Image Repair Strategies, Local News Portrayals and Crisis Stage: A Case Study of Duke University’s Lacrosse Team Crisis

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The case analysis presented here studies Duke University’s strategic use of communication to defend its image during the scandal involving its men’s lacrosse team. Benoit’s (1995, 1997) image repair theory is used to analyze Duke’s strategy in 54 public statements, news releases, and documents. Additionally, 870 local newspaper stories about the Duke case from The News & Observer (n = 443) and The Herald Sun (n = 427) are analyzed by crisis stage. Results show that Duke initially relied most on simple denial and mortification to defend its athletes, and engaged in bolstering, corrective action, separation, and attacking one’s accuser to defend the university’s reputation. Findings suggest a new defense category: expression of disappointment, which is related to the concept of separation. Use of the strategy of attacking one’s accuser was associated with the most positive local news coverage.

On March 13, 2006, the behavior of members of the Duke University men’s lacrosse team created a crisis situation for the university. The event’s circumstances contained news elements that kept the story in news headlines for more than a year. The off-campus party that triggered the crisis included underage drinking and two hired female dancers, one of whom alleged that three team members had sexually assaulted and raped her at the party (Meadows & Thomas, 2006; Ruibal, 2006). The sexual assault charge against Duke’s players provided fodder for the news media on the national “hot button” issues of gender, sexual violence, class privilege, and race threatening the players’ reputations and that of the University. Ultimately, on April 11, 2007, the North Carolina District Attorney’s office declared the three accused innocent (Whoriskey & Adcock, 2007). However, the intense media scrutiny exacerbated the situation, as did information leaked by both the district attorney and defense lawyers (Willing, 2006).

This case analysis examines how Duke University used image repair strategies to defend its image and how those efforts corresponded to local news coverage. Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow (2007) argue that image repair strategies are strategic because they are designed to achieve a specific end—mending an organization’s or an individual’s reputation. Two studies have previously...
examined the Duke case (Barnett, 2008; Fortunato, 2008), but did not analyze local news coverage. By investigating the use of image repair strategies and news coverage, this study aims to inform theory and explore how the crisis affected Duke’s ability to carry out its mission. According to Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2007, p. 3), strategic communication entails “purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission.” According to Duke University, its mission is to:

... engage the mind, elevate the spirit, and stimulate the best effort of all who are associated with the university; to contribute in diverse ways to the local community, the state, the nation, and the world, and to attain and maintain a place of real leadership in all that we do (Duke University, 2001).

The Duke University lacrosse scandal challenged Duke’s ability to achieve its mission and required that it deliberately respond to the situation.

Researchers have previously applied rhetorical analysis and image repair theory (IRT) to case studies of crisis situations. Although case studies have drawn criticism for their descriptive nature (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000), case studies can synthesize multiple data sources derived from real-world crisis situations. Data triangulation in case studies, if well conceived, increases reliability when different sources point to the same conclusion. Furthermore, findings obtained from studying crises in their contexts raise the external validity. Even though experiments grant researchers the ability to discern causal links among variables, experiments have often relied on student samples (not typically active publics), single-message designs (limiting generalization), and contrived situations (threatening validity and reliability).

Because all methods can be criticized, combining data from a variety of methods can offer novel insights from actual public relations practice. To evaluate crisis response effectiveness in case studies, scholars have often used attitudinal (e.g., opinion poll data) or behavioral measurements (e.g., enrollment, voting, purchasing) at the late crisis stage. In this study, to evaluate the effectiveness of Duke’s communications, local news coverage, as well as attitudinal and behavioral measures, are examined. This study adds to the strategic communication literature by looking at the understudied strategy of separation,1 by determining how crisis stages affect the tone of local newspaper portrayals of facets of Duke’s identity (Duke’s president/spokesperson, Duke’s athletics, and Duke’s students), and by assessing the effectiveness of the crisis response.

What follows is a review of the literature on university image and crises, and IRT and separation. This is succeeded by a description of the context of the Duke case and the study’s research method.

LITERATURE REVIEW

University Image and Crisis

Universities and colleges have engaged in modern-day publicity practices for more than a century (Kummerfeldt, 1975). These institutions recognized early on that a positive reputation is a valuable commodity for a university, enabling it to attract high caliber students and faculty, increase the number of potential donors, raise the profile of its researchers as news sources, lure a greater number of quality job recruiters, and strengthen alumni loyalty.

1Brinson and Benoit (1999) argue, “the conditions for successful use of separation (or dissociation) have yet to be articulated” (p. 505).
Just like any other type of brand, a university’s brand can become discredited. A brand that becomes damaged can suffer financial loss from sales declines and the loss of customers, investors, and partners key to survival (Brinson & Benoit, 1996). Similarly, when a university is faced with a crisis, there is the potential that the crisis may affect its relationships with current students, alumni, parents, prospective students, donors, staff, faculty, residents of the local community, sports team fans, and advisory boards. In the case of public institutions, a crisis may also affect funding and support from taxpayers, the state legislators, and the governor. And unlike some organizations in the business sector, many university stakeholders, much like professional sports fans (Bruce & Tini, 2008), hold strong emotional attachments to their alma maters and their athletics teams. When a university must address a crisis in which stakeholders possess conflicting desires, it can make handling a crisis even more complex.

Research on university crises demonstrates that universities must make strategic decisions regarding prioritizing publics because universities serve a broad array of constituents. Wahlberg’s (2004) study of the University of North Dakota’s athletics/branding controversy showed how the interests of faculty, donors, alumni and the community clashed over the university’s use of its American Indian logo and mascot, The Fighting Sioux. In the end, the university chose to retain its old brand identity by prioritizing the desires of donors and alumni against the wishes of some of its other constituents. Studies by Leeper and Leeper (2006) and Worthington (2005) illustrate that universities may neglect to communicate with their publics or fail to address simmering problems that then get reported in the local news and aggravate potential damage to the institution’s reputation.

Of the studies of university crises, three studies specifically examine the topic of sexual assaults (Barnett, 2008; Fortunato, 2008; Worthington, 2005). Worthington (2005) examined the reporting of the purported cover-up of sexual assaults and rape on a small college campus. She found that student perceptions of administrative apathy and inaction led to campus activism, public scrutiny and damage to the institution’s image. Although both Fortunato (2008) and Barnett (2008) examined the Duke lacrosse case, Fortunato focused his analysis mainly on message strategies implemented by Duke overall, suggesting that the University emphasized its corrective actions. Barnett examined message framing concentrating her analysis on Duke University’s response to the alleged rape charges against its players. She concluded that the University used the frames of “reason” and “suffering.” She argued that the university took a reasoned approach to the allegations by discouraging emotional responses and she noted that Duke remained largely silent on issues of violence against women and on privilege accorded to university athletes.

The current study adds to the previous research by investigating the local media coverage of the Duke case by crisis stage along with analyzing the University’s communications to understand how Duke’s message strategies are associated with the tone of news coverage. Brinson and Benoit (1996) have suggested that there is benefit in examining crisis stages. In addition, this analysis adds to theory by looking more deeply at the under-examined image repair strategy of separation. The next section outlines the theoretical approach.

**IRT and its Strategies**

Many researchers have used IRT to examine postcrisis communication messages. Introduced by William L. Benoit (1995) and centered on the discourse of *apologia* (self-defense rhetoric), the theory draws on the work of Scott and Lyman (1968) and Ware and Linkugel (1973). According
to Benoit (1995), organizations or individuals enact self-defense strategies when they have been accused of or are perceived as being responsible for a negative event that threatens their reputation or public image. The five main defense strategies of IRT are denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Subcategories exist within each option and are explained here with emphasis placed on the most used as well as on the strategy of main interest here—separation.

Denial and separation. According to Benoit, there are two forms of denial, simple denial and shifting the blame. Simple denial is a dismissal of the fact that the event occurred, was negative or that the entity/rhetor was connected to the event (Benoit, 1995; Len-Ríos & Benoit, 2004). Shifting the blame places responsibility elsewhere. Brinson and Benoit (1999) added another category to shifting the blame called separation. They noted that separation occurs when an organization places the responsibility on one or more of its members and points out that those members were noncompliant with the organization’s values or acted without authority. They asserted that “separation is more difficult to use because the target of the blame is part of the entity that is claiming innocence” (p. 505). Hearit (1995) addresses a similar concept in his use of the term individual/group dissociations when examining corporate apologia.

This tactic, Hearit argues, allows a company to identify the transgressors and to preserve the company’s reputation by establishing that the transgressors’ behavior is atypical of its other members, defies its articulated values, and is not sanctioned. Researchers have noted that combining the strategies of corrective action, shifting the blame, and bolstering lead to the separation strategy (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000; Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). Other investigators have identified the strategy as diversion. For example, Bruce and Tini (2008), in examining an Australian-New Zealander rugby team crisis, observed that in defense of the team caught exceeding player salary caps, the league separated the transgressors, i.e., team administrators, from the fans and team players and portrayed the fans and players as victims in the crisis. The authors argued that focusing on the fans and players as victims allowed the team to restore its image. Although the authors associated this strategy with bolstering, effectively what the team did was identify some “tainted individuals” and relegated the responsibility to them.

No matter what name it goes by (called separation in this study), what is evident from the literature is that organizations attempt to preserve their reputations by separating or disassociating the “infected” members from the group and by illustrating how they are deviant from the rest of the organization. Brinson and Benoit (1999) argue that in order for separation to work, the organization must show that its policies were ignored, that wrongdoers were punished, and that policies were enacted to ensure future compliance. Furthermore, they asserted that separation cannot be implemented with simple denial because the implication of a separation strategy is that a wrongful act has occurred, which does not allow for denial. Coombs and Schmidt (2000) compared the effectiveness of separation with other image repair strategies. They found that separation and bolstering led to greater account acceptance than did shifting the blame. However, separation did not differ from other strategies in improving participant assessments of corporate reputation or willingness to engage in supportive behaviors.

Although separation has been studied, there are limitations to these studies in that many other variables were left unaccounted for. The current study adds to knowledge about this strategy.

Other defense options. Along with the overall category of denial, Benoit offered the categories of evading responsibility (provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions),
reducing offensiveness (bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one’s accusers, or offering compensation), corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1997).

Of the subcategories related to evading responsibility, defeasibility has received the most attention in the literature. It is used to reduce the accused’s responsibility by arguing that the individual or organization lacked control or information pertinent to the situation. Benoit (2006) demonstrated that former President George W. Bush used this defense in justifying his decision to send troops into Iraq. In his analysis, Benoit showed that Bush argued he had acted on the intelligence information he had had at the time. Benoit (2006) warns that the use of defeasibility can erode a rhetor’s credibility because it suggests a lack of control, knowledge, or authority that might be expected of a leader.

Research on reducing offensiveness has suggested that bolstering, or attempts to increase credibility by illustrating prior positive behavior, is a much-used technique. Len-Ríos and Benoit (2004) concluded that California congressman Gary Condit’s use of bolstering was largely ineffective in repairing his image because he failed to address the issues related to the crisis surrounding the disappearance of Chandra Levy. Other scholars have found that bolstering is effective when the rhetors are presented as victims (Bruce & Tini, 2008) or when the organization possesses long-held public admiration and support (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009).

Corrective action is a staple image repair strategy and is indicated as a co-strategy in separation (Brinson & Benoit, 1999; Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). Hearit (1995) argues that engaging in corrective action signifies that an organization bears some responsibility for the event and, therefore, it cannot be used with denial. In an examination of 17 fraud crises, Caldiero, Taylor, and Ungureanu (2009) found that corrective action was the most-used strategy. Of the crisis responses, corrective action is the most forward-looking in that it commits an organization to take specific future courses of action. It is also the most closely tied to a form of rhetoric some scholars have called a “discourse of renewal” (Ulmer et al., 2007), which is defined as an organic response to a naturally occurring crisis that includes steps to rebuild for the future.

Finally, IRT offers mortification. This refers to apologizing, or taking responsibility and asking for forgiveness. It has been considered an effective response in many situations, but scholars have also been wary of implementing mortification because of the legal and financial implications of accepting responsibility when it appears that in some circumstances other response options may generate the same level of positive reaction (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). For instance, Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) found that bolstering strategies correlated most with positive news coverage, whereas mortification was associated with more negative news coverage than positive news coverage. They concluded that apologizing does not always lead to more positive results and is not necessarily always a good choice. Conversely, Sheldon and Sallot (2009) studied political rhetoric and discovered that mortification was the best strategy for generating public support and enhancing one’s reputation. These conflicting results indicate that the individuals and organizations in question, as well as the nature of the crises, affect strategy effectiveness.

Summary. Previous scholarly work indicates that the effectiveness of image repair options may be associated with the circumstance, perceived intention, prior level of credibility, and performance history associated with the communicator or crisis event (Benoit, 2006; Brinson & Benoit, 1996, 1999; Bruce & Tini, 2008; Caldiero et al., 2009; Coombs, 1995; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000; Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009; Len-Ríos & Benoit, 2004; Sheldon & Sallot,
How an organization strategically chooses image repair options will depend on how its mission is threatened.

THE ACCUSATIONS

Whether or not Duke University was responsible for the actions of its athletes or whether the athletes were guilty of what they were charged with doing (and ultimately the courts found the players not guilty), an image can be tarnished solely by the perception of wrongdoing. As Benoit and Pang (2008, p. 247) point out, “Threats to image that are not based in reality can be just as damaging as threats arising from the accused’s harmful actions.” As long as there was a public perception that the allegations were true and that the University was partly responsible by association, Duke needed to respond. In fact, an April USA Today/Gallup (2006) public opinion poll indicated that 60% of the U.S. public said that it was following the Duke case “very closely” or “somewhat closely” and that 44% felt that charges were at least “probably true.” In addition, women (52%) were more likely than men (36%) to say the charges were true (Carroll, 2006).

Although Duke University itself was not the “actor” in this situation, it was nonetheless involved because the crisis concerned its athletes. Complicating matters was the fact that the crisis touched on issues of race relations, which are still divisive U.S. societal issues. Williams and Olaniran (2002) state “racial issues are especially prone to high profile media coverage, large financial loss, and distrust or alienation from critical stakeholders” (p. 296). The most detrimental for Duke could have been the perception that it was an elitist institution that condoned a climate that led to the charges against its student athletes, threatening its mission to be a national leader. Thus, Duke could be perceived as indirectly responsible by (1) not adequately overseeing the activities of its student athletes, (2) being perceived to condone misogynistic and racist attitudes at Duke, and (3) catering to the privileged and ignoring its local community.

The first charge is not as critical as the latter two charges, but it is what associates Duke with the scandal. There have been news reports of partying-related misbehavior by students, student athletes, and even professional athletes, and it has not always imperiled the reputations of their players, teams or schools. However, in cases where athletes have demonstrated misogynistic attitudes toward women and have been accused of sexual violence against women (e.g., the University of Colorado, the University of Virginia, the Kobe Bryant case), the charges are more explosive and attract more media attention. Also, as Leeper and Leeper (2006) and Worthington (2005) showed, when a university is viewed as callous or detached from its surrounding community, its faculty, or its students, activism against the school can build.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on a review of the literature, research questions are presented to address Duke’s strategic communication efforts to see how they compare to news coverage at different crisis stages. The first research questions are offered:

RQ1a: What image repair strategies did Duke University use overall in responding to the crisis involving its men’s lacrosse team?
RQ1b: Were the image repair strategies used by Duke University associated with different stages in the crisis?

The next three research questions examine whether the themes of the news stories were related to image repair strategies, whether the tone of the news portrayals varied according to different facets of Duke’s identity (its president, its athletics department, and its student body) and crisis stage (early, middle, late), and whether certain facets of Duke’s identity received more prominent coverage depending on the crisis stage. The groups representing the different facets of Duke’s identity are related to the concept of separation. Duke’s president represented the official voice of the university and its administration. Duke’s athletics department represented the arm of the university most closely associated with the crisis and could be seen as most responsible for the lacrosse players. Duke’s students were associated with the university climate regarding issues of race, class and gender issues. It is important to determine whether the different facets associated with Duke’s identity were treated differently in news coverage because it could illustrate how different entities within a large, multi-faceted organization might be held more or less accountable and/or responsible for a crisis.

RQ2a: Were the main themes in the local news coverage of the Duke lacrosse crisis associated with crisis stage?

RQ2b: Were the news portrayals of the University president, University athletics, and University students related to the stage of the crisis?

RQ2c: When the news coverage was prominent (Section A1 or section front) were the news portrayals of the University president, University athletics, and University students related to the stage of the crisis?

The study also explores whether the combination of message options selected by Duke in communicating with its publics appeared effective in repairing the University’s image. In particular, the university’s short-term success is measured by examining news coverage, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., changes in enrollment).

RQ3: How effective was Duke’s communication strategy in repairing its reputation in the short-term?

The following section describes the method.

METHOD

This research uses a single case study method by providing a rhetorical analysis of the apologia options used by Duke University officials by applying Benoit’s (1995, 1997) IRT and offering data from a quantitative content analysis of local news stories that were published during the crisis. To provide the context for the case, public opinion poll data and national news stories were also examined.

Studying an organization’s strategic response to a crisis by using the case method and primary materials allows for analysis of actual public relations techniques (Cutler, 2004). Although criticized as a simple descriptive technique (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000),
a case study “uses as many data sources as possible to systematically investigate individuals, groups, organizations, or events” (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994, p. 154), which adds to the reliability and external validity of the study. Other advantages to using this method are that it allows for “fresh insights,” “detailed description,” and discovery of new theoretical connections (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994, p. 154).

Qualitative Analysis of Duke University’s Response Strategies

Analysis of Duke University’s response focuses on its website labeled “Archive of statements and announcements from Duke” that was devoted to the lacrosse team case. The information analyzed is from March 24, 2006, to April 27, 2007, the time span from Duke’s initial crisis response to its final statement on the North Carolina district attorney’s announcement that the charges against the players were dropped. The author read each document and then initially categorized response strategies using Benoit’s framework.

After initial categorization, the author created a chart recategorizing the message strategies by (1) rhetorical option (e.g., “simple denial”), (2) date, (3) accusation prompting response, (4) rhetor, and (5) the text of what was written/said. In addition, a separate table was developed to determine the number of times a rhetor delivered a response and to identify the intended public. This latter analysis showed that Duke University President Richard H. Brodhead was most often identified as the author or the spokesperson for the released material (38%), followed by John F. Burness, senior vice president for public affairs and government relations (20%). The remaining messages were from university-affiliated personnel or did not indicate an author. Moreover, the majority of information released, 74%, was not addressed to any specific public. Some of the material, primarily in letter form, was directed to students, the “Duke Community,” parents, alumni, and faculty.

Quantitative Analysis of Local News Coverage

Sample. The local news analysis examines full-text stories retrieved from the Lexis-Nexis database that contained the key words “Duke,” “lacrosse,” and “rape.” Stories were collected between the dates of March 13, 2006, and April 12, 2007, from The News & Observer (Raleigh) (n = 443) and The Herald Sun (Durham) (n = 427). These two newspapers serve the local Raleigh-Durham community.

Crisis stages. Six time periods were created that coincided with key events in the crisis (see Table 2 for dates of stages). Stage 1 began at the point of no return when The News and Observer broke the story. On April 5, Duke suspended its lacrosse team season, which begins Stage 2. Stage 3 spans April 17 to May 15, the time period when all three players were indicted. Stage 4 runs between May 16 until June 5, when Duke announced it would resume its lacrosse team schedule. Stage 5 goes from June 6–December 12 when few Duke communications were released. Stage...
begins on December 13 when 60 Minutes conducted an interview with Duke University’s president and the prosecutor’s case began to unravel. To analyze the portrayals of Duke and the prominence of stories, the time periods were collapsed to create three crisis categories (early: Stages 1–2, middle: Stages 3–4, and late: Stages 5–6). Collapsing categories ensured there were sufficient stories for analysis and that cells had an expected frequency of 5 or more per cell (Hatcher & Stepanski, 1994). Previous studies (Brinson & Benoit, 1996; Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009) have examined crisis stages to provide a better look at how image repair strategies correlate with news coverage and change over time.

**Coding categories.** The story was the unit of analysis. Coding categories were part of a larger content analysis. The categories included here are: *story prominence*, *theme of story*, and *portrayal of actors* (Duke University president, Duke athletics, Duke University students). *Prominence* was operationalized by whether it was an A1/section page 1 story or an inside page story. Eight themes were used to categorize stories as *ethical issues*, *legal issues*, *political/administrative issues related to the district attorney*, *broad societal issues*, *public reaction*, *Duke University climate*, *sports*, or *other*. For examining the portrayal of actors, the stories were coded for whether the actors were portrayed *positively* (e.g., honest, open, likeable), *negatively* (e.g., uncaring, dishonest, unfriendly), *neutral* (shows individual or group as complex and does not emphasize positive/negative traits) or *not applicable* (were not included in the story).

Two students were trained on the coding manual. Intercoder reliabilities were conducted on a sample of 10% of the stories. Scott’s *pi* reliabilities were: story prominence = 1.0, theme of story = .80, portrayal of Duke University President Brodhead = .88, portrayal of Duke athletics = .84, and portrayal of Duke University students = .84. Methods texts suggest that reliabilities above .70 are generally acceptable (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000).

**RESULTS**

**Image Repair Strategies Used By Duke University**

A total of 54 communication pieces contained 61 uses of rhetorical strategy. Strategies not used were *provocation, accident, good intentions, minimization, and compensation*.

The first statement released by Duke University, as indicated on its website, was not until March 24, 2006, nearly 10 days after the lacrosse team party. An internal examination of the delay in response indicated that the administration was not made aware of “the situation’s racial aspects, which would later become prominent” (“Committee Finds Administration’s,” 2006). The initial reactions, therefore, focused more on the charges against the athletes. However, as the legal process dragged on, the president differentiated the university’s response to the charges against the players from the university’s defense of its image. This means that the university was responding on two fronts.

The first research question looks at the image repair strategies Duke University used most. Analysis shows that the strategies used differed based on whether the university addressed allegations against the players or the university.

Initially, the university addressed the accusations against the lacrosse players using simple denial and mortification (see Table 1 for excerpts of strategies). Regarding simple denial, the
university reiterated statements by the director of athletics and the players concerning the sexual assault/rape charges. Although simple denial addressed the rape and sexual assault charges, the administration and the players engaged in mortification, or apology, in addressing some of the players’ admitted behaviors by offering statements of the players’ remorse.

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<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Charges</th>
<th>News Releases and Statements</th>
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<tr>
<td>Simple Denial</td>
<td>Rape/Sexual Assault Allegations</td>
<td>“The players deny the criminal allegations” (“Duke Announces Forfeiture,” 2006) “We also stated unequivocally that any allegation that a sexual assault or rape occurred is totally and transparently false” (“Statement from Captains,” 2006)</td>
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<td>Corrective Action</td>
<td>Poor Behavior</td>
<td>“men’s lacrosse team will forfeit today’s contest against Georgetown as well as Tuesday’s game with Mount Saint Mary’s” (“Duke Announces Forfeiture,” 2006)</td>
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<td>Corrective Action/Separation</td>
<td>Sexual Assault Allegations/Poor Behavior</td>
<td>“The court released today a previously sealed warrant, whose contents are sickening and repulsive. I have canceled the men’s lacrosse season and all associated activities, effective immediately. Lacrosse Coach Mike Pressler has submitted his resignation to the Athletics Director Joe Alleva, effective immediately.” (“Statement on Release,” 2006)</td>
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<td>Bolstering</td>
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<td>Let me also say that as painful as these times are, the test of a school is not preventing bad things from ever happening, but in addressing them in an honest and forthright way. In my meetings with students, faculty, and administrators, I believe Duke is doing just that. (“Brodhead Letter to Alumni,” 2006) We are proud of the response of students at North Carolina Central University and Duke University who are organizing events to educate each other about sexual violence, racism, and why our system of law presumes innocence until guilt is established. We are grateful for the work of clergy and other leaders who are using this time to urge healing, peace, and truth. . . . I continue to believe: that over time, Duke will be judged not by the events of March 13, but by how we face and learn from those events. I am committed to drawing the lessons of those events and it is my hope that in so doing we will make a great university better. (“Statement by President Brodhead on Resumption,” 2006) But the intensity of interest in this story is driven by much more than that. It is driven by broader national social concerns about education, individual and institutional responsibility, race, gender and inequality in 21st century America. None of these issues is peculiar to Duke or Durham. Both Duke and Durham are probably far ahead of most of the rest of the United States in our mutual attempts to deal with them.” . . . “It is a measure of the character of this place, and of the leadership of this University, how Duke has responded to date.” (“Statement from the ECAC,” 2006)</td>
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<td>Attacking One’s Accuser</td>
<td>News Media</td>
<td>“If you were at a university where the president meted out punishment based on what he reads in the newspaper, it would be a pretty dangerous place” (“Brodhead Calls on Students,” 2006)</td>
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<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Charges</th>
<th>News Releases and Statements</th>
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<td>Mortification</td>
<td>Poor Behavior</td>
<td>“expressed sincere regret over the lapse in judgment in having the party on March 13 which has caused so much anguish for the Duke community and shame to our families and ourselves” (“Statement from Captains,” 2006).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Poor Behavior</td>
<td>“expressed regret for their errors in judgment and the embarrassment they had caused themselves, their families, the athletic department and the university” (“Duke Suspends Men’s,” 2006).</td>
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<td>Expression of Disappointment</td>
<td>Poor Behavior</td>
<td>“I’m dismayed by the party on March 13” (“Duke Announces Forfeiture,” 2006)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Poor Behavior</td>
<td>“This conduct was wholly inappropriate to the values of our athletics program and the University” (“Duke Suspends Men’s,” 2006)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rape/Sexual Assault Allegations</td>
<td>“The criminal allegations against three members of our men’s lacrosse team, if verified, will warrant serious penalties” (“Statement by President Richard Brodhead,” 2006).</td>
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*Note:* The table provides select examples of image repair strategies from Duke communications to accompany the rhetorical analysis.

Whereas simple denial and mortification were used to address allegations made against the lacrosse players, the university addressed its image by focusing on reducing offensiveness through the use of corrective action/separation, bolstering, and attacking one’s accuser. Of these strategies, corrective action was used the most. Initial corrective action messages concerned the lacrosse team and its forfeiture of two games (see Table 1). Later, President Brodhead announced the decision to suspend the season. Not only was the president taking action by punishing the lacrosse players, but he also indicated that the coach would be replaced. Here, the university also engages in what might be considered *separation*. The clear implication is that a new coach may “fix” any problems with the lacrosse team for which the previous coach may have been responsible (see Table 1).

The messages also include announcements about President Brodhead meeting with community leaders, such as the mayor of Durham, the chancellor of North Carolina Central University\(^3\) and leaders of the Durham Committee on Black People. The suggestion here is that the president is strengthening the university’s ties with the Black community (in case they were perceived to

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\(^3\)North Carolina Central University was an important partner because it is where the alleged rape victim was enrolled in school and because most of its students are African American (Meadows & Thomas, 2006).
be weak). This matches recommendations for organizations in a crisis: “collaborate and coordinate with credible sources” (Heath, 2006, p. 246). These relationships serve to increase Duke’s credibility by showing that Duke is concerned about its community relationships.

Statements from President Brodhead and others also start to differentiate between the allegations made against the lacrosse team players and those hurled at the university. A Duke trustee spelled this out in his statement:

As President Brodhead has noted, we need not – and will not – wait on the resolution of this case to address broader issues that range from the social culture of our students to difficult questions involving race, class and Duke’s relationships with its Durham neighbors. (“Statement from Trustees Chairman,” 2006)

This statement supports the initiatives that President Brodhead outlined in an April 5, 2006, letter to the community (“Letter to the Community,” 2006). These initiatives involved the formation of five committees charged with determining necessary corrective action.

Bolstering appeared quite frequently throughout the statements to reiterate the university’s commitment to learning and diversity. To further this strategy the university released an ad titled “A Community of One” (2006), which was signed by President Brodhead, the mayor of Durham and the chancellor of North Carolina Central University. The language of the ad was meant to demonstrate unity. In a June 5 statement, the president emphasized values he wished to associate with Duke—honesty and a commitment to learning. Because the issues of gender and race relations are still controversial in U.S. society, Duke could not assert that it is something that would soon be corrected, but it could assert leadership in addressing these issues, which matches its institutional mission. It should be noted that “the corrective action” relates to perceptions of Duke. In an April 20 statement released by the head of the Academic Council, Duke’s leadership is commended and the author reinforces the values reflected in Duke’s mission while reaffirming Duke’s crisis response efforts (see Table 1).

Attacking one’s accuser is also a common form of self-defense rhetoric, and how it is used by the university in its defense changes across time. At the outset, the target “accusers” are the media. Later, the university’s attacks focused on District Attorney Michael B. Nifong. From the beginning, President Brodhead criticized the news media for alleged sensational and inaccurate coverage. President Brodhead’s indictment of the news media includes severe accusations, considering that a hallmark of the news media is to be fair and accurate. It is clear that President Brodhead wants to attack the credibility of the media portrayals (see Table 1).

Duke eventually comes out with strong statements against District Attorney Nifong by arguing that the case should be placed “in the hands of an independent party, who can restore confidence in the fairness of the process” (“Statement from Duke President Brodhead Regarding,” 2006), arguing that the case was improperly handled.

In addition to these strategies, another strategy emerged—expression of disappointment in group members. This strategy relates to separation, but is not as definitive as separation. Whereas

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4The University refrains from making outright statements against the alleged female rape victim, although it does release a police report that shows the victim changed her story several times and states in various locations that the victim was not seen as credible.
separation is about placing responsibility on a group member and disassociating the organization from the member, expression of disappointment acknowledges bad judgment or behavior, but does not definitively sever the member from the group. What expression of disappointment accomplishes is that it: (1) differentiates an organization’s articulated values from the actions and expressions of particular group members, (2) shows discontent with the actions taken by the “implicated” group members that go against expressed organizational values, and (3) allows for the possibility that the group members are not completely disassociated from the organization.

In a way, it serves as a “wait and see” strategy. In this instance, a university cannot completely separate itself from its students as it awaits the court decision. This strategy serves as an intermediate “safe” response and could be interpreted as a step in the process of “corrective action” (i.e., replacing the lacrosse coach, punishing players). The difficulty with expression of disappointment is that it may be interpreted as a middle ground response and as too cautious and indeterminate, thereby not satisfying parties who were hoping the university would take a strong position either way.

The university used expression of disappointment several times in its public statements (see Table 1). These types of statements are used to show that the university administration did not condone the behavior or alleged behavior of its students. Thus, the university suggests that the players’ poor behavior should only be a reflection on them and not the school.

Message Strategies and Crisis Stages

RQ1b pertains to whether different strategies were used at different stages in the crisis. Table 2 shows the results, indicating mortification occurred most at early stages, whereas attacking one’s accuser was used most heavily toward the end of the crisis. Most communication emanating from Duke occurred in Stages 1 and 3, and most news stories were written during Stages 5, 6 and 3, respectively.

Local Newspaper Coverage and Crisis Stages

To answer RQ2a, descriptive statistics revealed that overall during the 14-month period, the majority of stories were on the theme of legal issues (38.2%, n = 332). Other themes, in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crisis Stage</th>
<th>Image Repair Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1 (March 23–April 4, 2006)</td>
<td>simple denial, defeasibility, bolstering, transcendence, attacking one’s accuser, expression of disappointment, corrective action, mortification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2 (April 5–16, 2006)</td>
<td>corrective action, separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3 (April 17–May 15, 2006)</td>
<td>shifting the blame, defeasibility, bolstering, attacking one’s accuser, expression of disappointment, corrective action, mortification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 4 (May 16–June 5, 2006)</td>
<td>shifting the blame, bolstering and corrective action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 5 (June 6–Dec. 12, 2006)</td>
<td>defeasibility, attacking one’s accuser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 6 (Dec. 13, 2006–April 12, 2007)</td>
<td>transcendence, attacking one’s accuser</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 3  
Percentage of News Stories by Story Theme and Crisis Stage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Theme</th>
<th>Early</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Late</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legal Issues</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>41.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duke Climate</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Reaction</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad Societal Issues</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Issues</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Issues/DA Nifong</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages are followed by number of stories in parentheses. Percentages are rounded.

order of prevalence, were political issues and District Attorney Nifong (17%, n = 148), Duke University’s campus climate (12.6%, n = 110), public reaction (7%, n = 61), ethical issues (6.1% n = 53), broad social issues (5.6%, n = 49), sports (3.6%, n = 31), and other (9.9%, n = 86). An analysis of story theme and crisis stage revealed a statistically significant association, χ²(14, N = 870) = 122.67, p < .001. The top theme in all stages was legal issues (see Table 3), but the proportion of themes changed among the other categories across time. Furthermore, examined another way, 84.5% of stories about political issues and District Attorney Nifong were written in the late stage of the crisis, while 87.8% of the stories about broad societal issues were addressed at the early and middle stages of the crisis.

RQ2b asked whether the tone of the local newspaper portrayals of facets of Duke University’s image (the University president, Duke athletics, or Duke students) were associated with the crisis stages. Chi-square analysis revealed no statistical association between crisis stage and the portrayal of Duke University President Brodhead, χ²(4, N = 187) = 5.12, p = .28. Even so, examination of Figure 1 shows that there were more negative portrayals (30.2%, n = 16) early in the crisis, and fewer negative portrayals late in the crisis (19.5% n = 15). With regard to the portrayals of Duke athletics, χ²(4, N = 146) = 26.14, p < .001, there was a statistically significant shift. At the early stage, few stories included positive portrayals of the athletics (12% n = 6), but at the late stage more than half (56% n = 28) of the stories included positive portrayals (see Figure 2). In looking at portrayals of Duke students, considered privileged in the local community, a statistical association was revealed between crisis stage and the portrayal of Duke students, χ²(4, N = 191) = 12.71, p < .05. Although the portrayal of Duke students was neutral a majority of the time, at the early stage, 40.8% (n = 20) of portrayals were negative and by the late stage just 26.3% (n = 25) of the portrayals were negative (see Figure 3).

RQ2c includes a closer examination of prominent news stories, A1 or section front pages, and portrayals of Duke’s president, its athletics, and its students, at different crisis stages. Analyses show a nearly significant relationship between crisis stage and portrayal of the Duke president, χ²(4, N = 119) = 9.45, p = .051. During the early stage, just 35.3% (n = 12) of portrayals were positive and during the middle stage 28.6% (n = 10) were positive. However, during the late stage, 54% (n = 27) were positive. There was a statistically significant association between
Percentage of News Stories Portraying Duke University President Brodhead by Tone and Crisis Stage

FIGURE 1 The time-series chart shows the percentage of news stories portraying Duke’s president by news tone at the early \((n = 53)\), middle \((n = 57)\), and late stages \((n = 77)\), of the crisis.

Percentage of News Stories Portraying Duke Athletics by Tone and Crisis Stage

FIGURE 2 The time-series chart shows the percentage of news stories portraying Duke’s athletics by news tone at the early \((n = 50)\), middle \((n = 46)\), and late stages \((n = 50)\) of the crisis.
Percentage of News Stories Portraying Duke Students by Tone and Crisis Stage

FIGURE 3 The time-series chart shows the percentage of news stories portraying Duke’s students by news tone at the early (n = 49), middle (n = 47), and late stages (n = 95) of the crisis.

The final research question relates to how effective Duke’s apologia was in repairing the school’s reputation in the short-term. First, the university did not attempt to get involved in the criminal allegations against its students, asking its publics to let the judicial system carry out justice. This was the “noncontroversial” thing to do and demonstrated to students and alumni that administrators would not jump to conclusions, or to the defense, when it came to their students. When the district attorney’s case against the three lacrosse players started to unravel, it was important that the university had not taken sides for or against its players. This was a difficult position for the University because it undoubtedly did not satisfy alumni and students who felt the University should have provided stronger support for the students.

Duke’s “wait and see” strategy certainly did not satisfy the indicted players and some of their teammates. Evidence showed that two of the accused players were not in the vicinity at the time of the alleged rape and that the accuser was discredited by her varied accounts of the incident. In February 2008, a group of lacrosse players and their parents sued the university contending that it “withheld evidence school officials knew would help the three accused” (Daum, 2008).
In addition, The Washington Post ("Current, former," 2008) reported, "The players accuse the university of implying their guilt by canceling the team’s season after the rape allegation surfaced." The claim in the lawsuit did nothing to improve the university’s reputation and focused on the effects of the strategy of "expression of disappointment."

Even though Duke needed to address legal fallout from the crisis, it seems that at the local community level, people were ready to "move on" by the late stage. As these data show, news stories about Duke athletics were overwhelmingly positive by the late stage of the crisis, and nearly half of the stories that included portrayals of Duke University President Brodhead were positive. This suggests that Duke’s image may have improved in the local community.

The effects of this case cannot only be interpreted in light of the individuals involved, but also by concern for larger U.S. cultural issues—race, gender and class. The university attempted to show leadership in this area by conducting an examination of the campus climate and implementing corrective action. However, news coverage of committee recommendations could not compare with the lurid details about the party and the alleged victim that were reported in the media. Additionally, as Hearit (1995) has pointed out, engaging in corrective action denotes that in fact something has "gone wrong" and that the entity shoulders some responsibility because something needs to be fixed.

Whether Duke repaired its image with students and faculty is unclear. In addition to receiving unfavorable news coverage, the incident also rattled racial tensions on campus. Two of the later releases on Duke’s website dealt with harassment that students and faculty felt for expressing their views. It was reported that African-American faculty members were attacked via blogs and through anonymous e-mails ("Provost Peter Lange," 2007). It is not clear whether persons outside the Duke community were aware of this information or whether the revelation on the website unnecessarily alerted external publics to the internal problem. A separate study of the local news coverage of this crisis (Jin, Park, & Len-Ríos, 2010), suggests that the predominant emotion expressed in news coverage by publics toward Duke was that of anger. Those expressing the most anger included university employees and the community.

Perhaps one sign of whether Duke’s image was repaired nationally is to examine reactions of prospective students and look at admissions applications. A news report indicated that early admission applications dropped 20% for 2007 (Stancill, 2006). Applicants may have been deterred by the scandal.

All in all, the university’s strategy was reactive and multifaceted. It appeared more successful in improving the image of its athletics in the local community than it did in addressing other publics. In handling the response, Duke needed to balance its deference to the legal process with taking a strong stand. With regard to issues of gender, race and class, it is not clear as to whether the University demonstrated national leadership on handling this aspect of the crisis. To be fair, however, very few, if any, institutions have found a solution to these differences, which is a reflection of U.S. culture.

**DISCUSSION**

This case study examined Duke University’s image repair strategies in response to its men’s lacrosse team crisis. Analysis of its communications shows that the University responded late and that it had to address both the allegations against its athletes and the perception that it
did not take the initial situation seriously. Previous research shows that in certain situations, if the party implicated in the crisis reveals the crisis information first to the public before the media, it will be perceived more positively and will incur less damage to its reputation (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Duke was at a disadvantage from the start.

With respect to image repair options, this case study suggests another category related to separation—expression of disappointment. Brinson and Benoit (1999) pointed out that denial and separation do not mix well—why would an organization distance itself from one of its members if there was no wrongdoing? Expressing disappointment is a response for behavior that may be perceived as a minor offense or when there is doubt that the act occurred. In a legal battle, where an organization is reluctant to choose sides, expression of disappointment may give the organization time to determine its strategy. In this way, it serves as a type of “holding statement.”

A benefit of this technique is that it does not sever the group members immediately (e.g., such as firing or expelling would). We have seen political groups use these methods to distance themselves from members “in trouble” while they wait for the maelstrom to subside. In this situation, the organization can also express disappointment, which shows that the organization is emotionally responsive. The potential problem with using this strategy is that it may be perceived as a weak response if it is sustained as the primary response. Timing in using this technique may be especially important as it must be implemented at the outset of the crisis.

One of the more challenging aspects of image repair here was to address the impression that Duke University did not foster racist or sexist behavior on campus. The University did not address sexism or sexual violence in a sustained way, but instead concentrated on racial attitudes. In the news release about Duke’s internal report, it showed that the racial element was viewed as more serious than gender violence issues. Addressing issues of race is especially thorny. More research should assess how best organizations can respond when members create crises related to race and gender. By the University’s own admission, the event stirred hostile and negative behavior toward some faculty of color. It remains to be seen whether the efforts and committees the University president convened can create long-term change to help the university achieve its mission and repair its reputation. Unfortunately, the university will not likely get the same level of media coverage for its corrective actions.

The results of this case analysis address several issues in the crisis literature. First, they revealed that Duke used multiple communication strategies at the same time, making it difficult to tease out the effects of any one strategy. Prior research suggests that more positive strategies, such as corrective action, bolstering, and mortification, can put the organization in a better light (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). In this case, more negative strategies, such as shifting the blame and attacking one’s accuser (i.e., District Attorney Nifong), although not positive, may have served to refocus public ire. Toward the late stage of the crisis, when the bulk of the stories focused on District Attorney Nifong, local news coverage of Duke’s athletics and Duke’s students was more positive. It is apparent that crises are not clear-cut and that strategic communication practice is complex and situated in cultural contexts. Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) determined that the Air Force weathered its sexual assault crisis partly because the cultural climate in the United States is to support the military. The Duke crisis, situated in the historical context of U.S. Southern politics and civil rights for blacks and women, influenced the atmosphere surrounding the crisis.
Second, as Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) have articulated, there is a strong association between crisis stage and the portrayals of individuals in the crisis. It appears that early news coverage will be negative and it is the challenge of communication professionals to turn it around. In this case, it was interesting that the press portrayed Duke’s president primarily in neutral or positive ways. This raises the question as to whether characteristics of and perceptions of individual spokespersons matter. The favorable portrayals of Duke’s president could reflect the fact that he already had a positive reputation in the community and local journalists may see him as a reputable source. Good practitioner-journalist relationships between Duke’s public relations staff and the local press may have also helped. In a crisis, existing relationships may affect the tenor of news stories.

Regarding practitioner characteristics, Barnett (2008) in her analysis of the Duke case, suggested that it might have been advantageous for Duke to provide an expert on gender issues or sexual assault in discussing the case. An unintended consequence of inviting such an expert may have been to appear to have taken sides. On the other hand, to have a female spokesperson represent Duke, even if she were not an expert on gender issues, may have given Duke added credibility. Future research could reveal whether an organization’s believability is enhanced if a woman or person of color represents an organization during a crisis involving race and/or gender.

Last, in examining IRT from a strategic communication perspective, it appears that when organizations select their strategies it is unclear what level of responsibility the organization should take and how it should prioritize publics to achieve its long-term, rather than short-term goals. Additionally, a crisis may not only turn on which publics should be addressed, but also on what facets of an organization’s identity are involved or affected. The results indicate that the different facets of Duke’s identity, represented by Duke’s president, its athletics and its students, were portrayed differently by the news media. This suggests that some entities within organizations may be held more or less responsible than others. It also shows that some facets of identity may recover more quickly than others (e.g., if sports teams win, they are more easily forgiven). Furthermore, while scholars have studied image repair strategies in the United States using a variety of methods, fewer studies have looked at whether these same strategies could be implemented by global organizations in other countries and cultures. Similarly, although this study has made mention of the importance of considering the multiple constituents that an organization serves, more research needs to be done on implementing message strategies for specific public segments and the effectiveness of using combinations of strategies.

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