

IMAGE REPAIR: EXPLORING TRUMP'S TWEETS IN RESPONSE TO FAMILY
SEPARATION CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

Image repair was brought into the spotlight in 2018 when the family separation crisis put President Trump under significant public scrutiny when his image was tarnished regarding his actions towards the issue. This study's objective was to identify the image repair strategies Trump employed in his tweets in order to repair his image, and evaluate their overall effectiveness during this time. A qualitative approach to content analysis was used to categorize the image repair strategies according to Benoit's (1995, 1997) typology. *Gallup* presidential approval ratings were also used to determine the effectiveness of those strategies. The analysis yielded the use of reducing offensiveness, denial, and evading responsibility as predominant defense strategies employed by Trump. Political polarization and demographic characteristics were two of the main factors that impacted the effectiveness of the used strategies.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	vii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. LITERATUE REVIEW.....	4
Image Repair Theory	4
Image Repair in Research	8
Family Separation Crisis.....	18
Crisis Timeline.....	23
Research Questions.....	25
III. METHOD.....	26
Research Design.....	26
Variable Specification and Analytic Frames.....	27
Sampling Method.....	29
Procedure.....	30
IV. RESULTS.....	32
Research Question One.....	32
Research Question Two.....	41

V. DISCUSSION	43
Research Question One.....	43
Research Question Two.....	48
Limitations and Future Research.....	52
CONCLUSION.....	54
REFERENCES.....	55

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Crisis Timeline.....	23
Table 2 Benoit’s Image Repair Typology.....	27
Table 3 Sample Tweets for Image Repair Strategies Used.....	39
Table 4 Trump’s Job Approval Ratings.....	41

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In April 2018, Jeff Sessions, Attorney General, announced the “zero-tolerance” policy directing federal prosecutors to prosecute all adults entering the country illegally. As such, children were being separated from their parents as they could not stay in detention centers with them (Hegarty, 2018). This policy was legitimized under the argument that it would deter immigrants from crossing the border illegally. In the span of five months, the policy increasingly faced backlash from different interest groups, such as politicians on Democratic and Republican sides, advocacy groups, and social justice leaders (Rivas, 2018). Public attention on the matter spiked resulting in tremendous pressure on the President and his administration to issue public statements and respond to the crisis. Lawmakers from the Democratic and the Republican parties faced a roadblock and could not agree on a solution. The Republicans advocated for this policy while Democrats denounced it. This sharp disagreement caused the crisis to deteriorate and delayed a solution that satisfied the public (Holpuch, 2018). Due to the national outcry, on June 20, 2018 the President signed an executive order to end the separation of families at the border.

Former President Barack Obama was among the first presidents to use Twitter in his 2008 presidential election campaign. He gained 118,000 followers by sharing updates and volunteer opportunities about his campaign. Ever since, many politicians started using the social media platform to gain more proximity to their followers (Yaqub, Chun, Atluri & Vaidya, 2017). It was not surprising to see the presence of Twitter communication during

the Trump presidential campaign. However, no other President has used the social media platform like Donald Trump has. During the campaigning stages and his presidency, Trump frequently used Twitter as a medium of communication to post comments and address different crises. His use of Twitter allowed for instantaneous and direct access to the public, without the interruption of the media and other critics. Trump's use of Twitter has been described as unprecedented (Newport, 2018). He so often discussed public issues and sensitive topics that his tweets began to make news headlines in many news channels, newspapers, and other news media. Research has focused on television and broadcast media, speeches, press releases, interviews, and fact sheets as main artifacts to study image repair processes (Eriksson & Eriksson, 2012; Hambrick, Frederick & Sanderson, 2013). Neglecting the increasing use of social media outlets, such as Twitter, by politicians provides a gap that this study tries to address. In fact, Twitter presents a modern communication channel where politicians not only share their policies and opinions but also directly interact with the public. This channel allows them to greatly influence their followers and shape the political discourse making it essential to evaluate these messages (Yaqub et al., 2017).

In a crisis setting, politicians are often put to the test by the public and "either become heroes or villains" (Liu, 2006, p. 41). In the midst of the 2018 family separation crisis, Trump faced a large wave of criticism and public outcry that required him to defend his image. Holding one of the most powerful public positions in one of the most powerful countries in the world, Donald Trump's use of Twitter as a medium of presidential communication constitutes a high priority for research. This crisis presents a valid case study to explore the image repair strategies used by the President through Benoit's (1995, 1997)

image repair theory. It is worthwhile to study these strategies as they will provide communication researchers and professionals, and the general public with evidence-based guidelines to identify the different image repair resources available when dealing with a crisis. This research will be beneficial to communication scholars and experts of the field by providing insight and evidence on the effectiveness of image repair strategies by allowing them to make strategic, educated, and beneficial decisions when facing reputational crises. Additionally, this study will provide the general public and people who hold interest in image crises with insight to help them construct informed opinions about their government representatives. After all, the President's communication greatly influences public opinions (Liu, 2006).

The major goal of this study is to provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of the strategies used at repairing the President's image and potentially extend the application of image repair theory in the political arena. More specifically, this study seeks to identify the image repair strategies used by the President and evaluate their effectiveness. To do so, two research questions will be presented following the review of relevant literature in Chapter Two. Next, the methods used to accomplish these goals are included in Chapter Three, followed by Chapter Four which will include the results. Ultimately, a discussion of the different strengths and weaknesses of the image repair strategies used by Trump is provided in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Image Repair Theory

William Benoit (1995) developed image restoration theory as a tool to study an organization's response strategies when facing a crisis. Benoit emphasized that in order to understand these strategies, one ought to examine the nature of the attacks or offensive actions. The theory is based on two fundamental assumptions necessary to understand the nature of the attack. The first component is that "the accused is held responsible for an action" (p. 178), and the second component is that the "act is considered offensive" (p. 178).

Benoit (1997) further explained the importance of these two components. First, if a company is not believed to be responsible for the action, one has no reason to view the company negatively. In addition, if the most relevant audience does not perceive the action as offensive and approves of it, one cannot view the company negatively. According to Benoit (1997), "perception is more important than reality" (p. 178). As such, it does not matter if the company or individual did indeed commit the offensive act or not, if the audience does not think of the action as offensive then it is not a negative image for the individual or company. The company's image is heavily dependent on the perception of the audience. The same principle applies to whether the act is in fact offensive. If the audience does not think or perceive the action as offensive, then the company's image is not at risk even though the action is indeed offensive.

Furthermore, Benoit (1997) addressed the significance of the audience. He stated that each individual or company has a wide variety of audiences and some are more important than others. For instance, an oil producing company's stakeholders vary from shareholders, environmentalists, governmental agencies, and citizens. Acknowledging that each of these different audiences have different objectives and needs, a company is more apt to determine its most significant audience during a crisis and respond accordingly (Benoit, 1997).

The approach Benoit (1997) took in addressing responses to crises is not to address each crisis situation individually, but instead to examine the different response options. As such, he introduced a typology that categorized the different strategies to deal with image repair. The typology included five main categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. These main strategies split into different sub-strategies that further explain the different courses of action available to a crisis communicator.

The first strategy that Benoit introduced was denial. Denial can be manifested through simple denial, which means to simply refuse the offensive act and announce that it did not happen, the company did not commit the act, or the act did not present harm. A second way a company can utilize denial is through shifting the blame, which means that the company says that someone else is responsible for the offensive act (Benoit, 1997). This sub-strategy was used by Exxon's chair when he put the blame on government officials and the Coast Guard for causing the delay in cleaning the oil spill in Alaska (Benoit, 1997).

The second strategy of image restoration is evading responsibility. One way this strategy could take place is when the company explains its offensive act as a response to

another company's offensive act. A company can also use defeasibility as a way to evade responsibility. In this sub-strategy, the company will use the lack of information or control as a reason for its offensive act. The company can also state the offensive act was committed by accident to shift the blame. The last sub-strategy is when the company claims that the offensive act happened with good intentions. By legitimizing the act and trying to convince the audience to not be held accountable for the act, the company can evade responsibility.

Reducing offensiveness is the third strategy offered by Benoit (1995). A method that can be used through this strategy is bolstering. Bolstering allows the rhetor to reduce the negative effects of the act by making the audience positively believe in the rhetor (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Using this method allows for the audience to identify with the rhetor by presenting something that is valued and cherished by the audience. Another way a company can engage in bolstering is by trying to reduce the negative feelings that came with the act and downplaying the negative consequences associated with it. Also, the company can use differentiation, which is explained as comparing the act to other more offensive acts and distinguishing it as less offensive. Employing the strategy of transcendence is another way to reduce offensiveness, by "attempting to place the act in a more favorable context" (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). A more aggressive approach to reduce offensiveness is to attack the accusers. The final approach under this strategy is to offer compensation as long as the compensation is acceptable to the victim.

The corrective action strategy of image restoration is the fourth strategy of Benoit's (1995) typology. By promising to correct the act, a company attempts to restore its image and promises the audience that something will be done to either make things go back to their pre-

crisis state and/or promises to prevent future occurrences of the offensive act. The last general image repair strategy of the typology is mortification. The company or the individual can decide to confess to committing the offensive act and apologize for it. The use of these strategies varies from one situation to another and from one company to another.

Companies/individuals may choose to use a combination of these strategies or only use one.

Benoit explained that a crisis situation may develop and change over time, which would implicate that the company or individual has to adapt their strategies according to the change (Brinson & Benoit, 1996).

Despite the numerous strategies that the typology contains, it was admitted that it is not comprehensive and can be theoretically expanded and developed (Benoit, 1995). Seizing this opportunity, Smithson and Venette (2013) argued that stonewalling is a strategy of image repair that should be considered as a defense strategy. Stonewalling is defined as “uncooperative communication that strategically obstructs and delays the flow of information” (Smithson & Venette, 2013, p. 399). This method can be used by the accused to offer trivial information without giving control to the accuser. It is a way of hindering the flow of information and dodging accusations. This strategy seeks to weaken the accuser by denying them relevant information about the accusation. In other words, by providing irrelevant information, the accused is in a more powerful position than the accuser as they are able to reroute the flow of the exchange. By doing so, the accuser is left with two choices: either repeatedly question the accused, which becomes seen as harassment, or look for a different strategy to get the accused to admit to the wrongdoing. In both cases, the rhetor controls the situation by withholding relevant information from the accuser, refocusing the

conversation on something trivial, which makes further questioning seem pointless and frustrating (Smithson & Venette, 2013).

It is important to note that Smithson and Venette argue that stonewalling is not to be confused with silence (2013). Silence is viewed as a passive crisis response strategy while stonewalling is viewed as an active one. Another major distinction between the two strategies is that through silence, the accused is withholding information, giving up control over the situation, and allowing the accuser to interpret their reaction in the manner they desire. Through stonewalling, however, the accused refuses to respond while still withholding information. In this case, the accused is not giving up control as they steer the conversation away from the relevant issue (Smithson & Venette, 2013).

Image Repair in Research

Numerous researchers have used image repair theory as a model to study the different ways corporations, institutions, and individuals react to crisis situations and the consequences their response strategies have on their image. In the field of politics, the theory has been used in identifying certain rhetoric and analyzing the repercussions the chosen communication methods have on the image of the accused. An often studied case is that of President George W. Bush after his approval ratings started to decline as the number of casualties caused by the Iraq war rose (Benoit, 2006). In the field of public relations, Mazer (2013) employed image repair theory to study Dan Rather's apology in the CBS Evening News following allegations of using fraudulent sources to cover his story on President Bush's service in the Texas Air National Guard. Religious institutions have also utilized image repair theory to determine the best defense strategies to use. Particularly, the Catholic Church has been at the

center of multiple public image attacks following different allegations and has also had its messages studied by researchers (Garcia, 2009; Kauffman, 2008).

The theory has also been largely studied in the field of business. Notably, the study of product recall cases largely analyzed the use of image repair strategies in crises. Specifically, a 2009 study examined two strategic partner's (Ford Motor Company and Firestone Tires) game of shifting the blame that resulted in ruining both companies' reputations (Jerome & Rowland, 2009). Environmental and natural disasters related crises have also used this theory. The Valdez Exxon oil spill that damaged the reef in Alaska was a significant event that required the company to respond to environmental pressure groups and government agents of Alaska (Benoit, 1997). In the case of corporations, Benoit (1997) stated that "attorneys may recommend that their companies eschew certain strategies to minimize the risks of litigation" (p. 177). This point emphasized the crucial role image repair strategies play in determining the fate of a corporation or an individual. The wide variety of fields where this theory has been utilized illustrates its adaptability to a wide range of situations and crisis settings.

Mazer (2013) employed image repair theory to examine Dan Rather's apology in the *CBS Evening News* after allegations of using fraudulent sources to cover his story on President Bush's service in the Texas Air National Guard. The analysis revealed that CBS News used denial as a defense strategy in the beginning stages of the crisis. The network strongly negated that the documents used to cover the story were fraudulent and that they were indeed based on "a preponderance of evidence" (p. 175).

In the following stages of the crisis, the network used shifting the blame by claiming that Bill Burkett, a former Texas Army National Guard officer, was the one who gave *CBS* the documents it used in the report. After increasing speculations over the authenticity of the documents, Dan Rather used bolstering to attempt to align his values with positive values that relate to the audience by stating that the audience's trust is what the network strives to maintain. In other instances, transcendence was also used as a strategy by stating that if Rather had known that the documents were fraudulent, he would not have gone with the story.

Towards the end of the crisis, Dan Rather issued an apology that combined strategies of corrective action and mortification. By inviting authentication experts to further investigate the documents, the network attempted to redeem its image in the eyes of its viewers. Additionally, the anchor apologized to the public. Dan Rather's attempt to restore his image, using all the strategies mentioned above, was described as unsuccessful. Mazer (2013) claimed that even though the newsman did use apologetic words such as "I'm sorry", he only admitted to a simple error in judgment. In fact, he was not able to regain "the network's and the American public's trust in his position as anchor of the *CBS Evening News*" (p. 180).

In their 2009 article, Holtzhausen and Roberts addressed the sexual assaults crisis at the Air Force Academy in 2002. The objective of this study was to determine which image repair strategies were used by the Air Force in dealing with the allegations and to assess their effectiveness. Ultimately, the study found that the Air Force Academy mainly used corrective action, bolstering, defeasibility, and mortification. The "Air Force argued that it had a plan in

place to solve and prevent the action from reoccurring” (p. 18). The entity employed bolstering by emphasizing its alliance with good and moral traits. It also used defeasibility saying that the lack of information and ability was a contributing factor to the crisis. Mortification was another strategy used as the Air Force took full responsibility for the incident and apologized for its actions. Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) emphasized in their analysis how difficult it was to determine the effectiveness of image repair strategies because of the situational differences and other contingencies that have affected the crisis. These strategies were found to be more positive in this situation than other strategies, such as shifting the blame or denying that the incident even occurred.

The field of politics has been marked by so many incidents where image repair was needed. Whether it is a politician’s career or a government’s image that is at stake, image repair theories have been extensively used as a lens to study the different impacts each strategy has on politics. In a speech where he fought back attacks of guilt by association, Barack Obama used different image repair strategies in response to misinterpreted comments made by his pastor, Reverend Wright. The controversy pushed Obama to address the allegations in an attempt to repair not only his image but also his Reverend’s image, as well (Mooney, 2008; Nasaw, 2008; Zuckerman, 2008). The story started during Senator Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign when *ABC News* released a 2016 report, which studied and analyzed the different image repair methods the senator used at the time to defend himself against attacks of guilt by association because of provocative remarks made by his pastor. Reverend Jeremiah Wright was reported to have said in sermons, “the government gives them the drugs, builds prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing ‘God Bless

America.’ No, no, no God Damn America, that’s in the Bible for killing innocent people” (Nasaw, 2008, p. 1). These remarks were not pleasing to many viewers and were labeled as denunciations to the US by *ABC News* reporters Ross and El-Buri (Benoit, 2016).

Linked to his pastor’s provocative comments, Obama was accused of being unpatriotic and racist with guilt by association as he was accused of sharing the same opinions about America as Reverend Wright. On March 18, 2008, Obama took to the stage and gave a speech entitled “A More Perfect Union” where he used denial as a strategy to repair his own image and used bolstering and provocation to repair Reverend Wright’s image (Benoit, 2016). For bolstering, Obama used the U.S. constitution to reference high morals and values that the country is founded on like liberty, justice, and equality. This strategy helped Obama strengthen the audience’s view of him by associating himself with positive characteristics and values shared by his audience. In addition, Obama employed simple denial when he condemned the statements of Reverend Wright by stating that he strongly disagreed with his pastor’s political views and mentioning his white grandmother as a way to prove his disassociation with racism (Benoit, 2016).

Similarly, Davis (2013) found Hillary Clinton’s involvement in the Iraq war a valuable case for image repair analysis. In 2002, Clinton voted to authorize the use of the United States armed forces against Iraq. This decision was faced with criticism as her primary voters strongly opposed the war. This situation presented a public relations and political crisis for Hillary Clinton as she was the democratic candidate for the 2008 presidential primary. Using image repair theory, Davis (2013) was able to analyze the strategies used by Clinton as an attempt to repair her political image. In fact, Davis’ research

revealed that mortification, defeasibility, and differentiation were the primary strategies she used when she answered questions in a political debate (Davis, 2013). Clinton's use of differentiation was explained by the fact that she was going for increased diplomacy. This strategy was interpreted by Davis as a lack of incompetence as she was not able to differentiate between authorizing military force and increased diplomacy (Davis, 2013). As for defeasibility, it was interpreted that Clinton evaded responsibility by stating that her decision was not well informed. However, because in a different statement Clinton motioned that she was sufficiently briefed on the matter and consulted with previous experts, her actions were interpreted as having the right information to make an informed decision and had no reason to evade responsibility on the basis of the lack of information. As for using mortification as a strategy, Clinton claimed to accept responsibility for actions without explicitly apologizing. However, by saying that she did the best job she could at the time, she was still interpreted as evading responsibility. Ultimately, the methods used by Clinton have been interpreted as ineffective. Her contradicting statements that she was briefed and that she made an informed decision "weakened the effectiveness of defeasibility and mortification" (Davis, 2013, p.318).

Benoit's (2006) study of Bush's April 2004 news conference explores the field of politics. President Bush held the only prime time news conference during his presidency demonstrating how important it was for him to defend and repair his image. Because of the Iraq war and the increasing number of casualties at the time, President Bush was facing a reputation crisis manifested through a drop of 21% in approval ratings in a period of one year from 2003 to 2004. President Bush faced a challenging task to repair his damaged image and

justify starting a war against another country in the midst of a re-election period. The study was a rhetorical analysis of the President's press conference speech and attempts to identify the different strategies Bush used to repair his image. The study found that transcendence, bolstering, and denial were among the main strategies that dominated in the President's speech and answers (Benoit, 2006).

Other than identifying the different image repair theories that President Bush used in his speech, Benoit (2006) evaluated the effectiveness of each strategy found. The instance of transcendence where Bush stated that Saddam Hussein was an imminent threat was ineffectual. His attempt of defeasibility by saying that those who knew the location of the weapons were too scared to tell was also judged as weak and ineffective as Hussein was in fact captured a few months prior. Bush continued to refuse to admit to any wrong doing throughout his speech and answers. His use of transcendence by saying that Hussein was an imminent threat to the Iraqi people did not justify going to war with Iraq (Benoit, 2006).

Denial was also a less effective strategy to change his audience's opinions. By refusing to admit that it was a mistake to start a war without having a legitimate reason, Bush appeared to be stubborn as he refused to concede to any responsibility and apologize. Benoit (2006) came to the conclusion that President Bush "failed to turn around the slide of his popularity" (p. 142). The study used a *Washington Post* poll comparison between pre and post conference to show that the President's approval ratings decreased proving that a majority of his audience disapproved of his handling of the Iraq war. Because the President faced a highly polarized audience, his responses and strategies could not have satisfied everyone and his strategies were evaluated to target those who were susceptible to

persuasion. According to Benoit (2006), clinging to the narrative that Hussein was an eminent threat and that the Iraqi people deserved freedom as a transcendence attempt was not a successful strategy.

As explained in the previous cases, image repair theory has been used as a lens to analyze different cases of political crises. However, determining which image repair strategy will yield the best outcome is highly contingent on many factors and the specificities of each situation. In fact, Sheldon and Sallot (2009) noted that “when a politician makes a mistake, he ought to publicly apologize to protect his reputation” (p. 44). Aligned with Benoit’s recommendation, when it comes to political crises, politicians’ best bet is mortification as has been shown through history. The study discussed Gary Condit and President Nixon as examples of politicians who did not use mortification and were therefore unsuccessful at repairing their image. The authors admit that it is hard to determine whether apologizing would have indeed changed the outcomes of those cases, but emphasized that an apology does bring many benefits and improves the crisis in one way or another (Sheldon & Sallot, 2009).

Garcia (2009) studied the Pope’s 2009 revocation of the excommunication of four schismatic Society of Saint Pius X Bishops. The crisis took place when the mass media condemned that one of the four excommunication bishops, Richard Williamson, was allowed back into the Church in January 2009 by Pope Benedict XVI despite the fact that he denied the existence of the Holocaust on Swedish television. To investigate the repercussions the crisis had on the image of the Church and the Pope, the author applied the theory of image repair to examine the public outcry that the incident caused. In his paper, Garcia (2009)

argued that the Catholic Church has faced many communication crises that were valuable to evaluate. Such scandals included the criticism the Pope faced regarding his statements about the use of condoms for AIDS prevention in Africa and Benedict XVI offenses to the Muslim world in a Regensburg conference. Being a valuable and symbolic figure in the Catholic Church, the Pope's rhetoric is inevitably valuable to analyze. Through the lens of image restoration, Garcia (2009) argued that the Church used evading of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification as defense strategies. These strategies were argued to be fundamentally correct; however, their implementation was criticized due to structural limitations that the Church faces when responding to such crises. As the Church's response was not speedy, it was not accepted in the eyes of the public. As is the tradition in the Church's hierarchy, the Church sees the need to respond to only Christ when it comes to public allegations. The opinion of the public does not represent a crisis in the eyes of the Church. This factor limits the effectiveness of applying image repair strategies to the case of Bishop Williamson. In fact, in the nature of the bureaucracy by which the Church operates, an idea of a quick response is contradictory. Additionally, different nations reacted in different speeds: "the reactions of the German and American Episcopalian conferences were much quicker and firmer than others in their condemnation of the remission of Bishop Williamson's excommunication" (Garcia, 2009, p. 2). Despite the fact that the strategies used were considered to be correct from a theory standpoint, the Pope's image was affected according to media consensus (Garcia, 2009).

Kauffman (2008) tackled the sexual abuse of minors scandal that broke out in 2002 in the Archdiocese of Boston. The crisis signaled a critical point in the history of the Catholic

Church in America as it faced escalating criticism from the public. Image repair theory was employed by Kauffman to analyze the response strategies used by Pope John Paul II. The analysis yielded the use of a number of image repair strategies including: mortification, defeasibility, bolstering, and corrective action. After apologizing to the victims of the abuse and asking for forgiveness, Law claimed that his decision to assign Geoghan to a parish was based on the advice of therapists and doctors and was made in good faith. Additionally, Law tried to change the audience's feelings about him by reminding them of the new policy he created that addressed sexual abuse of minors by clergy and investigated all the cases using a rigorous process. In addition to his policy, Cardinal Law announced a new policy that made a requirement for clergy and employees in the church to report all alleged abuse cases.

Cardinal Law's strategies to defend his image were judged as unsuccessful as his response was rejected by the audience. In fact, Law was not trusted by his audience and was perceived as arrogant; therefore, his apology was questioned and not believed (Kauffman, 2008). The study concluded that despite the fact that Law used the most appropriate and effective strategies of image restoration, he was not able to successfully repair his image. Kauffman (2008) argued that this unsuccessful attempt was due to the situation saying that "Law may have faced a situation in which it may not have made any difference which image restoration strategies he employed" (p. 261).

As discussed above, image repair theory is used in a wide variety of literature and was applied to a multitude of crises supporting that Benoit's typology is adaptable to any image repair crisis. The various strategies and sub-strategies represent a valuable resource for organizations and individuals to use in cases where image repair is needed. Benoit's

strategies serve as tools to repair, enhance, and maintain image. The different studies using this theory illustrate how important it is to not only identify these strategies when a crisis occurs, but also to assess their effectiveness. Determining whether a strategy is successful or not allows other researchers and scholars to use the theory and expand upon it. Thus, a current crisis that allows for possible expansion of the Image Repair Theory is Trump's Family Separation crisis, which brought heavy scrutiny to his reputation by many opposed to his decision.

Family Separation Crisis

The issue of illegal immigration has been a prevalent problem in America after the start of the so called "war on terror". Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, great attention has shifted to American border security as a major priority for the country in order to decrease the terrorist threat stemming from illegal immigration (Pope & Garrett, 2012). In fact, according to Pope and Garrett (2012), the crackdown on illegal immigration became "a paramount policy issue" (p. 168). Thus, U.S. policies on illegal immigration have increasingly emphasized this issue as a priority for national security.

In April 2018, the Trump administration elected to put into effect the "zero-tolerance" immigration policy, which separates immigrant children from their parents once they arrive to the southern border of the US illegally. The objective behind this policy was to discourage people from crossing the American-Mexican border without legal documentation. According to the Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, "family separation is necessary to deter migrants from trying to cross the border illegally" (Holpuch, 2018, p.1). As a result, about 2,300 children

were separated from their families by May 2018 alone as their parents were being prosecuted by the Justice Department and authorities at the border (Hegarty, 2018).

Ambiguity and questions on whether the policy was proper floated around the issue (Kopan, 2018). The crisis did not stop at the problem of child separation, but evolved to include accusations of child abuse and heartlessness (Klein & Liptak, 2018). For a long time, the administration officials and other concerned authorities have refrained from releasing any official facts and numbers about the issue. No exact number of how many children were separated was provided, and contradicting statements were made about the goal behind the policy. This ambiguity led to increasing pressure from Congress and members of the media that demanded to know the number of children that the policy affected to quantify the impact of the policy. However, officials have consistently declined to provide any numbers. Instead, different parties refuted certain facts. On the one hand, Jeff Sessions and White House Chief of Staff John Kelly claimed that the policy was used as a deterrent for immigrants not to cross the border illegally. On the other hand, Stephen Miller, the White House senior policy adviser, claimed that the policy was effectively ensuring that “no one is above the law” (Rhodan, 2018, p. 1). Additionally, the Homeland Security Secretary, Kirsten Nielsen, denied the claim that the policy existed in the first place stating that “we do not have a policy of separating families at the border. Period” (Rhodan, 2018, p. 1). Responding to a *New York Times* story that claimed that “more than 700 children ha[d] been separated from their parents” (Dickerson, 2018, p. 1), which confirmed the high number of cases, Nielson continued to deny that the number was that high. However, few days later, Nielsen defended the policy when she spoke before the National Sheriffs’ Association justifying that the policy

was needed as children were being used by adults to form fake families in order to be able to cross the border (Rhodan, 2018).

Another element that added uncertainty around the issue was whether an actual law existed that separated children from their families. According to an article released by *The Washington Post* (2018), the “zero-tolerance” policy was confused with the existence of a law that separates families when in fact children cannot be kept with their parents in jails as they get prosecuted for illegally crossing the border, thus, making it necessary to separate parents from their children. The children are then rendered unaccompanied and are required to go through the Department of Health and Human Services (Kim, 2018). Another contradicting message that caused confusion around the issue was the goal behind issuing the “zero-tolerance” policy.

Concerns and questions over the humanitarian conditions of the children were also raised. Kim (2018) reported that images released by Customs and Border Protection showed migrants “enclosed in large pens with chain-link fences for walls” (p. 1). Additionally, according to reporters allowed on scene, children were kept in “concrete-floor cages in this warehouselike facility and given foil blankets, bottled water and food as they waited to be processed” (Kim, 2018, p. 1). These concerns further complicated the nature of the issue and highlighted its priority making the job of concerned authorities, notably the President, more critical than ever. According to Cox and Rodriguez (2009), the President of the United States has considerable authority over the issue of illegal immigration. Top government officials from the Trump administration have been involved in this crisis including the President

himself. After reports confirmed that around 2000 children were separated from their families at the border, President Donald Trump began to receive much scrutiny.

Before being elected as President, according to the *Gallup* measure of public opinions, “Americans have consistently viewed Trump more negatively than positively” (Jones, 2016, p. 1). The only exception to that statement was in 2005 when the poll witnessed a high 50% of favorable opinion of Trump when his show *The Apprentice* was one of the most popular programs on TV (Jones, 2016). Prior to the presidency, Donald Trump was primarily a real estate developer and businessman known for his involvement with different reality TV programs. He took on cameo roles in movies such as *Home Alone 2* and *Sex in the City*. He was also the host for the hit reality TV show *The Apprentice*, which he produced. As TV star and businessman, Donald Trump emerged as a rich celebrity among viewers. He was known to have controversial views on sensitive issues, such as race and immigration. In 1973, Trump settled a lawsuit with the Department of Justice in which he was accused of refusing to rent his apartments to black renters (CNN, 2018). After announcing his presidential bid, the issue of immigration was a staple of his presidential campaign as he advocated for stronger border control and stricter policies on illegal immigration. He often used Twitter to rant about immigrants calling them criminals, terrorists, and drug dealers. In 2015, after announcing his decision to run for the presidency, Trump promised to be stricter on immigration as Mexico was sending “people who have lots of problems...they’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, they’re rapists...” (Reilly, 2018, p.1). His stance on immigration set him apart from other political leaders and gained him support from people who shared the same conservative views as him. He continued to spread the rhetoric that

America needed to stop letting immigrants in and that the US needed to also build a wall around its southern border as a means of protection for the nation.

Trump created his Twitter account in 2009 and used it primarily to advertise his shows and business. He used ghostwriters at the time for most of his publications. His tweets mainly served a promotional purpose and did not have any political content (Carr, 2018). In 2011, Trump's Twitter activity started to increase as he began to comment and share his rants on the social media outlet without any filters for the choice of tone, words, or even punctuation. The style and frequency of his tweets mark a definite change in the way Presidents communicate with the public. Today, Trump has 46.7 million followers (Buncombe, 2018). According to Buncombe (2018), he "uses Twitter in a way that has no equal among other political leaders" (p. 1). The fact that the media makes Trump's tweets the subject of their news headlines adds some sort of legitimacy to him (Buncombe, 2018). The issue of immigration was dominant in his tweets. When it came to the family separation crisis in 2018, Trump used this social media outlet as a platform where he defended the policy and blamed others for loopholes that caused it. He responded to the reports of family separations by saying that Democrats refused to cooperate with Republicans on working to solve immigration issues. The President expressed his discontent with the family separations conveying how disappointed he was in Democrats for making this law (Kim, 2018; Rhodan, 2018). Donald Trump's immigration rhetoric was described as aggressive according to a *CNN* article as he used the phrase "infest our country" as a way of describing what the immigrants crossing the border were doing (Kopan, 2018). As Trump's rhetoric became increasingly aggressive, it became more evident through the media that Trump's support of

separating children from their parents became highly scrutinized. As such, a public outcry began. As a result, Trump’s rhetoric within his tweets began to shift as a noted reputational crisis began to emerge.

Crisis Timeline

In April 2018, the “zero-tolerance” policy that separates children from their parents was launched by the Trump administration in efforts to deter illegal immigration at the southern border. The administration suggested the idea of separating families as early as March 2017 to gauge others’ perception of it and interest in it. Speculations around whether the policy was indeed being executed increased as time went by. The pre-crisis phase was initially signaled in March 2017. Then, the crisis evolved when the first official confirmation was mediated in May 2018. Table 1 highlights the chronological order of the major events of the crisis. The following crisis timeline, adapted from *USA Today* news network, assists in charting both the pre-crisis and crisis stages of the President’s reputation predicament (Hegarty, 2018). It is worthy to mention that this crisis is ongoing; therefore, the post-crisis phase is not included.

Table 1

Crisis Timeline

Pre-Crisis Phase	
March 7, 2017	John Kelly, previously Secretary of Homeland Security in the Trump administration, tells <i>CNN</i> that the administration is considering separating families as it will discourage people from crossing the border illegally.
April 5, 2017	In a testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, John Kelly states that children will be separated from their parents if their lives were endangered.

Table 1 Continued

Pre-Crisis Phase	
October 2017	A <i>New York Times</i> article published in April 2018 confirmed that the separations begin no later than October.
December 11, 2017	A joint complaint is filed with the department of Homeland Security by immigration advocacy groups of which are Immigration Justice Campaign, Kids in Need of Defense, American Immigration Council, and American Immigration Lawyers Association.
Crisis Phase	
April 6, 2018	A zero-tolerance policy was announced by Attorney General Jeff Sessions. The policy gave orders to federal prosecutors to prosecute adult immigrants as criminals once they cross the border illegally.
April 11, 2018	Kirstjen Nielsen, Homeland Secretary, testified before the House of Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee that there is no policy that calls for family separation.
April 16, 2018	According to a <i>CNN</i> report, the Homeland Security Inspector General will start to look into whether the separation is proper or not following an investigation request from Democratic senators.
April 20, 2018	A report released by the <i>New York Times</i> claims that 700 children have been separated from their parents since October.
May 7, 2018	Jeff Sessions clarifies the administration’s intent to prosecute all adults that cross the border illegally.
May 11, 2018	White House Chief of Staff, John Kelly, defended the separation by describing it as a “necessary evil” to increase border control.
May 15, 2018	Kirstjen Nielsen also defends the policy
June 14, 2018	Jeff Sessions defends the policy
June 15, 2018	Department of Homeland Security announces for the first time that nearly 2000 children have been separated from their parents from April 19 to May 31.
June 17, 2018	Public outcry and attention about the issue spike according to Google trends.

Table 1 Continued

Crisis Phase	
June 18, 2018	Kirstjen Nielson claims that the administration is only doing its job and there is no need for apology.
June 19, 2018	GOP governor of Iowa criticizes policy as horrific.
June 20, 2018	Trump signs an executive order in order to keep migrant families together. The order, which was drafted by Nielsen, dictated that the Homeland Security keeps families together after it reported that 2342 children were separated at the border from May 5 to June 9.
June 24, 2018	Trump tweeted that illegal immigrants are to be immediately deported back to their home countries without any court involvement.
June 25, 2018	Customs and Border Protection Commissioner says the order temporarily stopped criminal prosecution of parents.
June 26, 2018	A California federal judge, Dana Sabraw, ordered US immigration authorities to reunite families within 30 days (children younger than 5 years old must be unified within 14 days).

Research Questions

The family separation crisis constitutes a perfect case to study the different image repair strategies President Trump used in his tweets and their impact on his approval ratings. In order to analyze the rhetoric conducted by President Trump in dealing with the 2018 immigration crisis, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: Which image repair strategies did Trump use in his tweets when responding to critiques of his immigration policy that separated parents from their children once they arrived at the southern U.S. border?

RQ2: Were the identified image repair strategies used by Trump effective in repairing his image?

CHAPTER III

METHOD

To be able to answer the presented research questions for this study, the researcher conducted a qualitative content analysis on all tweets made by the official public Twitter account of the President concerning the family separation crisis. These tweets were filtered using the database “TrumpTwitterArchive”. The researcher determined that the President’s use of Twitter is a valuable source being that the President uses this social media platform as a means of communication with the U.S. citizens. In fact, his frequent use of Twitter has made his unfiltered comments, responses, and rants more available to the American people than ever before (Newport, 2018). Despite the existence of press releases and more official means of communication, the use of Twitter as a means of presidential communication is unprecedented making tweets an interesting sample for research.

Research Design

Content analysis aims to provide understanding and interpretations of textual data on a certain phenomenon. It is a largely used method of analysis in research (Jong, Duckers, & Velden, 2016; Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, & Cosby, 2018) making it an appropriate tool of analysis for this study. Specifically, a directed approach to qualitative content analysis was chosen. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), the objective of using this approach is to allow researchers to “validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory” (p. 1281). Similarly, in this study, using Benoit’s image repair theory as a theoretical framework to categorize the President’s tweets may yield a new category of tweets that does not fit

within the existing typology of image repair strategies. Consequently, the directed qualitative content analysis will allow the researcher to expand the existing body of literature on image repair theory.

Qualitative content analysis can be done on two different levels: manifest and latent. The manifest level deals with counting surface features, such as words or phrases, while latent content deals with the more underlying meaning of the words or phrases. Latent content is less obvious as it deals with “interpreting the underlying meaning of the text” (Thayer et al., 2007, p. 270). Even though this study predominantly focused on the latent content of the tweets, a closer look at the manifest content (i.e., words that indicate the use of certain repair strategies, such as *I’m sorry*) will allow for more precision during the analysis phase.

Variable Specification and Analytic Frames

For research question one and in order to identify which image repair strategies were used by the President in response to the family separation crisis, Benoit’s (1995, 1997) image repair theory was used as a lens. Table 2 offers the theoretical definitions for all the image repair strategies existing in Benoit’s typology.

Table 2

Benoit’s Image Repair Typology

Strategy	Characteristics	Example
Denial <i>Simple denial</i>	Act not performed by accused	I did not steal your pen
<i>Shifting the blame</i>	Act performed by someone else	Someone else stole your pen, not me

Table 2 Continued

Strategy	Characteristics	Example
Evasion of Responsibility <i>Provocation</i>	Response to another act	I stole your pen because you did not help me with my assignment
<i>Defeasibility</i>	Lack of information or control	I took the pen, but I did not know you needed it
<i>Accident</i>	Act was an accident	I took your pen thinking it was mine
<i>Good intentions</i>	Accused meant well	I meant to buy you a new pen
Reducing Offensiveness <i>Bolstering</i>	Highlight good qualities	I have always been nice to you
<i>Minimization</i>	Act is not as serious	It's no big deal I stole your pen, it was old and did not write well
<i>Differentiation</i>	Act is less offensive than others	I did not steal your pen, I borrowed it
<i>Transcendence</i>	More important issues to consider	I took your pen to write you a love note
<i>Attacking the accuser</i>	Reduce accuser credibility	You lied about the times you stole my pen
<i>Compensation</i>	Reimburse the victims	I will help you with your assignment
Corrective Action	Plan to prevent problem or solve it	Offer to buy a new pen
Mortification	Admit and apologize	Apologize for stealing pen

Adapted from Benoit (1997, 2015)

This theory is and has been considered as the “dominant paradigm” in studies of communication crises (Kauffman, 2008, p. 259). Numerous studies (Benoit, 2006; Davis, 2013; Kauffman, 2008; Mazer, 2013) have used Benoit’s image repair as a lens to identify image repair strategies and assess their effectiveness. Tweets that could not be categorized

according to Benoit's image repair typology were separated and set aside for further analysis. The researcher analyzed those tweets using stonewalling of Smithson and Venette (2013) to determine whether this new strategy could account for these uncategorized tweets.

For the second research question, the researcher examined the approval ratings of the President that coordinated with his tweets during the period of crisis. This step allowed the researcher to determine whether the identified strategies were effective in repairing the President's image or not. Job approval has been considered to be among the most reliable measures of a president's public standing (Lavrakas, 2008). In this study, the researcher used the *Gallup* poll as the main tool to do so. The researcher's decision to use the *Gallup* poll was driven by the high credibility the polling organization has gained throughout the years. The poll has been used to conduct presidential approval ratings polls since the 1940s with little bias (Gallup, n.d). Several research studies utilized the *Gallup* poll (Franklin, 2005; Lavrakas, 2008) to determine presidential success as it has been considered to be "the best comparative assessment of presidential performance we have" (Franklin, 2005, p. 1). Additionally, the fact that the poll is updated on a weekly basis gives the researcher the flexibility to conduct more specific comparisons of presidential approval over different periods of time.

Sampling Method

Sixty-two tweets were collected from the official account of the President spanning a period of four months. The researcher chose a timeframe between May 01, 2018, which signals the start of the month during which Attorney General Jeff Sessions confirmed that families were being separated at the border, and August 31, 2018, which is when media

coverage of the crisis began to dwindle. The period of analysis spans four months and aligns with periods of time where the crisis gained extensive media attention. It is important to note that even though President Trump signed the executive order to end family separations on June 20, the crisis was still extensively covered by the media reporting that children were yet to be reunited with their parents and that separations were continuous (Editorial Board, 2018; Ulloa & Davis, 2018).

Choosing to cover all tweets made by the President during the crisis provides a comprehensive understanding of Trump's reaction to the pressure he faced during the crisis and allows for a more accurate answer to the first research question. These tweets were retrieved from the "TrumpTwitterArchive", which is a database that archives all tweets made by the official public Twitter account of the President @realdonaldtrump since 2009. The database can be filtered by date and/or keyword (Fallows, 2016). The date research feature also allows the researcher to personalize the period of time during which tweets were made and to further narrow the research using specific keywords.

Procedure

To become familiar with the sample, an initial review of the tweets was conducted. First, the researcher read and re-read the tweets to gain a sense of the content. Reading through the tweets, the researcher took notes and looked for meaning in an effort to determine which tweets were more valuable to the research (Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching CIRT, n.d.). To acquire further understanding of the sample, the researcher used the presented research questions as a guide to focus the analysis on finding

the answers to those questions. Additionally, the researcher directed the analysis to more specific events and relevant time periods to better comprehend the specificities of the sample.

In order to answer research question one, the researcher first used the date research feature and looked for tweets made from May 1 to August 31, 2018, which is the chosen period for analysis. The initial sample collection using the date feature resulted in a total of 1358 tweets posted from May 1 to August 31. To avoid redundancy, retweets were excluded from the sample as they either did not represent tweets made by the President himself, or were mere repetitions of tweets already accounted for. This resulted in a sample of 1194 tweets. Then, the researcher utilized the keyword feature to isolate the tweets using the following keywords: “children”, “immigration”, “border”, and “ICE”. After doing this, it was discovered that only 62 of the tweets directly addressed the family separation crisis, which more consistently aligned with news headlines covering the situation at the border. In order to easily reference the tweets throughout the paper, the researcher numbered all tweets from 1 through 62.

To better answer research question two, special attention was given to the President’s approval ratings surrounding the period of signing the executive order as it constituted a significant event during the family separation crisis. In addition to noting approval ratings before the start of the crisis (i.e., May 1, 2018) and after the end of it (i.e., August 31, 2018), the researcher decided to look at two additional significant periods: pre-executive order and post-executive order approval ratings. With this distinction, the researcher hoped to account for and anticipate any important changes in approval ratings that could help better understand and answer the second research question of this study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Research Question One

After coding the sample using Benoit's image repair typology, three main image repair strategies emerged: reducing offensiveness, denial, and evasion of responsibility. It is important to note that some tweets contained more than one image repair strategy. Specifically, 13 tweets were found to use two or more strategies. For this reason, instead of counting tweets, the researcher found it more accurate to count instances instead (i.e., the number of times a certain strategy was used in all tweets). The total number of instances was 76.

The first and most predominant strategy used by the President was reducing offensiveness representing 39.6% (n=30) of the total 76 image repair instances found in all 62 tweets. The first sub-strategy to emerge under reducing offensiveness is transcendence. As Benoit (1997) defined it, transcendence occurs when the accused tries to place the offensive act in a more favorable light or context. It was detected that President Trump was indeed trying to reduce offensiveness of the crisis by placing it in a more favorable context. The following are examples of the 11 instances of transcendence found in Trump's tweets:

We are going to demand Congress secure the border in the upcoming CR.

Illegal immigration must end! (Tweet #11)

If this is done, illegal immigration will be stopped in it's tracks - and at very little, by comparison, cost. This is the only real answer... (Tweet #32)

...Must get rid of Lottery, Catch & Release etc. and finally go to system of Immigration based on MERIT! We need great people coming into our Country! (Tweet #35)

If you don't have Borders, you don't have a Country! (Tweet #41)

We must have Border Security, get rid of Chain, Lottery, Catch & Release Sanctuary Cities - go to Merit based Immigration. Protect ICE and Law Enforcement and, of course, keep building, but much faster, THE WALL! (Tweet #36)

We have to maintain strong borders or we will no longer have a country that we can be proud of – and if we show any weakness, millions of people will journey into our country. (Tweet #44)

We must maintain a Strong Southern Border. We cannot allow our Country to be overrun by illegal immigrants as the Democrats tell their phony stories of sadness and grief, hoping it will help them in the elections. Obama and others had the same pictures, and did nothing about it! (Tweet #45)

I am sorry to have to reiterate that there are serious and unpleasant consequences to crossing the Border into the United States ILLEGALLY! If there were no serious consequences, our country would be overrun with people trying to get in, and our system could not handle it! (Tweet #54)

The second sub-strategy to be detected under reducing offensiveness is bolstering. According to Benoit (1997), bolstering permits the accused to downplay the negative effects of the offensive act by associating it with positive values shared by the audience. Ten instances showed the President used this method to emphasize positive values cherished by

U.S. citizens across the country. The following are examples of bolstering for illustrative purposes:

My Administration is acting swiftly to address the illegal immigration crisis on the Southern Border. (Tweet #22)

Our first duty, and our highest loyalty, is to the citizens of the United States. We will not rest until our border is secure, our citizens are safe, and we finally end the immigration crisis once and for all. (Tweet #29)

Such a difference in the media coverage of the same immigration policies between the Obama Administration and ours. Actually, we have done a far better job in that our facilities are cleaner and better run than were the facilities under Obama. Fake News is working overtime! (Tweet #31)

HOUSE REPUBLICANS SHOULD PASS THE STRONG BUT FAIR IMMIGRATION BILL, KNOWN AS GOODLATTE II, IN THEIR AFTERNOON VOTE TODAY... (Tweet #33)

We are doing a far better job than Bush and Obama (Tweet #47)

The Democrats are making a strong push to abolish ICE, one of the smartest, toughest and most spirited law enforcement groups of men and women that I have ever seen. I have watched ICE liberate towns from the grasp of MS-13 & clean out the toughest of situations. They are great! (Tweet #55)

Six instances of attacking the accuser were noted as the third most used strategy by Trump. As explained by Benoit (1997), attacking the accuser is a more aggressive way to

reduce the offensiveness of the act. The following examples show how the President was attacking Democrats:

Democrats mistakenly tweet 2014 pictures from Obama's term showing children from the Border in steel cages. They thought it was recent pictures in order to make us look bad, but backfires (Tweet #2)

Democrats, who want Open Borders and care little about Crime, are incompetent, but they have the Fake News Media almost totally on their side! (Tweet #51)

The radical left Dems want you out. Next it will be all police. Zero chance, It will never happen! (Tweet #56)

Democrats want anarchy, amnesty and chaos (Tweet # 58)

The last three instances of reducing offensiveness showed the use of differentiation. Benoit (1997) indicated that when using differentiation, the rhetor tries to compare the offensive act to other more offensive acts and distinguishes it as less offensive. The following sample tweets show that Trump chose to compare the family separation crisis to more dangerous situations happening in Germany and Mexico to show that the crisis is not that offensive in comparison.

The people of Germany are turning against their leadership as migration is rocking the already tenuous Berlin coalition. Crime in Germany is way up. Big mistake made all over Europe in allowing millions of people in who have so strongly and violently changed their culture! (Tweet #3)

Has anyone been looking at the Crime taking place south of the border. It is historic, with some countries the most dangerous places in the world. Not going to happen in the U.S. (Tweet #4)

We don't want what is happening with immigration in Europe to happen with us! (Tweet #14)

The analysis revealed that the second most used image repair strategy was denial. The President did not use simple denial in any of his tweet and instead heavily relied on shifting the blame. It was found that, of a total of 76 instances, 24 contained shifting the blame representing 31.6% of all image repair instances used. Benoit (1997) stated that, when using shifting the blame, the accuser claims that the act was committed by another person or entity. In these instances, the President emphasized that Democrats were the ones responsible for creating the crisis at the border. By claiming that “it is the Democrats fault”, he is shifting the blame of the family separations onto his rival political party. The following are example tweets using shifting the blame:

Put pressure on the Democrats to end the horrible law that separates children from there parents once they cross the Border into the U.S...(Tweet #1)

The Democrats are forcing the breakup of families at the Border with their horrible and cruel legislative agenda. (Tweet #12)

It is the Democrats fault for being weak and ineffective with Boarder Security and Crime. (Tweet #15)

It's the Democrats fault, they won't give us the votes needed to pass good immigration legislation. They want open borders, which breeds horrible crime.

(Tweet #19)

Democrats are the problem. They don't care about crime and want illegal immigrants, no matter how bad they may be, to pour into and infest our Country, like MS-13. (Tweet #23)

Separating families at the Border is the fault of bad legislation passed by the Democrats. Border Security laws should be changed but the Dems can't get their act together! Started the Wall. (Tweet #39)

The third main image repair strategy used was evasion of responsibility representing 27.5% (n=21) of the total uses of image repair strategies. More specifically, defeasibility was the more dominant type of evading responsibility with 16 instances. Benoit (1997) stated that defeasibility occurs when the rhetor claims that the offensive act happened because of a lack of information or control over the situation. In those 16 instances, President Trump was blaming the crisis on “loopholes” in the immigration system and on the “weak laws” over which he has no control. The following are examples to illustrate this finding:

...Our system is a mockery to good immigration policy and Law and Order... (Tweet #6)

Hiring many thousands of judges, and going through a long and complicated legal process, is not the way to go - will always be dysfunctional.... (Tweet #7)

...Congress must act now to change our weak and ineffective immigration laws... (Tweet #10)

Why don't the Democrats give us the votes to fix the world's worst immigration laws?... (Tweet #13)

#CHANGETHELAWS Now is the best opportunity ever for Congress to change the ridiculous and obsolete laws on immigration. Get it done... (Tweet #16)

...Our immigration laws are the weakest and worst anywhere in the world... (Tweet #18)

Five instances were detected to contain the use of provocation. Provocation, as explained by Benoit (1997), is when the accused says that the offensive act happened in response to another offensive act. Stating that “children are being brought up by their parents on a dangerous trip” is an offensive act that, according to Trump, deserves a similar act in response. In the following sample tweets, President Trump rationalizes the crisis as a response to other offensive acts:

...Of the 12,000 children, 10,000 are being sent by their parents on a very dangerous trip, and only 2000 are with their parents, many of whom have tried to enter our Country illegally on numerous occasions. (Tweet #5)

Please understand, there are consequences when people cross our Border illegally, whether they have children or not - and many are just using children for their own sinister purposes... (Tweet #9)

...Where is the outcry for the killings and crime being caused by gangs and thugs, including MS-13, coming into our country illegally? (Tweet #13)

We are gathered today to hear directly from the AMERICAN VICTIMS of ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION. These are the American Citizens permanently separated from their loved ones b/c they were killed by criminal illegal aliens. (Tweet #28)

Table 3 further simplifies the results found for research question one and provides a sample tweet of each image repair strategy used by Trump in response to the family separation crisis.

Table 3

Sample Tweets for Image Repair Strategies Used

Strategy	N=76	%	Sample Tweet
Denial	24	31.6	“It is the Democrats fault for being weak and ineffective with Boarder Security and Crime...”
<i>Shifting the Blame</i>	24	100	
Evasion of Responsibility	21	27.5	“...Loopholes in our immigration laws all supported by extremist open border Democrats...”
<i>Defeasibility</i>	16	76.2	
<i>Provocation</i>	5	23.8	“We are gathered today to hear directly from the AMERICAN VICTIMS of ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION. These are the American Citizens permanently separated from their loved ones b/c they were killed by criminal illegal aliens.”
Reducing Offensiveness	30	39.6	“The people of Germany are turning against their leadership as migration is rocking the already tenuous Berlin coalition. Crime in Germany is way up. Big mistake made all over Europe in allowing millions of people in who have so strongly and violently changed their culture!”
<i>Differentiation</i>	3	10.0	
<i>Bolstering</i>	10	33.3	“Our first duty, and our highest loyalty, is to the citizens of the United States. We will not rest until our border is secure, our citizens are safe...”

Table 3 Continued

Strategy	N=76	%	Sample Tweet
<i>Transcendence</i>	11	36.7	“We have to maintain strong borders or we will no longer have a country that we can be proud of – and if we show any weakness, millions of people will journey into our country.”
<i>Attack the Accuser</i>	6	20.0	“Democrats mistakenly tweet 2014 pictures from Obama’s term showing children from the Border in steel cages. They thought it was recent pictures in order to make us look bad, but backfires.”
*Stonewalling	1	1.3	“Many Democrats are deeply concerned about the fact that their “leadership” wants to denounce and abandon the great men and women of ICE, thereby declaring war on Law & Order. These people will be voting for Republicans in November and, in many cases, joining the Republican Party!”

*Stonewalling is not a part of Benoit’s image repair typology. However, it was introduced by Smithson and Venette (2013).

After categorizing the tweets, the researcher discovered that 1.3% (n=1) of the tweets did not fit in any of the strategies within Benoit’s typology. In this tweet, President Trump attempted to repair his image but did not explicitly use any of Benoit’s strategies. After further examination, one common theme emerged and aligned with stonewalling. As defined by Smithson and Venette (2013), stonewalling is an uncooperative response strategy where the accused offers trivial and irrelevant information in an effort to block the flow of information without denying a response. In this tweet, even though the President provided a response in attempt to repair his image, he was not directly addressing the critiques. By offering irrelevant information, the President was avoiding the real crisis and instead

stonewalling about superficial details. For illustrative purposes, the following is the sample tweet where stonewalling was detected:

Many Democrats are deeply concerned about the fact that their “leadership” wants to denounce and abandon the great men and women of ICE, thereby declaring war on Law & Order. These people will be voting for Republicans in November and, in many cases, joining the Republican Party! (Tweet #57)

Research Question Two

As for RQ2, the researcher examined President Trump’s approval ratings at four main points in time: before the beginning of the crisis, before the signing of the executive order, after the signing of the executive order, and after the end of the crisis. The analysis revealed the results summarized in table 4.

Table 4

Trump’s Job Approval Ratings

Significant Event	Date	Ratings
The start of the crisis	April 29, 2018	42%
Three days before the signing	June 17, 2018	45%
Four days after the signing	June 24, 2018	41%
The end of the crisis	September 2, 2018	41%

As shown in table 4, before the signing of the executive order on June 17 (three days before the signing), Trumps’ job approval ratings were at 45%. According to the *Gallup* poll, this approval rating was the President’s highest to date (Gallup, n.d.). After the signing, his

approval ratings fell by four percentage points and remained steady after the end of the family separation crisis.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Image is a vital element to study in situations of crisis. It is imperative to understand the implications and effectiveness of image repair strategies in crisis communication. This study sought to investigate presidential communication on Twitter during the 2018 family separation crisis at the southern border of the United States. The researcher identified the image repair strategies used by President Trump in response to the family separation crisis and evaluated their effectiveness.

Research Question One

Research question one's objective was to determine which image repair strategies were used in President Trump's tweets to respond to the family separation crisis. After analyzing all 62 tweets made by the official Twitter account of the President, the study found that President Trump used several of Benoit's image repair strategies in different capacities. A noteworthy finding indicated that Trump tried to reduce the crisis offensiveness in most of his tweets. Through transcendence, Trump insisted that the policy was not only necessary to end illegal immigration but also the most efficient and cheap way to do so. To him, without the "zero-tolerance" policy resulting in the family separations, America will be a chaotic land where crime and murders wreak havoc, which makes the separations more favorable than "losing" America. Trump tried to place the family separations in a different light by emphasizing the greater good that can result from enforcing the policy and calling attention to more important considerations, such as safety and security of the American citizens.

Instances of bolstering showed that the President was reminding the public of the great accomplishments that his administration had accomplished. He emphasized that the facilities where the children were detained were better maintained than those under the Obama administration, that ICE was protecting America from crime coming from Mexico, and that his administration was working hard to pass fair, and strong immigration laws. These instances of bolstering stressed good traits, such as safety and fairness, associated with the Trump administration in an attempt to strengthen the audience's view of him. In a similar study, former President Bush used bolstering to defend his image following the high death toll of American troops in the Iraq war (Benoit, 2006). This finding aligns with the literature as different studies have shown that politicians repeatedly used bolstering as a defense tool when facing similar crises (Benoit, 2006, 2015, 2016, 2017; Garcia, 2011; Sheldon & Sallot, 2009). In this context, Sheldon and Sallot (2009) argue that bolstering can be a more effective strategy than mortification as it allows for the accused to stress good deeds and connect with the public.

Attacking the accuser was another choice of defense where Trump attacked the credibility of the Democrats and the media; two of his main critics. Naturally, as indicated by Benoit (1997), politicians expect attacks from opposing political parties because of deep partisanship which makes them more apt to use this strategy when facing similar situations. This finding aligns with the literature where politicians used this strategy to defend their image. For instance, Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the House of Representatives, accused his attackers of using his book deal to make money (Kennedy & Benoit, 1997). In similar instances of attacking the accuser, analysis detected that Trump focused almost

exclusively on vilifying the Democrats. By stating that Democrats are incompetent, radical, and disruptive, Trump was trying to undermine the credibility of one of his main accusers and deflect attention from the actual issue at hand (Benoit, 2017).

Trump's use of differentiation highlighted that family separations are much less offensive than the crime happening south of the border in Central American countries. His attempt to defend and legitimize the "zero-tolerance" policy was prominent in one of the tweets when he compared the crisis to Europe's immigration situation, specifically in Germany. Trump claimed that crime in Germany skyrocketed due to the country's liberal immigration policies, which allowed millions of immigrants to enter the country illegally. He also claimed that the German culture changed as a result of illegal immigration, causing the German people to turn against their government. Claiming that criminal activity and political instability caused by more lenient immigration policies in Germany, Trump did not provide any evidence, nor did he support these statements. Such claims have to be fully supported and developed for the accused to have the best image repair outcome. In fact, Benoit (1997) suggests that, since image repair discourse is a form of persuasion, it is essential for the rhetor to "avoid making false claims" and "provide adequate support for claims" (p. 183).

Additionally, the President heavily relied on denial as a way to repair his image. Trump attempted to shift the blame for the family separations to Democrats. Benoit (1997) indicated that, generally, "people frequently want to know whom to blame" (p.184). As such, the President highlighted that the Democrats were the main cause of the family separations ("the Democrats are forcing the breakup of families at the border..."). Research has shown that simple denial is one of the most frequently used image repair strategies among

politicians. In fact, many studies illustrated how different politicians commonly used simple denial when facing similar reputational crises (Benoit, 2006, 2016; Garcia, 2011). Whereas, President Trump did not use simple denial and committed to using shifting the blame throughout his tweets. The hostile political environment and the deep political partisanship surrounding Trump's presidency can be a factor that explains the unwavering use of shifting the blame.

In addition to trying to reduce offensiveness of the crisis and shifting the blame on to Democrats, Trump attempted to evade responsibility. Through the use of defeasibility, he blamed the crisis on loopholes in the immigration system and ineffective immigration laws. From these instances, it is understood that Trump had no control over the situation and was, therefore, not responsible for it. This finding is similar to Benoit's (2006) study of Bush's defense. The study indicated that former President Bush used defeasibility to claim that those who knew the location of weapons in Iraq were afraid to tell.

Provocation was also present in Trump's defense as he emphasized the crime caused by illegal immigrants in America. He asserted that families who crossed the border illegally, which is an offensive act, deserve to be separated at the border. He also claimed that immigrants often smuggled children on dangerous trips across the border, which makes it acceptable to separate them from their parents. Responding to one offensive act with another offensive act is the way Trump tried to rationalize the crisis and defend his image against critics. The use of provocation in politics is not as prominent as other repair strategies. A rare instance where former President Barack Obama used provocation was when he defended Reverend Wright's image. Attributing the offensive comments made by Reverend Wright to

the poor economic conditions African Americans grow up in, Obama's use of provocation was judged as well-received (Benoit, 2016).

Much like Smithson and Venette (2013) who found the need to expand the literature on image repair theory, the finding that shows Trump's use of stonewalling offers more support for their claim. It has been recommended by crisis communication research that openness and clarity should be a priority for the accused in situations of crisis (Benoit, 1997; Venette, Sellow & Lang, 2003). However, stonewalling is a strategy that allows for ambiguity and unclear flow of information. Even though it provides a response option for those wanting to avoid accepting responsibility, stonewalling is seen as an unethical defense strategy (Smithson & Venette, 2013). Through stonewalling, Trump redirected attention to voting, which is a completely irrelevant issue during the family separations. His emphasis on voters joining the Republican party makes him appear uncooperative, elusive, and disruptive to the flow of information concerning the family separations, which are traits often disliked by the public.

It is significant to note that the researcher detected contradictory statements made by the President. On the one hand, Trump admitted that the family separation policy was a disaster that was caused by "horrible" and "cruel" laws. On the other hand, in multiple tweets, he called for tougher laws, more arrests, and "unpleasant consequences" to be enforced when immigrants cross the border illegally. The inconsistency in Trump's tweets may impact the effectiveness and the overall clarity of his message. Contrary to the literature, Trump did not employ any of the image repair combinations judged to be more effective. Previous research suggests that some image repair theories work better when combined

together. In fact, Benoit (1997) suggested that reducing offensiveness can be successful when combined with corrective action and defeasibility also partners well with corrective action.

Neither of which Trump employed.

Additionally, the findings indicated that the President did not use mortification in any of his tweets, nor did he apologize for the crisis. Benoit (1997) stated that politicians are less inclined to use this strategy as they fear litigation threats. If they apologize for the offensive act, they are consequently subjected to litigation and potential law suits. However, Benoit (1997) suggested that mortification is the most successful image repair to be used by politicians. The public generally expects to hear apologies from politicians believed to be at fault (Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004; Sheldon & Sallot, 2009). The President's tweets could have been more successful at protecting his reputation if they contained some instances of mortification and less of reducing offensiveness, denial, and evading responsibility.

Research Question Two

The second research question sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the image repair strategies used by the President by looking at his approval ratings as a measure. Prior to the family separation crisis, the President's approval ratings were at 42% then decreased to 41%. By comparing only these two points of time, the findings suggest that the image repair strategies found in Trump's tweets were not successful at repairing his image. However, on June 17th, his approval ratings increased to an all-time high of 45% since he was appointed President (Gallup, n.d.). This increase coincided with the day public scrutiny over the separation crisis peaked, according to Google trends (Hegarty, 2018). This finding shows that Trump was relatively successful at defending his image at the beginning stages of the crisis. It is known that supporters have always rationalized Trump's controversial policies and stood

by his decision-making style. His use of reducing offensiveness, evading responsibility, and denial portrayed Trump's stance towards immigration as assertive, aggressive, and tough; qualities often admired by Trump's supporters. This unwavering support from the public dated back to the first campaigning stages of his presidency. Specifically, when the audio scandal broke out revealing Trump's use of derogatory language to talk about women: "Grab 'em by the p*ssy..." (Makela, 2016, para. 2), a large number of people did not change their stance and still supported him despite the gravity and incivility of his statement (Benoit, 2017).

Following the signing of the executive order, which allegedly ended the family separations at the border, Trump's approval ratings decreased by four percentage points to reach 41%. Benoit (2017) highlighted the importance of other communication coming from parties other than the accuser. This explains that even though Trump did not tweet about signing the executive order, the extensive media coverage the event received helped classify it as an instance of corrective action. Research has shown that corrective action can be effective in reducing public tension in a crisis (Sheldon & Sallot, 2009; Brinson & Benoit, 1996). According to Benoit (1997), using reducing offensiveness and corrective action is a recommended combination for successful image repair. More specifically, Trump's use of bolstering and corrective action was encouraged by Benoit (1995) who indicated that these strategies show that the accused is placing the blame on oneself, which can help downplay the accusations.

However, the 4% decrease in approval ratings after engaging in corrective action (i.e., signing the executive order) does not indicate that the President was successful after all.

Signing the executive order after a long time of stubborn denial, reducing offensiveness, and evasion of responsibility shows inconsistency in Trump's position towards the "zero-tolerance" policy. His supporters may have interpreted this move as giving in to the opposition and weakening his strong stand on immigration. By signing the executive order, Trump was implicitly admitting to a wrongdoing without ever acknowledging any responsibility. This action did not align with his previous position and may have been the reason behind the decrease in his approval ratings.

Evaluating Trump's defense in this context is very challenging due to the divisive nature of the political environment that surrounded the crisis (Benoit, 2017). Jarman (2005) claimed that it is normal for Republicans and Democrats to react differently to the same message. However, looking more closely at the composition of all adults in the *Gallup* poll, the division of opinions between Republicans and Democrats is staggering. In fact, the *Gallup* poll shows that, from August 27 to September 30, President Trump had 87% of approval from Republicans and only 7% of approval from Democrats (Gallup, 2019). These statistics show that the party polarization under the Trump presidency is setting a new record high. According to Jones (2018), "the gap in Republican-Democrat ratings of Trump thus far has been 77 points, on average" (p. 1). Because of this strong political division, Trump's job to satisfy everyone of his audience and be completely effective at repairing his image is not only challenging but may also be impossible.

The approval ratings poll is not only influenced by partisanship but also by race. Examining the demographic breakdown of the approval ratings during the same period of time, the *Gallup* poll shows that the President's approval among whites was at 50%.

However, his approval was only at 25% among Hispanics, 20% among nonwhites, and 10% among blacks (Gallup, 2019). This finding explains how President Trump was able to keep his approval ratings from plummeting by more than 1%, which can be seen as a relative success.

Over the course of his presidency, Trump's approval ratings have been described as more stable and consistent than other Presidents (Jones, 2018). This study's findings show that Trump's approval ratings did not dramatically decrease post family separation crisis. However, the recent partial government shutdown, presenting yet another crisis for Trump, proves otherwise. The shutdown started on December 22, 2018 and lasted till January 25, 2019 causing many federal government workers to work without pay for over a month (Hafner, 2019; Hayes, 2019). Looking at Trump's approval ratings following the government shutdown shows considerable disapproval from his usual supporters. In fact, the *Gallup* poll indicates that Trump's approval was only at 37% all through the month of January. This finding offers a good explanation of why Trump's approval was not deeply impacted post family separation crisis: when a crisis impacts people's personal lives and finances, they are more apt to disapprove of the President's performance. In contrast, with the family separation crisis, most Americans were not personally affected by the separations. Thus, a noteworthy implication that this study suggests is that the more personal the crisis is perceived by American citizens, the more it impacts the way they rate the President.

It is undeniable that social media as a modern-day communication channel contributes to forming political discourse (Conover et al., 2011). According to Ott (2017), Twitter as a communication platform fosters impulsiveness and mediocracy. The limited

number of characters allowed by Twitter does not allow for deep and well thought-out tweets and does not leave time for users to consider the consequences of their tweets. Additionally, this communication platform is easily accessible and requires minimal effort from users; thus it encourages impulse and simplicity. The public opinion and political discourse have been greatly influenced by the President's Twitter feed. It is undeniable that Trump's rhetoric towards immigration is offensive and insulting. His tweets often contained emotionally charged language through which he shared his unfiltered opinions on sensitive issues without considering the potential consequences. In fact, Ott (2017) claimed that tweets containing emotionally charged messages are retweeted more often than those that are more neutral. The fact that the President's tweets are retweeted so frequently and monitored by mainstream media enables the spread of toxic public views of immigration and creates a more hateful and divisive political rhetoric (Ott, 2017). The effect that Trump's Twitter feed spreads has been described as contagious: "Trump's simple, impulsive, and uncivil Tweets do more than merely reflect sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia: they spread those ideologies like social cancer" (Ott, 2017, p. 64). As such, influenced by this hateful rhetoric, the reaction of the public towards the family separation crisis was passive and unempathetic. Consequently, the President's approval ratings were not substantially affected.

Limitations and Future Research

This study exclusively examined tweets as a communication artifact, which can be restrictive to detecting all image repair strategies used by the President to respond to the family separation crisis. To gain a more holistic understanding of the used repair strategies, future research should include other public relations materials, such as press releases, fact

sheets, and speech transcripts. Additionally, researchers can build on this study's findings and further explore whether the use of Twitter, as opposed to more traditional channels of communication, impacts the effectiveness of image repair theories used to defend one's image. While this study focused on the message, other studies should take a deeper look at the medium (i.e. Twitter).

Additionally, this study was focused on a single politician's use of Twitter in a situation of crisis. It would be worthwhile for future research to extend this study and explore how other politicians in America use Twitter to share policies, influence public opinion, and manage crises. A comparison between the use of Twitter by different politicians could yield considerable additions to crisis communication in the political arena. An additional limitation is that the statistics in table 4 are only analyzed at face value. By adopting a more statistical approach, a deeper and a more thorough look could possibly indicate additional arguments on the increases and decreases of approval rating percentages.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this research illustrated the importance of image repair in the presence of a crisis and the implications that come from choosing certain strategies over others. This study contributed to crisis communication research by providing theoretical and practical implications. Communication academics and professionals could use these findings as guidelines to make effective decisions when facing reputational crises. Also, the general public and concerned citizens who closely monitor the politicians representing their views could use the insight provided by this study to form educated public opinions. The findings are useful not only to individuals but also to organizations dealing with similar image crises. This study provided important findings and offered a good understanding of the different factors impacting the effectiveness of image repair strategies, mostly in a political arena.

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