

The Failed Launch of “Lady Doritos” and PepsiCo’s Image Repair Effort

Nick Backus
Western Oregon University

Abstract

PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi, in an interview on the Freakonomics podcast, described the eating differences between men and women that justify introducing “Lady Doritos,” a product purportedly designed for women’s needs. Nooyi indicated many other such products upcoming. The idea of “Lady Doritos,” a product that appears not to exist in reality or in planning, rapidly spread through social media, with virtually all responses being negative. The PepsiCo/Doritos brand was damaged. PepsiCo responded, attempting to repair their image. Benoit’s Image Repair Theory explains PepsiCo’s effort correct the damage to their brand. The purpose of this paper is to describe, explicate, and evaluate PepsiCo’s response to Nooyi and the public.

In many instances, the corporate CEO is seen as not just the leader of a company, but as a brand leader as well. The CEO enacts this role by promoting the brands under the corporate logo, in part to heighten awareness of and foster product identification with the product lines and further to strengthen the brand. Apple’s Time Cook comes to mind as one who focuses on a new product (latest iPhone, for instance) in the context of demonstrating the robustness of the broader enterprise. No doubt, many CEOs of successful businesses concerns routinely engage in behavior motivated by many of Cook’s same concerns. They have product lines to advance, which in turn promote the greater organization. Failure to engage in the appropriate actions, or to enact the role correctly, should mean a negatively impacted company, damaged in terms of reputation, sales, market share, and/or product lines related to (or not) the failed brand leadership. When this kind of failure occurs, the reactions from various publics can be seen as attacks on the brand or the organization that supports it. Considering serious implications existing for both brand and organization, the company involved will likely mount some sort of response in order to repair the image they see as damaged by the attacks. In an analysis of a Philip Morris advertising campaign, Metzler (2001) argues that an organization’s “right to exist and conduct operations” constitute the legitimacy of the organization. The publics of the organization appraise a situation and determine legitimacy based on how the activities of the organization conform to the norms and values of the culture. When the organization engages in activities counter to cultural in the eyes of its publics, then, legitimacy and organizational integrity are threatened. In the present case, we find PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi announcing a new product, Lady Doritos. Nooyi’s comments on the new product line threatened the perceptions held by Doritos’ publics and demanded an image repairing response from PepsiCo. This investigation intends explanation of the Lady Dorito crisis through: an introduction of PepsiCo’s Lady Doritos line, including public and PepsiCo responses to the line; a presentation and explanation of the critical tool, Benoit’s image repair theory, which forms the foundation of the response to the crisis; and consideration of PepsiCo’s response to the Lady Doritos crisis, analyzed using tools from Benoit’s image repair theory.

A New Line of Doritos

Introducing Lady Doritos

One instance of brand failure by a CEO came from PepsiCo CEO, Indra Nooyi, during an attempted promotion of PepsiCo's Doritos product line (Basu, 2018; Gilchrist, 2018; McGrath, 2018). Nooyi, in an interview for the January 31, 2018 Freakonomics podcast (Judkis, 2018), stated that PepsiCo's Doritos division "developing a cleaner, less crunchy Dorito variety aimed at women" (ABC 7 Chicago, 2018; Smith, 2018; Nichols, 2018). "Gendering" products is hardly new (Spence, 2018). Friedman and Lowengart (2018) comment that, "Marketing managers often use gender segmentation as a means of targeting consumers by offering different products and perceptual features." They note that, "most research studies have claimed that men and women are psychologically different" (Friedman & Lowengart, 2018). This presumption of psychological differences between women and men and the apparent acceptance of gender differentiated products and campaigns would seem to put Nooyi in the mainstream—merely doing what most other professionals would do and have done. Further, Nooyi was developing a reputation through practice of being sensitive to women's issues in the workplace (McGrath, 2018). Unfortunately, Nooyi did not subject her comments to potential product development. Rather, she created a crisis for Doritos and PepsiCo. Perhaps some further elaboration on gender segment, marketing, and communications would have been useful here. After all, companies have succeeded in introducing many gendered products for a long time. The comparison/contrast would have enriched this discussion.

Nooyi did not imply but rather stated that there are differences between women and men in terms of eating style. Instead, Nooyi describes and compares the Doritos eating habits of men and women (Wanshel, 2018; Yu, 2018). Men, she says, "lick their fingers with great glee, and when they reach the bottom of the bag, they pour the little broken pieces into their mouth, because they don't want to lose that taste of the flavor, and the broken chips in the bottom" (Gilchrist, 2018, Welk, 2018). It seems that men know what they want (bold flavor) and when they get it, will make noises in celebration. Nooyi, though, continues, claiming that, "Women would love to do the same, but they don't. They don't like to crunch too loudly in public. And they don't lick their fingers generously, and they don't like to pour the little broken pieces and the flavor into their mouth" (Gilchrist, 2018; Gant & Darrah, 2018). Perhaps to guide the decision-making process, Nooyi provides more and specific criteria for determining the utility of a snack food for women. She offers variables such as "low-crunch, the full taste profile, not have so much of the flavor stick on the fingers, and how can you put it in a purse?" (McGauley, 2018; Nickalls, 2018).

As if the development of the Lady Dorito is not enough, Nooyi indicates that the new Dorito is just the beginning of a new future for PepsiCo snack foods. Nooyi describes the coming product line as one that is gender based (or highlighted) and that includes of large number of gendered snack foods: "It's not a male and female [scenario] as much as 'are there snacks for women that can be designed and packaged differently?' And yes, we are looking at it, and we're getting ready to launch a bunch of them soon" (LaForge, 2018; Nickalls, 2018).

The Public Response to Lady Doritos

The idea of Lady Doritos clearly was intended to entice women. The opposite occurred—women rejected Lady Doritos (Wylie, 2018) The reception of Lady Doritos by the public, particularly on social media, was swift and negative—with many objections voiced (Graham, 2018). News of lady Doritos

spread rapidly through social media. A post on the Daily Wire's website claimed over 10,000 actions about Lady Doritos on Facebook (LaForge, 2018). Twitter was particularly active, with "Lady Doritos" trending shortly after Nooyi's presentation went public (Pisani, 2018). Lacina (2018) claims that, "The Twittersphere yesterday erupted with outrage at the news: Pepsi was releasing 'Lady Doritos,' a quieter, purse-friendly chip for women." Of course, not all the dissent came from the social media world. In Austin, Texas "dozens of women" as well as girls and men gathered at the state capitol for what one observer called "the crunch heard 'round the world." Those assembled crunched "their Doritos loudly in rebuke" of PepsiCo's apparent interest in Lady Doritos (Cantu, 2018; Zara, 2018).

The variety of comments is broad, but a sample should demonstrate both nature and intensity of these perspectives. Some of the tweets take a realist position, describing actual behaviors or outlining specific preferred outcomes. @jmarieray provides a real-life description of actual behavior: "I'm still laughing about lady doritos because I don't know a single woman who doesn't knock back the crumbs in the bottom of the bag" (Gant & Darrah, 2018). @IsaLeeWolf and @andizeisler provide lists outlining serious differences in the status of women and men (Welk, 2018; Herzog, 2018).

Humor is used in these social media posts. In this context, humor plays an important role, extending the lifespan of tweets, providing accessibility to the tweet to more people over a longer period (Highfield, 2015). In these tweets, some humor is light, while other humor is sarcastic in nature. These friendlier posts serve a function beyond information transmission. They have a strong relational component. Anderson and Huntington (2017) present social media as helping to maintain relationships and express affiliation. Conservative political commentator S. E. Cupp (@secupp) jumped into the debate, replying that, "I don't want soggy or chewy chips. This is the pink camo of snack marketing" (Smith, 2018). @NicCageMatch opines, "Cheer up, gals! We may not get a lady president, but we do get lady Doritos!" (Smith). @kateford76 offers this threat: "In response to Doritos lady friendly crisps I shall be eating the biggest crisps I can find crunching really loudly burping and carrying a packet of crisps as a handbag" (Gant & Darrah, 2018). @JessicaValenti, as well, makes a humorous and vague threat of defiance: "The only good thing about the new quiet "Lady Doritos" is now they can't hear us coming" (Gold 2018).

Some of the humor tweeted is darker in nature. Sarcasm seemed to account for a substantial portion of humorous tweets. @LetMeStart writes: "Questions I have about the forthcoming lady Doritos: 1. May I request they be salted with the tears of our enemies? 2. Will they be priced to align with the gender pay gap? 3. If a lady is OK with crunching, crumbs and public eating, is she banned from purchasing them?" (Gant & Darrah, 2018). @OhNoSheTwitnt illustrates the absurdity of women's product or icons in achieving equality: "Good news, ladies. We got a female Colonel Sanders and Doritos that don't crunch, so feminism is cancelled. We've achieved equality" (Gant & Darrah, 2018). @OhNoSheTwitnt laments the extra time on women's hands: "Now that Doritos has delivered us from sexism, what are we gonna do instead of a women's march next year, gals, should we just hang out quietly eating chips?" (Gant & Darrah, 2018). Both @everywhereist ties Lady Doritos to wage disparity between women and men, stating that, "What if Lady Doritos are just regular Doritos but when a woman buys a bag, she only gets 77% of the chips a guy would?" (Gold, 2018). @UnfilteredSE commentator S. E. Cupp, brings history and politics to bear when she says that, "ICYMI: @secupp and @morninggloria rejoice over PepsiCo's long overdue invention of the Lady Dorito. "Go tell Sojourner Truth and Susan B. Anthony they can finally rest in peace"(Schultz, 2018). @TheRealMorley applies gender issue to food products: "Will Lady Doritos come in womanly flavors like "Nacho Salary" and "Moderately Cool Ranch Home" and "Sour Cream and Oppression?" (Calix, 2018). @MrWordsWorth bring gendered employment differences as comment: "Instead of Lady Doritos, Doritos should create a tortilla chip so loud, it shatters glass ceilings and the

patriarchy” (Welk, 2018). And @edsbs, perhaps speaking for some men, lampoons his own masculinity to make a supportive point, lamenting the de-masculinizing loss of chip flavor one might experience if eating Lady Doritos: “I don’t feel masculine enough when I eat my chips anymore, please make ones that explode in my mouth like cellphone batteries” (Wanshel, 2018).

One problem noted by the public is the sexist assumptions underlying the product. Nickalls (2018) claims, not surprisingly, that the result is “many users calling the move sexist and outdated.” The idea of gendered products and marketing is not new or rare (Mitchell, 2018). Roberts (2018) argues that, “PepsiCo isn’t developing a product based only on sexism. PepsiCo is developing a product based on real-life behaviors that are themselves based on sexism.” Gilchrist (2018) argues that the tweets “nail the sexism inherent in developing a chip designed expressly to support stereotypes about women.” DeArmon (2018) reports the reaction to paternalism, stating that, “I think what tends to irk women in particular is how companies treat the public as children who cannot think for themselves. Also, women are said to pay a “Pink Tax” for gendered items—usually pink and smaller than the regular version.

The reification of sexist attitudes and behaviors noted by Roberts (2018) point to two conflicting values lying underneath the ethical question begging to be asked: “The question is how wrong is that. The product perpetuates sexist stereotypes, yes, but companies want to sell stuff.” (Roberts, 2018). The issue boils down to, it appears, rights versus profits. In fact, DeArmon (2018) offers the Lady Doritos case as illustrative of the role of capitalism in our lives: “I mainly chose to rehash “Lady Dorito-gate” because it perfectly encapsulates contemporary capitalism: desperate for an ever-widening consumer base and long out of pertinent material, advertising agencies keep upping the ante on attention-grabbing marketing campaigns.” @leeflower provides a clear statement of priorities, exactly what is at stake and the risk to women and girls: “As we all mock this Dorito news, please remember that creating anxiety around eating is what got us into this dystopian hellscape where women are meant to think we’re not entitled to consume food in the first place” (Spence, 2018).

PepsiCo’s Response to the Lady Doritos Crisis

Clearly, Indra Nooyi’s introduction of Lady Doritos pushed PepsiCo into a state of crisis. Gutierrez (2018) observes that, “Social media had a field day on Monday eating up the “news” that the folks at Doritos planned to introduce a low-crunch, purse-friendly version of the snacks for women.” As opinions flew around the internet and people organized protests, PepsiCo had to craft a response to the situation. But PepsiCo had additional motivation: their bottom line. Negative sentiment toward Doritos skyrocketed after the Lady Doritos incident. Zara (2018) explains research findings about Doritos in light of Lady Doritos: “New data from Digimind, which tracks consumer sentiment, suggests that the Doritos brand has taken a significant PR hit. By coincidence, the firm was already tracking sentiment around Doritos for the Super Bowl, and it found that negative opinions about the brand spiked 138% between the game day on Sunday and two days later—after the stories about “Lady Doritos” made the rounds. According to Digimind, negative sentiment was at a low of 13% on Sunday, likely because of positive reactions to its commercial, which featured a rap battle between Peter Dinklage and Morgan Freeman.” Zara (2018) explains the connection between brand and negative information, even if untrue: “The sharp rise in negative sentiment bolsters the idea that negative stories can hurt a brand regardless of whether they’re true or not.” Certainly, PepsiCo had motive to answer the attacks on their nonexistent product.

Smith (2018) describes the corporate state of mind leading into the response: “After reading a litany of side-eyed commentary across the Internet, Doritos started issuing statements: Despite its boss’s insistence, “the company has no plans to launch a gender-specific line of snacks, and its social media

team, at the very least, seems to recognize that the notion of a line of genteel snack chips for women is... ridiculous." "As they balanced the CEO's statements and the real-world implications of the product she introduced, the best policy appeared to be a direct message rejecting the idea of the Lady Doritos product.

PepsiCo's response to Lady Doritos was, in fact, direct. "The reporting on a specific Doritos product for female consumers is inaccurate," a company spokeswoman said in a statement to Ad Age on Monday night" (Gutierrez, 2018). They also elaborated on this inaccuracy in a consumer-positive and product-positive manner. Gutierrez (2018) offers another statement by PepsiCo about Lady Doritos: "We already have Doritos for women - they're called Doritos, and they're enjoyed by millions of people every day. At the same time, we know needs and preferences continue to evolve and we're always looking for new ways to engage and delight our consumers." LaForge (2018) provides another PepsiCo communication, less clear, certainly, than earlier messages: "I can't yet give any more details beyond what Indra relayed in the podcast," the spokeswoman said. "However, I will be able to in a few months." The lack of details and the time delay set this message apart from the others, since few people will know what this means until it happens. Another communication from PepsiCo provides further clarification of their position. Bruner (2018) presents more of PepsiCo's response: "We already have Doritos for women — they're called Doritos, and they're enjoyed by millions of people every day. At the same time, we know needs and preferences continue to evolve and we're always looking for new ways to engage and delight our consumers."

PepsiCo made their response to the crisis. Their messages were, mostly, clear and direct statements of the corporate position. Regardless, not everyone was satisfied with the explanations provided by PepsiCo. One journalist expresses her frustration with image repair effort: "I know that PepsiCo is trying to make this all go away with its statement, but I still demand answers. Either the company really was considering some sort of sludge-like "Lady Doritos" product, which it thought would be actually marketable to people like me, or it has a CEO that has been walking around hallucinating that the company was considering it — and it hasn't even fired her for lacking the mental fitness for her job. Truthfully, I'm not sure which is worse" (Timpf, 2018). Fortunately, scholars have developed methods of assessing image repair efforts. Of particular use is William Benoit's Image Repair Theory. The following sections will outline the theory, including some of its theoretical grounding. Then the category scheme presented by Benoit will be applied to the analysis of PepsiCo response. The investigation concludes with an examination of the likely effectiveness of the tactics used and implication for future assessments of image repair crisis communication responses.

Responding to a Crisis

Benoit (1997) proposes that a crisis begins with an accusation, comprised of two parts: (1) the accused party is held liable for an action and, (2) that the act in question is considered offensive. The largely public negative reaction to Lady Doritos clearly occurred with the full knowledge that both the PepsiCo and Doritos brands were ultimately responsible for Lady Doritos. Further, the clear and substantial public reaction was negative about PepsiCo, Doritos, and Lady Doritos because the product is sexist in design and promotion. PepsiCo and Doritos being in crisis demanded a response. Carveth and Ferraris (2014) describe the situation PepsiCo found themselves in and that demanded a response: "Image restoration becomes an issue when organizations or individuals have passed the point of anticipation and have lost the opportunity to act proactively in protecting themselves." The present study examines the PepsiCo response to the crisis through the lens of the Image Repair Theory advanced by William Benoit and based in part on apology theory. Benoit (2000) identifies a shift in his language about the

theory: he prefers “repair” to “restoration” since repair is a frequent only option for some organizational crises. After an explanation of the theoretical grounding and method of this study, Image Repair Theory will be applied to the PepsiCo response.

Theoretical Antecedent: Apologia

Apologia serves as the foundation of Benoit’s Image Repair Theory. Ware and Linkugel (1973) define apologia as “the speech of self defense.” Writing to argue for genre status for apologia, Ware and Linkugel offer Abelson’s (1959) “modes of resolution” as factors identified in paradigm cases of apologia. Abelson’s modes are denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. These concepts will appear later, in Benoit’s work. Ware and Linkugel maintain that these factors “account for most of the strategies people find useful in speaking their own defense.” Each of Ware and Linkugel’s apologia factors plays a role in Benoit’s Image Repair Theory. These factors comprise most of the theoretical foundation of Image Repair Theory, as well as form its structure and practice.

Ware and Linkugel describe denial as made of “the simple disavowal by the speaker of any participation in, relationship to, or positive sentiment toward whatever it is that repels the audience. They also include the denial of intent as a vital part of the broader concept of denial, arguing that, “The person who is charged with some despicable action often finds a disclaimer of intent as an attractive means of escaping stigma if the denial of the existence of the action itself is too great a reformation of reality to gain acceptance.” We have a strong motive to engage in denial in crisis situations when we see no other way out. An example of denial would be the small child who breaks a lamp, is the only child home, and is chastised by a parent for breaking the lamp. The child says, “I didn’t do it.”

Bolstering is the second factor of apologia identified by Ware and Linkugel, indicating that, “the bolstering factor is... the obverse of denial.” They claim that bolstering “reinforces the existence of a fact, sentiment, object, or relationship.” This means that the speaker associates themselves with things that will be seen as positive, inviting identification between speaker and audience. Where denial negates, bolstering produces rapport. An example of bolstering would be the child mentioned above, but instead of denying responsibility, the child presents the parent with a listing of the child’s strengths: good at school, takes care of siblings, does everything parents instruct, is loved by animals, or does the laundry without being asked—in the hopes that these character strengths will outweigh the flaw that resulted in the broken lamp.

Differentiation, according to Ware and Linkugel, is comprised of “those strategies which serve the purpose of separating some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship from some larger context.” They provide further context for differentiation, suggesting that, “Any strategy which is cognitively divisive and concomitantly transformative is differentiation.” They say that while differentiating is effective in some cases, in most cases it is not. Our broken lamp example continues, except that after confrontation by the parent, the child would argue that other kids came in the house and broke the lamp, independent of the child. Or that all the child’s siblings break lots of household items, but this child has only broken a lamp—far less significant than the transgressions of the other sibling, thus setting the child apart from the destructive group of siblings.

Ware and Linkugel present transcendence as the fourth apologia factor. They describe transcendence: “This factor takes in any strategy which cognitively joins some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship with some larger context within which the audience does not presently view that attribute.” Specifically, they state that transcendence involves “a change in cognitive identification and in meaning.” The

psychological effect of transcendence is to push “the audience away from the particulars of the charge at hand in a direction more abstract, general view of his character.” In the lamp example, the child might try to replace the focus on the broken lamp with the greater values of childhood, a happy family, domestic harmony, or unconditional love. Each of these represents a somewhat relevant shift from the concreteness of the lamp toward far more abstract values.

Benoit’s Image Repair Theory

William Benoit begins his presentation of Image Repair Theory by discussing the nature of attack. In addition to the conditions described above, Benoit (1997), importantly, points out that, “Perceptions are more important than reality.” Put another way, what an audience believes to be true tends to overwhelm what is true. This phenomenon is at play regardless of attitude valence—a company in crisis may maintain its “good” standing with the public regardless of any actions the company may have taken and conversely, the “good” company may lose its positive standing with the public for reasons not based in reality. Provocative acts may or may not be perceived as such, meaning that public reactions may or may not be grounded in reality. Benoit continues research involving his earlier image repair design, examining Juan Williams (2011), Rush Limbaugh (Ferguson & Benoit, 2013), and Donald Trump (2017).

Benoit (1997) clearly defines the focus of his theory: “Rather than describe the kinds of crisis situation, or the stages in a crisis, the theory of image restoration discourse focuses on message options. In other words, what can a corporation say when faced with a crisis?” And while grounded in earlier work such as apologia), this theory is broader in scope and utility. Benoit operationalizes his theory in five behavioral categories with 14 specific tactics related to crisis response. Cowden (2015/16) describes Benoit’s scheme as “perhaps the most comprehensive typology available.” Each category/subcategory provides multiple methods of response and is described in turn.

Benoit (1995) presents denial as “simply to deny the undesirable action.” Denial is described in two parts. “Simple denial” refers to a response that rejects claims that the actor performed the action in question. An example might be, “We did not dump that toxic sludge in your creek.” The other type of denial takes the form of “shifting the blame” by claiming that someone else engaged in the behavior in question. An example of shifting the blame would be, “We aren’t responsible for the oil spill since we contracted out the job related to the accident to another company.”

The second of Benoit’s (1995; 1997) category of image repair strategy is evasion of responsibility. Rather than the flat-out rejection of damaging action in “denial,” this category describes taking the damaging action, but without intent to harm, often out of the actor’s control. “Provocation” refers to the speaker’s behavior being prompted, if not caused, by the actions of another. One example of this tactic would be the child, caught fighting, who says, “It’s not my fault. He pushed me, and I had to fight back.” A corporate example might be, “We raised our prices only because we had to—our suppliers raised theirs first.” “Defeasibility” is the second tactic for evasion, referring to the actor not having the ability or information to be responsible for the action in question. For instance, if a company is being held responsible for food poisoning outbreaks stemming from consumption of their food, defeasibility might manifest as saying, “We simply did not know that people were getting sick. How could we have acted?” The tactic of “Accident” simply refers to the mistaken nature of the offending action. An accident tactic might be that, “When we redesigned the car’s safety features, we had no idea that there would be more injuries than before. It’s tragic, but an accident.” “Good intentions” rounds out the tactics for evasion. This approach describes the actor’s aim as purposeful and prosocial. For instance, one was to accuse a

cashier of short-changing them, the cashier might respond that, “I was so worried about counting out the ones that I might have slipped on the ten. I was only trying to do a good job for you.”

Next, Benoit (1995; 1997) proposes the strategy of reducing the offensiveness of the negative event. Overall, the audience is asked to believe that the odious action really is not very bad. The first tactic given for reducing offensiveness is “Bolstering.” Using this tactic, the actor would describe other actions seen as positive, in the hope that they will outweigh the negative action. If an actor were accused of tax evasion, the bolstering response might be that, “We have given so much to the community—sponsored baseball teams, provided 4th of July fireworks, and started a summer lunch programs at the schools.” Another tactic for reducing offensiveness is “Minimization.” The goal of this tactic is to change negative perceptions about the significance or impact of the act—it’s not as bad as you think it is. An example of minimization could be that, “Fewer than 100 people died during the hurricane in Puerto Rico, not the thousands cited by others.”

“Differentiation” is Benoit’s next tactic for reducing offensiveness. Communicators would use this tactic to achieve a separation of the current problem from other similar but more negative actions. An example of differentiation might be that, “All of those other gas stations gouged you with high prices after 9/11. Our prices went up only enough to guarantee an unbroken supply of gas for our customers.”

The next tactic associated with reducing offensiveness is “Transcendence.” This tactic tries to lift the negative action and re-place it in a better setting. The Red Cross provides an example. The Red Cross places severe restrictions on blood donation by gay men. When challenged on this issue by straight people asking why they should donate blood given the harshness of the policy, the Red Cross responded that, “Yes, this is tragic, but think of all the lives we save through blood donations by others.”

Benoit refers to the fifth tactic for reducing offensiveness as “Attack the Accuser.” The goal of this tactic is to reduce the credibility of the accuser. An example of attacking the accuser, tragically, is playing out across the United States in the form of accusations of sexual assault and rape of women, usually by men in places of power. As the #MeToo movement has grown, more women are publicly accusing their attackers. Too often, the accused rapists respond by attacking their accusers, saying things like, “It was consensual. She put the moves on me. Her friends told me about how morally loose she is. If she didn’t want sex, why did she dress that way?”

The last form of reducing offensiveness is “Compensation.” This is essentially paying off the victim(s), or promising to pay, to counteract the offensive act. Often compensation is seen as an “affirmative defense” in which the person/entity admits some degree of wrongdoing, but sees compensation as a strong mitigating factor, perhaps erasing the negative act. A product that advertises “double your money back” is an example of compensation. If there is a product failure, the company will compensate, which mitigates the problem and softens the public response. Further, the promise of compensation, real or not, is likely to influence customers so they may be an expected compensation effect.

The fourth strategy (and tactic) Benoit (1995; 1997) identifies is “Corrective Action.” This refers to the actor taking some action to alter audience perceptions to believe that the organization will “make things right.” This does not necessarily include actual action taken to fix the problem—perceptions matter more than reality. For instance, when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, everyone involved from politicians to businesspeople promised that New Orleans would rise from its current devastation to become a much better version of itself because everyone wanted it to happen and seemed willing to fund the revival.

Benoit (1995; 1997) presents “Mortification” as the fifth strategy (and tactic). Mortification, described by Benoit (1997), is “to confess and beg forgiveness.” Often, the specific message contains an actual apology, although not always. As an example, after a scandal involving financial irregularities breaks in the news, a CEO could address the public, confess to the charges, and plead for forgiveness and a restoration of trust.

Analysis of PepsiCo’s Response to Lady Doritos

Assessment of PepsiCo’s Response

PepsiCo’s first response for analysis is the reference to inaccurate reporting of the Nooyi comments on Lady Doritos: “The reporting on a specific Doritos product for female consumers is inaccurate.” The obvious application from Benoit is that this response is a simple denial of the charges. While that claim is likely accurate, another layer of meaning manifests: shifting the blame. While there appears no doubt that this statement represents denial, the blame shift is a bit subtler. PepsiCo has taken a statement undoubtedly made by Nooyi and reallocated responsibility to “reporting.” This claim implies that Nooyi is not the responsible party, but rather it is the press who made the mistake. On its face, the argument over responsibility for the statement is farcical: Nooyi said it and her comments were recorded. As far as reporting this information, the traditional press was not the primary source of information. Social media was ahead of the press, with reporters addressing online comments rather than engaging in investigative journalism. Again, simple denial by PepsiCo is quite direct in nature. The claim that reporting was responsible for the Lady Doritos crisis seems unfounded.

The next of PepsiCo’s crisis responses for examination is the claim that all Doritos are for all people, male or female: “We already have Doritos for women - they're called Doritos, and they're enjoyed by millions of people every day. At the same time, we know needs and preferences continue to evolve and we're always looking for new ways to engage and delight our consumers.” The first tactic evident in the statement is bolstering. PepsiCo is, in effect, stating that they took care of this issue already by creating Doritos that everyone can enjoy. The point here is well taken in that anyone really can eat Doritos and that it seems silly, somehow, to claim otherwise. PepsiCo has taken care of a problem that never existed, in essence. This statement also minimizes the problem by taking a lighter, more humorous approach by saying that, of course, this is not a problem.

The second part of this message is more troubling and more difficult to classify. We can assume that every company with a product to sell is looking for ways to keep their customers happy, but this part of this statement feels like a promise of some vague actions in the future. Will PepsiCo develop Lady Doritos? Other gendered snack products? Those issues are unclear. Instead, this part of the statement seems to have a promise of corrective action (without any admission of fault) by developing new products to make consumers happy. This part of the statement also seems to address good intentions by PepsiCo. The idea is that they have in the past and will continue acting on behalf of their customers, never intending to hurt or insult anyone. This second portion of the statement may also perform a bolstering function by claiming that their good will subsumes any negative outcomes from Nooyi’s comments.

The last part of PepsiCo’s response is the least clear in terms of meaning, application, and classification in Benoit’s scheme. A PepsiCo spokeswoman stated that, “I can’t yet give any more details beyond what Indra relayed in the podcast. However, I will be able to in a few months.” Perhaps the most easily applied concept is that of defeasibility. At one level, this statement might discredit the other PepsiCo

responses. The definitive, fairly direct approach found in PepsiCo’s other responses to the crisis undermines the idea they PepsiCo knew about the issues and simply said, “Not a problem” or “Not our problem.” How can the representative be unable to address Nooyi’s comments for a few months if the company does, indeed, understand the problem at hand? If PepsiCo cannot speak beyond what Nooyi has already said, how have they been able to deny (or any of the other tactics used) what Nooyi stated? By claiming a degree of ignorance, PepsiCo could be tearing down the edifice of its own responses. Add to that problem, the fact that more than a few months have passed (five at this writing) without the promised clarification of Nooyi’s comments or PepsiCo’s crisis response.

Critical Tools for Analyzing the PepsiCo Response

PepsiCo’s crisis tactics are identified and classified. Now, the impact of the Lady Doritos response can be considered. PepsiCo’s response may be examined based on the predicted effectiveness of the tactics, through analysis based on research findings concerning the overall effectiveness and appropriateness of using particular tactics. Speculation about the actual results and their causes is included in this consideration.

Two works address the effectiveness of particular image repair strategies. Benoit and Drew (1997) had students respond to one of five face-threatening interpersonal situations in which all the Benoit tactics were operationalized. A repeated measures ANOVA indicated that subjects perceived differences in the appropriateness of form of image repair, with responses grouped through a post hoc Duncan Multiple Range test resulting in “remarkably clear” groupings. The “A” group (most appropriate) contains mortification and corrective action. Good intentions and accident (which overlaps with “C”) are the “B” group. Accident, compensation, and defeasibility represent the “C” group in the middle range. The “D” group contains transcendence and shift blame. Only differentiation placed in the “E” group. Group “F” holds simple denial, provocation, minimization, bolstering, and attack accuser.

Benoit and Drew’s (1997) results also indicated the perceived effectiveness of the different tactics. Mortification and corrective action top the list in the “A” category. The next most effective tactics were in the “B” category: compensation, accident, good intention, transcendence, and defeasibility (overlap with “C”). Defeasibility, shift blame, and attack accuser make up the “C” group. Differentiation is the top item in the “D” group, but simple denial, provocation, and minimization occur in both groups “D” and “E.” Bolstering finishes group “E.” A simplified table modeled on Benoit and Drew’s work shows the distribution of perceived effectiveness of image repair strategies.

Table 1
Perceived Effectiveness of Image Repair Strategies

A (perceived most effective)	B (seen as next most effective)	C (seen as third most effective)	D (next to least effective)	E (perceived least effective)
Mortification Corrective Action	Compensation Accident Good Intentions Transcendence Defeasibility ^a	Defeasibility ^a Shift Blame Attack Accuser	Differentiation Simple Denial ^b Provocation ^b Minimization ^b	Simple Denial ^b Provocation ^b Minimization ^b Bolstering

^a These items overlap categories B and C

^b These items overlap categories D and E

Arendt, LaFleche, and Limperopulos (2017) examined relevant literature (110 articles in 51 peer-reviewed journals) looking for patterns in crisis or reputation damage situations. Their results include designations of most successful strategy (tactic) and the most common strategies (tactics). This study indicates that corrective action is the most successful tactic, followed by corrective action used together with reducing offensiveness, then corrective action used in combination with bolstering, with evading responsibility rounding out the list of successful tactics. This research also identifies the least successful tactics. These include denial, denial with reducing offensiveness, and denial with evasion of responsibility.

They continue with the most common strategies (tactics) identified empirically in the research surveyed. Denial, according to these results, is the most commonly used tactic. Reducing offensiveness places as the second most common tactic, with corrective action used the third most frequently. Shifting the blame is the fourth most used tactic.

The authors identify mitigating factors their analysis “unearthed,” which are offered as “factors that helped shape success or failure.” These influences are: guilt or innocence, remaining silent, potential legal action, scope of the crisis, and promptness. Some of these factors inform the present analysis and will be explained below as they are used.

Evaluating the PepsiCo Tactical Response to Lady Doritos

The first part of the PepsiCo message identified is based on simple denial and shifting the blame, stating that there is no Lady Doritos and that the unclear messaging is the fault of reporters as simple denial and shifting the blame. Benoit and Drew classify denial near the bottom in terms of both effectiveness and appropriateness, while Arendt et al. identify denial as the most frequently used tactic. Shifting the blame does not fare much better: in the middle of Benoit and Drew’s effectiveness list and in the next to lowest category of appropriateness. The obvious questions concern why an advocate would use an inappropriate and ineffective message form. Arendt et al. provide mitigating factors to assist in explaining behaviors that deviate from the norms of effect and accepted usage. The first listed mitigating factor is germane to this discussion. Is the accused party guilty or innocent? If innocent, the denial could go a long way, as could shifting the blame. In this instance, given the silliness (despite serious social implications) of this crisis, it might be easy for an audience presume that the whole thing is a joke and to presume PepsiCo’s innocence and the shift in blame is justified.

The next response by PepsiCo argues that they already have Doritos for women, called Doritos and that everyone already eats and enjoys them, and we want to take care of our customers’ needs. Bolstering, promised corrective action, and good intentions are in use in this response. In Benoit and Drew’s analysis corrective action (promised or actual) is the most appropriate and most effective tactic. Arendt et al. rate this the most effective tactic. Bolstering is at or near the bottom in effectiveness and appropriateness, while good intentions is near the top in both effectiveness and appropriateness. This message, given the ratings, appears more likely to succeed than the first message. Arendt, et al. claim that corrective action and bolstering, when used together, are the third best tactic. This merging of tactics for greater effectiveness combined with the high effectiveness and appropriateness judge this part of the message as likely to be effective.

The final portion of the message comes from a PepsiCo spokesperson and contains the admission that the spokesperson says that she is unable to go beyond the content of the podcast, but that she should be able to talk in a few months. Aside from the truly curious and cryptic nature of this message, there

are concrete problems associated with the content. While the tactic of defeasibility is in use, the implications for the Doritos brand from this tactic would caution against its use in such a situation as this. In their ranking of tactics, Benoit and Drew place defeasibility defensibility? in the middle of both appropriateness and effectiveness, which should indicate that the tactic has some possibility of success without a great amount of risk. The difficulty with this individual message is a lack of context and little, if any, antecedent from which to draw meaning. The claim that the spokesperson could go no further than Nooyi's podcast appears contradicted by the other spokespeople responding well beyond Nooyi's communication. The first two messages analyze here provide information that is well beyond Nooyi's podcast. Further, the promise of the spokesperson being able to talk in a few months, which seems to fit the Arendt et al. mitigating factor of remaining silent. They describe the impact of silence in strong terms about damaging a brand seriously for a long time. This is unlikely to happen in the PepsiCo instance because this person is one voice among many and seems to be the sole possessor of this unusual message.

Conclusion

The crisis communication response by PepsiCo in answer to a message by its CEO Indra Nooyi drew a substantial response from the American public on social media (Graham, 2018; Lacina, 2018; LaForge, 2018; Pisani, 2018; Wylie, 2018) . As Nooyi explained a new Dorito designed for women in response to problems that Nooyi says women have had eating the snack food, people perceived a sexist attitude underlying her effusive descriptions of the need for the product and the product itself. While protests certainly occurred in cities such as Austin, Texas, the largest outcry was online, particularly via social media. The responses were numerous and negative, whether to disparage the clearly sexist attitudes behind Nooyi's comments or to ridicule the idea of products for ladies. As swift as the public clamor appeared, PepsiCo countered with comments meant to alleviate the image problems that were growing for the Doritos brand. While difficult to determine that PepsiCo's strategies were successful, research on the genre of image repair denotes some areas of potential success and some of potential failure. No doubt, PepsiCo could have used additional tactics for a broader approach to their problem. The image repair messages could have been more detailed and less puzzling in their content. Unfortunately, this incident points to a lack of crisis communication readiness by PepsiCo. Several pundits noted that the whole event, Nooyi through PepsiCo's answers to critics, had to be planned. If so, the planning was poor. If not, PepsiCo needs to develop a more effective crisis communications plan. Yes. And the situation speaks to a whole of host of other related issues, including spokesperson selection and preparedness and overall marketing communications strategy and implementation.

References

- ABC 7 Chicago. PepsiCo CEO says company might consider making brand of Doritos for women. (2018). *ABC 7 Chicago*. <http://abc7chicago.com/business/pepsico-ceo-says-company-might-consider-making-brand-of-doritos-for-women/3042271/>.
- Abelson, R. P. (1959). Modes of resolution of belief dilemmas. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 3, 343-352.
- Anderson, A. A., & Huntington, H. E. (2017). Social media, science and attack discourse: How Twitter discussions of climate change use sarcasm and incivility. *Science Communication*, 39(5), 598-620. DOI 10.1177/1075547017735113
- Arendt, C. LaFleche, M., & Limperopulos, M. A. (2017). A qualitative meta-analysis of apologia, image repair, and crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 43, 517-526.
- Basu, T. (2018). Why 'Lady Doritos' are sexist, scientific nonsense." *The Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-lady-doritos-are-sexist-scientific-nonsense-4>.

- Benoit, W. L. (1995). *Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration strategies*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Benoit, W. L. (1997). Image repair discourse and crisis communication. *Public Relations Review*, 23(2), 177-186.
- Benoit, W. L. (2000). Another visit to the theory of image restoration strategies. *Communication Quarterly*, 48, 40-44.
- Benoit, W. L. (2011). NPR's image repair discourse on firing Juan Williams. *Journal of Radio and Audio Media* 18(1), 84-91.
- Benoit, W. L., & Drew, S. (1997). Appropriateness and effectiveness of image repair strategies. *Communication Reports*, 10, 153-163.
- Benoit, W. (2017). Image repair on the Donald Trump "Access Hollywood" video: "Grab them by the p*ssy. *Communication Studies*, 68, 243-259. DOI: 10.1080/10510974.2017.1331250
- Bruner, R. (2018). The internet thinks 'Lady-Friendly' Doritos are in pretty bad taste. *Time*. <http://time.com/5133674/lady-doritos/>.
- Calix, B. (2018). Lady Doritos? Seriously? Internet says women are fine with crunch, thank you. *The Tribune (San Luis Obispo)*. <https://www.sanluisobispo.com/living/food-drink/article198539119.html>
- Cantu, T. (2018). CRUNCH! Texas women protest 'Lady Friendly' Doritos Chip. *Patch*. <https://patch.com/texas/downtownaustin/crunch-texas-women-protest-lady-friendly-doritos-chip>.
- Carveth, R., & Ferraris, C. (2014). What not to do in a crisis: The case of Donald Sterling. *Proceedings of the 79th Annual Conference of the Association for Business Communication*. businesscommunication.org
- Cowden, K. (2015/16). A failure of pandemic proportions: Image restoration and metanarration delivered by the CDC during the H2N2 virus release of 2005. *Journal of the Communication, Speech, & Theatre Association of North Dakota*, 28, 1-11. Retrieved from: <http://www2.edutech.nodak.edu/ndsta/>
- DeArmon, A. (2018). Doritos? But I'm a lady. *Frederick News Post*. https://www.fredericknewspost.com/opinion/columns/doritos-but-i-m-a-lady/article_9bd0c313-e4a8-5e3c-a2f5-d27e2ae6e47f.html.
- Friedman, E., & Lowengart, O. (2018). The context of choice as boundary condition for gender differences in brand choice considerations. *European Journal of Marketing*, 52, 1280-1304. DOI: 10.1108/EJM-08-2017-0524.
- Furgerson, J. L., & Benoit, W. L. (2013). Limbaugh's loose lips: Rush Limbaugh's image repair after the Sandra Fluke controversy. *Journal of Radio and Audio Media*, 20(2). 273-291
- Gant, M., & Darrah, N. (2018). PepsiCo contradicts CEO's claim that Doritos may make lady-friendly chips. *Fox News*. <http://www.foxnews.com/food-drink/2018/02/06/pepsico-contradicts-ceos-claim-that-doritos-will-make-lady-friendly-chips.html>.
- Gilchrist, T. E. (2018). Amid #MeToo and Time's Up, Doritos announces new, more ladylike chip. *The Advocate*. <https://www.advocate.com/women/2018/2/05/amid-metoo-and-times-doritos-announces-new-more-ladylike-chip>.
- Gold, H. (2018). PepsiCo claims reports of 'Lady Doritos' are 'inaccurate.' *Jezebel*. <https://jezebel.com/pepsico-claims-reports-of-lady-doritos-are-inaccurate-1822786019>.
- Graham, R. (2018). You know what? I do want "Lady Doritos." *Slate.com*. <https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/02/the-backlash-to-lady-doritos-is-absurd.html>.
- Gutierrez, L. (2018). 'Lady Doritos' are not a thing, says PepsiCo. *Kansas City Star*. <http://www.kansascity.com/news/nation-world/article198516944.html>

- Herzog, K. (2018). Doritos didn't invent lady chips. The internet did. The Stranger.
<https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2018/02/07/25790386/doritos-didnt-invent-lady-chips-the-internet-did>
- Highfield, T. (2015). Tweeted joke lifespans and appropriated punch lines: Practices around topical humor on social media. *International Journal of Communication*, 9(2015), 2713-2734.
- Judkis, M. (2018) Doritos is developing lady-friendly chips because you should never hear a woman crunch. The Washington Post.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/food/wp/2018/02/05/doritos-is-developing-lady-friendly-chips-because-apparently-you-should-never-hear-a-woman-crunch/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.59c76aa00b0b
- Lacina, L. (2018). 'Lady Doritos' don't actually exist, but the outrage against it teaches us an important Lesson about making up our own minds. Entrepreneur.
<https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/308631>
- LaForge, P. (2018). 'Lady Doritos'? Pepsi wants a do-over. New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/06/business/lady-doritos-indra-nooyi.html>
- McGauley, J. (2018). Everyone was so confused by Doritos' plan to make 'lady-friendly' chips. Thrillist.
<https://www.thrillist.com/news/nation/doritos-for-women-twitter-reacts>
- McGrath, M. (2018). What Pepsi can learn from its 'Lady Doritos' debacle. Forbes.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/maggiemcgrath/2018/02/06/what-pepsi-can-learn-from-its-lady-doritos-debacle/#5358f5787c43>
- Mitchell, C. (2018). Products 'for ladies' promote gender stereotype. The Temple News, February 27.
<https://temple-news.com>
- Nichols, A. (2018). Please buy our product that makes you so mad: 'Lady Doritos' and the new, facile culture wars. The Outline. <https://theoutline.com/post/3328/lady-doritos-controversy-outrage-marketing?zd=1&zi=vxox5atf>
- Nickalls, S. (2018). Pepsi CEO says it's targeting women with Doritos that are cleaner and less crunchy. AdWeek. <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/pepsi-ceo-says-its-targeting-women-with-doritos-that-are-cleaner-and-less-crunchy/>.
- Pisani, J. (2018). "Lady Doritos"? It's not happening, PepsiCo says. USA Today.
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/food/2018/02/06/lady-doritos-not-happening-pepsico/312192002/>
- Roberts, M. (2018). Why are Lady Doritos such a big deal? Washington Post.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2018/02/05/why-are-lady-doritos-such-a-big-deal/?utm_term=.e2284e7bb0d4.
- Schultz, E. J. (2018). PepsiCo says "Lady Doritos" not a thing. AdAge. <http://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/pepsico-shoots-lady-doritos-speculation/312267/>
- Smith, B. (2018). Everything you need to know about the 'Lady Doritos' controversy. Men's Journal.
<https://www.mensjournal.com/food-drink/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-lady-doritos-controversy/>
- Spence, S. (2018). No, 'Lady Doritos' are not actually going to be a thing. People.
<http://people.com/food/lady-doritos-not-real-pepsi-ceo-indra-nooyi/>
- Timpf, K. (2018). What exactly is a 'Lady Dorito'? National Review.
<https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/02/lady-doritos-pepsico-indra-nooyi-floats-female-friendly-snacks/>
- Wanshel, E. (2018). People hilariously blast 'Lady Doritos' on Twitter. Huffington Post.
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/lady-doritos-twitter-backlash_us_5a78a642e4b006e74aef01cd

- Ware, B. L., & Linkugel, W. A. (1973). The spoke in defense of themselves: On the generic criticism of apologia. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 59, 273-283.
- Welk, B. (2018). Lady Doritos? Pepsi CEO floats separate 'snacks for women,' internet won't bite. *The Wrap*. <https://www.thewrap.com/lady-doritos-pepsi-internet/>
- Wylie, M. (2018). What's the deal with the 'Lady Doritos' rumors? *BizWomen*. <https://www.bizjournals.com/bizwomen/news/latest-news/2018/02/whats-the-deal-with-the-lady-doritos-rumors.html?page=all>.
- Yu, D. (2018). PepsiCo refutes launch of Doritos for women. *Bakery and Snacks*. <https://www.bakeryandsnacks.com/Article/2018/02/09/PepsiCo-denies-lady-Doritos-launch>.
- Zara, C. (2018). "Lady Doritos" were not good for the Doritos brand. *Fast Company*. <https://www.fastcompany.com/40528577/lady-doritos-were-not-good-for-the-doritos-brand>.

NICK BACKUS (Ph. D., Kansas) is a Professor of Communication Studies at Western Oregon University.