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Beyond Apologies: Mapping the Strategic Shifts in BP's Leadership Rhetoric from Crisis to Recovery

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Abstract: The 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill precipitated one of the most severe environmental and reputational crises in corporate history. BP's initial crisis-phase communications under CEO Tony Hayward were marked by denial, minimization, and ill-timed personal remarks, which exacerbated public outrage. Following Hayward's replacement by Bob Dudley, BP's leadership rhetoric shifted toward mortification, corrective action, and bolstering, coupled with concrete safety reforms and compensation commitments. Drawing on Situational Crisis Communication Theory and image-repair frameworks, this study conducts a rhetorical analysis of English-language speeches, press releases, CSR reports, and interviews from April 2010 through late 2011. Findings reveal a clear transition from defensive tactics (denial, evasion) to restorative strategies (apology, accountability, reform) that gradually stabilized BP's public image. The study contributes to crisis communication scholarship by mapping how leadership rhetoric evolves to rebuild trust and legitimacy following a major corporate transgression.

Keywords: Deepwater Horizon; BP; Crisis Communication; Rhetorical Analysis; Trust Restoration.

1. Introduction

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which occurred on April 20, 2010, resulted in the release of approximately 3.19 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico over 87 days, marking the worst marine oil spill in U.S. history [1]. The environmental devastation was compounded by severe reputational damage to BP, whose share price plummeted by more than 50 percent in the days following the disaster. Public sentiment toward the company reached record lows, further exacerbating the crisis [2]. BP's initial crisis communication, led by CEO Tony Hayward, was heavily criticized for its defensive and tone-deaf nature, including Hayward's infamous comment, "I'd like my life back" [3]. These early mistakes in messaging fueled public outrage and eroded the company's credibility, exemplifying the failure of defensive communication strategies in crisis management [1,4].

Effective crisis communication is crucial for managing stakeholder attributions of responsibility and mitigating the damage to corporate reputation. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by W. Timothy Coombs, posits that the organization's response strategies—whether it be denial, diminishment, or apology—must align with the crisis's severity and the company's perceived level of responsibility [1]. Missteps in communication during the early stages of a crisis can exacerbate reputational damage, whereas timely and appropriate communication strategies can foster trust restoration [5].

This paper investigates the strategic shifts in BP's leadership rhetoric from crisis to recovery, specifically focusing on the transition from Tony Hayward's leadership to Bob Dudley's, and how this change in communication strategy influenced the public's perception of BP. Through a rhetorical analysis of BP's speeches, press releases, corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports, and media interviews, this study maps the shift from a defensive crisis response to a more proactive approach emphasizing apology, corrective action, and long-term commitment to recovery.

The study contributes to existing crisis communication literature by highlighting the role of leadership rhetoric in organizational recovery and examining how BP's communications evolved from an initial defensive stance to a more restorative strategy. By analyzing how BP's leadership rhetoric aligns with the broader goals of trust restoration and legitimacy repair, this research adds new insights to the application of SCCT and image-restoration theories in the context of corporate crises [1,4].

2. Literature review

In the context of crisis communication, much of the existing literature emphasizes the importance of leadership rhetoric in managing organizational crises. SCCT by Coombs posits that the severity of the crisis and the organization's perceived responsibility influence the type of response strategy an organization should adopt [1]. The theory categorizes response strategies such as denial, diminishment, and apology based on the organization's crisis type and level of responsibility, which are key considerations in shaping leadership rhetoric. For BP, an oil spill of such magnitude necessitated a shift in leadership communication from minimizing the crisis to taking responsibility for the environmental disaster [1].

Research has demonstrated that the use of denial and minimization strategies during a crisis can exacerbate reputational damage. For example, Hayward's initial statement that the spill was "tiny" compared to the vast ocean, and his infamous comment, "I'd like my life back", were seen as minimizing the impact of the disaster. These remarks not only lacked empathy but also reinforced the perception that BP was not taking full responsibility for the spill [3]. This is consistent with Benoit's image restoration theory, which argues that effective crisis communication requires the acknowledgment of the harm caused and the implementation of corrective actions [4].

The transition in BP's communication strategies, particularly after the replacement of Hayward by Bob Dudley, illustrates the shift from defensive communication to a more restorative rhetoric. Dudley's rhetoric incorporated elements of mortification and corrective action, aligning with SCCT's recommendations for high-responsibility crises. As Coombs

suggests, when an organization is highly responsible for a crisis, strategies that focus on mortification and corrective actions, such as offering apologies and taking steps to mitigate the damage, are more effective in restoring trust [1].

Dudley's leadership marked a notable departure from Hayward's defensive rhetoric, as Dudley consistently used terms such as "regret" and "commitment" in his speeches, signaling BP's accountability. The establishment of a $20 billion compensation fund for the victims of the spill was one example of a concrete corrective action that was emphasized in Dudley's speeches. This is in line with the findings of Jin et al., who emphasize that the adoption of transparent, corrective actions is essential for restoring trust in the aftermath of a crisis [2].

Research on corporate apologies also highlights the importance of sincerity in apology statements. Kanso et al. argue that for an apology to be effective, it must demonstrate genuine regret and offer assurances of change [5]. Dudley's emphasis on BP's long-term commitment to Gulf recovery and safety reforms was central to his rhetoric, aligning with the view of Kanso and collaborators that an effective apology must be accompanied by tangible steps toward resolution [5].

In addition to SCCT and image restoration theory, recent research on corporate reputation management has explored the concept of bolstering—where organizations emphasize their positive qualities to counterbalance the negative effects of a crisis. Bob Dudley's use of bolstering rhetoric, such as referencing BP's long-standing contributions to energy security in the U.S. and job creation in the Gulf region, reflects this strategy [6]. Bolstering serves as a tool for restoring an organization's reputation by reminding stakeholders of its positive contributions, despite the crisis [4].

Furthermore, the impact of social media in crisis communication has gained attention in recent years. Social media platforms provide organizations with direct channels to engage with stakeholders, but they also amplify the reach of negative news. Research by Jin et al. highlights how social media can either facilitate crisis resolution or exacerbate a crisis, depending on how the organization responds [2]. BP's use of Twitter during the early stages of the spill was scrutinized, as the company's tweets often employed defensive strategies, which only intensified public dissatisfaction [7]. As the crisis unfolded, BP's leadership, under Dudley, adjusted its social media strategy to focus on transparency and real-time updates, a crucial move in rebuilding public trust.

Notably, the concept of trust restoration in crisis communication has been explored by several scholars. Van Zoonen and Van der Meer developed a model of trust-repair discourse, which emphasizes the role of transparency, accountability, and collaboration in restoring trust after a crisis [8]. BP's communications under Dudley followed this model, focusing on transparency in its recovery efforts and collaboration with local communities, environmental organizations, and the U.S. government. These efforts helped shift the narrative from BP being a villain to being seen as a responsible organization committed to the long-term recovery of the Gulf region.

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze the rhetorical strategies used by BP's leadership during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill crisis and its subsequent recovery. The research involves a rhetorical analysis of key public communication materials, using the frameworks of SCCT and Image Restoration Theory. The focus of the analysis is on the leadership rhetoric of BP's CEOs, Tony Hayward and Bob Dudley, from April 2010 to December 2011. This study specifically examines their public speeches, press releases, CSR reports, interviews, and social media posts.

(1) Data collection

The data for this study were drawn from a variety of publicly available documents and media sources. These included significant public speeches delivered by BP's CEOs, such as Tony Hayward's early speeches in 2010 and Bob Dudley's speeches from 2010 and 2011. Notably, Dudley's speeches at the Southern Governors' Association in August 2010 [9] and at CERAWeek in 2011 [10] were integral to understanding the shift in BP's leadership rhetoric during the recovery phase. Additionally, press releases and media statements issued by BP's corporate communications team during the crisis were analyzed. These documents were accessed through BP's official website and offered valuable insight into the company's narrative and crisis management strategies.

The study also incorporated the analysis of BP's CSR reports for 2010 and 2011, which were available through the company's investor relations portal. These reports provided a comprehensive look at BP's evolving rhetoric and corporate actions during the recovery phase. Furthermore, key interviews with both Tony Hayward and Bob Dudley, including Hayward's PBS NewsHour interview [11] in May 2010 and Dudley's CNN interview [12] in July 2010, were analyzed for their rhetorical content and the tone of leadership during these interviews. Lastly, BP's official Twitter account was examined to identify the company's social media communication strategies. A content analysis was conducted to understand how BP's tweets during the crisis and recovery periods aligned with the company's broader crisis communication efforts. Table 1 maps out significant events, BP's public statements, and leadership actions during the crisis and recovery phases.

Table 1. *Timeline of Key Events and Public Statements*

Date	Event/Action	CEO	Key Statement/Action
April 20, 2010	Deepwater Horizon Spill Occurs	Tony Hayward	"This is a tiny spill" (denial strategy)
May 2010	Hayward's interview with the press	Tony Hayward	"I'd like my life back" (minimization strategy)
July 2010	Tony Hayward replaced by Bob Dudley	Bob Dudley	Appointed as new CEO, beginning of shift in communication
August 2010	Dudley's speech at Southern Governors' Association	Bob Dudley	Apology for the spill, commitment to Gulf recovery(mortification)
October 2010	Establishment of $20B compensation fund	Bob Dudley	Announced financial commitment to victims (corrective action)
December 2010	Dudley's Annual Report and Updates	Bob Dudley	Detailed reforms, focus on long-term recovery

(2) Data analysis

The analysis proceeded in two main stages. First, a rhetorical analysis was conducted on the collected texts to identify the rhetorical strategies employed by BP's leadership during the crisis. The key strategies identified were denial and minimization, which were used predominantly by Tony Hayward during the early stages of the crisis. These strategies were evident in Hayward's public comments, such as his description of the spill as "tiny", which minimized the gravity of the disaster. In contrast, Bob Dudley's communication, particularly later in the crisis, shifted to focus on mortification and apology, expressing regret for the loss of life and the environmental damage caused by the spill.

Alongside mortification, Dudley emphasized corrective action, which involved concrete steps like the establishment of a $20 billion compensation fund and the implementation of organizational reforms. Additionally, Dudley frequently used bolstering, a strategy where an organization highlights its positive attributes to counterbalance negative perceptions. This was evident in Dudley's speeches, where he frequently referred to BP's long-standing contributions to energy security and its role in creating jobs in the Gulf region. These strategies were crucial in the shift from a defensive crisis response to a more restorative communication strategy aimed at rebuilding BP's image.

The second stage of the analysis involved a coding procedure using NVivo software to systematically categorize the collected data. Open coding was applied to identify instances of the five core image repair strategies outlined by Benoit [4] and Coombs [1]: denial, evasion, corrective action, mortification, and bolstering. The texts were then mapped to SCCT's crisis clusters, classifying the strategies based on the perceived level of responsibility attributed to BP. The coding process also accounted for the different phases of the crisis, distinguishing between the rhetoric used during Hayward's tenure and that used during Dudley's leadership. Table 2 illustrates the application of SCCT and Image Repair Strategies, showing how BP's response strategies aligned with the severity of the crisis

Table 2. *Image Repair Strategies and SCCT Crisis Clusters*

Crisis Cluster	BP's Rhetorical Strategy (Hayward)	BP's Rhetorical Strategy (Dudley)	SCCT Recommendation
Victim Crisis	Denial, Minimization	Mortification, Corrective Action	Denial if low responsibility, Mortification if high responsibility
Accidental Crisis	Minimization, Defensive comments	Mortification, Corrective Action	Mortification, Corrective Action for high responsibility
Intentional Crisis	-	Mortification, Bolstering	Mortification and Bolstering, focus on image restoration

To ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis, intercoder reliability was assessed using a 10% subsample of the data. The analysis yielded a high level of agreement (κ = 0.85), indicating consistency in the coding procedure [13]. Furthermore, the study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines by using only publicly available data, and all materials analyzed were freely accessible online. To ensure the authenticity and accuracy of the data, the collected texts were cross-referenced with BP's official website and other trusted sources.

One limitation of this study is the reliance on publicly available texts. These materials may not fully represent BP's internal communication strategies or the complete range of its crisis management efforts. Additionally, while the study includes social media analysis, the role of social media in crisis communication is multifaceted, and future research could explore BP's social media interactions with a focus on stakeholder engagement and the evolving digital landscape of crisis communication.

Despite these limitations, this study offers valuable insights into the rhetorical strategies used by BP's leadership to manage the crisis and its aftermath. By analyzing BP's leadership rhetoric, the study contributes to the broader understanding of crisis communication, particularly in relation to leadership rhetoric, image restoration, and trust rebuilding during high-responsibility crises.

4. Findings and Discussion

(1) Rhetorical strategies during the crisis phase (April 2010-July 2010)

In the early phase of the Deepwater Horizon crisis, BP's crisis communication, led by CEO Tony Hayward, was predominantly characterized by defensive rhetoric. This approach, employing denial and minimization, served to avoid or downplay the company's responsibility for the disaster. Early statements from Hayward, including describing the spill as "relatively tiny" in comparison to the vast expanse of the ocean, exemplified the minimization strategy. This is a classic example of an image repair tactic in which an organization downplays the severity of the situation in order to reduce its perceived responsibility. However, such remarks were widely seen as tone-deaf and dismissive of the environmental catastrophe unfolding, further exacerbating BP's negative public perception [1].

One of the most significant rhetorical missteps during this period was Hayward's statement, "I'd like my life back", made during a May 2010 interview. The comment was perceived as self-centered and failed to demonstrate the necessary empathy for the affected communities. This misstep triggered an avalanche of criticism, with many stakeholders arguing that Hayward's focus on personal inconvenience undermined the seriousness of the crisis and the suffering of others [3]. In crisis communication, it is essential for leaders to show awareness of the broader social and environmental impacts, and Hayward's remark exemplified a failure to properly engage with the public's concerns. Coombs notes that during high-responsibility crises, such as BP's, denial and minimization are typically viewed as inadequate responses that fail to mitigate the crisis, often exacerbating reputational harm [1].

Further complicating BP's position was the company's early attempt to externalize blame. In his initial remarks, Hayward argued that the spill was "not our accident", positioning BP as a victim of unforeseen circumstances. This use of denial and blame-shifting ultimately alienated key stakeholders, including environmental groups, the public, and the U.S. government, who viewed BP as primarily responsible for the disaster [1]. Such rhetoric is considered ineffective in crisis situations where the organization is highly accountable for the event. Hayward's initial communication strategy was consistent with the "incompetence model" of crisis communication, where organizations attempt to avoid or

deflect responsibility rather than accept it and work toward repairing their image [4]. Table 3 summarizes the different rhetorical strategies employed by the CEOs during their respective phases of leadership.

Table 3. *Rhetorical Strategies Used by BP's CEOs (Hayward vs. Dudley)*

Rhetorical Strategy	Tony Hayward (April 2010 – July 2010)	Bob Dudley (August 2010 – December 2011)
Denial	"Not our accident"; downplaying spill size	-
Minimization	Describing spill as "tiny" in vast ocean	-
Mortification	-	Acknowledged regret for loss of life, environmental damage
Apology	-	Offered public apologies in speeches
Corrective Action	-	$20B compensation fund, safety reforms
Bolstering	-	Emphasized BP's past contributions to energy security and job creation

(2) Transition to Bob Dudley: Rhetorical shift to mortification and corrective action (August 2010-December 2011)

The appointment of Bob Dudley as BP's new CEO in July 2010 marked a dramatic shift in the company's leadership rhetoric. Dudley moved away from Hayward's defensive approach, adopting a more apologetic and accountability-driven communication style. His rhetoric, focusing on mortification (acceptance of responsibility and apology) and corrective action (implementation of visible actions to rectify the situation), was more aligned with the best practices of crisis communication, particularly for an organization facing significant public outrage and scrutiny [1,4].

Dudley's speeches and public addresses were marked by frequent expressions of regret and acknowledgment of BP's responsibility for the spill. For example, in his August 2010 speech at the Southern Governors' Association, Dudley stated, "We deeply regret the loss of life and the environmental impact of the spill", a direct acknowledgment of the harm caused by BP [9]. This shift toward an apology was crucial in beginning to restore BP's credibility with key stakeholders, including the affected communities and environmental organizations, as well as the U.S. government. According to Benoit, mortification as a rhetorical strategy involves an organization taking full responsibility for its actions, offering sincere regret, and demonstrating a commitment to make things right [4].

Dudley's rhetoric also highlighted BP's corrective actions, which included the establishment of a $20 billion compensation fund for victims of the spill and the introduction of safety reforms within the company. The compensation fund, a tangible, financial commitment to addressing the disaster's consequences, represented a key element of BP's strategy to regain public trust. By offering real financial compensation, BP sought to demonstrate accountability and rebuild credibility [1]. This move was accompanied by Dudley's rhetoric emphasizing BP's commitment to long-term recovery, signaling to the public that the company was committed not only to rectifying the immediate damage but also to ensuring the long-term ecological and social recovery of the Gulf Coast region.

In addition to mortification and corrective action, Dudley also employed the bolstering strategy. According to Griffin, bolstering involves emphasizing positive qualities or past contributions in order to offset the negative impact of the crisis [6]. Dudley frequently reminded the public of BP's long-standing contributions to U.S. energy security, including the company's significant investments in the Gulf Coast region and its role in creating jobs in the area. By framing BP as a responsible actor that had made significant positive contributions to society, Dudley sought to counterbalance the company's tarnished reputation and encourage the public to focus on BP's broader, long-term commitment to recovery.

(3) Impact of Dudley's communication strategy on trust restoration

By the end of 2010, BP's public reception had improved, though the company's reputation had not fully recovered. While trust restoration was a gradual process, Dudley's shift to a more transparent, accountable, and proactive communication strategy played a pivotal role in the stabilization of BP's public image. Research on crisis communication suggests that when an organization is perceived to have accepted responsibility for its actions and taken concrete steps to repair the damage, trust can begin to be restored over time [2].

A survey in 2011 showed that while BP's reputation had not fully rebounded, there was a marked improvement in public sentiment compared to the immediate aftermath of the crisis [1]. The improvement was largely attributed to Dudley's efforts to shift the narrative from one of corporate negligence to one of recovery and accountability. BP's commitment to long-term Gulf restoration and safety reforms signaled a genuine intention to prevent similar crises in the future and demonstrated that the company was willing to take responsibility for the environmental damage it caused [4].

Moreover, the role of social media in BP's crisis communication should not be overlooked. While BP's use of social media during the initial stages of the crisis was heavily criticized for being defensive and tone-deaf [7], Dudley's communication strategy included a more responsive and transparent use of social media platforms. This shift was crucial in providing real-time updates and engaging directly with stakeholders, especially the affected communities and environmental organizations. As Jin et al. suggest, the use of social media in crisis communication can enhance an organization's transparency and facilitate engagement with the public, which was critical in BP's recovery [2].

Figure 1 illustrates BP's key actions during the crisis and recovery phases from April to December 2010. It shows four pivotal moments in the company's efforts to restore public trust. The Initial Apology in April 2010 represented BP's first step in acknowledging the gravity of the situation, a strategy that aligns with Coombs's concept of mortification, where organizations accept responsibility and express regret [1]. Following this, BP replaced CEO Tony Hayward with Bob Dudley in July 2010, signaling a shift in leadership and a commitment to change, which was crucial for rebuilding credibility and public trust [4]. In October 2010, BP established a $20 billion compensation fund, emphasizing concrete efforts to address the impact on affected communities, a move that exemplifies corrective action in

crisis management, as outlined by Coombs [1]. By December 2010, BP had begun implementing safety reforms to prevent future incidents and rebuild its credibility, reflecting Dudley's commitment to long-term recovery, as he emphasized in his speeches [6]. This timeline highlights the strategic actions BP took to align with Dudley's communication efforts, marking the company's transition from crisis management to active restoration [14,15].

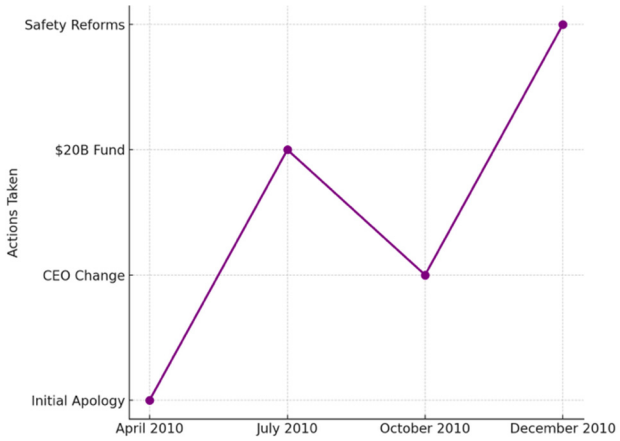


Figure 1. *BP's Trust Restoration Actions Timeline*

(4) Limitations of BP's rhetorical strategies

Despite Dudley's more effective communication strategies, several limitations remained in BP's efforts to restore its reputation. One significant limitation was the lingering perception of insincerity regarding BP's recovery efforts. Many stakeholders, particularly environmental groups and Gulf Coast residents, continued to view BP's actions, such as the establishment of the $20 billion compensation fund, as an attempt to minimize liability rather than a genuine effort to address the systemic issues that contributed to the disaster, such as BP's cost-cutting culture and inadequate safety protocols [2]. These criticisms point to the broader challenge of ensuring that crisis communication is perceived as authentic and aligned with an organization's long-term commitments, rather than merely a short-term damage control effort.

Furthermore, media coverage of BP remained focused on the long-term environmental impacts of the spill, even as BP made strides in its recovery efforts. As Coombs notes, the media's framing of a crisis can have a lasting impact on public perception, particularly when the media continues to highlight the harm caused by the crisis rather than the organization's efforts to repair the damage [1]. This media focus on the lingering environmental damage undermined the effectiveness of BP's communication strategy, as it kept the company in the public eye for all the wrong reasons.

Importantly, the delayed visible results of BP's corrective actions, particularly in the recovery of the Gulf Coast ecosystems, further limited the effectiveness of Dudley's communication strategy. As Coombs argues, for crisis communication to effectively restore trust, the public must see tangible outcomes that demonstrate the organization's commitment to change [1]. The slow recovery of the Gulf Coast's ecosystems and the continued environmental challenges in the region meant that BP's recovery efforts were continually under scrutiny, which delayed the full restoration of trust.

5. Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of BP's crisis communication strategy during and after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, focusing on the leadership rhetoric employed by the company's CEOs, Tony Hayward and Bob Dudley. Through a detailed rhetorical analysis of BP's public communications, this research identifies the key strategies used by BP to navigate the crisis, shift the narrative, and restore trust with stakeholders.

The findings demonstrate a clear transition from defensive tactics under Hayward, such as denial and minimization, to more restorative strategies under Dudley, such as apology, corrective action, and bolstering. This shift in leadership rhetoric reflects the broader change in BP's approach to crisis management, from an initial failure to acknowledge responsibility to a more proactive effort to repair the company's reputation and rebuild stakeholder trust.

BP's crisis communication strategy during Hayward's tenure was marked by a lack of empathy, evident in his controversial comments and tone-deaf public statements. Hayward's denial and minimization tactics only aggravated the public's perception of BP, particularly as the spill's environmental and economic impacts became more apparent. However, the transition to Bob Dudley's leadership, coupled with his adoption of mortification and corrective action, marked a pivotal turning point in BP's communication strategy. Dudley's rhetoric, characterized by sincere apologies, the acceptance of responsibility, and tangible actions like the $20 billion compensation fund and organizational safety reforms, aligned with best practices for crisis communication and image restoration. His ability to express regret for the disaster, coupled with a commitment to long-term recovery, played a key role in gradually restoring BP's credibility.

However, while Dudley's leadership marked a significant improvement in BP's communication strategy, the company's efforts to rebuild its reputation were not without limitations. The lingering skepticism surrounding BP's motives, particularly from environmental groups and Gulf Coast residents, underscores the difficulty of rebuilding trust after a crisis of such magnitude. Moreover, the media's continued focus on the long-term environmental damage caused by the spill hindered the full restoration of BP's image, as the company remained at the center of negative media coverage for years after the spill. While BP made significant strides in addressing the immediate consequences of the disaster, the slow recovery of the Gulf Coast's ecosystems and the continued media focus on the spill's impact meant that BP's efforts were continuously under scrutiny.

Despite these challenges, BP's response to the crisis offers important insights into the role of leadership rhetoric in crisis communication. The case of BP demonstrates the importance of adapting communication strategies to the severity of the crisis and the level of responsibility attributed to the organization. Dudley's ability to pivot from a defensive stance to a more accountable, empathetic approach was central to the company's efforts to regain public trust. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of aligning crisis communication with concrete actions to address the crisis, as mere rhetoric without substantive changes can fail to repair an organization's reputation in the long run.

Future research could further investigate how other organizations in high-responsibility crises, particularly those involving environmental disasters, have utilized similar

rhetorical strategies to repair their public image. Additionally, exploring the role of social media in crisis communication and its potential to accelerate or hinder reputation restoration would provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of corporate communication in the digital age.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on crisis communication, offering new insights into the interplay between leadership rhetoric and organizational reputation repair. By analyzing BP's communication strategies from crisis to recovery, it underscores the significance of transparent, accountable, and action-oriented communication in rebuilding trust and legitimacy in the aftermath of a major corporate crisis.

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