#CancelTheDuggars and #BoycottTLC: Image repair or exploitation in reality television

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A B S T R A C T

This case study examined the network TLC’s response to Josh Duggar’s (from their reality show 19 Kids and Counting) confirmation that he molested young girls, including two of his sisters, when he was a teenager. While TLC was not responsible for the molestation, their proximity to the family and their relationship with the Duggars led to criticism and thus, a plan to improve their image. Overall, TLC relied on four different tactics to assist their image repair efforts: (a) delayed and minimal responses, (b) reducing offensiveness, (c) minimizing the severity of the situation, and (d) ineffective social media use. We argue these four strategies were unsuccessful tactics. Specifically, their decision to wait two months to cancel 19 Kids and Counting, to air a documentary on sexual abuse featuring the two sisters victimized by Josh Duggar and their later decision to give these two sisters their own spin-off series calls into question the ethical and exploitative nature of their response.

1. Introduction

Often individuals or organizations implement image repair campaigns in the wake of scandals or crises directly related to them, while others court controversy because of their associations. For examples, college and universities become apologists when students, such as athletes, are accused of sexual assault (see Fortunato, 2008; Len-Rios, 2010, for their analysis of how Duke University handled the lacrosse team’s rape allegations). This case study examines how the network TLC handled their image when one of their reality shows, 19 Kids and Counting, came under fire when the oldest son admitted to molesting young girls as a teenager, including two of his younger sisters.

Reality television is an understudied yet important genre to examine as it dominates the landscape of entertainment television. Its market share has grown from approximately 20% in 2001 to 40% in 2013 (Writers Guild of America, East, 2013). In 2015 alone, 750 reality television shows aired on cable, a figure that is a staggering 83% higher than scripted television. Of those 750 reality shows, 350 were new shows (VanDerWerff, 2016).

However, reality television’s outlook is not as promising as these numbers might suggest. Schneider (2017) writes that “Reality TV has become a mature business, which means the shows are more expensive, profit margins have been squeezed, and ratings are down—yet producers are being asked to do more” (para. 3). Unfortunately, these circumstances could pressure producers and network executives to approve programming with controversial content and “stars” whose antics, scandals, or crimes could threaten a network’s reputation. This article examines one such case.
2. Literature review

2.1. Image repair

One’s reputation often suffers in the aftermath of a crisis. Image repair,1 therefore, focuses on repairing the image of an organization or individual in crisis. Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2015) explain that “an effective response is designed to repair the organization’s damaged image or reputation” (p. 28). Two theories important to image repair are Benoit’s Image Repair Theory and Coombs’ Reputation Repair Strategies. Each theory includes multiple image repair strategies, some of which overlap. First, Benoit’s (1995, 2015) theory includes five repair categories, or image repair strategies: (a) denial, (b) evasion of responsibility, (c) reducing offensiveness, (d) corrective action and (e) mortification. Coombs’ (1999) image repair strategies include many similarities to Benoit’s (1995) typology, although Coombs provides a few key differences. These strategies include: (a) nonexistence, (b) distance, (c) intransigence, (d) mortification, (e) suffering, (f) diminishment, and (g) rebuilding.

2.1.1. Corporate apologia

Similar to Benoit and Coombs’ strategies, Corporate Apologia is the discourse of self-preservation (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). Hearit (2004) expanded this definition, adding that apologia is “a response to criticism that seeks to present a compelling competing account of organizational accusations” (p. 502). The five different communication strategies of Apologia include: (a) denial, (b) counter-attack, (c) differentiation, (d) apology, and (e) legal (Hearit, 2006). Strategies are selected based on the amount of responsibility the accused is held accountable for.

2.2. Relevant strategies

Between Benoit (1995, 2015) and Coombs’ (1999) typologies and corporate apologia, three strategies, or substrategies, are particularly relevant to the current study: reducing offensiveness, distance, and differentiation.

2.2.1. Reducing offensiveness

Reducing offensiveness is one of Benoit’s (1995, 2015) strategies. This occurs when an attempt is made to reduce the public’s negative feelings about the accused. Benoit (1995) described six variants including (a) bolstering: the accused aims to reinforce the public’s positive feelings towards them; (b) minimization: the public is swayed to believe “that the negative act isn’t as bad as it might first appear” (p. 24); (c) differentiation: the undesirable action is described as another “similar but less desirable” (p. 24) action; (d) transcendence: when the objectionable act is discussed in a contrasting framework; (e) attacking the accuser: when the accused lessens the reliance of the accuser; and (f) compensation: when the accused offers a form of compensation to the victim.

Bentley (2012) studied the image repair strategies Rush Limbaugh image used in 2012 after he made offensive comments about law student Sandra Fluke on the air. Fluke had testified at a Congressional hearing about the lack of birth control coverage by student health insurance. Limbaugh criticized the student’s testimony, called her offensive names, and made other inappropriate remarks about the situation. He was quoted saying “What does that make her? It makes her a slut right? It makes her a prostitute” (Bentley, 2012, p. 228). The following day he added “If we are going to pay for your contraceptives and thus pay for you to have sex, we want something for it. We want you to post the videos online so we can all watch” (Bentley, 2012, p. 228). Reducing offensiveness was one of a few strategies Limbaugh utilized. Bentley (2012) noted that he tried to minimize the public’s negative feelings through transcendence and bolstering. Limbaugh used transcendence when he said “for over 20 years, I have illustrated the absurd with absurdity, three hours a day, five days a week. In this instance, I chose the wrong words in my analogy of the situation” (Bentley, 2012, p. 231). He later used bolstering when he said “never, ever, do any of us on our side of the aisle try to suppress the speech or the voices of those with whom we disagree, and we never will” (Bentley, 2012, p. 231). These approaches assisted him in regaining the support of his followers.

In another example, Toyota also used reducing offensiveness, specifically minimization, during the crisis stemming from their need to recall automobiles due to sudden, unintended acceleration that resulted in numerous crashes, some fatal. The company originally claimed that “no serious accidents could be attributed” (George, 2012, p. 238) to their products. George (2012) argued that this tactic, mixed with their initial denial, was not successful in correcting the company’s deteriorating reputation.

2.2.2. Distance

One of Coombs’ (1999) strategies applicable to the current study is the distance strategy. The distance strategies accept and acknowledge a crisis while “weakening the linkage between the crisis and the organization” (Coombs, 1999, p. 451); this lessens the negativity reflected upon the organization, which in turn avoids a damaged reputation. The two sub-strategies are excuse and justification.

The goal of the excuse strategy is to reduce responsibility for a crisis (Coombs, 1999). By reducing responsibility, the negative feelings towards the accused should be minimal. The excuse strategy includes denial of intention and denial of volition.

The second strategy, justification, “seeks to minimize the damage associated with the crisis” (Coombs, 1999, p. 451). The accused aim to sway the public into believing that the crisis is not as bad as it appears, oftentimes comparing the crisis to a similar, but worse,

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1 We use the term image repair in this article to refer to both image repair and image restoration.
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