

Use of Image Repair Strategies and Narrative in the Oscar Pistorius Murder Case

Introduction

On February 15, 2013, authorities charged Olympic sprinter Oscar Pistorius with the murder of his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp. Pistorius denied the allegation that he intended to kill Steenkamp, claiming to have mistaken her for an intruder at his home in Pretoria, South Africa, and that he fired shots in self defense.

This paper will first describe the image repair strategies Pistorius used in his communication following the shooting, focusing on the affidavit he presented to the court. This paper will then discuss media criticism of the narrative Pistorius presented about the night of the shooting, in order to evaluate the reliability of that narrative and how successfully he used the image repair strategies described. I contend that the effectiveness of such strategies can depend, in part, on the narrative they are contained within. When combined with a reliable narrative, image repair strategies are more likely to be successful.

Image Repair

William Benoit's image repair theory "is based upon the assumption that an individual's or an organization's most important asset is its reputation" (Zhang & Benoit, 2009) and that "restoring, or protecting one's reputation is a primary goal after a crisis" (Benoit, 1995). These strategies are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Benoit's image repair strategies

Strategy	Key characteristic	Example
<i>Denial</i>		
Simple denial	Did not perform act	I did not do it
Shift the blame	Another performed act	My accountant did it
<i>Evading responsibility</i>		
Provocation	Response to another's act	Opponent attacked first
Defeasibility	Lack of information/ability	Did not know about bill
Accident	Mishap	Miscalculation was an accident
Good intentions	Meant well	Tried to reduce deficit

Strategy	Key characteristic	Example
<i>Reducing offensiveness of event</i>		
Bolstering	Stress good traits	Look at accomplishments
Minimization	Act not serious	Only 20 million
Differentiation	Less offensive than similar acts	Not a tax increase, a revenue enhancer
Transcendence	More important values	Tax evasion as protest, not dishonesty
Attack accuser	Reduce accuser's credibility	Witness is a liar
Compensation	Reimburse victim	Return illegal funds
<i>Corrective action</i>	Plan to resolve/prevent recurrence of problem	New policy on accepting campaign contributions
<i>Mortification</i>	Apologize	I'm very sorry

(Zhang & Benoit, 2009)

Pistorius used several of these strategies in his affidavit to the court, relying heavily on denial, evading responsibility, and reducing offensiveness of the event.

Simple Denial

“Simple denial happens when a defense claims that an undesirable act did not occur or that the accused was not the one who performed it” (Zhang & Benoit, 2009). In his affidavit, Pistorius used multiple instances of simple denial to refute the court’s charge that he is guilty of the “undesirable act” of murdering Steenkamp: “I have been informed that I am accused of having committed the offence of murder. I deny the aforesaid allegation in the strongest terms” (In full: Pistorius' affidavit to court, 2013). He claimed that “the State will not be able to present any objective facts that I committed a planned or premeditated murder” and said “I fail to understand how I could be charged with murder, let alone premeditated murder, as I had no intention to kill my girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp” (In full: Pistorius' affidavit to court, 2013). Pistorius denied that a murder occurred because he did not plan or intend to kill Steenkamp, though he did not deny shooting and killing her.

Differentiation

Benoit described differentiation as an image repair strategy that attempts to reduce the offensiveness of an act by “distinguish[ing] the alleged wrongful act from other similar but more offensive actions” (Zhang & Benoit, 2009). In his affidavit, Pistorius differentiated the offensive act

of premeditated murder from shooting a home intruder in self defense. He described waking up to bring in the fan from the balcony and close the sliding doors, after which he claimed:

I heard a noise in the bathroom and realised that someone was in the bathroom... I believed that someone had entered my house... I grabbed my 9mm pistol from underneath my bed. On my way to the bathroom I screamed words to the effect for him/them to get out of my house and for Reeva to phone the police. It was pitch dark in the bedroom and I thought Reeva was in bed. I noticed that the bathroom window was open. I realised that the intruder/s was/were in the toilet because the toilet door was closed and I did not see anyone in the bathroom. I heard movement inside the toilet. The toilet is inside the bathroom and has a separate door. It filled me with horror and fear of an intruder or intruders being inside the toilet. I thought he or they must have entered through the unprotected window. As I did not have my prosthetic legs on and felt extremely vulnerable, I knew I had to protect Reeva and myself. I believed that when the intruder/s came out of the toilet we would be in grave danger (In full: Pistorius' affidavit to court, 2013).

This narrative, describing perceived intruder(s) and Pistorius' intention to protect himself and Steenkamp during a home invasion seems to be an attempt to redefine the shooting incident as self defense, which is a far less offensive act than premeditated murder. He also makes it clear that he thought Steenkamp was still in bed, which seems to indicate that he did not mean to shoot her.

Provocation

Benoit defined provocation as an image repair strategy that attempts to evade responsibility by “explain[ing] that the offensive act occurred in response to someone else’s offensive act, so the action is “a reasonable reaction to that provocation”” (Zhang & Benoit, 2009). In his affidavit, Pistorius stated that he fired shots believing that one or more intruders had broken into his home (an offensive act). He stated “I am acutely aware of violent crime being committed by intruders entering homes with a view to commit crime, including violent crime. I have received death threats before. I have also been a victim of violence and of burglaries before. For that reason I kept my firearm, a 9 mm Parabellum, underneath my bed when I went to bed at night” (In full:

Pistorius' affidavit to court, 2013). This description of his concerns about violent crime committed by home intruders, along with his past experiences of death threats and burglaries seems intended to make the fact that he sleeps with a gun under his bed seem reasonable.

In his affidavit, he described the fear he felt when he believed that there was an intruder in his home: "I felt a sense of terror rushing over me. There are no burglar bars across the bathroom window and I knew that contractors who worked at my house had left the ladders outside... I believed that when the intruder/s came out of the toilet we would be in grave danger... I fired shots at the toilet door and shouted to Reeva to phone the police" (In full: Pistorius' affidavit to court, 2013). This narrative seems intended to make firing shots into the toilet door seem like a reasonable response to a frightening and potentially dangerous situation.

Defeasibility

Benoit described defeasibility as another strategy for evading responsibility. "Defeasibility claims the offensive act occurred due to a lack of information or ability" (Zhang & Benoit, 2009). Pistorius mentioned multiple times in his affidavit that he told Steenkamp to call the police, and that he thought she was still in bed. He stated that after he fired shots through the toilet door he noticed that she was not responding. "I realised that Reeva was not in bed. That is when it dawned on me that it could have been Reeva who was in the toilet... With the benefit of hindsight I believe that Reeva went to the toilet when I went out on the balcony to bring the fan in" (In full: Pistorius' affidavit to court, 2013). This narrative seems intended to show that Pistorius did not have enough information to avoid shooting Steenkamp, since he thought she was still in bed.

Bolstering

Benoit defined bolstering as an attempt to reduce the offensiveness of an act by "stressing good traits of individuals or organizations so as to offset negative affect from the offensive act" (Zhang & Benoit, 2009). In his affidavit, Pistorius indicated that he loved Steenkamp and valued their relationship. He stated: "We were deeply in love and I could not be happier. I know she felt the

same way” and referred to her as “my beloved Reeva” (In full: Pistorius' affidavit to court, 2013).

This emphasis on how much he cared for her seems to be a bolstering tactic meant to show that he loved her too much to murder her.

Upon discovering that he'd shot Steenkamp, Pistorius described in his affidavit how he tried to help her:

I battled to get her out of the toilet and pulled her into the bathroom. I phoned Johan Stander ("Stander") who was involved in the administration of the estate and asked him to phone the ambulance. I phoned Netcare and asked for help. I went downstairs to open the front door. I returned to the bathroom and picked Reeva up as I had been told not to wait for the paramedics, but to take her to hospital. I carried her downstairs in order to take her to the hospital. On my way down Stander arrived. A doctor who lives in the complex also arrived. Downstairs, I tried to render the assistance to Reeva that I could, but she died in my arms (In full: Pistorius' affidavit to court, 2013).

This narrative seems meant to indicate that Pistorius did everything he could to try to save Steenkamp's life, and therefore did not intend to kill her. He also pointed out that: “After the shooting I did not attempt to flee. Rather, I accepted Stander would contact the police, and I remained at the scene” (In full: Pistorius' affidavit to court, 2013). This seems meant to highlight his good actions by noting that he did not behave like a guilty person by fleeing the scene.

Good Intentions

Benoit described good intentions as a strategy for evading responsibility which “admits that the accused performed the wrongful act but claims that it was justified by the accused's laudable purposes” (Zhang & Benoit, 2009). In his affidavit, Pistorius claimed that he fired shots at what he believed was an intruder in his home, in order to protect himself and Steenkamp. His narrative described “horror” at the idea of an intruder, and he stated that “I knew I had to protect Reeva and myself” (In full: Pistorius' affidavit to court, 2013).

Summary of Image Repair Strategies

The image repair strategies used by Pistorius are summarized below. The effectiveness of these strategies is somewhat debatable. While Pistorius was granted bail, the rationality of his narrative has been subject to criticism, as described in the following section.

Table 2: Image repair strategies used by Pistorius

Strategy	Key characteristic	Example
<i>Denial</i>		
Simple denial	Did not perform act	Did not intend to kill Reeva, did not commit murder
<i>Evading responsibility</i>		
Provocation	Response to another's act	Shooting was a response to a perceived intruder
Defeasibility	Lack of information/ability	Did not know Reeva was in the bathroom, thought she was still in bed
Good intentions	Meant well	Tried to protect himself and Reeva by shooting an intruder
<i>Reducing offensiveness of event</i>		
Bolstering	Stress good traits	Was in love with Reeva, tried to save her life after he realized he'd shot her, did not flee the scene of the shooting
Differentiation	Less offensive than similar acts	Shooting was self defense, not murder

Based upon Table 2 in Zhang & Benoit, 2009.

Narrative Probability and Narrative Fidelity

The search for order following a crisis “is a rhetorical exigency; it takes the form and substance of a narrative, a series of statements that is expected to present a factually accurate, coherent, and probable account for the event and its proper resolution” (Heath, 2004). Kirsten Theye argues that:

Within those subgenres of apologia in which the rhetor cannot possibly deny the negative action, narrative is a critical component of successful apologia. One way to drastically increase the acceptance, and therefore the effectiveness, of these types of apologia is to include a well-defined narrative. Narrative is uniquely suited to function as a framing device that can shape the facts of the story to reflect more positively on the person who is apologizing. In addition, the narrative works to create an intimate connection with the audience by offering a personal testimony of the incident (Theye, 2008).

For a narrative to successfully meet those requirements, it must have both narrative probability and narrative fidelity:

Narrative probability is a judgment of the extent to which a story holds together, rings true, and is free from internal contradiction. Narrative fidelity refers to the weight of values, good reasons, consideration of fact, consequence, consistency, and the degree to which a story has bearing on relevant issues. Narratives, especially those enacted during a crisis, give audiences, both internal and external to an organization, the chance to know (test hypotheses) which accounts are reliable” (Heath, 2004).

Pistorius’ narrative about the night of the shooting has been questioned by commentators.

In an article for Slate, William Saletan (2013) noted that:

Pistorius lives in a hyper-secure gated community (Peters, 2013) that advertises a “solid, electrified security wall” (Why Silverwoods?) laser sensors, and biometric locks. Wealthy South Africans move to such communities precisely so they can go outside without fear (Serino, 2013). At last week’s bail hearing, a police officer testified that there were two dogs outside the window where Pistorius claimed an intruder might have entered (Owen, 2013). The prosecutor also asked why, if Pistorius feared burglars, he slept with his balcony doors open.

Saletan’s remarks call into question the narrative probability of some of the statements in Pistorius’ affidavit, particularly his terror that an intruder had entered through the bathroom window and his general concern about people breaking into homes in order to commit crimes. Additionally, Saletan stated that “there’s no record of any burglary-like incident at Pistorius’ home. The two incidents he has acknowledged were false alarms” (Saletan, 2013), which seems to contradict the claim in Pistorius’ affidavit that he had been the victim of previous burglaries.

Saletan also questioned Pistorius’ description of retrieving his gun and moving through the house before firing shots through the door to the toilet. Based on floor plans for Pistorius’ home that were presented in court, Saletan (2013) described the following:

[Pistorius'] bedroom door wasn't down the hall, where he'd heard the purported burglar noises. It was in the entryway right next to him. All he had to do was wake Steenkamp and slip out with her. His "limited mobility," which supposedly prevented him from making it 15 feet to the bedroom door, somehow didn't deter him from maneuvering 20 feet down the hall toward the danger, and around a corner for another 15 feet to where he thought the intruder was. There, a homeowner ostensibly too terrified to turn on a light in his bedroom, or even unlock his bedroom door and flee, had no trouble firing four shots through the locked toilet door, which offered no escape route. If there really was an armed intruder, this was the course of action most likely to escalate the carnage.

The circumstances described above call into question the narrative probability that Pistorius fired the shots in order to protect Steenkamp and himself from the perceived intruder.

With regard to narrative fidelity, Heath explains that "consequence is a standard by which key publics consider the likelihood and desirability of believing some account. The facts presented are judged by the extent to which they are consistent with those key publics know or expect to be true" (Heath, 2004). Saletan contended that the actions and reasoning Pistorius described in his affidavit were not consistent with how the public would expect a rational person to act under similar circumstances. "The magistrate who granted Pistorius bail calls these anomalies in his story "improbabilities that need to be explored" (Moore, 2013). But they're improbable only if you assume Pistorius is a normal person. If you assume he's paranoid, violent, and reckless, his version of events begins to make sense" (Saletan, 2013).

Conclusion

Pistorius' affidavit used several of Benoit's image repair strategies, particularly denial, evading responsibility, and reducing offensiveness of the event. While Pistorius used these strategies successfully enough to be granted bail, his narrative of the night of the shooting fails with regard to narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Because his narrative is not reliable, it has come under media criticism, rendering the image repair strategies less effective. Though the case

has yet to go to trial, Pistorius' reputation is tarnished in the media. While some people may still remember him as an inspirational athlete, others may only remember him as a paranoid murder suspect.

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