An Examination of Image Repair Theory and BP's Response to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

by

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Abstract

The 2010 explosion of BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig was an environmental disaster unparalleled in United States history. Because of this, there has been a great deal of research studies regarding the matter.

The purpose of this study was to determine what inshore fishing guides in the Tampa Bay Area feel should be a response to future oil spills using Image Repair Theory, as well as how this important group of stakeholders felt about the image repair responses employed by BP in the wake of the spill.

In depth interviews were used to gather data and answer the pertinent research questions, which also generated follow up questions. The findings showed Tampa Bay Area captains feel that BP's responses in the wake of the spill were inadequate in alleviating the situation. The captains felt that better planning on the part of oil companies is needed and also that oil companies should be mortified and have clear and decisive plans for correcting the situation as well as alleviating the effects of said spill on the pertinent publics.

CHAPTER ONE:

Introduction

Thesis Statement

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of what inshore fishing guides in Tampa Bay feel should be a response to oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico under the guise of Image Repair Theory. Another purpose of this study was to gauge the captains' perceptions and responses/thoughts regarding the image repair strategies that were employed by BP following the Deepwater Horizon spill. These goals were accomplished by conducting in depth interviews.

Of all the research that currently exists regarding the Deepwater Horizon spill, charter fishing guides have not been represented at all. Charter captains can spend up to 300 days a year on the water, while they don't necessarily hold scientific knowledge; they are very in tune with the happenings of the waters that they fish. The lack of representation this public has in the current body of research is folly on the part of published social science researchers.

The study uses Image Repair Theory as a lens to examine the responses of the given population; this theory has never been applied to this population before. The data that the populations that are being examined provided the primary investigator with could conceptually provide practical information to be referenced for future responses to such occurrences. Not only could the findings be helpful to organizations in crisis (Image Repair Theory is practically a

guide book for an organization in crisis), but it could also help bystanders impacted by the event and in the case of an oil spill, the environment. The study didn't make claims or hypotheses, it didn't aim to make any sort of broad changes; it merely provided information that was previously unavailable. The responses to the research questions that the selected sample provided could hold significant weight as guides are the eyes and ears on the water, therefor the results of this study could conceptually help shape future public policy if policy makers were to reference this study and decided to take this research and this public into account in the event of another oil spill.

The population that was examined in this study is not only influential, but represents a major part of Florida's economy and identity. Florida is a peninsula; it is no secret that many people make their livings on the water because of this. Even those who don't work on the water can be impacted by things that may happen to the water (fish kills, algae blooms, dangerous wildlife, floods, etc.) many people also choose to spend leisure time on the water as well. Florida was a state that was impacted in various ways by the Deepwater Horizon spill (which was also the worst accidental spill ever in the U.S.). The actual population will be discussed in more detail in the forthcoming sections.

In short, this study filled in a gap in the existing research regarding the Deepwater Horizon spill by examining an underrepresented group of influential stakeholders which were impacted by the event and BP's associated responses. If policy makers were to read this study it could help to shape future responses and strategies in the wake of oil spills because of the influence of the effected publics and their take on the events (in depth discussion available in results and discussion sections). The study did this under the guise of Image Repair Theory. All

of the associated details with what was discussed in this first chapter can be found in the following chapter.

CHAPTER TWO:

Literature Review

Background

On April 20, 2010, the offshore oil rig, Deepwater Horizon exploded causing the largest oil spill ever in U.S. waters. Federal officials estimated that over 84 days, more than 200 million gallons or 4.9 million barrels of crude oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico (Ramseur, 2010). The spill affected more than 600 miles along the coasts of various states on the Gulf of Mexico, including Florida, Alabama, Louisiana and Texas (Grattan et al., 2011). In the aftermath of the spill, British Petroleum, who owned the rig, made use of many different tactics to clean up the oil as well as to minimize the overall environmental damages. The physical response strategies are listed as follows: it's estimated that three percent was skimmed, five percent was burned, eight percent was chemically dispersed, 16 percent was naturally dispersed, 17 percent was captured, 25 percent was evaporated or dissolved and 26 percent was remaining (Atlas & Hazen, 2011). Skimming and burning were tactics employed in the 1993 oil spill that resulted from the freighter *Balsa 37* colliding with two inbound barge-tug combinations in Tampa's main shipping channel (Galt, LaBelle, McGrattan & Tennyson, 1994).While some of BP's tactics had been used before and were somewhat mainstream, the use of chemical dispersants proved to be a controversial move. Another tactic that was also used with some degree of success in protecting coastal shorelines was booms (Levy & Gopalakrishnan, 2010).

The Deepwater Horizon will go down as one of the all-time worst environmental disasters. In the end the total costs of the spill were unlike anything ever previously seen. Total damages to BP, the environment and the U.S. Gulf Coast economy were estimated to be $36.9 billion (Smith, Smith, & Ashcroft, 2011). Not only was there enormous environmental and economic damage, there were also deaths that resulted from the explosion. The explosion of the instillation resulted in the deaths of 11 people (Liu, Weisberg, Hu & Zheng, 2011).

Image Repair Theory

Being responsible for an oil spill that dwarfed the infamous Exxon Valdez spill is something that BP did not take lightly. BP employed a variety of image repair strategies to deal with the public relations nightmare that the spill caused.

Image Repair Theory was developed by William Benoit to help understand how organizations and individuals respond to crises, the theory is based around two key assumptions, the first being that someone accuses an organization or individual as being responsible for a particular action or situation, and the second is that the action in question is offensive or harmful (Liu & Fraustino, 2014). A solidly constructed image has elements that enhance an organization or individual's ability to project a perception of power, character, trust, leadership and name recognition (Moody, 2011). Under Benoit's Image Repair Theory, there are five primary strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification (Compton, 2016). These five strategies will be discussed further in the measures section.

Image Repair Theory can almost be thought of as a self-help manual or a roadmap back to good standing for organizations facing crises. Throughout its development, Image Repair

Theory has been used exclusively as a retrospective framework. This means that those who have used the theory have applied it to understand particular cases of corporate communications by looking back on what happened and why. This makes sense given the tenants that categorize the theory itself. Sometimes, suggestions are also made about what could have been done better or what generally can be done by others facing similar circumstances." (Smudde & Courtright, 2008).

In the wake of the Deepwater Horizon, BP's strategies centered on describing and delineating what they were doing to correct the problem and compensating the victims, but it did not include strategies such as shifting the blame to the other parties nor did it include admitting their own blame (Harlow, Brantley & Harlow, 2011).

Results of a content analysis showed that the use of corrective action was the predominant image restoration strategy BP chose to use in their Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr pages (Muralidharan, Dillistone & Shin, 2011). This echoed the findings presented by Harlow and Brantley (2011). Specifically, in the Facebook posts that BP used, they focused on information giving, letting the public know what was being done to fix the spill and trying to generate positive comments and engagement from those affected by the spill. "Information giving strategies dominated BP's crisis response, and Facebook users were more likely to comment favorably when BP used information giving strategies and accommodative strategies. Bolstering strategies and third-party endorsement did not achieve anticipated effectiveness" (Lan Ye & Eyun-Jung, 2017).

In regard to the payouts from the spill to those individuals and businesses impacted by the spill BP paid out $20 billion to those impacted by the spill (Sole, 2011). The payouts and

corrective actions associated with the spill was a major topic of discussion with the participants of this study. Corrective action is a statement that expresses a commitment to repair the damage from said offensive act. Corrective action can take two forms. The rhetorician can make a promise to restore things to before the offensive act or they can promise to prevent any new recurrences of the act" (Benoit, 2014) (P. 735).

There was a study conducted by Joy Smithson and Steven Venette (2013) that brought to light an image repair strategy that had previously gone uncatalogued, specifically in BP's congressional testimonies. Analysis of the testimony revealed a previously unidentified image-defense strategy, labeled here as stonewalling. This tactic redirected the audience's attention to miniscule and unimportant details, which enabled BP to temporarily prevent further damage to the company's image (Smithson & Venette, 2013).

In an article published earlier this year, entitled, *The BP Gulf of Mexico oil spill: Exploring the link between social and environmental disclosures and reputation risk management* present findings which Arora and Lodhia concur with the Smithson and Venette study. "The company was engrossed in providing accounts of its world class facilities and superior quality of management, diverting attention away from the severe environmental damage caused by the massive oil spill" (Arora & Lodhia, 2017). While the article doesn't detail unimportant details that the Smithson and Venette study discussed, it does bring up that BP tried to draw attention away from some aspects of the spill and to get people to focus on other things. The article also supports Lan Ye and Eyun-Jung 's 2017 article which was previously mentioned in the aspect that information giving was a huge part of BP's response strategy.

Uses of Image Repair Theory

There are abundant examples of Image Repair Theory being used during times of crisis; it has been used by both individuals and organizations. One example was President Barack Obama after the rollout of the Affordable Care Act and all of the issues associated with it. Having accepted responsibility for these problems, the President's defense proposed corrective action to fix the situation. He declared that "problem number one [is] making sure that the website works the way it's supposed to … [W]e're working 24/7 to get it working for the vast majority of Americans in a smooth, consistent way". "My pledge to the American people is that we're going to solve the problems that are there, we're going to get it right, and the Affordable Care Act is going to work for the American people" (Benoit, 2014) (P. 735).

Another instance of Image Repair Theory being used successfully was in the case of Duke Lacrosse. In 2006, members of the Duke men's lacrosse team were accused of sexual assault. Courts would eventually clear the players of all charges, but despite this, Duke had to employ image repair strategies to protect their image. "Of these strategies, corrective action was used the most. Initial corrective action messages concerned the lacrosse team and its forfeiture of two games. Later, the university president announced the decision to suspend the season. Not only was the president taking action by punishing the lacrosse players, but he also indicated that the coach would be replaced. The clear implication was that a new coach may "correct" any problems within the lacrosse team that the previous coach may have been responsible for". (Len-Ríos, 2010) (P. 277).

In the introduction, the possibility of the results of this study being influential in future policies was discussed. This study doesn't directly aim to change any existing policies of

governmental or non-governmental parties; conceptually if this study made it in front of the right eyes it could be influential. The sexual assault cases at the United States Air Force Academy in the early 2000s are an example of Image Repair Theory being used, with changes in policy that went along with it as a result.

In January of 2003, female cadets began coming forward and contacting members of Congress with reports of sexual assault and indifference from commanders, investigations would reveal 142 allegations of sexual assault dating as far back as 1993 (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). According to anonymous surveys regarding the climate of the academy (a standard practice), cadets felt that there was a sexual assault problem at the academy and even 20 percent of male cadets didn't believe women belonged in the academy (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). The Pentagon, Congress and Air Force brass had got involved and the entire situation was an embarrassment to the Air Force.

In March 2003, the Secretary of the Air Force, a civilian appointed by the President of the United States and charged with oversight of the entire U.S. Air Force, and the Chief of Staff, the service's highest ranking military officer, replaced the four top academy leaders and drew up new institutional policies. They called it the "Agenda for Change," and it addressed leadership, cadet life and the broader academy climate (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). Not only was there corrective action of removing key individuals from positions of power at the academy, but there was a policy change, the "Agenda for Change".

This wasn't the only time that image repair strategies resulted in policy changes. The early 2000s also saw China in hot water, as their exports to countries around the world came under scrutiny for being hazardous. Denial was a common image repair strategy utilized when it

tried to diffuse criticisms. In the days following the US pet food recall, for instance, China denied that grain protein products caused the spate of pet deaths. More criticisms followed ranging from tires to toothpaste, from places ranging from the United States to New Zealand (Peijuan, Pei & Pang, 2009).

China couldn't deny everything or shift the blame forever; eventually they had to use corrective action, which also included policy changes overall. At the national level, a four-month campaign was launched to improve product and food safety. Through these measures, the Chinese government promised that there would not be any uncertified producer by 2012. Besides instituting massive reforms internally, China also established mechanisms with its trading partners to ensure food safety (Peijuan, Pei & Pang, 2009).

There are many other examples of policy changes resulting from Image Repair Theory and a crisis. The previously mentioned examples show how important Image Repair Theory can be as it changed practices in the United States Air Force, a massive and powerful entity, and in the country of China, a world power.

Philosophical Assumptions

Aside from Image Repair Theory, there are other factors that shaped the direction of this study. The philosophical assumptions of the primary investigator helped to direct the path of how the research was conducted. In this section, epistemology, ontology and axiology are defined and the specific philosophical beliefs of the primary investigator are also discussed.

Ontology relates to the nature of reality and its characteristics, reality are multiple as seen through many views. Epistemology entails researchers getting as close as possible to the participants being studied. The researcher attempts to lessen the distance between themselves

and that being researched. Axiology involves the researcher bringing his own values into a study; the researcher acknowledges that research is value laden and that biases are present (Cresswell, 2013).

Epistemology can also be thought of as the questions, "how do we know the world?" or "what is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?" (Brennen, 2017). Ontology raises basic questions about the nature of reality (Brennen, 2017).

The ontological perspective of the primary researcher was that the specific public that was under investigation in this study could offer a unique perspective. Specifically, the primary researcher felt that the reality of the given public as it pertains to the Deepwater Horizon incident may be different than the reality of other groups and publics because they lived through it and had it directly impact their lives.

Given that the primary investigator was driven by his ontological philosophical perspective it lead to the belief on the part of the primary investigator that in depth interviews were the best approach to collect the pertinent data. The group that was studied is underrepresented in the current research, therefore, their reality may be unique and not one that is currently known and understood. Interviews were the best way to discover this information.

Populations

The body of research regarding the Deepwater Horizon spill is extensive. There is a great deal of scientific research papers discussing how everything from ocean sediments to plants and animals were impacted by the spill – the biological implications. There are also a large number of social science papers that discuss the human aspect of the spill. For example, a marketing research company commissioned by the Louisiana Seafood Promotion Board reported that 70

percent of consumers polled expressed at least some level of concern about seafood safety following the Gulf oil spill, and 23 percent had reduced their consumption of seafood during that time. The study implied that consumer concerns with safety had caused a decrease in demand for Gulf seafood and seafood in general (Upton, 2011). This phenomenon was supported by the 2016 study, *Measuring the Impact of the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill on Consumer Behavior.* According to the study, "the BP spill had a negative impact on oyster demand in terms of short-run actual behavior, although spill effects show signs of dissipating several months following the spill" (Morgan, Whitehead, Huth, Martin & Sjolander, 2016). Additionally, the study also revealed that short and long term spill responses differed across consumer groups.

Aside from consumer behaviors, there is research on other stakeholders such as commercial and recreational fisherman. The same 2011 study by Upton found that recreational fishing also makes significant contributions to the region's economy by supporting businesses such as charters (guides), bait and tackle shops, restaurants and lodging. In 2008, 5.7 million Gulf recreational fishermen, both visitors and residents, took 24 million fishing trips. In 2008, recreational fishermen spent over $12.5 billion on durable equipment and trips in the Gulf region.

In Florida, recreational saltwater fishing generates $7.6 billion dollars per year and supports 109,341 jobs (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2014). From sales of Florida fishing licenses alone, $35,528,631 in revenues was generated in fiscal year 2013/14 (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2016). It was because of this that this population is so important. Recreational fishing has a huge impact on the state of Florida, and this very specific group of stakeholders that hasn't yet been studied. There were two research questions in this survey:

RQ1: How do the participants regard BP's response strategies used in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill?

RQ2: What response strategies do participants feel should be used in future spills?

Through the gathering of empirical data, this study took the already extensive body of research regarding the Deep Water Horizon oil spill in a new direction under the guise of Image Repair Theory.

CHAPTER THREE:

Method

Participants

Participants included 11 inshore charter fishing captains in the Tampa Bay Area spanning from Dunedin and Clearwater to Tampa Bay. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling; the primary investigator has been a part of the fishing industry for many years and had ready access to the participants. The participants in question had over 100 years of experience as guides and had been fishing recreationally for nearly their entire lives. In terms of demographics, the participants were all white males that all spanned the age categories from 18 to 24 to over 55.

Procedure

The study was approved by the USF Institutional Review Board (IRB). The locations for each interview were selected by coordinating with each subject to find a mutually agreeable setting for the interview. Interview sites were evaluated by proximity to each party, comfort level for each individual and seclusion/noise level in order to facilitate the best recording conditions.

Upon meeting at an agreed on location, before the interview commenced, there was small talk between the primary investigator and the participants. The small talk served to relax the subject and help them to feel comfortable; during this time each party also had the opportunity to order food. All the participants signed an informed consent sheet for the study as well as for

being audio recorded which was explained thoroughly by the primary investigator who also answered any questions the participants had.

After the aforementioned process was completed, the primary investigator began the interview. In depth interviews that lasted at least an hour but not longer than two hours were conducted and recorded by the primary investigator on a cell phone recording app. There were four primary questions (these questions are listed in the measures section) in the interviews which also yielded follow up questions. The primary investigator let each participant talk and divulge into various areas and opinions/thoughts, but was mindful to keep the overall conversation on track and related to the Deepwater Horizon and the aftermath thereof. If the participant ordered food or drinks or wanted to use the bathroom facilities at the location, breaks were allotted for those purposes. Most of the interviews conducted in this research study consisted of at least one break.

Upon completion of the interview, the primary investigator thanked the participants for sharing their time and answering the questions provided. Later the primary researcher transcribed the responses, which can be found in the results section. The transcribed interviews were coded by the primary researcher using a code book available in the appendix section. Codes were created by finding a generalizable trend first or sequence of themes that consistently fell in line with one of the image repair strategies, for example not being truly regretful would fall under the mortification strategy. After the generalizable trend was identified, a more in depth explanation of what the trend was and meant was deduced. Finally, the actual quote from the participant was presented. All of these three components were best created and presented in tables as previously noted.

The participants were not compensated for participating nor did they incur any costs to participate in the study; furthermore, participation was completely anonymous and the captains were only referred to as participant followed by their number. This study had no identifying information for any of the guides who participated.

A similar study from 2015 titled “Crisis Communication and Celebrity Scandal: An Experiment on Response Strategies” also explored Image Repair Theory and crisis response strategies. In the study, the primary investigator used Qualtrics to gather the pertinent data, but because this was a qualitative study that was guided by the philosophical perspective of ontology, interviews were deemed the best data gathering method. Another reason that interviews were chosen for this study was because they easily generate follow up questions and dialogue, in this case follow up questions and comments were important because of the insights and experiences of the guides.

Measures

The study used an inductive approach to test the research questions. The participants were asked a number of questions, which were then coded and used to answer the research questions. The initial questioning also yielded follow up questions. The following is a list of the four main questions asked by the primary investigator:

- What do you think about the length of time that it took BP to respond to the spill?
- What do you think about the roles of the IGFA, CCA and FWC in the aftermath of the spill?
- Do you feel that BP acted with the interests of fisherman in mind in the aftermath of the spill?

- How was the fishing impacted by the spill, was it more seen in specific species that you target or a broad effect on the environment?

The participants' responses were analyzed under the five strategies of Image Repair Theory; this analysis can be found in the results section with the associated code book and/or tables available in the appendices section. These five strategies are denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification.

The first strategy, denial, contains two types: simple denial (I/ we didn't do it) and shifting the blame. The second strategy, evasion of responsibility, has four types: provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. Reducing offensiveness has six components: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack the accuser, and compensation. The fourth strategy, corrective action, is not broken down into subcategories. Rather, this is the organization's attempt to fix the problem, solve the problem, or both. The fifth and final strategy of Benoit's typology is mortification. Mortification takes place when everyone involved apologizes for the crisis (Arendt, LaFleche & Limperopulos, 2017).

CHAPTER FOUR:

Results

A total of eleven in depth interviews with inshore charter fishing guides in the Tampa Bay Area which lasted at least one hour but not longer than two hours, were recorded, transcribed and put into a code book guided by Image Repair Theory. The following is the data that was yielded from the procedures. .

In regards to **RQ1**: "How do the participants regard BP's response strategies used in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill?" the interviews yielded the answer that the responses from BP were too slow, unorganized and overall not appropriate to address the disaster. Additionally, while the guides felt that BP was right to compensate those who were impacted by the spill, overall BP was insincere in their responses and the company was viewed as bungling.

In regards to **RQ 2:** "What response strategies do participants feel should be used in future spills?" The interviews found that the captains felt that oil companies should use mortification and be clearly regretful for their actions, have clear corrective action plans laid out to deal with these situations and reduce offensiveness (the use of payouts to those effected as well as investing in the environment should be used but there should be a vetting process).

Analysis

BP employed all five strategies of Image Repair Theory. Corrective action had to be employed in order to clean up the spill, but the use of chemical dispersants and the lack of a real plan of action again negatively impacted the company. Reducing offensiveness was a strategy that was used and had positive impacts; however it was also viewed negatively as time wore on. BP didn't vet people as they should've been , so what was once viewed as fairly compensating those who were negatively impacted by the disaster came to be viewed as throwing money at everyone and everything in order to make it all go away. Finally mortification was something that BP failed to properly employ as well; it was a failed attempt at appearing mortified and truly regretful for what happened.

The following are quotes from participants regarding some of the response strategies used:

Corrective action

"My take on all of that… the dispersants… is that we may all die from what they did. They threw untested stuff in our water" - Participant six

"I'm assuming that most of the oil sunk to great depths and was dispersed." "I don't know what the impact of that was" - Participant four

These quote show dissatisfaction with how BP responded to the spill as far as clean-up efforts in corrective action.

Reducing offensiveness,

"The compensation was irresponsible, I feel like people who weren't really affected were compensated"- Participant 10

“It seemed a little gimmicky to me, kind of like, “oops, let’s fix this, let’s spend some money and try to get everyone back on our side”- Participant 11

These quotes show how disingenuous participants felt that the payouts that BP used as a form of reducing offensiveness were

Denial

“They didn’t want to let everyone know that there were millions of gallons spilling” – Participant 10

“Yeah I definitely saw denial there” – Participant 11

These quotes show that participants felt that BP used denial as a response strategy after the spill

Evasion of responsibility

“I feel like they shifted the blame to other parties” – Participant one

“I think there was blame being shifted to the blowout preventer, the manufacturer” – Participant 10

These quotes regarding evasion of responsibility show that participants felt that BP didn’t take responsibility for the spill

Mortification

BP said they cared, but they didn’t”, - Participant two

“They were more worried about themselves”.

“I felt that it wasn’t sincere and that they didn’t care as much about the environment as they were trying to advertise” – Participant seven

These quotes demonstrate how participants felt that BP wasn’t truly regretful and mortified by what happened

Other salient quotes:

“They didn’t give a shit about us, they were making millions and million and billions of dollars” – Participant two

“They were negligent to allow for there to not be a plan there” – Participant three

“I wasn’t listening to them because I didn’t trust them to begin with. They’re the ones that caused the problem to begin with, and with everything they said nothing was happening so I had no trust or belief in what they were saying” – Participant three

“I think fishermen were forgotten and that they acted in their own interests.”

“Waitresses and mechanics who weren’t effected got $50,000 checks” - Participant seven

All of these quotes demonstrate that BP bungled the handling of the spill, from not having a plan, to appearing untrustworthy and uncaring.

As an aside to what was learned through the research questions regarding Image Repair Theory, the guides felt that action plans should include working with conservation organizations before a spill ever even happens. Additionally it was found that in the aftermath of an oil spill, guides would hope to see every organization that has anything to do with fishing, from conservation organizations to record keeping organizations and law enforcement organizations to

step up and lend a hand in recovery efforts and to aid guides, fisherman and the environment in whatever way they can.

An additional finding of the study was that guides responded positively in regards to the possibility of greater representation and a coalition of angler driven organizations to help guides and the environment in times of need. While there was support for the aforementioned organization(s) there was an air of cynicism as the guides expressed that it would be a nearly impossible task to accomplish.

Another result that the study found was that the fishing in Tampa Bay was largely unaffected by the spill, some respondents even said that the fishing was fantastic and that they saw no changes at all. Tampa didn't have oil washing up on the shores of local beaches; further research should be conducted from areas that had widespread oil wash-ups to see how the fishing and environment was impacted there.

In sum, BP took far too long to respond to the spill and participants felt that they were not prepared whatsoever to handle a disaster scenario, BP's responses were not sincere and were a poor attempt to save face in the wake of negligence (especially in denial, evasion of responsibility and mortification), even in the physical actions of corrective action, the use of dispersants was a point of major concern for the guides. The use of these chemicals in the water made many guides fearful that they could have long term health effects for the ocean. The use of dispersants was worrisome to guides as well because they were concerned that future generations wouldn't be able to have to same fishing opportunities as they did as a result of possible damage done by the chemicals to the ecosystem, especially future fish stocks.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Discussions and Conclusion

The most significant findings of this study were the answers to **RQ 1**, how do the participants regard BP's response strategies used in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill? And **RQ 2**, what response strategies do participants feel should be used in future spills? The majority of the captains felt that BP's image repair responses were inadequate in alleviating the situation following the Deepwater Horizon disaster and also that in the future of oil spills oil companies should be clearly and genuinely mortified and have clear and decisive plans for correcting the situation as well as alleviating the effects of said spill on the pertinent publics.

BP should have refrained from using certain response strategies and used others differently. The use of denial and evasion of responsibility greatly hurt BP; these were strategies that should not have been used, as they made the company look seedy, dishonest and unperturbed by the disaster. If BP had not used denial and evasion of responsibility but rather took ownership of the spill from the beginning as well as appearing to be truly mortified rather than feigning regret, they would've been perceived less negatively. Additionally, having a clear and concise plan of action (corrective action) for clean-up – specifically taking measures to stop the spill rather than letting it spill for 84 days and doing a better job of vetting people to make sure that only those who were actually impacted by the spill received payments (reducing

offensiveness), then they would have been perceived more favorably. Essentially, choosing the right responses at the right times would have helped BP.

Image Repair Theory and its utility and applications were at the heart of this study. This study added to the extensive and well documented body of literature on the theory and l served as a case study of its application. The Deepwater Horizon spill was the worst oil spill in U.S. history and surely will not be the last. Image Repair Theory's application and the insights gained from the interviews should be carefully examined and considered for use in the event of future spills. Image Repair Theory can be thought of as a guide book of what an organization in crisis should do, in the case of BP and the Deepwater Horizon; it can be looked at as a guide book of what not to do as an organization in crisis. BP bungled the response to the spill, the strategies in Image Repair Theory have been laid out and there was ample literature as well as success stories of organizations using the strategies therein in times of crisis, yet BP either used responses they shouldn't have or used responses in a poor fashion. As a result of BP's failure to appropriately respond to the spill, the environment suffered, jobs and the economy suffered and they were viewed very negatively. From boycotts to popular culture mocking the organization and groups of very dissatisfied stakeholders, BP got hit with a firestorm of criticism and negative publicity.

The feedback from the participants in this study should be taken seriously and referenced by future organizations in both public and private sectors. This is because guides are the eyes and ears on the water, nearly all of the guides that were interviewed in this study spend at least 300 days on the water per year. Guides make their living through fishing and being out in the environment, if they're not, then they're not making money. It is a likely assertion to say that of those not in the scientific field, no one is more in tune with what is happening in the water and

marine environments than charter fishing guides, especially in Florida, a state surrounded by water on three sides.

If an organization or even a government agency or official can adopt these image repair strategies, use them properly and learn from this and other research that presently exists, then when they inevitably face a crisis they will be able to navigate it and come out on the other side without having their image completely destroyed. Again, this study made no hypotheses and didn't claim to try and change policy or change the way that Image Repair Theory is studied, it just brought to light new information. Whether or not this information is referenced and put to use is in the hands of the reader.

The findings of this study added to the current body of research about the BP oil spill and that of Image Repair Theory, but it should also be viewed as opening the door for future research about guides, image repair and oil spills. This study didn't make any assumptions nor did it have a hypothesis, it merely presented the thoughts and opinions of an underrepresented group of stakeholders on an issue. These stakeholders are a very influential group and their intimate knowledge of the topic as well as insights that have not yet been considered in previous research studies. There has been much biological research about this event, but the social science research is lacking – the arena of the impacts that it had on guides just isn't there. The interviewees did indicate that they wanted to see greater connection between science and those who make their livings on the water as well as a larger role of conservation based organizations; this study could perhaps help make inroads there.

In conclusion, the insights and opinions of guides are very important when it comes to environmental issues, specifically oil spills as they tend to be catastrophic events that can have

long lasting impacts on an ecosystem. Unfortunately, the literature that currently exists grossly under represents them despite the fact that they're the eyes and ears on the water when it comes to environmental defense. Policies of both public and private entities as well as their responses to environmental disasters should consider them. This study provided real data from individuals and their businesses that were directly impacted by the Deepwater Horizon disaster. Given the amount of oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico one could argue that it isn't a matter of if another spill happens, but when. Before the next spill occurs, the primary investigator suggests that policy makers survey charter captains and their associated organizations in order to gain a better idea of the course of action that they should take with oil companies in the wake of future disasters.

Future considerations should be made to the various limitations of the study. The sample could have been expanded to include female guides as well as other races and ethnicities (every guide that was interviewed was a white male). Eleven interviews were conducted; more interviews could provide more data. The results of this study were not generalizable because of the small sample size, they are only generalizable among the small sample that was collected in this study, and a random sample was not used.

As stated before, Tampa Bay didn't see oil washing up on area beaches, this study could be easily replicated with other captains in other Gulf Coast regions and states who were more impacted by the spill and did see oil wash-ups, such as Louisiana and Texas. Tampa Bay was impacted much less severely than other Gulf Coast states and even other parts of Florida. This study should be conducted with these other captains to increase the sample size as well as gathering a sample that was closer to the epicenter of the event. Future studies could investigate offshore captains as this study only focused on inshore guides. Finally, the study was qualitative

in nature; quantitative studies such as surveys should also be conducted to provide different sets of data and more information.

However, directions for future research go beyond broadening the demographics or changing the type of study from qualitative to quantitative. Situations beyond environmental disasters should be examined in a similar fashion to how this study was conducted. Image Repair Theory can be applied to both organizations and individuals, scandals from yesteryear such as Enron and Tylenol to more recent events such as Bill Cosby and even athletes embroiled in scandals involving performance enhancing drugs. Finally, the circumstances surrounding the Primary Investigator such as being a graduate student limited the scope of the study. Future research could examine crises responses in other countries and cultures to add more scholarship to the current body of research.

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Appendix One: IRB Approval Letter

RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

October 23, 2017

William Korte, Jr.
School of Advertising and Mass Communications
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**
IRB#: Pro00032545
Title: An examination of Image Repair Theory and BP's response to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

Study Approval Period: 10/23/2017 to 10/23/2018

Dear Mr. Korte:

On 10/23/2017, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
Thesis Protocol.docx

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
USF IRB Informed Consent.docx.pdf

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent documents are valid until the consent document is amended and approved.

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) calendar days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice
Chairperson USF Institutional Review
Board

Appendix Two: Code Book

Denial Codes

Code	Explanation	Example
Failure to recognize older rigs and practices	BP kept forging on ahead in a form of cognitive dissonance in that the same old rigs and parts were deemed acceptable	"We're not updating aged pipelines and delivery vehicles at nearly the pace they're being put in" "Pipelines rupture, we know this is going to happen"
Early denial of things being as bad as they were	BP's language essentially tried to placate the situation by denying the severity of the spill and its impact	"They didn't give a shit, they were making millions and million and billions of dollars"
Willful denial of the danger of a spill	BP was negligent in not having a corrective action strategy in place, this could've resulted from a denial of the possibility of catastrophic failure	"I would say that it was corporate negligence"
Denial of the need for a plan of action in case of a spill	There seemed to be a disconnect between the reality of an aging oil rig and the possibility of a disaster and having a plan in place to deal with that eventuality	"Someone screwed up and there was negligence"

Code	Explanation	Example
Didn't deny their role(s)/failures in the spill	BP owned up to losing their rig and having this disaster happen	"They did a good job of taking responsibility"
Didn't deny what was going on	The magnitude of the spill made it impossible to deny	"What are they going to tell me? There's still oil spilling out, we all knew that, they had cameras down there showing it all day long"
Denial of safety issues	Some Gulf oil rigs are dilapidated and look unkempt	"I've fished under those oil platforms and I saw some from BP that looked rusty, unkempt and unsafe."
Denial wasn't used	Denial couldn't be used because of how large the disaster was	"There was no denying it, everyone could see it"
Denial of fault, muddled responses	Didn't have an open and honest dialogue about the incident. Passed the buck	"As time went on, I think that they became more open and said, "we're working on it and doing the best we can do"
Size of the problem	Initially BP used denial in regards to how large the spill was	"They didn't want to let everyone know that there were millions of gallons spilling"
Some denial	BP didn't completely deny the spill or their role in it, but they did try to shift some of the blame away	"Yeah I definitely saw denial, they weren't exactly shunning all the blame away but there was something"

Reducing Offensiveness Codes

Code	Explanation	Example
Felt disrespect from BP	Put profits over the environment, paid out money but didn't do enough	"I really feel like they didn't take nearly the hit that the environment took"
Made an effort to make things better	Aside from cleaning up the spill, BP tried to help those who the spill impacted	"Yeah, I mean they tried, they tried to reimburse you if you lost business, but it was a pain in the ass"
BP wasn't trusted	Response messages weren't even worth listening to because BP was seen as disingenuous	"All the stuff you'd see on TV was just brainwashing"
Responses weren't relevant	Because oil didn't directly impact the Tampa Bay Area directly, response strategies were ignored	"It didn't impact my business, life goes on, I didn't pay much attention; but I do feel that their payouts were huge"
Actions of BP were more important than words	The messages from BP were ignored, but the physical actions, particularly the payouts given by BP were seen as good	"I think that it was pretty generous and pretty fair" "I honestly didn't pay a whole lot of attention to what they were saying"
BP wasn't serious in their responses	Compensation was seen as adequate, but overall BP was seen as unmoved	"It sounded like those who had real claims were fairly compensated" "If they went out of their way to do more things and show that they cared… I just didn't see them do that"

Code	Explanation	Example
BP didn't care about the fishing community	Lost compensation claims, huge payouts to those who were seen as undeserving	"I think fisherman were forgotten and that they acted in their own interests" "Waitresses and mechanics who weren't effected got $50,000 checks "I would put in these applications for money and then once or twice they lost it, I received zero compensation"
BP's response strategies for reducing offensiveness were viewed positively	Messages were ignored because of the spills lack of saliency. Compensation viewed positively	"I'll be honest with you; I didn't pay much attention to what they were saying. I was fishing and they paid me off"
Reducing offensiveness response strategies were irresponsible	Just throwing money around when it could have been spent in better ways	"The compensation was irresponsible, I feel like people who weren't really effected were compensated" "I'm not criticizing them for spending that money, but it could've been better invested in shoreline restoration"
BP acted slowly but once things progressed, some actions were viewed favorably	Plans and coordinated messages took time to organize, compensation was fair	"It took a while to get the ball rolling and for them to realize that all hands on deck were needed" "I think that they did a decent job with payouts and reducing offensiveness"
BP wasn't seen as genuine	Reducing offensiveness response strategies were more for show than anything else	"It seemed a little gimmicky to me, kind of like, "oops, let's fix this, let's spend some money and try to get everyone back on our side"

Corrective Action Codes

Code	Explanation	Example
Need for better corrective action responses	Slow responses to the spill, no course of action.	"we should've had a plan in place to take care of this"
Need long term and tried/true solutions	Corrective action only to alleviate the current situation	"I mean if you go out into the Gulf right now, who knows how much oil has settled on the bottom"
Need more overall corrective action	Actions didn't go far enough	"I'm not really sure that they did enough; I think they could always do more"
Distrust of corrective actions taken	Chemical dispersants being used was seen as a negative move by BP	"I'm assuming that most of the oil sunk to great depths and was dispersed." "I don't know what the impact of that was".
Need faster response time	BP didn't react fast enough to the spill	"I definitely think that it was lengthy, I feel like it was devastating by the time that anybody had really addressed it and it was pretty bad"
Concern for future generations	Chemical dispersants seen as dangerous	"we may all die from what they did, they threw untested stuff in our water"
Unprepared, no plans for spill	Did not seem ready to deal with a spill	"It seemed like they didn't have a plan of action"
Adequate responses	Not fast enough but okay response	"I think that they corrected things as much as they could"
Acceptable responses	Actions were deemed adequate	"I mean they spent a lot of money and effort"
Had to limit damage	Not exactly sure of processes involved in clean up	"You have to minimize the damage as much as you can"

Code	Explanation	Example
No real plan	Lack of quick action endangered future fish stocks	“It seemed like there was no direct plan of action right away”

Evasion of Responsibility Codes

Code	Explanation	Example
Shifted the blame	BP didn't take responsibility for what happened	"I feel like they shifted the blame to other parties"
Didn't issue real and meaningful statements that would tie them to the situation	BP tried to distance themselves from what happened by not addressing the issue as best they could	"I mean it was all bullshit, they told us what we wanted to hear so that they could keep doing what they were doing before"
Didn't adequately address the spill in any fashion (physical or otherwise)	BP tried to separate themselves from the spill as much as possible	"They just wanted it all to disappear from our eyes and from the media"
Focused attention on an improperly installed piece of equipment	BP wanted people to know that a specific piece of equipment installed by a third party broke	"I do remember something about the installation not being quite right and I can't remember them saying that it wasn't a problem"
Through corrective action and reducing offensiveness BP took responsibility	By cleaning up the spill and paying out millions to those effected by the spill BP took responsibility for their actions	"I think that they did a good job of taking responsibility"
Adequately took responsibility for the spill	After the spill BP did respond and owned it but not enough	"They were kind of blasé."
Took adequate ownership of the spill	Didn't try to shift the blame, but didn't use enough corrective action, which was the true mark of ownership	"They took ownership and responsibility but could have done more"
Took responsibility for the spill	Didn't pass the buck at all	"I don't think that I ever heard them say, "it's your fault not ours", it's been a while but I don't seem to remember that"

Code	Explanation	Example
BP owned the spill	BP didn't try to put the blame on anyone else	"I feel like they owned it. I mean I didn't think that they pushed it on anyone else or anything like that"
BP blamed someone else for the disaster	BP put the blame on the manufacturer of the blowout preventer	"I think there was blame being shifted to the blowout preventer, the manufacturer"
Tried to create distance between the company and the disaster	Didn't deny that the spill was happening but tried to get away from the disaster	"I think that BP was kind of not shunning blame away, but there was something" "Like evasion of responsibility" "Right"

Mortification Codes

Code	Explanation	Example
Expressed mortification that was insincere	BP's guilt in the wake of the spill was more for show than anything else; to keep their doors open	"I feel that their primary focus and concern was dollars"
BP wasn't truly mortified at all	BP said and did what was necessary to make themselves seem less like the "bad guy"	"BP said they cared, but they didn't" "They were more worried about themselves"
Mortification messages that weren't trusted	BP wasn't trusted and their messages fell on deaf ears	"I had no trust or belief in what they were saying"
Unclear if BP was mortified or not	Because of the disorganization of response strategies, it was difficult to ascertain BP's intent and beliefs	"I don't really remember a specific, consistent message"
Mortified out of necessity	BP expressed regret, but they were doing so to appease the public	"I think that they were really only just trying to cover their asses"
No mortification	BP didn't seem to be mortified at all	"It sounded like they were just doing their jobs and it was a regular day"
BP didn't care about the effects of the spill	All of the messages and dialogue mortification wise were only for show	"I felt that it wasn't sincere and that they didn't care as much about the environment as they were trying to advertise"
BP was honestly mortified	A spill is the worst thing that can happen to an oil company, the magnitude of this spill reinforced their mortification	"I think that they were pretty well distressed, no oil company wants a rig to blow up"
Adequately mortified	The spill was an absolute catastrophe and BP was embarrassed and seemed remorseful about it	"I think that they were pretty mortified, with a spill that big, how much more could they have done?"

Code	Explanation	Example
Not known for sure if BP was in fact mortified or not	There is no way to know for sure if words mean what the people saying them actually mean	"It's a hard call, they may have just put on a face"
Dishonestly mortified	Because of public reactions to the spill BP used mortification strategies	"It seemed like it may have been a little bit forced or that they got a slap on the wrist and said, "I'm sorry"."