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Selection of Image Repair Strategies in Online Crises: The Model of Image Repair Selection

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Abstract

In contemporary society, social media plays an ever-increasing role. The frequency and impact of crises, particularly online, are escalating, posing economic and reputational threats to organizations. Although much research on crisis communication and management has emerged, the field still lacks a general theory or paradigm. This research deficiency has reached a point where it is necessary to limit the inclusion of new theoretical elements but instead concretize practical applications of existing theory.

Organizations often struggle with inadequate or rhetorically insufficient crisis responses, leading to stakeholder dissatisfaction and subsequently loss of resources. In this article, I have addressed this problem. By examining to what extent, it is possible to create a new theory for selecting an image repair strategy that can be used both during crises and as an analytical tool in retrospect.

Thus, proposing a new theory, the Model of Image Repair Selection (MIRS), and proposals for integrating the theory into crisis management efforts, offering practical solutions to the complexity of crises.

Thus, this work proposes a new theory, the Model of Image Repair Selection (MIRS), along with recommendations for integrating the theory into crisis management efforts, offering practical solutions to address the complexity of crises. With this, MIRS has the potential to help organizations navigate and lessen the effects of crises. MIRS accommodates both the complex and dynamic dimensions of crises without excluding combinations with other approaches to crisis communication. By integrating the six major rhetorical strategies in crises into a model based on four parameters—risk, transparency, attitude, and communicative resources—MIRS enhances theoretical understanding and provides organizations with a valuable instrument for crisis management.

Keywords

Crisis Communication, Image Repair, Cancel Culture, Organizational Crisis, Model of Image Repair Selection, Social Media

1. Introduction

We often hear the phrase silence speaks louder than words, and in crisis communication, silence can be deafening. But how do you know when to stay silent, defend oneself against allegations, or even deny the accusation? Since Benoit (1995) provided five broad categories of strategies to restore one's image, called the image restoration theory, many have further developed the theory of image restoration with how to use image repair in crisis (Frandsen & Johansen 2017), additional strategies (Coombs 2007), and which strategies are the most popular (Ferguson et al. 2018).

While the field of contemporary crisis communication has become increasingly saturated with strategic approaches to respond in crisis, theories on the complex and coherent aspects of the crisis are on the rise. Today, social media has become a catalyst for creating organizational crises, where cancel cultures rule the fate of organizations. The simple strategies of denial, apologies with no explanations, and complete silence no longer satisfy the audience of the organization that is tired of surface-level apologies. As a result, the crisis audience has higher expectations towards organizations than ever seen before, which is why it is important to know when to use which strategies of image repair in crisis.

Instead, contemporary literature attempts to understand and make meaning of all potential aspects of the crisis. Thus, it is important to consider the many aspects of crises to not overlook the importance of each context, the field of crisis communication has been filled with too complex theories. This could be a result of a field mostly built on case studies, from which it is hard to draw generalities, and unique features are constantly brought out. However, it is not possible to predict or strategize the next step in crises without generalizations on the outcome. This is especially seen in the field of image repair, in which there is plenty of literature discussing the risks and possibilities associated with each strategy (Benoit 2024; Ferguson et al. 2018), but nobody explains when to use which strategy.

So, what do you do when you have a field that does not make generalizations but organizations are not sure how to approach choosing a strategic standpoint in its crisis response? *Is it actually possible to concretize the fields of image repair within crisis communication?*

Crises are unpredictable perceived wrongdoings that cause stress for organizations (Coombs 2015; 2023). The perceived wrongdoings might not lead to crisis if performed by another organization, because cancel culture is accidental in its selection. Thus, organizations are always threatened by the possibility of crisis. This makes every organization subject to a potential crisis.

Creating a tool for selecting an image repair strategy during a crisis is immensely important in the age of cancel culture, where stakeholders' perceptions of an organization play a powerful role in shaping how a crisis evolves.

Problem statement

Based on the existing theory of crisis communication and image repair theory, it is explored to what extent it is possible to create a new theory for selecting an image repair strategy that can be used both during crises but also as an analytical tool in retrospect.

2. The tendencies of social media

Social media has become the predominant communication channel today (Prettman, 2016). The technological development in the 21st century has changed the how, when, and why many communicate in correlation with the accessibility of online communication (Jaafar 2023). The reputation of the organization was previously established in the local relations in face-to-face communication; it is now a result of the megaphone that is the internet (Klok & McClellan 2023; Jaafar 2023). Any opinion can now be heard in faraway places that were not reachable before technologies made it possible. This technology is developing at a rapid pace, and research is struggling to keep up. While some consider social media to be changing traditional communication (Prettman, 2016), others suggest the internet and social media have made different types of media, such as electronic text, telephone, radio, and television (Finnemann 2014) more accessible. Social media is characterized by the new ways it is possible to build communities and communicate in the online world (Klok & McClellan 2023; Jafaar 2023). Social media can be defined in different ways among different people. Many have studied the 'social' aspect of the definition and its ramifications on communication.

The term 'social' refers to the "*connectedness of human users*" (van Dijck 2015, 1) the term 'social media' is thereby perceived as the idea of "*an ecosystem of connected media*" (Ibid.) in contemporary literature. While the definition of 'social' depends on the context in which it is placed, social media can be perceived as the context for communicative actions but are simultaneously grounded as the infrastructure and networks of said communication (Sun, 2020). It can be intangible to perceive social media neither as a place nor a thing (Pettman 2016) but instead as a sphere of influence with ramifications for those who participate (Klok & McClellan 2023). Social media should not be characterized as a tool that is utilized because, as most studies indicate, it also affects the user in reverse (Jaafar 2023). Research on social media is therefore characterized by either the optimistic (Carrier 2018) or pessimistic (Pettman 2016) attributes of social media because of the way social media has changed how people communicate. To better understand what separates the fields, this division can be perceived as whether researchers see social media as adding to (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshimi 2012) or replacing (Carr & Hayes 2015) classic face-to-face communication.

This 'new' communication setting (Yurder & Akdol 2021; Carr & Hayes 2015) is studied in terms of how norms, choices, and relationships are established and maintained on social media and, further, what effect this might have on face-to-face interactions.

Social media provides a space in which society can grow and develop. Individuals can find each other despite time and location. There is no limit to the number of communities one can participate in (Jafaar 2023). Specifically, social media then can provide the space in which people can find solidarity and support they may not otherwise have (Jafaar 2023). However, studies show that young adults describe technological communication as their primary communication channel (Carrier 2018). The critiques argue that having technological communications as one primary communication channel is problematic due to the addictive phenomenon and the immense distractive function of social media (Prettman 2016; Klok & McClellan 2023). Social media functions by giving us enough micro pleasures to distract us from elsewhere. While this grants social media a great deal of power, Pettman (2016) argues social media are more powerful than people realize. These addictive qualities presented (Pettman 2015; Carrier 2018) can then be related to the commercial interest of social media platforms. There has been a motivation to study how advertising is the primary motivation for promoting social media now with the increasing interest in social media as an economic opportunity (Agerdal-Hjermind, 2014). A section of marketing research is now dedicated to exploring the importance or even necessity of implementing social media in contemporary marketing (Mahoney & Tang 2016) or how the platforms that desire to seek advertising revenues encourage more clicks and time on screen (Fisher, 2022). This furthers the addictive nature of social media and its immense distractive function (Prettman, 2016).

In other words, the issue is not how the contemporary use of social media are perceived but rather the effects it has on communication that primarily takes place online. My interest is motivated by a desire to understand how the online cultures and norms on social media provide a space in which it is socially acceptable to post hate, negative comments, and bottomless critique, which contribute to the increase in the number of online crises. This boycott phenomenon can, by using social media, reach a wider scope. The sense of self-belonging is built through interaction with other people from whom unacceptable behavior can be taught (Over 2016; Klok & McClellan 2023; Jafaar 2023), which furthers the spread of hate and negative comments. This new digital landscape requires organizations to develop comprehensive crisis communication plans tailored to the digital ecosystem. This should enable swift responses to reputational crises and minimize negative publicity an organization might face online. However, managing the organizational online reputation has become increasingly complex and consequential (Nkrumah 2023). The reason is online reputation management has become a critical concern due to the highly interconnected nature of the digital ecosystem (Nkrumah 2023). The rapid spread of misinformation and negative publicity poses challenges for brands seeking to maintain a positive reputation across online platforms. Organizations, therefore, have to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape to maintain a positive online image and credibility (Nkrumah 2023).

2.1 Cancel culture

The idea of 'Cancel culture' has become deeply contested in the public discourse in contemporary society, and many public debates emerge over what cancel culture is and what it means for the organization. This includes whether it is a way to hold people accountable, a tactic to punish others unjustly, or a mix of both (Vogels et al. 2021). While cancellation can be considered a tool for forcing a reckoning on those abusing their power or those not complying with cultural norms, cancel culture has also quickly evolved into a practice where people swiftly can cancel anyone or anything considered even remotely offensive (Cummings et al. 2023). As it was argued above, the prevalence of online communication has broadened what was previously confined to one's social relationships and enabled it to be communicated to an unlimited number of people.

Cancel culture can also be understood as a cultural tool whose purpose is to advocate for social justice. The attack on those who are perceived to have said or done something unacceptable or problematic online is the social media equivalent of justice (Clark, 2019; Jaafar 2023). Cancel culture often revolves around group dynamics and refers to the collective online effort to hold individuals or entities accountable for perceived wrongdoing by publicly denouncing, boycotting, or 'canceling' them on social media platforms (Nkrumah 2023). In cancel culture, individuals participate in the condemnation or support of others based on shared beliefs, values, or affiliations (Nkrumah 2023).

The public, however, has different views on the concept of cancel culture. The Pew Research Center studied how the U.S. public views the concept of cancel culture, in which they surveyed 10,000 Americans on their definition of cancel culture. Additionally, participants were asked what they think the term means and, more broadly, how they feel about the act of calling others out on social media (Vogels et al. 2021). It was found that the answers varied based on factors such as sex, age, and political identification (Ibid.). The most common definition of cancel culture was centered around accountability. 49% of those familiar with the term said it describes actions people take to hold others accountable (Vogels et al. 2021). The minority also mentioned these actions could be misplaced, ineffective, or overtly cruel, which is why the study concluded that cancel culture means different things to different people (Ibid.). However, it was found the majority said calling out others on social media is more likely to hold people accountable as opposed to punishing those who do not deserve it (Ibid.).

This type of 'holding others accountable' can be recognized from the rules of the legal system, which could be considered the predecessor of cancel culture (Ronson 2015). When an individual or organization violates the norms of the shared online community, the public will criticize, avoid, and punish them, which gives the public a sense of control (Ibid.). The definition of cancel culture is furthered by the study of what cancel culture is by differentiating the definition from a similar definition of boycotting another cultural form of public punishment (Cummings et al. 2023). Cummings et al. (2023) found Gen X believes that boycotting and cancelling are different. Their participants report that consumers who boycott large corporations care about

redeemability, and instead, cancelling is about virtue signaling, that is, letting others know you are moral to avoid being guilted and shamed (Cummings et al. 2023).

Cancelling is often driven by moral or social injustices, and those who cancel want others to perceive them positively and avoid being shamed for not participating in the movement. Therefore, cancelling here is motivated by social identity. It is important to understand how these social identities come to be. In my prior research, the concept of self is established online, that is, how the concept of self affects and is affected by online cultures (Klok and McClellan 2023). Using the ideas of decision-making on Instagram contributes to an understanding of how online cultures allow for hate, negative comments, and critique. Online culture is less sanctionable than seen in face-to-face interactions, which allows people to post more recklessly, with little to no concern for others online. A possible explanation for the establishment of online cancel culture. Specifically, the complex blurring of monologic and dialogic forms of communication found online generates a hollow and inconsequential culture that maintains narrow concepts of self and fails to generate interactions necessary to co-create relevant and meaningful social values (Klok & McClellan 2023). In that, if it is considered inappropriate, taboo, immoral, or offensive, there must be a general set of cultural standards that inform us what is or is not appropriate (Jay, 2017). Therefore, the control and power of this phenomenon remains in the hands of its users (Jaafar 2023), though it cannot be denied that the tools we shape, shape us in return (West R. & Turner 2021). We have a relation to the mediated technology, i.e., we create and use technology, which re-creates who we are (Ibid.). This blurs the lines between the perceived online and 'real life' because to succeed in contemporary society, one must be present both online and offline. This exact idea is crucial to consider when it comes to managing crises.

Proactive reputation management strategies, stakeholder engagement, and adaptation in navigating the complexities of cancel culture in the digital era are important for maintaining a positive organizational reputation (Nkrumah 2023). The importance of facilitating proactive strategies that help shape public perception and mitigate potential risks is necessary in the digital age.

Technological developments have created new opportunities for marketing and communication. But it also comes with a new challenge, cancel culture, that should be managed closely to avoid crisis.

3. Crisis communication

Crisis communication is today an integrated part of most vocabulary, but it is still considered a new field of research. Crisis communication first became an independent field in the 1990s (Frandsen & Johansen 2017), where it was more focused on what today is considered disasters (Quarantelli 2005; Coombs 2023). Disasters are perceived as sudden, serious disruptions of routines, requiring response from multiple governmental units (Coombs 2023) These require new courses of action to cope with the disruption and pose a danger to values and social goals (Quarantelli 2005; Coombs 2023).

Today, the fields of crisis communication have evolved, and the focus of the research has shifted to what is known as organizational crises. The broad idea is that organizational crisis breaks down the system of an organization, and this breakdown causes stress for the organization or its audience (Coombs 2023). Taking it one step further, crises are arguably complex processes that may be studied at many levels and from various perspectives (Frandsen & Johansen 2017, 34). This constitutes the general idea of crises as multifaceted situations, all unique but with a shared imposed level of stress. Organizational crises are, by Coombs (2023), defined as *the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders* (Coombs 2015, 3). The perceived violations of important stakeholder expectations may have negative implications for the company (Ibid.).

This disruption of stakeholder expectations jeopardizes the relationship between the organization and its stakeholders. The perceived wrongdoing may lead to the stakeholders becoming upset with the organization (Lewis 2011; Coombs 2015). If a crisis exists, it is thus not a question of what makes a crisis but what the stakeholders interpret and negotiate among themselves to be a crisis (Coombs 2023). Stakeholders can, however, perceive crises differently because interpretations might be colored by attitudes, beliefs, and feelings.

While many scholars do not acknowledge crisis communication as an independent field of study (Frandsen & Johansen 2017), it today remains one of the most studied parts of managerial communication (Coombs 2023). All current definitions of what constitutes a crisis are founded on an understanding of one's stakeholders as a crucial feature of the notion (Coombs 2023, Frandsen & Johansen 2017), as the stakeholders are considered the determiner of the crisis.

Since the field of crisis communication consists of such a large amount of literature, it is possible to identify the research gap and uncover the broader agreeance on how to communicate in crises by comparing and discussing the existing approaches to crisis communication. When crisis communication was first studied, the field was studied as a transmission paradigm (Heath & Bryant 1992; Benoit 1995), where the organization communicated a message to an audience. Now, crisis communication is studied as an interactive paradigm (Coombs 2023; Frandsen & Johansen 2017), in which crisis communication is considered a dialog between the organization and the crisis audience (Coombs 2023, 2015) and sometimes even among the crisis stakeholders. As a result, the literature previously focused on the sender, their distribution of information, and their intended effect, now adjusted to focusing on the receiver, possible misinterpretations of messages from its receivers, and co-creation of meaning between sender and receiver (Frandsen & Johansen 2017). Another aspect that is included today is the ideal times and places for communicating crisis communication, making the interactive approach more complex in nature (Frandsen & Johansen 2017).

It is advised by many (Coombs 2015, 2023; Benoit 2024; Massey & Larsen 2006) to prepare crisis management plans before a problem arises, though it is often seen that unexpected and immediate crisis management is necessary. While management

can occur concurrently with the development of the crisis, hasty management of crises can result in mismanagement or faulty communication.

Crisis management and crisis communication are two closely related types of organizational practices in crisis. The function of the practices is to lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis, thereby protecting the organization from harm while facilitating a positive response to the situation (Coombs 2023, 7). In an organizational crisis, the crisis is caused by the wrongdoing of an organization and/or has negative consequences for said organization. This can damage the economic capital, political capital (influence), social capital (trust), and symbolic capital (image and reputation) of the organization (Frandsen & Johansen 2017). While some literature separates the two disciplines of crisis management and crisis communication, these can be seen as one. There is “*no crisis management without communication, and no crisis communication without management, when a crisis breaks out.*” (Frandsen & Johansen 2017, 10). Crisis communication cannot be reduced to an operational or tactical activity, that is, the production of the communicative message. This cannot be activated until the crisis management team of the organization has decided which strategy it will pursue to handle the crisis (Frandsen & Johansen 2017). The decision-making process is also a communicative process.

If, however, the crisis is not managed, it can turn into a double crisis (Coombs 2015, 2023; Frandsen & Johansen 2017). If a communicative crisis overlaps the original crisis so far, the organization in crisis is not able to manage the communication; the organization has to deal with two crises at the same time. However, the communicative crisis often attracts more attention than the original crisis (Ibid.). This type of mismanagement is the worst case when managing crises. If the improper image repair strategy is selected, there is a risk of this happening. It can, however, be difficult to determine if a double crisis is occurring or if the stakeholders are simply not satisfied with the crisis response. To which I argue what determines whether it is a long crisis or a double is the stakeholders’ perception of what the perceived issues are. They are the ones who interpret and argue the crisis among themselves, why it is possible to observe from these, whether it is a question of one or two crises from what the stakeholders perceive as a problem.

Another discipline often interchanged with crisis management is risk management. Simply put, ‘risk’ is defined as the multiplication of the probability of a negative or dangerous object by the consequences or severity (Ibid.). The objective of which is to eliminate, reduce, or control risks, thereby gaining enhanced utility or benefitting and avoiding detriment from the risks (Ibid.). Management of risks consists of several proactive approaches, such as risk identification, risk analysis and profiling, risk decisions and actions (Ibid.). What differentiates risk management from crisis management is the focus is exclusively on the pre-crisis stage, whereas crisis management can be in all stages of crisis.

A popular approach to crisis communication literature is to apply a staged approach, that is, viewing crises as having several stages (Fink 1986; Mitroff 1994; Coombs 2015), to comprehend the complexity of the crisis. Crises are typically divided into pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis, which stages can be viewed as a negative parabola in that crises most often have a maximum turning point. The staged approaches are found within the broad strategic perspective on crisis management. The stage approach is the view of crises as having a life cycle (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995). The stages each have a range of disciplines and tools based on the individual model or framework. Coombs (1999) established the now well-known, three-stage approach: pre-crisis, crisis event, and post-crisis. Within each of these three stages, there are found separate substages or sets of actions that should be covered in a crisis (Coombs 2023, 2015). This way of viewing crises remains to this day, from which much newer literature originates (Coombs 2023). Therefore, this systematic approach to crisis with a three-part structure has significantly contributed to further research on crises and their structures.

While the stage approach provides, often necessary, structure to crises, reality is far from staged. Especially on social media, where the multitude of stakeholders’ different opinions often overlap (Frandsen & Johansen 2017), and it seldom is possible to distinctive point to the beginning and end of each stage. These stages should instead mark how the audience at different points in time has different expectations towards the organization in crisis. In that, audiences may not initially perceive the organization as in crisis but voice an opinion online. However, with time surpassing and the organization not properly responding, the audience will start to consider the organization as in crisis. Here, it will not be possible to pinpoint the evolvement from precrisis to crisis; it will, however, be possible to see the change in perception.

The ideal crisis communication model integrates the various crisis models available with additional insights provided by other crisis communication experts (Coombs 2015). Therefore, any comprehensive model must be able to provide insights into the crisis management process from different, random, as well as fixed, perspectives (Coombs 2015). The three stages are popular because it is general enough to accommodate the other dominant crisis management models and simultaneously allow for the integration of ideas from other crisis management experts (Coombs 2015). However, in the last century, many have focused on how to approach framing the context of a crisis in broad theoretical frameworks (Frandsen & Johansen 2017).

The research on crisis management does tend to be pessimistic in their evaluation of the development of the discipline, by the constant emphasis on the lack of a general paradigm (Pearson et al. 2007; Frandsen & Johansen 2017). Where the research on crisis communication is more optimistic in that crisis communication is a subproduct of public relations (Toth 2010) but is ‘provocatively and excitingly’ growing to be an independent field (Coombs & Holladay 2010).

One approach is situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), where the audience’s attribution of crisis responsibility to an organization serves as the basis for choosing the most appropriate crisis response strategy (Coombs 2015). Here, the additional layer to the classic three-stage approach is in framing the attributes of the stakeholders to repose appropriately. SCCT is based on an experimental approach to the study of crisis communication (Coombs 2007). Coombs advanced toward the creation of an image

repair selection theory. SCCT is considered a useful and credible framework for evaluating crisis responses, but the many intangible components of it make it difficult to select an image repair strategy. SCCT further lacks directions on how to differentiate between response strategies in the same cluster, but in reality, both the public and crisis managers have different perceptions of the strategies (Furgeson et al. 2018). The literature is focused on providing examples of real events, wherefore SCCT will be influenced by the cases and examples, as it is contended that crises are complicated and distinctive. All crises might not comply with the normative guidelines of SCCT (Coombs 2015).

In recent approaches to crisis communication, the organization is the focal point, but the communication among stakeholders is integrated (Frandsen & Johansen 2017). This can be approached in the complex set of ideas about the social space, the rhetorical arena (RAT), that opens when a crisis breaks out (Frandsen & Johansen 2017, 143). This space is not permanent but rather opens or closes long before and after the crisis event and will always be out there (Ibid.). In this space, many stakeholders start communicating when a crisis breaks out (Ibid.). This idea furthered the field of crisis communication from being focused on the individual communicative process to including multiple potential communications in crisis. This created multiple layers of crisis communication, then studied from two different but integrated perspectives: the micro- and macro perspective (Frandsen & Johansen 2017). While these perspectives provide additional layers to crisis communication, it is argued that the rhetorical arena presents a paradox. That RAT is designed to add the communicative complexity that characterizes organizational crises to the traditional existing ideas of crisis communication to better understand the crises (Ibid.). It will, however, never be achievable to study or integrate all the proposed aspects of crisis communication. The aim of the macro perspective of mapping all stakeholders and those without a stake in the crisis is not considered possible, as the countless communication channels that exist today would make it impossible. Though paradoxical, the advantages of RAT should not be disregarded but rather encourage limitations by the individual researcher or crisis manager based on the specifics of the crisis and the goal of the communication. Further, RAT has shifted the field of crisis communication from the focus on a communication process to understanding there can be multiple communication challenges.

The technological development and increasing use of social media have had implications on crisis communication that have attracted attention from scholars. Therefore, the growing cancel culture should be considered by organizations in the management of crises. Organizations are now subjected to social sanctions and cancellations both in cyberspace and in real life (Jaafar 2023). The research on crisis communication on social media is a quickly growing field, in which it is acknowledged that social media and the internet have changed the ways organizations should manage crises (Frandsen & Johansen 2017; Coombs 2015). Organizations should further proactively engage in online communication. By being proactive in the monitoring of online conversations, prioritizing transparent and authentic communication, swift response to emerging issues, and collaborating with the audience to address concerns, organizations can manage their online reputation (Chen & Wang 2019; Nkrumah 2023). Therefore, organizations should establish resilient online reputation management strategies in which transparency, authenticity, and responsiveness to effectively navigate the challenges posed by cancel culture are prioritized (Nkrumah 2023). For this exact purpose, it is suggested that online reputation is best managed in the context of cancel culture by providing practical recommendations for individuals and organizations (Nkrumah 2023). However, the most prominent literature on crisis communication lacks practical guidelines.

Whilst it is considered important to proactively manage the cancel culture as part of the organization's crisis management, sometimes organizations do not realize they are in crisis or realize it too late, in which the image of the organization is already damaged. In such instances, the organization should utilize image repair efforts.

4. Image repair theory

Image Repair Theory (IRT) is adopted in crisis response strategies. IRT was the most used theory in public relations articles between 1991 and 2009 (Benoit 2024). Leading theorists (Coombs, Frandsen & Johansen) take their approach to crisis response from Benoit (1995). He aggregated the work of several scholars who dealt with strategic options for rhetoric crisis communication, resulting in five broad rhetoric strategies, three of which have different variations.

'Image' is, by Benoit (2024), considered the public persona of an individual, group, or organization, and "*it is constructed by each audience member based on their attitudes toward the target*" (Benoit 2024, 2), in which people with a common interest, such as an audience, can develop overlapping attitudes toward an individual, group or organization. Images, therefore, consist of related overlapping attitudes, these are groups of attitudes that concern an individual, group, or organization (Benoit 2024). What defines an image is highly contested across the area. However, there is a consensus that organizational image is created by the perception of the audience (Benoit 1995; Dowling 1986; Frandsen 2017). It is when an individual, group, or organization is accused of wrongdoing, an image can be damaged. These threats to an image can motivate image repair.

Image repair is when a person or organization accuses another of wrongdoing, and the accused produces a message that attempts to repair that image (Benoit 2015). Benoit (2024) argues one does so based on the audience's perception(s) of belief and values. Therefore, it is necessary for the organization to understand the perception of the audience when trying to repair their image (Ibid.). From this, the organization will attempt to produce the most effective message to persuade that audience (Benoit 2015). These perceptions may or may not reflect an accurate understanding of the audience's perceptions (Ibid.). The communicated perceptions are what the organization must work with to produce a possibly persuasive message because it never will be possible

for the organization to look ‘inside’ the heads of the audience to determine their real attitude (Benoit 2024). It will be in the communication between the organization and audience both participants approach the real attitude of the other. Wherefore, it must be realized that both organizations and audiences act and react based on their perceptions or misperceptions about reality (Ibid.). Image repair can be prompted by suspicions rather than explicit accusations (Ibid.) as to why the image repair might or might not be necessary. Also, it is possible that image repair can be used preemptively, attempting to forestall accusations.

IRT consists of five broad strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, mortification, and corrective action, three of which have variations (Ibid.), all accounted for in the following sections.

Since IRT emerged as a subject area, many applications and case studies have ensued in which the nature and functions of defensive discourse were highlighted (Ibid.). One of the first critiques of image repair in crisis communication was the defensive role of the organization. Benoit painted the role of the organization as defensive, in that the function of image restoration is to first respond when a crisis is occurring, to which others argue that image restoration should be placed in a broader, more strategic perspective (Sturges 1994). Other applications are less critical yet reappearing in the field. Such as the strategies of mortifications and corrective actions best used together, and some strategies are mutually exclusive (Benoit 1995 2024). Most literature within the field is contextualization of IRT. Qualitative case studies are used to understand how each of the strategies is perceived by an audience. While these rhetorical strategies have been rudimentary for crisis communication, literature today is either focused on the explanatory elements of providing the framework (Coombs 2023) or the selection and identification of strategies in case studies (George & Pratt 2012).

Further image repair theory originally had 14 strategies (Benoit 2015) and there have since been added additional strategic approaches. In 2007, ‘no response’ was proposed as the sixth addition to the five broad categories (Coombs 2007), and in 2024, two new variants of denial were proposed: deflect attention and straw denial (Benoit 2024).

Although this literature is immensely enlightening and important for the development of the field of communicating in crisis, the field should be criticized for its lack of approaches to selecting an image repair strategy. Recently, new literature has studied the effectiveness of the strategies, where studies have valued some strategies as more appropriate (Benoit 2024), more successful (Ferguson et al. 2018), or undesirable (Ibid.). Even contingency plans for crises have been developed, which include image repair plans (Benoit 2024). The eight steps are (1) identifying accusations or suspicions, (2) deciding which audience is most important, (3) analyzing the attitudes of the intended audience, (4) identifying other potential conflicting goals, (5) managing resources, (6) developing the image repair effort, (7) selecting a media to reach the intended audience, (8) developing and deploying image repair messages, may be useful for conceptualizing the problem at hand, it does not lead to a selection a strategy based on how the problem is conceptualized.

The theory of image repair selection has yet to be studied and developed. It is this research gap I will address. This will be done by examining the most prominent existing strategies for image repair and the experimental evaluations of the use of image repair to determine the expectations and risks associated with the strategies. This is done in the hopes of expanding the image repair plans to include the selection of strategies to further the field of literature to include determiners of the selection of image repair strategies, thus closing the research gap. While it may seem paradoxical to draw on the literature under review here, the design of a selection methodology is dependent on the case studies using IRT. It is in these case studies that one can gain insights into which strategies have or have not been successful in each context.

5. Method

This model is made as a tool for selecting an image repair strategy based on the four parameters. The model is made up of extensive research on existing theories, case studies, and ongoing dialog with PR practitioners, which in turn will affect how the model applies to crises. The case studies are limited to online organization crises. Therefore, this is, first and foremost, the type of crisis the model is studied to work on. Online organizational crises transpire in the view of the public. This makes the image repair strategy especially important because online communication is most often carefully selected, and the expectations are created accordingly. Online organizational crises are, therefore, the most important crises to make a model for. This makes it possible to draw comparisons from other’s use of image repair strategies to understand how they are selected.

It was previously argued that today, most crises are transpiring online, wherefore, I would not disregard any possibility that the model could be useful for other types of crises or incidents. MIRS is built on the general features of organizational crises, which is why it will most likely work in various types of organizational crises. It has, however, only been tested on written crisis communication. Face-to-face communication allows for more explanations and dialog, which is why the other attributes are assigned to the image repair offers. It would require more testing and actional considerations in the different steps to be able to determine if MIRS works on these types of crises.

The perfect theory is, however, difficult given the unique features of crises. MIRS accommodates this by only focusing on the four most important elements of crisis communication and leaving the rest of the communication structure up to the organization. Thus, MIRS will work in most instances, as the key objectives of crisis communication are integrated into the model. The purpose of this is to start the concretization of crisis communication research. This is done by starting with only those elements that are widely agreed upon in the theoretical field.

Despite the generalizations and manageable approach of MIRS, the four parameters form a framework for the essential elements of crisis communication, namely managing communication and risk, the transparency of the organization, and selecting the rhetorical approaches in either being defensive or offensive, in which it is also necessary to understand an audience. MIRS is combining only the necessities to communicate in crisis, creating an overview of the crisis from which it is possible to approach a strategy. It is suggested that online reputation is best managed in the context of cancel culture by providing practical recommendations for individuals and organizations.

This is exactly what the field has lacked: a theory-based tool to select the strategy that resonates in each crisis. MIRS is the addition the field has been missing. Further, MIRS is able to provide insights into the crisis management process from different, random, as well as fixed perspectives, which constitutes the ideal model (Coombs 2015).

Ethical considerations

Each theoretical approach, however, comes with limitations. One of the limitations that is up to the individual organization to consider is the ethical considerations. As Benoit (2015) argues, the ethical considerations of image repair are important. Lying in a message is unethical and uncommendable (Ibid.). False, simple denial may help repair a damaged image, but it is considered unethical (Benoit 2024). I believe that an organization should not try to convince an audience of something untrue. Specifically, something the organization believes to be untrue. What is considered true will be deepened on the context in which it is communicated. In image repair, the truth will, therefore, be what the audience of the organization cannot prove is factual wrong. Lying is arguably wrong; it also carries several strategic repercussions, as there will always be the possibility that one's audience may know or learn the truth. While the best image repair is based on nothing but the truth, MIRS is rather focusing on the strategic disadvantages of lying to one's audience. Studies show how common strategies in crisis communication, such as mortification, corrective actions, and reducing offensiveness, all associated with low risk, varied in effectiveness. The effectiveness was dependent on factors including the perceived sincerity of the organization (Nkrumah 2023). Based on this, it is advised to always be authentic and truthful, to the degree allowed and possible, to best repair an image. In reality, this means that the accused should find a way to tell the audience something sincere and true to best resolve the problem and repair the damaged image. This means the organization should not focus on what they believe the audience "wants to hear" but rather rely on a sincere response to the perceived wrongdoing. Further, MIRS and the method of using MIRS are made to be successful only if the organization is honest with themselves and its audience, which is why it is important to consider if one believes in the image repair strategy before communicating it to one's audience.

6. The Model of Image Repair Selection

The model of image repair selection (MIRS) is the solution to the research gap brought out in the previous sections. MIRS is neither a new theory of apologetic discourse nor a new crisis communication theory. The concept refers to the theoretical framework that, if used in alignment with the following theory-grounded explanation, will provide its user with the ability to select an appropriate image repair strategy. This chapter provides a detailed introduction to MIRS and its components. MIRS completes the void in the theoretical field by confronting points of criticism made of image repair theory by arranging the image repair strategies in a dynamic sphere that guides selection. The previously mentioned literature approaching such a framework will be integrated into this model (Benoit 2024; Ferguson et al. 2018; Blaney et al. 2015). Additionally, one way of using MIRS is proposed.

6.1 The Model

The visualization of MIRS is a circle. The circle is dynamic in that there is no fixed starting point. The circle is associated with constant movement, which corresponds with the communicative situation as communication is also everchanging depending on the context of said communication. Additionally, by using a circle instead of a triangle or a square, flexibility between the elements of the model is preserved. Had an angular shape been chosen, the shape of the model would be perceived as more fixed and unchangeable, which does not align with its ideas, where both crises and their communication are fluid and determined by context. In the circle, the six categories of image repair strategy are placed based on the four parameters: (1) risk associated with the strategy, (2) transparency, (3) degree of communicative resources, and (4) whether the strategy is considered defensive or offensive.

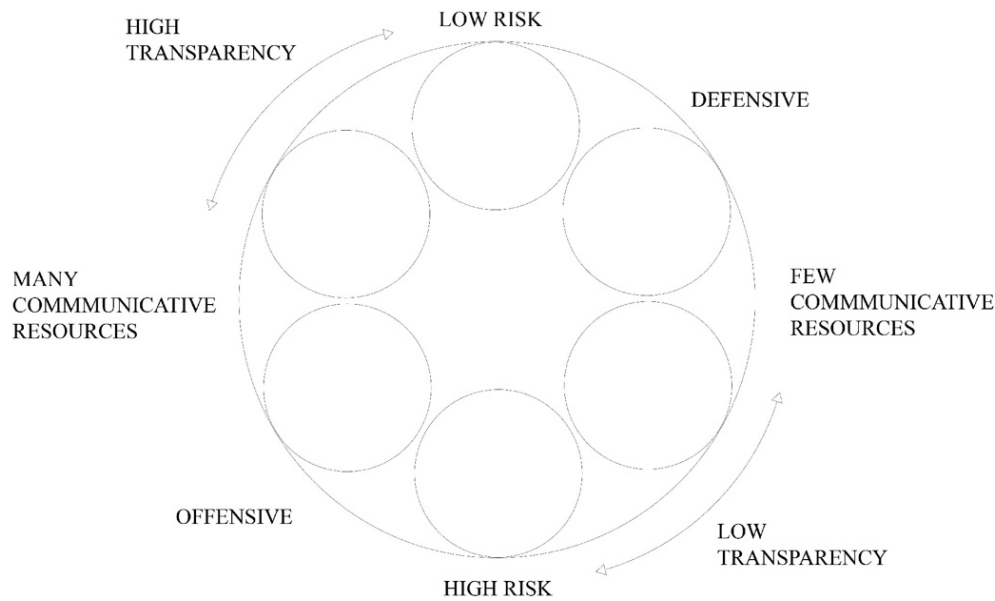


Figure 1 – Image repair selection model (1): structure

As can be seen in the model, the circle is surrounded by the four parameters, two of which have double-sided arrows. High and Low transparency have arrows to demonstrate how this extends over a wider width of the model.

6.2 The four parameters

The four parameters are placed around the circle, where opposites are placed across from each other. These four parameters have been carefully curated based on an extensive reading of the field and which factors were recurring and used to select or criticize the image repair strategy. These four elements are part of what makes MIRS so useful for many because the elements are understood and identifiable by most people. The first element is the risk associated with each strategy. Since risks have already been defined, this section will be based on how people tend to rank the different image repair strategies (Ferguson & Kim, 2012; Ferguson et al. 2018). The risk associated with the chosen strategy will refer to the level of risk of the audience not accepting the image repair strategy. Thus, ‘low risk’ refers to the risk of the audience not accepting the strategy, and ‘high risk’ is the increased chance of the audience not accepting the strategy. Low risk is placed at the top, and high risk at the bottom. There will, therefore, be a rational hierarchy in which the top of the model is associated with the most popular strategies in the public, and the lower part is the less accepted strategies. Although there is no correct place to be located, there is an underlying rationality that organizations want to minimize risk because the objective is to eliminate, reduce, or control risk. Integrating risk in the model accommodates the critique made of similar approaches to image repair strategies.

The second element is the level of transparency in the image repair strategy. High transparency is important to preserve trust and credibility in online communication (Nkrumah 2023), while low transparency can cover up the unfortunate. High transparency is placed next to a high level of communicative resources, as it requires communication efforts of the accused to provide the audience with transparent communication. This can help organizations not only navigate the crisis but also minimize reputational damage (Ferguson & Kim, 2012). Therefore, transparency is also placed next to low risk, as it is shown how many values transparency in image repair strategy (Nkrumah 2023; Anderson 2012; Chen & Wang 2019). The fundamental strategy of prioritizing transparency and authenticity in all communication helps manage reputation in the digital age because transparent communication helps maintain relations and shape public perception (Nkrumah 2023). On the contrary, a lower degree of transparency will distance the accused from relations and, thus, also distances the accuser and the perceived problem from the accuser. Low transparency is related to a high level of risk because the audience either accepts the lack of transparency or reacts to the lack of transparency as a new problem, forcing the accused to respond to yet another perceived wrongdoing. However, low transparency works if there are few communicative resources available, and the audience eventually will move on to the next thing. Although it is rational to think that high risk and low transparency is a bad idea, it does work for some organizations.

In the Netflix double crisis in 2023, they did not respond to the second crisis. While this was very risky and had no transparency, the audience eventually moved on, and Netflix returned to their daily routines. This means that while some strategies are rationally preferable, and perhaps in most cases, they are, what is best for the organization is based on each individual crisis. The parameter transparency is also illustrated with arrows because transparency extends over a wider part of the model. This parameter extends over the parameters positioned next to it, as these contribute to obtaining transparency.

The third element is the level of communicative resources. Communicative resources refer to the information the accused can give to the audience. This includes what information the organization wants to give its audience, what they are allowed to give the audience, and what information the organization has without lying to its audience. By communicating as much as possible, organizations can demonstrate their commitment to transparency and integrity, thereby preserving trust and credibility. If the organization has much information about the perceived wrongdoing and is willing to provide the audience with the information, the organization can demonstrate a high level of transparency. If, however, they do not have information about the crisis or are not allowed or willing to give this out, they cannot obtain transparency.

The fourth element is whether the strategy is considered defensive or offensive. This refers to how the accused wants to be perceived by its audience. The terminology is borrowed from the world of sports, in which to be defensive means to take a reactive approach rather than a proactive approach, which is to be offensive. Therefore, the defensive element is placed next to low risk, as it functions by preventing the accuser from further damaging the accused reputation. The offensive element is, therefore, placed next to high risk, as offensive strategies are associated with higher risk in that they attempt to reclaim the narrative. This, however, does also require more communication than defensive strategies because it requires more communication to change the perceptions of the audience than agreeing with them. All this can be seen in Figure 2. Having explained the model and the four parameters, it is possible to place the six strategies in the model.

6.3 The placement of each strategy

In the model below, the six strategies are placed within the framework. The six strategies are placed based on the literature on each strategy. To simplify MIRS, it is the strategies that are placed in the model instead of each variation. The placement of each strategy is accounted for in the following.

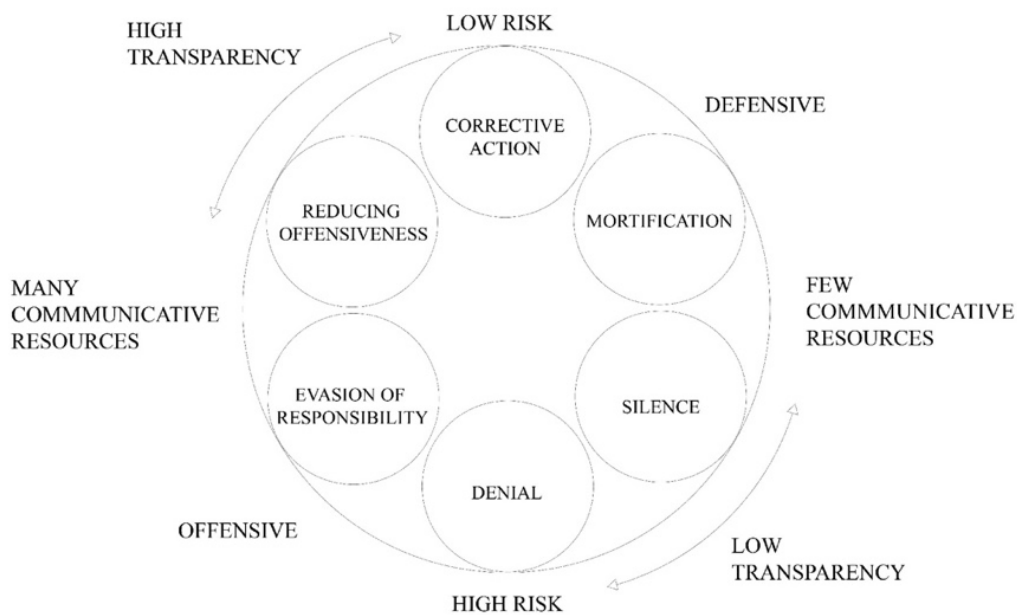


Figure 2 - Image repair selection model (MIRS)

Corrective Action

The strategy, corrective action, is when the accused makes a promise to correct the problem. One way of applying this strategy is to resort to the state of affairs to what it was before the undesirable action. Another is to prevent the recurrence of the action (Benoit 2024). Some argue this should be subsequential to an apology, where it is important to realize people may take corrective actions without admitting guilt for the wrongful act (Benoit 2024). The willingness to take corrective action or hinder the recurrence of the problematic situation may improve the image of the accused. This should not be mistaken for compensation; it differs in that corrective actions will offer to correct or prevent the problem, whereas compensation seeks to pay restitution for it (Benoit 2024). Corrective action is placed at the top of the model. This makes it the strategy associated with the least risk and is placed in the middle between many and few communicative resources. It is close to both high transparency and defensive, rather than offensive and low transparency. Corrective action is one of the most effective image repair strategies (Benoit & Pang 2008; Ferguson et al. 2012). This strategy is the least risky, as it is evaluated as the most positive and most likely to be recommended by public relations

(PR) professionals (Ferguson et al. 2012). Corrective action can come in a variety of different communicative messages, which is why it is placed between many and few communicative resources. Further, it is considered defensive rather than offensive, as it will most often correct the perceived problem and thereby be responsive rather than attempting to change the narrative of the communication. Lastly, this strategy requires a higher level of transparency, as the audience should be able to understand the changes and/or motive for the change.

Mortification

This strategy is, in its simplicity, an apology. Mortification is when the accused of the wrongful action confesses to committing the action and begs for forgiveness (Benoit 2024). If the audience believes the apology is truthful, they might pardon the wrongful action. This strategy may be used best in couples with other strategies, such as corrective action. However, these strategies can exist independently.

Mortification is placed in the upper right spot. This makes this the most defensive strategy. It is placed in the middle between high and low transparency, but closer to low risk and few communicative resources, rather than high risk with many communicative resources. Mortification is also placed next to corrective action because these are often used together. This strategy is evaluated as the second most effective strategy in that it is likely to be recommended to organizational leaders by PR professionals, wherefore this strategy is closer to low risk. However, mortification is considered less communicative on its own, and an apology does not require much communication when used independently of other strategies. Further, it is the most defensive strategy, as the apology is in direct response to the perceived wrongdoing. Lastly, this strategy does not demonstrate either high or low transparency, as less communication does not enable the audience to read into the considerations of the organization.

No response

While the total of 14 different strategies condensed by Benoit is accepted, it is discussed in rhetorical and strategic crisis communication literature whether the 15th strategy, 'no response', should be included as a strategy. Coombs (2007) argues no response should be included in the list of strategies. As for Benoit, he acknowledges the strategic approach is used (Benoit 1995) but argues it should not be considered a rhetorical strategy, as the lack of communication equals a lack of rhetorical strategy. However, I would argue that choosing not to speak sometimes is worth a thousand words, which is why it should be considered a rhetorical strategy. Further, I attempt to explore all strategic approaches to crisis communication, which is why it is included in the theoretical framework. The strategy is simply when the accused chooses not to respond to the allegations of the audience. The accused may hope this audience then, at some point, moves on and forgets about the allegations of wrongdoing, thereby resorting the situation to what it was before the undesirable action. Because the attitudes of people can vary widely in some cases, image repair measures can persuade some people simultaneously while repelling others with different attitudes (Benoit 2024, 3).

Silence is placed in the lower right spot. This spot has the least transparency and is in the middle of defensive and offensive. It is, however, closer to few communicative resources and high risk rather than low risk and many communicative resources. Silence often leads to negative perceptions and is the second most negative strategy and second least likely to be recommended by PR professionals (Ferguson et al. 2012), which is why it is considered high risk. Further, silence is the least transparent and requires no communicative recourses, as the very basis of the strategy is not to engage in communication with the audience.

Denial

Another option for repairing one's tarnished image is to deny the wrongful act. Denial comes in two variations. First, simply denial, in which the accused denies performing the wrongful action. This can either be denying the undesirable act has occurred or denying that the accused committed it (Benoit 2024, 1995; Ware & Linkugel 1973). If any of those two options is accepted by the audience, it should absolve the crisis immediately. This strategy has, however, been highly criticized for being ineffective (Ferguson et al. 2018). Specifically, using denial despite having performed the undesirable act has received critique from both scholars and the public (Ibid.). This has resulted in the public having developed doubt about this strategy, which has affected its effectiveness.

The second variation of denial is shift of blame, in which the accused directs blame to another person, group, or organization (Benoit 2015). If another actor is to blame for the undesirable event, the accused may not be to blame anymore (Ibid.). This variation may be preferable to simple denial because additional information is provided. Blame shifting provides a new target for the negative attitudes the audience may have while answering the important question of "*if you did not do it, who did?*" simultaneously (Benoit 2024).

Denial is placed at the bottom of the model. This makes it the strategy associated with the highest risk and is also placed in the middle of many and few communicative resources and closest to both low transparency and offensive rather than defensive and high transparency. Simple denial should, if accepted, enhance perceptions of the offender's image (Benoit 2023, 2015). However, in reality, strategic communicators perceived this strategy to be particularly ineffective (Wallance et al. 2008; Ferguson et al. 2012). It is also found that practitioners hold negative perceptions of shifting of blame (Ibid.), wherefore this strategy is the strategy associated with the most risk. This strategy also has negative perceptions associated with it and is the most (simple denial) and third most (shift of blame) negative strategy and most and third most least likely to be recommended by PR professionals (Ferguson et al. 2012), only divided by silence. This strategy does not require either many or few communicative resources, as denial can be consistent with both much information and no information. The strategy is considered more offensive, as denial

directly disrupts the opinion of the audience. Lastly, the strategy is considered low in transparency, as the communication does not encourage the audience to understand the actions of the organization but rather wants to remove the organization from wrongdoing.

Evasion of responsibility

Evasion of responsibility may be used when the accused is unable to or does not wish to deny performing the offensive action (Benoit 2024, 2015, 1995). In this strategy, the accused might be able to repair their image by evading or reducing their apparent responsibility for the action. This strategy has four variants. The first is provocation, a version of which might be known as scapegoating (Scott & Luman 1969), not to be mistaken for shifting of blame. In provocation, the accused claims the wrongful action was in response to another action; the wrongful was provoked by another wrongful action. If accepted by the audience, the provocateur is being held responsible for the actions instead of the accused (Benoit 2024).

A second variant of evading responsibility is defeasibility (Ibid.), in which the accused claims a lack of information about or control over key elements impacted in the situation (Scott & Luman 1968), which means that the accused should not be held fully or partially accountable for the offensive act. If the audience accepts this strategy, it should help repair the tarnished image by reducing the perceived responsibility for the offensive act (Benoit 2024, 1995).

The third variant is accident, where the accused claims the wrongful action occurred by accident (Benoit 2024; Scott & Lyman, 1968). There is a tendency to believe that others are responsible only for factors that are reasonably under their control (Benoit 2024). This should lessen the apparent responsibility of the accused and the damage to their image if the accused can persuade the audience that the wrongdoing was an accident.

The fourth, good intentions, is when the accused suggests that the undesirable action was done with good intentions (Ibid.). People who do wrongful actions while attempting to do good are often held less accountable than those who intend to do bad (Ibid.). Therefore, if accepted, the audience might relieve the accused of some or the entire responsibility.

Evasion of responsibility is placed in the bottom left spot. This makes this the most offensive strategy. It is placed in the middle between high and low transparency, but closer to high risk and many communicative resources, rather than low risk with few communicative resources. Evasion of responsibility has four different variations, which is why the placement is highly deepened on the context. Generally speaking, however, all the strategies are placed in the two last thirds of accepted strategies, and whether researchers and partitions would recommend these strategies (Coombs 2007; Ferguson et al. 2012). These strategies are considered the most offensive, in that the focus of the accused is to assign most of the blame for the perceived wrongdoing to external factors. Therefore, this strategy also requires many communicative resources, as the assignment of blame requires information and explanation for the audience to accept this strategy. Evasion of responsibility is placed in the middle between high and low transparency because communication about external factors neither showcases credibility and trust in the organization nor takes away credibility and trust from them.

Reducing offensiveness

The strategy of reducing offensiveness is when the accused attempts to reduce the offensiveness of the wrongful action by justifying the action (Benoit 2024). This strategy has six variations: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one's accuser, and compensation.

The first variant is bolstering, in which the accused attempts to communicate the positive effects of the accused to the audience. In the hopes of offsetting the negative feelings, the audience might associate with the wrongful act (Benoit 2024, 2015; Ware & Linkugel 1973). When people are accused of wrongdoing, they describe positive characteristics they possess or positive actions they have done previously (Benoit 2024). The amount of negative perception from the accused wrongdoing remains the same when using bolstering, but the increased positive affiliations towards the accused may help reduce the negative feeling towards them, thereby creating an improved image (Ibid.).

A second variation is to minimize the negative feelings towards the accused that are evoked by the wrongful action (Benoit 2015). How this is done is less clear and highly dependent on the context of the crisis. If the audience comes to believe that the offensive action is not as bad as first perceived, the negative feeling towards the action is reduced (Benoit 2024), thereby minimizing the damage the undesirable act might have made to the image of the accused.

The third strategic variation one can engage in is differentiation. In this strategy, the accused distinguishes the undesirable act from other similar but more offensive actions (Benoit 2024; Ware & Linkugel 1973). If the actions in question seem less offensive in comparison, the negative feelings of the audience may be reduced.

Fourth, transcendence is a variation in which the wrongful action is placed in a different but more favorable context (Benoit 2024; Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Depending on the given context, it can be either placing the action in a broader context (Ware & Linkugel, 1973) or simply suggesting a different frame of reference (Benoit 2024). A more positive context may reduce the perceived offensiveness of the action.

The fifth strategy is attacking the accuser. If the credibility of the accuser is damaged, the damage to the image of the accused may be reduced because the source of the perceived wrongdoing loses its credibility (Benoit 2024; Scott & Lyman 1968).

The sixth and last variant is compensation, in which the accused offers to help the victim to nullify the bad feeling that arose from the offensive action (Benoit 2024). This can be either valued goods, services, or monetary reimbursement. If the

compensation is acceptable, the negative feelings from the wrongful action should be eliminated, repairing the image of the accused (Benoit 2024).

Reducing the offensiveness is placed in the upper left spot. This spot has the most transparency and is in the middle of defensive and offensive. It is, however, closer to many communicative resources and low risk rather than high risk and few communicative resources. Like evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness has several different variations, why the placement is highly deepened on the context. The six variations are, however, placed in all different parts of rankings of accepted strategies and whether researchers and partitions would recommend these strategies (Ibid.). Therefore, the placement is closer to low risk than evasion of responsibility. This strategy is also placed closest to transparency because most of the variations are focused on communicating the positive attributes of the accused to remove the damage to their image. This is also why this strategy is placed close to many communicative resources because it requires much communication to change the perception of the audience.

6.4 The visualization and movement of MIRS

Because crises are complex and dynamic configurations of communicative processes (Frandsen & Johansen 2017), the development of MIRS accommodates context by allowing its shape to increase or decrease before, during, and after a crisis. As discussed above, the visualization is circular because the dynamic model allows for movement. Therefore, each of the six strategies is also visually represented as smaller circles, which can also be flexible in size.

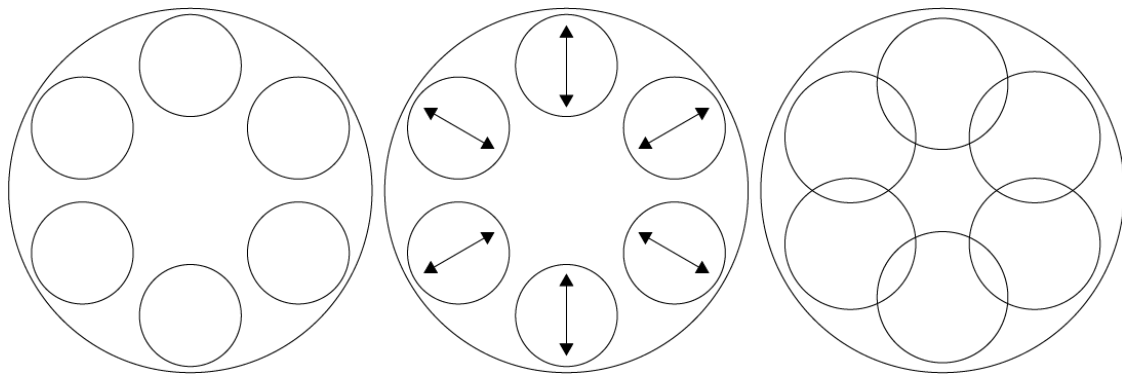


Figure 3 – Image repair selection model (2): movement

In Figure 3, it can be seen how the size of each strategy changes. In the first part, the circles representing each of the six strategies are further apart. However, these can change in size, resulting in closer or overlapping strategies, as shown in the last part of Figure 3. This happens based on how acceptable the audience is in the crisis. Some audiences accept more image repair strategies, why the circle will shrink, and so will the space between the four parameters. An example of this is in 2018 when Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) ran out of chicken (Petroff 2018). Here, the audience was susceptible to most communication, which allowed KFC to apologize and even rearrange the letters on the side of chicken buckets to “*FCK*” instead of “*KFC*”. Had the audience been less susceptible, this could have furthered the crisis, but instead, it has been named “*very FCKing clever*” (Brownsell 2018) crisis management.

On the contrary, the circle can also grow in the opposite direction, making the space between the strategies greater when the audience is less likely to accept some strategies. This was seen in 2023 when Netflix shared a comprehensive list of guidelines outlining how it will prohibit password sharing. In this crisis, the audience was far from receptive to all crisis communication. The list of guidelines was only up for 24 hours, and Netflix claimed this was an “*error*” and stated “*that those rules are in fact currently in place, just not yet in the United States.*” (Tamanini 2023). The audience especially noted the word ‘yet,’ so much so that it turned into a double crisis for Netflix. This example shows that in some crises, when the audience is less susceptible, each strategy is further from the other.

Each of the smaller circles, when having the ability to change, allows for an imperfect symmetry, as the unique and complex nature of crises may influence the model. Thus, this circular model consisting of smaller circles captures the fluid and dynamic sphere that opens when a crisis emerges (Frandsen & Johansen 2017).

6.5 Using MIRS

Now, having explained MIRS, it will be possible to use it. This will be with a basis in Image Repair Plans, which explains the steps of the image repair selection process (Benoit 2024). These will be the considerations that should be made to properly select a strategy from the model presented. When using the first three steps of the model, it is important to be completely honest with oneself and disregard potential societal pressures or pressure from others, as the model deems it a necessity in online image repair responses, to

be honest. Today, online audiences have seen vast quantities of crisis responses, wherefore they are advanced in interpreting transparently.

The use of the MIRS is primarily for, but not limited to, organizations in crisis. MIRS is both for partitioners who are working with image repair in the pre-crisis, crisis, or post-crisis stages. Also, it is for the use of those who are studying crisis responses. If MIRS is used retrospectively, it partially loses its function, which is the selection of an appropriate image repair strategy. However, the retrospective use can help partitioners and those who study image repair understand new unforeseen issues with the selected image repair strategy, bettering the user for future use.

The model has been explained. The following sections will explain how to use the model by explaining the steps necessary for finding one's position and, thereby, the right strategy in the model. The selection has five primary steps, in which the last has three consideration subcategories:

1. Identifying the problem
2. Deciding which audiences are most important
3. Analyzing the attitudes of the audience
4. Selecting an image repair strategy.
5. Rethinking the chosen strategy
 - a. Identifying other potential conflicting goals
 - b. Managing resources
 - c. Selecting media to reach the intended audience.

This order also reflects the hierarchical arrangement of the five questions. While I believe that all questions are important, some things are more important than others to understand to best get insights into the crisis. Thus, starting with understanding the problem(s) at hand and then who is the most important audience, one avoids becoming blinded by a strategy or sub-elements of the crisis before considering more details. However, this process is circular, meaning one can go through these five steps again and again to make sure the right strategy, based on MIRS, has been selected. The first step should, however, always be to identify the problem at hand.

Identifying the problem

First, to start the selection of an appropriate image repair strategy, it is important to understand the problem at hand. Understanding the potential threat or threats to one's image is vital for appropriate selection (Benoit 2024). These might be directly stated by the accuser; if not, one should quickly look for the theme(s) described in the accusations. In online crises, the accusations are, most often, short statements in a large quantity, wherefore, this should be straightforward. All problems, directly stated by the audience or perceived by the accused, should be noted for the following steps.

Deciding which audience is most important

The second step is determining if there is one or more perceived wrongdoings by the audience or audiences. The world is of a myriad of audiences (Benoit 2024), wherefore it is impossible to reach everyone. Therefore, it is deemed vital to determine which audiences are most important in the problematic situation. If there is more than one problem at hand, these should be prioritized based on which audience is most important (Ibid.). Audiences can, however, be ranked by an indefinite number of different factors. An organization can be concerned with its reputation with the public, investors, customers, government regulators, employees, the news media, or other audiences (Ibid.). While it would be ideal to satisfy everyone, audiences tend to have conflicting goals, not to mention different beliefs, values, and attitudes (Ibid.), and online, all of these are presented to the remaining audiences.

The important part of this step is to determine what perceived wrongdoing the organization should attempt to respond to. While this does not equal a strategy, this part is important in that if judged correctly; it removes the danger of furthering the crisis at hand by further upsetting the highest valued audience.

Analyzing the attitudes of the audience

The first step is to analyze the attitudes of the most important audience. Once the threat or threats to reputation and the pertinent audience(s) have been identified and ranked, it is important to analyze the nature of negative attitudes (Benoit 2024). While the perceived wrongdoing should be identified at this point, it is important to understand the underlying feelings, beliefs, and expectations of the audience. The most important part here is to understand the unfavorable attitudes, one should not disregard the favorable attitudes held by the audience, as any positive attitudes used in accusations can be included in reducing the offensiveness (Ibid.).

Three things should be determined in this step: (1) What is the feeling the most important audience holds? If the audience is angry, one should be placed on the defensive end of the model. If the audience is on the contra search for an apology, the accused should choose the strategy of mortification. (2) The most important characteristics for the audience in that the response should be interpreted as in line with these characteristics. (3) Does the audience expect an explanation, change, or simply to know whether the

accused did the undesirable action? (Ibid.). In online crises, the audiences are often direct about their needs and wishes, wherefore, it should be possible from a sample of accusations to determine these needs and wishes.

After these three steps, one should have an idea of where in the model one should place oneself and, thereby, what general image repair strategy one should use. In the following steps, the purpose is to propose some of the possible risks associated with the selected image repair strategy.

Selecting an image repair strategy

When the perceived problem by the most important audience is identified, and their attitude thereof and towards the accused, one can choose the appropriate image repair strategy. One might already know where to place oneself in MIRS. If this, however, is not the case, one should take the four parameters and consider if these are appropriate for the online crises at hand. This is not a precise science, but rather an impression based on the unique structures of the crisis, why it would not be possible to make a specific outline of how to determine the placement of the accused within MIRS. It is, however, possible to make a set of generalizations that can help the organization in crisis understand their possibilities and limitations, as it is suggested that online reputation is best managed by providing practical recommendations for organizations. This is one way of determining one's placements and not the way. The approach explained below is a generalization based on the ideas of MIRS. This approach should, therefore, only be used in line with the ideas of MIRS to work appropriately. In that, it is important that the accused fully disregard any of their expectations of what is considered the best strategy but rather focus on their perception of the problem and do not lie to either themselves or the audience. Based on six questions, one should be able to determine their placement in MIRS. The six questions are:

- (1) Did we do what the most important audience accused us of?
- (2) Do we fully understand and are compassionate toward the problem?
- (3) Are we willing to take a risk?
- (4) Do we want an offensive strategy?
- (5) Do we have more information to give?
- (6) Do we want high transparency?

These six questions are made up of two important aspects of MIRS. First, it is important to understand if the accused did the undesirable action because one of the premises of MIRS is not to lie. The second question is integrated to make an organization aware of its own biases in crises because audiences are advanced in recognizing sincerity in crisis apologies. Thus, to even consider mortification, organizations should have both done the undesirable action and be sympathetic toward the problem. The four last questions are each made up of one of the parameters in MIRS. By lining up the questions one by one, it becomes more manageable, making it easier to find one's location in MIRS. In this approach, yes and no questions are used to simplify the process of consideration. I do, however, acknowledge the answers in this process may not be as clear cut yesses or noes, why it should be acknowledged this approach is only considered a tool for guiding the image repair selection process.

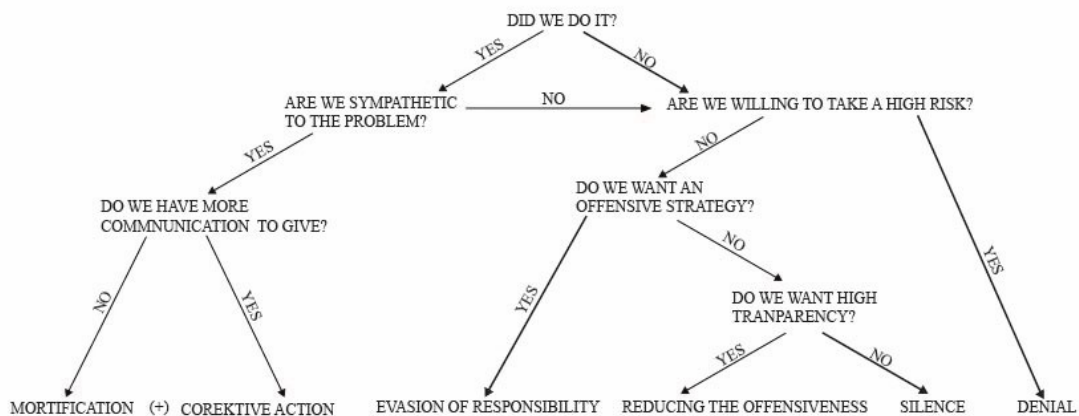


Figure 4 – Image repair selection model (MIRS) (3): flowchart

First, one should find out if the perceived problem is true. If one is innocent, denial is the best strategy, whereas if one committed the offense, one should use mortification. While this is true, reality is not as simple.

If the accused is innocent, denying the accusation may be perceived as the best option. However, some people in the audience may reject denial even if the accused is innocent (Benoit 2024). Denial should, however, only be used when willing to take the high risk as the audience may not believe the accused. Similarly, if the accused find out they did do the offensive action,

mortification may be the obvious choice. However, if the organization is not fully sympathetic to all accusations, again, the audience may not believe the accused. Therefore, the two first determining questions will be:

- (1) Did we do what the most important audience accused us of?
- (2) Do we fully understand and are compassionate toward the problem?

If one can answer both questions with a yes, mortification is a proper strategy. If the accused has more information to give, the mortification should be used with other strategies.

- (3) Do we have more communication to give?

If the communicative resources are limited, mortification should be used on its own. If the communicative resources are not limited, corrective actions should be used in some capacity, either on its own or additionally to mortification. This strategy or combination is the most popular in both research and by the public (Benoit 2015; Ferguson & Kim, 2012; Nkrumah 2023). If either question was answered with no, the accused must then determine the level of risk the accused is willing to take.

- (4) Are we willing to take a risk?

If the accused did not do the perceived wrongful action and is willing to take a high risk, denial may be used. If the accused is less disposed to take a risk, they should determine whether they do want to use an offensive strategy. While there is a higher risk associated with offensive strategies than with defensive strategies, there is still less risk associated with offensive strategies denial (Ferguson & Kim 2012).

- (5) Do we want an offensive strategy?

If the accused wants an offensive strategy, in that the accused wants to take a proactive approach and redirect the communication from the perceived wrong. If the accused wants to take this approach, evasion of responsibility is used. On the contrary, if the accused wishes to take a less offensive approach, they should determine with what transparency this should be done.

- (6) Do we want high transparency?

If this is not important for the accused, they may use silence. If the accused wished to have a high level of transparency, then reducing the offensiveness could be used, while this strategy requires more communication than silence, the accused then needs to provide to the audience.

Choosing more than one strategy

There is a possibility to choose more than one image repair strategy to include in the crisis response. If this is done, one should choose one image repair strategy as the key strategy and use further strategies, if appropriate, supplementary. The selected image repair strategies should not be contradictory, as the insincerity of contradictions is unlikely to improve one's reputation. It is vital to realize that using more than one image repair strategy is not necessarily better than using fewer strategies (Benoit 2024). A single strategy, if selected particularly, might be successful (Benoit 2015). Consistency in the selection of image repair strategies is vital to successful image repair (Benoit 2024). A perfect example of this was in 2015 when AB also found itself in crisis. Placing the statement "*The perfect beer to remove the word "NO" from your vocabulary for the night*" on their beer cans and bottles resulted in negative responses online. In their response, they used evasion of responsibility (good intentions), reducing offensiveness (bolstering), and corrective actions all in one statement. When the accused is faced with multiple accusations, the defensive efforts do not need to use the same strategy for each accusation if the overall message is clear and consistent (Ibid.). The accused can deny some accusations and apologize to others in the same crisis response. Therefore, MIRS also allows for overlaps in strategies, something that is unique to the model. Benoit addresses this in his Image Repair Plans, from which the consideration originated. It is, however, yet to be used in crises, which is why MIRS is interpreting the possibility that one can use several strategies simultaneously. This can be to cover multiple needs or different, not conflicting, audiences (Ibid.).

Identifying other potential conflicting goals

Having selected an image repair strategy, one should search for potential conflicting goals associated with using this strategy. One can have other important conflicting goals in the situation in addition to repairing one's image (Benoit 2024). While this model has the key goal of repairing one's image, it is important to acknowledge that, in reality, one may have other goals than image repair, which may conflict with image repair (Ibid.). For instance, in 2017, United Airlines made a public statement apologizing for dragging Dr. David Dao out of the airline (McCann 2017). They had, however, not accounted for the conflicting goal of their employees needing reinsurance. After which, they sent out an internal note stating that the employees had handled the situation correctly (Ibid.). This was leaked and further damaged the image of the organization because of the contradicting statements.

This should especially be considered in changes in internal structures, new launches, and other initiatives that change what is known of the organization by its audience. What is then advised is to go back to the second and third steps, a (re)evaluating if the strategy chosen has similar, fewer conflicting substitutes or if the chosen strategy is the best possible option despite potentially conflicting goals.

Managing resources

Another component to be reflected on once having selected an image repair strategy is what resources are available to use in the defense against the accusations. These considerations can also be on the financial resources of the organization and crisis management team; it mostly refers to what informative communication(s) it is possible to add to the crisis response (Benoit 2024).

In that, it is possible to layer strategies. This, again, is something special with MIRS, as the layering of strategies and the continuance of additional information is highly valued. Here, the question is, are there any evidence, arguments, information, or other people who can reinforce the image repair message(s)? While it may persuade an audience to use simple denial, supporting the image repair strategy with additional arguments related to the strategy may be more persuasive (Ibid.).

In evasion of responsibility, there might be information about the other event (provocation), the lack of information (defeasibility), proof of mishap (accident), or good intention that should be included in the response (Ibid.). Bear in mind this information should not be possible for the audience to directly refute. The same goes for variations of reducing offensiveness. Suggestions may be to consider if statistics showing the problem is exaggerated (minimization) if there is proof that the criticisms that are made are false (attack the accuser), what positive qualities exist, and what positive things have been done recently (bolstering), and can there be found additional sources, from whom the image repair can be supported (Benoit 2024).

Corrective actions slightly deviate from the other. It is still important to reflect on additional information that should be included in a crisis response, specifically how, when, and why corrective actions are taken. However, it is immensely important to reflect on whether the corrective actions are achievable, sufficient for the audience, and in line with other important goals (Ibid.). It might be decided in the three steps that the most important audience expects corrective actions, and this is the only possible strategy for repairing one's image. If there, however, is the slightest doubt about whether the expected corrective actions are achieved, phrases like "we will try", "we will work internally on", or "we will do our best to" should be used in the crisis response. Though these weak statements may predict more negative reactions, it is assets to gather less damage to one's image, than not responding.

Mortification is almost always a good idea. If a crisis emerges from the problematic situation, the audience will expect an apology. However, one should only apologize if they are sorry. The increase in online crises has seen its fair share of insincere apologies, which is why the public audience can assess these without much effort. If, however, one does find oneself sincere and sympathetic, this should be included in the response. In addition, one should reflect on what led to the problematic situation and include this in one's response. However, it is very important not to use a "but" or other markers to indicate that the information after the apology is an excuse for perceived wrongdoing, as this could be perceived as insincere.

Selecting media to reach the intended audience

The accused should consider which online medium or media the crisis response should be published to reach the intended audience. People are active in choosing and using particular media to satisfy specific needs (Katz et al.1973). If the crisis transpired on a specific medium, this would be the apparent choice. For each medium, there is the possibility the message might not reach all audiences (Benoit 2024). It is also important to understand media have a limited effect because users are able to exercise choice and control (West & Turner 2021). In that, media is used to gratify the needs of its users (Katz et al.1973). Therefore, it is important to seek out the appropriate social media platform, online news media, influencer collaboration, etc.

However, the interconnectedness of social media will help distribute all messages, so the most important consideration is where one was accused of wrongdoing. If, however, the accused chooses to address more than one audience, this may mean tailoring different messages for different audiences (Benoit 2024). This should, however, be done with conscience, as it is vital to be consistent because some people might see both messages and think a contradicting defense is being made (Ibid.).

This chapter explained the theoretical contribution crisis communication made to establishing a new theoretical framework. This included a definition of organizational crises, crisis management, and IRT. All of which contributed to creating MIRS, the first step to filling the research gap. Having established a new theory and an additional method of using said model, it is important to study how it applies to a real organizational crisis.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the theoretical framework, MIRS, gave new insights into how to approach selecting an image repair strategy. This study started with the wonder of to what extent it is possible to create a new theory for selecting an image repair strategy. The aim was to create a theory that could be used both during crises but also as an analytical tool in retrospect. Based on the existing theory of crisis communication and IRT, supported by empirical data, MIRS was created. MIRS is the theoretical framework that contains only the most important parts of crisis communication. This distances MIRS from the paradoxical complex theories that the theoretical field has developed in recent times. MIRS is considered the first step in filling the research gap. MIRS has four parameters: (1) risk associated with the strategy, (2) transparency, (3) degree of communicative resources, and (4) whether the strategy is considered defensive or offensive. One way of using MIRS was proposed to further the concretization of the field. The method of using MIRS can help organizations understand how to position themselves within the model and practitioners with an understanding of the mismanagement of the crisis.

While it was argued MIRS provided new insightful strategic ideas in the selection of image repair strategy, I suggest MIRS should be used in the study of several different crises. This will contribute to a greater understanding of the potential and functionality of the theory.

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