the college admissions scandal as an
additional variable of interest/control. Additionally, future studies would benefit from
using a less familiar context for the stimuli to ensure measurements of participants’
instinctual reactions, not their previously formed opinions and biases. Changing the
context would increase findings’ generalizability beyond the college admissions scandal.

In addition to compensating for this study’s limitations, future research would
also benefit from reevaluating and reconceptualizing gender norms. As this study’s
findings were inconsistent with the BSRI, modern standards for how men and women
should speak and behave should be given greater attention. Existing differences could
align with other image repair strategies than bolstering and defeasibility, which could
lead to greater theoretical and practical findings. Moreover, giving consideration to which
strategies are actually used most frequently by men or women could also lead to
interesting findings regarding expectancy violations. Though image repair theory is
relatively understudied in quantitative contexts, this direction of study bears the potential
for progressing the framework in ways not possible in other analyses.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

As society becomes more networked and globalized, one’s reputation is also becoming increasingly more valuable and vulnerable to threats. Today’s technology and media enable people to interact with others they have never met, expand the power and nature of parasocial relationships, and increase opportunity to voice accusations, threats, and complaints. When an individual or organization experiences an image-related crisis, their audience is bigger than ever before. Millions of people can discuss the scandal on social media, share news articles, or comment in online forums. Additionally, this increased reach has also been associated with greater consequences and difficulty in correcting or addressing the issue. It seems like a new image-related crisis occurs every day in the public eye, illustrating how the image repair theory is needed now more than ever.

Grounded in decades of sociological research, the image repair theory provides a targeted, crisis communication-focused typology that can be applied to a variety of contexts and situations. Unfortunately, misbehavior is inevitable for individuals and organizations alike. Benoit (1997) provides denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, mortification, and various substrategies as opportunities for addressing one’s responsibility for their offensive actions. Though these strategies are incapable of fully restoring a reputation to its status before the crisis occurred, they still have the ability to rebuild goodwill with audiences and allow for productive work moving forward.
This study contributes to crisis communication scholarship by examining how image repair strategies interact with the gender double bind that exists in societal norms. My initial question asked, “Could following these norms influence an image repair situation more than the message itself?” Results from a 2 (transgressor gender) x 3 (image repair strategy) factorial experiment show that gender does not have any main effects on an image repair strategy’s effectiveness. Further, an interaction effect does exist, where those who violate gender norms are actually viewed as less responsible for their actions than those who follow them. Based on these findings, women, who are especially scrutinized in the public eye, have the opportunity to make effective statements with little hesitation due to their gender. These findings are only a starting point for helping public figures make the most informed and effective decisions when developing responses to image-related crises.
REFERENCES


ABC7 News (2019b, April 9). *List: These Bay Area residents have been charged in alleged college admissions scam.* ABC 7 News. https://abc7news.com/list-bay-area-people-charged-in-alleged-college-admissions-scam/5186505/


Finley, L. & Barry University Students (2017). Boys will be girls and girls will be boys. In L. L. Finley & N. S. Gordon (eds.) Reflections on gender from a
https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(74)90079-1


Prentice, D. A. & Carranza, E. (2002). What women and men should be, shouldn’t be, are allowed to be, and don’t have to be: the contents of prescriptive gender
https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-6402.t01-1-00066


APPENDIX A: SCALES AND MEASURES

Demographics
- Age [number entry]
- Gender identity [multiple choice]: Male, Female, Nonbinary, Prefer not to Answer, Other (please specify)
- Race/ethnicity [multiple choice]: African American/Black, American Indian, Asian, Caucasian/White, Hispanic/Latinx, Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, Mixed Race, Other (please specify)

Gender-Based Attitudes (Swim et al., 1995)
*Please rate your agreement with the following phrases.*
1. Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the United States.
2. Women often miss out on good jobs due to sexual discrimination.
3. It is rare to see women treated in a sexist manner on television.
4. On average, people in our society treat husbands and wives equally.
5. Society has reached the point where women and men have equal opportunities for achievement.

Tuition Coverage (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020)
*Please select which financial source pays for the majority of your tuition:*
- Scholarships/Grants
- Student Loans
- Work Study/Assistantship
- Veteran’s Education Benefits
- Parents/Family Pay
- Personal Income/Savings
- Other (Please Specify)

Acceptability (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987)
*Please rate your agreement with the following phrases.*
1. Blake said things that seemed out of place in their response.
2. Blake was a smooth talker.
3. Some of the things Blake said were in bad taste.
4. Blake did not violate any of my expectations.
5. Blake’s response was effective.

Likability (Brown et al., 2015; adapted from McCroskey, 1966)
*Please rate your agreement with the following phrases.*
6. I trust that Blake told the truth about their involvement in the college admissions scandal.
7. In this circumstance, I am likely to believe what Blake is saying.
8. I would prefer to not trust Blake’s statement about this incident (reverse coded).
9. Blake is being honest about their involvement in the scandal.
10. In light of this incident, Blake would still have a good reputation.
Responsibility (Shields, 1979)

Please rate your agreement with the following phrases.

4. Blake should be expected to explain their behavior.
5. Blake should apologize for the incident.
6. Blake is responsible for their behavior regarding the incident.

Likelihood of Repeated Offense (Brown et al., 2018, adapted from Benoit, 2016)

Please rate your agreement with the following phrases.

4. It is probable that Blake would be involved in another incident similar to this one.
5. It would surprise me if Blake became involved in another incident similar to this one.
6. I think Blake will be involved in another similar to this one in the future.

Deserved Punishment (Brown et al., 2018, adapted from Benoit, 2016)

Please rate your agreement with the following phrases.

4. Blake deserves a tough punishment from their employer.
5. Blake should be punished greatly for this incident.
6. Blake should be criticized by the media for this incident.
APPENDIX B: STIMULI

Version 1: Man/Bolstering

San Francisco (kgo) – More than a dozen Bay Area residents have been charged in the largest college admissions cheating scam ever prosecuted in the United States.

Authorities say the operation, dubbed “Operation Varsity Blues” uncovered 750 families described by U.S. Attorney Andrew Lelling as a “catalog of wealth and privilege” who collectively paid $25 million to bribe college officials, coaches, and college entrance exam administrators, who then helped students secure admissions “not on their merits but through fraud,” Lelling said.

Among those charged is prominent figure, Ted Blake, an entrepreneur and investor from San Francisco. He faces felony charges for paying $50,000 in bribes to a University of Southern California athletics official in May 2018 to get his daughter into the school as a purported volleyball recruit.

According to the charging documents, Mr. Blake’s daughter didn’t know about her father’s involvement in the scam. When Ted was talking to a cooperating witness about a possible IRS audit, he couldn’t even remember what sport they faked his daughter playing. Page 173 says it was asked if it was basketball. It was actually volleyball.

Voicemail and email messages seeking comment were left with Mr. Blake’s attorney last Wednesday. In response, Mr. Blake provided the following statement:

“I have always tried to help the members of this community when they needed it. I hope people remember the thousands of dollars I donate to local charities every year instead of associating me with this situation. My reputation speaks louder than the claims against me, and I know that people around me see me as a generous, honest citizen.”

Mr. Blake is set to appear in court on March 29 in San Francisco. If convicted, he could receive a sentence of up to six months in federal prison.
Version 2: Man/Defeasibility

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS SCANDAL

Charges Filed Against Bay Area’s Ted Blake

By Jordan Smith
Updated an hour ago

SAN FRANCISCO (KGO) – More than a dozen Bay Area residents have been charged in the largest college admissions cheating scam ever prosecuted in the United States.

Authorities say the operation, dubbed “Operation Varsity Blues” uncovered 750 families described by U.S. Attorney Andrew Lelling as a “catalog of wealth and privilege” who collectively paid $25 million to bribe college officials, coaches, and college entrance exam administrators, who then helped students secure admissions “not on their merits but through fraud,” Lelling said.

Among those charged is prominent figure, Ted Blake, an entrepreneur and investor from San Francisco. He faces felony charges for paying $50,000 in bribes to a University of Southern California athletics official in May 2018 to get his daughter into the school as a purported volleyball recruit.

According to the charging documents, Mr. Blake’s daughter didn’t know about her father’s involvement in the scam. When Ted was talking to a cooperating witness about a possible IRS audit, he couldn’t even remember what sport they faked his daughter playing. Page 173 says it was asked if it was basketball. It was actually volleyball.

Voicemail and email messages seeking comment were left with Mr. Blake’s attorney last Wednesday. In response, Mr. Blake provided the following statement:

“I did not have all of the information until it was too late. I cannot claim full accountability for my actions because I was under the impression that I was paying for my daughter to attend a volleyball camp at the University of Southern California. This misunderstanding was out of my control, and I know that people around me will recognize my intentions.”

Mr. Blake is set to appear in court on March 29 in San Francisco. If convicted, he could receive a sentence of up to six months in federal prison.
CHECK AB7 NEWS FOR LIVE UPDATES.

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS SCANDAL

Charges Filed Against Bay Area’s Ted Blake

By Jordan Smith
Updated an hour ago

SAN FRANCISCO (KGO) – More than a dozen Bay Area residents have been charged in the largest college admissions cheating scam ever prosecuted in the United States.

Authorities say the operation, dubbed “Operation Varsity Blues” uncovered 750 families described by U.S. Attorney Andrew Lelling as a “catalog of wealth and privilege” who collectively paid $25 million to bribe college officials, coaches, and college entrance exam administrators, who then helped students secure admissions “not on their merits but through fraud,” Lelling said.

Among those charged is prominent figure, Ted Blake, an entrepreneur and investor from San Francisco. He faces felony charges for paying $50,000 in bribes to a University of Southern California athletics official in May 2018 to get his daughter into the school as a purported volleyball recruit.

According to the charging documents, Mr. Blake’s daughter didn’t know about her father’s involvement in the scam. When Ted was talking to a cooperating witness about a possible IRS audit, he couldn’t even remember what sport they faked his daughter playing. Page 173 says it was asked if it was basketball. It was actually volleyball.

Voicemail and email messages seeking comment were left with Mr. Blake’s attorney last Wednesday. Mr. Blake has not responded, nor has he made any public statement regarding his involvement.

Mr. Blake is set to appear in court on March 29 in San Francisco. If convicted, he could receive a sentence of up to six months in federal prison.
COLLEGE ADMISSIONS SCANDAL

Charges Filed Against Bay Area’s Angie Blake

By Jordan Smith
Updated an hour ago

SAN FRANCISCO (KGO) – More than a dozen Bay Area residents have been charged in the largest college admissions cheating scam ever prosecuted in the United States.

Authorities say the operation, dubbed “Operation Varsity Blues” uncovered 750 families described by U.S. Attorney Andrew Lelling as a “catalog of wealth and privilege” who collectively paid $25 million to bribe college officials, coaches, and college entrance exam administrators, who then helped students secure admissions “not on their merits but through fraud,” Lelling said.

Among those charged is a prominent figure, Angie Blake, an entrepreneur and investor from San Francisco. She faces felony charges for paying $50,000 in bribes to a University of Southern California athletics official in May 2018 to get her daughter into the school as a purported volleyball recruit.

According to the charging documents, Mrs. Blake’s daughter didn’t know about her mother’s involvement in the scam. When Angie was talking to a cooperating witness about a possible IRS audit, she couldn’t even remember what sport they faked her daughter playing. Page 173 says it was asked if it was basketball. It was actually volleyball.

Voicemail and email messages seeking comment were left with Mrs. Blake’s attorney last Wednesday. In response, Mrs. Blake provided the following statement:

“I have always tried to help the members of this community when they needed it. I hope people remember the thousands of dollars I donate to local charities every year instead of associating me with this situation. My reputation speaks louder than the claims against me, and I know that people around me see me as a generous, honest citizen.”

Mrs. Blake is set to appear in court on March 29 in San Francisco. If convicted, she could receive a sentence of up to six months in federal prison.
COLLEGE ADMISSIONS SCANDAL

Charges Filed Against Bay Area’s Angie Blake

By Jordan Smith

Updated an hour ago

SAN FRANCISCO (KGO) – More than a dozen Bay Area residents have been charged in the largest college admissions cheating scam ever prosecuted in the United States.

Authorities say the operation, dubbed “Operation Varsity Blues” uncovered 750 families described by U.S. Attorney Andrew Lelling as a “catalog of wealth and privilege” who collectively paid $25 million to bribe college officials, coaches, and college entrance exam administrators, who then helped students secure admissions “not on their merits but through fraud,” Lelling said.

Among those charged is prominent figure, Angie Blake, an entrepreneur and investor from San Francisco. She faces felony charges for paying $50,000 in bribes to a University of Southern California athletics official in May 2018 to get her daughter into the school as a purported volleyball recruit.

According to the charging documents, Mrs. Blake’s daughter didn’t know about her mother’s involvement in the scam. When Angie was talking to a cooperating witness about a possible IRS audit, she couldn’t even remember what sport they faked her daughter playing. Page 173 says it was asked if it was basketball. It was actually volleyball.

Voicemail and email messages seeking comment were left with Mrs. Blake’s attorney last Wednesday. In response, Mrs. Blake provided the following statement:

“I did not have all of the information until it was too late. I cannot claim full accountability for my actions because I was under the impression that I was paying for my daughter to attend a volleyball camp at the University of Southern California. This misunderstanding was out of my control, and I know that people around me will recognize my intentions.”

Mrs. Blake is set to appear in court on March 29 in San Francisco. If convicted, she could receive a sentence of up to six months in federal prison.
COLLEGE ADMISSIONS SCANDAL

Charges Filed Against Bay Area’s Angie Blake

By Jordan Smith
Updated an hour ago

SAN FRANCISCO (KGO) – More than a dozen Bay Area residents have been charged in the largest college admissions cheating scam ever prosecuted in the United States.

Authorities say the operation, dubbed “Operation Varsity Blues” uncovered 750 families described by U.S. Attorney Andrew Lelling as a “catalog of wealth and privilege” who collectively paid $25 million to bribe college officials, coaches, and college entrance exam administrators, who then helped students secure admissions “not on their merits but through fraud,” Lelling said.

Among those charged is prominent figure, Angie Blake, an entrepreneur and investor from San Francisco. She faces felony charges for paying $50,000 in bribes to a University of Southern California athletics official in May 2018 to get her daughter into the school as a purported volleyball recruit.

According to the charging documents, Mrs. Blake’s daughter didn’t know about her mother’s involvement in the scam. When Angie was talking to a cooperating witness about a possible IRS audit, she couldn’t even remember what sport they faked her daughter playing. Page 173 says it was asked if it was basketball. It was actually volleyball.

Voicemail and email messages seeking comment were left with Mrs. Blake’s attorney last Wednesday. Mrs. Blake has not responded, nor has she made any public statement regarding her involvement.

Mrs. Blake is set to appear in court on March 29 in San Francisco. If convicted, she could receive a sentence of up to six months in federal prison.