It may seem to the general public that we are in an “age of scandal.” With abundant allegations of sexual harassment among prominent figures, corruption abounding in politics in multiple countries, and massive security breaches and violations of privacy from multiple companies that are portrayed in the media, we are exposed to scandals almost every day. While the number of scandals we see may not be any different from decades ago, there are several reasons why it may seem more abundant. First, social and digital media has put news right at the public’s fingertips, which has contributed to the “24-hour news cycle” (Rosenberg & Feldman 2008). This has significantly contributed to the speed at which we receive information. Social and digital media has also contributed to the globalization of communication. It is much easier for people to communicate cross-culturally, which means more exposure to international scandals (Block 2004).

Another significant reason that it seems like we’re in the “age of scandal” is because the public has the power to affect a person’s or company’s image at their fingertips (Brazeal 2008). As we saw with the viral spread of the video of a passenger being dragged off an overbooked United Airlines flight (Zdanowicz & Grinberg 2018), scandal can affect a person’s or company’s image in a matter of minutes. Because of this, it is imperative that accused parties not only respond in a timely manner, but also give an appropriate response that will minimize the damage caused by the scandal to one’s image (Benoit 1995; Coombs 2014).

Since William Benoit wrote his seminal work, Accounts, Excuses and Apologies (1995), IRT (formerly image restoration theory) has been used by multiple scholars to examine the form and impact of accused parties’ response strategies during times of scandal. Although IRT is primarily a rhetorical approach to examining response to transgressions, recent studies have seen the theory used in more empirical research, including content analysis (e.g. Len-Rios 2010) and experiments (e.g. Brown 2014). As an attempt to synthesize the research conducted using this theory, this chapter will begin with a brief summary of IRT, followed by a discussion of the two approaches that have been used to examine the theory: the source-oriented (rhetorical) approach and the audience-oriented (empirical) approach. Then, after a summary of some of the prominent contextual perspectives that have been studied using the theory, the chapter will conclude with some generalizations gathered from IRT research and directions for future research.
Conceptualizing image repair theory

Benoit and Hanczor (1994) defined image as “the perception(s) of a person, group or organization held by the audience, shaped by the words and actions of that person, as well as by the discourse and behavior of other relevant actors” (p. 40). Benoit (1995) provided two reasons why maintaining a favorable image is important. First, a favorable public image can contribute to a healthy self-image. A negative public image can cause anxiety, stress, and guilt, which can be detrimental to one’s health. Negative sanctions from audience members (e.g., prison sentences for crimes) also can contribute to the decline of a healthy self-image. Second, a positive public image can be helpful when attempting to persuade audiences effectively because audiences frequently call a speaker’s credibility into question when they are presented with persuasive material. From a public relations perspective, it is important to respond to an attack on the image of a person or organization that a practitioner represents because the profession exists to crystallize and support a positive reputation for individuals and organizations through the management of that entity’s image, especially during times of scandal (Fearn-Banks 2007).

IRT is a theoretical framework that was derived from several theories, including Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) apologia theory, which posits that it is human instinct for a person to respond to an attack on his or her morality, motives, or reputation, and the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen 2010), particularly pertaining to the notion of beliefs and values. IRT is designed to provide guidance for responding to persuasive attacks on one’s image. A persuasive attack has two components. First, some action occurred that is perceived by many to be offensive or undesirable, which can violate one’s values. Second, an entity is believed to be responsible for the offensive or undesirable act, which creates one’s belief that that entity is the aggressor. Grounded in the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen 2010), IRT proposes that, in order to repair one’s image, the accused must respond to the act in one of two ways. First, the accused can attempt to reject or reduce one’s responsibility for the actions in order to alter the public’s beliefs about one’s involvement. Second, the accused can reduce the offensiveness, possibly by even admitting responsibility or proposing to correct the issue, which helps to reduce the violations of the public’s values.

The foundation of IRT has two key assumptions. First, communication is a goal-directed activity. Communication is motivated by one’s intentions, beliefs, and goals, and it is used to achieve these goals through various forms of communication, whether interpersonal, rhetorical, or mediated. Clark and Delia (1979) gave three universal motives for a person to use communication: (1) to respond to a particular obstacle or problem that he or she is facing; (2) to create and maintain relationships; and (3) to establish and maintain a desired self-image, which is the second key assumption of IRT: maintaining a favorable image is one of the key goals of communication. As stated previously, not only is maintaining a desirable image important for a healthy self-image, but from a persuasive standpoint, maintaining a desirable image is important for the credibility of a speaker (Benoit 2015).

Image repair strategies. A primary function of IRT is to provide a typology of responses that an accused party can use to respond to persuasive attacks. Benoit (1995) provides a typology of five strategies that one can use to repair one’s image after a persuasive attack. Table 47.1 provides a complete list of these strategies.

First, a person can choose to deny the fact that he or she performed the act in question. The denial strategy has two variants. A simple denial just states that the person in question did not perform the offensive act. The accused party can also shift the blame. This is a form of denial because if someone else performed the act, then obviously the person accused cannot be held responsible.
A person could attempt to evade responsibility for his or her actions. There are four variations of this strategy. A provocation approach, also known as scapegoating, proclaims that the person accused of the offense performed the act in response to someone else’s wrongdoing. The accused can claim he or she performed the negative behavior because of a lack of control, lack of information, or misinformation—known as defeasibility. The person accused can also claim the act was caused by an accident or that the person had good intentions when performing the act in question.

A person can also attempt to reduce the offensiveness caused by the party’s actions. This strategy has six variations. Bolstering involves referring to positive acts performed in the past by the accused that will help mitigate the negative perception. Minimization involves making the audience believe that the offensive act is not as serious as perceived. Differentiation involves comparing the act in question to other, more offensive acts to make the current accusations seem less offensive. Transcendence involves placing the act in a broader, more favorable context to mitigate the negative perception. The accused can also attack his or her accusers to reduce the credibility of the opposing party or provide compensation for the victims of the offensive act.

The final two strategies have no variations. The accused can perform corrective action in order to show commitment to preventing the problem from occurring again. This can occur in two forms: the accused can restore the situation to its state before the incident or promise to prevent the reoccurrence of the incident. Finally, the accused can admit that he or she is responsible for the action and ask for forgiveness, called mortification, or apology.

Beyond Benoit’s (1995) initial response strategies, several scholars have suggested other strategies through their analysis of accused parties’ responses to allegations. For example, Liu (2008) suggested that using humor and endorsements from third parties were response strategies used to reduce offensiveness, and that claiming misinterpretation was a response strategy used to evade responsibility. Hambrick, Frederick & Sanderson (2015) suggested strategies of confirming and retrospective regret as ways to reduce offensiveness, and Bruce and Tini (2008) suggested diversion as a way to evade responsibility.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Strategies and explanations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>• Simple denial (stating that the organization or individual did not perform the act in question)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Shifting the blame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evading responsibility</td>
<td>• Provocation (scapegoating, claiming the actions were provoked by the actions of another person or organization)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Defeasibility (claiming the action was provoked by lack of information or misinformation)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Accident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Good intentions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing offensiveness</td>
<td>• Bolstering (stressing the positive traits of the organization or individual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Minimization (claiming the crisis is not as serious as the public or media perceives)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Differentiation (making the act seem less offensive than the public perceives)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transcendence (places the crisis in a more favorable context)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Attack the accuser</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Compensation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corrective action</td>
<td>• Corrective action (promising to correct the problem)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortification</td>
<td>• Mortification (admitting the crisis was the organization’s or individual’s fault and asking for forgiveness)</td>
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Studying image repair theory: two perspectives

The vast majority of studies that examine IRT have been conducted from the point of view of the party accused of scandal. This source-oriented approach typically involves case studies of the image repair attempts of the accused party in a specific scandal, mainly through a textual analysis of the documents used to communicate the accused party’s image repair efforts (e.g. Brinson & Benoit 1999; Zhang & Benoit 2004), a rhetorical analysis of interviews and speeches made by accused parties (e.g. Benoit & Hanczor 1994; Furgerson & Benoit 2013), or a content analysis of statements in mass media sources, like social media posts or news articles (e.g. Harlow, Brantley & Harlow 2011; Len-Rios 2010). Each of these approaches involves a critique of the strategies used by the accused parties to react to allegations. While this approach provides the opportunity to analyze critically the responses used by accused parties to react to scandals and transgressions they face, it suffers from a lack of guidelines or evidence to determine if those strategies used by accused parties were successful, which reduces the predictive power of IRT and makes findings less applicable to similar scandals (Burns & Bruner 2000; Sheldon & Sallot 2008).

Because of this limitation, several scholars have recently begun to examine IRT from an audience-oriented approach, using experimental design to examine the effects of IRT strategies on participants (Brown, Dickhaus & Long 2012; Brown 2014; Coombs & Schmidt 2000; Dardis & Haigh 2009; Haigh & Brubaker, 2010; Sheldon & Sallot 2008). This has allowed scholars not only to examine the impact of certain image repair strategies on audience perception, but has also allowed scholars to examine the influence of other contextual variables, including prior reputation and performance history (Sheldon & Sallot 2008), race and gender (Brown, Billings, Mastro & Brown-Devlin 2015), fandom (Brown, Dickhaus & Long 2012), occupation (Len-Rios, Finneman, Han, Bhandari & Perry 2015), and relationship history with stakeholders (Haigh & Brubaker 2010). Although this approach does provide evidence of the effectiveness of IRT strategies, it suffers from the artificial nature of experimental research, which typically involves staging scandal situations and the responses from accused parties. In addition, however, Benoit (2016) pointed out that most experimental studies only test a few image repair strategies, which cannot guarantee a comprehensive understanding of the image repair discourse; also, the existed experimental studies have applied a variety of dependent variables to measure the audience reaction, making the comparison of results across studies problematic.

Contextual approaches to image repair research

IRT has been used primarily to examine image repair discourse in three areas: politics, sports and entertainment, and corporate (Benoit 2015). According to Benoit (2015), there are two elements that make the study of political image repair unique. First, the partisan nature of politicians means that the opponents of accused politicians will repeatedly attack and remind the public of scandals. Second, politicians make decisions on a daily basis that can affect the lives of millions of people. Because of this, a politicians’ constituents typically hold politicians to a higher level of morality compared to others.

Typically, from a political standpoint, IRT is used to examine statements involved in scandals, beginning with the first study of IRT that investigated statements made by President Ronald Reagan in response to his involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal (Benoit, Gullifor & Panici 1991). These statements are usually not in response to criminal accusations, but rather (for a significant number of them) examine scandals involving unethical and questionable behavior. For example, previous studies conducted have examined responses to racially charged statements made by politicians, specifically Sheldon and Sallot’s (2008) experimental examination of an incident
similar to Trent Lott’s racial remarks during Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday party, and Liu (2008)’s analysis of statements made after multiple allegations of racial remarks by then-Senator George Allen using content analysis and interviews with former staffers. Previous studies conducted by Benoit and Nill (1998), Len-Ríos and Benoit (2004), Garcia (2011), and Benoit (2017) have examined response strategies used after various allegations involving sexual misconduct.

IRT has also been used to examine response to backlash following controversial political decisions, similar to Benoit, Gullifor and Panici’s (1991) study on the Iran-Contra scandal. President George W. Bush’s decisions have been the focus of several studies, particularly in response to questionable decisions made during the Iraq War (Benoit 2006a; 2006b) and in relation to Hurricane Katrina (Benoit and Henson 2009; Liu 2007). Barack Obama engaged in image repair strategies after his health care initiative, HealthCare.gov, went live and faced major infrastructural issues (Benoit 2014). Kenneth Starr’s responses to criticism during the Bill Clinton investigation has also been studied (Benoit & McHale 1999).

Corporate image repair is unique because corporations also have the responsibility and capacity to manage scandals while serving a wider set of audiences compared to politicians and other individuals (Benoit 1997). Corporations are generally responsible to these various audiences, and reputation is often built by carefully balancing “the expectations of employees, investors, government, activist groups, and society as a whole” (Oliveira 2008, p. 230). It goes without saying that the needs and expectations of government regulators are different from those of employees, stockholders, and societal groups. Furthermore, when facing a scandal, corporations often have to balance the needs and expectations of legal teams, whose goal is to encourage (or even discourage) communication strategies that could lead to litigation.

In addition, corporations have the advantage of having multiple people speak on their behalf through multiple platforms. Organizations such as BP (Schultz et al. 2012), Findus Nordic (Falkheimer & Heide 2015), Dow Corning (Brinson & Benoit 1996), and Texaco (Brinson & Benoit 1999) all had opportunities to respond to media criticisms through press releases, speeches, and statements. Even organizations such as The New York Times have used their stature and platform to respond to internal scandals (Hindman 2005).

Corporate crises and scandals have been examined multiple ways, often considering the impacts of strategies on audience responses through case studies and retrospective analyses. Long-term examples, such as Philip Morris’s responses to public and government criticisms, show how crises and scandals can change and endure over time (Oliveira 2008). Studies examining the Husi Food Company’s food-safety scandal (Xie & Yao 2016), Australian supermarket crises (Grimmer 2017), and Findus Nordic’s horsemeat scandal (Falkheimer & Heide 2015) illustrate how IRT can be used to respond to international corporate scandals. Scholars have even considered how the image restoration typology can be applied in financial reporting (Erickson, Weber & Segovia 2011). However, scandals often play out in the media; to this end, specific cases have highlighted the impact that media can have not only on bringing crises and scandals to light, but in serving as a vehicle for organizations to communicate their positions (e.g. Benoit & Brinson 1994; Falkheimer & Heide 2015).

Compared to political and corporate image repair, image repair from a sports and entertainment perspective also has some key conceptual distinctions. First, compared to politicians, entertainers’ scandals usually do not have as serious an impact on people’s lives, which makes their image repair attempts easier to be accepted by the public (Benoit 1997). However, it is difficult for an entertainer or an athlete to distance themselves from scandals, unlike executives or employees of corporations (Benoit 2015). Typically, politicians and corporate officials are also less likely than entertainers and athletes to use the mortification strategy to repair their images because the prices of admitting mistakes tends to be higher (Benoit 2015).
The majority of studies devoted to sports and entertainment image repair are usually about individual athletes and entertainers that are facing high-profile scandals, beginning with the initial study in sports image repair conducted by Benoit and Hanczor (1994) that examined the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan scandal. Previous studies have examined the saga between Terrell Owens and the Philadelphia Eagles (Brazeal 2008), doping accusations and admissions from Lance Armstrong (Hambrick, Fredrick & Sanderson 2013), Floyd Landis (Glantz 2010), and Roger Clemens (Sanderson 2008), and the sexual transgressions of Kobe Bryant, Ben Roethlisberger, Tiger Woods, and Hugh Grant (Benoit 1997; Meng & Pan 2013). While many of these studies are from a source-oriented perspective, many have been conducted from an audience-oriented perspective, not looking at a factual case involving an individual, but rather staging scenarios to test the effectiveness of response strategies and the influence of intervening variables (Brown 2014; Brown, Dickhaus & Long 2012; Brown et al. 2015; Len-Rios, Finneman, Han, Bhandari & Perry, 2015).

**Generalizations and future directions for image repair research**

Based on previous research, there are a few generalizations that have been made regarding the effectiveness of IRT strategies. First, and perhaps the most universal generalization, is the widespread acceptance of mortification and corrective action as successful strategies. Rhetorical (e.g. Benoit & Brinson 1994; Brinson & Benoit 1996; Glantz 2013; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner 2011) and empirical studies (e.g. Brown et al. 2012; Haigh & Brubaker 2010) have provided support for both mortification and corrective action as effective strategies to use when attempting to repair one’s image after a scandal. Previous research also provides evidence that mortification also makes evading responsibility and reducing offensiveness strategies more effective (e.g. Benoit 2015; Glantz 2013; Utsler & Epp 2013). Benoit (2016) recommends using the mortification and corrective action strategies in combination when appropriate. Another generalization is that the denial strategy is typically ineffective, particularly when evidence contradicts the accused party’s claim (e.g. Benoit & Hanczor 1994; Glantz 2010; Hambrick, Federick & Sanderson 2015; Kennedy 2010). The denial strategy has mainly been examined in rhetorical image repair literature; however, Haigh and Brubaker (2010) also found empirical evidence supporting the claim that the denial strategy is the least effective strategy in a hypothetical scenario.

Because the vast majority of image repair studies approach IRT from a source-oriented perspective (Burns & Bruner 2000), future research should consider testing IRT strategies from a more empirical, audience-oriented approach. For example, when considering the evading responsibility and reducing offensiveness strategies, future research should test the differences in effectiveness among the variants for each strategy. Benoit (2016) suggests that testing only a few strategies in empirical studies provides an incomplete comparative analysis of the effectiveness of strategies, particularly when discussing the evading responsibility and reducing offensiveness strategies. Because typically one of these strategies are tested in previous empirical research (e.g. Brown 2014; Haigh & Brubaker, 2010), generalizations are haphazardly made for all evading responsibility and reducing offensiveness variants. Benoit (2016) found difference among the specific forms of each of these strategies, but future research should test their effectiveness in other specific contexts. In addition, while most rhetorical studies reveal that accused parties usually respond to scandal using multiple IRT strategies, empirical IRT research usually tests single strategies. Future research should test strategies in combination to examine their effectiveness compared to standalone strategies.

From a contextual standpoint, there are two particular areas of image repair that warrant more research. First, image repair should be studied from a more international perspective. While there
have been a few studies that examine international image repair, the majority of studies have examined image repair efforts in the United States (Benoit 2015). Benoit and Brinson (1999) was the first study that examined international image repair efforts, rhetorically investigating the controversy surrounding Princess Diana’s death and responses from the Royal Family. Despite this, very few studies have been conducted from an international context, including the investigations of image repair strategies used by Israeli political figures (Kampf 2008) and corporate image repair in China (Meng 2010). In order to examine the effectiveness of IRT strategies across cultures, more studies should be conducted from a non-U.S. standpoint. In addition, more comparison of the use of IRT strategies in similar U.S. and non-U.S. settings would be ideal, similar to Low, Varughese and Pang’s (2011) comparison of government responses made by the U.S. and Taiwan to defend similar issues in their responses to natural disasters.

Also, more research should examine third-party image repair, defined by Benoit (2015) as image repair efforts offered on the accused party’s behalf by someone not involved in the scandal. Benoit (2015) discussed two types of third-party image repair: historic third-party image repair and contemporary third-party image repair. Historic third-party image repair focuses on attempts to repair an image due to past offensive acts, such as Carmack, Bates and Harter’s (2008) examination of President Bill Clinton’s repair efforts for the Tuskegee syphilis experiments. Contemporary third-party image repair focuses on third-party attempts to repair another party’s image for recent acts, such as Wen, Yu and Benoit’s (2009) analysis of image repair efforts by Taiwanese newspapers defending Chien-ming Wang’s subpar performances as a member of the New York Yankees, a very rare instance of international third-party image repair. Brown and Billings (2013) introduced a form of third-party image repair in their discussion of fan-enacted crisis communication. Despite these efforts, more research should be devoted to the image repair efforts on behalf of accused parties by third-party sources in order to investigate the effectiveness of those efforts.

IRT research also suffers from a lack of comparative research. Typically, in both rhetorical and empirical research devoted to IRT, a single scenario is examined. For a basis of comparison among IRT strategies in different contexts, more studies should examine multiple scenarios. Rhetorically, Meng and Pan (2013) compared three sex scandals involving athletes: Tiger Woods, Ben Roethlisberger, and Kobe Bryant. This allows the authors to make comparisons among the three accused athletes’ image repair efforts, which can lead to more generalizable assumptions that can be tested with empirical methods. Empirical studies should include multiple conditions regarding the type of scandal an accused party faces, similar to Brown’s (2014) investigation of the effectiveness of image repair efforts during a criminal and non-criminal scandal.

No matter the approach to examining responses to scandal using IRT, it is evident that maintaining a positive image is important during a 24-hour news cycle. Attacks on one’s image can happen and become widespread in a matter of minutes, so crafting an appropriate, timely response is important to one’s personal, and possibly financial, well-being. Living in an “age of scandal” means that there will be abundant opportunities for scholars to use IRT as a framework to study these instances, and there is a significant number of opportunities for future research in this area.

References


Protecting public perception


