Does a Media Organization's Defense of its Own Image Matter?

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Organizations and individuals depend on the mass media to transmit a transgressor's apologia to the public. In such cases, the effectiveness of the apologia is dependent on public reception of and attitude to the apologia. However, with most studies of crisis communication focused on transgressors who rely on media as third party, little is known of what happens when that third party (media) is the transgressor. For instance, how do other media react when a competing medium transgresses? And how does a media transgressor frame its message to its audience? This study on *The Sun* newspaper (UK) investigates those questions. In this case, *The Sun* issued an apologia after a racial faux pas that outraged the city of Liverpool. The study finds that competing media took advantage of the situation not only to critique *The Sun*, but also to excoriate the newspaper by insinuating unethical motivation for *The Sun*'s publications and suggesting that *The Sun*'s readers abandon the newspaper. In contrast, a textual analysis shows how *The Sun* framed a different message to its readership.

Keywords: apologia, newspaper reputation, competing media, media framing, image repair and crisis communication

Kalb (2015) and Eccles, Newquist, and Schatz (2007) pointed to the importance of corporate image by noting that a damaged image comes with costs to the company. Eccles et al. (2007) claimed, "In an economy where 70% to 80% of market values come from hard-to-assess intangible assets such as brand equity, intellectual capital, and goodwill, organizations are especially vulnerable to anything that damages their reputations" (para. 1). Studies also demonstrate that organizations with poor reputations have difficulty attempting to repair a poor image from an immediate crisis (Decker, 2012; Lyons & Cameron, 2004; Mason, 2014; Money, Saraeva, Garnelo-Gomez, Pain, & Hillenbrand, 2017; Rhee & Valdez, 2009; Turk, Jin, Stewart, Kim, & Hipple, 2012).

Furthermore, organizations and individuals depend on the mass media to transmit a transgressor's apologia to the public. In such a situation, scholars note that the transgressing party (organization or individual) depends not only on its ability to choose effective apologia strategies, but

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also on the media to frame the apologia in ways that the organization or the individual may find successful. However, there are no guarantees that a third party, like the media, will ensure effectiveness for an organization.

What is unknown is what happens when the third party (media) is the transgressor. Unfortunately, because most studies have focused on transgressors who rely on the media as third party, little is known about what happens when that third party (media) is the transgressor. Traditionally, studies of transgressing nonmedia organizations have focused on image repair issues, whereas studies on transgressing media organizations have been labeled journalistic paradigm repair. Paradigm repair assumes that the transgressing medium violated some aspect of media reporting paradigm, such as credibility or confidentiality, among others. However, repairing a broken paradigm is also restoring a journalistic image. This study negotiates between these two systems of image repair while acknowledging differences between media and nonmedia transgressors. It acknowledges that media have advantages over nonmedia organizations on the issue of communication access to large publics.

Specifically, the study investigates how other media react to *The Sun*'s transgression and how *The Sun* frames its message to its audience. Given that there are few studies of media organization transgressors, studies like this are welcomed as a way to advance knowledge of organizational apologia. Presently, there is a belief, worth investigating, that media often support fellow media during times of crises by warning of "chilling effects" (Reider, 1997).

The Sun, a newspaper in the United Kingdom, is an organization with a poor reputation. Chippindale and Horrie (2013) cited the newspaper's ban by a public library in 1970 over its sexual content, which included serialization of erotic books, other indecent stories, and photographs. In the rating of public trust of various news brands in the UK, *The Sun* newspaper ranks among the lowest (Turvill, 2014). Survey participants rated *The Sun* just 3.7 of 10 as a trusted source of news, making it one of the least trusted sources, in the bottom five. However, the newspaper is the second most read in the country (National Readership Survey [NRS], 2017; see Table 1).

Table 1. Timeline of The Sun's Case.

Date (2017)	Activity
April 9	Ross Barkley is punched in a Liverpool bar.
April 14	*The Sun* publishes MacKenzie's racist article on Barkley and the bar incident.
April 15	There is immediate public outrage against the article. Hundreds petition the IPSO.
	Later that day, *The Sun* pulls down the online version of the article.
April 15–May 19	Other media begin to respond adversely to *The Sun*'s apologia. The response continues into May 19 (last date of data collection). On April 15, Everton FC bans *The Sun* from its grounds. The mayor of Liverpool files a police report against *The Sun*.
April 22	*The Sun* issues a revised apologia that is published verbatim.
May 15	*The Sun* announces that MacKenzie will not return to the newspaper.

Tony Gallagher, editor in chief of *The Sun,* described the newspaper as "more than a newspaper. It is an instigator, an entertainer, a cultural reference point . . . [it] inspires reaction, raises the pulse. It's brave, bold and bawdy. . . *The Sun* makes life simpler, richer and more sensational" (n.d., paras. 1–4). It is an apt description of the newspaper and provides a vision of the image that the newspaper seeks to create daily in the minds of its readers. The focus of this study, however, is *The Sun*'s publication of a racist story on one of England's international footballers, Ross Barkley, in early 2017 (Football, in this paper, refers to soccer (aka associate foortball). The newspaper immediately faced a backlash requiring image repair.

Background

The racist-laced column appeared on April 14, 2017, and likened Ross Barkley to a gorilla. Barkley, a local Liverpool boy, has a Nigerian grandfather but is widely identified as Caucasian. Ross Barkley, who at the time played for Everton FC[1] in the English Premier League, had gone to a local Liverpool pub to celebrate a win. While there, a client at the club punched him in the face (Hay & Jones, 2017). This, of course, became a big story, and a video of the incident emerged. The issue of race took center stage when Kelvin MacKenzie (2017) wrote about the incident in his column in *The Sun* on April 14. Following is the transcript of the column, titled "Here's Why They Go Ape at Ross."

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[1] Ross Barkley has since transferred to Chelsea FC in London.

PERHAPS unfairly, I have always judged Ross Barkley as one of our dimmest footballers. There is something about the lack of reflection in his eyes, which makes me certain not only are the lights not on, there is definitely nobody at home. I get a similar feeling when seeing a gorilla at the zoo. The physique is magnificent but it's the eyes that tell the story. So it came as no surprise to me that the Everton star copped a nasty right-hander in a nightclub for allegedly eyeing up an attractive young lady who, as they say, was "spoken for." The reality is that at £60,000 a week and being both thick and single, he is an attractive catch in the Liverpool area, where the only men with similar pay packets are drug dealers and therefore not at nightclubs, as they are often guests of Her Majesty. However, 23-year-old Mr Barkley will have learned a painful lesson. He is too rich and too famous to be spending his time in local hangouts where most of the customers have only just broken through the £7.50-an-hour barrier. He should follow the thought process of fellow Scouser Wayne Rooney, who when he wanted to get knocked out invited his mates round to his house for a drink. Now that's a man with brains. (p. 2, emphasis in original)

It was a shocking article. Though a recent YouGov.com poll of 1,965 British adults indicates that 20% more Britons see race relations to be worse in America compared with Britain, there are significant racial issues in Britain (Dahlgreen, 2013). Although individual racism has receded because of a policy focus, Andrews (2015) reported that very little progress has been made at the systemic or institutional levels. Though *The Sun* made its name as a tabloid that enjoys sensationalism and controversies, there are incidences that cross the line. A search of tabloid apologies and apologia demonstrates regret over fabrication, intrusion of privacy, and overt racism, which generate either public outcry or legal charges. Thus, being associated with overt racism and attracting public backlash is an unlikely goal of *The Sun*.

Liverpool's Mayor, Joe Anderson, reported the article to both the police and the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). IPSO acknowledged that it received numerous complaints about the matter. Ruddick and Sweney (2017) argued that the actions of the newspaper could damage the opportunity for its owner, Rupert Murdoch, to successfully complete a purchase of an additional 61% stake in Sky broadcasting. They claimed that the incidents could show that "Murdoch would not be a 'fit and proper' owner of Sky" (para. 11). At the time, Rupert Murdoch (owner of *The Sun*) was negotiating for full control of British satellite broadcaster Sky. Those considerations may have forced *The Sun* to act quickly. By the afternoon of April 14, it took down the article from its online site and issued an apologia in a brief news story that it carried the next day. The apologia blamed MacKenzie by noting his "'wrong' and 'unfunny' views about the people of Liverpool" and adding that he had been "suspended with immediate effect" ("Kelvin MacKenzie Suspended," 2017, p. 1). It also denied knowledge of Barkley's heritage and apologized to Liverpool town. However, public pressure against the newspaper continued. Thus, on April 22, *The Sun* issued another apologia (see Table 1 for timeline of *The Sun*'s case). This time, it admitted responsibility: "We published a piece in the Kelvin MacKenzie column . . . the paper was unaware of Ross Barkley's heritage and there was never any slur intended" ("Ross Barkley—An Apology," 2017, p. 5). It also apologized to Barkley but changed its claim of corrective action to its

retraction of the online version of the offending story. This time, the apologia was also published as an official letter and not as a news story.

Literature Review

Money et al. (2017) noted that the audience for any apologia is unlikely to be monolithic. Nonetheless, most studies on apologia tend to study the audience as monolithic. This study, however, examines at least two categories of apologia audience. The first is the wider audience reached by various British newspapers in the wake of the crisis, and the other is the narrower audience of *The Sun*'s readers. In each case, the interest is not the audience reaction, but (1) how the competing media, which influence public reactions, responded to *The Sun*'s apologia, and (2) how *The Sun* framed its message in attempt to influence responses.

Media Criticism of Other Media

We begin by providing a rationale for studying *The Sun*'s competitors. Haas (2006) noted an increase in media criticism of other media but also pointed out that very little research has occurred on such criticism. Haas also categorized media criticism into (1) news media reporting about constraints to media work in general, (2) criticism of other media, and (3) news media self-criticisms. Constraints to media reporting (Chyi, Lewis, & Zheng, 2012; Esser, Reinemann, & Fan, 2001) and self-criticism (Delli Carpini, 1998) are introspective, and scholars have found that media often do not criticize their work as vigorously as they critique the work of other professions (Chyi et al., 2012; Hoyt, 2009). Furthermore, Reider (1997) argued that media often band together to defend against an external critique of media practices.

A few studies have examined media criticism of other media; these include studies that involve media criticism of WikiLeaks (Coddington, 2012), Internet news sites (Ruggiero, 2004), *The New York Times* (Hindman, 2005), and the *San Jose Mercury News* (McCoy, 2001). In the case of WikiLeaks and Internet news sites, the criticism is directed at competitors that are nontraditional news sites. These sites are excoriated for violating traditional practices. Ruggiero, for example, cited traditional media criticizing Internet news sites on issues of accountability, credibility, and objectivity. In the case of WikiLeaks, Coddington (2012) reported that *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* (London) have portrayed WikiLeaks and Julian Assange (its owner) as deviant and outside the boundaries of good journalism. Coddington specifically noted that *The New York Times* characterized "WikiLeaks as an unstable group that essentially consisted solely of an erratic, egomaniacal figure who should not be taken seriously" (p. 384).

However, McCoy (2001) and Hindman (2005) focused on criticism of traditional media competitors. McCoy (2001) and Hindman (2005) are among the few scholars who have studied how competitors react to apologia offered by a media organization. Hindman focused on *The New York Times* and its image and paradigm repair after plagiarism by one of its journalists, Jayson Blair. *The New York Times'* repair involved multiple strategies identified in Benoit's (2015) image repair theory (see Table 2).

Table 2. Benoit's Strategies Used in Defense Against Wrongdoing.

Strategy	Tactical Options
Denial	(a) *Simply deny* culpability, or (b) *Shift the blame* to another object/subject.
Evade Responsibility	When a denial strategy is unavailable, this option may be used to: (a) claim a response to *provocation*, (b) plead a lack of adequate information (*defeasibility*), (c) claim the act was *accidental* and beyond control, or (d) claim that the act resulted from a *good intention*.
Reduce Offensiveness	This strategy is used to ameliorate negative attitudes toward the offending party. There are several options, including: (a) offer to *compensate* the victim, (b) *bolster* by reminding the audience of previous good deeds or reputation, (c) *minimize* adverse effects of the act, (d) use *transcendence* by placing the act in a broad context to make it less offensive, or (e) *attack the accuser* by questioning his/her credibility.
Mortification	Admit responsibility and ask for forgiveness.
Corrective Action	Claim a plan to correct action.

These strategies included shifting blame, evading responsibility (defeasibility), reducing offensiveness (bolstering and transcendence), mortification, and corrective action. Hindman's (2005) study demonstrated how other media responded by questioning the credibility of *The New York Times*. On the other hand, McCoy's (2001) work focused on how three of the country's largest newspapers sharply scrutinized the *San Jose Mercury News'* investigative report that associated the United States' Central Intelligence Agency with the spread of crack cocaine in the country. Hindman's (2005) and McCoy's (2001) studies highlight how competitors scrutinize media organizations during a period of crisis, and, therefore, they questioned Reider's (1997) claim that media rally around a competitor that faces criticism during a crisis. Based on results of these studies, juxtaposed with Reider's claim, it is important to investigate the following:

RQ1:   How did other media respond to The Sun's *apologia?*

Role of Prior Reputation

Corporate reputation (CR) has been intensely studied since the late 1940s, according to Money et al. (2017). Although focus on CR has been intense, its definition remains unsettled. Earlier definitions view CR as a strategic function of organizations (Lange, Lee, & Dai, 2011), but increasingly, several studies support the view that reputation is based on a relationship between the organization and its stakeholders (Dowling, 2016; Fonbrum, 1996; Freeman, 2010). Tucker and Melewar (2005) described this relationship by defining CR as "perception of an organization based on its stakeholders' interpretation of that organization's past, present, and future activities and the way in which these are communicated" (p. 378). This definition of CR focuses on how stakeholders perceive organizational responses to their expectations and demands measured against the organization's key rivals.

Furthermore, Money et al. (2017), in their extensive review of CR research, noted that a corporate relationship with its stakeholders (such as *The Sun* and UK news consumers) produces a reputation for the organization that is derived from the organization's functions (e.g., news content quality), relational drivers (shared values), and third-party drivers (audience networked communication about *The Sun*). This relational reputation can be competitive (CR based on personality compared with competitors; e.g., *The Sun* is sensational) and emotional (e.g., admiration, dislike, etc., of *The Sun*). This view of CR has generated extensive research correlating public perception of a company's image repair and the company's prior reputation.

Generally, a good prior reputation increases an organization's likelihood of success during an image repair effort following a crisis (Coombs, 2006; Decker, 2012; Tucker & Melewar, 2005). In fact, Decker (2012) noted that organizations with prior good reputations are easily believed when they use a denial strategy during image repair. The opposite is the case with organizations that have poor prior reputations. The difference between how stakeholders respond to those two types of companies is based on what Decker (2012) and Hoeken and Renkema (1998) described as trust. Decker (2012) confirmed, "The firm described as having a good reputation was rated more trustworthy than a firm having a poor reputation" (p. 27). Coombs (2007), in his proposal of a situational communication crisis theory (SCCT), affirmed the importance of prior reputation to how a company is perceived during a crisis. He noted that the reputational threat faced by a company in crisis is influenced by three elements: initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and the company's prior reputation. Thus, a high crisis responsibility, existence of a crisis history, and prior poor reputation create a tough persuasive task for the organization in crafting an effective apologia. Other studies, such as one by Mason (2014), have found that attribution of crisis responsibility is also linked to attitude favorability toward an organization's reputation. In *The Sun*'s case, these attributions are related to how competing media frame a crisis during the postcrisis period and an assessment of *The Sun*'s apologia. Mason found that an organization's reputation is impacted by its perceived level of responsibility for a crisis and by media messages that emphasize responsibility for solving a crisis (treatment responsibility). Based on these issues, it is necessary to ask the following:

RQ2:   What role did prior reputation play in the media response to The Sun's *apologia?*

Impact of Media Framing

Scholars have found that media messages impact organizational image and reputation (Carroll, 2010, 2017; Meadows & Meadows, 2016). This strand of research points to how media coverage and audience perception of crisis become related in such a way that media coverage predicts audience agenda and influences audience view of the crisis. This is what Entman (1993) described as framing, which is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). Although Entman's definition of framing is widely adopted and used by researchers, there are multiple definitions of framing. However, Boydstun, Gross, Resnik, and Smith (2013) noted that all definitions of framing agree that language is central, and it is used to emphasize certain elements of a topic above others in order to shape the meaning of the narrated event.

De Vreese (2005) differentiated framing from agenda setting by noting that the latter focuses on creating awareness of the importance of certain issues, whereas the former focuses on how those issues are presented. Nevertheless, the concepts overlap where frame setting is, essentially, a second level of agenda setting (Boydstun et al., 2013). By framing, media influence the audience regarding what to think about the agenda. Several scholars have found framing to be pervasive in the media and confirmed its effect (Burgers, Konijn, & Steen, 2016; Denham, 2014; Kiousis, Park, Kim, & Go, 2013). Notably, Meadows and Meadows (2016) demonstrated how a corporation's mass media agenda influences the corporation's perceived reputation after comparing media reports and YouTube clips of selected companies to respondents' reputation rating of those companies in the 2014 Harris Poll.

Benoit (2015) argued that organizational resources make a difference in an organization's ability to pursue repair of its image. Media organizations, with access to large audiences, own resources that are critical for image repair. Therefore, studying a media organization's image repair text provides insight into the image repair process of a highly resourced organization. There are additional reasons to believe that media organizations may perform image repair differently from nonmedia organizations. Media organizations, for instance, control their own framing of image repair, whereas nonmedia organizations rely on third parties (the media) to frame, or at least negotiate framing of, their apologia. Second, media control both the content of an apologia and its volume (i.e., frequency or number of times). Nonmedia organizations have less control. Third, a media organization structures its apologia to the public. Therefore, a transgressing media organization has advantages. The RQ that follows examines possible outcomes from those advantages:

RQ3:   *How did* The Sun *frame its image repair message?*

Method

Textual analysis is used to investigate the research questions. The first two research questions require examining competing media texts that respond to *The Sun*'s apologia. The third research question involves analyzing the texts of *The Sun*'s apologia. Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000) and Porter

(1996) described textual analysis as seeking to derive meanings from the text. Frey et al. (2000) stated that "researchers use narrative approaches, for instance, to focus on major themes and stories contained in texts" (p. 237). For Porter (1996), the analysis involves "attributing meaning to large-scale units . . . by interpreting the meaning of smaller scale units (of the text)" (p. 63). Porter recommended that the focus must remain on the text in attempt to discover internal patterns or themes. The goal of this study is, therefore, to analyze newspaper texts in order to discover patterns (themes) inherent in media responses to *The Sun*'s image repair attempt and also how *The Sun* sought to frame its messages in an attempt to persuade the audience.

In this case, textual analysis is used to study British-based newspapers accessed through the LexisNexis database. The National Readership Survey of 2017 claimed that 90% of all British adults consume a news brand either in print or digitally, with 65% consuming in print and 75% via a digital platform. This demonstrates the importance of sampling such news brands. A LexisNexis search using search words like "Kelvin MacKenzie," "Ross Barkley and racism," and "*The Sun* apology" produced 186 articles that ran in British newspapers from April 14 to May 19, 2017. The next step is the selection of all appropriate articles that appeared in the top 10 newspapers (see Table 3). These articles numbered 102, with the largest number in the *Liverpool Echo* (43) and the lowest in *Daily Star* and *Express*, with an article each. Though the *Liverpool Echo* is not among the top 10 British newspapers, it is selected because it is the top newspaper in Liverpool, where Ross Barkley plays football (soccer).

Table 3. The Top 10 News Brands in Britain.[2]

Title	Average Monthly Readership
1. Daily Mail	14,322,000
2. The Sun	12,982,000
3. Metro	12,066,000
4. The Guardian	9,978,000
5.The Daily Telegraph	9,807,000
6. Daily Mirror	8,725,000
7. Daily Express	6,835,000
8. Evening Standard	6,312,000
9. The Times	6,099,000
10. The Independent	4,175,000

[2] This is derived from the UK National Readership Survey (NRS, 2017). Samples are drawn for this study from these news brands. Data include readership of print, PC, and mobile versions.

An investigation of RQ1 relied on extracting themes from newspaper texts using Corbin and Strauss's (2008) constant comparison method. This required the reading of the selected newspaper articles to discover meanings. These meanings, which can be implicit or explicit, are then compared for similarity and contrasted for dissimilarity. Those with similar meanings are identified as a theme. The initial themes are labeled and compared in order to determine which should be merged and which should be considered independent. This process is done up to a point where no further insight is discovered, and, thus, a point of exhaustion is assumed. These themes, whether positive or negative toward *The Sun*, indicate how competing media responded to *The Sun*.

For RQ2, the analyses of selected newspapers include an examination of the role that the previous reputation of *The Sun* plays in competitors' reaction to *The Sun*'s apologia. This analysis requires careful identification of any mention of *The Sun*'s previous reputation, controversies, or reputation dimensions defined by previous scholars such as Fonbrum (1996). Fonbrum's dimensions include perceptions of company likeability, product quality, financial prospects, strength of leadership, quality of its managers and workers, and good citizenship. Textual analysis of newspaper texts is particularly important because most previous measures of reputation in studies of organizational crisis have been quantitative. However, reputation is defined as a subjective and perceptive concept, which lends itself to qualitative analysis. This type of concept, measured quantitatively, provides aggregated numbers of audience felt-response to an experimental treatment. In a textual analysis, however, opportunity exists to qualitatively capture perception of reputation in a real situation; however, such "capture" invariably depends on the researcher's interpretation of text.

RQ3 requires a frame analysis of *The Sun*'s text used in response to the crisis. De Vreese (2005) and Boydstun et al. (2013) conceptualized how to uncover issue-specific frames. De Vreese, for instance, argued that frames are "specific textual and visual elements or 'framing devices.' These elements are essentially different from the remaining news story which may be considered core news facts" (p. 54). Examining text requires several readings, with the focus on identifying underlying meanings in the text within the context in which the text is written. Evidently, the method requires examining the text and separating core facts from other textual elements that may or may not be implied but are used in framing the text. Meanings are subtle or implied, and they arise from the narrative structure of the text and interactions among its elements. Meanings must be justified by the content and the context in which the text is written even though the meaning may be one of several plausible meanings. Using frame analysis allows discovery of meanings that frame the text and explains why a text is organized in a particular way, choices made in treatment of the text, and its structure, length, and word choices, among other elements.

Results

How Competitors Responded to The Sun's *Apologia (RQ1)*

Some newspapers, surprisingly, did not dedicate space to *The Sun*'s apologia. Instead, they focused on reporting announcements by *The Sun* following the crisis, including *The Sun*'s suspension of and eventual firing of MacKenzie and the banning of *The Sun* from Everton FC grounds. Beyond those

moments, those newspapers, which include the *Express* and *Daily Star*, were silent on the crisis. Only one report each was located for the *Express* and the *Daily Star*, and in each report, *The Sun* crisis was mentioned as background; the focus was on Barkley's performance for Everton against Burnley. But these were exceptions and not the rule for most of *The Sun*'s competitors. Other newspapers produced a large number of stories on the crisis. The *Liverpool Echo,* which produced the most coverage about the issue, did not hide its advocacy against *The Sun*'s repair attempts.

Several iterative readings of articles in the selected newspapers led us to four major themes: (1) that *The Sun*'s image repair did not go far enough, (2) distrust of *The Sun*, (3) sticking together to combat *The Sun*'s attack on the city and one of us (Barkley), and (4) identifying dissenters and calling them out. These themes, integratively, symbolize entrenchment and resistance to *The Sun*'s apologia.

The articles make it clear that actions taken by *The Sun* newspaper did not go far enough. Competitors noted this in news reports and opinion pieces and also cited the public in pressing forward this claim. After *The Sun*'s initial apologia, competitors called for *The Sun* to be banned from Everton FC grounds, which eventually took place. Other articles in the *Liverpool Echo* shared similar opinions, with the *Independent*, on May 10, pushing forward with a call to hold *The Sun*'s editor, Gallagher, accountable. There was also this report from Boland and Kirby of the *Independent* on April 17:

> Hillsborough campaigners have called for the sacking of senior editorial staff at *The Sun* who approved Kelvin MacKenzie's column about Everton footballer Ross Barkley. . . . It's not just MacKenzie you have to think about. (2017, p. 9)

A second theme focused on a veiled distrust of *The Sun*'s apologia. Competitors linked *The Sun*'s apologia to (1) the attempt by the paper's owner (Rupert Murdoch) to clean his media image in order to acquire 61% of Sky broadcasting and (2) the threat of revenue losses to the organization. In a sense, the media believe that the newspaper's image repair attempts are contrived, not genuine, and are motivated by other interests. *The Guardian*, the *Independent*, and *Evening Standard* linked *The Sun*'s image repair to the organization's attempts to clean up its image in order to ease Rupert Murdoch's purchase of Sky broadcasting. The *Liverpool Echo* added another dimension, focusing on the belief that *The Sun* was only apologetic because it was concerned that financial losses could result from the paper being banned. The *Liverpool Echo* cited not just bans in the city of Liverpool (by Liverpool FC and Everton FC), but also retail shops refusing to sell the paper in the city, and bans in places such as Belfast, Chester, and Tranmere Rovers' grounds. Writing in the *Liverpool Echo,* Shennan (2017) added,

> That Merseyside boycott, which has already reached Belfast, is likely to spread still further across the UK—indeed, there is now, for example, a fans' petition to ban *The Sun* from Celtic Football Club [in Scotland]. Apologies are free—but boycotts cost money. Lots of it. That's what will make *The Sun*, a vile newspaper before and after 1989, truly sorry. (paras. 8, 9)

The *Liverpool Echo* promoted the theme of the city sticking together. This theme initially arose from statements made by the city's mayor, Joe Anderson, who was cited by the *Liverpool Echo*. Mayor

Anderson used that theme to pressure Everton FC to ban *The Sun* newspaper from the club's grounds. Eventually, the *Liverpool Echo* projected the theme in its narratives about *The Sun*'s crisis. The critical aspect of this theme is the narrative of a city under attack from outsiders, such as the London-based *Sun* newspaper. The *Liverpool Echo* provided support for the theme by citing previous stories in *The Sun*, such as the false Hillsborough reports, which blamed city residents for the deaths of scores of fans, and recent stories like the Ross Barkley racist attack. The *Liverpool Echo* recommended that the city should come together and fight back. Further, the *Liverpool Echo*'s April 16 article titled "Ross Barkley Knows Everton Loves Him" (Prentice, 2017) is part of this narrative of togetherness. Anderson's claim of being embarrassed to be an Everton fan, also reported by the *Liverpool Echo*, is a related narrative to shame the Everton club into defining the attack on Barkley as an attack on the city. A sample of the narrative follows:

> He [Anderson] said: "It has been great to see the passion of the people of this city who, along with our local media, have forced News International [owner of *The Sun*] to act. I think people power won the day. Let's hope the right action is taken for this despicable, disrespectful and outrageous attack on our city and what I believe is a racial slur against one of its sons." (Thorp, 2017a, p. 12)

The final theme is the identification of dissenters and calling them out. The *Liverpool Echo* used this theme. In several articles, the *Liverpool Echo* wrote about opposing voices from a former member of parliament (MP), from the Football Writers Association, and from the Union of European Football Associations. In each case, *Liverpool Echo* made it clear, in its narrative that dissent was not to be supported. Next, I mention *Liverpool Echo*'s response to each:

> Edwina Currie [former MP] claimed Liverpool should show its "sense of humour" in a shocking interview . . . (Parry, 2017, para. 1)

> Hillsborough campaigner Margaret Aspinall says Football Writers' Association should "be ashamed of itself" for asking Liverpool and Everton to overturn bans on *The Sun*. *. . .* But the request has not gone down well with Margaret Aspinall—who lost her 18-year-old son James at the Hillsborough disaster and has campaigned for justice ever since. (Thorp, 2017b, paras. 1, 10)

> Journalists from *The Sun* will reportedly be allowed to attend European games at Anfield [Liverpool FC] and Goodison Park [Everton FC] next season. . . . The newspaper has been vehemently boycotted throughout Merseyside and beyond. . . . The latest revelation will undoubtedly cause shock and anger across Merseyside after fans applauded the bans when they were implemented. (Dunn, 2017, paras. 1,2, 10)

Clearly, the *Liverpool Echo* does not support dissenting voices to the crisis in its city. Its use of the words *shock*, *shame*, and *anger* against dissenters points to its position even if these words are expressed through voices of its sources.

What Role Did Reputation Play in Competitors'
Response to The Sun*'s Apologia? (RQ2)*

An examination of the content of media texts indicates that reputation played an important role. For instance, practically all *Liverpool Echo* articles reminded readers of MacKenzie and *The Sun*'s previous false reports on the Hillsborough stadium incident that led to 96 deaths. *The Daily Mirror* argued that suspension would not stop MacKenzie because he and *The Sun* had a reputation. *The Daily Mirror* argued as follows:

> But he [MacKenzie] gets headlines, clickbait, attention he and his paper seem to crave. It's the new currency in publishing since it went online. Katie Hopkins [*Sun*'s staff] has carved out a decent career being a bitter, horrendous hack with extreme and uninformed opinions that set out to incense and enrage. . . . The suspension won't stop MacKenzie . . . words such as MacKenzie's keep picking at the wounds. Don't encourage it. Don't read it. (Lindsay, 2017, p. 10)

The preceding text, from the *Daily Mirror*, made several points about the reputation of *The Sun*. It pointed to sensationalism as central to the newspaper's publications and alluded to sensationalism being critical to *The Sun*'s readership growth. By claiming that *The Sun* craves sensationalism, the *Daily Mirror* created a sense that sensationalism is continual, never ending, and persistent, and by using the words "since it went online," the *Daily Mirror* cited a lengthy period of the act. Moreover, it noted that this reputation is not only associated with *The Sun* but also key for *The Sun*'s journalists. The *Liverpool Echo* (Hardy, 2017, para. 9) also cited the following reputation:

> The former Sun editor has been despised on Merseyside ever since his infamous "The Truth" front page following the Hillsborough disaster which falsely accused Liverpool fans of stealing from their dying friends and family.

Importantly, competing newspapers did not only cite previous reputation of *The Sun*, but they also made judgments and recommendations beyond that. In the *Daily Mirror's* text, it clearly urged its readers, "Don't encourage it. Don't read it" (Lindsay, 2017, p. 10).

How Did The Sun *Frame Its Apologia? (RQ3)*

A frame analysis reveals the strategies that *The Sun* used in minimizing the importance of the story for its readers. Of importance is that while *The Sun*'s competitors, such as the *Liverpool Echo*, were dedicating numerous articles to the crisis during the investigated period, *The Sun* published only three articles, two of which were apologia. Although this study did not survey *The Sun*'s readers to affirm the success of the newspaper's framing, there are signs that the framing may have been successful. For instance, *The Sun* experienced a rise in its digital readership (Farey-Jones, 2017). This leads to the possibility that the decline in readership of *The Sun*'s print edition, which followed bans in Liverpool and elsewhere, may have led to affected readers relying on digital access.

In examining the framing of the newspaper's apologia, it is important to note various techniques:

1. The newspaper's mention of the Ross Barkley crisis is tucked into the inside pages, and there were only few mentions of it. In each case, the space used is small. The first mention of the case is only 107 words, and the second 112 words.

2. The first mention was reported as a minor news story, which detracts attention from it. The second was a full apology, but again brief.

3. The content of the stories focused on *The Sun* being a professionally run organization.

In essence, *The Sun* framed the crisis as an insignificant event for which *The Sun* has expressed its disappointment by taking action immediately and restoring order. The overall effect is framing this as an unimportant issue; thus, there is no need to draw reader attention to it. Importantly, action has been quickly taken. Invariably, *The Sun*'s readers who may not be privy to what rival newspapers are reporting may be influenced by how *The Sun* framed the issue; thus, readers are unlikely to focus on the issue, and there is little adverse effect on the newspaper's readership.

Discussion

Findings from this study provide a number of insights. The study provides support for the possible failure of *The Sun*'s apologia within the larger British audience, the role of *The Sun*'s reputation in competitors' response to its apologia, and how *The Sun* sought to frame its own message. It is within the analysis of media text that we locate indications of how competing media may react to an apologia by other media. The reactions affirm findings by Coddington (2012), Hindman (2005), McCoy (2001), Ruggeiro (2004), and Wasserman (2006), who reported harsh and strident responses by competing media to a transgressor's actions.

In *The Sun*'s case, three competitor reactions emerged from this study: condemnation, persuading the audience to reject, and ethical enthronement. *The Sun*'s competitors, in this case, used *The Sun*'s reputation to label the newspaper as "vile," among other names. The *Liverpool Echo* labeled *The Sun* disgraceful and inaccurate. Kelner of the *Independent* (2017, p. 24) accused the author of the controversial article, MacKenzie, of telling lies of the "most heinous, despicable sort" and wrote that MacKenzie's brand was of "gruesome political incorrectness." In essence, *The Sun*'s competitors were not content in analyzing the wrongfulness of the newspaper's racial article, but instead extended their criticisms to attacks on the author of the article and to *The Sun*.

The *Daily Mirror* and the *Liverpool Echo* explicitly recommended negative action against *The Sun*. Although *The Sun*'s article was racist, the open condemnation and recommendations against the newspaper affirm Wasserman's (2006) claim that criticisms by competitors may represent a struggle to win over subscribers. The *Daily Mirror* advised against reading *The Sun*, and the *Liverpool Echo* called for *The Sun*'s ban in Liverpool, where *The Sun* is the *Echo*'s major competition. An attack by competitors alludes to the attention *The Sun* was attracting with its coverage style, which competitors labeled "sensational." This was

essentially an attack on *The Sun*'s ethics. Competitor comments referred to *The Sun*'s reputation for sensationalism, falsehood, and attention-seeking headlines, which they noted as baiting readers into clicking to read *The Sun*. This questions *The Sun*'s ethics and links its high readership numbers to "unethical practice." Thus, one can see how such criticism is related to the struggle for readership claimed by Wasserman (2006).

Results from this study also indicate that the news media, while critiquing a competitor in crisis, could be motivated by other considerations besides the central issue of the crisis. In *The Sun*'s case, competitors took advantage of the crisis to attack and to seek further damage to the newspaper's image. These results are similar to McCoy's (2001) study, which found that three national newspapers began to cover the story of crack cocaine epidemic in the United States only after the *San Jose Mercury News* attracted large readership following its coverage of the epidemic. Instead of advancing the story, the three newspapers focused on stories that "seriously damaged the series credibility" (McCoy, 2001, p. 167). In other words, media competition may not always be about what is expressed in explicit narrative, but about other considerations, which may include financial considerations and a struggle for subscribers.

Results from the study affirm the role of reputation in how an organization is perceived during a crisis. Although *The Sun* used several repair strategies recommended by Benoit (2015), this study finds that competitors referred to *The Sun*'s prior reputation in responding to its apologia. This is precisely what Coombs's SCCT (2007) predicts.

Furthermore, results demonstrate how a mass medium uses its resource advantage (see Benoit's 2015 work on this) to communicate directly to its readership. This is the type of resource unavailable to many organizations. Here, *The Sun* is able to frame the message to its advantage, and it is not surprising that *The Sun*'s apologia may have been effective among its own readers. As Table 4 demonstrates, *The Sun* experienced a fall in its readership, but it is impossible to attribute this to the Ross Barkley crisis given the annual decline in newspaper readership (Greensdale, 2017; Ponsford, 2017).

Table 4. Monthly Readership of Top 5 Newspapers in the UK One Year Before the Crisis.[3]

Monthly Readership Averages			
News Brand	Oct. 2015 – Sep. 2016	Oct. 2016 – Sep. 2017	% Change
1. Daily Mail	17,494,000	14,322,000	-18%
2. The Sun	13,297,000	12,982,000	-2%
3. Metro	11,633,000	12,066,000	+4%
4. Daily Mirror	10,548,000	8,725,000	-17%
5. The Daily Telegraph	10,047,000	9,807,000	-17%

[3] Data from the UK National Readership Survey (NRS, 2017). Note that *The Guardian*, ranked number 4 by October 2016 to September 2017, was not in the top 5 in the previous year.

In fact, as Table 4 shows, the decline in circulation at *The Sun* is only 2% from the previous year, which is much better than the double-figure declines experienced by the *Daily Mirror* (17%), *The Daily Telegraph* (17%), and *Daily Mail* (18%). *Metro* newspaper is the only publication with an increase in readership (4%), but it is a free daily. According to Ponsford (2017), citing figures from the Audit Bureau of Circulation in the United Kingdom, readership figures for *The Sun* and six other national newspapers had fallen an average of 10% annually.

Conclusion

There are several conclusions from this study. Intermedia criticism of *The Sun*, while it focuses on *The Sun*'s poor reputation on credibility, indicates motivations that reach deeper. The poor reputation suggests that it is important for individuals, corporations, and practitioners to think through their defense and ensure that it is not only truthful but also sincere. Although it would have been difficult for *The Sun* to defend a racial faux pas, there were possible ways to do this. For instance, it could claim dissociation by not only firing MacKenzie but also firing editors who approved the racist article for publication. Further, *The Sun* could have cited some of its attempts to mend fences with Liverpool city. In the May 9 edition of London's *Evening Standard*, Armitage (2017) wrote that *The Sun*'s chief executive, Rebekah Brooks, was working with the city to do exactly that before the offensive article was published. Thus, it is surprising that *The Sun* did not use this in designing a bolstering strategy. Moreover, *The Sun* should have offered a compensation strategy by pledging to provide service to the Black and minority communities in the city of Liverpool. Unfortunately, *The Sun* did not offer compensation as a way to repair its image. But these suggestions assume that the competing media would have been persuaded. This assumption could be wrong when one considers that competitors focused on *The Sun*'s reputation and may have been further motivated by competitive interests and the desire to take away *The Sun*'s subscribers. Nevertheless, assessing *The Sun*'s strategies without locating its primary audience could be problematic. It is highly probable that its strategic choices would be acceptable to its primary audience or readership, notwithstanding the suggestions proffered here. *The Sun* framed its apologia in ways to define the level of importance its readership should attach to the transgression, and, in the end, it may have assisted in maintaining its readership numbers.

This is an affirmation of a previous study by Money et al. (2017), which claimed that the audience for an apologia is not monolithic. Thus, messages should be designed to appropriately reach the desired audience segment. As we find here, the audience may be conditioned by messages it consumes from a particular mass medium. Those who read *The Sun* are likely to accept *The Sun*'s framing of its apologia and may not decline to read the newspaper because of the crisis. However, this is unlikely to be the case for those who read other newspapers, such as the *Liverpool Echo* or the *Daily Mirror*, which framed the crisis in other ways. This indicates that the direct link between a transgressing mass medium and its audience provides advantages that may not accrue to other types of organizations that rely on a third party (mass media) to get an apologia across to an intended public.

Ultimately, there is a need to use more direct measures of readers in the future to test whether there is a difference in a mass medium's defense of its own transgression and the effectiveness of such a defense. In such a study, it is important to further categorize the readership or audience of the selected media by separating those who solely use the transgressing medium from those who use the medium along

with other media sources. Such separation could be critical because the second group of media users could be susceptible to other media frames beyond those offered by the transgressing medium.

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