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Johnny Depp v Wootton & NGN: “Wife-Beater”

1. Introduction:

In May of 2016, Amber Heard appeared in court in Los Angeles seeking a restraining order from her husband Johnny Depp. She sought the order on the grounds that Depp had used violence against her on multiple occasions and that she regularly faced domestic abuse. She told reporters that she “had endured ‘excessive emotional, verbal and physical abuse’ and ‘angry hostile, humiliating and threatening assaults,’” (Sillito, 2020). Depp denied this abuse. Heard was granted the restraining order.

When the couple appeared in court again in London four years later, it was not for Heard’s case, but for a libel case brought forward by Depp against a British news source called “The Sun.” Depp incited the case after the journal called him a “wife-beater,” and Depp used the case to try to prove that the accusations made against him were nothing other than an “elaborate hoax,” (Sillito, 2020).

Throughout the 16 day trial, Heard recounted over 14 different occasions in which Depp had been violent toward her and claiming that at times, she even felt in fear for her life. The purpose of the libel case was to determine whether or not The Sun was able to accurately call Mr. Depp a “wife-beater” rather than to criminally charge Depp. Justice Nicol determined that The Sun had proven their article to be “substantially true” and he found 12 of the 14 alleged incidents of domestic violence to have occurred (Johnny, 2020).

This essay will discuss how Johnny Depp utilized two of William Benoit’s strategies of image repair discourse, denial and attacking the accuser, to try to repair his image in court and win his case. Because of his failure to present sufficient supporting evidence to his case in court,

it is safe to say that Depp's strategy for image repair was unsuccessful in the eyes of the law.

However, with Depp's use of denial and attacking the accuser in response to the allegations made against him, I argue that Depp's image repair strategy was successful to me personally.

2. Review of Literature:

2.1. Benoit's Image Repair Theory

In the face of accusations, one's reputation suffers, and after crisis, many turn to image repair in order to repair a broken reputation. One theory that is very important to the concept of image repair is William Benoit's Image Repair Theory which includes five different image repair strategies: (1) denial, (2) evasion of responsibility, (3) reducing offensiveness, (4) corrective action, and (5) mortification (Benoit, 2014). In the case of Johnny Depp, denial and reducing offensiveness are most relevant. Denial occurs when the accused simply denies the accusations and reducing offensiveness occurs when the accused attempts to reduce the degree of wrongdoing that the audience feels that the accused has committed. Depp employs a sub-category of reducing offensiveness called attacking the accuser during his case.

2.2. Related Studies

2.2.1. TLC

TLC found themselves faced with accusations damaging to their reputation after one of the stars on their reality show "19 Kids and Counting" admitted to molesting five underaged girls. Because of the scandal, the family's positive reputation was being questioned, and TLC was under fire for producing the show. Because of TLC's association with the family, TLC had to engage in image repair. The network used image repair strategies such as minimization, a subcategory of reducing offensiveness. The analysis conducted concluded that while TLC's

overall viewing went up, that public perception of the network and the family did not improve, meaning that their image repair strategies were ineffective (Diulio, 2018).

2.2.2. Michael Phelps

In 2009, a photo of Michael Phelps smoking pot circulated, causing controversy. Phelps' reputation and image as a role model for children was brought into question, resulting in the need for image repair. The athlete himself exercised image repair by using mortification and bolstering strategies. His sponsors used bolstering and minimization techniques as well. The authors, Joseph Walsh and Sheila Spooner report that his image repair strategies were a success as his sponsors and organizations took well to his statements and the media dismissed the issue due to Phelps' young age (Walsh, 2011).

2.2.3. David Letterman

In 2009, David Letterman, host of *The Late Show*, made a joke about former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin's daughter, causing controversy as the girl was underage. At first, Letterman defended himself with denial and used humor as well to try to diffuse the situation. This first attempt was unsuccessful as many saw his apology as insincere. The TV host tried again using different image repair strategies such as bolstering, differentiation, and finally mortification to own up to his actions and corrective action by promising to better himself. This second attempt was much better received by the public and by Palin herself, so the authors Josh Compton and Brett Miller write it as a successful image repair attempt (Compton, 2011).

3. Analysis

3.1. Denial

When faced with accusations of beating his wife, Johnny Depp turned to two of Benoit's strategies of image repair, the first of which is denial. In pretrial documents, Amber Heard listed

14 different occasions in which Depp had assaulted her, many of which alcohol or drugs were involved. According to the New York Times, in response to Amber's accusations, Depp "told the court that whenever the couple had an argument he would retreat, sometimes hiding in bathrooms. 'I would try to go to my own corner, as it were,' 'I thought it important that we separate before things got out of hand,'" (Marshall, 2020). In this instance, Depp denies the accusations, he could not possibly have harmed her if he preferred to retreat. In his image repair attempts, Depp employs two kinds of denial, simple denial and shifting blame. When Depp states that he has not done the actions he is being accused of, he is using simple denial and when he paints Heard as the aggressor instead of him, Depp employs shifting blame.

3.1.2. The Painting

In one of the 14 alleged events of domestic abuse, Heard details that Depp "hit [her] so hard that blood from her lip ended up on the wall... and that the morning after this incident I tried to set fire to the painting," (Depp v NGN, 2019, pg.10). Depp uses simple denial and claims, "I certainly did not hit Ms Heard at all, then or ever... I also did not try to set fire to the painting in question at any point in time," (Depp v NGN, 2019, pg.10). Depp's response to the painting incident accusations are a perfect example of his use of Benoit's simple denial as he claims to not have done the things he is being accused of.

3.1.3. Blame Shifting

Along with simple denial, Johnny Depp also uses blame shifting in an attempt to repair his image. Depp recounts in his witness statement that "From early on in [his] relationship and throughout the course of it, Ms Heard was abusive to [him] physically and verbally. The abuse was such a common occurrence that it is difficult for [him] to specify when and where such abuse took place as it was essentially ongoing," (Depp v NGN, 2019, pg.5). By shifting blame,

Depp aims to repair his image by making the audience reconsider who is the victim of the situation and who is the aggressor because the victim's reputation should not suffer, but the aggressor's should.

3.2. Attacking the Accuser

The second image repair strategy used by Johnny Depp in his case is attacking the accuser. In response to the allegations made against him by Heard, Depp has repeatedly brought forward reasons to question Miss. Heard's credibility as a witness. By trying to undermine the accusations that Heard presents, Depp employs Benoit's image repair strategy of attacking the accuser, a subcategory of reducing offensiveness. With this strategy, Depp hopes to repair his image to the judge and win his case.

3.2.1. Plane from Boston to LA, May 2014

Another of the accusations against Depp states that he, after drinking heavily, threw objects at Ms Heard. Then, pushing a chair at her as she walked by, yelled at her, and taunted her. It also states that when Ms Heard stood up, Depp kicked her in the back, causing her to fall over, and threw his boot at her while she was on the ground and continued to scream obscenities. In his witness statement, Depp responds to this allegation with "This story is nothing but one more pathological lie made up by Ms Heard," (Depp v NGN, 2019, pg.10). In his response, Depp is attacking his accuser by calling her a pathological liar.

3.2.2. May 21, 2016

In May of 2016, Depp returned to the apartment he shared with Heard to pick up things he had left there. It was alleged that Depp came to the apartment drunk and caused a scene along with making a big mess. Depp returns the statement that he arrived sober with members of his security team and made no such mess. Depp says in his witness statement, "Two domestic- abuse

trained police officers, who attended the property shortly after the alleged incident, inspected the property and saw no spilled wine, broken glass or any sign of disturbance whatsoever,” (Depp v NGN, 2019, pg.31). While Depp does not directly call Heard a liar following this incident, he is proving this with his statements. By countering Heard’s story with evidence, Depp is trying to prove that Heard is a liar, and trying to repair his image with the strategy attacking the accuser.

4. Evaluation

Because I am unable to conduct research on the public opinion of Johnny Depp before and after his libel case, it is impossible to say whether or not he has successfully repaired his opinion in the eyes of many of his fans. However, I do know what I personally believe and because Johnny’s image repair took place in a courtroom, I also know the opinion of the judge.

4.1. The Judge

At the end of Depp’s 16 day libel trial, Justice Nicol determined that there was sufficient evidence of domestic abuse for The Sun to continue to air their article calling Depp a “wife-beater.” The reasoning behind Justice Nicol’s decision could have had to do with Depp’s reliance on Benoit’s image repair strategy denial. It is a human tendency to connect emotionally with those who express sincere apologies and focus on image repair strategies such as mortification and corrective action. After reading several articles that conducted studies throughout the course of this class, mortification and corrective action seem to be the most successful image repair strategies in the eyes of the public. However, since Johnny Depp either did not do anything wrong or believes that he did not do anything wrong, he exercised great amounts of denial and attacked the accuser. While these strategies were important for maintaining his innocence, they don’t exactly make Depp much of a sympathetic character in the

eyes of the judge. Simple denial and attacking the accuser were not enough to convince Justice Nicol that The Sun was wrong to call Depp a “wife-beater.”

4.2. Personal Evaluation

While it is impossible to say exactly who is the victim in this situation because the case happens to be purely the word of Depp versus the word of Heard, at the end of this project, I find myself believing Johnny Depp. This was a hard case for me because being a woman, I admit my biases for believing women. However, after reading the witness statements and conducting research into the case, I have come to the conclusion that, as far as my beliefs are concerned, Johnny Depp is innocent. Because of my attitude toward the innocence of Johnny Depp, it is fair to say that his image repair strategies were successful, at least to a member of the general public. The strategy that I found to be the most effective was attacking the accuser. Simple denial did not really sway me either way in this case, but the proof of Amber Heard’s previous history of lying helped repair Depp’s image in my eyes very effectively.

5. Conclusion

In this essay I have discussed the accusations made against Johnny Depp and the ways in which he responded to these accusations in regard to Benoit’s Image Repair Theory. Depp focused on two of Benoit’s image repair strategies very heavily in an attempt to win his libel case: denial and attacking the accuser, a subcategory of reducing offensiveness. While these strategies were not enough to win his libel case, his use of attacking the accuser was enough to repair his image in my eyes, so I argue that his strategies were successful. More studies would have to be conducted in order to gauge public opinion of Johnny Depp.

6. Works Cited

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