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A Categorical Reframing Approach to Crisis Communications

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we argue that crisis communication studies can be developed by considering the self-categories speakers use in response to their behavior being scrutinized. The use of such categories in response to reputational threat enables individuals and organizations to draw on associations and meanings to reframe actions that audiences perceived to be offensive. Analyzing statements from sporting personalities accused of complicity in sportswashing by Western Media outlets, we use discursive social psychology to animate how crisis communication rhetoric can draw on specific identities; an approach we label categorical reframing. Specifically, speakers articulated distance from diminished categories (e.g. sportswashers) to reduce responsibility and accentuate closeness to other categories (e.g. parent) to reduce offensiveness complementing distinct crisis communication strategies. Based on our analysis, we provide propositions relating to the congruence between identity and rhetoric for observational and experimental analysis to better understand when and why social categories might be deployed during crisis communication to enhance their effectiveness.

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Crisis communication research provides empirically grounded recommendations that inform strategies to protect the reputation and image of an individual or organization accused of wrongdoing. Two prominent theories framing such recommendations are situational crisis communication theory (SCCT; Coombs, 2007) and image repair theory (IRT; Benoit, 1997b). Each theory provides situation-dependent recommendations for crisis response, including how much responsibility to accept, what channels to communicate through, and which strategies to use. Both approaches conceptualize how to respond to a reputational threat based on the level of perceived offensiveness and attributed responsibility. To date, however, this work has been largely agnostic to the role of identity in crisis response. In this vein, scholars have recently advocated for the need to conceptualize crisis communications in a manner that appreciates (i) a representative's rhetorical choices are constrained by their identity (e.g., gender and race; Waymer & Hill, 2023), and (ii) where identity-based rhetoric is deployed to manage reputational threats, speakers need to address multiple, potentially competing audiences (Read & Lock, 2022).

Building on this line of theorizing, we argue that crisis communications research can be developed by considering the self-categories speakers deploy when responding to reputational threat. We draw on the theory of rhetorical category construction (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996) to explain how self-categories (i.e., groups with which a person identifies) may be deployed in crisis communications to reframe an action which caused reputational threat. A strategy we name *categorical reframing*. This theorization raises new questions about why and how certain crisis communication strategies might be used alongside a speaker making claims about categories they identify with.

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It is our contention that using categories in this way enables speakers to create distance from negatively valenced categories during a crisis (e.g., selfish athlete) and closeness to others that may enable audiences to interpret their actions in more favorable terms (e.g., young). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the presence of rhetorical category construction in crisis communications. This aim is animated in our research question: how are self-categories used in crisis communications? We examine our theorization in the crisis context of sport personalities verbally responding to allegations that their participation in events funded by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is sportswashing (i.e., using sport to diminish concerns about human rights abuses).

Literature review

Crisis communication theory

It is possible for organizations to use rhetoric to change audience perceptions of a crisis (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). As such, crisis communication is an exercise in influencing perceived control over an event to mitigate its offensiveness (see Arendt et al., 2017 for a review). A positive image is important as reputational damage can lead to a loss of support from key audiences, perceived trustworthiness, and revenue (Gatzert, 2015). Various definitions have been put forward to define when a crisis occurs for an individual or organization. These include whether: (1) the event is a turning point or unexpected, (2) the event is harmful internally or externally, (3) the event is in conflict with audience expectations, (4) the individual or organization bear some degree of responsibility, or (5) the audience response poses a reputational and/or financial threat (Heath, 2010). Common across these definitions is organizational control, and whether the offensive act was preventable (Heath, 2010). The importance of control is reflected in two leading crisis communication models which are premised on an entity's degree of responsibility over a crisis when determining an appropriate response (Benoit, 1997b; Coombs, 2007).

SCCT and IRT are prominent theories of apologetic rhetoric (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Based on attribution and institutional theories, SCCT starts by considering how much responsibility is attributed to an organization (i.e., victim, accidental, or preventable), and an audience's emotional response to determine threat severity (Coombs, 2007). Crisis history (i.e., have similar acts happened before) and prior relationship reputation (i.e., how well the organization has previously treated an audience) can heighten or diminish reputational threat. Selecting whether to deny responsibility, diminish responsibility and offensiveness, or rebuild reputation then depends on the level of responsibility and threat.

IRT also provides a framework to differentiate between rhetorical strategies employed by individuals and organizations to explain crises and repair their image (Benoit, 1997b). Benoit (1997b) argues an image crisis exists when an audience perceives that a relevant party is (i) responsible, and (ii) has committed an offensive act (although not all audiences may agree on degree of fault or offensiveness). Each is associated with the choice of strategies to alter audience perceptions, such as: (1) denying or evading responsibility, (2) reducing the perceived offensiveness of the act, and (3) apologizing and implementing corrective action (Benoit, 2014).

Both SCCT and IRT have been used to explain the success (i.e., persuasiveness) of communication crisis strategies in various contexts such as politics, business, tourism, sport, and religion (Arendt et al., 2017). Recently, both crisis communication theories have been criticized for overlooking how the identity (e.g., race and gender) of an individual or organization impacts the availability and appropriateness of specific crisis communications strategies (Waymer & Hill, 2023). Moreover, researchers have identified how the race and gender of a public figure undertaking image repair can affect public responses (Arpan, 2002; Brown et al., 2015, 2016, 2021, 2022; Choi & Mitchell, 2022; Crijns et al., 2017).

Identity, however, extends beyond socio-demographic and employment characteristics to focus on the ways in which people and groups define their actions, and the actions of others in terms of shared

identity. For instance, following crises, corporate communications can draw on, and attempt to, engender organizational identification by: establishing common ground between speaker and audience, creating a shared enemy with different values (i.e., antithesis), and communicating an “assumed we” that implicitly draws group boundaries based on employment (Cheney, 1983; Downing, 2007). Such rhetoric attempts to create consubstantiality (Burke, 1969), where a speaker aims to convince an audience of a shared identity (even if they have different goals). If successful, consubstantiality makes it more probable an audience will be persuaded by crisis communications. Experimental tests of this theorization demonstrate that when CEOs emphasize relevant and relatable private or personal information, such as being a parent during a crisis response, audiences are more likely to identify with the speaker and empathize, which leads to more positive evaluations of the organization (Crijns et al., 2017; Denner et al., 2024; Koch et al., 2022).

IRT and SCCT are leading crisis communication frameworks. However, there is an important research opportunity to investigate how speakers deploy self-categories in their crisis response rhetoric to explain the action or behavior that led to scrutiny. The following section outlines rhetorical category construction as a theoretical explanation for the ways in which individuals and organizational representatives might deploy identity-based language in response to reputational threat.

Rhetorical category construction

Collectively, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2001) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) are referred to as the social identity approach (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). The social identity approach sets out a social and cognitive basis for group membership. When a person self-categorizes with a group, evidence suggests they will show preferential bias to other members (Hornsey, 2008). This effect is evident in analyses of organizational and brand identification such that when individuals share (do not share) values with a speaker or brand before a crisis it can promote forgiveness (intensify negative perceptions) (e.g., Einwiller et al., 2019; Harrison et al., 2024; Ma, 2023a, 2023b; Xu, 2020). Relatedly, brand identification can influence the perceived credibility of information sources (Lim & Brown-Devlin, 2023). However, to date, the emphasis has been on how consumers respond, rather than the ways in which the people implicated used self-categories in crisis communications.

There has been extensive research exploring how leaders (typically politicians) deploy categories to gain support and cultivate a feeling that “we are in this together” (Haslam et al., 2020; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996). Through language, speakers can communicate categories and then furnish them with meanings that are appealing to the audiences they are seeking to influence. This communication strategy is called rhetorical category construction. Political leaders frequently draw on categories in their rhetoric to construct themselves as an idealized ingroup member to mobilize support for their agenda (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996). Furthermore, research in political communications shows that appeals to groups based around a shared social identity can improve public image (Huber, 2022). A four-year analysis of the American National Football League’s response to the reputational threat of athletes protesting during the national anthem demonstrated that through the Commissioner’s press conferences, the National Football League shifted its use of categories from promoting law enforcement and militaristic versions of American patriotism, to inclusive arguments about making American communities better (Read & Lock, 2022). This transition was possible because the league’s Commissioner used rhetoric to frame, and then reframe, what it meant to be a patriotic American and a National Football League fan as the crisis unfolded.

Rhetorical category construction (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996) has important implications for crisis communication. It provides a perspective that public figures and organizational representatives can add closeness to, or distance from, self-categories in crisis communications; a process we label categorical reframing. Speakers might use such communications to persuade audiences that they are like the person or organization under scrutiny. Alternatively, adding distance from a category that is part of the image crisis (e.g., *doper*) has potential to lessen the reputational threat.

From a theoretical standpoint, rhetorical category construction offers a powerful approach to develop present knowledge of crisis communication. Through language, a speaker might describe their identity such that it is interpreted through a different category that makes sense of an act deemed to be offensive. Additionally, used effectively, closeness to a self-category, such as “young,” may also enable a speaker to benefit from associations that people hold in memory about the “young” (e.g., “naive”). In turn, this might reduce the offensiveness of an action, or an actor’s responsibility for it. Furthermore, when used in rhetoric, speakers can furnish categories with meanings that may appeal to a specific audience. For instance, the self-category “young” could be provided with content about the “capacity to learn” to reframe the reputational threat to fans.

The importance of rhetorical category construction is clear if we reinterpret previous analyses of crisis communications involving high-profile individuals (in manuscripts that did not discuss rhetorical category construction). Walsh and McAllister-Spooner (2011) analyzed US swimmer Michael Phelps image repair after a picture surfaced of him allegedly smoking from a marijuana pipe. However, their analysis did not engage with the categories he used in his response. Phelps used the adjective “youthful” in his statement, which enabled him to justify his “naivety” during his crisis response. Similarly, American televangelist Jimmy Swaggart (Legg, 2009), categorized himself as a hard-working preacher serving his ministry which created closeness to the self-category of “*career preacher*” and distance from the category of “*sinner*”. In these examples, self-categories were communicated to appeal to an audience[s] or distance the accused from the accusation. That is not to say that the examples provided were effective. Rather, it is to demonstrate that self-categories were present in their crisis communication.

In summary, rhetorical category construction offers a set of theoretical propositions that link the social identities of speakers with the language they use in crisis communications. When facing a crisis individuals can seek to repair reputational damage by drawing on other groups to reframe and justify their decision. The ability to promote or downplay identities provides an opportunity to express group values that might foster closeness or create distance. The focus on identities and similarities between speaker and audience transcends distinct strategies as developing closeness and empathy may help reduce the offensiveness of an act whilst creating distance may reduce responsibility or aid denial.

Sportswashing

Originating from public sector organizations such as Amnesty International in 2015, and later diffused by Western journalists, the term sportswashing refers to cases of countries with recognized human rights violations using sport to develop more favorable views among foreign publics and politicians (Boykoff, 2022; Skey, 2023). Accusations of sportswashing have most prominently been levied by non-governmental organizations against Gulf State nations. However, other countries have also been accused of using sport to distract from human rights concerns (e.g., Liew, 2022; Ronay, 2022; Zidan, 2022). Fruh et al. (2023) argued that sportswashing creates a halo-effect through which the positive emotional sentiment fans hold toward an athlete, team, or sport event transfers to sponsors, owners, and hosts (Fruh et al., 2023). In turn, state-led investments can improve perceptions of a nation (Grix et al., 2025), but might equally lead to increased negative attention and judgments (Brannagan & Rookwood, 2016; Liu, 2020). Fruh et al. (2023) stated that athletes, coaches, commentators, and fans are complicit in sportswashing when they do not acknowledge criticisms of their financial backers. It follows that where sporting personalities do not comment on human rights concerns, it separates the positive sentiment audiences associate with sport from the actions of their backers. Media accusations of complicity in sportswashing present a reputational threat to sporting personalities because their involvement in events funded by nations with a history of alleged human rights violations may undermine their brand (Sato et al., 2015).

It is important to note that the term sportswashing has been criticized for (1) simplifying complex politico-economic objectives that motivate sport investment (e.g., promoting national security and diversifying national economy) (Chadwick, 2022; N. Koch, 2018); (2) providing inadequate

differentiation from traditional notions of sport as a vehicle for power, and (3) inconsistent application (Skey, 2023). In short, sportswashing is a term predominantly used by European and North American media but is rarely applied to global north countries that invest in sport for political purposes. Despite these criticisms, for our analytical purposes the term is still regularly used negatively in Western media and NGO publications (Boykoff, 2022), creating an image crisis for the accused. For this reason, we focus on how athletes, coaches, and promoters who accept funding endorsements respond to questions about their alleged complicity in sportswashing during interviews with Western media (Fruh et al., 2023; Skey, 2023) to evidence that categorical reframing occurs and that rhetorical category construction is a valuable tool for understanding crisis communications.

Materials and methods

The data collection and analysis are informed by discursive social psychology (DSP). DSP draws together aspects of discourse and rhetoric analysis (Litton & Potter, 1985; Potter, 1998) to address the construction and interaction of psychological phenomenon; in this instance, the categories that athletes, coaches, and promoters (sporting personalities from hereon) deployed in transcribed versions of interviews with Western media. As such, our approach draws from naturalistic interactions between journalists and sporting personalities (see Potter, 1998). Rather than viewing sporting personalities responses in isolation, we draw from DSP to frame their deeply interactionist nature. Such interactions were crucial to our study because they encapsulated an allegation by a media actor that a sporting personality was complicit in sportswashing. In turn, the accusation yielded a response (which may or may not have been successful) to persuade audiences and manage the reputational threat.

Data

Data were collected from interviews with sport personalities involved in events funded by the Public Investment Fund (PIF) or hosted in KSA. Press releases and interviews are a common data source for analyzing how crisis communication is enacted through rhetoric, as they provide records of language that might have influenced public perceptions (Frederick et al., 2014; Read & Lock, 2022). KSA was chosen given its high-profile investment in hosting sport events and purchasing rights since 2018, which has spurred discussions about sportswashing (Boykoff, 2022). This context had the benefit that data were available from multiple speakers managing the same accusation, which enabled multiple case analysis.

Through a manual online search of athletes, teams, and competitions linked to PIF investment: golf, boxing, Formula 1, tennis, and football were identified as sites where sporting personalities had been accused of sportswashing during interviews. Further searches for press conferences and interviews involving the search strings “PIF,” “Saudi Arabia,” “human rights,” “sportswashing” were then undertaken using Google, ASAP sports, and YouTube to identify and cross-reference sporting personalities who had publicly responded to questions concerning human rights or sportswashing from 2019 to 2024.

Quotes and interview transcripts were collated and analyzed. We then gleaned interactions between the media and sporting personalities related to sportswashing and human rights that were subsequently combined to form the textual corpus. Responses to questions not related to sportswashing were excluded because they were unrelated to our research question. It is important to note that other high-profile athletes, and in particular footballers (e.g., Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, Riyad Mahrez), who have signed contracts to play football in KSA have been accused of complicity in sportswashing by Western media outlets. However, based on an extensive search, they have not given interviews where they addressed the topic, typically only communicating their reasons for joining through club organized media. For this reason, we excluded these individuals. Data collection was limited to interviews held in English given that sportswashing is typically a term used by Western

Table 1. Data sources.

Interview Number	Event	Mode	Source of text	Year	Sport	Spokesperson(s)	Nationality
1	Golf – LIV Tournament funded by the PIF.	Press Conference	ASAP Sports; digital copy of transcribed interview.	2022	Golfer	Dustin Johnson, Louis Oosthuizen, Graeme McDowell, TK Chantananuwat	Mixed
2	Golf – LIV Tournament funded by the PIF.	Press Conference	ASAP Sports; digital copy of transcribed interview.	2022	Golfer	James Piot, Kevin Na, Talor Gooch and Sihwan Kim	Mixed
3	Golf – LIV Tournament funded by the PIF.	Press Conference	ASAP Sports; digital copy of transcribed interview.	2022	Golfer	Phil Mickelson, Chase Koepka, Justin Harding and TK Chantananuwat	Mixed
4	Golf – LIV Tournament funded by the PIF.	Press Conference	ASAP Sports; digital copy of transcribed interview.	2022	Golfer	Ian Poulter, Lee Westwood, Sam Horsfield and Laurie Canter	Mixed
5	Golf – LIV Tournament funded by the PIF.	Press Conference	ASAP Sports; digital copy of transcribed interview.	2022	Golfer	Paul Casey, Charles Howell III and Jason Kokrak	Mixed
6	Golf – LIV Tournament funded by the PIF.	Press Conference	ASAP Sports; digital copy of transcribed interview.	2022	Golfer	Sergio Garcia, Lee Westwood and Martin Kaymer	Mixed
7	Golf – LIV Tournament funded by the PIF.	Press Conference	ASAP Sports; digital copy of transcribed interview.	2022	Golfer	Bryson DeChambeau, Matt Wolff, and Abraham Ancer	Mixed
8	Golf – LIV Tournament funded by the PIF.	Press Conference	ASAP Sports; digital copy of transcribed interview.	2022	Golfer	Brooks Koepka, Patrick Reed, and Pat Perez	Mixed
9	Golf – ARAMCO Team Series sponsored by the PIF.	Press Conference	ASAP Sports; digital copy of transcribed interview.	2022	Golfer	Charley Hull, Georgia Hall, and Bronte Law	Mixed
10	Golf – LIV Golf Media Conference funded by the PIF.	Press Conference	ASAP Sports; digital copy of transcribed interview.	2022	CEO and former golfer	Greg Norman	Australian
11	Boxing – Anthony Joshua versus Andy Ruiz held in KSA.	Interview	BBC Website; quotations presented in article text.	2019	Boxer	Anthony Joshua	British
12	Boxing – Anthony Joshua versus Andy Ruiz held in KSA.	Interview	The Guardian; quotations presented in article text.	2019	Boxer	Anthony Joshua	British
13	Boxing – Anthony Joshua versus Andy Ruiz sponsored by the PIF.	Interview	The Guardian; quotations presented in article text.	2019	Promoter	Eddie Hearn	British
14	Boxing – Amir Khan versus Callum Smith held in KSA.	Interview	BBC Website; quotations presented in article text.	2019	Boxer	Amir Khan	British
15	Boxing – Anthony Joshua versus Oleksandr Usyk held in KSA.	Interview	BBC Website; quotations presented in article text.	2022	Boxer	Anthony Joshua	British

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Interview Number	Event	Mode	Source of text	Year	Sport	Spokesperson(s)	Nationality
16	Boxing – Anthony Joshua versus Oleksandr Usyk held in KSA.	Interview	The Independent; quotations presented in article text.	2022	Promoter	Eddie Hearn	British
17	Boxing – Tyson Fury versus Francis Ngannou held in KSA.	Interview	YouTube; video subtitle transcription.	2022	Boxer	Tyson Fury	British
18	Football – Newcastle United Football Club (NUFC) owned by PIF.	Press Conference	YouTube; video subtitle transcription.	2021	Manager	Eddie Howe	British
19	Football – NUFC owned by PIF.	Press Conference	TalkSport; quotations presented in article text.	2021	Manager	Eddie Howe	British
20	Football – NUFC owned by PIF.	Press Conference	The Mirror; quotations presented in article text.	2021	Manager	Eddie Howe	British
21	Football – NUFC owned by PIF.	Press Conference	YouTube; video subtitle transcription.	2021	Manager	Eddie Howe	British
22	Football – Al-Ettifaq Football Club	Interview	The Athletic; quotations presented in article text.	2023	Player	Jordan Henderson	British
23	Formula 1 – Saudi Arabian Grand Prix.	Interview	Sky News; quotations presented in article text.	2021	Driver	Lewis Hamilton	British
24	Formula 1 – Saudi Arabian Grand Prix.	Interview	ESPN; quotations presented in article text.	2022	Driver	Lewis Hamilton	British
25	Formula 1 – Saudi Arabian Grand Prix.	Interview	The Daily Mail; quotations presented in article text.	2021	CEO	Stefano Domenicali	Italian
26	Tennis WTA Finals – Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	Press Conference	ASAP Sports; digital copy of transcribed interview.	2024	Player	Elena Rybakina	Kazakhstani
27	Tennis WTA Finals – Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	Press Conference	ASAP Sports; digital copy of transcribed interview.	2024	Player	Jasmine Paolini	Italian

Media (Skey, 2023). Overall, 27 press conferences and interviews were identified which are displayed and numbered in Table 1 for reference. Table 1 also shows the connection between each sporting event and the KSA or PIF.

Analysis

Analysis in DSP is iterative with a “focus on how the discourse is constructed, and constructive of different versions of events, how it is situated in interaction, and how it is bound up with actions” (Wiggins & Potter, 2017, p. 84). Consequently, we focussed on how sporting personalities constructed

Table 2. Rhetorical arguments to shift categories.

Presented Identity	Categorical Reframing
Sport Professional	Created closeness to their sporting profession and added distance from the category of politician to argue that they were unqualified to discuss geopolitical issues.
Family Provider	Created closeness to the category of family provider to combat accusations of greed by arguing that earning money more quickly (e.g., having to compete in less tournaments) enabled them to spend more time with their families.
Businessperson	Created closeness to the category of businessperson to reframe their choices as an economic decision in unstable employment conditions (e.g., limited time, injury risk) requiring the need to maximize economic opportunities.
Sport Ambassador	Created closeness to the category of sport ambassador to present arguments that sport was a progressive force for societal change in KSA to argue their participation was bringing about tangible change.

their version of events (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996) by creating closeness with, and distance from, different categories in response to media scrutiny (i.e., reinterpreting responsibility and event offensiveness). To achieve this, coding was undertaken independently by both authors to identify the arguments sporting personalities used to reframe their decision. The self-categories were coded independently by both authors before we collaborated on the structure of the results. Statements were examined in relation to the context in which they were given as well as acknowledging that regardless of outcome, we were interested in the language used to construct and persuade audiences (Potter, 1998).

Results

Through our analysis, sporting personalities used four categories in response to allegations of sports-washing (see Table 2 for a summary). Each was used to create distance from the reputational threat of being labeled a “sportswasher.” The four categories that we discuss in this section are sports professional, family provider, businessperson, and sporting ambassador.

Sports professional

In response to media questions, personalities categorized as a sports professional to justify (1) their lack of geo-political expertise, or (2) inability to influence violations. Fruh et al. (2023) observed that athletes and coaches funded by countries accused of sportswashing distance themselves from politics to avoid answering questions. In our textual corpus, sporting personalities created closeness to their sporting profession and argued that they were unqualified to discuss geopolitical issues. Newcastle United Football Club (owned by the PIF) manager, Eddie Howe, was asked about the execution of 81 men in KSA, he replied:

It’s difficult for everyone concerned. I understand the questions have to be asked, I’ve got no problem with that. From my perspective – and I’ve always maintained this – my specialist subject is football. It’s what I know, it’s what I’ve trained to do . . . As soon as I deviate from that into an area where I don’t feel qualified to have a huge opinion, I think I go into dangerous ground, so I prefer to stick to what I believe I know.” (Interview 20)

Howe communicated his lack of knowledge about the executions in KSA. He categorized himself as a football person to argue that he was *qualified* to speak about his sport (i.e., closeness). However, the same category was used to argue that he did not have sufficient qualifications to comment on actions committed by the regime that funded his employer.

Golfer Georgia Hall was asked if she was comfortable playing golf funded by “a regime that gives women little freedom and has a terrible human rights record.” She responded:

When I was seven years old, I grew up wanting to be a professional golfer, and I’m not a politician. I just want to help grow the game. What I’m here doing, Ladies European Tour (LET), massive prize funds. It’s helping a lot of

the girls on the LET, previous few years have struggled. I think it's just all about playing good golf and doing your best to grow the game. Yeah, I'm just involved on the professional level. (Interview 9)

Hall categorized as a golfer, then added distance from the category of politician to argue that she could not speak about KSA's human rights record. A similar approach was used in responses to scrutiny about LIV Golf. When asked directly about human rights concerns, golfer Graeme McDowell said:

I wish I had the ability to be able to have that conversation with you. You know, I think as golfers, if we tried to cure geopolitical situations in every country in the world that we play golf in, we wouldn't play a lot of golf. It's a really hard question to answer. You know, we're just here to focus on the golf and kind of what it does globally for the role models that these guys are and that we are, and yeah, that's a really hard question to get into. (Interview 1)

In this response McDowell self-categorized as a golfer to enable himself to argue that he lacked "the ability" to hold a conversation about geopolitics. He argued that "geopolitical situations" existed in most countries that "we" competed and were not unique to KSA. Then, he extended this argument to justify his lack of commentary on human rights concerns because his sporting identity was aligned with a priority to "play lots of golf."

Representatives also categorized as a sporting professional to argue that they did not have the power or ability to change human rights in countries that hosted events. For example, Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton stated:

... But we don't decide where we go. I think we are duty-bound to try while we are here [to raise awareness], it's not necessarily our responsibility when we are brought here, but we try and do what we can. I think it's important that we just try to educate ourselves and with the little bit of difference that we can make, make sure that we are doing something. But ultimately, it's the responsibility of those in power to make the changes. And we're not really seeing enough, so we need to see more. (Interview 24)

Hamilton used the collective noun "we" to categorize himself with other Formula 1 drivers who, he argued, were unable to choose where they competed. Instead of arguing that he was uneducated to comment, Hamilton created distance from "those in power" with agency to make decisions about where races were held. In categorizing himself as a driver, Hamilton presented an argument that diminished his responsibility as he was pursuing his racing career in KSA because of decisions made by other people. This response was unavailable to other sporting personalities that had agency over where they competed.

Family provider

The second self-category used in response to scrutiny about sportswashing was family provider. Sporting personalities used this category to combat accusations of greed by arguing that earning money more quickly enabled them to spend more time with their families. The decision to accept money from KSA was justified by the same criteria other parents and carers might consider when thinking about their employment conditions. Following a line of questioning about the negative response from fan groups and LGBTQ+ rights groups, footballer Jordan Henderson discussed his decision to play football in KSA arguing "I think there was always going to be criticism regardless of what I did, whether I stayed, whether I went. So basically, I had to make the decision on what was best for me and my family" (Interview 22). In his response, Henderson added closeness to his role as a family provider to distance himself from claims of greed and complicity in sportswashing.

The category of family provider was also identifiable in golf. LIV Golf was designed around shorter tournaments than the Professional Golfers Association or DP World Tours. As such, players argued that joining LIV Golf allowed them to make more money to support their family's living conditions and spend more time with them. For instance, Louis Oosthuizen was asked by a journalist: "... it is essentially about the money that's why you're here first and foremost isn't it?" In response, he stated:

For me, it was where I was in my career, it was probably going to be my last year on the PGA Tour. I always said when I get to that stage around 40, I want to do something else and not just golf in my life. I wanted to try something else. I mean, everyone knows I love being on a farm and being outside and do stuff. So I was almost done, and along came this opportunity where you know, I can do four years of this and be faster time spent with my family after this. I can do what I want to do. (Interview 1)

Oosthuizen self-categorized as a family man that loved the outdoors and his farm, to reframe his decision to join LIV golf. By referring to being able to spend more time with his family, he added meaning to this category, describing the benefits for his home life and, in turn, reducing focus on allegations of his greed linked to the money involved. It was also argued by Dustin Johnson in response to the same question that players could live a more balanced life:

... I don't want to play golf for the rest of my life, which I've felt like I was probably going to have to do. You know, for me, this is something new. I like to do a lot of other things besides golf, and I think this gives me opportunities to spend more time with my family. Gives me an opportunity to spend more time doing the things that I love to do, and it's exciting. (Interview 1)

Johnson's comments mirrored Oosthuizen's in that it reframed his decision by giving him space to argue that, as a family man, he sought work–life balance. A clear example of justifying the decision based on personal circumstances was given by Phil Mickelson:

... I've said it a few times. I just needed a little bit more balance on and off the golf course, and this provide me a chance to bring golf back into my life but still do the things off the course I've wanted to do, whether it's traveling, spending time with people I care about. I went to my nephews – a couple of my nephew's little league games. I haven't had a chance to do that my whole life. Went to my niece's lacrosse games. I haven't had a chance to do that. It's given me opportunities, like I say, to have a better balance on and off the golf course. (Interview 3)

Sporting personalities furnished the category of family provider with meaning to reframe their decision to join LIV golf. The meanings attached to this category enabled Mickelson and other sporting personalities with families to present claims that accepting money from KSA was appropriate as it enabled them to balance work commitments with other pressures, which – if believed – had the potential to reduce the offensiveness of the decision.

Businessperson

The third self-category promoted by sporting personalities was “businessperson.” Like any other businessperson, athletes treated sport as their career, emphasizing their insecure employment conditions when asked about their motivations. For instance, LIV golfer Graeme McDowell stated:

But myself, Dustin and Louis, we have played all around the world for 20 years, chasing pay checks. It started with the majors and The Ryder Cups. It's a business. Yes, we love the sport, we love competing but you know, purse that we are playing for any given week, appearance money, you know, we're running a business here. It's like the sacrifice that we make being away from our families – I hate to use the word “sacrifice.” We are all here playing golf for a living; it's a pretty sweet life. But still, you're away from your family 30, 35 weeks a year. It has to be worth it financially, otherwise it's a big sacrifice you're making for no reason. You're always weighing up from a business point of view: What is the best financial outcome for me for my time spent. (Interview 1)

McDowell categorized as a businessperson to reframe his participation in LIV Golf as a business decision where he prioritized financial incentives in relation to “chasing pay checks” and “sacrifice” for his family. This enabled personalities to present an argument that because of insecure employment, players needed to take advantage of financial opportunities when they arose. In making this argument, McDowell eschewed criticisms of his complicity in sportswashing by arguing that he was running a business.

Using the category of businessperson, professional athletes argued that their income from sport was time limited. This underpinned arguments that their short career justified attempts to translate their sporting ability into economic reward as exemplified by LIV Golfer Ian Poulter.

Every week we play, we play for vast sums of money and we always want to play for as much as possible. This is no different this week. When I moved over to play in 2004 to play on the PGA Tour, it was exactly the same there. So I want to play for as long as I possibly can. Longevity in this game at the age of 46, turning 47 soon, you know, that's a factor which I want to play golf for as long as I possibly can and be competitive for as long as I possibly can, so I'm happy. (Interview 4)

Poulter acknowledged the high remuneration available. However, he justified his decision to participate in LIV golf arguing that his capacity to earn money was limited. This argument presented an economic justification that Poulter deployed to reframe his decision to join LIV Golf. The finite athlete career was amplified in boxing because of its risk. The same argument was made by boxer Amir Khan in emphasizing his identity as a “prize fighter” looking to capitalize on the financial opportunities available in KSA. When asked about sportswashing, he stated “. . . they are throwing a lot of money on to the table and at the end of the day we are prize fighters. For me, I would be stupid to not take this opportunity.” (Interview 14).

Sport ambassador

The fourth category that we interpreted in the data related to the benefits each speaker attached to the sport they represented. In section, 5.1 we discussed how categorizing as a sporting professional was used to diminish qualifications, ability, or agency to speak about geopolitics. Our interpretations here were subtly but importantly different. Sporting personalities used self-categorization with the sport to present arguments that it was a progressive force for societal change. In this instance, speakers engaged with some of the social issues raised by the media but then reframed them to argue their participation was bringing about change. LIV golfer Phil Mickleson was asked about human rights violations in KSA:

I don't condone human rights violations at all. I don't think – nobody here is does, throughout the world. I'm certainly aware of what has happened with Jamal Khashoggi, and I think it's terrible. I've also seen the good that the game of golf has done throughout history, and I believe that LIV Golf is going to do a lot of good for the game as well. (Interview 3)

Drawing on the good that can be done by the “game of golf” broadly, and “LIV Golf” specifically, Mickelson stated that he did not support the actions of any nation committing human rights violations. He then argued that golf was a source of progress in such nations to reframe the reputational threat associated with his complicity in sportswashing. When Greg Norman, CEO of LIV Golf (funded by the PIF) was asked “where are you at with the accusations of sportswashing?,” he also focussed on developing golf:

. . . We are here for the game of golf. We are here for the betterment of the game of golf. We're the force for good in the game of golf. These questions will continually come up. But then again, the questions should come up against the PGA TOUR; why do they have 27 title sponsors that do work with Saudi Arabia . . . (Interview 10)

Similarly, when Anthony Joshua was questioned about the controversy of hosting his fight in KSA, he outlined the growth of boxing since his last visit: “Since we were last there, boxing has grown 300% and they've opened 49 boxing gyms in the region and had their first women's championships as well. So it's been a positive in my opinion” (Interview 15). Joshua used his categorization with boxing to argue that social change had occurred in KSA.

When questioned on his responsibilities “to make moral considerations or is it just to have the best career you can and provide as well as you can for yourself and your family?” LIV golfer, Martin Kaymer argued that they were inspiring people as sport ambassadors:

I also think, imagine you're a child in Saudi Arabia and you've never been to – you've only saw maybe golf on TV, and then for the last three, four years, you were able to watch golf live in your country and you could even try it out, like a lot of other sports that Saudi Arabia brought to their country. I think you can also see it from that point of view, that you can inspire a different generation to do good, to do better, to do something with their lives that they never thought they would be capable of doing . . . (Interview 6)

Kaymer eschewed concerns about human rights in KSA in his response. Instead, he argued that his, and other golfers' participation in LIV golf inspired young people to play, reframing his decision to play in the tournament as a force for social progress. His use of the phrase "you can inspire a different generation" positioned sport as a vehicle for societal change that reframed his decision to play.

When female tennis players Jasmine Paolini was asked if they had any personal "reservations or concerns about playing here in Saudi Arabia, given the human rights record particularly around women and the LGBTQ+ community," she argued that their presence was good for women's tennis and women's rights

I think can be good for the country because I think it's woman competition with the best woman in the world. We are all working. We are all independent. I think it's good to promote this kind of competition in this country. Two days ago, I spoke with the girls that are starting to play tennis. I think they did a good job involving also the girls who start to do sport. I think could be really good for the rights of the womans here. (Interview 27)

In Paolini's response she self-categorized as a woman, a women's tennis player, and then used both categories to argue that her participation was helping young women in KSA. In turn, this potentially reduced the offensiveness of her decision.

Sporting personalities also argued that their participation had already led to social changes in KSA. Therefore, while not specifically engaging with human rights concerns, sporting personalities drew examples of positive changes in the rights of specific populations in KSA. This was evident in the comments from Formula 1 CEO, Stefano Domenicali, when questioned on the human rights record of KSA:

... The resources that they're putting in place to move forward, you see here. Don't forget a couple of years ago, women couldn't drive, and they are here on the grid, cheering and seeing the sport. They are changing a lot of laws in order to make sure this (Formula 1) is happening. We have to consider that. Of course, there are tensions inside, there are things that have to be improved. We don't want to be political on that, but I do believe that we're playing a very important role in the modernisation of this country. We are focusing on making sure it is at the centre of our agenda. (Interview 25)

Domenicali argued that investment and change in KSA highlighted the central role Formula 1 played in "modernising" the Kingdom. He implied that changes to the law would not have occurred without Formula 1 races being hosted there. When asked about human rights, LIV golfer Paul Casey reframed criticism of his decision by stating that he had witnessed change:

I've been to the Kingdom a couple of times, and I've seen change happening in the Kingdom, so I can confidently say that change is happening and that what we do is having a positive effect [journalist: You personally?] I've been there, and I've seen change, and I've talked to the people there. I played with a young girl in the pro-am at the Saudi Invitational earlier this year, 17 years old. I played with her father. I played with another lady who's a human rights lawyer. They were brilliant company, entertaining, and that young girl spoke of how things have changed and that just in the last couple of years since she took up the game of golf, how things have radically changed for her and her family and that that opportunity wouldn't have been there more than a couple of years ago. (Interview 5)

Casey emphasized his experience and position as a sporting ambassador who had traveled to KSA and seen change. Implicitly, he argued that he spoke from an informed position based on his lived experiences, which he contrasted with the "inexperience" of the journalists that questioned his behavior. In addition, he argued that by playing golf in KSA, "we" (i.e., golfers) were "having a positive effect."

Discussion and conclusion

We have demonstrated that considering the self-categories individuals draw upon when faced with reputational threat can develop crisis communication theorizing (e.g., Benoit, 1997b; Coombs, 2007). Our analysis reinforced and developed prior communications research, which has examined identification and consubstantiality (Burke, 1969, p. 21), and organizational identification rhetoric (Cheney,

1983). The categories speakers use in crisis communications have received little theoretical or analytical attention to date. Instead, scholars have focussed on the effects of audiences and speakers sharing identities (Crijns et al., 2017; Koch et al., 2022). Evidently, from the analysis presented here, crisis communications can draw on self-categories to make sense of actions that have caused offense with different audiences.

The self-categories used by sporting personalities in our sample related to each individual's subjective position, the criticisms they faced, and the version of events they sought to convey (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996; Haslam et al., 2020). As such, rather than discussing the contextualities of our findings, we focus on the theoretical process that we view as a more generalizable feature of crisis response. The use of self-categories in crisis communications rhetoric creates space for individuals and organizations to draw on identity content to reframe their actions and achieve typical crisis communication goals in two ways. First, the use of specific self-categories can create closeness to a more favorable identity in the minds of audiences to make sense of an action. Alternatively, by adding distance from negatively valenced categories in the crisis context, representatives can draw on self-categories and furnish them with meanings that are more advantageous to their crisis response. Both routes chart a path to the reduction of an event's offensiveness, and a representative's perceived responsibility, which have occupied the minds of crisis scholars for 30-years (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). Second, these categories may (but not necessarily) activate associations that are beneficial to crisis communication goals. Previous research has shown that stereotypes can influence perceptions of image repair efforts (Brown et al., 2015), and speakers may actively draw on such associations to reframe audience perceptions.

Importantly, self-categories operate at a different level to strategies suggested by IRT (Benoit, 1997b) and SCCT (Coombs, 2007) as closeness or distance could be employed to augment denial, evade responsibility, reduce offensiveness, or apologize. The use of self-categories extends beyond sportswashing to other sectors that are retrospectively visible in prior analyses. Hugh Grant's mortification when charged with engaging in lewd conduct in public relied on closeness to the self-category of cheating boyfriend to ensure his apology was authentic (Benoit, 1997a). Former US President George Bush emphasized closeness to his religious identity when bolstering his image following his government's response to Hurricane Katrina (Benoit & Henson, 2009). When the British Royal Family was criticized for its response to Princess Diana's death, the Queen emphasized her identity as a grandmother to reinforce her sincerity and bolster her image (Benoit & Brinson, 1999). These examples all showcase the presence of self-categories in crisis communications that have not previously been theorized despite the recognized impact of shared identity on the effectiveness of rhetoric (e.g., Arpan, 2002; Choi & Mitchell, 2022; Crijns et al., 2017).

Moving forward, we suggest that the self-categories speakers deploy in response to reputational threat should become a more central part of analyses to understand how common ground is created with audiences (Cheney, 1983; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996) and whether it is effective, or not. When tailoring crisis strategies, public relations practitioners might consider the most favorable categories available to a speaker to achieve communication goals (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Our analysis does not address whether categorical reframing was effective or not, simply that it occurred as a foundation to inform research in different contexts and experimental methods.

Based on the idea of categorical reframing, there are three directions for future research to enhance theorization and public relations research that also attend to the limitations of this study. First, examining how categorical reframing occurs with other image repair strategies (e.g., denial or mortification) using cases from other sectors can help expand on the role of self-categories in IRT. Second, researchers might develop experimental manipulations of categorical reframing to determine when and how categories can be used in crises communications to change audience perceptions. Third, netnographic approaches offer an opportunity to explore how crises communications are received by audiences, especially among highly and lowly identified consumers (Ma, 2023a). Netnography also provides the opportunity to undertake longitudinal research that is lacking in relation to crisis communications to see if there are changes in perceptions alongside categorical

reframing. Lastly, there is a need to ensure theory, and practice in public relations are integrated. Involving public communications practitioners about whether identity is incorporated into crisis plans ensure practical relevance (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016).

In conclusion, our analysis of sport personalities has demonstrated the presence of categorical reframing in crisis communication. We argue that this rhetorical strategy enables speakers to create closeness or distance to categories which may be more favorable in context. The explicit theorization of self-categorization can shed further light on the continued public relations challenge of understanding when and why crisis communications are successful or not.

Disclosure statement

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