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# British Petroleum's Use of Image Restoration Strategy on Social Media and Response After the 2010 Gulf Oil Spill

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

BRITISH PETROLEUM'S USE OF IMAGE RESTORATION STRATEGY ON  
SOCIAL MEDIA AND RESPONSE AFTER THE 2010 GULF OIL SPILL

By

Katherine Rogers

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts

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As the population and use of social media platforms increase, so does the role they play in crisis communication. This study focuses on how BP used social media, specifically Twitter, as a platform for their public relations response to the devastating 2010 Gulf Oil Spill. Additionally, this study focuses on identifying how social media users used Twitter as an avenue to reach out to BP on and voice concerns and attitudes after the spill. A content analysis of Tweets written in response to the spill was conducted and through that analysis it was determined that BP used Twitter as a way to disperse messages about how they were making things better or compensating people; while social media users used Twitter to attempt to engage with BP and voice negative opinions about many areas that were damaged because of the spill. By identifying how BP used Twitter and restoration strategies in the wake of the spill, it is possible to compare their use to best practices that have developed through academic research and existing case studies where social media and restoration strategy was used effectively. This can identify why BP's response was not well received. By identifying how social media users used Twitter, it is possible to use this case study as an example of the importance of engaging with users and identifying areas of concern. This study has implications for public relations practitioners and all professionals who are charged with creating crisis

communication plans. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research were included.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico that began on April 20, 2010, was the result of an explosion and fire roughly 40 miles off the coast of Louisiana. British Petroleum (BP) owned and operated the Deepwater Horizon drilling unit working on an off shore exploratory well when malfunctions caused the explosion. The explosion claimed the lives of 11 men working on the exploratory well. As the fire burned, oil poured from the well into the Gulf of Mexico at an estimated rate of 55,000 barrels of oil per day. This continued until July 15, 2010, when the well was finally capped. In total, between 185 and 205 million gallons of crude oil poured into the Gulf. In addition to the tragic loss of life, the spill proved to be devastating to marine life in the Gulf, killing and endangering countless animals and entire species. Gulf Coast industries such as fishing, tourism, and real estate recorded damages in the billions of dollars. The spill took a physical and psychological toll on those who were impacted by its aftermath, both directly and indirectly.

Total damages to BP, the environment, and the economy in the Gulf Coast are currently estimated to be \$36.9 billion. It was a disaster on both human and environmental fronts and British Petroleum was left to figure out how to combat all aspects of the situation. BP never took direct responsibility for the spill, rather in press releases and other communications issued following the explosion and spill, they focused on shifting blame and assuring the public they would honor all legitimate claims and gave detailed information about the steps that they were taking to stop the flow of oil and rectify the situation. BP was faced with a major

public relations crisis in the wake of this disaster. They encountered many challenges and setbacks, including insensitive remarks made by CEO Tony Hayward and complaints from the public that BP was not doing enough remedy the situation.

The BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill began at the height of the environmental movement. People were increasingly vigilant of environmental issues and many were beginning to make a conscious effort to become more environmentally responsible or “green.” Corporate social responsibility was becoming of great importance and consumers considered more than just the product and price when making a purchase.

Prior to the spill, oil itself was a controversial issue. Gas prices were soaring and many Americans were taking a serious financial hit because of the increase. With that being said, the issue of off shore drilling was becoming increasingly controversial even before the spill due to conflicting concerns about the environment and rising cost of oil and the resulting increased price of gas. Off shore drilling and environmental policies played a pivotal role in the 2008 presidential election. After the spill, President Barak Obama had to put in place certain emergency measures and policies, including a moratorium on off shore drilling that lasted for several months before being lifted.

Further, the spill occurred when social media was becoming incredibly important and influential in the media and society. Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, and Seymour (2011) state that “social media helps conversations to reach a wider audience leveraging the ‘long tail’ concept, which means conversations that can be conveyed to different forums” (p. 85). Social media platforms started

increasing in relevance in 2000. By July 2010, Facebook had more than 500 million active users, YouTube videos were receiving millions of views daily, and Twitter was becoming increasingly popular as a source for news and communication (Edosomwan et. al, 2010, pp. 81 – 84). News was traveling faster thanks to social media, and anyone's opinion could be written and voiced. Many corporations and companies were operating social media platforms and had to have a plan for their social media use in times of crisis.

The BP oil spill and its aftermath provide valuable lessons in crisis communication. It is a case that will serve as an example of what to do and what should be avoided when preparing a crisis communication plan or combating a crisis. The long term effects of the spill are not yet known, but in the short term there are lessons to be learned about not only what could have been done to prevent the spill but about how to combat an environmental crisis on the public relations front. The purpose of this study is to identify, specifically, the crisis response strategies employed by British Petroleum on Twitter and why they may not have been optimally effective in using social media to control the public relations crisis that resulted from the explosion and oil spill. Additionally, it will examine in depth how people responded and reacted on social media outlets.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

In order to examine the role of crisis communication strategy and the use of social media as a platform to express opinion and attitude in the BP Oil Spill response and aftermath, there are several areas of influence to be reviewed. Understanding exactly how the oil spill was caused and the extent of the damages that resulted, including damages to the environment, economy, and citizens' health and well-being provides evidence as to why people were so dismayed by the spill and possessing the knowledge that it could have been prevented with some basic safety precautions.

Legal issues were plentiful after the spill. Questions of preparedness, guilt, liability, and rights of those effected abounded after the disaster. BP could have looked to previous environmental disasters and how they were handled for guidance as they moved forward. The 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in particular provided a precedent as to how oil spills can be handled in the United States. Crisis communication and image restoration models (e.g., Benoit, 1997) are in existence to help organizations and individuals prepare for and recover from a crisis. In addition, today the social media must be addressed in crisis communication. Social media has created a sense of transparency and accessibility between citizens and organizations. A plan must address the way it will be employed in crisis management situations.

Finally, current social trends need to be taken into consideration during crisis communication planning. The history and state of the "green" movement in

the United States and the ability to know how it will impact crisis management is important in the BP oil spill case because of the environmental destruction it caused. Oil drilling is a controversial environmental issue and the spotlight on environmental issues at the time of the spill made the fallout even worse for BP.

### *Oil Spill Cause and Effects*

An explosion on the Deepwater Horizon drilling unit being operated by British Petroleum roughly 40 miles off the coast of Louisiana triggered the oil spill that began on April 20, 2010, in the Gulf of Mexico. The explosion was just the beginning of a nightmare for BP, residents of the Gulf Coast, and all those impacted by the spill. Issues of responsibility, accountability, liability, and cause abounded in the wake of the spill as citizens of the Gulf Coast watched their environments and lives be gravely impacted by the oil spilling into the Gulf. Smith, Smith, and Ashcroft (2010) explain that the damages from the spill are

attributed to three major factors: (1) human error and equipment failure at BP's Deepwater Horizon offshore drilling unit; (2) failure of the U.S. government to assign, and in some cases to permit, resources to assist with the containment of the oil spill; and (3) misinformation disseminated by the news media regarding the amount and location of oil pollution in the water and on the beaches of the Gulf of Mexico. (p.1)

The results of the spill were not easy to account for, however; estimated total damages to BP, the environment, and the economy are at least \$36.9 billion, though this is subject to change. Some short-term effects of the spill associated with the resilience of the environment and the oil spill are known now, but the long-term effects will not be realized for years to come. The oil spill led to laws and regulations a moratorium on drilling (which was later ruled arbitrary and overturned) and restrictions to areas for fishing (Smith et. al., 2010, p. 5).

*Legal Issues, Lack of Preparedness and Impact on Clean-up*

Along with the environmental and humanitarian disaster that BP was responsible for taking care of, they now had to deal with a massive public relations crisis. Evidence points to the fact that the crisis could have been avoided all together if proper safety precautions were taken. However, the explosion happened and oil poured into the Gulf at an alarming rate. While their preparedness to deal with the spill environmentally was being questioned, there were also issues with whether or not they had a proper crisis communication plan in place. Griggs (2011), for example, raises issues of preparedness. One of the major issues that came into play legally during the spill was the pace of response due to the fact that BP would not allow any private help without going through the lengthy permission process. This was a battle fought by local people who were familiar with the area and equipped to help in some ways, but were prohibited from doing so. This was reflected in the media as a source of great frustration. At the root of this problem was the legal issue that BP was financially responsible for the cleanup and therefore had to approve everything. If they allowed for outside help before approval they risked the private party wanting to collect for the work they had done (Griggs, 2011, p. 7).

BP was not prepared for the PR crisis they would be dealing with in the aftermath of the spill. The Society for Risk Analysis (SRA) *Mini-symposium on the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill* (2010) brought to question BP's preparedness on several levels. In particular, past SRA president Caron Chess questioned BP's level of risk communication preparedness. Chess felt that BP lacked any amount of preparedness and failed miserably from a risk communications point of view.

Further, Chess noted similarities between BP's response and Exxon's 1989 response to its oil spill in the Straits of Valdez, Alaska. She cited an article from *Greenwire* that noted "depressing similarities between Exxon's and BP's risk communication smash-ups: shifting blame from the corporation, emphasizing science rather than people, and initially downplaying the potential impact of the disaster" (Chess, 2010, p. 216).

#### *Similarities between Exxon Valdez Spill and BP Spill*

BP was not without an example on how to deal with spills. They had plenty of lessons that they could have taken away from the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill. It is impossible to discuss the response to the BP oil spill without looking at other major incidents that preceded it. The Exxon Valdez oil spill serves as benchmark of sorts to compare the BP response to, although the BP spill was larger than the Exxon spill. Ritchie et al. (2011) note that one of the lessons learned from the Exxon spill is that the BP spill recovery is far from over:

We know that social and psychological stress is heightened by the uncertainty that comes from toxic contamination. The complexities of local and regional economies and the upheaval created by a temporary economic boom created by cleanup operations also contribute to the disaster's lingering effects. Finally, as injured parties seek compensation for damages resulting from this environmental disaster, many will be traumatized by impersonal bureaucratic structures and protracted litigation. (p. 31)

Another similarity is that both spills effected renewable resource communities; renewable resource communities "depend on renewable natural resources for their social, cultural and economic existence" (p. 31). Ritchie also draws similarities between those in the area of the spill who gained financially as a result of the spill because of the cleanup efforts. Further, disasters often drive people to move from

their communities. This results in economic loss and human capital loss (Ritchie, 2011, p. 34).

### *BP's Safety Record and Use of Social Media*

During times of crisis, a company's safety record and image come into question. Companies who have better reputations going into a crisis often come out better than those who go into the crisis unfavorably. BP is no exception. The oil spill has brought criticism from a wide range of people, from activist groups to government entities. While BP has taken responsibility for taking care of the spill, they have shifted blame on subcontractors Transocean and Halliburton. A study by Muralidharan, Dillistone, and Shin (2011) choose to examine social media and how BP used it during the oil spill response because it allows them to understand "the dimensions of audience reaction" which they claim to be "crucial in a cycle of crisis" (p. 227). The social media served as a platform for the public to voice their concerns, issues, and anger during the spill. Many times, the messages were in regards to BP's safety measures in the past leading up the spill and how the spill could have been prevented had appropriate safety measures been taken.

BP's safety record came into question initially in the early 2000s. They came under fire even more so after a 2005 explosion at its Texas City, Texas, refinery that claimed the lives of 15 workers and injured nearly 200 others. After the explosion, BP assured the public that they had learned from their mistakes and that safety was a top priority. All of this was just five years prior to the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. After the spill, much of BP's responses were defensive. In their initial press releases, BP focused on how they were the assisting party rather than the



responsible party. The first press release issued on April 21, 2010 was a confirmation and copy of Transocean's release announcing the explosion (British Petroleum, p.1). BP's second press release, also issued on April 21, 2010 stated that

BP today offered its full support to drilling contractor Transocean Ltd. And its employees after fire caused Transocean's submersible drilling rig Deepwater Horizon to be evacuated overnight, saying it stood ready to assist in any way in responding to the incident. (British Petroleum, para. 1)

It was not until April 24, 2010 that BP even acknowledged publicly the loss of life that occurred as a result of the spill (British Petroleum, p. 1). BP remained steadfast that they were in a supporting role, and not responsible for the disaster. In Bob Dudley's May 6, 2010 speech at the Chief Executives' Club of Boston (which was the first speech after the spill), the event was blamed on a faulty blowout preventer (Dudley, 2010). As more information was released, Halliburton's faulty cement job would come into play as another guilty party BP sought to blame. Eventually, it came into question whether or not BP was aware of the fact that the cement job on the Deepwater Horizon well was faulty; with evidence pointing to the fact that they were aware. This was highly criticized by many people and groups. BP spent \$50 million defending its record to the public. Many felt that this was \$50 million that should have been spent to clean up the spill and aid those who had been affected. Muralidharan et al. (2011) quote Chris Gildez of the global public relations firm Hill and Knowlton as saying, "until the leak is stopped, no amount of advertising and PR will help" (p. 227).

### *Impact of Oil Spill on the Health of Gulf Coast Citizens*

April 20, 2010, will be deeply etched into the minds of citizens of the Gulf Coast. The spill's impact on the environment and economy was already proving to be disastrous. Linda McCauley (2010) states that citizens of the Gulf Coast will be affected by the oil spill with short and long term psychological damage. In addition to incidences of suicide as a result of stress caused by the spill, responders and residents of the Gulf are at risk for developing anxiety disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder. Similar issues were seen in the wake of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. McCauley also cites evidence that long-term responders have shown signs of irreparable psychological damage (pp. 54 – 56). In the *Energy Weekly News* (2011) the psychological effects are highlighted again in more detail. This article cites studies and statistics demonstrating that a similar level of stress was present in individuals in Gulf Coast states that were directly influenced by the oil spill and those in states, such as Florida, that were not as directly impacted. According to *Energy Weekly News* (2011), a University of Maryland and University of Florida study showed that the oil spill was a huge public mental health crisis and suggests that some recovery efforts need to address these issues (p. 1).

### *Two Theoretical Crisis Models*

Two models of crisis response may help to better understand both BP's response strategy and the public's response to that strategy. Coombs' (2004) Situational Crisis Communication Theory examines the impact of prior events and attributions based on those events on crisis reaction. Benoit's (1997) image

restoration approach looks at the actual messages communicated by an organization after the crisis has occurred.

*Attribution Theory and Situation Crisis Communication Theory*

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) posits that an individual's knowledge of past crisis events an organization is charged with being responsible for is necessary to take into consideration when addressing future crisis communication planning (Coombs, 2004, p. 265). According to Coombs', as "reputational threat increases, the crisis manager should use response strategies that demonstrate the acceptance of responsibility for the crisis and that address victim concerns" (p. 266). BP, due to the nature of their industry and the Texas City refinery disaster, was in a position of high reputational threat as they went into crisis response situation during the 2010 oil spill. The high reputational threat and past record of safety issues leading to serious disasters means that BP would likely be held responsible in some degree for the situation, no matter how much they could have influenced or prevented the situation.

Attribution Theory is connected to SCCT because it holds that "people will make judgments about the causes of events, especially unexpected events with negative outcomes" (Weiner, 1985, p. 280) and that there are certain attributions, or perceptions, that will influence how the event is judged. In particular there are three dimensions that are used to form attributions, as represented in Table 2-1.

Table 2-1  
Attribution Theory

<b>Attribution</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Stability	If the cause happens frequently (stable) or infrequently (unstable)
External Control	Whether the cause of the event was controllable or uncontrollable by another person
Personal Control / locus	The extent to which a person can control his or her own fate in the situation

Each attribution impacted how individuals judged BP before, during, and after the oil spill. Stability was debated because of the disaster that claimed several lives just 5 years previous to the spill. External control was a major factor during the post-disaster scramble to find facts about what happened and whether or not it could have been prevented. The distinctiveness of the situation was called to question as BP's track record was examined. According to Coombs (2007), a crisis is not distinctive when "an organization shows little consideration for stakeholders across a number of domains, not just in crisis" (p.137). As more information became clear about the details of what happened and BP was working to respond to the public relations crisis, managers should have looked to Situational Crisis Communication Theory as a guide to finding the best possible way to respond, given their reputation and the situation.

#### *Crisis Communication Response Models*

There are two models that attempt to explain crisis communication strategies and responses. Benoit (1997) takes a more rhetorical look at the crisis

communication messages by focusing on the strategic rationale behind the message, while Bradford and Garret (1995) look at a two-factor approach that focuses on a response or no response dichotomy.

*Image restoration theory*

BP was left with the daunting task of restoring its image to try and get back in the public favor. This is a very difficult public relations task, especially when dealing with a disaster as large and devastating as the oil spill. Benoit's (1997) "Image Restoration Theory" provides the theoretical reasoning behind why certain strategies are best employed in particular situations. The theory is based on basic concepts that propose that the accused party is responsible and that the accusation is considered offensive (Benoit, 1997, p. 177). Table 2-2 presents the 14 strategies that have emerged from Benoit's theory range from simple denial to mortification (Harlow, 2011, p. 81).

Using Benoit's theory as a basis for his study, Harlow says that "BP was focused on the twin tasks of describing corrective action and describing attempts to compensate the victims of the incident" (p. 82). Further, he states that BP never bore any of the responsibility for the actual explosion and resulting oil spill, rather they simply accepted responsibility for dealing with its aftermath. This is a point that caused significant tension (p. 82).

Table 2-2

## Benoit's (1997) Image Restoration Strategies

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Example</b>
Simple denial	We did not do it
Shifting blame	Someone else did it
Provocation	We did it, but were provoked
Defeasibility	Lack of information or control
Accidents	The incident was an accident
Good intention	The error was the result of good intentions
Bolstering	Our good characteristics outweigh any error
Minimization	The problem is not that bad
Differentiation	The incident is different from some other act
Transcendence	The act should be understood in a different context
Attack accuser	The person blaming us is the one at fault
Compensation	The victim will be compensated
Corrective Action	We will fix the problem
Mortification	We admit responsibility or ask for forgiveness

*Corporate communicative response model*

Crisis communication is a delicate task to handle. There must be a crisis communication plan in place prior to a crisis occurring in order to properly address and combat the situation. Bradford and Garret's (1995) corporate communicative response model "focuses on the potential effectiveness of corporate communicative responses to accusations of unethical organizational behavior" (p. 876). Their model is comprised of two paths: the no response path and the corporate response path. The no response path finds that during times of crisis, organizations in question may offer no response for the allegations being brought. Bradford and Garret argue that the no response path generally leads to observers assuming guilt); alternatively, the corporate response path holds that, by offering some response, an organization can influence the observer's perception of the situation (p. 878). Under the corporate response path falls four responses that may be offered in times of crisis. Table 2-3 presents these responses and the optimal situations for their use.

Table 2-3

## Bradford and Garret's (1995) Response Model

<b>Response</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Situation</b>
Denials	Denials are statements that deny the occurrence or existence of the questionable event, or deny that the accused organization is the cause of the event.	When an actor can provide evidence that he/she did not commit an allegedly unethical action (commission situation), this actor should use a denial communicative response.
Excuses	Excuses are statements that argue that the accused organization should not be held responsible for the occurrence and/or impact of the questionable event because certain factors limited the organization's control over the occurrence and/or impact of this event.	When an accused actor can provide evidence that he/she did not have control over the occurrence and/or impact of an allegedly unethical action (control situation), this actor should use an excuse communicative response
Justifications	Justifications are statements that argue that, even though the accused organizations is responsible for the questionable event, the standards being used by the accusers to evaluate the impact of this questionable event are inappropriate.	When an accused actor can provide evidence that inappropriate standards are being used to evaluate this allegedly unethical action (standards situation), this action should use a justification.
Concessions	Concessions are statements that agree that the questionable event did occur, that the accused organization caused this event, that they evaluative standards being used by the accusers are appropriate.	When an accused actor concludes that the allegations raised are valid (agreement situation), the actor should use a concession.

Due to the scope and nature of the BP disaster, issuing a response of some nature was necessary. However, in the beginning of their communicative response, BP did



what they could to try to shift the blame to other players in the disaster. This model demonstrates that the response BP chose did not correspond with the situation created by their unethical behavior. This likely played a role in the level of public acceptance of the communicative and public relations measures BP took in the wake of the disaster.

### *A Changing Media Environment*

Two factors mediate any analysis of BP's crisis response strategy and communications. The first deals with a changing communication medium—the rise of a populist-approached social media. The second deals with a renewed awareness of the fragility of the world's environment. Both help to better understand BP's strategy and its failures at communicating.

### *Social media revolution and crisis communication*

The BP oil spill happened during a time when two very important revolutions were happening. First, social media was taking over and changing the way communications, public relations, and organizations functioned. Waters, Tindall, and Morton (2010), for instance, examined how public relations has responded to and evolved with the increased use of social media. They found that more reporters are now open to getting news and pitches through alternative sources. The study goes so far as to cite Julia Hood, then editor at *PR Week*, as saying that the “media pitch is dead” (p. 242).

Reaching the media and public is changing because of social media, forcing reporters, publicists, and all communicators to adapt. The media is no longer solely

getting stories through traditional pitches; rather they are looking at alternative methods, including social media, to get stories. This is important when studying the BP oil spill because it was one of the first experiences with crisis and social media. During the Exxon Valdez oil spill, public relations practitioners did not have to worry about Twitter and Facebook and Blogs. The BP oil spill broke the mold and public relations professionals had to seriously consider the repercussions of social media and how they would utilize it to combat the situation. It was also the first oil spill whereby the public had access to social media. Reporters were able to reach out the public on social media to get feedback and information.

Social media, as it is available at peoples' fingertips, has become influential in how an individual forms opinions. Twitter, in particular, has created a sense of community where individuals use 140 characters to post links, express opinions, and share information with those who "follow" them and are part of their community. The community permits the sharing of opinions and values between users (Auer, 2011, p. 711). Furthering this, studies conducted just after the 2008 Presidential election in the United States showed that among social media users aged 18 - 29, 50% of the population polled by Pew said they used social media to discover, learn, and influence their voting decision and opinions on issues. For users age 30 and over, the percentage was 32% (Auer, 2011, pp. 711-712).

The propensity of people to use social media as a place to gather news during crisis can be demonstrated by comparing the response of a pre-social media crisis to a current crisis. During the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, officials had to spend millions of dollars and time to synchronize communication systems. In

comparison, during the Haiti earthquake of 2010, Twitter was used as a meaningful channel of emergency communication (Auer, 2011 ,p.723).

Social media has also increased as sources for news because of the greater amount of freedom it allows for. Where certain types of images or stories are restricted, social media has broken the barrier and allowed for all news and stories to be given airtime (Cheong and Lee, 2010, p. 47). This was demonstrated most recently during the so-called “Twitter Revolution” and other social media lead revolts (Morozov, 2010, pp. 24 - 25).

Twitter has become a powerful word of mouth tool to share sentiments and experiences, both positive and negative, about brands and companies. Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, and Chowdury (2009) for example found that 19% of microblogs contained a mention of a brand or company, and of that percentage, 50% were positive and 33% were negative (p. 2169). Twitter, as a microblog, is accessible at all times for a user to quickly post an opinion as it comes to top of mind. It enables users to immediately write how they feel or what they think during experiences. Their study also found that there is a U-shaped relationship between an individual’s experience and their likelihood to express it (Jansen et al., 2009, p. 2178).

Twitter is archival, which increases its relevance and importance in communication. Although there are limits to this on the actual Twitter website, there are numerous reliable archive websites where you can access the past (Fischer, 2010, p. 15). Unlike a face-to-face conversation, where details can be lost over time, Tweets can be found and traced back and found in the context that they were written. They have become part of history in how they have been used in crisis

and lead to revolution. Social networks, including Twitter, have demonstrated their importance by allowing for the continuation of progress and through providing an “instantly accessible and ongoing inventory of information that can be used to solve problems and even potentially to provide emotional support” (McSwite, 2009, p. 92).

### *The Environmental Revolution*

The second revolution taking place during the Gulf oil crisis was a shift of focus towards environmentalism. Care for the environment and instruction to do so can be traced back to ancient times. It is in the *Bible* and *Qur'an*. Theodore Roosevelt led an environmental movement during his presidency between 1901 and 1909. Although its history dates back so far, many people did not take into consideration how their actions effect the environment until more recently. Environmentalism has become an important part of business and especially marketing due to the fact that costumers are now looking for environmental and social responsibility when making purchases. Studies have found that consumers prefer “green” products and would switch brands and spend more money in order to purchase these products (Smith, 2010 p. 2). Even prior to the oil spill, the damages caused by oil and gas companies turned people off to these industries and their images were hurting. Thus, the degree of crisis facing BP was enhanced due to a renewed response to environmental disasters and impacted on not only what people communicated about the crisis but also in new communication channels.

### *Research Questions*

Most of the existing literature regarding the 2010 Gulf Oil Spill examines the causes, effects, and outcomes of the disaster. The complete outcome of the spill is unknown and may not be fully understood for sometime as industry and environment both require significant time to bounce back, and fact finding and legal battles regarding the spill are still ongoing. Existing social media literature largely focuses on prevalence of different platforms and how the power of social media can be harnessed and best used to solve certain communication issues. Given the extent of existing research on social media and literature regarding crisis communication, it is possible to study how certain strategies were employed in BP's public relations response following the spill. Based on the preceding discussion, the following research questions are posed:

- RQ1:* What was the dominant tone of Tweets directed towards British Petroleum during and after the 2010 Gulf oil spill?
- RQ2:* What was the dominant focus of Tweets directed toward British Petroleum during and after the 2010 Gulf oil spill?
- RQ3:* What were the dominant Image Restoration Strategy employed by British Petroleum on Twitter in response to the 2010 Gulf oil spill?

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

In order to study both how British Petroleum used Image Restoration Strategy (Benoit, 1997) in their social media response to the oil spill and how the public used social media as a platform to respond and reach BP after the 2010 Gulf oil spill, a content analysis was conducted. The analysis of Tweets generated by BP\_America and Tweets written by the public to @BP\_America were all produced between May 2, 2010 and January 15, 2012. The greatest percentages (89.5% and 85.3%) of content came from the first few months immediately following the oil spill.

#### *Units of Analysis*

Several units of analysis were analyzed in order to gather all necessary information to answer the research questions. The units of analysis included social media type, message tone, gender of sender, date of message, message focus, and BP image restoration strategy (see Appendix A for Codebook).

#### *Sampling*

All Tweets used in the samples for content analysis were selected at random. In order to identify the various image restoration strategies used by BP, a sample of 109 Tweets was selected at random from the initial sample of 300 Tweets gathered from an archive service. A second sample on 82 Tweets directed at BP was randomly selected from the initial gathered sample of 170 Tweets directed at BP from an archive service. In all, 191 Tweets comprised the sample used to analyze BP's restoration strategies and answer the three stated research questions.

### *Coding*

Tweets produced by the public directed towards @BP\_America were coded for the following variables: date (mm/dd/yy), gender of the sender, tone of the message, and focus of the message. Tweets produced by BP\_America were coded for the following variables: date (mm/dd/yy), image restoration/not image restoration, and Benoit's 14 image restoration strategies (See Table 2-2). Each variable and its meaning was agreed upon by the coders (See Appendix A ):

- **Date:** The year, month, and date that each individual tweet was published. Each Tweet in this study had a date that shows when it was published.
- **Gender:** When possible, the gender of the individual was recorded as "male" or "female". At times, the gender was unclear and recorded as "other".
- **Tone:** When applicable, the Tweets were analyzed for tone. Content that was written in support of BP or its efforts to clean the Gulf, rectify the situation, or take responsibility for what they had done were classified as "positive". Content that condemned BP, its measures in the Gulf, their response to the oil spill in general were categorized as "negative". Also included as negative were any Tweets that criticized BP's response as ineffective, insufficient, or improper. Content that challenged BP's honesty and integrity in the cleanup or aftermath in any were categorized as negative. Some content contained both positive and negative remarks towards BP and their

response to the oil spill and as such was categorized as “neutral”.

Content that expressed no strong feeling, offered suggestions or clarifications was also categorized as neutral.

- **Focus of the Message:** When possible, the coders identified the main focus of the Tweet as being in regards to industry damage or progress, health concerns, environmental damage or progress, financial and economic impact of the spill, recovery efforts, or other.
- **Image Restoration Strategy:** When applicable, the coders categorized the Tweets into one of the 14 different strategies included in Benoit’s (1997) Image Restoration Strategy theory (See Table 2-2).

### *Coding reliability*

The researcher and another public relations graduate student, after agreeing on guidelines and instructions, coded a test set of 107 Tweets directed to @BP\_America and generated by @BP\_America and reached an acceptable level (.84) of reliability determined by using Holsti’s (1969) reliability formula.

### *Statistical Analyses*

After coding reliability was established, the sample sets were coded and all data was entered into SPSS for descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. Specifically, data were displayed by frequency and percent and tested for differences via Chi-square tests.



## Chapter 4

### Results

The purpose of the specific research questions that were put forward in this study was to specifically identify how restoration strategy was used on Twitter, how individuals used Twitter as a platform to voice their opinions in the wake of the spill, and finally to determine the primary concern voiced by of Twitter users after the spill. Answering these questions provides better insight into how social media can be best employed in crisis and why BP's crisis communication plan did not work out that well.

The study conducted a content analysis of 191 Tweets generated by or directed at British Petroleum after the April 21, 2010 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig and the resulting oil spill. All data collected from the sample set of Tweets were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS).

#### *Descriptive Statistics*

The data collected to answer the research questions was gathered from the Twitter archive service Topsy. 170 Tweets @BP\_America were collected to gather a sample size of 82 Tweets for analysis. Analyzed content came from dates beginning on May 2, 2010, and ending on September 14, 2011. Although the Tweets for the analyzed sample were collected at random, the majority of content (85.3%) was generated in 2010 from the beginning of the oil spill until August 2010, just after the well was capped. In the aforementioned sample the gender of the senders was reported as 35.4% male, 17.1% female, and 47.6% other (see Table 4-1).

Table 4.1 Gender of Tweet Sender

		Gender			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Other	39	47.6	47.6	47.6
	Male	29	35.4	35.4	82.9
	Female	14	17.1	17.1	100.0
	Total	82	100.0	100.0	

Data collected to answer the research questions in regard to Tweets generated by British Petroleum were also gathered from Twitter archive service Topsy. Three hundred twenty Tweets from BP\_America were collected and a sample of 109 Tweets was selected at random for analysis. Analyzed content ranges in date from May 10, 2010, to January 15, 2012. Although the Tweets were selected at random, in the same manner as the first sample, the majority (89.5%) of the Tweets in the sample are from the time span from the beginning of the spill to shortly after the well was capped. Almost eighty percent (79.8%) of the content in the sample was restoration strategy, while 20.2% of the content was not restoration strategy (see Table 4-2). Tweets coded as not restoration strategy simply contained some basic information or did not pertain to the oil spill and recovery.

Table 4.2 Percentage of Tweets Containing Restoration Strategy

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Restoration	87	79.8	79.8
	Not Restoration	22	20.2	20.2
	Total	109	100.0	100.0

*Test of Research Questions*

*RQ 1:* What was the dominant tone of Tweets directed towards British Petroleum during and after the 2010 Gulf oil spill?

In order to determine the dominant tone of the Tweets directed towards BP, each individual unit of analysis was coded to determine whether the overall tone of the message was positive, negative, or neutral ( $X^2=47.73$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0$ ). As found in Table 4-2, results showed that of the 109 tweets analyzed that 63.4% (52) were negative in tone. The definition of “negative” as used in the analysis was any content that condemned British Petroleum, or any content that criticized BP’s response as ineffective, insufficient, or improper. For example, negative Tweets included one from May 19, 2010 when @geoffliving Tweeted “It seems like @BP\_America claim to 5k barrels a day in the oil spill is the biggest PR lie of the year so far. #BPhearing”.

Neutral-toned Tweets accounted for 35.4% (29) of the analyzed content. “Neutral” was defined as content that contained an equal amount of positive and negative, content that did not express strong feeling, and content that gave suggestions, clarifications. Content coded as neutral included a Tweet from May 3, 2010 by @zaibatsu that says “Let @BP\_America know the #OilSpill is important to you” and another Tweet from July 1, 2010 when PBS News Hour (@NewsHour) Tweeted, “ Watch @BP\_America interview live on our @ustream”. The final 1.2% (1) of the content was positive in tone. In order for a Tweet to be “positive,” it had to contain content that was in support of BP and their efforts to clean the Gulf or in

praise of the progress made by BP in the Gulf. The only recorded positive Tweet was a Tweet that stated that BP had brought the community together in the Gulf for a large barbeque event.

Table 4.3 Recorded Tone of Tweets Directed Towards BP

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	<b>Negative</b>	52	63.4	63.4
	<b>Neutral</b>	29	35.4	35.4
	<b>Positive</b>	1	1.2	1.2
	<b>Total</b>	82	100.0	100.0

Chi-square value: 47.73

*RQ 2:* What was the dominant focus of Tweets directed toward British Petroleum during and after the 2010 Gulf oil spill?

To determine the dominant focus of Tweets directed toward British Petroleum in the data set, content was coded and categorized in one of six possible categories, including: industry, health, environment, financial and economic impact, recovery, and other. The purpose of this research question is to determine what the dominant concerns during the oil spill were among individuals and groups who used Twitter to communicate concerns and issues during the oil spill and clean up (see Table 4-4).

“Other” accounted for the largest percentage, 39% (32) of content. Many of the Tweets that fell into this category contained messages that expressed frustration as whole towards BP, rather than concerning a specific focus. The environment was the most focused on specific category, with 30% (25) of the tweets containing content that concerned what BP was doing to fix the environment or other content

that was in regards to environmental impact due to the spill. Tweets regarding the recovery process comprised 20.7% (17) of the analyzed content. 4.9% (4) of Tweets were in regard to the financial and economic impact that the spill had on those that it had affected. Industry and health both were the focus of 2.4% (2) of the content that was analyzed to answer the above stated research question.

Table 4.4 Recorded Focuses of Messages

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Industry	2	2.4	2.4
	Health	2	2.4	2.4
	Environment	25	30.5	30.5
	Financial / Economic impact	4	4.9	4.9
	Recovery	17	20.7	20.7
	Other	32	39.0	39.0
	Total	82	100.0	100.0

Chi-square value: 61.56, df=5, p=0

To expand on the first two research questions, cross tabulation was calculated to determine any irregular or extreme variances between tone and focus, gender and tone, and gender and focus (see Tables 4-6, 4-6, and 4-7).

Table 4.5 Tone – Focus Cross Tabulation

		Focus						Total
		Industry	Health	Environment	Fin. and econ. impact	Recovery	Other	
Tone	Negative	1	1	20	3	10	17	52
	Neutral	1	1	5	1	6	15	29
	Positive	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Total		2	2	25	4	17	32	82

Chi-square value: 8.928

Table 4.6 Gender – Tone Cross Tabulation

		Tone			Total
		Negative	Neutral	Positive	
Gender	Other	23	15	1	39
	Male	21	8	0	29
	Female	8	6	0	14
Total		52	29	1	82

Chi-square value: 2.505

Table 4.7 Gender – Focus Cross Tabulation

		Focus						Total
		Industry	Health	Environ.	Fin. and econ. impact	Recovery	Other	
Gender	Other	1	1	13	2	10	12	39
	Male	1	1	9	1	2	15	29
	Female	0	0	3	1	5	5	14
Total		2	2	25	4	17	32	82

Chi-square value: 8.25

The cross tabulation tables demonstrate that there is variance between tones and focus ( $X^2=8.93$ ,  $df=10$ ,  $p=.553$ ). The areas of focus that were most prevalent in the sample also show the highest concentration of negativity. Tweets produced by

females appear to be more evenly split between negative and neutral content than Tweets produced by males ( $X^2=2.51$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p=.64$ ). The gender – focus cross tabulation ( $X^2=8.25$ ,  $df=10$ ,  $p=.604$ ) shows some unbalance in the distribution of message focus between the genders. Women show a higher concentration of Tweets focused on recovery while men had a higher focus on Tweets focused on the environment. The higher percentage of males in the sample, in addition to the high frequency of Tweets that were unable to be categorized into one of the five areas of focus likely may have skewed the results in the particular area.

*RQ 3:* What were the dominant Image Restoration Strategy employed by British Petroleum on Twitter in response to the 2010 Gulf oil spill?

One hundred nine Tweets generated by British Petroleum were analyzed to determine the dominant Image Restoration Strategy (Benoit, 1997) employed by BP in Twitter content after the spill and during the recovery from the disaster ( $X^2=169.26$ ,  $df=9$ ,  $p=0$ ). As seen in Table 4-7, almost 80% (87) of the Tweets were restoration strategies and able to be categorized in nine of Benoit's possible 14 strategies. 20% (22) Tweets were not image restoration, meaning that they were just some form of simple information and unable to be categorized in one of the possible 14 strategies. For example, on July 7, 2010 @BP\_America Tweeted an announcement encouraging followers to “stay tuned for live tweeting of the latest updates.” This Tweet is just a way of informing followers that more information will be released in the near future, it is not a restoration tactic. Another example of

content that was coded as not restoration is from July 14, 2010 when @BP\_America Tweeted about a briefing being moved up by an hour.

Forty-two percent (46) of the Tweets were coded as corrective action, which was the most common strategy employed by BP. Corrective action Tweets focused on technical measures that were being taken by BP to stop the spill and clean the oil. On July 15, 2010 @BP\_America Tweeted “At 12:30pm we started to close the choke – we did it half a turn at a time to slowly close the well in.” This Tweet was coded as corrective action and is from the day that the well was finally sealed. Another example of corrective action was Tweeted on May 10, 2010 when @BP\_America said “We are also in the process of gaining access at the bottom of the BOP. The next step is the junk shot and top kill to shut off the flow.”

Bolstering was the second most common strategy and encompassed almost 16% (17) of the coded content. Bolstering was defined as when BP tried to emphasize the positive things they were doing rather than the negative events that were actually taking place. For example, BP often Tweeted about seafood safety and how very few tests on Gulf sea food were coming back with positive results for contamination. This recurrent theme demonstrates bolstering because while all the seafood was supposedly safe, the well was still not capped and oil was still flowing.

Of the rest, 9.2% (10) were classified as using compensation as restoration strategy; transcendence was employed in 4.6% (5) of the analyzed data; minimization as strategy was used in 2.8% (3) in the data; shifting blame and good



intention were each observed 1.8% (2) of the time; and simple denial and attacking the accuser were each employed in .9% (1) of the content .

Table 4.8 Image Restoration Strategy Frequencies

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Not Restoration Strategy	22	20.2	20.2
	Simple Denial	1	.9	.9
	Shifting Blame	2	1.8	1.8
	Good Intention	2	1.8	1.8
	Bolstering	17	15.6	15.6
	Minimization	3	2.8	2.8
	Transcendence	5	4.6	4.6
	Attack the Accuser	1	.9	.9
	Compensation	10	9.2	9.2
	Corrective Action	46	42.2	42.2
	Total	109	100.0	100.0

Chi-square value: 169.26

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

Social media has become increasingly important in the past decade as more platforms have become available for users to connect with other users and generate their own content. It is now expected that an individual, organization, or business be present and active to some degree on social media platforms. Through creating connections between individuals and organizations, social media has changed the business climate. An individual can now seek customer service via social media rather than the old fashioned way of making a phone call. In that way and some others, social media has increased the efficiency of organizations and connecting with the public. However, it has also allowed for individuals to have a platform to spread messages of discontent or bad experiences to all of their “followers” and “friends” and those Tweets, posts, and videos have demonstrated their ability to cause so much damage by going viral overnight. Another change social media is in part responsible for is the call for more transparency. Individuals now demand to know how a company is operating and how their policies will affect them, and social media has created a connection between individual and corporations to facilitate this exchange in information.

In April 2010, when oil began to pour into the Gulf and reach the shores in numerous coastal communities, the effected individuals, industry leaders, and advocates were rightly infuriated with British Petroleum. The truth about who is to blame for the spill and the total damage is still unknown and evolving as more information is released and studies are conducted. There are many lessons to be

learned from the oil spill, and one of those lessons is about the use of social media in times of crisis. Individuals can reach an organization and voice concerns, frustrations, and suggestions in a public forum like never before. Similarly, British Petroleum was able to use social media as a platform to address concerns and frustrations while reaching mass amounts of people with information to help control the crisis, if done properly.

This study focused solely on the social media platform Twitter and how individuals used it to connect with BP and how BP, in turn, used it to reach individuals and try to recover from the public relations crises that ensued as a result of the explosion and spill. Twitter allows for a rapid way to engage because it's accessible and free of charge to anyone who has access to the Internet and is equipped with a computer or other device. It can be a fast and efficient way to relay vital information in times of crisis. Twitter allows for two-way symmetrical communication, a two-way conversation where connections are forged and feedback can be given and received (Grunig, 1990, p. 21).

At the time of the 2010 oil spill, many companies and organizations were operating at some level on social media. Whether those company leaders were aware of it or not, information about the company could likely be found somewhere on social media platforms. BP, prior to the oil spill, had a relatively inactive Twitter account. That is, they did not use Twitter to actively engage with the public until after the oil spill. In fact, after the spill, Twitter accounts such as @BPGlobalPR became popular and gained more followers than the verified BP account. It seems

clear that BP was reactive rather than proactive in their use of social media, which just further demonstrates their lack of crisis communication plan preparedness.

Prior to the crisis, British Petroleum was not in the best graces in the eyes of many due to the nature of the industry in which they operate. Big oil did not need a massive crisis to be hated. Oil plays a large role in domestic politics and foreign policy. At the time of the spill oil prices had been soaring and many families and individuals in the United States were struggling financially as a result.

Environmentalists and the increasing number of individuals who, at the time, were beginning to view oil as “dirty” due to the impact of off-shore drilling were calling for big oil and the government to develop and fund cleaner energy even before the spill. All of these factors, combined with the 2005 Texas City, Texas, explosion, left BP in a situation of high reputational threat going into the crisis caused by the 2010 explosion and spill (Coombs, 2004).

Considering their high reputational threat at the time of the crisis, BP should have adopted “strategies that indicate a greater acceptance of responsibility for the crisis and simultaneously demonstrate concern for victims” (Coombs, 2004, p. 269), that is, employing social media channels to get its side of the story out and create both narrative and dialogue with its publics. BP showed lack of preparedness and would have been able to create a different outcome for themselves had they taken the time to research their best options and prepare. Had they realized and accepted their reputation and position before the spill and learned from the past, they may have recognized the importance and potential benefits of taking a more sincere path. Focusing on people, the environment, and damage to the industry rather than

science and extremely technical details of the spill would have made them better off. Additionally, more sincerity from CEO Tony Hayward and an actual apology and admittance of error may have appeased far more people than the reactive strategy that focused on technicalities after the spill.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous literature and studies about best practices in social media and best practices in crisis communications. BP did not use proper crisis communication, and that was demonstrated in their seemingly careless response. They employed social media as a *reactive* method and did not effectively engage and connect with those using social media to reach out and engage with them. They focused on very technical corrective actions that they were taking to cap the well, stop the flow of oil, and clean up the mess. Often times, the language that was used in Tweets was far too technical for the average person who is not in the industry to understand. For example, a Tweet from July 15, 2010 says “At 10:30am we closed the kill line. At that point the only flow was going out the choke line.” Technical language like that can be unclear to an average person unless they had knowledge of what a kill line and choke line are. At times during the spill, BP even used social media to make jokes about the situation, including one from May 27, 2010 about clean up resuming as soon as a XXL wet suit was found for a larger individual responsible for clean up — a strategy that clearly should have been avoided if they were concerned about their image in any way.

Also in accordance with previous literature was this study’s findings about the way individuals used social media to reach and connect with BP. The greatest percentage (63.4%) of Tweets directed at @BP\_America in this study was negative.

Considering the gravity of the situation and that most people have been found to express a strong feeling in either direction when addressing a company or product on social media, the large negative social media response was to be expected. The large percentage of negativity can also be attributed to be reactive to BP's use of Twitter during the crisis. Their lack of willingness to engage with social media users, in addition to their response strategies, worked against them as evidenced by the findings in this study.

### *Summary*

Social media has changed the way individuals communicate. Two-way communication through methods other than meeting face-to-face or through telephones is now the norm. Communication platforms like Twitter and other social media have bridged a gap between individuals and companies. The need for transparency, honesty, and connection is greater than ever because of how accessible everyone has become. It is no longer necessary to write a letter or place a phone call to voice your opinion about a company or situation. Press releases, press conferences, and traditional methods of public relations are now just part of the practice of building and maintaining relationships with the public because of social media.

During times of crisis, social media has become a vital outlet to gather and send information. It has become expected for an organization, individual, or company to use social media to address concerns and disseminate information during times of crisis whether they are emergency crises, corporate crises, technical malfunctions, or otherwise. BP's slow reaction on social media and unwillingness to

engage with concerned citizens looking to engage on Twitter and other social media was just fuel to the fire during the oil spill and its clean up.

Although the well has been capped in the Gulf and billions of dollars have been spent on the clean up and on compensation measures for citizens in the Gulf, BP still faces harsh criticism for their handling of the oil spill. As time passes and more information comes out about BP practices before and during the spill, in addition to the amount of damage done to the environment, industry, and health of Gulf citizens, BP has to continue to address the crisis and practice crisis communication. Their use of social media has evolved from being nearly non-existent to being active on many platforms and also demonstrating slightly more willingness to engage.

### *Implications*

There are several implications that result from this study. The first is that the study demonstrates the need for companies and organizations to have a crisis communication plan in place that carefully selects the strategies that they will use in accordance with best practices. Some research would have given evidence to support that BP should have been less technical and more apologetic and sincere in the wake of the disaster. Some forethought about using social media in the crisis communication plan would have allowed them to be more proactive rather than reactive and more engaging rather than using the platform to distribute technical information. Crisis communication has demonstrated in the past how it can be used to transform situations and allow embattled organizations to overcome and move on after the crisis ends. BP did not have to look to far to see what works and what

does not work in crisis communication. Although the situation was unique in many ways, the individuals responsible for the crisis communication plan could have looked to the past. Specifically, they could have avoided Exxon's mistakes.

Another implication from this study for public relations professionals includes knowing the importance of knowing your audience and their concerns. Had BP known their audience and gauged their concerns, they could have directly addressed them. Social media allows for monitoring what people are saying about a particular company through channels such as blogs and Tweets. Taking the time to search social media and engage those with concerns, criticisms, or even support helps better identify concerns and address them. BP's Twitter account did not mirror the concerns of those trying to connect with them. The social media in general, and Twitter in particular, are more than platforms for entertainment; they have demonstrated their serious implications and power and should not have been overlooked and misused as they were by BP. BP's negligent behavior was called to attention in a Tweet from @Mackcollier who said "Seriously if @BP\_America doesn't care enough to monitor Twitter or engage here, what makes us think they care about @BPGlobalPR?".

This study showed how individuals used social media in times of crisis to voice their opinions. In this case, there was no shortage of Tweets harshly criticizing every move that BP was making. On May 3, 2010 @NaturalPapa Tweeted "Hey @BP\_America - why are citizens volunteering to clean your freakin' mess? Put those profits to good use and clean up after yourself." Further a Tweet from June 4, 2010 generated originally from @LuxuryPRGal but re-Tweeted numerous times stated



“BP is spending \$50 MILLION on a new ad campaign. They should spend that on cleaning up the ocean. RT if u agree @BP\_America.” Strategic planning and proper employment of social media in the future can allow for public relations practitioners to achieve better outcomes than the outcomes reached by the BP public relations plan.

#### *Limitations and Direction for Further Research*

This study focused only on one aspect of social media, Twitter, and its use in crisis communications. The results of this study demonstrate how BP’s use of Image Restoration strategy was used in this one singular outlet, and how the public reacted to the situation on just that one outlet. While social media is very important, it was just one aspect of BP’s crisis response and it was only one way that the public reacted after the April 2010 Gulf Oil Spill. Twitter is a popular way to vent frustrations and feelings, but the format of the content does make it very difficult to interpret feeling as some things like sarcasm and humor are not easily understood in certain contexts.

Further research should include other social media outlets to determine if there was any variance between Image Restoration Strategies used across the platforms and also to determine if social media users tone varied across the different platforms in the messages directed towards BP. More research may also include identifying any difference in tones and message reception in different geographic areas. This study does not take into consideration where the message sender lives and whether or not they were directly affected by the spill or not.

Further research in these particular areas could identify variances and allow for better, more thorough crisis communication planning in the future.

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## APPENDIX A

### Thesis Coding

#### Units of Analysis:

The study examined social media messages by British Petroleum (BP) and others. Several units of analysis will be examined in response to the social media content generated by BP America as a response to the oil spill.

#### Social Media Type:

1. Comments generated by the public toward @BP\_America on Twitter
2. Twitter content generated by @BP\_America

#### Restoration Strategy:

1. Restoration strategy
2. Not restoration strategy

#### Image Restoration Strategy (Benoit, 1997):

1. **Simple Denial** – defined as when the accused party responds to any accusations by refuting claims of responsibility
2. **Shifting Blame** – defined as when the accused party responds to accusations by placing culpability on another party that may or may not have been involved
3. **Provocation** – defined as when the accused party admits they are to blame, but that they were provoked into committing the harmful action
4. **Defeasibility** – defined as when the accused party responds to accusations by saying that they lacked control or information needed to prevent the actions they are accused of

5. **Accidents** – defined as when the accused party responds to accusations by stating that the event was unintentional
6. **Good Intention** – defined as when the accused party responds to accusations by explaining that the event was the result something planned with good purpose that went wrong inadvertently
7. **Bolstering** – defined as when the accused party highlights positive characteristics they hold which they believe outweigh the bad in the situation
8. **Minimization** – defined as when the accused party downplays the seriousness or gravity of the situation
9. **Differentiation** – defined as when the accused party responds to the accusations by explaining that the event is different from other acts and cannot be compared to or understood through other events
10. **Transcendence** – defined as when the accused party responds to accusations by explaining that the event should be understood in a different context than it is currently being understood
11. **Attack Accuser** – defined as when the accused party turns the blame around and puts it on the party that is accusing them of causing the problem
12. **Compensation** - defined as when the accused party responds to the accusations by stating that those impacted will be able to recover damages, but does not necessarily mean that the accused is taking responsibility for causing the damage

**13. Corrective Action** – defined as when the accused party takes responsibility for undertaking necessary measures to fix the problem, but does not necessarily take responsibility for causing the problem

**14. Mortification** – defined as when the accused party admits responsibility for a certain event and asks forgiveness from the general public and those impacted

**Tone:**

1. **Positive**—favors the actions taken / comments made by BP
2. **Negative**—criticizes the actions taken / comments made by BP
3. **Neutral**—neither favors nor criticizes the actions taken / comments made by BP or there are a seemingly equal amount of positive and negative comments

**Gender of sender:**

1. Female
2. Male
3. Other



**Message Focus:**

1. Industry
2. Health
3. Environment
4. Financial and economic impact
5. Recovery
6. Other

**Date of Message****Instructions:**

Coders are responsible for accurately categorizing all data gathered as correctly as possible. First, coders entered the date that the unit of analysis was written in a MM/DD/YY format. Second, when applicable, coders categorized the writer of the unit being analyzed as Male, Female, or Other. Because the content being analyzed was coming from social media outlets, there may be some names that are aliases or not real names. These were categorized under “Other,” as well as any names that are unisex or otherwise not clear. Names that are traditionally women’s names were categorized as “Female” and traditionally masculine names as “Male.”

All data in the sample generated from BP was collected from the company’s verified Twitter account. These tweets were coded for date, restoration strategy, and when applicable, the particular Image Restoration Strategy. To code content for Image Restoration Strategy (Benoit, 1997), coders identified the strategy BP

employed in creating the message content. Coders were given a list of the 14 strategies and examples of each before the coding process begins.

The data set that is composed of comments generated by the public directed towards BP was then coded to identify tone, reference to particular subject area, date, and gender of writer. Content that was written in support of BP or their efforts to clean the Gulf, rectify the situation, or take responsibility for what they have done was categorized as "Positive." Also to be categorized as positive were comments about measures that are perceived as effective or comments about the improvements that BP is responsible for in the wake of the oil spill.

Content that condemned BP's posted message, their measures in the Gulf, and their response to the oil spill in general were categorized as "Negative." Content that criticized BP's response as ineffective, insufficient, or improper was categorized as negative. Content that challenges BP's honesty and integrity in the cleanup or aftermath in any way was also categorized as negative.








Some content had both positive and negative remarks toward BP and their response to the oil spill. Content that included equal parts negative and positive was categorized as "Neutral." Also to be categorized as neutral, were those that generally expressed no strong feeling in either direction about the actions being undertaken. For example, some responses might give a suggestion or clarification, but were neither critical nor written in praise. This content was categorized as neutral.

The content in this sample set was coded to determine the particular focus of the message, including: industry, health, environment, financial and economic impact, recovery, or other.

Before the coding and categorization process began, coders discussed and came to agreement on the meaning of the categories above. Once agreement and understanding was reached, coding begin. Intercoder reliability will be tested to ensure that a high level of agreement is reached.









## APPENDIX B

### Screen shot of Tweets from @BP\_America

-  **bp\_america** BP America  
(Update): \$60M claims fund for realtors now up and running at <http://www.gulfreclaims.com>. More info: <http://bit.ly/cBHwYL>  
09/06/2010 Reply Retweet Favorite
-  **bp\_america** BP America  
@Jorgitopaco1 Galveston looks good. Status: <http://bit.ly/cfBVdM> Past wknd photos: <http://bit.ly/9kKDrU> Live webcam: <http://bit.ly/3TP0hv>  
07/13/2010 Reply Retweet Favorite
-  **bp\_america** BP America  
Visit <http://t.co/HCVWjXsw>'s #Gulf restoration section to learn about the changes we've made to ensure #safety: <http://t.co/SnXo87r3>  
19 days ago Reply Retweet Favorite
-  **bp\_america** BP America  
@will665 Data updates 2x day: <http://bit.ly/dq1r0L>. Live subsea video feeds: <http://bit.ly/ayAii4>. Latest tech update: <http://bit.ly/dCGdd2>  
06/20/2010 Reply Retweet Favorite 4
-  **bp\_america** BP America  
@AviHein We are on FB at <http://www.facebook.com/BPAmerica> and unified spill response effort is <http://www.facebook.com/DeepwaterHorizonResponse>  
05/26/2010 Reply Retweet Favorite
-  **bp\_america** BP America  
20,000 of 100,000 claims have been filed online. File yours at <http://www.bp.com/claims> and see the process in action: <http://bit.ly/c2bdad>  
07/14/2010 Reply Retweet Favorite 3
-  **bp\_america** BP America  
@SJTonline You can find more information on the donation here: <http://bit.ly/dm6Nzs> and more about the NFWF here: <http://www.nfwf.org>  
06/22/2010 Reply Retweet Favorite

## APPENDIX C

### Screen shot of Tweets @BP\_America

-  **newshour** NewsHour  
RT @NewsHour: BREAKING: There does not appear to be oil flowing into the Gulf of Mexico. We are confirming w/@BP\_America  
07/14/2010 Reply Retweet Favorite 270
-  **alyssa\_milano** Alyssa Milano  
I'd hate to be the guy/gal running the BP\_America twitter page. That is all. #OilSpill  
05/10/2010 Reply Retweet Favorite 30
-  **bpglobalpr** BP Public Relations  
RT @BPGlobalPR: Now accepting fan mail! Please send to: BP America c/o Tony Hayward; 501 Westlake Park Blvd Houston, TX 77079 No turds.  
06/15/2010 Reply Retweet Favorite 674
-  **nprnews** NPR News  
RT @nprnews: BP America Doesn't Flinch At Potential \$14 Bln Payout <http://n.pr/c481wp>  
05/11/2010 Reply Retweet Favorite 13
-  **nrdc** NRDC  
Not even! Oil still washing ashore in AL LA FL & MS RT@BP\_America NRDC Beach Report includes info on improved conditions since #BP #oilspill  
06/29/2011 Reply Retweet Favorite 12
-  **markknoller** Mark Knoller  
Other BP execs in the mtg incl CEO Tony Hayward, Managing Dir Bob Dudley & BP America CEO Lamar McKay.  
06/16/2010 Reply Retweet Favorite 4
-  **nrdc** NRDC  
RT @NRDC: Seriously? BP America says victims of its calamity are receiving too much money from their government-administered..  
02/17/2011 Reply Retweet Favorite 8
-  **markknoller** Mark Knoller  
And @mikeallen reported yesterday that Geoff Morrell, Pentagon spokesman under Gates, taking over as Head of Communications for BP America.  
09/06/2011 Reply Retweet Favorite 7