

Taking a Nosedive: Can Boeing's Image be Saved? Application of Image Repair Theory

James Ndone*

Department of Communication, Media, & Culture, Coastal Carolina University, 308 Brittain Hall, 125 Chanticleer Dr W, Conway, South Carolina, 29528, USA

Abstract: Boeing's leadership faced significant criticism for its mishandling of the two 737 Max plane crashes that occurred within a six-month span. Since then, Boeing has been grappling with ongoing quality control issues with its 737 Max series, including a recent door plug failure on a 737 Max 9 mid-flight, and production flaws in the 787 Dreamliner, such as gaps between fuselage sections. This case study applies image repair theory (IRT) to explore Boeing's crisis communication strategies in response to the 737 Max plane crashes. This study further investigates the application of the concepts of stealing thunder, framing hypothesis, and ethical apology, and their application in Boeing's crisis management. The findings reveal that Boeing's leadership employed both denial and mortification strategies; however, the timing and execution of these communications were flawed, leading to long-term reputational damage. Boeing's failure to employ stealing thunder, effective framing, and delivering sincere apologies has hindered its ability to control the crisis narrative. Theoretical implications for IRT are discussed.

Keywords: Image repair theory, Boeing, case study, stealing thunder, ethical apology.

On Monday, October 29, 2018, Lion Air Flight 610, a Boeing-manufactured plane, departed from Jakarta's Soekarno—Hatta International Airport (Indonesia) at 6:21 a.m., destined for Pangkal Pinang, a small provincial city on an island in the Java Sea. However, the plane never reached its destination, plummeting into the Java Sea and killing all 189 people on board. Boeing, the manufacturer of the plane, issued a statement emphasizing that safety was a top priority for the company. Less than six months later, on March 10, 2019, another Boeing-manufactured plane, an Ethiopian Airlines flight, crashed shortly after takeoff from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, en route to Nairobi, Kenya, killing all 157 people on board. The fallout from these two crashes was immediate and severe, with over 40 countries grounding Boeing planes and several others refusing to allow them into their airspace (Bussewitz, 2019). The United States Federal Aviation Administration also issued an emergency order grounding Boeing planes, marking a significant crisis for the company.

Boeing's refusal to voluntarily ground the planes in the wake of these tragedies, coupled with lawsuits from victims' families and compensation claims from airlines, further damaged the company's reputation and financial standing. Boeing's core profits fell by 21 percent in the first quarter of 2019 compared to the same period in 2018 (Baker, 2019). The company's crisis deepened, highlighting the urgent need for effective crisis communication and image repair.

The present study analyzes Boeing's efforts to repair its image using a case study approach grounded in Image Repair Theory (IRT). While case study research is well-suited for in-depth exploration of complex real-world phenomena, the use of this method in this study is particularly appropriate due to the intricate and multifaceted nature of Boeing's crisis. Case studies allow for a comprehensive examination of specific instances within their real-life context, which is essential for understanding the nuances of Boeing's crisis communication strategies given the relevance and utility of case studies in organizational communication research (Crowe *et al.*, 2011; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

This study focuses on five key press statements issued by Boeing's then-CEO, Dennis Muilenburg, directly related to the two 737 Max crashes. These statements were selected based on their timing and significance in the company's crisis response, representing crucial moments in Boeing's attempt to manage the crisis narrative. I provide a detailed explanation of the data selection process, including the rationale for focusing on these five statements and the exclusion of others, to ensure methodological transparency. In analyzing Boeing's crisis communication, I apply IRT to examine the specific strategies employed by the company. Additionally, I explore the concepts of stealing thunder, framing hypothesis, and ethical apology, and their application in Boeing's crisis management. Finally, I discuss the implications of this analysis for IRT, contributing to the broader literature on crisis communication and organizational reputation management.

*Address correspondence to this author at the Department of Communication, Media, & Culture, Coastal Carolina University, 308 Brittain Hall, 125 Chanticleer Dr W, Conway, South Carolina, 29528, USA; Tel: 843-349-2725; E-mail: jndone@coastal.edu

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational Crisis Communication

Crisis communication scholars have developed various theoretical frameworks to help organizations understand how to deal with crises. An organizational crisis is a “specific, unexpected, and nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high-priority goals” (Ulmer, *et al.*, 2019, p.7). A crisis can also be seen as “the perceived violation of salient stakeholder expectations that can create negative outcomes for stakeholders and/or the organization” (Coombs, 2023, p. 4).

Within the field of crisis communication, three key theories have been extensively researched. First, situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) links attribution theory and crisis response strategies by examining the reputational threat posed by the crisis and recommending appropriate crisis response strategies based on the level of reputational threat (Coombs, 2007). Second, the Discourse of renewal (DoR) theory emphasizes the opportunities that crises present for organizations to learn and project a forward-looking image of growth and recovery (Ulmer, *et al.*, 2019). Finally, image repair theory (IRT) focuses on the need to analyze the threat to an organization's image and

outlines strategies for repairing that image by addressing the actions that led to the crisis (Benoit, 2015). In this study, IRT serves as the primary theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework: Image Repair Theory

Image repair theory, developed by Benoit (1995, 1997, 2015), examines how organizations respond to accusations or account for their actions following a crisis. The theory posits that threats to an organization's image consist of two key elements: an offensive act attributed to the organization and the perception of responsibility for that act. Two core assumptions underlie IRT: first, that communication is a goal-oriented activity, and second, that maintaining a positive reputation is a fundamental goal of communication. The theory suggests five strategies that organizations can use to respond to a crisis (see the Table 1 below).

CRISIS COMMUNICATION TIMING: STEALING THUNDER, FRAMING HYPOTHESIS, AND ETHICAL APOLOGY

Framing Hypothesis: Timing of Crisis Messages

The concept of the framing hypothesis is central to crisis communication. Framing a crisis from an org-

Table 1: Adapted from Crisis and Image Repair at United Airlines: Fly the Unfriendly Skies (Benoit, 2018)

Strategy	Definition	Example
Denial		
<i>Simple denial</i>	did not perform act; act is not harmful	Did not poison Tylenol capsules
<i>Shift blame</i>	Someone else committed the offense	Madman poisoned the capsules
Evade Responsibility		
<i>Provocation</i>	offensive act just a response to an earlier offense	firm left state because of new taxes
<i>Defeasibility</i>	lack of information or ability	executive not informed of changed meeting time
<i>Accident</i>	mishap	tree fell on tracks, causing train wreck
<i>Good intentions</i>	meant well	company believed changes would help consumers
Reduce offensiveness		
<i>Bolstering</i>	stress defender's good traits or acts	Exxon claimed “swift and competent oil spill cleanup” few harmed by water
<i>Minimization</i>	offense less serious than it appears	pollution
<i>Differentiation</i>	act less offensive than other, similar acts	Sears repairs were preventative maintenance, not fraud
<i>Transcendence</i>	act justified by more important values	research uses animals to help create drugs for people
<i>Attack accuser</i>	reduce credibility of accuser; suggest victim deserved offense; shift audience attention from act	Pepsi owns restaurants and competes for your customers
Corrective action	fix the problem/ prevent recurrence	AT&T promises to spend billions to improve service
Mortification	apologize	AT&T apologized for service interruption

izational perspective occurs when an organization publicly acknowledges a crisis, and handling this aspect effectively can significantly reduce the negative impact of the crisis (Coombs, 2015; Beldad *et al.*, 2017; Claeys *et al.*, 2013; Hegner *et al.*, 2018; Lee, 2016). Crisis communication practitioners often debate the appropriateness of openness during a crisis, with some advocating for a more guarded approach while others emphasize the importance of being open and proactive (Coombs, 2015; Claeys *et al.*, 2013; Kline *et al.*, 2009). Research, however, tends to support the latter view, highlighting the benefits of early and transparent communication (Huang & Su, 2009).

Two common crisis timing strategies are widely discussed in the literature: the *ex-ante* crisis timing strategy, often referred to as "stealing thunder," and the *ex-post* crisis timing strategy, known as "thunder." Stealing thunder is a proactive approach where an organization discloses information about a crisis before external parties, such as the media or government, can do so (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). This concept has been tested in various contexts, including self-disclosure during trials, where framing helped minimize organizational responsibility for the crisis (Dolnik *et al.*, 2003; Claeys *et al.*, 2013). Stealing thunder allows organizations to take control of the narrative, potentially reducing the perceived severity of the crisis. By stealing thunder, organizations can prevent damaging media coverage and enhance their credibility by portraying themselves as transparent and sincere (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Lee, 2016). In contrast, the *ex-post* strategy involves a reactive approach, where the organization waits to respond until after the crisis information has been disclosed by external parties.

Ethical Apologies in Crisis Communication

The concept of ethical apology expands on the traditional notion of apology in crisis communication. An ethical apology involves a multi-layered approach that incorporates context and actions meant to display sincere regret (Hearit & Borden, 2006). For an apology to be effective, it must meet several criteria, including explicitly admitting wrongdoing, showing empathy, seeking forgiveness, fully disclosing information, addressing stakeholder concerns, and providing assurances to prevent future occurrences. This approach aligns with the principles of stealing thunder, where the organization takes early responsibility, thus enhancing the perceived sincerity of its apology.

Moreover, ethical apologies are crucial in differentiating organizations that are genuinely committed to ethical practices from those that may simply be engaging in damage control. Stakeholders are increasingly savvy and can distinguish between perfunctory apologies and those that are grounded in ethical principles. As such, an ethical apology can strengthen stakeholder loyalty and trust, as it signals the organization's dedication to doing what is right, even at the cost of short-term gains (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

The Boeing 737 Max Crisis: A Case Study

The Boeing 737 Max crisis, one of the most significant in modern aviation history, unfolded after two fatal crashes within five months of each other—Lion Air Flight 610 in October 2018 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 in March 2019—resulting in the loss of 346 lives (Kitroeff *et al.*, 2019). The crashes were attributed to a faulty Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS), a software designed to stabilize the aircraft, which mistakenly forced the planes into nosedives (Gates, 2019).

The crisis not only raised concerns about the safety of the Boeing 737 Max aircraft but also led to intense scrutiny of Boeing's crisis management and corporate ethics. Boeing's initial responses were heavily criticized for being slow, defensive, and lacking transparency (Pasztor & Tangel., 2020). The company initially attributed the crashes to pilot error and did not acknowledge the MCAS issue until after the second crash. This delay in full disclosure was perceived as an attempt to shift blame and minimize responsibility, which significantly damaged Boeing's reputation and stakeholder trust (Shepardson, 2019).

Boeing's subsequent crisis communication efforts included issuing multiple apologies, grounding the 737 Max fleet, and pledging to fix the MCAS software (Gelles, 2019). However, the effectiveness of these efforts has been debated, with critics arguing that Boeing's actions were more reactive than proactive. The company's delayed acknowledgment of the MCAS fault and its failure to immediately ground the aircraft after the first crash contradicted the principles of ethical apology and proactive crisis management, such as "stealing thunder" (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

In the context of Image Repair Theory (IRT), Boeing's strategies can be analyzed through various lenses (Benoit, 1997). Initially, Boeing employed

strategies like denial and shifting blame, attempting to downplay its responsibility for the crashes. However, as the crisis deepened, Boeing shifted to corrective action and mortification strategies, particularly after the global grounding of the 737 Max and the growing pressure from regulators and the public (Rushe, 2019).

Furthermore, Boeing's approach to the crisis can be examined through the concepts of stealing thunder, the framing hypothesis, and ethical apology. Boeing's decision not to disclose the MCAS issues proactively, especially after the first crash, suggests a missed opportunity to "steal thunder" and control the narrative (Williams *et al.*, 1993). Instead, external parties, including investigative agencies and the media, dictated the crisis narrative, which amplified the reputational damage (Coombs, 2023).

The framing hypothesis also plays a critical role in understanding Boeing's crisis communication (Entman, 1993). By not framing the crisis on its terms early on, Boeing allowed negative perceptions to solidify, which proved difficult to reverse. Boeing's apologies, although eventually incorporating elements of ethical apology, were seen by many as insufficient and insincere due to the company's earlier attempts to evade full responsibility (Hearit & Borden, 2006). These aspects of Boeing's crisis communication strategy form the basis for the following research questions:

RQ1: What crisis response strategies from IRT did Boeing utilize to respond to the 737 Max crisis?

RQ2: To what extent did Boeing use the concepts of (a) stealing thunder; (b) framing hypothesis, and (c) ethical apology in handling the 737 Max crisis?

METHOD

The case study approach was employed to answer the research questions. A case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p. 18). The case study method was appropriate for the study because it enables a researcher to investigate and understand a real-life phenomenon in depth (Yin & Davis, 2007). Additionally, the use of case studies allows "an inclusive way to examine crisis and disaster communication ecologies" (Perreault & Smith-Friggerio, 2024, p.3). Case studies can also be "used to explain, describe, and explore events or phenomena in the

everyday contexts in which they occur," Crowe *et al.*, 2011, p.4). Given the complexity and ongoing nature of the Boeing 737 Max crisis, this approach was particularly suited to exploring the nuanced and multi-faceted aspects of Boeing's image repair strategies, as it allows for in-depth analysis within the specific context of the crisis.

To provide a complete analysis as possible, I analyzed data from the press statements that Boeing released following the crisis. The press releases were a valid focus of the study because of the nature of this study involving image repair strategies that Boeing used to repair its image. Besides, the use of press releases in communication research is growing, as people seek to explore specific communication aspects contained in the releases (Grimmelikhuisen *et al.*, 2018). Press statements are key artifacts in crisis communication, often representing the organization's official stance and strategic response to a crisis. As such, they provide critical insights into the rhetorical strategies employed by the company.

The selection of press statements for analysis was based on a systematic review of all public statements issued by Boeing in relation to the 737 Max crisis. The company issued numerous statements throughout the crisis period; however, I focused on those that were directly tied to the two plane crashes and those personally delivered by then-CEO Denis Muilenburg. This selection criterion was applied because the CEO is traditionally viewed as the primary spokesperson during a crisis, embodying the organization's leadership and accountability (Lucero *et al.*, 2009). The five statements chosen for analysis were those that addressed key moments in the crisis: the immediate aftermath of each crash, Boeing's response to preliminary investigation findings, and the company's strategy to mitigate the fallout and restore public trust. These statements were representative of Boeing's broader crisis communication strategy and allowed for a focused analysis of their image repair tactics. Additionally, this selection was intended to capture the evolution of Boeing's communication approach over time and to reflect the major phases of their crisis management efforts.

Evaluation of Boeing's Crisis Communication Strategies

The first statement that Boeing issued after the Lion Air Flight 610 crash was released on October 29, 2018, the same day as the crash. In this initial statement,

Boeing expressed its heartfelt condolences to the families and loved ones of those onboard and mentioned that it was deeply saddened by the loss (Boeing, 2018a). Boeing also stated that it was providing technical assistance under the direction of the Indonesian National Transportation Safety Committee and other relevant authorities but did not provide specific details about corrective measures or acknowledge any potential issues with the aircraft (Boeing, 2018a). This statement primarily employed the Image Repair Theory (IRT) tactic of mortification by expressing sympathy and sorrow for the victims without admitting fault. The then-CEO, Dennis Muilenburg, issued a more detailed statement later in the days following the crash, (Boeing, 2018b). In his statement, the CEO expressed sadness following the crash but did not issue specific measures that the company was undertaking to improve the plane's safety. After the preliminary investigation, the CEO issued another statement, saying that the company was cooperating with relevant authorities to ensure that the planes are safe and ready to go back to business (Boeing, 2018c).

Throughout these statements, Boeing primarily utilized three IRT strategies: denial, shifting blame, and mortification. First, Boeing used denial by not accepting any direct responsibility for the crash and instead focusing on the actions of the pilots. Boeing's statements included references to the procedures that were not followed, suggesting that the pilots bore some responsibility (Boeing, 2018c). Boeing's tactic of shifting blame was evident in their statements about the pilots' actions, indicating that the pilots might not have performed all necessary procedures, which implicitly deflected responsibility from Boeing. This is evident when Boeing said, "The report does not state whether the pilots performed the runaway stabilizer procedure or cut out the stabilizer trim switches" (Boeing, 2018c). Secondly, Boeing utilized the mortification strategy by extending "heartfelt condolences and sympathies to the families and loved ones of those onboard" (Boeing, 2018c). In all the statements, Boeing insisted that "safety is a core value for everyone at Boeing and the safety of our airplanes, our customers' passengers, and their crews is always our top priority" (Boeing, 2018c).

When Ethiopian Airlines flight ET302 crashed outside Addis Ababa shortly after takeoff, Boeing did issue a statement immediately. On the same day of the crash, March 10, 2019, Boeing released a statement expressing its deepest condolences to the families and loved ones of those onboard, similar to the response

after the Lion Air crash (Boeing, 2019a). Boeing also stated that it was providing technical assistance to the investigation led by Ethiopian authorities and the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board. However, Boeing did not address specific concerns about the aircraft model in this initial release (Boeing, 2019a). The CEO's first detailed public statement, in a pre-recorded video, came later on April 4, 2019 (Boeing, 2019b). Since this was the second Boeing 737 Max crash in less than five months, bringing the total death toll from the two crashes to almost 350, Boeing should have responded immediately to frame the crisis in their terms. However, the CEO's recorded video statement came nearly four weeks later (Boeing, 2019b). In the video, Dennis Muilenburg used mortification, saying that the company was "sorry for the lives lost in the recent 737 Max accidents" and that Boeing was "feeling the immense gravity of these events across our company and recognize the devastation of the families and friends of the loved ones who perished" (Boeing, 2019b).

Boeing was defensive, slow, and passive in its actions, suggesting an absence of openness and accountability. The company's statements following the crashes did not include specific acknowledgments of faults or errors in the aircraft design. Instead, Boeing emphasized the proper procedures that should be followed by the pilots, indirectly suggesting that pilot error contributed to the crashes. This approach represents evasion of responsibility, another IRT tactic, where Boeing acknowledged the crash occurred but suggested that other factors (such as pilot error) were to blame rather than Boeing's design or instructions (Boeing, 2019c). For instance, one of the statements released read in part that "the 737 Max was correctly designed" and suggested the "pilots did not completely follow the procedures that Boeing had outlined" (Boeing, 2019c). In this scenario, Boeing seemed to shift the blame to the pilots. In the immediate aftermath, Boeing continued to assert that the 737 Max was safe, despite mounting global concern and decisions by multiple countries to ground the aircraft. Even when the Federal Aviation Administration stepped in to ground the aircraft, Boeing insisted that the planes were safe, trying to shift the blame to the pilots. Eventually, after 26 days, CEO Dennis Muilenburg stated, "We own it," adding that the company was taking corrective measures to update the plane's software to ensure that similar accidents would "never happen again" (Boeing, 2019c). However, the company's CEO started defending the design of the plane a few weeks later, saying that Boeing had "redesigned the sensors" (Boeing, 2019c).

In its apology, Boeing pledged to create a software update that would fix the problem and help the plane maker return to the skies as “one of the safest planes ever to fly” (Boeing, 2019c). Here, Boeing utilized bolstering strategy to repair its image by emphasizing the steps it was taking to address the issue and improve safety, thus attempting to associate itself with positive actions and values (Boeing, 2019c). Additionally, Boeing used differentiation as a strategy by defending the plane’s design to the public and shareholders, claiming that there was no technical slip or gap in its creation (Boeing, 2019c). Also, when thanking Boeing’s partnership with Ethiopian Airlines, the Boeing CEO used bolstering strategy saying that the accident did not define the “enduring relationship” with Ethiopian Airlines, reminding everyone of Boeing’s past deeds and relationship with other members of the aviation industry (Boeing, 2019b).

In terms of theories of ethical apology, Boeing’s apology fell short in several areas. First, it did not meet the Hearit and Borden criteria of an effective apology. Boeing’s apology was non-transparent and did not include statements like the company halting its flights to investigate the causes of the crashes. Also, the organization tried shifting blame to the pilots, indicating insincerity in its apology. Also, the medium used (Twitter) was not appropriate for the nature of this crisis. This being a crisis involving loss of lives, a face-to-face media briefing with journalists present to seek clarifications would have been ideal. Boeing simply offered a mere “we’re sorry” and therefore, its apology lacked the multi-layered approach that in corporates attention to context and actions (Hearit & Borden, 2006). In addition, the CEO did not assure the stakeholders that the mistake would not reoccur. All these elements indicate that the apology was likely to be ineffective. Lastly, Boeing did not utilize the concept of framing hypothesis to frame the 737 Max crisis. After learning about the crisis, Boeing should have called for a media briefing to issue a statement and take control of the narrative surrounding the crisis. This would have enabled Boeing to be in charge of the crisis.

DISCUSSION

Boeing’s mishandling of this crisis will have a long-term impact on its reputation. Since the crisis involved the loss of life, the company needed to show compassion, empathy, and use corrective action strategies and respond immediately. A strategy they could have employed would be messaging proactively to help control the crisis. Instead of waiting for countries and

regulators to ground the 737 aircraft, Boeing should have stolen the thunder from these bodies and grounded the planes first. This could have been done with news releases and press conferences immediately after the crisis. By doing so, Boeing could have employed framing hypothesis, framing the crisis in its own way. The apology video, a pre-recorded one, was distributed through social media. A real-time video or presentation, however, could have been viewed differently, as the CEO would have been there to respond to any questions from the public or even journalists.

Initially, Boeing seemed to operate under the assumption that “the less said, the better,” a tactic that ultimately backfired by creating an information vacuum filled by media speculation and criticism. The delayed apology, issued days after the crashes, was perceived as too little, too late. In crises, delays in communication create opportunities for others to fill the void with alternative narratives, often to the detriment of the organization involved. In its use of various Image Repair Theory (IRT) strategies, Boeing appeared to engage in what Benoit and Czerwinski (1997) termed “pseudo-corrective action,” suggesting that the changes mentioned by Boeing’s CEO were not genuinely intended to improve safety but rather to convince the public of the company’s safety commitment. This approach rendered Boeing’s response ineffective and continues to negatively impact the company’s reputation and financial performance. The apology itself, perceived as insincere, failed to restore stakeholder confidence.

This study has several implications for the IRT. While Boeing chose strategies that could have been effective, the implementation was flawed in both in design and execution. For instance, the bolstering strategies of mentioning that the company had an “enduring relationship” with Ethiopian Airlines did not resonate as intended. Similarly, using denial and shifting blame onto the pilots was ineffective, given the implausibility that pilots from different airlines could make identical errors due to poor piloting skills. When using denial, it should be “forceful and address specific charges or at least, the specific charges that are likely to be salient to an audience” (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997, p. 52). Boeing’s failure to immediately ground the aircraft and take visible corrective action, despite its insistence on “redesigning sensors” and ensuring its software was undergoing “an unprecedented level of global regulatory oversight, testing and analysis” (Boeing, 2019), further demonstrates the ineffectiveness of its chosen strategies. An effective

corrective action should “correct the problems and not merely change public attitudes” (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997, p. 52), and Boeing’s actions fell short of this standard.

The first action that Boeing could have taken was to issue a public apology immediately and explain some measures being undertaken to mitigate the crisis, like grounding the aircraft. This is part of the mortification strategies advocated by IRT. Research indicates that an organization perceived as at fault can be more persuasive when it admits the mistake and apologizes (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997, Ndone *et al.*, 2022). When addressing the public on the status of the crisis, Boeing should have been honest, transparent, moral, and ethical. Information should have been relayed promptly. The organization’s leadership should have indicated that Boeing takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness. Constant updates through the media could have saved the organization’s reputation and showed that the company was in control of the situation. After the investigations were done, the organization could have said that it will compensate the victims of the crashes and even went a step further to have a memorial for the victims. These are signs that the organization cares for the victims and could have touched the emotions of the victims positively, which would make them accept the actions of the organization.

Since the 737 MAX crashes, Boeing has faced multiple crises that have further damaged its reputation and revealed systemic issues. Quality control problems with other aircraft models, such as the Boeing 787 Dreamliner, have raised concerns about the company’s manufacturing oversight and safety culture. Foreign object debris found in the fuel tanks of undelivered 787 Dreamliners in 2020 and 2021 led to production halts and regulatory scrutiny, questioning Boeing’s ability to ensure consistent quality (Goldman, 2024). Delays in deliveries and inspections have strained airline schedules and financial performance, affecting relationships with customers. The Boeing 777X program has also faced delays due to engine issues and regulatory changes (Josephs, 2024).

In early 2024, a crisis emerged when a component of an Alaska Airlines 737 Max detached shortly after takeoff, leading to a nationwide grounding of the jets (Afshar *et al.*, 2024). Preliminary findings by the National Transportation Safety Board suggested Boeing might have failed to secure bolts in a crucial door plug. Although Boeing has not fully acknowledged

these findings, CEO Dave Calhoun admitted the company made a mistake and accepted responsibility (Goldman, 2024). The incident resulted in congressional hearings, production and delivery delays, and multiple federal investigations, including a criminal probe. Boeing’s stock fell by about 30%, erasing nearly \$50 billion from its market value.

Further compounding the company’s troubles, pilots reported control issues with a United Airlines 737 Max in February, and the FAA flagged safety concerns with de-icing equipment on both the 737 Max and 787 Dreamliner models a month prior (Muntean & Wallace, 2024). Despite the FAA allowing the planes to continue flying, Boeing claims these issues do not pose an immediate risk.

These ongoing crises highlight the urgent need for Boeing to re-evaluate its crisis management strategies and organizational culture. The company’s repeated failures to address safety and quality concerns proactively have resulted in significant financial losses and strained customer relationships. To restore stakeholder confidence, Boeing must adopt a more transparent, accountable, and proactive approach to crisis management.

Another implication for the IRT is the need to choose appropriate image repair strategies, as not all are complementary. In Boeing’s case, combining denial, corrective action, and mortification was contradictory. An organization cannot effectively deny wrongdoing while simultaneously apologizing, especially in light of a second crash within six months. The strategy of shifting blame to the pilots effectively constituted denial, but this conflicted with the mortification strategy of expressing sorrow for the loss of life. While Boeing might have sought to avoid admitting guilt to prevent litigation (Benoit, 1995), the clear evidence of software malfunction left little room for such a defense. Denial is most effective when there is a strong case for the organization’s innocence; however, it can severely damage reputation when investigations clearly attribute fault to the company (Coombs, 2023).

Although a limitation of IRT is its lack of guidance for crisis preparation, the theory provides valuable insights for crafting messages to repair reputation post-crisis. If Boeing had employed more appropriate and effective messaging strategies, the crisis could have been managed more successfully. Engaging directly with all affected publics and conveying positive messages could help restore trust. Effective

organizational rhetoric, especially during a crisis, is the responsibility of leaders who must inspire, empower, motivate, and rebuild confidence among stakeholders. Leaders must avoid negative messaging that could exacerbate public anxiety. For instance, if Boeing had committed to corrective action, the initial step should have been to ground its aircraft, thoroughly inspect all 737 Max models, rectify the software issue, train pilots on the upgrades, and then communicate these steps through mainstream media.

Moreover, there is a need to expand IRT to include strategies suitable for social media contexts. Boeing's CEO's video statement, shared on Twitter, underscores the rapid escalation of crises on social media and the need for robust image repair strategies tailored to digital platforms. Expanding IRT to incorporate the principles of framing hypothesis and ethical apology could further enhance its utility in restoring reputation post-crisis. Framing a crisis allows an organization to manage the narrative effectively and maintain control. Testing the integration of framing and ethical apology empirically could provide new insights into crisis communication strategies.

CONCLUSION

Organizations can learn from Boeing's missteps. It is crucial to plan and analyze crisis communication strategies carefully. Adopting a proactive stance and employing strategies like "stealing thunder" could have benefitted Boeing. Gathering comprehensive information and openly sharing it—even if it is damaging—is essential. The CEO's assurances about the importance of safety would have been more credible if supported by transparent actions and a willingness to engage openly about what happened, who was responsible, and why it occurred. Moving forward, Boeing needs to demonstrate its commitment to safety through concrete, transparent measures rather than vague assurances. Ultimately, Boeing must prioritize lives over reputation and profits.

Finally, I suggest that Boeing utilize a combination of strategies to rebuild its image. The company should integrate bolstering and rebuild strategies. Through bolstering, Boeing can employ reminder, ingratiation, and victimage postures as proposed by Coombs (2017). By using the reminder posture, Boeing can highlight its positive past achievements. Ingratiation involves commending stakeholders for their continued support during the crisis, while the victimage posture allows Boeing to express that it too is a victim of the

crisis. For the rebuild strategy, Boeing should fully embrace mortification by promptly apologizing to stakeholders and accepting full responsibility for the crisis, coupled with offering compensation to the families and airlines affected. This combined approach of bolstering and rebuilding could be instrumental in helping Boeing recover its reputation and prepare to handle future crises of similar magnitude more effectively.

FUNDING STATEMENT

This research received no external funding or financial support.

REFERENCES

- Afshar, P., Wolfe, E., Wallace, G., & Muntean, P. (2024, January 8). *Missing part of Alaska Airlines plane is found in Portland, Oregon, NTSB says, as new details emerge about the aircraft*. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/08/us/alaska-airlines-plug-door-found-investigation-monday/index.html>
- Arpan, L. M., & Pompper, D. (2003). Stormy weather: testing "stealing thunder" as a crisis communication strategy to improve communication flow between organizations and journalists. *Public Relations Review*, 29, 291–308. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(03\)00043-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(03)00043-2)
- Arpan, L. M., & Roskos-Ewoldsen, D. R. (2005). Stealing thunder: Analysis of the effects of proactive disclosure of crisis information. *Public Relations Review*, 31, 425–433. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2005.05.003>
- Baker, S. (2019, April 24). Boeing's nightmare year just got worse, as profits plunge in the wake of 2 horrific 737 Max crashes that left the plane grounded worldwide. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/boeing-earnings-to-show-effect-737-max-crashes-grounding-planes-2019-4>
- Beldad, A. D., van Laar, E., & Hegner, S. M. (2017). Should the shady steal thunder? The effects of crisis communication timing, pre-crisis reputation valence, and crisis type on post-crisis organizational trust and purchase intention. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 26(1), 150–163. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12172>
- Benoit, W. L. (1995). Sears' repair of its auto service image: Image restoration discourse in the corporate sector. *Communication Studies*, 46, 89–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510979509368441>
- Benoit, W. L. (1997). Image restoration discourse and crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 23, 177–186. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(97\)90023-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(97)90023-0)
- Benoit, W. L. (2006). President Bush's image repair effort on Meet the Press: The complexities of defeasibility. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34, 285–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880600771635>
- Benoit, W. L. (2015). *Accounts, excuses, apologies: Image repair theory and research* (2nd ed.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781438454009>
- Benoit, W. (2018). Crisis and image repair at United Airlines: Fly the unfriendly skies. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 1, 11–26. <https://doi.org/10.30658/jicrcr.1.1.2>
- Benoit, W. L., & Czerwinski, A. (1997). A critical analysis Of USAir's image repair discourse. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 60(3), 38–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/108056999706000304>

- Boeing news releases. (2018a, November 21). Boeing statement on Lion Air Flight JT 610 investigation. Retrieved from <https://boeing.mediaroom.com/news-releases-statements?item=130333>
- Boeing newsreleases. (2018b, November 27). Boeing statement on Lion Air Flight JT 610 investigation. Retrieved from <https://boeing.mediaroom.com/news-releases-statements?item=130336>
- Boeing newsreleases. (2019a, March 17). Boeing CEO Muilenburg issues statement on Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 accident investigation. Retrieved from <https://boeing.mediaroom.com/2019-03-17-Boeing-CEO-Muilenburg-Issues-Statement-on-Ethiopian-Airlines-Flight-302-Accident-Investigation>
- Boeing news releases. (2019b, March 26). Boeing response to Ethiopian Airlines Group CEO AtoTewoldeGebreMariam and the aviation industry. Retrieved from <https://boeing.mediaroom.com/news-releases-statements?item=1304134>
- Boeing newsreleases. (2019c, April 4). Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg addresses the Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 preliminary report <https://boeing.mediaroom.com/2019-04-04-Boeing-CEO-Dennis-Muilenburg-Addresses-the-Ethiopian-Airlines-Flight-302-Preliminary-Report>
- Bussewitz, C. (2019, March 15). *Boeing takes hit to its reputation after 2 plane crashes*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/national-national-general-news-a7f4dba194db4310b1687f5e952c7df3>
- Claeys, A.-S., Cauberghe, V., & Leysen, J. (2013). Implications of stealing thunder for the impact of expressing emotions in organizational crisis communication. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 41, 293–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2013.806991>
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10, 163–176. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049>
- Coombs, W. T. (2015). The value of communication during a crisis: Insights from strategic communication research. *Business Horizons*, 58, 141–148. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2014.10.003>
- Coombs, T. (2023). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing and responding*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crowe, S., Cresswell, K., Robertson, A., Huby, G., Avery, A., & Sheikh, A. (2011). The case study approach. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 11(1), 1–9. NCBI. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-11-100>
- Dolnik, L., Case, T. I., & Williams, K. D. (2003). Stealing thunder as a courtroom tactic revisited: Processes and boundaries. *Law and Human Behavior*, 27, 267–287. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023431823661>
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Frandsen, F., & Johansen, W. (2017). The apology of a sports icon: Crisis communication and apologetic ethics. *HERMES - Journal of Language and Communication in Business*, 20(38), 85. <https://doi.org/10.7146/hjicb.v20i38.25906>
- Gelles, D. (2019, December 24). Boeing can't fly its 737 Max, but it's ready to sell its safety. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/24/business/boeing-737-max-survey.html>
- Goldman, D. (2024, April 10). *Analysis: Boeing somehow managed to get itself into even bigger trouble* | CNN Business. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/10/investing/boeing-safety-problems/index.html#:~:text=The%20whistleblower%2C%20Sam%20Salehpour%2C%20a>
- Grimmelikhuijsen, S., Vries, F. D., & Zijlstra, W. (2018). Breaking bad news without breaking trust: The effects of a press release and newspaper coverage on perceived trustworthiness. *Journal of Behavioral Public Administration*, 1, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.30636/jbpa.11.16>
- Hearit, K. M., & Borden, S. L. (Eds.). (2006). *Crisis Management by Apology: Corporate Response to Allegations of Wrongdoing*. Muhwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410615596>
- Hegner, S. M., Beldad, A. D., & Hulzink, R. (2018). An experimental study into the effects of self-disclosure and crisis type on brand evaluations – the mediating effect of blame attributions. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 27(5), 534–544. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-05-2017-1478>
- Huang, Y.-H., & Su, S.-H. (2009). Determinants of consistent, timely, and active responses in corporate crises. *Public Relations Review*, 35, 7-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2008.09.020>
- Josephs, L. (2024, August 20). *Boeing pauses tests of 777X aircraft after finding damage to one of the jets' structures*. CNBC; CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/08/20/boeing-pauses-tests-of-777x-aircraft-after-finding-damage-to-one-of-the-jets-structures.html>
- Kitroeff, N., Gelles, D., & Nicas, J. (2019, July 27). The roots of Boeing's 737 Max crisis: A regulator relaxes its oversight. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/27/business/boeing-737-max-faa.html>
- Kline, S. L., Simunich, B., & Weber, H. (2009). The use of equivocal messages in responding to corporate challenges. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 37, 40–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0090988080259262>
- Lee, S. Y. (2016). Weathering the crisis: Effects of stealing thunder in crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 42(2), 336–344. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.02.005>
- Lucero, M., Kwang, A. T. T., & Pang, A. (2009). Crisis leadership: when should the CEO step up? *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 14, 234–248. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13563280910980032>
- Muntean, P., & Wallace, G. (2024, March 7). *NTSB probing "stuck" control incident on Boeing 737 Max* | CNN Business. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/07/business/ntsb-probing-stuck-control-incident-on-boeing-737-max/index.html>
- Ndone, J., Warner, B., & Duffy, M. E. (2022). Emotional crisis communication: The effects of CEO's expression of guilt and anger on organizational reputation. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 16(5), 685–699. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2022.2085574>
- Pasztor, A., & Tangel, A. (2020, September 16). *FAA, Boeing blasted over 737 Max failures in Democratic report* (A. Tangel, Ed.). The Wall Street Journal. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/faa-boeing-blasted-over-737-max-failures-in-democratic-report-11600246802>
- Perreault, M. F., & Smith-Frigerio, S. (2024). *Crisis communication case studies on COVID-19: Multidimensional perspectives and applications*. Peter Lang Publishing Inc. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b18897>
- Rushe, D. (2019, December 11). *FAA let Boeing 737 Max continue to fly even as review found serious crash risk*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/dec/11/boeing-737-max-plane-faa-regulators-crash-risk>
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage Publications.
- Ulmer, R. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2019). *Effective crisis communication: Moving from crisis to opportunity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Williams, K. D., Bourgeois, M. J., & Croyle, R. T. (1993). The effects of stealing thunder in criminal and civil trials. *Law and Human Behavior*, 17(6), 597–609. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01044684>

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and Methods* (5th ed.). Sage.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.

Yin, R. K., & Davis, D. (2007). Adding new dimensions to case study evaluations: The case of evaluating comprehensive reforms. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2007(113), 75–93.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.216>

Received on 13-07-2024

Accepted on 11-08-2024

Published on 09-09-2024

<https://doi.org/10.6000/2818-3401.2024.02.02>

© 2024 James Ndone.

This is an open-access article licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the work is properly cited.