

A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF
IMAGE REPAIR STRATEGIES IN POLITICAL SEX SCANDALS

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ABSTRACT

High-profile sex scandals involving American politicians during the latter half of the 20th Century through to modern day have captured a significant amount of public and media attention. While such scandals have ended many political careers, there have been surprising instances of the rehabilitation and recovery of an offending politician's image and career, the success of which has proven difficult to predict. Research performed to date on the success of sex scandal image repair strategies have largely involved case studies, and particularly with respect to Benoit's Image Repair Theory, have been almost exclusively qualitative in nature; research into this topic has failed to comprehensively include an analysis of strategy effectiveness using public opinion polling, which is commonly employed in similar political science research. Consequently, conducting a polling-based quantitative assessment of image repair strategy effectiveness in the context of political sex scandals is appropriate. Specifically, using Benoit's Image Repair Theory framework as a foundation, a statistical analysis of emotional and cognitive responses to a politician and his sex scandal crisis response messaging with respect to each of the five image repair strategies as well as scenario context (e.g., moral versus criminal) is performed. Suggestions for the overall effectiveness of particular sex scandal response strategies is produced and discussed.

Introduction

American political sex scandals taking place in the past several decades have garnered exceptional attention from the now omnipresent media and public, putting politicians in crisis mode in an attempt to retain their elected seats or win an elected office. While some careers survive the controversy, many more do not. While it may seem that there has been an increase in political sex scandals in recent decades—from governors to congressmen to the president—the reality is that they pre-date the formation of the United States by thousands of years (Kuntz, 1998). From Mesopotamia to Thomas Jefferson to John F. Kennedy, political scandals of a sexual nature have been occurring regularly throughout history since the advent of politics (Kuntz, 1998; Foster et al., 1998; Stewart, 2013). While some female politicians have been caught in this type of crisis situation, most involve males, perhaps because there are simply more men than women holding elected positions (Henig, 2011; Wallace, 2011).

Previous research showed that corruption has an impact on voters, and moral violations, above all others, are most likely to be punished at the polls (Welch & Hibbing, 1997). Politicians' careers have ended overnight because of these personal affairs, despite whatever good work they've accomplished on behalf of their constituents. The outcomes of these scandals can be influenced by several variables, such as how the politician responds to the sex scandal (his crisis response), the timing of the response(s), how the media frame the story, his political affiliation, whether criminality is involved in the scandal, and how the public perceives both the politician and his indiscretion(s) (Benoit, 2015; Iyengar, 1996; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Wigley, 2011; Yioutas &

Segvic, 2003). This study explores various strategies a politician can employ in his crisis response to increase the likelihood of being forgiven by the voting public.

A crisis can be defined as a “sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat” (Coombs, 2007, p. 164). And, in the journalistic view, it is “dramatic and newsworthy” (Heath, 2012, p. 1). Not surprisingly, much of crisis communication literature relates to corporate crisis response and image repair. In particular, the interest of this current research lies in evaluating political crisis response in a systematic manner using Benoit’s (2015) Image Repair Theory. Image Repair Theory outlines five potential image repair strategies —denial, evasion, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification—and he has done significant research on how organizations and individuals apply them to various successes and failures (Benoit, 2006a; Benoit, 2006b; Benoit et al. 1991; Benoit & Nill, 1998; Blaney & Benoit, 1998).

It has been argued and examined that negative information tends to weigh more heavily than equally positive information, specifically with regard to political perception—it’s less important to be thought good of, with more importance on not having voters think badly of a politician, illustrating the importance of solid image repair to amend negative perceptions in the public’s mind (Lau, 1982). Rundquist et al. (1997) explored why people might vote for corrupt politicians, allowing for the possibility of politicians retaining their positions following scandals. Previous research regarding political scandals includes comparing the response strategies of Sen. David Vitter and Rep. Anthony Weiner (Benoit, 2015), the image repair strategies of Rep. Gary Condit (Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004), strategies used by Governors Eliot Spitzer and David

Paterson (Wigley, 2011), and examinations of President Bill Clinton's scandal with White House intern Monica Lewinsky (Garcia, 2011; Kramer & Olson, 2002; Shah et al., 2002; Yioutas & Segvic, 2003; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000).

The prevalence of news media coverage of American politics, particularly when controversy arises, indicates a need for more research on how politicians should respond to crises in an effort to repair their images and continue work on behalf of their constituents. However, few studies evaluate the use of crisis response strategies in a systematic way employing experimental design (for examples see: Claeys et al., 2010; Fuchs-Burnett, 2002; Hartel et al., 1998; Heath, R. L., 2010; Jorgensen, 1994). Politics itself relies heavily on quantitative polling, but thus far this information has not been widely captured and evaluated in a systematic way to inform the evolution of crisis response strategies. Further, the research that does address political sex scandals is also void of empirical evidence on whether the type of sex scandal—paying for an escort vs. having an affair with a staffer, for example—has an impact on the outcome; i.e. whether the response strategy must be altered for scandals that include criminal elements. Political party affiliation is another important factor that should be considered in political crisis communication (i.e., when a scandal arises). Most of the quantitative research that has been employed in this realm involves content analysis (in cases of media agenda setting and framing) or secondary analysis using existing polling data (Shah et al., 2002; Yioutas & Segvic, 2003; Zaller, 1998); there have been few studies designed to examine the impact of crisis response strategies on audience responses (perception) employing an experimental design.

The main goal of this research is to examine, within the framework of Benoit's Image Repair Theory (2015), how the different image repair strategies—denial, evasion, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, mortification— influence audiences' cognitive and emotional responses to a politician at the center of a purely moral sex scandal and a scandal that has criminal elements entwined when each of these image repair strategies is used in the crisis response in an effort to determine the effectiveness of the response message. To do so, this study employed an experimental design in which response statements to the public were manipulated by utilizing each of Benoit's five different types of strategies. Thus far, the different image repair strategies have been mainly employed and investigated in qualitative research (i.e., case study). Thus, this research contributed to the extension of Image Repair Theory in the area of political communication (political sex scandal) using a systematically designed experiment.

Literature Review

Theories of Apologia, Framing, and Agenda Setting

In studying crisis communication, image repair and political communication, several theoretical frameworks have been commonly employed. Most notably, apologia—rhetoric of self-defense—has been employed for more than two millennia, is foundational to crisis response in general, and has been examined in the context of both political and corporate crises, giving it particular relevance to political sex scandals and subsequent theories of image repair. Downey (1993) traced the evolution of apologia from ancient Greece to modern times, noting its shifts in function as time progresses. She argued that contemporary apologia shifted from the “judicial to the political arena,” where most public apologists are politicians, responding to charges stemming from “betrayal of trust, indiscretion, corrupt practice, or mishandling of an issue” (p. 53). Fuchs-Burnett (2002) offered a subsequent exploration of corporate apologia, noting that apologies above all other forms of apologetic defense are generally necessary to repair damaged relationships between brands and consumers. These findings by Fuchs-Burnett provided insight into political apologia, as a corporate brand can be considered equivalent to a given politician’s identity.

As a longstanding, fundamental, and perhaps intrinsic form of rhetorical crisis response, most politicians have continued to employ apologia during the course of their scandals. However, other variables, such as the timing of the defense, have been shown to potentially impact the ultimate success or failure of the approach. For example, Kramer and Olson (2002) evaluated President Bill Clinton’s sex scandal with White

House Intern Monica Lewinsky through the lens of apologia, finding that Clinton successfully used progressive apologia to manage kategoria—accusations—as they unfolded over time. They examined his responses to various accusations, identifying that he was adept at evolving his self-defense as different accusations arose, even as key audiences shifted. Their findings suggested that that even an accused who is guilty can initially benefit from using a denial form of apologia, so long as “the denial is framed in a way that allows one to later maintain the denial’s ‘technical’ accuracy” (p. 365). Additionally, Wigley (2011) examined the timing variable in analyzing the sex scandals of New York Governors Eliot Spitzer and David Paterson (who immediately replaced Spitzer following his resignation) to see if the “stealing thunder” strategy—where the politician discloses his transgressions to the media before they can break the story on their own—minimizes long-term coverage of the scandal. Indeed, she found that subjects who stole thunder received considerably less coverage than subjects who did not (p. 50). In these cases, Paterson stole thunder while Spitzer did not; Spitzer resigned, while Paterson remained governor. Important to note, however, is a potential biasing factor in this comparison, which is that Paterson’s and Spitzer’s scandals are spatially coincident and temporally adjacent. In other words, the fact that Paterson’s scandal came on the heels of Spitzer’s, and because the public wasn’t surveyed by Wigley during the course of the study, it is difficult to rule out the possibility that the public had simply grown weary of a seemingly constant barrage of sex scandal coverage by the time Paterson revealed his transgressions, making the public more likely to accept his mortification and move forward from this crisis. Achter (2000) assessed the timing variable in the context of the 24-hour news cycle, finding that many scandals replay over and over again as the

lead story in news broadcasts, which counteracts apologia efforts by recreating a constant troubled narrative for politicians exposed hourly to millions of constituents across the country. This reinforces the potential importance of timing – that a politician’s initial statement or address made in response to a sex scandal is likely to be rebroadcast and reprinted across significant media outlets for days as the crisis situation unfolds. Further, Iyengar (1996) raised the question of an another aspect of the timing variable: if the current state of social or economic affairs is perceived as poor when a politician’s scandal breaks, does that make recovery less likely because the public is in a collective bad mood?

Additionally, many complexities were found to exist in the interface between apologia and modern media. Achter (2000), in evaluating the 1990 Minnesota gubernatorial campaign where a sex scandal figured prominently, found a relationship between apologia and narrative (storytelling) theory. Specifically, Achter identified that the evolution of the 24-hour news cycle and the pervasiveness of social media allow stories to replay repeatedly, the effect of which positions personalities at the center of political campaigns instead of being grounded in issues or circumstances. He wrote, “...the notion that a public official of significant standing has engaged in morally reprehensible behavior has sent the media into a frenzy. As far as news outlets are concerned, at the very moment an allegation is made, a scandal is born” (p. 318). Further, because of the narratives created by the media during these scandals, Achter says “attempts at self-defense have become a part of the linguistic context of scandals rather than potential rhetorical antidotes for them” (p. 321). Beyond assessing the narratives associated with a given political sex scandal, larger-scale theories of framing and agenda

setting are also frequently applied in evaluating media coverage of crisis situations. Framing describes the assignment of meaning to situations by focusing a narrative on specific events to establish a relationship with contemporary issues. Because media coverage is typified by narrative form, a staple of journalistic style, coverage is highly susceptible to the biasing effects of framing (Iyengar, 1996). Specifically, Iyengar tested attribution effects of media framing by employing an experiment where subjects were exposed to media coverage on various hot-button topics like racism and poverty. His findings indicate that public reasoning is susceptible to framing effects; for example, racial cues shaped viewers' response to poverty and crime possibly reinforcing racial prejudice when African Americans are depicted largely as poor and criminal. As a result, as Achter (2000) points out, a story contrary to the facts of a situation can ultimately triumph over the simple reporting of facts.

Based on agenda setting, media dictate to the public what the main issues of the day are, which in turn reflects what the public views as the main issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). McCombs and Ghanem (2001) discussed the convergence of agenda setting and framing —the idea that agenda setting can define frames, and, therefore, provide a framework through which sex scandal crisis response may be characterized. Yioutas and Segvic (2003) applied that convergence in a content analysis specific to the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, but noted, “one limitation of framing has been its inability to operationalize effects on audience perceptions” (p. 575). They argued that agenda setting is more favorable for assessing the impact on audiences in a quantitative way, pointing to polling data on moral issues (p. 576). Shah et al. (2002) also examined the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal in the context of media framing, concluding that President

Clinton's high public approval ratings during the scandal were the result of public backlash against "the framing of the scandal in terms of the strategic motives of conservative elites" (p. 339). Their research used a content analysis of news media, presidential job approval polls, and monthly estimates of disposable personal income (which would indicate how well people were doing economically—better economic situations could lead to higher presidential approval ratings despite the presence of a scandal). A previous study (Iyengar, 1996) supports the potential relationship between framing and prevailing public sentiment, finding that "because the public's reasoning about responsibility is susceptible to framing effects and because the episodic frame is so predominant...television news enables incumbent officials to distance themselves from any rising tide of disenchantment over the state of public affairs" (p. 70). Similarly, Zaller (1998) found, in examining the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal through polling data and content analysis of media coverage, that the "public is, within broad limits, functionally indifferent to presidential character" (p. 188). He, like Shah et al. (2002), examined President Clinton's high approval rating following the scandal and finds that people seem to care more about issues of substance than Clinton's private life—in that case, the relatively good state of affairs in the country at the time Clinton's scandal broke could explain why his approval ratings remained high following a sex scandal.

Beyond the aspects of timing, framing, and agenda setting, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) examined agenda setting in the specific context of television news, finding broadcast news to be a participant in the American political process because of the large number of people who depend on it as their main source of information. They found that the nature of coverage is significant, where lead stories were found to have a much

greater effect on public perception than non-lead stories. This becomes something of an ominous observation when paired with the findings of Achter (2000), which identified that political scandals were often reported as leading stories. Earlier work by Zaller (1992) provided reinforcing context: He found that mass opinion is shaped largely by exposure (i.e. the media), concluding that intense scandal coverage can work to drive audiences away from forgiving a politician. Williams and Delli Carpini (2000) also assessed political scandal from the perspective of media coverage, using the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal to prove that the “gatekeeping” role of the mainstream press has been virtually eliminated, contributing to the erosion of the news versus entertainment distinction. This research was conducted prior to the rise of social media, which now dictate to some extent the focus of audiences as certain stories go “viral”—this seems to further support the notion of gatekeeping breakdown. In some cases, the media are now forced to cover stories about which their audiences are already talking, which signals a change in dominance between mass media and social media as the primary scandal-spreading mechanism. Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) examined changes in society and the media that have affected political communication in the modern age; they found that avenues of political communication are becoming more “diverse, fragmented and complex (p. 209). They mentioned that the “political arena has become more turbulent, less predictable, less structured, and more difficult to control” (p. 211). Blumler and Kavanagh found dissolving boundaries between “public” and “private,” along with “quality” and “tabloid” approaches to journalism, allowing room for scandal stories to take precedent over issues of the day, echoing the findings of Williams and Delli Carpini (2000). Further, Thompson (2000) argued that increased visibility in the

media blurs the line between public and private life for politicians, which can bring sexual scandals to the forefront of coverage. It's clear that the media's influence is significant in shaping public opinion, though Wigley's (2000) research, which finds a decrease in media coverage by public figures who self-reported a scandal thereby "stealing thunder," indicates that a politician's crisis response can, in fact, abate coverage if done well, an important conclusion for crisis managers to consider.

In addition to the timing, framing, and nature of media coverage, the immutable details of the scenario play a significant role. For instance, Lau (1982) found through a survey that negative information tends to weigh more heavily with audiences than equally positive information, specifically with regard to political perception—it's less important to be thought good of, with more importance on not having voters think badly of a politician. He noted that people tend to form impressions of candidates based on their personal qualities and that integrity and competency are emphasized. Rundquist et al. (1997) explored why people might vote for corrupt politicians, finding through a computer-based experiment that some people will stick with a corrupt politician if their policy positions are important to them. One interesting finding was that party identifiers were more likely to switch to a "clean" candidate, while independents would remain with corrupt candidates (p. 959). Wigley (2011), examining the sex scandals of New York Governors Eliot Spitzer and David Paterson, noted that Paterson admitted to adultery with a family friend and remained in office, while Spitzer admitted to illegal adultery with a high-priced escort and ultimately resigned. Based on the context of Lau's findings on negative information, this study asks if Paterson's moral scandal was easier to forgive because it didn't involve any criminal elements. In particular, this study examined the

influence of type/context of political scandal (morality vs. criminality) in the context of political sex scandal image repair.

Attribution Theory and Situational Crisis Communications Theory

Attribution Theory suggests the idea that people judge the causes of events based on several factors, including controllability. Coombs (1995) created crisis response strategies and developed guidelines for employing them based on Attribution Theory, factoring in the situation, various involved publics and where they might assign blame for the situation—this addresses other variables to consider in crisis response: whether the type of crisis always plays a role in dictating the response and how important it might be to have different responses for different audiences. Meanwhile, Hartel et al. (1998) paired Attribution Theory with the Theory of Reasoned Action to propose a model aimed at supporting crisis managers; as they observe, being able to predict an audience's reaction to mishaps would greatly benefit those responding to crises situations. Despite that, the work of Hartel et al. doesn't survey audiences on their reaction to any real or hypothetical crises; it leans on theoretical and psychological assumptions that may or may not prove accurate in an organizational crisis situation. Jorgensen (1994) addressed some of these shortcomings by applying Attribution Theory in an experiment with 36 subjects to analyze single versus multiple explanations—external/uncontrollable (an accident, for example), internal/controllable (negligence, for example), ambiguous/mixed (blame undeterminable or partly uncontrollable and partly controllable)—for any major negative event and their impacts on public perceptions. He found that consumers' "affects, attitudes, and, perhaps, behaviors following a negative company-related incident may be influenced by their understanding of the cause or causes underlying the incident"

(p. 351). In this regard, Jorgensen's study stands alone in the literature by focusing on an important and hitherto neglected variable: audience perception.

Noting that the field of crisis communication is dominated by case studies, and "the end result is that we know precious little about how stakeholders react to crises or to the crisis response strategies used to manage crises," Coombs presented an evidence-based framework, called Situational Crisis Communication Theory, or SCCT (2007, p. 163). Also based on Attribution Theory, SCCT is an attempt by Coombs to approach the field of crisis communication more scientifically by creating a matrix of response strategies based on various factors. Coombs noted that SCCT provides guidelines for crisis response based on details about the situation—for example, whether the crisis was intentional or accidental and whether it was a one-time or repeated transgression. SCCT works to simplify crisis response by providing a flow chart of sorts for how a crisis should be handled. However, it fails to clearly address that complex crises may have multiple audiences—investors and consumers, for example—that need different messaging, and in some cases seems to recommend the same defensive response even if the accused is actually innocent of the offensive act.

Image Repair Theory

Image Repair Theory unifies concepts of apologia (persuasive defense), accounts and excuses. Originally called Image Restoration Theory when Benoit first defined it in 1995, he modified its title thinking that "restoration" might falsely imply the possibility of completely restoring an image, when it may only be possible to partially restore or repair it (Benoit, 2015). Image Repair Theory is founded on two key assumptions: communication is a goal-directed activity and maintaining a favorable reputation is one

of the central goals of communication (Benoit, 2015, p. 14). Image repair messages focus on the goal of repairing one's reputation, though Benoit qualifies that this may not be the only goal or the most important one (p. 20).

Within the image repair theory, various image repair strategies fall into five categories: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. In explicating denial strategies, Benoit builds on Ware and Linkugel (1973) and Burke (1970) to write that the communicator may deny the offensive act actually happened or deny that he or she performed it. Denial may cause an audience to wonder who did commit an offense if not the accused, which allows the accused to shift the blame—in Image Repair Theory, shifting the blame is considered a variant of denial, because the accused cannot have committed the offensive act if someone else actually did it (p. 22). Benoit writes that this version of denial may actually be more effective than simple denial because it gives a target for the ill will felt by an audience, and answers the “who did it?” question that makes audiences hesitant to accept simple denial. Alibis are also considered denial in Benoit’s theory, as they provide evidence that denies the defendant committed the crime (p. 23).

For those unable to deny performing an offensive act, another strategy is to evade or reduce responsibility for it, and Benoit identifies four variants on evasion of responsibility, derived from Scott and Lyman (1968) and Ware and Linkugel (1973). The first variant, provocation, suggests that the accused may claim the offensive act was performed in response to another wrongful act, which provoked the offensive act in question. Defeasibility is claiming a lack of information or control over the situation. Excuses can also be based on accidents, as audiences generally only hold others

responsible for factors they can control (Benoit, 2015, p. 23). The fourth variant of evasion of responsibility is to suggest the offensive act is justified on the basis of intentions; the accused may shoulder less responsibility by demonstrating that something bad happened while he or she was trying to do good.

Reducing offensiveness—attempting to reduce the extent of negative feelings experienced by an audience—has six variants. The first, bolstering, which Benoit (2015) derived from Ware and Linkugel (1973), “may be used to mitigate the negative effects of the act on the actor by strengthening the audience’s positive effect for the actor” (p. 24). When bolstering, the accused may emphasize his or her positive attributes or positive actions he or she performed in attempt to add new beliefs (or remind an audience about forgotten ones) that have positive associations (p. 24); increased positive feelings from an audience may offset the negative ones, providing a reputational improvement to the accused. Another variant is to attempt to convince an audience that the offensive act isn’t actually as bad as it originally appeared; Benoit built on sociological research in account strategies from Sykes and Matza (1957), Scott and Lyman (1968), Schonbach (1980), Schlenker (1980), Tedeschi and Reiss (1981), and Semin and Manstead (1983), which all discuss minimization of injury. The third variant, differentiation, is used by the accused to “distinguish the act performed from other similar but less desirable actions (Benoit, 2015, p. 24); this variant is derived from Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) apologia research. Benoit also used Ware and Linkugel (1973) and Scott and Lyman (1968) as the basis for the fourth reducing offensiveness variant, transcendence. Transcendence attempts to place the action in a different, broader context; Benoit uses Robin Hood as an example—he is a thief, yes, but his actions were meant to help the poor (p. 25). A fifth variant is

attacking the accuser, based on work by Rosenfield (1968) and Scott and Lyman (1968).

This tactic attempts to diminish the credibility of the source of the attack, which could result in the damage from the accusations being lessened. Compensation is the final variant in reducing offensiveness, where the accused offers to remunerate victims to offset negative feelings experienced because of the offensive act (p. 25); this variant comes from Schonbach (1980).

Benoit's (2015) fourth image repair strategy is corrective action, where the accused promises to fix the problem (and prevent it from happening again). Benoit derives this from Goffman (1971), who mentions corrective action as a component of an apology.

Finally, mortification is admitting wrongdoing and asking for forgiveness (Benoit, 2015, p. 26); Benoit employs Burke (1970, 1973) and Schonbach (1980) in framing this strategy. He notes that this is a complex strategy, as there is no universal conception of what an apology should include (p. 26).

Since its popularization in the late 1990s, Benoit's Image Repair Theory has been successfully utilized to characterize crisis response across a broad range of crises, including both personal and organizational. Encompassed by these are responses to political scandals, including those of a sexual nature, which makes Image Repair Theory an ideal framework to utilize for this research.

Benoit, Gullifor, and Panici (1991) investigated President Reagan's messaging in response to the Iran-Contra affair, studying 11 of the President's messages to search for patterns over time. He used denial, differentiation, then finally admitted he was wrong and put forth corrective action, at which point his popularity rebounded. Mortification

made a strong show in this case, along with corrective action. Kennedy and Benoit (1997) explored image repair strategies used by Rep. Newt Gingrich following a scandal over a book deal while legislation was pending before Congress regarding the owner of his publishing company. The authors found his strategy not particularly effective. Gingrich first used denial (that taking an advance for his book was not wrong) then shifted to bolstering, attacked his accusers (the media and Democrats), and then finally rejected the advance in an attempt at corrective action. Kennedy and Benoit point out that this raised many questions—why return an advance if it wasn't wrong to take it? If it was wrong, then why initially deny it was wrong and then not apologize (p. 64)? This pivoting from one strategy to another is common in the course of scandal discourse, but the Gingrich case points to something interesting: a lot seems to rest on that first response. Gingrich's ultimate criticism came back to why his first reaction was to deny. Image repair discourse of the Democratic political candidates during the 2004 and 2008 campaigns were researched in Kaylor (2011) as they tried to repair the perception that the Democratic Party didn't care about religion. Corrective action was shown to be the most effective strategy. Benoit (2006a, 2006b) evaluated the image repair tactics of President Bush in 2003 and 2004 during controversy arising from the war on terrorism and the Iraq War finding that Bush's use of defensibility hurt his discourse, as people expect the president to always be in control of events.

Using Image Repair Theory to assess political scandals of a sexual nature, Benoit and Nill (1998) investigated the image repair strategies used by Judge Clarence Thomas when Anita Hill accused him of sexual harassment during his Supreme Court confirmation hearing, finding that he successfully used denial, bolstering and attacking

his accuser in his crisis response. Benoit and Nill say it became possible for senators to vote for him because he denied the accusations and bolstered his own reputation. By attacking his accuser—the senators who opposed him, not Hill—senators were motivated to confirm him, as Thomas implied that a vote against him would prove racism (p. 192). Image Repair Theory was then used to explore President Clinton’s affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky in Blaney and Benoit (2001), where reducing offensiveness was found to be the most effective strategy for Clinton. Polling data and newspaper commentary were correlated to support the authors’ conclusions, though as other studies for the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal found, Clinton’s high approval ratings could have had more to do with the generally good state of affairs in the country at the time and not necessarily satisfaction with how the President responded to the Lewinsky scandal (Zaller, 1998; Shah et al., 2002).

Rep. Gary Condit’s image repair discourse was evaluated in Len-Rios and Benoit (2004) following the disappearance of his intern Chandra Levy, with whom Condit was having an affair. The authors correlated pre-defense polling data, showing that 65 percent of respondents thought Condit was involved in Levy’s disappearance. A letter Condit sent to his constituents was evaluated for the strategies it employed (denial/shifting the blame, bolstering, attacking the accuser, transcendence), along with his ABC News interview with Connie Chung, which was largely viewed as a failure because of his refusing to answer several of Chung’s questions. Len-Rios and Benoit criticize Condit’s heavy use of denial, along with a distinct lack of mortification in his response. They use post-interview polling data to support their rhetorical analysis, writing that an NBC/Zogby poll showed 71 percent of people thought he was hiding

something. The correlated poll data is interesting, as it relates directly to his response (in contrast to Blaney and Benoit, 2001, which relied on job approval polling data).

Integrating this quantitative aspect into the qualitative analysis strengthens the conclusions, but it doesn't reveal what audiences wanted to hear Condit say—was there another type of response audiences wanted to hear? Garcia (2011) assessed the image restoration strategies of President Bill Clinton and Silvio Berlusconi during their respective sex scandals, examining how cultural dynamics affected the two crises. As other researchers also found, Clinton's evolving image repair discourse supported his recovery, where Berlusconi did not alter his strategy (though Garcia notes that Italian politicians feel less inclined to respond to public opinion). Benoit (2015) compared the image repair strategies of Sen. David Vitter and Rep. Anthony Weiner, both of whom faced sex scandals. Vitter's scandal focused on his involvement with prostitutes in Washington, D.C., and Louisiana at a time when he had taken a critical position of President Clinton during his sex scandal with Monica Lewinsky. Vitter accepted blame, apologized and showed corrective action; Benoit put significant importance on a statement issued by Vitter's wife saying she'd forgiven him. The role of a politician's family in surviving a sex scandal is another little-studied variable. Most politicians have their family, most notably wives, present for their statements, indicating that if their families can forgive their transgressions so should the public. In the end, Vitter survived the scandal. Meanwhile, Rep. Anthony Weiner was accused of using Twitter to send a lewd photo of himself to a woman he knew only through the Internet. Weiner initially lied about the photo being of him, making his later mortification too little too late.

Again, his first response followed him to the conclusion of his scandal, indicating that what a politician says first weighs heavily on the outcome of a scandal.

The successful application of Image Repair Theory to frame research into political scandals has shed light on many cases, exposing problems in politicians' discourse, as well as illustrating successes. Corrective action and mortification/apology are most praised in the literature, while denial—especially if that denial is a lie—appears less effective. Studies (Benoit, 2015; Kennedy & Benoit, 1997) show that responses can follow a politician to the end of a scandal, often exposing falsehoods and hypocrisy that lead to failed image repair. This indicates an importance on proper planning for that first response, as it can set the tone for the discourse to follow. Many variables are well studied—timing of responses and media coverage, for example. Others beg for more research, such as how political party affiliation might affect response strategies, elements of criminality entwined in these moral scandals, and audience perception. Audience perception is of particular interest, because no studies directly test varied response strategies directly with the people voting for these politicians. Correlated polling data, which is used intermittently in the research is of value, but doesn't take the research far enough to draw firm conclusions on which responses play best with audiences; which responses are most likely to gain forgiveness from constituents. This type of data could aid crisis managers making decisions in real time, allowing for something more practical than post-mortem analyses of various cases of political sex scandal. Therefore, the first research question asks if the type of image repair strategy matters.

RQ1: How do different image repair strategies—denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification—influence participants'

cognitive and emotional response to a politician and his message at the center of a political sex scandal?

The second research question seeks to find if the context of political sexual scandal impacts (increases, reduces or alters) audience response and further if these two variables—type of image repair strategies and the context of political sexual scandal—interacts (the third research question). Thus,

RQ2: How would the context (moral vs. criminal) of the political sex scandal influence participants' cognitive and emotional responses regarding the politician and his message differently?

RQ3: How would the type of image repair strategies and the context of the political sex scandal interact?

Methods

Experimental Design and Stimuli

This study employs a 5 (response strategy type: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, mortification) x 2 (context of scandal: moral vs. criminal) mixed-subjects design. Response strategy type was a between-subjects factor; whereas context of scandal was a within-subjects factor. The study participants were provided first with both contexts of scandal scenario and two crisis response messages corresponding to each scandal scenario and employing one of the five image repair strategies. They were then provided another two scandal scenarios—one of both contexts: moral and one criminal—with two crisis response messages that differ from the first messages they received. Messages (or scenarios) with the background information regarding each political scandal were provided to the participants and following that crisis response messages were provided accordingly. Specifically, four fictitious sample crises situations were created based on the compendium of actual political sex scandals and posed to respondents. These four crisis scenarios differ in terms of the contextual details of each scandal in which the politician is involved, two moral and the other two with criminal elements. The moral situations involved a male politician having an affair with a female family friend and visiting a strip club; the criminal situation scenarios involved a male politician paying for a female escort and misusing federal funds to keep a mistress quiet. Five different types of crisis response messages were provided for one moral and one criminal crisis scenario, each based on one of Benoit's five image repair strategies (please see Appendix for the full survey). Then, participants were provided

one crisis response message randomly chosen from five possible strategies. Next, another moral and criminal scenario was presented, where participants received one different crisis response message that was different than the first strategy they received. For the latter two scenarios, the five response strategies were divided into two groups: denial, evasion of responsibility, and reducing offensiveness were part of the “refusing to admit the sin” group, and corrective action and mortification were part of the “admitting the sin” group. If respondents received a response strategy from the first group for the first two scenarios, they received a strategy from the second group for the second two scenarios.

Independent Variables

Type of political sex scandal. The type of political sex scandal is defined by the details of the specific scandal scenario and has two levels, moral and criminal. Moral scandal is focused on events that may have personal or professional impact on the politician but include no behavior that could introduce legal implications (i.e. the politician could not be charged in a court of law for his actions). Criminal scandal is focused on elements in the scandal that could have legal implications for the politician; behavior that could result in indictment and prosecution in a court of law.

Crisis response strategy. Five different strategies were employed in the politician’s crisis response, including denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. These crisis response strategies were created based on the definitions of Benoit’s image repair strategies (Benoit, 2015). Denial is defined as denying the act actually occurred; evasion of responsibility is defined as lessening or evading responsibility for committing an act (it was accidental, for example);

reducing offensiveness is defined as attempting to “reduce the degree of ill feeling experienced by the audience” (Benoit, 2015, p. 24); corrective action is defined as providing a solution for fixing the problem; and mortification is defined as admitting the offensive act and seeking audience forgiveness.

Dependent Variables

Message effectiveness. Message effectiveness is defined as the perceived persuasiveness of the candidate’s crisis response messages to the public. By modifying the perceived message effectiveness measure from a previous study (Dillard et al., 2007), a total of six items were measured, including 1) not persuasive/persuasive, 2) ineffective/effective, 3) not convincing/convincing, 4) not compelling/compelling, 5) misleading/straightforward, and 6) forgettable/memorable on 7-point semantic differential scales, ranging from “1” being *not persuasive, ineffective, not convincing, not compelling, misleading, forgettable*, to “7” being *persuasive, effective, convincing, compelling, straightforward, and memorable*. In order to create the measure, the six items were combined and averaged (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .945$).

Emotional response to politician. Emotional response to the politician is defined as the level of credibility and trustworthiness of the politician as a function of the exposure to scenarios and crisis response messages, and employed two measures. The first measure, a feeling thermometer, measured participants’ emotional response to the politician depicted in the scenario and crisis response message on a 0-100 scale, and the second measure gauged the level of favorability to the scandal subject, based on participants’ overall impression of the politician using four items: 1) not credible/credible 2) untrustworthy/trustworthy, 3) unfavorable/favorable, and 4)

likable/dislikeable on 7-point scales, ranging from “1” being *not credible, untrustworthy, unfavorable, disliked* to “7” being *credible, trustworthy, favorable, and likable*. These emotional response measures of the politician were provided before the crisis response message (right after the exposure to scenario, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .810$) and after the crisis response message was presented (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .776$).

Covariates

Demographics. Demographic data collected in this study included age, income, gender, and highest education level completed.

Political affiliation. This was measured by asking participants whether they identify as Democrat, Republican, Independent or Other for their political party preference.

Religious affiliation. This was measured by asking participants whether they identify as Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox, such as Greek or Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Atheist, Agnostic or Other. A complementary question asked how frequently the participant attends religious services: never, a few times a year, a few times a month, every week, and multiple times a week.

Experimental procedure

The survey was hosted on Qualtrics, and participants were found online by distributing a link to the experiment through MTurk, the Amazon Mechanical Turk crowdsourcing marketing place that is frequently used by university students and professors for obtaining data at a reasonable cost (Emanuel, 2014). The conditions set forth in the experiment required 200 participants; this number allowed for double the usual number of participants for this type of experimental design because it took place

online via a survey link instead of in person with the researcher present. On MTurk, the researcher set the location qualification to United States, so only people within the U.S. participated.

The sample population was 51.5% female (N=103) and 48.5% male (N=97). Age demographics were 7% 18-24, 34% 25-34, 21% 35-44, 15% 45-54, and 23% 55 years or older ($M=42.63$ years, $sd=17.90$ years). For education, 1% had some high school, no diploma; 13.5% high school graduate, diploma or equivalent; 20% some college, no degree; 2.5% trade, technical or vocational training; 46% Associate or Bachelor's Degree; 5% some graduate school, no degree; 12% Master's or Doctorate Degree. For political affiliation, the sample population was 49% Democrat, 24% Republican, 26.5% Independent, and .5% other. Religious affiliation in the sample group was 27.5% Protestant; 20.5% Roman Catholic; 19% Atheist; 17% Agnostic; 11% Other; 3% Buddhist; 1% Mormon; 1% Orthodox, such as Greek or Roman Orthodox; 0% Jewish; 0% Muslim; 0% Hindu. 56.5% of respondents never go to church; 16.5% attend a few times a year; 13% go every week; 11% attend a few times a month; 3% go multiple times per week.

Respondents were randomly assigned into one of 12 groups when they began the survey, which determined which response strategies they were shown for each of the four scenarios. The 12 groups comprised all possible combinations of response strategies that ensured respondents received a strategy from the “refusing to admit the sin” group for two scenarios (one moral and one criminal) and a strategy from the “admitting the sin” group for the other two scenarios (one moral and one criminal).

Results

In order to answer Research Questions 1-3, a 2 (type of political sex scandal) x 5 (type of response strategy) repeated measures ANOVA was performed on each outcome variable—cognitive response (message effectiveness), emotional response and emotion thermometer, respectively.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked how different image repair strategies—denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification—would influence participants' cognitive and emotional response to a politician and his message at the center of a political sex scandal.

There was no significant main effect of strategy type found on message effectiveness ($F(4, 248) = 3.543, p > .05$), although the mean results showed that mortification was most effective ($m=3.82, sd=.160$), followed by denial ($m=3.75, sd=.161$), reducing offensiveness ($m=3.71, sd=.179$), corrective action ($m=3.70, sd=.183$), and evasion of responsibility ($m=3.01, sd=.173$).

For the emotional response feeling thermometer (measured after exposure to stimuli), there was no significant main effect of strategy type found ($F(4, 248) = 3.833, p > .05$), although the results of mean showed that corrective action was most effective ($m=42.47, sd=2.72$), followed by denial ($m=40.72, sd=2.63$), mortification ($m=36.79, sd=2.54$), reducing offensiveness ($m=36.48, sd=2.57$), and evasion ($m=28.76, sd=2.78$).

For emotional response (measured following exposure to stimuli), there was a significant main effect of strategy type found ($F(4, 248) = 5.806, p < .001$). In order to compare multiple means, post-hoc Bonferroni analysis was run. The results showed that

there is significant difference on emotional response as a function of message strategy being denial ($m=3.46$, $sd=.129$) and evasion of responsibility ($m=2.62$, $sd=.152$). No significant difference was found among the other strategies: corrective action ($m=3.45$, $sd=.152$), mortification ($m=3.19$, $sd=.125$), and reducing offensiveness ($m=3.24$, $sd=.151$).

Research Question 2

The second research question asked how the context (moral vs. criminal) of the political sex scandal would influence participants' cognitive and emotional responses regarding the politician and his message differently. There was a significant main effect of the context found on cognitive response between the moral and criminal contexts ($F(1, 62) = 87.606, p < .001$), where the message effectiveness (cognitive response) after the exposure to moral context message was higher than one after the exposure to criminal context ($M_{\text{moral}} = 4.05$ and $sd_{\text{moral}} = .086$; $M_{\text{criminal}} = 3.13$ and $sd_{\text{criminal}} = .080$.)

For the emotional response feeling thermometer (measured after exposure to stimuli), there was also a significant main effect of context found ($F(1, 62) = 98.92, p < .001$), where the post-exposure moral feeling thermometer was higher than the post-exposure criminal feeling thermometer ($M_{\text{moral}} = 43.5$ and $sd_{\text{moral}} = 1.28$; $M_{\text{criminal}} = 30.6$ and $sd_{\text{criminal}} = 1.24$).

For emotional response (measured following exposure to stimuli), a significant main effect was found ($F(1, 62) = 91.622, p < .001$), where the post-exposure moral emotional response was higher than the post-exposure criminal emotional response ($M_{\text{moral}} = 3.66$ and $sd_{\text{moral}} = .071$; $M_{\text{criminal}} = 2.73$ and $sd_{\text{criminal}} = .089$).

Research Question 3

The third research question asked if there would be an interaction effect found between image repair strategy and the context of the political sex scandal on a series of outcome variables. For the cognitive response measure (message effectiveness), there was no significant interaction effect of strategy and context found ($F(4, 248) = 2.625, p > .05$). For the emotional response feeling thermometer (measured after exposure to stimuli), no significant interaction effect of strategy and context was found ($F(4, 248) = 2.655, p > .05$). For emotional response (measured following exposure to stimuli), no significant effect of strategy and context was found ($F(4, 248) = 2.72, p > .05$).

Table 1
Interaction Between Context and Strategy

Measure		Cognitive	Feeling Thermometer	Emotional
Context	Strategy	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Moral	Corrective Action	3.926 (.210)	46.984 (2.955)	3.755 (.148)
	Denial	4.143 (.198)	45.016 (2.876)	3.737 (.151)
	Evasion of Responsibility	3.452 (.192)	34.556 (3.153)	3.125 (.165)
	Mortification	4.437 (.173)	45.159 (2.751)	3.728 (.101)
	Reducing Offensiveness	4.320 (.211)	45.810 (2.957)	3.939 (.173)
Criminal	Corrective Action	3.474 (.224)	37.952 (3.420)	3.147 (.217)
	Denial	3.362 (.192)	36.429 (3.182)	3.187 (.211)
	Evasion of Responsibility	2.566 (.181)	22.968 (2.734)	2.115 (.172)
	Mortification	3.196 (.204)	28.429 (2.914)	2.647 (.208)
	Reducing Offensiveness	3.095 (.210)	27.143 (2.991)	2.536 (.205)

Discussion

This study was designed to examine how the context of a politician's sex scandal and Benoit's five different response strategies influence audience's cognitive and emotional responses. To do so, four different sex scandals were developed (two moral and two criminal), with participants rating their emotional response to the politician before and after exposure to each scandal scenario, and by rating the message effectiveness (cognitive response) of each response strategy to which they were exposed.

The first research question asked how the different image repair strategies—denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification—influenced participants' cognitive and emotional response to a politician and his message at the center of a political sex scandal. While no statistically significant main effect was found between the strategies for the cognitive response measure (message effectiveness), mortification received the highest mean rating, while evasion of responsibility received the least. The feeling thermometer emotional response measure that was administered after respondents were exposed to the politician's crisis response message also showed no significant effect. However, the emotional response measures posed following exposure to the crisis message did have a significant effect, between the denial and evasion of responsibility strategies. Throughout the analyses, evasion of responsibility repeatedly returned the least favorable results. Denial, which generally performed poorly in studies in the existing literature (particularly in Benoit's (2015) qualitative research), was viewed more favorably throughout this experiment; it was ranked highest after mortification in the analysis for this first research question.

The second research question asked how the context of the political sex scandal—moral vs. criminal—would influence participants’ cognitive and emotional responses regarding the politician and his message differently. A significant effect was found between the cognitive response (message effectiveness) measure and both emotional response measures administered following participants’ exposure to stimuli. The effect showed that the politicians and their messages were viewed more favorably in the context of moral-only sex scandals, and viewed more harshly in scenarios that included a criminal element.

The third research question asked how the image repair strategies and the context of the scandal would interact. For this measure, no statistical effects were found for the cognitive response (message effectiveness) measure or either of the emotional response measures. This indicates that though respondents gave harsher ratings to the politician and his crisis response message in scenarios with criminal elements, the strategy chosen to address the scandal did not significantly alter emotional responses to the politician or cognitive responses to effectiveness of the crisis message. However, while all strategies netted lower means in criminal scenarios than moral ones, none saw drops greater than mortification and reducing offensiveness. This apparent trend could benefit from further research to quantify in more detail with greater statistical power.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this research is not evaluating how media, which would report on any public statements a politician would make in the wake of public scandal, might distill the statement—showing only parts of the response or taking quotes out of context, for example—altering what viewers and readers at home see and read. Another

limitation of this research involved the scenarios created for the purpose of the experiment. While each of the moral and criminal scenarios was based on actual political sex scandals that made national headlines, they were each slightly different in detail. Someone who responded one way to a politician's response to criminal scandal involving prostitution might respond differently to the same message strategy for a criminal scandal involving meddling of government money. Because respondents saw different strategies for each context pair (moral and criminal) they were presented, any change in cognitive and emotional response could be due to the details of the scenario itself instead of the crisis response strategy presented. Similar to that, the details within each response strategy may have effected perceived message effectiveness; for example, while respondents didn't respond favorably to the type of evasion presented within this experiment, it's possible that a different evasion tactic might elicit a different response.

Thinking more broadly about this study's finding and the literature, Benoit's Image Repair Theory has been useful in classifying image repair discourse, particularly in cases of political scandal, as demonstrated in this research. While Coombs' related SCCT has been tested experimentally, Benoit's theory has largely been used in qualitative methods, making it ripe for further quantitative assessment. Coombs' SCCT is important in that it attempts to approach crisis communications more scientifically, but Benoit's Image Repair Theory remains more flexible, as it more clearly addresses the need for varied messaging to address different audiences while adequately covering the spectrum of strategies an offender could undertake for image repair. Quantitative methods are used more frequently in political science research than in crisis communications study with regard to political scandals, though these studies are more

focused on audience perception of media stories and are not generally married with how politicians' responses might directly shape these perceptions. This leaves room for researchers to assess how political image repair discourse shapes public opinion, to which this study sought to contribute.

Studies (Benoit, 2015; Kennedy & Benoit, 1997) show that responses can follow a politician to the end of a scandal, often exposing falsehoods and hypocrisy that lead to failed image repair. This indicates an importance on proper planning for an initial response, as it can set the tone for the discourse to follow. Because of this, the evolution of crisis response is also ripe for further research—Benoit's (2015) political case studies reveal that as a scandal unfolds, politicians often evolve their strategies, pivoting from one to another in an attempt to repair their images. When hypocrisy and lies are exposed, the offenders often have to shift strategies to manage reputational damage. For example, while the denial strategy fared well in this experiment, it could be that it was rated higher because respondents believed the politician was not guilty of his scandal. However, if it was revealed later that this denial was a lie or if other hypocrisy was exposed as the scandal unfolded, denial might not be as well received, and require a shift in strategy in attempt to repair image.

Numerous other opportunities exist for future research into crisis communications response to political sex scandals. The variable of how political party affiliation might impact successful response strategies should be studied. The role of familial support in these types of scandals is ripe for research; for example, is a response received differently if a politician's spouse is present for the statement vs. when the spouse is not present? A study that examines media distillation of political crisis statements in terms of agenda

setting and framing that also take audience perception into effect might illustrate how truncated or out-of-context messages are received. Of particular use for future research would be the development of a specific crisis response framework aimed at political sex scandals, generated by compiling the totality of the literature (and research to come), and developing a response plan specific to this complex and frequent crisis.

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Appendix-Survey

In this experiment, you will read several scenarios based on real news events where a politician has been accused of personal involvement in a sex scandal. After you finish reading each scenario, you will rate statements about the politician himself and his public response to sex scandal allegations. Please read each scenario and response carefully, so you can answer each of the questions that follow.

Scenario 1

A national cable news channel just reported a story that married Sen. John Smith had an affair with a long-time family friend that spanned several months last year, but has since ended. The mistress has come forward to news media to tell her story, saying she thinks it's no longer right to keep it a secret. Sen. Smith is in the midst of serving his second term in the Senate and has enjoyed high approval ratings throughout his years of public service. Despite that, political opponents are demanding his resignation.

I'd like you to rate Sen. Smith using something we call a feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50-degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. What is your feeling toward Sen. Smith?

*0.....100

My overall impression of Sen. Smith is...

- *Not credible 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Credible
- *Unfavorable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Favorable
- *Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trustworthy
- *Dislikable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Likable

Sen. Smith calls a press conference to address the allegations. He says the following:

Response 1 [Denial Strategy]

"News reports that I had an affair are completely unfounded. I have been happily married to my wife for more than 25 years and I would never break my vows to her. I deeply resent these false accusations and the stress they have caused my family."

Response 2 [Evasion of Responsibility]

"Let me first say that my private life should remain private, as discussing these things publicly are painful for everyone involved. My marriage has been strained for some time, as my wife has dealt with a series of challenges in recent years that left her unable to be present in our marriage, both physically and emotionally. For a period of time, I sought companionship with a close family friend who was able to support me when my wife could not, allowing me to better support her."

Response 3 [Reducing Offensiveness]

“None of us are perfect. We all make mistakes. I don’t want this personal misstep to overshadow the many accomplishments of my tenure as a United States Senator. From my voting record to my relentless commitment to the issues on which my campaign was founded, I have worked proudly for you everyday for 10 years. We’ve seen our economy grow, new businesses open, new jobs be created. I’ve successfully brought millions of federal dollars into our community to reduce crime rates, improve our roads and parks, and make our schools competitive with the best in the nation. This transgression pales in comparison to what we’ve done together and what we will continue to do, and I’m grateful for your support.”

Response 4 [Corrective Action]

“Most marriages hit rough patches, but I firmly believe that how you see them through impacts whether a couple finds happiness again. My wife and I met with our pastor this morning, and he’s agreed to counsel us through this difficult time. I know in my heart that with his guidance, the love of my wife and children, and your support, a mistake like this will never happen again.”

Response 5 [Mortification]

“News reports today are true: I made the immense mistake of being unfaithful to my wife for several months last year. That is now over, and I am immensely sorry for my deception, for the pain that I caused my family and for betraying your trust, too. I humbly ask for your forgiveness in this private matter, so that my family may heal and so that I can get back to work for you.”

Is this response...

- *Not persuasive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Persuasive
- *Ineffective 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Effective
- *Not convincing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Convincing
- *Not compelling 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Compelling
- *Misleading 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Straightforward
- *Forgettable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Memorable

I’d like you to rate Sen. Smith using something we call a feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don’t feel favorable toward the person and that you don’t care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50-degree mark if you don’t feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. What is your feeling toward Sen. Smith after reading his response?

*0.....100

My overall impression of Sen. Smith is...

- *Not credible 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Credible
- *Unfavorable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Favorable
- *Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trustworthy
- *Dislikable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Likable

Scenario 2

A national cable news channel just reported a story that married Sen. Sam Williams allegedly paid for a high-price escort multiple times spanning several months last year. A police investigation is underway. Sen. Williams is in the midst of serving his second term in the Senate and has enjoyed high approval ratings throughout his years of public service. Despite that, political opponents are demanding his resignation.

I'd like you to rate Sen. Williams using something we call a feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50-degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. What is your feeling toward Sen. Williams?

*0.....100

My overall impression of Sen. Williams is...

- *Not credible 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Credible
- *Unfavorable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Favorable
- *Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trustworthy
- *Dislikable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Likable

Sen. Williams calls a press conference to address the allegations. He says the following:

Response 1 [Denial Strategy]

"News reports that I had an affair are completely unfounded. I have been happily married to my wife for more than 25 years and I would never break my vows to her. I deeply resent these false accusations and the stress they have caused my family."

Response 2 [Evasion of Responsibility]

"Let me first say that my private life should remain private, as discussing these things publicly are painful for everyone involved. My marriage has been strained for some time, as my wife has dealt with a series of challenges in recent years that left her unable to be present in our marriage, both physically and emotionally. For a period of time, I sought companionship with someone who was able to support me when my wife could not, allowing me to better support her."

Response 3 [Reducing Offensiveness]

"None of us are perfect. We all make mistakes. I don't want this personal misstep to overshadow the many accomplishments of my tenure as a United States Senator. From my voting record to my relentless commitment to the issues on which my campaign was founded, I have worked proudly for you everyday for 10 years. We've seen our economy grow, new businesses open, new jobs be created. I've successfully brought millions of federal dollars into our community to reduce crime rates, improve our roads and parks, and make our schools competitive with the best in the nation. This transgression pales in comparison to what we've done together and what we will continue to do, and I'm grateful for your support."

Response 4 [Corrective Action]

“Most marriages hit rough patches, but I firmly believe that how you see them through impacts whether a couple finds happiness again. My wife and I met with our pastor this morning, and he’s agreed to counsel us through this difficult time. I know in my heart that with his guidance, the love of my wife and children, and your support, a mistake like this will never happen again.”

Response 5 [Mortification]

“News reports today are true: I made the immense mistake of being unfaithful to my wife for several months last year. That is now over, and I am immensely sorry for my deception, for the pain that I caused my family and for betraying your trust, too. I humbly ask for your forgiveness in this private matter, so that my family may heal and so that I can get back to work for you.”

Is this response...

- *Not persuasive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Persuasive
- *Ineffective 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Effective
- *Not convincing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Convincing
- *Not compelling 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Compelling
- *Misleading 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Straightforward
- *Forgettable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Memorable

I'd like you to rate Sen. Williams using something we call a feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50-degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. What is your feeling toward Sen. Williams after reading his response?
*0.....100

My overall impression of Sen. Williams is...

- *Not credible 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Credible
- *Unfavorable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Favorable
- *Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trustworthy
- *Dislikeable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Likable

Scenario 3

A national cable news channel just reported a story that married Sen. Robert Anderson was seen frequenting a local strip club during the last year, with observers reporting that he received private attention from a variety of exotic dancers employed by the club. Sen. Anderson is in the midst of serving his second term in the Senate and has enjoyed high approval ratings throughout his years of public service. Despite that, political opponents are demanding his resignation.

I'd like you to rate Sen. Anderson using something we call a feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50-degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. What is your feeling toward Sen. Anderson?

*0.....100

My overall impression of Sen. Anderson is...

- *Not credible 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Credible
- *Unfavorable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Favorable
- *Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trustworthy
- *Dislikable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Likable

Sen. Anderson calls a press conference to address the allegations. He says the following:

Response 1 [Denial Strategy]

"News reports that I cheated on my wife with an exotic dancer are completely unfounded. I have been happily married to my wife for more than 25 years and I would never break my vows to her. I deeply resent these false accusations and the stress they have caused my family."

Response 2 [Evasion of Responsibility]

"Let me first say that my private life should remain private, as discussing these things publicly are painful for everyone involved. My marriage has been strained for some time, as my wife has dealt with a series of challenges in recent years that left her unable to be present in our marriage, both physically and emotionally. For a period of time, I frequented an exotic dance club to relieve the stress I was under, allowing me to better support my wife."

Response 3 [Reducing Offensiveness]

"None of us are perfect. We all make mistakes. I don't want this personal misstep to overshadow the many accomplishments of my tenure as a United States Senator. From my voting record to my relentless commitment to the issues on which my campaign was founded, I have worked proudly for you every day for 10 years. We've seen our economy grow, new businesses open, new jobs be created. I've successfully brought millions of federal dollars into our community to reduce crime rates, improve our roads and parks, and make our schools competitive with the best in the nation. This transgression pales in comparison to what we've done together and what we will continue to do, and I'm grateful for your support."

Response 4 [Corrective Action]

"Most marriages hit rough patches, but I firmly believe that how you see them through impacts whether a couple finds happiness again. My wife and I met with our pastor this morning, and he's agreed to counsel us through this difficult time. I know in my heart

that with his guidance, the love of my wife and children, and your support, a mistake like this will never happen again.”

Response 5 [Mortification]

“News reports today are true: I made the immense mistake of being unfaithful to my wife for several months last year. That is now over, and I am immensely sorry for my deception, for the pain that I caused my family and for betraying your trust, too. I humbly ask for your forgiveness in this private matter, so that my family may heal and so that I can get back to work for you.”

Is this response...

- *Not persuasive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Persuasive
- *Ineffective 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Effective
- *Not convincing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Convincing
- *Not compelling 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Compelling
- *Misleading 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Straightforward
- *Forgettable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Memorable

I'd like you to rate Sen. Anderson using something we call a feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50-degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. What is your feeling toward Sen. Anderson after reading his response?

*0.....100

My overall impression of Sen. Anderson is...

- *Not credible 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Credible
- *Unfavorable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Favorable
- *Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trustworthy
- *Dislikable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Likable

Scenario 4

A national cable news channel just reported a story that married Sen. Mark Edwards had an affair with an office staffer that spanned several months last year, but has since ended. The staffer has come forward alleging that she was paid federal money to stay quiet about the affair, and a police investigation is underway. Sen. Edwards is in the midst of serving his second term in the Senate and has enjoyed high approval ratings throughout his years of public service. Despite that, political opponents are demanding his resignation.

I'd like you to rate Sen. Edwards using something we call a feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50-degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. What is your feeling toward Sen. Edwards?

*0.....100

My overall impression of Sen. Edwards is...

- *Not credible 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Credible
- *Unfavorable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Favorable
- *Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trustworthy
- *Dislikable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Likable

Sen. Edwards calls a press conference to address the allegations. He says the following:

Response 1 [Denial Strategy]

“News reports that I had an affair are completely unfounded. I have been happily married to my wife for more than 25 years and I would never break my vows to her. I deeply resent these false accusations and the stress they have caused my family.”

Response 2 [Evasion of Responsibility]

“Let me first say that my private life should remain private, as discussing these things publicly are painful for everyone involved. My marriage has been strained for some time, as my wife has dealt with a series of challenges in recent years that left her unable to be present in our marriage, both physically and emotionally. For a period of time, I sought companionship with someone who was able to support me when my wife could not, allowing me to better support her.”

Response 3 [Reducing Offensiveness]

“None of us are perfect. We all make mistakes. I don’t want this personal misstep to overshadow the many accomplishments of my tenure as a United States Senator. From my voting record to my relentless commitment to the issues on which my campaign was founded, I have worked proudly for you every day for 10 years. We’ve seen our economy grow, new businesses open, new jobs be created. I’ve successfully brought millions of federal dollars into our community to reduce crime rates, improve our roads and parks, and make our schools competitive with the best in the nation. This transgression pales in comparison to what we’ve done together and what we will continue to do, and I’m grateful for your support.”

Response 4 [Corrective Action]

“Most marriages hit rough patches, but I firmly believe that how you see them through impacts whether a couple finds happiness again. My wife and I met with our pastor this morning, and he’s agreed to counsel us through this difficult time. I know in my heart that with his guidance, the love of my wife and children, and your support, a mistake like this will never happen again.”

Response 5 [Mortification]

“News reports today are true: I made the immense mistake of being unfaithful to my wife for several months last year. That is now over, and I am immensely sorry for my deception, for the pain that I caused my family and for betraying your trust, too. I

humbly ask for your forgiveness in this private matter, so that my family may heal and so that I can get back to work for you.”

Is this response...

- *Not persuasive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Persuasive
- *Ineffective 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Effective
- *Not convincing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Convincing
- *Not compelling 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Compelling
- *Misleading 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Straightforward
- *Forgettable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Memorable

I'd like you to rate Sen. Edwards using something we call a feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person and that you don't care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50-degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. What is your feeling toward Sen. Edwards after reading his response?

*0.....100

My overall impression of Sen. Edwards is...

- *Not credible 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Credible
- *Unfavorable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Favorable
- *Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trustworthy
- *Dislikeable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Likable

Classification questions:

1) With what gender do you identify?

- *Male
- *Female

2) What is your age?

- *18-24
- *25-34
- *35-44
- *45-54
- *55 years or older

3) What is your highest level of education completed?

- *Some high school, no diploma
- *High school graduate, diploma or equivalent
- *Some college, no degree
- *Trade, technical, or vocational training
- *Associate or Bachelor's degree
- *Some graduate school, no degree
- *Master's or Doctorate degree

4) With what political party do you affiliate?

- *Democrat
- *Republican
- *Independent
- *Other

5) With what religion do you affiliate?

- *Protestant
- *Roman Catholic
- *Mormon
- *Orthodox, such as Greek or Russian Orthodox
- *Jewish
- *Muslim
- *Buddhist
- *Hindu
- *Atheist
- *Agnostic
- *Other

6) How often do you go to church?

- *Never
- *A few times a year
- *A few times a month
- *Every week
- *Multiple times a week