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# Image Restoration for University Leaders' Public Health COVID-19 Response: A Case Study of Notre Dame

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### ABSTRACT

*Do as I say, not as I do* is a common phrase that applies to the case of Notre Dame's president as he began the Fall 2020 semester chastising students for gathering in large groups off campus leading to the spread of COVID-19 while he, just a month later, gathered unmasked in the U.S. White House Rose Garden to celebrate the nomination of a Notre Dame alum to the Supreme Court. This study draws upon image restoration strategies in crisis response literature to examine Notre Dame and its president's public response to both the two-week move to remote education in Fall 2020 following COVID-19 outbreak among its students and the unmasked attendance to an event that resulted in Notre Dame's president testing positive for COVID-19. Overall, *evasion of responsibility and corrective action* typified the university's response to students' behaviors that led to public health risk, but *mortification* along with contradictory messages *evading responsibility* typified the individual response of the university's president that led to public health risk. Of interest to the case is the lack of religious appeal intertwined in the image restoration strategies used in the president's apology yet the use of religious appeal in the university's accusations against student public health behavior. Given that Notre Dame is a religiously affiliated university and the president is clergy, the inconsistent use of religious appeal may undermine the image restoration rhetoric of the president.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, crisis response, image restoration, university public health response

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## Introduction

Institutions of higher education (IHEs) are communities, for which public health is a salient concern. From public health issues like meningitis to alcohol poisoning, IHE administration is held accountable for developing and enforcing risk reduction health protocols. Enter COVID-19 in Spring 2020, and IHE administrators closed their campuses, initiated remote learning, and developed public health protocols to prevent, test, and trace the spread of COVID-19. Summer 2020 was a tumultuous time as administrators, crisis and public health staff, and faculty weighed in on how to deliver education to their students in the COVID-19 era for Fall 2020. In their review of 3,000 U.S. institution's plans, the College Crisis Initiative (C2i) indicated that only 10% would be fully online with 34% as primarily online and only 23% primarily in person with 21% as hybrid (Elias, Troop, & Wescott, 2020 Oct. 1). That means that somewhere between 85-90% of campuses of higher learning planned to have students on campus to some degree.

For IHEs returning to in person instruction with students, faculty, and staff on their campuses, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offered resources and guidance to maximize safety and maintain low-risk environments. Nevertheless, the CDC's guidance encouraged local, customized responses to meet the unique challenges of the IHE. "IHEs vary considerably in geographic location, size, and structure. As such, IHE officials can determine, in collaboration with state and local health officials, whether and how to implement these considerations while adjusting to meet the unique needs and circumstances of the IHE and local community. Implementation should be guided by what is feasible, practical, acceptable, and tailored to the needs of each community" (CDC, 2020, para. 3). For the University of Notre Dame, a Catholic university in Indiana typically referred to simply as Notre Dame, their return to in person education followed a phase model with Phase 5 beginning August 10, 2020 for most students, faculty, and staff to return to campus will all campus buildings

open and functioning with health and safety protocols in place (University of Notre Dame, 2020 Aug. 10). Notre Dame's multi-faceted approach included protocols for daily health checks, mask wearing, physical distancing, hand washing, and surveillance testing (University of Notre Dame, 2020).

*Do as I say, not as I do* is a common phrase that applies to the case of Notre Dame's president as he began the Fall 2020 semester chastising students for gathering in large groups off campus leading to the spread of COVID-19 while he, just a month later, gathered unmasked in the U.S. White House Rose Garden to celebrate the nomination of a Notre Dame alum to the Supreme Court. This study draws upon image restoration strategies in crisis response literature to examine Notre Dame and its president's public response to both the two-week move to remote education in Fall 2020 following COVID-19 outbreak among its students and the unmasked attendance to an event that resulted in Notre Dame's president testing positive for COVID-19. To begin, the study reviews image restoration research culminating in three case-specific research questions guiding this inquiry. Next, the methods section details what rhetorical artifacts were analyzed and how. Then, the results section reveals the image restoration strategies employed by Notre Dame's President Reverend John Jenkins. Finally, the conclusion section addresses the uniqueness of this IHE case as a religious organization with implications for further research. As this case highlights crises that threatened Notre Dame's organizational reputation, image restoration as crisis response is an apropos place to begin.

## Image Restoration

The response of an individual or group to perceptions of wrongdoing has been termed image restoration or repair (Benoit, 2015; Rowland & Jerome, 2004). In as much as crises and their responses imply responsible parties, organizational reputation may be damaged and in need of repair or, at least, maintenance in crisis response (Coombs, 2007). Strategies to restore or

repair image are forms of organizational rhetoric (Spradley, 2017). Image restoration is frequently used by rhetorical, public relations, and risk and crisis communication scholars to study crisis response messages that either directly or indirectly implicate reputation. Image restoration is both a way of categorizing crisis response messages and a way of strategizing how to respond to a crisis. Work in this area has focused on governmental (e.g. Zhang & Benoit, 2004), organizational (e.g. Benoit, 1995, 2018; Brinson & Benoit, 1999), and individual (e.g. Dewberry & Fox, 2012) responses to crises across a variety of crisis types. With roots in corporate apology (Dionisopolous & Vibbert, 1988), image restoration owes a debt of gratitude to the work of Hearit

and colleagues, who “develop[ed] corporate apology as a more refined tool for crisis communication” (Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, & Johansen, 2010, p. 340).

This study focuses on Brinson and Benoit’s (1999) work with image restoration strategies by applying those strategies to the study of Notre Dame’s response to rising COVID-19 cases and the university president’s apology for violating his own health protocols. Brinson and Benoit (1999) assert that denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action, and mortification are the means of accomplishing reputational repair. See Table 1 for clarification of their typology and sub-types.

**Table 1: Brinson and Benoit’s (1999) Image Restoration Strategies**

Strategy	Definition
<b>Denial</b>	
Simple Denial	Deny responsibility for the act/problem
Shift Blame	Attribute responsibility to another(s) for the act/problem
<b>Evasion of Responsibility</b>	
Provocation	Blame act/problem on the need to respond to another
Defeasibility	Blame act/problem on ignorance (lack of information or ability)
Accident	Blame the act/problem on no one by deeming it a mishap
Good Intentions	Shift attention to well-meaning intentions
<b>Reducing Offensiveness</b>	
Bolstering	Focus on positive acts/characterizations
Minimization	De-escalate the gravity of the act/problem by downplaying it
Differentiation	Contrast the act/problem to something more serious or offensive
Transcendence	Offer prevailing values that supersede or outweigh the negativity of the act/problem
Attack Accuser	Question and erode the credibility of accuser
Compensation	Provide something of value to the victim
<b>Corrective Action</b>	Present a plan to resolve the act/problem or prevent the act/problem from reoccurring
<b>Mortification</b>	Apologize by expressing sorrow and regret for the act/problem; Take responsibility

This study is interested in the application of image restoration strategies to the case of Notre Dame’s COVID-19 crises. The following research questions emerge as avenues forward to study image restoration rhetoric by the Catholic university.

RQ1: What image restoration strategies were used by Notre Dame in response to the two-week closing of campus in Fall 2020?

RQ2: What image restoration strategies were used by the Notre Dame president in response to his unmasked attendance at a non-socially distanced event at the U.S. White House Rose Garden?

RQ3: In what ways are religious references intertwined with image restoration?

To answer these three questions, rhetorical analysis is used.

## Methods

Rhetorical analysis of public health messaging is undertaken in this research study. Rhetorical approaches to the study of public health messages focus on symbol usage, and in this case, language. Specifically, this study uses image restoration strategies to analyze two primary sources of Notre Dame University President Reverend John Jenkins's messages to students. First, Jenkin's recorded message to students on August 18, 2020 is analyzed to address RQ 1, and second, Jenkin's apology letter is analyzed to address RQ 2. These two rhetorical artifacts were selected for analysis as they are direct messages from Jenkins to one of his primary stakeholders-students-that directly relate to the first two research questions posed in this study. Additionally, these two messages contrast risky public health behavior by, first, Notre Dame students and, second, President Jenkins. The video address on August 18, 2020 was transcribed, and then, the transcript and the apology letter were coded for instances of image restoration strategies, which the outcomes of are reflected in Tables 2 and 3 in the results section. In as much as additional context was needed to fill out the case, secondary sources were consulted including the Notre Dame website and news sources. In the next section, results will be reviewed addressing both RQ 1 and RQ 2.

## Results

"The virus is a formidable foe. For the past week it has been winning. Let us as the Fighting Irish join together to contain it." (Jenkins, 2020 Aug. 18). As Notre Dame President Reverend John Jenkins ended his address to the student body on August 18, 2020, he reiterated the public health threat COVID-19 presented. Communally, President Jenkins calls on Notre Dame to do their part, but hypocritically, the university president violates public health protocols in place and contracts COVID-19. Apology and image restoration research may focus on the content, source and/or timing (Wooten, 2006), and in this case, source and timing are backgrounded while content is foregrounded. In the following results

section, the content of President Jenkin's rhetoric is analyzed. First, his August 18<sup>th</sup> address to students and, second, his September 28<sup>th</sup> apology letter are broken down and analyzed in terms of how he achieved image restoration through denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification.

### University President Blames

Focusing on the first research question, "What image restoration strategies were used by Notre Dame in response to the two-week closing of campus in Fall 2020?" President Jenkins drew on strategies of *denial*, *evasion of responsibility*, and *corrective action* as he looked directly through the camera lens to the Notre Dame student body in his August 18, 2020 address. Speaking as the IHE's spokesperson, President Jenkins explained the rising cases of COVID-19 and the need to enact a two-week remote education strategy to reduce the spread. Early in the address, Jenkins explains, "We began to make plans to send you home and continue instruction online as we did last spring; however, with the advice and encouragement of Dr. Mark Fox, we have decided to take steps short of sending students home, at least for the time being, while protecting the health and safety of the campus community." The five minute and 23 second address quickly employed denial strategies by shifting the blame for the rapid uptick in COVID-19 cases to off campus students. Jenkins explains, "Our contact tracing analysis indicates that most infections are coming from off campus gatherings. Students infected at those gatherings passed it on to others, who, in turn, have passed the virus on to a further group." Notre Dame's denial strategy to shift blame to students was not novel; in fact, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* along with numerous news outlets ran stories chronicling universities "blaming and shaming" of students socializing (Managan, 2020 Aug. 21). Possibly one contrast of Notre Dame's student-blaming to other universities is that President Jenkins did not dwell on the attribution of responsibility to students and reassured

students that no one participating in contact tracing would be disciplined. However, he did focus on student discipline within the presentation of corrective action.

The focus of President Jenkins August 18, 2020 address was on corrective action rather than on

student-blame. During the short address, four types of corrective action were identified: health protocols, disciplinary protocols, punitive threats, and student-student surveillance, which are illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Image Restoration Response to Notre Dame Closing for Two-Weeks in Fall 2020

Image Restoration Strategy	Strategy In Use
Shift Blame: Off Campus Students <i>Another is responsible for the problem</i>	The university denied responsibility for the COVID-19 outbreak and shifted blame to off campus students: “Our contact tracing analysis indicates that most infections are coming from off campus gatherings. Students infected at those gatherings passed it on to others, who, in turn, have passed the virus on to a further group.”
Corrective Action: Health Protocols <i>Plans to solve or prevent reoccurrence</i>	The university enacted protocols to close campus for two-weeks, remind students of health protocols, and increase testing: “For at least the next two weeks, we will move undergraduate classes to remote instruction, close public spaces on campus, and restrict residence halls to residents only.”  “Off campus students should remain in residences off campus, associate with housemates only, and not come to campus for this period.”  “We previously set the limit of gathering at 20 people. The limit now will be 10 people, always wearing masks and maintaining physical distance.”  “We must be diligent in wearing masks, keeping distance, washing hands, and completing the daily health check.”
Corrective Action: Disciplinary Protocols <i>Plans to solve or prevent reoccurrence</i>	“A number of you have asked why students involved have not been disciplined for behavior that endangers the health of the community.”  Notre Dame has a policy that cooperating students in the contact tracing process and the information they provide will not result in “disciplinary action.” “We will continue to adhere to this policy because we want students to be forthright with us so that we can discover the source of the infections and keep the community safe.”  “If, however, we learn of a serious violation of our policies from other sources, we will take disciplinary action.”  “We have several reports that have been submitted and referred to the university conduct process.”
Corrective Action: Punitive Threats <i>Plans to solve or prevent reoccurrence</i>	“If these steps are not successful, we will have to send students home as we did last spring.”  Reiterating the July 27 <sup>th</sup> letter, the president went on to say, “Serious or persistent failure to comply with health protocols will be handled as a disciplinary matter for students. Depending on the nature of the incident, violation of our standards could jeopardize your presence in our campus community.”
Corrective Action: Student-Student Surveillance <i>Plans to solve or prevent reoccurrence</i>	“For your sake, for the sake of our community, and for continuing our semester on campus, please observe health protocols, avoid behavior that puts yourself or others at risk, and report unsafe activity before or after it occurs.”  “Please take care of yourself and others by following our health protocol and challenge friends and classmates to do the same.”
Good Intentions: Corrective Action is Well-Meaning <i>Motivations are beneficent, well-meaning</i>	“I know that the restrictions that we must place on you are inconvenient.”  “The objective of these temporary restrictions is to contain the spread of the virus so that we can get back to in person instruction.”

Corrective action details the responsibility of the university and the individual student to heed President Jenkins warning, “The spike in cases is very serious, and we must take serious steps to address it.” Finally, President Jenkins frames corrective action as a type evasion of responsibility – *good intentions*. He expresses good intentions by demonstrating that he and the university were motivated by the safety and well-being of the community and that the punitive action of two-weeks of remote education is temporary. He even pleads with students to adhere to the health protocols, “Please take care of yourself and others by following our health protocol and challenge friends and classmates to do the same.” It appears as if his August 18, 2020 address and subsequent corrective action alleviated the COVID-19 threat escalation. Classes resumed after the two-week period elapsed. However, the university’s crisis was not averted because President Jenkins would soon violate his own advice by attending an off campus event unmasked and undistanced.

### University President Apologizes

Notre Dame University President Reverend John Jenkins contracted COVID-19 as a result of attending a White House Rose Garden ceremony for the nomination of Notre Dame alum Judge Amy Coney Barrett to the United States Supreme Court. Images quickly emerged of Jenkins in attendance without a mask and not practicing social distancing. In violation of the health protocols for attending off campus gatherings, President Jenkins issued a formal apology in a letter on September 28, 2020, less than two months after his appeal to his own students to observe health protocols for their sake, the sake of the Notre Dame community, and the sake of in person education. Addressing RQ 2 “What image restoration strategies were used by the Notre Dame president in response to his unmasked attendance at a non-socially distanced event at the U.S. White House Rose Garden?” Table 3 outlines the image restoration strategies used by President Jenkins in his apology letter.

**Table 3:** Image Restoration Response to Notre Dame President Attending Event Unmasked

Image Restoration Strategy	Strategy In Use
Provocation <i>Response to an act of another</i>	Attendance was in response to an invitation: “Last Saturday morning I received, on very short notice, an invitation to attend the nomination of Judge Amy Coney Barrett to the United States Supreme Court.”
Good Intentions <i>Motivations were well-meaning and benevolent</i>	Attendance was for the good of the university: “It was important, I believed, that I represent the University at this historic event to support a faculty colleague and alumna of Notre Dame who is greatly respected by academic and judicial peers, revered by her students and cherished by her friends.”
Bolstering <i>Stressing good actions and traits</i>	Some risk reduction actions were taken: “When I arrived at the White House, a medical professional took me to an exam room to obtain a nasal swab for a rapid COVID-19 test. I was then directed to a room with others, all fully masked, until we were notified that we had all tested negative and were told that it was safe to remove our masks. We were then escorted to the Rose Garden, where I was seated with others who also had just been tested and received negative results.”
Mortification <i>Apologize, express regret</i>	<p>“I write to express my regret for certain choices I made that day and for failing to lead as I should have.”</p> <p>“I regret my error of judgment in not wearing a mask during the ceremony and by shaking hands with a number of people in the Rose Garden.”</p> <p>“I especially regret my mistake in light of the sacrifices made on a daily basis by many, particularly our students, in adjusting their lives to observe our health protocols.”</p> <p>“I failed to lead by example, at a time when I’ve asked everyone else in the Notre Dame community to do so.”</p>
Corrective Action <i>Plans to solve or prevent reoccurrence</i>	“After returning to campus, I consulted the Notre Dame Wellness Center and was advised to monitor carefully and report any COVID-19 symptoms. In an abundance of caution, I have decided also to quarantine in accordance with University protocols.”

Image restoration strategies including *evasion of responsibility* and *mortification* were used to explain and apologize for contracting COVID-19 after attending the off campus event unmasked and in close proximity of other guests. Evasion of responsibility was accomplished three sub-strategies: provocation, good intentions, and bolstering. This trio of evasion was performed as explanation or rationalization of the unmasked and non-distanced behaviors recorded during the Rose Garden ceremony. First, provocation was used by President Jenkins to explain his presence at the event. He was responding to “an invitation.” Second, good intentions were used to rationalize the attendance. He attended to “represent the University at this historic event.” Third, bolstering, which is typically associated with reducing offense rather than evasion of responsibility, functioned to rationalize his specific choice to attend without a mask or distance himself. Using pre-event protocols to bolster his and the event planners *good actions*, President Jenkins states, “When I arrived at the White House, a medical professional took me to an exam room to obtain a nasal swab for a rapid COVID-19 test. I was then directed to a room with others, all fully masked, until we were notified that we had all tested negative and were told that it was safe to remove our masks. We were then escorted to the Rose Garden, where I was seated with others who also had just been tested and received negative results.”

*Evasion of responsibility* was followed up with *mortification* as President Jenkins apologized three explicit times. Using the term “regret,” on the first occasion, he writes, “I write to express my regret for certain choices I made that day and for failing to lead as I should have.” While beginning with a general sense of regret, he continues by specifying what he regretted. “I regret my error of judgment in not wearing a mask during the ceremony and by shaking hands with a number of people in the Rose Garden.” Despite the use of *evasion of responsibility* prior to expressing *mortification*, President Jenkins does not return

to *evasion of responsibility* at any time in his letter after the initial explanation and rationalization. The order of the image restoration strategies suggests that President Jenkins may have found it challenging to reject the invitation, impossible to have learned the risk protocols in advance, and had a false sense of safety through the testing process. Nevertheless, by not returning to *evasive* image restoration strategies and repeating *mortifying* statements, the letter resounds with regret. Negative implications of contradiction was avoided by emphasizing “regret” and de-emphasizing *evasion*. Furthermore, President Jenkins culminates the apology with *corrective action* that reinforced his assumption of responsibility for failure “to lead by example” in the Notre Dame community.

Ending his apology with this statement, “Thank you for your continued efforts during this semester, and for your understanding,” President Jenkins expresses an anticipated response of public health protocol adherence and a “pass” for his violation of protocols that he had, at the very least, endorsed in his address to the university on August 18, 2020. Early indicators demonstrate that negative media coverage of the president’s public health hypocrisy did not precipitate into student rebellion of public health protocols. Notre Dame’s campus has remained open for in person education through the time in which this study was conducted.

## Conclusion

Universities and colleges worldwide closed their campuses and pivoted to remote education in Spring 2020, but many, like Notre Dame, chose to reopen in Fall 2020 with strict COVID-19 public health protocols in place to reduce risks to the campus communities. As a case, Notre Dame stands out, in that the university president addressed the student body on August 18, 2020 announcing a move to two-weeks of remote instruction in response to rising cases of COVID-19 attributed to off-campus risky gatherings. Then, the university president himself attended, what would be known as an off-campus risky gathering and contracted COVID-19. In sum,

*evasion of responsibility* and *corrective action* typified the university's response to students' behaviors that led to public health risk, but *mortification* and contradictory messages *evading responsibility* typified the individual response of the university's president that led to public health risk. Through repetitive *mortification* and *corrective action*, President Jenkins strove to emphasize "regret" – regret for his violation of specific health protocols and for his failure to lead by example.

Another uniqueness of the Notre Dame case is that it is not just a university; it is a religious organization. Turning attention to RQ3 "In what ways are religious references intertwined with image restoration?" the Notre Dame president scantily made a religious reference in his image restoration rhetoric. At the culmination of the message to students on August 18, 2020, the president made the only direct religious reference in either of the two primary messages analyzed in this study, stating: "We ask as always for the intercession of Notre Dame, our Lady, and for God's help" (Jenkins, 2020 Aug. 18).

As Notre Dame President Reverent John Jenkins ended his address to the Notre Dame student body on August 18, 2020, he concluded with an appeal to the name sake saint of the university and God. This is the only distinct religious appeal in his message to his Notre Dame public in both his response to close campus for two-weeks and his apology for COVID-19 risky health behaviors. Of interest to the case is the lack of religious appeal intertwined in the image restoration strategies used in the president's apology, yet, the use of religious appeal, albeit limited, in the university's accusations against student public health behavior. Given that Notre Dame is a religiously affiliated university and the president is clergy, the inconsistent use of religious appeal may undermine the image restoration rhetoric of the president.

Further studies may extend broader application of image restoration as comparative cases of other universities in the U.S. and elsewhere to better understand COVID-19 public health

communication on college campuses, especially with regard to campus closures. Additionally, further studies may investigate the role of religious appeals in COVID-19 public health communication by religiously affiliated organizations that close due to pandemic-related risks.

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