

2015

Tourism in crisis: A qualitative content analysis of SeaWorld's Twitter response to Blackfish

Nicholas E. Marek

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.emich.edu/theses>



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Marek, Nicholas E., "Tourism in crisis: A qualitative content analysis of SeaWorld's Twitter response to Blackfish" (2015). *Master's Theses and Doctoral Dissertations*. 852.
<http://commons.emich.edu/theses/852>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses, and Doctoral Dissertations, and Graduate Capstone Projects at DigitalCommons@EMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses and Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@EMU. For more information, please contact lib-ir@emich.edu.

Tourism in crisis: A qualitative content analysis of SeaWorld's Twitter response to *Blackfish*

by

Nicholas E. Marek

Thesis

Submitted to the department of Communication

Eastern Michigan University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Communication

Thesis Committee:

Nick Romerhausen, Ph.D., Chair

Doris Fields, Ph. D.

Dennis Patrick, Ph. D.

March 15, 2015

Ypsilanti, MI

Abstract

Released on July 19, 2013, the documentary *Blackfish* highlighted the mistreatment of dangerous sea-life and the lack of employee training at the aquatic zoological theme park SeaWorld. Considering the immense reputational damage suffered by SeaWorld, this study uses qualitative content analysis to examine SeaWorld's Twitter (twitter.com) response to the *Blackfish* crisis. An inductive method of coding highlights overall themes present in SeaWorld's tweets while the deductive method of coding utilizes Benoit's (1997) image repair theory to determine how this tourism organization utilizes Twitter as a medium of image restoration. The results prompt suggestions for clarifying image repair theory as well as the use of social media in crisis response.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Literature Review	5
Crisis Communication	5
Image Restoration	7
Communication Practices within the Tourism Industry	11
Crisis Management within the Tourism Industry	14
Chapter 2: Method	18
Traditional Content Analysis	18
Qualitative Content Analysis	19
Data Collection	22
Chapter 3: Results	25
Inductive Analysis	25
SeaWorld is a fun destination/experience	25
<i>Blackfish</i> is misleading	26
Animal rescue efforts	27
Support for SeaWorld	29
Sea-life care	30
Guest Assistance	33
Deductive Analysis	33
Bolstering	34
Corrective Action	35

Attack Accuser	36
Chapter 5: Discussion	37
Works Cited	42

List of Figures

<u>Figure</u>		<u>Page</u>
1.	365 Days of SeaWorld rescue, sea turtle	28
2.	365 Days of SeaWorld Rescue #194, sea lions	28
3.	365 Days of SeaWorld Rescue #199, manatee	28
4.	365 Days of SeaWorld Rescue #185, pygmy killer whale	29
5.	365 Days of SeaWorld Rescue #198, pelican	29
6.	“I love SeaWorld...,” Orca and Trainer	30
7.	“Did you know...,” gentoo penguin	31
8.	“Did you know...,” California sea lions	31
9.	“Don’t Trash...,” turtle, bag, jellyfish cycle	31
10.	“Connections Create Conservationists,” orcas and guest	32
11.	Still image of video, orca and young guests touching glass barrier	32
12.	Killer Whale Environment, illustration of orca and guests	32

Introduction

On October 24, 2014 CNN aired the first broadcast of the documentary *Blackfish*, a film focusing on the mistreatment of *orcas*, or killer whales in captivity. Specifically, the film depicts the Fortune 500 Company SeaWorld as one of the most egregious abusers of orcas in their aquatic themed tourist attractions. CNN promoted the twitter hashtag #Blackfish throughout the broadcast as an attempt to facilitate a social media dialogue surrounding the film. Twitter data editor Simon Rogers (2013) reports that approximately 67,000 tweets were viewed by over seven million people on the night CNN aired the controversial documentary. On December 12, 2013 *Blackfish* was made available to instantly stream online at any time by Netflix and the film went viral as millions of people began to take sides in the war against SeaWorld.

The documentary highlights accusations of animal abuse and mistreatment within the parks. Specifically, allegations attacked the extremely small tanks in which SeaWorld keeps their orcas as well as the training staff receives about working with orcas. Multiple exemplifying incidents of apparent violence from the orcas are highlighted within the documentary. This violence is directly attributed to SeaWorld's lack of understanding and lack of training regarding orcas. The documentary also addresses the death of a trainer at the hands of an orca and directly attributes her death to SeaWorld's negligence.

SeaWorld has adamantly and vehemently disputed the claims made by the documentary with numerous press releases, videos and even released their own website titled *The Truth About Blackfish*. Despite their attempts to utilize traditional crisis management strategies to mitigate the crisis caused by the film, one year later SeaWorld is still reeling from the impacts of the film as their stocks have subsequently fallen over sixty percent and

social media continues to buzz about the injustice portrayed in the film (Ferdman, 2014). This research will examine how SeaWorld has utilized Twitter, the medium that served as a platform to start this crisis, in attempt to restore their public image in the wake of *Blackfish*.

Additionally, the nature of the service SeaWorld provides offers a unique insight into the field of Crisis Communication. Perhaps no industry understands the importance of an effective crisis communication plan quite like that of the tourism industry. Crises and disasters impact the reputation of vacation spots more than any other type of organization (Costal, 2001). For example, disease outbreak can derail the entire tourism economy on a local, regional or even national level, years after the contagion has been eradicated. England's tourism industry is still reeling as a result of the 2001 foot and mouth disease outbreak (Ritchie et. al., 2004). Additionally, with such a large collection of people, theme parks provide a unique challenge during and immediately following a crisis situation. In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the Walt Disney Company conducted one of the largest evacuations in history, safely escorting millions of guests from both the Disney Land and Walt Disney World theme parks (Zhong 2011). With the uniqueness of tourism locations and the vast number of stakeholders, crisis communication is arguably more vital for the tourism industry than any other type of organization.

Crisis communication is of the utmost importance for any organization; however the specified nature of the tourism industry makes it a higher risk for damage within a crisis situation. Unlike other organizations which can rely on the usefulness of a product or the necessity of services, the tourism industry displays a unique concept of service in that the customer may not need the service in question. Additionally, the tourism industry is unique

in that these organizations do not provide a traditional product or service but instead an experience encompassing every waking aspect of a vacation or trip. Given both the implicit frivolity regarded with tourism coupled with the experiential focus, the tourism industry has a unique reliance on crisis management techniques. In an industry reliant on marketing, public image, and word of mouth, effective crisis communication is an imperative skill for those wishing to prolong success in this field. Despite the urgency and popularity regarding tourism, studies on crisis communication within this industry lack a meaningful presence in scholarship (Ritchie et. al., 2003). Furthermore, when the subject is examined, research endeavors and analyses are mostly authored by scholars in tourism and hospitality studies and the tourism industry. Communication scholarship has emerged in recent decades to build theory, research, and applied strategies for understanding and advancing crisis communication. However, scholars have missed fully advancing theory and research on crisis communication which consider the unique phenomena of the tourism industry. Therefore I propose a research study as a first attempt to understand theory of communication that is unique to a network of overlooked vacation organizations.

Also, given the rise in popularity of social media as a primary method of disseminating and digesting messages, crisis communication scholarship must begin to encapsulate the importance of these computer-mediated means of communication. Social media is in the early stages of study by crisis communication scholars but may prove to be the most effective tool in mitigating problems and repairing an image (Moody, 2011). Communication scholars must continue to give credence to this powerful communication tool and adapt theoretical research to reflect the unprecedented immediacy and brevity social media provide in a crisis situation.

SeaWorld's Twitter response to the *Blackfish* crisis is an ideal subject to broaden and advance scholarship in crisis communication research in multiple ways. This study will add to the dearth of tourism related crisis communication research while subsequently advancing research on the use of social media within image repair discourse. Chapter one provides a review of the salient literature regarding crisis communication and the tourism industry. Chapter two provides a brief overview of the qualitative content analysis method before explaining the specific methodological approach to this study. Chapter three contains the results from both the inductive and deductive approaches. Chapter four discusses implications of this research, limitations of image repair theory, and provides suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

The consequent review of literature will discuss the overarching concept of crisis communication, look at the specific means that the tourism industry uses to communicate to its customers, and review the literature from tourism and management scholars to understand the place for communication research crisis and the vacation industry.

Crisis Communication

Within the realm of organizations, few areas of study are more crucial or impactful than crisis management. Crises can take many forms ranging from human made situations such as financial fraud or terrorist attacks as well as more natural forms encompassing dangerous weather or pathogenic outbreak (Laws & Prideaux, 2005). Given the unpredictable nature of crisis events, the response of an organization to an alarming or dangerous situation could drastically impact both the safety of the organization's stakeholders as well as its economic stability. The numerous methods of potential response make communication remains the most important in protecting and instructing all parties involved in said crisis. With questions raised by everyone involved, the methods an organization chooses to communicate dictates how individuals make sense of the situation which could then dictate the actions and responses of both employees and consumers (Roberts 2012). The importance of communication within a crisis response must not be overlooked or underestimated.

Many scholars agree upon the need to have a set plan in place regarding crises before the situation actually arises. However, Seeger (2007) maintains, "Any effort to articulate a generalized set of standards should first acknowledge that every crisis is a unique event that can be expected to evolve in unexpected ways" (p. 243). Pre-crisis planning remains an

integral part of building effective crisis communication strategies by helping to mitigate any confusion regarding solutions or even chain of command during a crisis event (Coombs, 2007; Sisco, 2012). An examination of previous incidents and organizational responses allows crisis experts to more effectively prepare for the inevitability of some sort of crisis. Additionally, a lack of learning from past crisis events can result in catastrophic consequences that could result in physical harm for the organization and its stakeholders (Elliot, 2009) or create additional compounding crises (Grebe, 2013).

While an all-encompassing plan may not be effective, researchers agree: in order to employ effective communication *during* a crisis situation, the organization must prioritize its communication efforts by attending to the needs of the stakeholders before addressing any economic or relational concerns of the organization itself (Anthony & Sellnow, 2011; Coombs, 2004; Coombs, 2007; Seeger, 2007). Seeger (2007) explains that stakeholders are the consumers or guests to an organization who control the stake of the organization through purchases and support. This order of operations provides the best opportunity to assure safety and will still ultimately impact the organization in a positive way if communicated correctly.

Historically, internet news aggregates, television reports and even traditional print media have been the foci of crisis response for many organizations. In the 21st century, a new and more unpredictable platform has become a primary source for information regarding crises events: social media (Austin, Liu & Jin, 2012). Given the immediacy of the message coupled with the wide audience that can be addressed, social media sites prove to be an impressive communication tool during a crisis situation. Additionally, however, a site such as Twitter.com presents the added difficulty of information overload or even false information

regarding a situation (Schultz, Utz, & Goritz, 2011). While a verified account is able to publish necessary information, if contradictory information is trending or widely believed by the populace, official messages run the risk of being buried beneath a sea of overzealous, freelance, armchair reporters. Heverin and Zach (2010) examined over six thousand different tweets regarding the shooting of four police officers and the subsequent 48-hour search for the suspect that took place in the Seattle-Tacoma area of Washington in late November 2009 (p. 1). The authors concluded that social media are widely used to share information perceived to be true at the time and the validity of a message can be diluted by an over discussed topic. Ultimately social media remain a powerful tool of crisis communication experts and must continue to be examined by scholars within the communication field.

Crisis communication continues to be one of the most important fields of study for scholars in both the communications and management fields as research has real world implications for public safety. This burgeoning realm of communication studies relies on up-to-date communication methods and techniques. With the risk involved regarding those in a crisis situation, effective crisis communication remains essential to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of citizens within society. All organizations (including those within the tourism industry) must focus their attention on crisis management and communication. As a result, communication scholars must also reflect this focus.

Image Restoration. While much of crisis communication research focuses on the immediate reactions and impacts of a crisis situation (Seeger, 2006; Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2011) recent scholarship has expanded to examine the more tenuous but no less important process of image restoration (Benoit, 1997; Liu & Faustino, 2014; Moody, 2011). Benoit (1997) stresses the importance of an organization or individual's reputation, or image,

to their respective success. Public relations professionals work to maintain a public image for an organization and become incredibly important as crisis situations unfold. Similar to an earthquake and its subsequent aftershocks, eventually the initial crisis situation will end, however many crises leave lingering effects that could further damage the reputation of the organization if left unaddressed. A mishandled crisis situation could result in reputational damage that has the ability to bankrupt an organization (Grebe 2013). Image restoration theory explains numerous strategies regarding crisis response that an accused or at fault organization can employ to repair reputational damage caused by the crisis (Benoit, 1997). Image restoration relies on two fundamental assumptions: that image is important to an organization or individual, and that projecting a positive image carries equal importance (Muralidharan, Dillistone & Shin, 2011). Image restoration, just as all means of crisis communication, is dependent upon the specific situations of the accusations or crisis events. The image restoration strategies employed by SeaWorld in response to the accusations brought forth by *Blackfish* will undoubtedly differ from the methods utilized by Tylenol in response to accusations of a poisonous product (Benoit & Lindsey, 1987) or President Obama after the Healthcare.gov website crisis (Benoit, 2014). By employing effective image repair strategies, an organization hopes to separate itself from the crisis and relies on its previous relationships to bolster support (Bruce & Tini, 2008).

Muralidharan et al. (2011) summarizes the posited five general image repair messages utilized by organizations and the individual tactics involved within these strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action; mortification (p. 228).

Table 1: Image Repair Strategies

General Strategy	Tactic	Example
Denial	Simple Denial	I did not embezzle money.
	Shift Blame	Steve took your wallet, not me.
Evade Responsibility	Provocation	I insulted you but only after you criticized me.
	Defeasibility	I was late because traffic delayed me.
	Accident	Our collision was an accident.
	Good Intentions	I did not tell you because I hoped to fix the problem first.
Reduce Offensiveness	Bolstering	Think of all the times I helped you.
	Minimization	I broke your vase but it was not an expensive one.
	Differentiation	I borrowed your laptop without asking. I did not steal it.
	Transcendence	Searching travelers at the airports an inconvenience but it protects against terrorism.
	Attack Accuser	Joe says I embezzled money but he is a chronic liar.
	Compensation	Because the waiter spilled a drink on your clothes, we'll give you a desert free.
Corrective Action		Because the waiter spilled a drink on your suit, we'll have it dry cleaned.
Mortification		I am so sorry I offended you. I regret hurting your feelings and I apologize.

(Benoit 2014, p. 734)

Denial involves claims that the accused act never happened, or that the organization or individual in question is not at fault in any way. The accused can also attempt to shift the blame from the organization. For example, in regards to accusations of poisonous medication, Tylenol was successfully able to shift the blame away from the organization as a whole and onto an individual employee who acted independently from Tylenol (Benoit 1997).

Evading responsibility contains four separate strategies attempting to rationalize the offensive act in some way. Provocation infers that the act was a necessary response to a third party's offensive act. Defeasibility frames the act as out of the organizations' control. Accident simply frames the accused acts as accidental. The fourth strategy in evading responsibility implies that the accused acted with good intentions.

Benoit (1997) explains that reducing the offensiveness of an act is essential to effective image repair discourse and describes six unique strategies involved. The first stratagem involves *bolstering* the positive aspects of the company in an attempt to strengthen stakeholders' feelings towards the accused. *Minimization* frames the offensive act as less offensive than it seems. A third strategy requires the accused to *differentiate* the offensive act from other, more offensive acts. The accused can also claim *transcendence* and imply that the offensive act was a necessary evil in the larger scheme of society. Attacking the accuser is also a strategy useful in reducing the offensiveness of the act as the accusations themselves are called into question. Finally, compensation remains an effective means of reducing the offensiveness by providing stakeholders with reparations in an attempt to improve the organization or individual's image.

The corrective action stratagem proves to be an important factor in image repair after a crisis. Benoit (1997) asserts, "While people frequently want to know whom to blame, it is more reassuring to know that steps have been taken to eliminate or avoid future problems" (p. 184). Corrective actions are important even if the accused denies involvement within the context of the crisis. The commitment to betterment can be seen as a positive action even if the organization was never at fault to begin with.

The theory borrows Burke's (1970) notion of mortification as the final stratagem of image restoration. Accepting responsibility and apologizing for the offensive act is often the first step to overcoming the reputational damage of a crisis (Benoit 1997). Ultimately, respect is often earned as the accused takes responsibility and promises to learn from their mistakes.

Social media have recently shown to be powerful tools regarding attempts to restore the image of the accused after a crisis situation (Moody 2011, Muralidharan et al. 2011, Kim 2013, Liu & Fraustino 2014). The immediacy and ease of sharing provide the opportunity to disseminate image repair tactics to a wide audience. Shultz, Utz and Goritz (2011) assert that stakeholders have a high amount of trust in the social media site Twitter and are more likely to share information attained from Twitter than from any other medium. SeaWorld's active presence and large number of followers make Twitter a main communication medium between the SeaWorld organization and its stakeholders. This prevalence makes SeaWorld's twitter account an ideal subject for an examination of image repair theory.

Contemporary scholarship has utilized image repair theory to examine the crisis response strategies of subjects ranging from President Obama (Benoit, 2014) and the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill (Muralidharan et al., 2011) to reality TV stars (Moody, 2011) and cartoons (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). The necessity for an organization or individual to repair a tarnished image is a universal notion and image restoration theory provides strategies for such repair.

Communication Practices within the Tourism Industry

With such specific needs and communication choices the tourism industry displays a unique array of ethnographic, performative and experiential communication methodology.

Inter-organizational crisis communication is undoubtedly important. However, this type of crisis management may not substantially differ from that of other organizations. The tourism industry takes a unique approach to communicating information with guests with the pervasiveness of social media and app technology, therefore necessitating discussion. By examining the unique relationships between tourism organizations and their guests, scholars can better determine the most common communication techniques involved.

Internet technology proves to be the most pervasive form of communication for the modern tourism industry (Bizirgianni & Dionysopoulou, 2013; Moya & Jain, 2012; Pesonen and Horster, 2012; Brown & Chalmers, 2003). Considering the fact that most consumers tend to research and schedule using some sort of web technology, the tourism industry relies heavily on the use of websites and email to communicate to consumers. Even “Googling” has become a focus of tourism scholars as Buhalis and Law (2008) explain, “Developments in search engines, carrying capacity and speed of networks have influenced the number of travelers around the world that use technologies for planning and experiencing their travels” (609). Web reservations have recently become the most implemented means of planning a vacation for the average family. The internet makes anyone into their own vacation planner as they contemplate attractions and compare prices. Communication via the world wide web remains an essential medium for the success of the tourism industry.

With the rise in popularity of the smart phone and tablet, mobile technologies have become an important communication tool for the tourism industry. While a relatively new form of technology, Pesonen and Horster (2012) explain that “More and more ways to use mobile devices in travel and tourism are developed continuously making the topic very important from tourism management perspective” (p. 11). Mobile app technology allows the

consumer to have a personalized experience that is guided directly by the tourist attraction itself. With mobile devices becoming the central means of planning and organizing for the average household (Brown & Chalmers, 2003), the tourism industry has placed a large amount of development into mobile app technology. By being constantly connected to the consumer, the attraction has the opportunity to communicate with guests in a more direct way. Additionally, the tourist industry must also mitigate the impact of the numerous travel review apps that may promote or even dissuade visitors from the attraction. The current untrustworthy nature of mobile app technology as well as the necessity to constantly be connected to a network make this type of communication difficult; however, the tourism industry has committed to improving their systems as a means to enhance the guest experience and communicate with their customers.

Additionally, social media prove to be powerful communication tools widely used by the contemporary tourism industry. The speed at which one can reach millions of consumers allows for an easy, cost efficient means of communicating. The importance of social media within the tourism industry is exemplified through the annual Social Media Tourism Symposium which allows experts from around the world to present research regarding this specific means of communication (<http://us.sometourism.com/>, 2014). Social media also provide tourism companies the opportunity to reach a difficult target audience: young adults (Bizirgianni & Dionysopoulou, 2013). Perhaps the most influential aspect of social media is the ability for consumers to communicate with the organization as well as each other. By creating dialogue about a tourist destination a social media site has the power to spread information as well as advertising in the way of customer reviews (Moya & Jain, 2012). Personal photos and accounts of a smiling family during their vacation can provide an

unparalleled endorsement of a tourist attraction and therefore acts as a free means of promotion (Moya & Jain, 2012). Subsequently, the opposite is also true; a negative reception to a tourist attraction has the ability to build and spread even more effectively than that of a positive message. Social media continues to be the main method of communication for the tourism industry and studies regarding crisis communication within the field must focus their attention on this computer mediated form of communication. Through an examination of SeaWorld's Twitter account, this study hopes to provide a unique insight as to how an experiential, tourism based organization utilizes social media in the wake of a crisis.

Crisis Management within the Tourism Industry

Crisis communication within the tourism industry is of the utmost importance given the amount of stakeholders involved in any given situation. While this concept is rarely addressed by communication scholars (Ritchie et al., 2004), tourism and organizational management scholars have attempted to examine communication within a crisis event. Discussing the methodology and findings of these scholars is imperative to identifying the specific necessity for research by communication scholars regarding the tourism industry and crisis communication.

Most research regarding crisis within the tourism industry focuses research methodologies on case studies regarding past crises within the industry (Carlsen & Liburd, 2008; Santana, 2004; Hall, 2010). These studies look at previous crises and attempt to learn from them. Hindsight is a powerful tool when attempting to find the causes of an organizational crisis. By mitigating a crisis in the first place, an organization can reduce the risk placed upon it. However, with such an emphasis on discovering the cause of a crisis, few scholars examine the communication used during and after a crisis. Carlsen and Liburd

(2007) even address the need for research regarding crisis communication within the tourism industry, demanding “focus on crisis management and market recovery and communications, rather than prevention” (p. 273). Prevention is essential to keep crisis situations at a minimum; however crises are inevitable and the tourism industry must be able to protect their stakeholders as well as their image surrounding the situation. There is a need for communication research in regards to crisis in the tourism industry and communication scholars must step in to fill that void.

When studying crisis communication, many articles address the phenomenon as a means to impact the reputation or brand identity. These aspects of the organization are of the utmost importance to the overall success of the organization. Santana (2004) explains the impact of a physical crisis on reputation and destination image, stating,

Considering that perceptions reality in the tourism industry (Wahab, 1996; Pizam et al., 1997; Sönmez, 1998; Wall, 1996) it is not difficult to realize how sensitive the industry is to changes in its operational environment. A study of three major tourism offices dealing with major crises which affected their destination (Hong Kong, after the Tiananmen Square student massacre in China; Fiji, after a bloodless military coup in 1987; and San Francisco, after the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989) revealed that a crisis can very quickly cripple the travel industry (Cassedy, 1992). In these cases the crises were ones of perception and it was observed that they could be just as devastating, if not more so, than crises that actually cause physical damage. In each of the cases, the crises were the perception of instability and danger by the travelling

public. The industry suffered because people lost confidence in the destination as an attractive and safe place to visit and stay in. (p. 304-305)

Santana's examples provide clear evidence as to the economical impact of a perceived crisis upon an organization. Subsequently, the example also provides the perfect exigency to examine the image repair tactics utilized by SeaWorld given their perceived offenses.

Considering the pervasiveness of social media within the tourism industry, this medium is often used to mitigate a crisis situation both during and after the initial event. For example, the Tokyo Disney theme park effectively used the social media website Twitter to disseminate informational, safety related information to employees, guests, and third party observers during the devastating earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in 2011 (Roberts 2012). With such a large number of stakeholders within the physical confines of the tourist attraction, social media proves to be the most effective means of quickly sharing important information during a crisis.

The medium of communication employed during a crisis situation may not exponentially differ from that of the average organization; however, with tourism research focusing on the impact a crisis has on an organization, there remains an untouched avenue of study regarding the guest's role and experience during and after a crisis. The impact of the tourism organization's communication during a crisis has a more profound effect on a larger number of people. Communication scholars must begin to examine this industry as a means to both further the validity and depth of

research, while subsequently providing necessary applicable findings that may help protect the livelihoods of thousands of employees and stakeholders.

Given the clear impact of social media on the crisis communication and image restoration of the tourism industry, this study posits the following questions:

RQ1: How is SeaWorld using their Twitter account in response to the *Blackfish* crisis?

RQ2: What are the dominant messages portrayed on SeaWorld's Twitter account?

RQ3: What are the dominant image restoration strategies utilized by SeaWorld through their Twitter account?

Method

This study utilizes the Qualitative Content Analysis method of analysis to answer research questions regarding SeaWorld's tweets. This chapter gives a brief overview of traditional content analysis and introduces the qualitative content analysis method, before discussing the sample and coding methods utilized in this study.

Traditional Content Analysis

Traditionally, content analysis is a quantitative approach to analyzing the manifest and latent meanings of texts (Treadwell 2014) Given the vast history of content analysis as a methodological approach, Cho and Lee (2014) provide a concise overview of the concept:

The early definition of content analysis shows that it started as a quantitative research method: "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson, 1952, p. 18).

Content analysis is described as a method to classify written or oral materials into identified categories of similar meanings (Moretti et al., 2011). These categories represent either explicit or inferred communication (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Abrahamson (1983) asserted that content analysis can be fruitfully used to examine virtually any kind of communication materials, including "narrative responses, open-end survey questions, interviews, focus groups, observations, printed media such as articles, books, or manuals" (as cited in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Because researchers can engage in data collection with or without direct contact with persons studied, it can be an unobtrusive method. (p. 3)

While Titscher et al. (2000) asserts that content analysis remains the "the longest established method of text analysis among the set of empirical methods of social investigation,"

Kolbacher (2006) contends that “there does not seem to exist a homogenous understanding of this method at present” (para. 34). Even with this lack of specificity regarding the method, Treadwell (2014) provides a comprehensive list of the seven typical parts involved in a content analysis:

- [1.] Develop a hypothesis or research question about communication content.
- [2.] Define the content to be analyzed. [3.] Sample the universe of content....
- [4.] Select units for coding. [5.] Develop a coding scheme. [6.] Assign each occurrence of a unit in the sample to a code in the coding scheme. [7.] Count occurrences of the coded units and report their frequencies. (p.218)

Qualitative Content Analysis

Specifically, this study utilizes Mayring’s (2000) methodology of quantitative content analysis to examine SeaWorld’s twitter messages. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define qualitative content analysis as a “research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). While traditional content analysis addresses and counts the manifest surface level context of a text, qualitative content analysis allows for the examination of deeper, underlying latent context of a text (Cho & Lee, 2014).

Mayring (2000) explains, that the aim of qualitative content analysis is to “preserve the advantages of quantitative content analysis for a more qualitative text interpretation” (para. 7). Four specific aspects of traditional content analysis are preserved:

- [1.] Fitting the material into a model of communication: It should be determined on what part of the communication inferences shall be made, to aspects of the

communicator (his experiences, opinions feelings), to the situation of text production, to the socio-cultural background, to the text itself or to the effect of the message.

[2.] Rules of analysis: The material is to be analyzed step by step, following rules of procedure, devising the material into content analytical units.

[3.] Categories in the center of analysis: The aspects of text interpretation, following the research questions, are put into categories, which were carefully founded and revised within the process of analysis (feedback loops).

[4.] Criteria of reliability and validity: The procedure has the pretension to be inter-subjectively comprehensible, to compare the results with other studies in the sense of triangulation and to carry out checks for reliability. (para. 7)

By utilizing these fundamental aspects of traditional content analysis, Mayring combines the process and reliability of the traditionally quantitative method with the deep, interpretive benefits of qualitative research.

Qualitative content analysis specifically differs from its quantitative counterpart in the categorical coding of data. Predicated on the necessity for categorical coding, Kohlbacher (2006) contends, “quantitative content analysis does not provide satisfactory answers to the question where the categories are derived from, and how the system of categories is developed” (para. 62). Mayring (2000) outlines two processes for selecting coding categories using qualitative content analysis: inductive and deductive.

The inductive method of categorical coding is utilized as an exploratory methodology that allows categories to stem from the data itself. The categories are influenced by goals reported in the research question as each category is revised step-by-step through a feedback loop (Kohlbacher, 2006). Categories that emerge may be adopted, combined or even

discarded as an outlier if the text cannot be combined into any other category. Reliability checks are utilized often, as the researcher re-codes the data based on the new categorical structure. Ultimately the categories are reduced to main categories which are then used as the data to be analyzed (Mayring, 2000). Lee (2010) utilized an inductive method of categorical coding “to identify needs, preferences, and levels of satisfaction of Korean American elders in nursing homes” (p. 60). While examining multiple texts, including interviews, observations, and document reviews, this study went through multiple stages of revision to ultimately discover two main categories: “I want to maintain the Korean way of life in the nursing home” (p. 119) and “Where can I receive care like here but...”(p. 140). Within these main categories, the study utilized sub-categories to discern more specific messages within the main categories. Through the inductive method of qualitative content analysis, this study is able to highlight the residents’ preference for their Korean heritage as well as their fear of the limitations of traditional nursing homes.

The deductive method of coding establishes categories before examining the data. Mayring (2000) elucidates, “Deductive category application works with prior formulated, theoretical derived aspects of analysis, bringing them in connection with the text” (para. 13). This type of categorizing is utilized when testing or supporting previous theoretical frameworks. Winn (2013) employs a deductive coding scheme while studying the textual content of laws regarding cyber bullying. Each legal definition was coded based on the three criteria provided by Vandebosh and Van Cleemput (2008) in regards to true cyber-bullying:

1. They are be intended to hurt (by the perpetrator) and perceived hurtful (by the victim)
2. Be part of a repetitive pattern of negative offline or online actions

3. and be performed in a relationship characterized by a power imbalance (p. 449)

Through a qualitative, thematic analysis of the legal definitions regarding cyber bullying, Winn (2013) categorized each definition based on these criteria and determined the truthfulness of each definition. Because the research utilized theoretical criteria separate from the data this research exemplifies the utility of the deductive method of categorical coding.

Data Collection

The purpose of this research is to determine how SeaWorld used Twitter to repair their public image in the wake of the *Blackfish* crisis. A qualitative content analysis was performed on the SeaWorld Twitter account which was verified utilizing the link from the organization's website. Content analysis provides insight as to how an organization utilizes communication strategies surrounding a crisis situation. Coombs & Holladay (2011) explain the utility of content analysis as organizations can learn from the success or failure of prior organizational responses.

The unit of analysis for this study consists of tweets collected from the SeaWorld Twitter account that encapsulate every post made by SeaWorld, including both tweets originated by SeaWorld as well as SeaWorld's responses to other users' tweets. In the case of tweets containing both text and photographs, both mediums were analyzed and the tweet was categorized holistically. Additionally, some tweets contain links to web pages. In these specific cases, the subject matter of the link was taken into account to determine the image portrayed by the tweet as a whole. The associated web pages were not analyzed further as the research focuses on the tweets themselves. Due to the fact that they were not authored directly by SeaWorld but rather re-posts of other authors, all re-tweets were discarded from the sample. I saved a webpage copy of SeaWorld's Twitter page on January 6, 2015, that

contained all tweets posted by the SeaWorld account from December 8, 2014, to January 6, 2015. Additionally I utilized a tweet collection service from twdocs.com that provided a spreadsheet containing SeaWorld's previous 1,000 tweets as well as the original tweets to which SeaWorld responded. The saved webpage contained the photographs embedded within the tweets while the spreadsheet did not; therefore, these two copies of data were necessary to examine SeaWorld's tweets holistically. The sample includes 373 tweets made by SeaWorld. Data saturation was reached "when no new categories or relevant themes [were] emerging" (Corbin & Strauss, 2014, p. 139). By collecting tweets from over a year after the release of *Blackfish*, this sample provides insight as to how an organization continues to use crisis response techniques long after the initial crisis event has passed.

This qualitative content analysis of the SeaWorld Twitter account utilizes both inductive and deductive categorization techniques. Initially, each tweet was coded using the inductive method in an attempt to address RQs 1 and 2. First, I qualitatively evaluated key words, phrases, images, and overall functions of each tweet to determine the overall theme. I went through the sample and wrote possible themes for each tweet, color coding the different options. After this initial examination, certain themes emerged as prevalent and others proved to be irrelevant. I chose nine categories which were then used to recode the data. After this second recoding, three categories were condensed into a single category, leaving seven total. Ultimately, through the inductive method of qualitative content analysis four dominant themes and two additional themes emerged from the sample of SeaWorld tweets.

Additionally, the deductive categorical coding method was used to answer RQ 3. Based on the general strategies and specific tactics outlined in Benoit's (1997) image repair

theory [Table 1], each tweet was placed into one of 14 initial categories. I analyzed the key words, phrases, images, and overall functions of each tweet to assess the prevalence of specific image repair techniques. While a tweet may have exhibited multiple stratagem or tactics, each unit was coded based on the dominant tactic or stratagem displayed. Certain tweets did not seem to entirely fit into the tactics described by image repair theory and prompted the necessity for an additional category which will be addressed in the Discussion section. Due to their lack of prevalence eleven categories were discarded. Deductive coding uncovered the three prevalent image repair tactics present in SeaWorld's tweets.

Results

Three hundred and seventy three tweets from the SeaWorld Twitter account were analyzed to determine how SeaWorld used Twitter in wake of the *Blackfish* crisis. In response to RQ1, over the course of a month, SeaWorld primarily utilized their twitter account to respond to public tweets rather than create original content. SeaWorld is dialogically engaging with the public through the use of social media.

Inductive Analysis

The results of a thematic content analysis established six different central themes to the messages disseminated by the SeaWorld Twitter page and ultimately answered RQ2 regarding the messages utilized by the organization. The dominant themes include: SeaWorld is a fun destination/experience, *Blackfish* is misleading, animal rescue efforts, and support for SeaWorld. Additional categories also emerged with scarce representation: sea-life care, assistance. The following sections will dissect entrants of each category while providing multiple examples of both text and photographs from published by the SeaWorld account between December 8, 2014, and January 6, 2015.

SeaWorld is a fun destination/experience. A large section of SeaWorld's Twitter activity (n=171, 45%) is reserved for positive responses to guest posts that frame the park as a fun destination/experience. As guests post pictures or accounts of their positive experiences at a SeaWorld park, the SeaWorld twitter account responds with varying levels of affirmation.

SeaWorld's tweets were individually tailored for each response. The @ symbol precedes the username of the account to which SeaWorld is responding. Various responses include well wishes regarding an upcoming visit to a SeaWorld park:

- “@ChantelColeman Have fun!”

- “@thisfloridalife Hope you have a blast!”

Other positive responses to tweets contained affirmative messages responding to positive words, pictures, or videos depicting a positive experience at SeaWorld:

- “@sadie_ann19 Awesome picture collage!”
- “@aylavee Great picture. :)”
- “@VeroCa23 Great video!”
- “@ChoirNerd2121 We're happy that you're having a great time! :)”

While many posts contained some form of verbal message, SeaWorld also elected to adopt a simpler approach:

- “@annamalcrackr @brittle1998 :)”

Each tweet within the, SeaWorld is a fun destination/experience, category exhibited either a positive affirmation to a guests original post regarding their good time at SeaWorld or positive messages regarding the SeaWorld as a tourist attraction. This category specifically focuses on SeaWorld as a destination rather than as an organization or an animal care facility.

Blackfish is misleading. The second, most prevalent subject matter addressed within the SeaWorld Twitter account was the response to public tweets regarding *Blackfish*. As people tweeted about watching the documentary, SeaWorld was quick to respond with tweets connecting readers with a link to various pages of their *truthaboutBlackfish.com* website.

Within this category, the strategy of the tweets ranged from attempts at equal representation:

- “@emelye_cnx If you have a moment, please check this out before making up your mind on *Blackfish*: <http://bit.ly/1ISxRbI>”
- To accusations or inferences of misleading information shared within the *Blackfish*

documentary countered by the notion that SeaWorld is sharing the truth.

- “@JacobAtkinson_ Hey Jacob, there is a lot that *Blackfish* doesn't tell you. Find the facts here: <http://bit.ly/1IRdFqF>”

- “@loismcvey Lois, learn the truth about how we care for our killer whales here: <http://bit.ly/1ckL433> “
- “@SJTxo Don't be misled. Learn the truth about killer whale care here <http://seaworld.com/en/truth/truth-about-Blackfish/> ...”

Other tweets regarding *Blackfish* blatantly attack the documentary with accusations of wrongfulness and lying.

- “@TobyFox01 Tobias, the footage *Blackfish* uses is misleading. Check out over 60 reasons why *Blackfish* is wrong.....
_7068751776aeee5fbf.r7.cf1.rackcdn.com/adf36e5c35b842.....”
- “@charatkins_ Hey Charlotte, please watch these current and former trainers point out the lies in *Blackfish*:
<http://seaworld.com/en/truth/videos/> ...”

Each tweet within this category directly addresses the *Blackfish* crisis by attempting to provide more information to readers. While the range and severity of accusation varies, each tweet advances the notion that the *Blackfish* documentary is missing crucial information and misleads viewers about SeaWorld’s policies and standards.

Animal rescue efforts. SeaWorld also utilizes their Twitter account to spread messages regarding their endeavors in animal rescue (n=46, 12%). Each of these tweets are accompanied by a photograph depicting the animal in question and often times the SeaWorld employees as rescuing agents. [*Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5*]

- “#SeaWorld rehabilitated this loggerhead sea turtle suffering from cold stress and returned it to the wild.”



Figure 1. 365 Days of SeaWorld rescue #200, sea turtle

- “This cutie is lookin’ at you! In 2013, SeaWorld rescued more than 400 sea lions, just like this little fellow!”



Figure 2. 365 Days of SeaWorld Rescue #194, sea lions

- “This is the 2nd cold-stressed manatee SeaWorld helped rescue this week & he is being treated w/ fluids & antibiotics.”



Figure 3. 365 Days of SeaWorld Rescue #199, manatee

- “#SeaWorld made a wetsuit for this little rescued Pygmy killer whale to help it stay afloat.”



Figure 4. 365 Days of SeaWorld Rescue #185, pygmy killer whale

- “This young brown pelican opens wide during an examination by SeaWorld aviculturists before returning to the wild.”



Figure 5. 365 Days of SeaWorld Rescue #198, pelican

In order to be placed into this category, tweets must communicate the efforts that SeaWorld has taken to rescue wildlife. Both text and images are prevalent within this category as the account often posts pictures of the rescued animals to accompany the message. Some examples of animal rescue addressed in the tweets take place as early as 1983. This use of past rescue efforts attempts to promote the notion that SeaWorld has long been an organization that helps rescue animals.

Support for SeaWorld. The final dominant theme portrayed by SeaWorld’s Twitter account involves messages of support for SeaWorld (n=43, 11%). While each tweet references supporting or standing with SeaWorld, there is no mention of *Blackfish* or any other adversary. The tweets originated by SeaWorld both ask for support as well as offer a link to

join their truth team [Figure 6]:

- Does this describe you? If so, thank you! RT to show your support & join our truth team: bit.ly/1sajhLy



Figure 6. “I love SeaWorld...,” Orca and Trainer

SeaWorld also chose to respond to supportive tweets with personalized thank you messages:

- @MKorn19 Thanks for your support, Matt. :)
- @MikeLostraglio Thank you for your support Mike. :) Happy Holidays!
- @EricaFooshee Thank you for standing with us. :)

Each tweet within this category addresses the notion of supporting, or standing with SeaWorld. While *Blackfish* is never directly addressed, the references to the truth connect the support to the *Blackfish* crisis.

While less prevalent, three additional message categories were utilized by the SeaWorld twitter account.

Sea-life care. Tweets within this category exhibited both a positive portrayal of sea-life as well as advocating for their care and protection. The tweets range from educational facts about certain marine animals [Figure 7, Figure 8]:

- “This comes in handy since gentoo penguins can dive underwater 450 times a day in search of food!”



Figure 7. “Did you know...,” gentoo penguin

- “A mother sea lion uses both sound and smell to find her pup when she returns from searching for food.”



Figure 8. “Did you know...,” California sea lions

Additionally, messages of sea-life conservation and protection were included in this category [Figure 9, Figure 10]:

- “To a sea turtle, plastic bags look like a quick meal. Please recycle and dispose of your plastic bags properly.”



Figure 9. “Don’t Trash...,” turtle, bag, jellyfish cycle

- “RT if connecting with an animal helped create a lifelong passion for conservation in your life!”



Figure 10. “Connections Create Conservationists,” orcas and guest

SeaWorld also promoted their own ethical treatment of aquatic organisms through their training and future projects [Figure 11, Figure 12]:

- “WATCH what this killer whale trainer wants you to take from SeaWorld. bit.ly/1xQ24vH”



Figure 11. Still image of video, orca and young guests touching glass barrier

- “We’re committed to giving our killer whales the best care and protecting those in the wild! bit.ly/1uE5xJW”



Figure 12. Killer Whale Environment, illustration of orca and guests

The tweets within this category differ from that of the rescue category in that these messages involve care and conservation rather than promoting the rescuing of animals that have been previously injured or endangered. Within this category the text and/or images within the tweets communicates SeaWorld's commitment to wildlife and their attempts to preserve habitats. It should be noted that many images within this category contain orca whales.

Guest Assistance. While remaining the least prevalent message theme disseminated through the SeaWorld Twitter account, SeaWorld occasionally tweeted as an attempt to assist a guest with a park related question:

- “@Cjohn383Chloe Hey Chloe, please visit .seaworld.com & click on "Buy Tickets" under the appropriate park. Hope that helps!”
- “@Laurynelise1 Hey Lauryn, if you purchase a pass, you can use it the same day!”
- “@holly_lanier Hey Holly, all of those shows are included with park admission or annual pass.”

While very small, this category involves tweets that are used to direct and assist guests in regards to their park visit. These direct responses to guests display the message that SeaWorld cares for their guests and wants help them have an easy, stress free experience when attending their parks.

Deductive Analysis

Benoit's image restoration theory (1997) describes numerous stratagems an organization or individual in crisis can utilize in an attempt to repair reputational damage caused by said crisis. Benoit (1997) explains that an organization's public reputation and image are incredibly important to the success of that organization. Image repair techniques

have proven vital to the restorative success of post-crisis organizations. Additionally, poor image repair strategies have further damaged companies and hurt their image beyond repair (Moody 2011). With the reputational damage caused by *Blackfish*, SeaWorld's image as an organization that cares for their animals as well as their employees has been damaged. The following section will answer RQ3 by examining SeaWorld's attempt at image repair and dissecting each strategy utilized through the organization's Twitter account.

Bolstering. Bolstering refers to the strategy of using messages to illicit positive feelings for the organization. SeaWorld predominantly utilizes this strategy to reinforce the image of SeaWorld as an organization that cares about its guests. Directing focus on the stakeholder acts as a powerful tool in crisis management and image repair (Seeger, 2007). All of the messages previously thematically categorized as positive responses to guest tweets act as attempts to accentuate and enhance the positive messages shared by guests. Tweets with language like "hope you have a blast" reinforce the notion of SeaWorld caring for its guests and their experience within the SeaWorld parks. While sparse, the messages involved with guest assistance also provide a bolstering effect as the tweets illustrate SeaWorld's commitment to guest satisfaction.

Additionally, SeaWorld uses their Twitter account to bolster their image in regards to supporting sea-life. Messages of conservation and protecting the environment work to enhance SeaWorld's ethos when it comes to caring for the sea-life that is crucial to their business. Ultimately, SeaWorld is reassuring guests that the aquatic entertainers used in numerous shows around SeaWorld's parks are taken care of and supported.

The messages of support for SeaWorld may also be considered fringe attempts to bolster. By highlighting supportive tweets from other members of the public, SeaWorld is

attempting to provide some precedent and ethos to rally the public in support of the organization. However, the bolstering strategy does not truly encompass these support based tweets and this notion depicting the organization as being supported does not adequately fit into any of the strategies suggested by image restoration theory.

Corrective Action. The strategy of corrective action implies that the organization is taking steps to fix the impetus of the crisis. While SeaWorld is not wholly admitting fault within the context of the *Blackfish* scandal, Benoit (1997) asserts “even those who are innocent of wrong-doing can benefit from plans for preventing recurrence of the problem” (p. 184). One of the primary attacks within the *Blackfish* documentary regarded SeaWorld’s acquisition of sea animals for simply profit driven reasons. Not only does the film accuse SeaWorld of abusively capturing these creatures, but the documentary then highlights the oppressive living conditions within which the animals are forced to live.

SeaWorld attempts to combat this reputational tarnish by highlighting their rescue efforts throughout the year. In the campaign, “365 days of SeaWorld rescue,” the company provides messages and images regarding the rescue and rehabilitation of sea-life. The organization’s textual and photographic documentation demonstrates an attempt to correct the notion that they have historically abused animals.

Additionally, with the focus of *Blackfish* being SeaWorld’s treatment towards their orca (or killer whales), SeaWorld provides messages of corrective action by promoting a new commitment to orca research and the plans to create “First of its kind killer whale environment...” By tweeting about this direct corrective action, SeaWorld hopes to repair an organizational image that has been overshadowed by accusations of abuse and ignorance.

Attack Accuser. SeaWorld heavily utilizes the strategy of attacking the accuser or discrediting the accusations as a primary means of reducing offensiveness. Each of the *Blackfish* related tweets respond directly to a stakeholder's tweet regarding watching the film. Some tweets utilized messages that attempted to discredit the accusation with language like *misleading* or *learn the truth*; inferring that the original accusations are incorrect or skewed in some way. SeaWorld also utilizes messages that directly attack the accuser. Statements such as "the footage *Blackfish* uses is misleading" directly implicate *Blackfish* as the primary agent in misleading the public. Additionally SeaWorld accuses the documentary of lying and accompanies each message with a link to "the truth." Ultimately SeaWorld is attempting to reduce the offensiveness of the *Blackfish* crisis by portraying the documentary as misleading and full of lies while framing SeaWorld as the victim who can offer the truth.

Discussion

This study answers each of the three previously posited questions by utilizing qualitative content analysis to dissect SeaWorld's Twitter account over one year after the release of the controversial documentary *Blackfish*. In regards to the first research question which asked "How is SeaWorld using their Twitter account in response to the *Blackfish* crisis," SeaWorld is using Twitter as a dialogic tool as well as an image repair tool to mitigate the reputational damage caused by *Blackfish*. Twitter has the unique opportunity to converse and respond to public comments directly rather than releasing a public statement. SeaWorld harnessed this opportunity and attempted to clear up the perceived misconceptions regarding the documentary.

The second research question posed was "what are the dominant messages portrayed on SeaWorld's Twitter account?" The inductive method of analysis highlights the dominant messages portrayed: SeaWorld is a fun destination/experience, *Blackfish* is misleading, animal rescue efforts, and support for SeaWorld. The less prevalent messages include: sea-life care and guest assistance. SeaWorld attempts to create an image of an organization that not only deeply cares about the satisfaction of its stakeholders but also the safety of wildlife. These messages directly show that SeaWorld has public support within the community. All of these messages work to communicate the efforts of SeaWorld to promote safety and fun within their parks. Additionally SeaWorld directly combats *Blackfish* by supporting the narrative that the documentary is misleading to viewers.

The final research question, "What are the dominant image restoration strategies utilized by SeaWorld through their Twitter account?" The three dominant strategies apparent in this analysis are bolstering, corrective action, and attack accuser.

While the outcome of this crisis is still being determined, a preliminary assessment of SeaWorld's image repair techniques can be reported. SeaWorld maintains that the *Blackfish* documentary contains lies and misleads stakeholders and therefore has not elected to apologize for the accused offenses or evade responsibility. Benoit (1997) explains that it is possible to come out of a crisis without fault however it is not probable. Corrective action and bolstering both help to promote a positive image for SeaWorld however with SeaWorld losing 16% of their profit in 2014, attendance to the parks plummeting, and the resignation of their CEO in January of 2015, SeaWorld is clearly still reeling from reputational damage caused by the *Blackfish* crisis (Blanco, 2015). SeaWorld must continue to utilize image repair strategy for the foreseeable future in order to truly repair their tarnished image.

These results highlight numerous limitations for the image repair theory of crisis communication. First, clearly SeaWorld is utilizing image repair strategies long after the initial release of and backlash from the documentary. Most research regarding image repair focuses on the immediate responses of the accused following a crisis situation. While these responses are undoubtedly important and worthy of study, so too are the strategies employed months after the initial crisis has ended as aftershocks continue to threaten the organization's reputation.

Another limitation for the image repair theory regards the necessity for a subcategory for bolstering regarding a showing of support. While bolstering does encapsulate every positive image an organization or individual may be trying to portray, the ethos behind showing all of the supporters of your organization goes beyond bolstering. This ethos provides support by providing large numbers, or examples of others' agreement and therefore

provides a credibility that doesn't quite fit under bolstering. I am suggesting a new strategy that relies more on the ethos of numerous supporters rather than message content.

Additionally, one aspect of the physical opportunities of Twitter does raise interesting questions regarding image repair. When a member of the public decides to follow an organization's twitter account, every original tweet published by the organization's account shows up on the viewers feed (list of tweets from the accounts you follow). However, the replies to individual tweets, such as the positive responses to guest tweets or the responses to tweets about *Blackfish*, do not show up in the public Twitter feed. One must go to the SeaWorld page and elect to view these responses. This bifurcation highlights the differentiation between public image and dialogic conversation. Social media provides the unique ability to witness these dialogic encounters if we so choose. Given that before the advent of social media technology, these conversations were more difficult to analyze due to the scarcity of a textual sample, sites like Twitter offer crisis communication and specifically image repair scholars a new opportunity to examine the differences between the strategies employed on both macro and micro levels.

There are limitations to the research provided by this study. The sample only relies on tweets from a one month span. A broadened timeline may provide additional insights as to the strategies utilized by SeaWorld.

This study provides assertions that require future research to further extrapolate. Research must be done to determine how organizations use image restoration techniques long after the initial crisis event has passed. New image repair tactics may be necessary as the organization gets further from the crisis. Research must also be done on the pervasiveness of

Twitter and other social media in shaping a corporate image. Additional studies may also enhance the depth of research that utilizes the qualitative content analysis.

With the experiential nature of tourism organizations, attractions like SeaWorld risk their entire businesses during each crisis event. With no necessary product or service provided, tourism organizations risk losing the interest of the public and therefore risk the organization as a whole. While crises have the possibility of crippling the tourism industry, one cannot simply view these types of crises as interactions between an organization and its stakeholders. Given the aforementioned examples, theme parks and tourist attractions contain more guests than employees. Buhalis and Law (2008) explain, “Tourism is an international industry and as the biggest provider of jobs on the planet boasts a greater array of heterogeneous stakeholders than many other industries” (p. 609). With so many untrained people within the proverbial walls of these tourism organizations, proper crisis communication is of the utmost importance to ensure the safety of sometimes millions of people. Communication scholars can no longer allow a field of study essential to the safety and wellbeing of so many citizens to be ignored.

Due to the unique lens provided by the tourism industry, communication scholars are missing out on an opportunity to examine crisis communication on a unique and important level. Crisis communication studies are inherently applicable in the field; however the tourism industry provides an applicability that impacts millions of people every year. Ultimately communication scholars must recognize these forms of crisis communication as a means to study the most extreme and influential crisis situations available.

SeaWorld acts as a microcosm for how Twitter can be used to create and repair a corporation’s image. This image is that much more important given SeaWorld’s status as a

tourist attraction. It is still too soon to determine if SeaWorld will recover from the reputational damage caused by *Blackfish*, but it is apparent that they will continue to utilize their Twitter account as they attempt to stay afloat.

References

- #SoMeT13US – Social Media Tourism Symposium. (n.d.). *SoMeT13US Social Media Tourism Symposium*. Retrieved December 9, 2013, from <http://us.sometourism.com>
- Anthony, K., & Sellnow, T. (2011). Beyond Narnia: The necessity of C.S. Lewis' First and Second Things in applied communication research. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 39, 441-443.
- Austin, L., Liu, B. F., & Jin, Y. (2012). How audiences seek out crisis information: Exploring the social mediated crisis communication model. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 40, 188-207.
- Benoit, W. L. (1997). Image repair discourse and crisis communication. *Public relations review*, 23(2), 177-186.
- Benoit, W. L. (2014). President Barack Obama's image repair on HealthCare.gov. *Public Relations Review*, 40(5), 733-738.
- Benoit, W., & Czerwinski, A. (1997). A Critical Analysis Of USAir's Image Repair Discourse. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 60, 38-57.
- Benoit, W. L., & Lindsey, J. J. (1987). Argument strategies: Antidote to Tylenol's poisoned image. *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 23(3), 136-46.
- Bizirgianni, I., & Dionysopoulou, P. (2013). The influence of tourist trends of youth tourism through social media (sm) & information and communication technologies. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 73, 652-660.
- Blanco, O. (2014). Seaworld CEO resigning in January. *CNN*, Retrieved March 11, 2015, from <http://money.cnn.com/2014/12/11/news/companies/seaworld-atchison-ceo-resignation/>
- Brown, B., & Chalmers, M. (2003). Tourism and mobile technology. *Eighth European*

- Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work, 1*, 1-20.
- Bruce, T., & Tini, T. (2008). Unique crisis response strategies in sports public relations: Rugby league and the case for diversion. *Public Relations Review*, 34(2), 108-115.
- Buhalis, D., & Law, R. (2008). Progress in information technology and tourism management: 20 years on and 10 years after the internet. *Tourism Management*, 29(4), 609-623.
- Burke, K. (1969). *A rhetoric of motives* (Vol. 111). Univ of California Press.
- Carlsen, J., & Liburd, J. (2008). Developing a research agenda for tourism crisis management, market recovery and communications. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 23(2), 265-276.
- Cho, J. Y., & Lee, E. H. (2014). Reducing confusion about grounded theory and qualitative content analysis: similarities and differences. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(32), 1-20.
- Coombs, W. T. (2004). Impact of past crises on current crisis communication: Insights from situational crisis communication theory. *Journal of Business Communication*, 41(3), 265-289.
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(3), 163-176.
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (Eds.). (2011). *The handbook of crisis communication* (Vol. 22). John Wiley & Sons.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2014). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage publications.
- Costal, J. (2001). Amusement park crisis management. *Rowan University*, 1, 1-84.
- Elliott, D. (2009). The failure of organizational learning from crisis: A matter of life and

- death?. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 17, 157-168.
- Ferdman, R. (2014, January 1). Chart: What the documentary 'Blackfish' has done to SeaWorld. *The Wall Street Journal*, Retrieved March 11, 2015, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/12/12/chart-what-the-documentary-Blackfish-has-done-to-seaworld/>
- Grebe, S. (2013). Things can get worse: How mismanagement of a crisis response strategy can cause a secondary or double crisis: the example of the AWB corporate scandal. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 18, 70-86.
- Hall, C. M. (2010). Crisis events in tourism: Subjects of crisis in tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 13(5), 401-417.
- Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative health research*, 15(9), 1277-1288.
- Kim, E. (2013). *The role of social media in crisis communication-A case study of Starbucks* (Doctoral dissertation, Texas State University-San Marcos).
- Kohlbacher, F. (2006, January). The use of qualitative content analysis in case study research. In *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (Vol. 7, No. 1).
- Laws, E., & Prideaux, B. (2005). Crisis management: A suggested typology. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 19(2-3), 1-8.
- Lee, E. H. (2010). *Providing culturally appropriate environments in nursing homes for frail ethnic minority elders in the US: Three case studies of Korean-American nursing homes* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri--Columbia).
- Liu, B. F., & Fraustino, J. D. (2014). Beyond image repair: Suggestions for crisis

- communication theory development. *Public Relations Review*, 40(3), 543-546.
- Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Social Research*, 1(2), Art. 20
- Moody, M. (2011). Jon and Kate Plus 8: A case study of social media and image repair tactics. *Public Relations Review*, 37(4), 405-414.
- Moya, M. D., & Jain, R. (2012). When tourists are your "friends": Exploring the brand personality of Mexico and Brazil on Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 39, 23-29.
- Muralidharan, S., Dillistone, K., & Shin, J. H. (2011). The Gulf Coast oil spill: Extending the theory of image restoration discourse to the realm of social media and beyond petroleum. *Public Relations Review*, 37(3), 226-232.
- Pesonen, J., & Horster, E. (2012). Near field communication technology in tourism. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 4, 11-18.
- Ritchie, B. W., Dorrell, H., Miller, D., & Miller, G. A. (2004). Crisis Communication And Recovery For The Tourism Industry. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 15(2-3), 199-216.
- Roberts, H. A. (2012). Organizational communication, social media, and sensemaking during a cascading crisis: Tokyo Disney and the 2011 Japan earthquake/tsunami/nuclear crisis. *University of Kentucky*, 3, 1-62.
- Santana, G. (2004). Crisis management and tourism. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 15(4), 299-321.
- Seeger, M. (2006). Best practices in crisis communication: An expert panel process. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34(3), 232-244.
- Schultz, F., Utz, S., & Göritz, A. (2011). Is the medium the message? Perceptions of and reactions to crisis communication via twitter, blogs and traditional media. *Public*

relations review, 37(1), 20-27.

Sisco, H. F. (2012). Nonprofit in crisis: An examination of the applicability of situational crisis communication theory. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 24, 1-17.

Thompson, I. (1996). Competence and Critique in Technical Communication A Qualitative Content Analysis of Journal Articles. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 10(1), 48-80

Treadwell, D. (2014). *Introducing communication research: Paths of inquiry* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Vandebosch, H., & Van Cleemput, K. (2008). Defining cyberbullying: A qualitative research into the perceptions of youngsters. *Cyber Psychology & Behavior*, 11(4), 499-503.

Winn, M. R. (2013). *Analyzing patterns within academic and legal definitions: A qualitative content analysis of the term 'cyberbullying.'* (Doctoral dissertation, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS).