“PINK SLIME”: A MEDIA-INDUCED CRISIS

by

Sarah J. Nelson

An Abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Communication University of Central Missouri

March, 2014
ABSTRACT

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Lean finely textured beef, or “pink slime,” became the center of media attention on March 7, 2012, when American Broadcasting Company (ABC) began an extensive series of reports centered on the controversial beef product and its treatment process. The reputation of the leading producer of the product, Beef Products, Inc. (BPI), quickly tarnished following the coverage. The company faced public scrutiny and, subsequently, a significant drop in sales. This case study examined how the media influences public opinion and drives consumer demand, as well as its ability to induce a crisis. It also analyzed BPI’s reputation management and communication strategies during the crisis and initial post-crisis stages. Findings revealed that initial agenda setting effects were stronger than consistent, strategic, reactive image restoration strategies.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE OF
THE STUDY

Introduction

“Meat jello.” “A salvage product.” “Cheap filler.” “Pink slime.” These words flooded the airwaves in March 2012 when American Broadcasting Company (ABC) began an extensive series of reports centered on lean finely textured beef and its treatment process (Avila, 2012a, para. 6; Avila, 2012c, para. 6; Avila, 2012c, para. 2; Avila, 2012c, para. 1). This signature product of Beef Products, Inc. (BPI), treated using small amounts of ammonium, was routinely added to ground beef where it was sold in grocery stores, used in school lunch programs, and eaten by consumers throughout the United States (Schultz, 2012).

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) approved the use of ammonium hydroxide in the treatment process of lean finely textured beef with a “no objection” letter in 2001: “BPI was not informed that anyone at the USDA (official, scientist, or other) objected to this [approval]” (Entis, 2012; Derfler, 2003; Complaint and Jury Demand, at 27, Beef Products, Inc., BPI Technology, Inc. and Freezing Machines, Inc., v. American Broadcasting Companies, Inc., ABC News, Inc., Diane Sawyer, Jim Avila, David Kerley, Gerald Zirnstein, Carl Custer, and Kit Fossee, CIU # 12-292 (S.D. 1st Cir. Union County 2012) [hereinafter “Complaint”]). The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also deemed ammonium hydroxide “generally recognizable as safe” in food production (“Database of select committee on GRAS substances (SCOGS) reviews ammonium hydroxide,” 2006). Further, the USDA stated that ammonium and lean finely textured beef need not be listed as ingredients on ground beef packages that contain the product (Derfler, 2003; Shultz, 2012).
Unbeknownst to BPI management, two USDA inspectors not involved in the approval process, Gerald Zirnstein and Carl Custer, were uncomfortable with lean finely textured beef and its treatment process despite the USDA and FDA’s tacit approval (Schultz, 2012). Zirnsten and Custer contacted numerous media outlets to share their disapproval of lean finely textured beef, a product they termed “pink slime” back in 2002 in an email to a colleague after touring a BPI plant (“The 10 worst PR disasters of 2012,” 2012, para. 34; Avila, 2012c). Zirnstein’s email read, “I do not consider the stuff to be ground beef, and I consider allowing it in ground beef to be a form of fraudulent labeling” (Andrews, 2012, para. 12). Popular media sources including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* published stories about “pink slime” after Zirnstein and Custer stepped forward, but the coverage was not met with a significant increase in public concern and “the industry continued to march on” (“The 10 worst PR disasters of 2012,” 2012, para. 34).

However, March 2012 marked the beginning of increased public concern when Zirnstein and Custer contacted ABC and told producers there about their disapproval of “pink slime” (Avila, 2012c). The subsequent extensive ABC coverage, lasting about 30 days, ultimately caused the phrase to go viral and quickly tarnished BPI’s business and reputation (Lopez, 2012). BPI suffered a detrimental blow as a result of the media coverage and, despite a public relations campaign, lost 80% of its sales and was forced to lay off more than 700 workers (Lopez, 2012). BPI filed a $1.2 billion defamation lawsuit against ABC in response, claiming the coverage was a “disinformation campaign” involving nearly “200 false and misleading defamatory statements” (Carman, 2012, para. 3). ABC, on the other hand, claimed its stories, albeit unpleasant, were completely truthful.
Thus, BPI’s downfall appeared to be linked to ABC’s “pink slime” coverage. Despite the previous media coverage, it was not until the extensive series of ABC reports that the phrase “pink slime” went viral, which suggests ABC played a prominent role in bringing the controversial process and product to the forefront of public attention. One day, BPI was a successful business, the next it faced scrutiny on national television.

This thesis analyzes all the sordid history and the current state of BPI, to bring into focus how a series of news reports can influence the public, suggestive of the agenda setting theory at work, and ultimately damage a company despite it adhering to government regulations. Although the agenda setting theory has been applied primarily to politics and the media (McCombs, 2004), this thesis offers it as a way to explain how the media have the ability to make a simple phrase like “pink slime” go viral and induce a crisis. Moreover, this study analyzes BPI’s response through the lens of image restoration to determine which strategies BPI used throughout the crisis and whether or not the strategies were effective in bringing the company back to economic health after the extensive media coverage.

**Purpose and Rationale**

The “pink slime” media uproar certainly drew attention from both public relations and food industries. However, articles addressing the uproar failed to delve into the particulars of the causal relationship between the ABC reports and BPI’s downfall, and the articles did not analyze BPI’s response. For example, *Advertising Age* and *Ragan’s PR Daily*, both popular sources for public relations professionals, *did* run brief stories centering on “pink slime” and the challenge that the media coverage presented for BPI (Schultz, 2012; Rudawsky, 2012a; Rudawsky, 2012b). However, the articles did not apply theoretical framework in an attempt to *explain* BPI’s demise.
Several food journals, such as Supermarket News, Nation's Restaurant News, and Food Weekly News, also published stories centering on the media uproar, which discussed the impact that the media had on not only BPI, but the entire beef industry (“Supervalu, Safeway discontinue ‘pink slime,’” 2012; Barone, 2012; “Concerns about ‘pink slime,’” 2012). Questions remain about what reputation management and crisis communication strategies BPI used in an attempt to counter the impact, though.

An exhaustive review of literature revealed that as recent as January 2014, the “pink slime” media uproar has been the focus of only one formal study. Food Weekly News published a survey conducted between March 29 and April 2, 2012, by Red Robin about consumer awareness and concern regarding “pink slime” (“Concerns about ‘pink slime,’” 2012). The survey results revealed that among 2,222 U.S. adults, 88% were aware of the “pink slime” controversy. Of this 88%, 76% indicated that they were “at least somewhat concerned” and 30% indicated extreme concern (“Concerns about ‘pink slime,’’” 2012, para. 3). The study’s main finding was as follows: “Despite industry and government efforts to manage the controversy, concerns about the so-called ‘pink slime’ in the nation’s beef supply are influencing decisions about what they [consumers] buy and eat” (“Concerns about ‘pink slime,’’” 2012, para. 1). Thus, the sheer scale of this crisis justified a need for further investigation surrounding the causal relationship between ABC reports, the widespread increase in public concern, and BPI’s economic and reputational downfall.

In summary, while multiple articles centered on “pink slime” from both public relations and food industries perspectives, including one formal study, these articles did not offer a way to analyze the “pink slime” media uproar from a theoretical standpoint. Further, while these
articles touched on the influence of the ABC coverage, they did not analyze BPI’s crisis response.

Conducting this case study ultimately provides the opportunity to expose theoretical insights surrounding the media’s ability to influence public opinion, drive consumer demand, and its capacity to impact a company’s reputation. The research also brings to light BPI’s reputation management and crisis response. As Carroll (2009) noted, “newer cases are continually sought to enrich our understanding and knowledge surrounding the important dynamics of crisis management and the risk they pose to corporate reputation” (para. 2).

CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Agenda Setting Theory

The agenda setting theory provides a productive lens to analyze the causal relationship between the ABC reports and BPI’s downfall. The theory addresses the media’s ability to bring a topic to the forefront of public attention, influence public response and consumer demand, and ultimately impose a crisis on a company despite adhering to legal standards.

Walter Lippman, known as “the intellectual father” of the agenda setting theory, established the theoretical framework in 1922 (McCombs, 2004, p. 3). He wrote a piece titled “Public Opinion” which explored the news media’s ability to influence public thought, although he did not call the idea agenda setting at that time (McCombs, 2004). It was not until a later date that McCombs and Shaw named and developed the theory and implemented further studies.

Most of McCombs and Shaw’s studies involved exploring politics and the media through the lens of the agenda setting theory. Specifically, the two studied the 1976 Presidential election to determine which issues were conveyed as being the most important (LittleJohn & Foss, 2011). They discovered that media “through repeated attention, make certain issues prominent,” which
is the heart of the theory (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 342). They claimed that media is most powerful when credibility is high, the audience has a need for guidance, and conflicting evidence is low (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

The theory explains how the media influences the importance of topics on public opinion or agenda (McCombs, 2004). However, the influence is not always premeditated or deliberate, but can be an “inadvertent influence resulting from the necessity of the news media to select and highlight a few topics in their reports as the most salient news of the moment” (McCombs, 2004, p. 2). Essentially, McCombs stated the mere reporting of a story cues the audience that the story is of importance and should be of public concern. The repetition of a topic also builds importance in public opinion because “a tight focus on a handful of issues conveys a strong message to the audience about what are the most important topics of the moment,” and “directs our attention to the early stages of public opinion when issues emerge and first engage public attention” (McCombs, 2004, p. 20). This surge in media coverage then leads to a rise in public attention.

Of course, McCombs recognized that some media outlets have the ability to more strongly influence the public than others. One example is television: “[T]elevision news agenda has a more limited capacity, so even a mention of the evening television news is a strong signal about the high salience of a topic” (McCombs, 2004, p. 2). Television also reaches a more extensive audience. In short, the agenda setting theory explains how public opinion is conceived largely through the media.

**Food Controversies and Agenda Setting Theory**

Bharad, Harrison, Kinsey, Degeneffe, and Ferreira (2010) studied agenda setting effects in relation to consumer confidence in food safety. Consistent with claims set forth by McCombs
and Shaw, Bharad et al. concluded that, “television coverage of food safety events is an important driver of the public’s opinion regarding food safety” (p. 8). In fact, “individuals who rely on television as their primary media source have generally less confidence in the safety of the food system” (p. 8). Ultimately, negative media coverage of food safety results in lower consumer confidence.

Frewer, Miles, and Marsh (2002) also studied media attention in relation to consumers’ views on food, and they uncovered similar findings. They sought to discover whether consumers’ perceptions of genetically modified foods (GMOs), a controversial product and process, aligned with perceptions put forth in media reports. To develop this study, researchers collected data before heightened media attention, one year later when reporting peaked, and a third time when media attention subsided. They discovered that “perceptions . . . of risk associated with genetically modified food increased during the highest levels of reporting about genetically modified foods, but were subsequently reduced as reporting levels diminished” (Frewer et al., 2002, p. 12). They also learned that the public’s perception of risks and benefits related to GMOs aligned with perceptions put forth in media reports (Frewer et al., 2002). Essentially, the frequency and concentration of reporting in addition to the content of the information put forth in the reports played a significant role in influencing public opinion. Once reporting decreased, so did perceptions of risk.

An additional study on GMOs yielded parallel findings: “Negative media coverage of biotechnology [GMOs] has raised public awareness, influenced public perceptions, and altered the public agenda” (Kalaitzandonakes, Marks, & Vickner, 2004, p. 1238). Kalaitzandonakes et al. (2004) claimed that average food consumers have little experience and knowledge of the food production system. The result, “consumers often rely on the mass media for relevant
information” (p. 1238). When mass media framed food production as controversial, risky, or less beneficial, the perceived risk increased while consumer demand decreased (Kalaitzandonakes et al., 2004).

Researchers also found that the amount of reporting contributes to consumer confidence. For example, “immediately following reporting of controversial food and processes, the perceived risk affected consumer purchases” (Kalaitzandonakes et al., 2004, p. 1239). However, for the decreased consumer confidence and demand to have any lasting impact, the reporting must be sustained over long periods of time (Kalaitzandonakes et al., 2004).

Literature discussing the agenda setting theory in relation to the food industry indicated that consumer confidence is strongly related to media reports. McCluskey and Swinnen (2011), however, took their study one step further to find out just why the media reports were so easily accepted when they may be focusing on only one side of food controversies and may be biased. First, they noted the agenda of the media: “[T]he media seems to focus on negative news stories and shun careful and balanced analysis of an issue, favouring ‘sound bites’ and simplistic conclusions” (McCluskey & Swinnen, 2011, p. 1). In short, negative stories sell. The media ultimately acts as purveyors of these negative stories which then “affects consumer perceptions of products and risks and, consequently, can influence demand for services and products . . . despite accumulating scientific evidence that these products do not harm the environment and are safe for human consumption” (McCluskey & Swinnen, 2011, p. 1).

So why do negative stories sell? McCluskey and Swinnen (2011) discovered that consumers assign more weight to negative than positive information. Their reasoning: “Consumers can use negative information to make decisions in order to avoid losses” (McCluskey & Swinnen, 2011, p. 4). Negative information is more diagnostic, impactful, and
seemingly credible than positive information. Even if a story is biased in nature, consumers still assign weight to said story: “[E]ven when viewers know that media sources are biased, they do not sufficiently discount the information to account for this bias. Exposure to media can thus systematically alter or reinforce beliefs and consumer behaviour” (McCluskey & Swinnen, 2011, p. 4).

Researchers, though, offered a way for companies with scrutinized products to combat the negative public perceptions and decreased consumer demand. They believe utilizing the internet as a method of mass communicating may be key to presenting information in a more balanced manner:

[The] internet as a source of information and a communication tool not only imposes challenges, but also provides important opportunities. It enables direct communication with the public to provide information without depending on the mass media as brokers. Hence, even if the media do not report- or do so with a lack of nuance- companies, scientists and governments can communicate correct and nuanced information through the internet. (p. 7)

This recommendation conflicts with conclusions drawn by McCombs (2004), who, as quoted earlier, stated television tends to influence the public more strongly than other mass media outlets. Even so, McCluskey and Swinnen (2011) believed that “scientists, businesses, interest groups and politicians can also influence public perception, in particular by using the internet to circumvent the mass media as the main source of information” (p. 7).

A review of these agenda setting studies indicates that media have the ability to influence consumer confidence and demand. This thesis offers the theory as an approach to analyze the causal relationship between ABC media reports and BPI’s downfall. To determine if BPI was successful in rebounding from this downfall, this thesis also applied the image restoration theory.
Image Restoration Theory

The image restoration theory serves as an appropriate lens to analyze BPI’s crisis response, determine the strategies BPI used to counter the negative effects from the media reports, and provide discussion surrounding its effectiveness.

William Benoit developed the image restoration theory to explore strategies that companies and organizations can use to emerge from a crisis, defined as a damaging event or series of events that “has considerable implications for the organization and its stakeholders, in that damage can be physical, financial or reputational in scope” and has “potential to disrupt or effect the whole organization” (Carroll, 2009, para. 3 & 5). The theory drew heavily on addressing criticism of earlier crisis communication theories as well as compiling strategies into a single, comprehensive theory (Benoit, 1995).

Benoit (1995) claimed, “[N]o one had developed a comprehensive theory of excuses and apologies in public discourse” (p. viii). To fill this knowledge gap, Benoit provided an exhaustive discussion of all works contributing to the development of image restoration theory in his seminal work, *Accounts, excuses, and apologies*. To begin, Benoit overviewed Rosenfield’s analog (1968), which contained characteristics of apologetic discourse. This crisis communication theory later became replaced with Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) more detailed apologia theory. Ware and Linkugel identified four factors in rhetorical self-defense: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence (Benoit, 1995), strategies that would later be incorporated into image restoration. Apologia theory has been used to analyze communication efforts in politics, speeches, sports, and religion following crises. Benoit also drew ideas from Burke’s purification theory when developing image restoration. Purification theory stated that a crisis evolves from guilt, or an undesirable state of affairs. To alleviate this guilt, a person or
company may engage in one of two discourses: victimage, or shifting the blame and adopting a
defensive stance, or mortification, admitting fault and seeking forgiveness (Benoit, 1995).
Additionally, Benoit detailed the development of theories of accounts, a theory focused on
creating an extensive list of specific strategies for restoring face following a crisis. Each of these
crisis communication theories—Rosenfield’s analog, Ware and Linkugel’s apologia theory,
Burke’s purification, and theories of accounts—had its own list of strategies, but these lists did
not overlap. Benoit ultimately compiled and condensed these lists, built on these theories, and
addressed criticisms to create one comprehensive crisis communication theory, image
restoration.

Image restoration has since been called the “dominant paradigm” for responding to a
restoration assumes that communication is, in general, a goal-directed activity” (p. 71). The goal
of communication following a crisis, then, is to offer explanations, defenses, justifications,
apologies, rationalizations, or excuses for the crisis at hand. Further, “human beings engage in
recurrent patterns of communicative behavior designed to reduce, redress, or avoid damage to
their reputation” (p.vii). Image restoration offers strategies a person or company can engage in
during an attempt to restore reputation while responding to a crisis. Strategies detailed in this
theory include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the act, corrective
action, and mortification.

The first strategy, denial, involves two tactics, simple denial and shifting the blame
(Benoit, 1995). Both involve adopting a defensive stance. Simple denial involves denying that
the wrongful act occurred or claiming that the person or company was not at fault (Benoit, 1995).
For denial to be effective, it should “be supplemented with explanations of apparently damaging
facts or lack of supporting evidence” (p. 75), which assist to reinforce innocence by providing evidence and records contrary to the damaging claim that the crisis exists or was the company’s fault. However denial may be ineffective if it fails to answer the question, “if you did not do it, who did?” Thus, shifting the blame is also a denial tactic. Shifting the blame works by providing a target and shifting the fault, and ultimately consequences, of the crisis away from the perceived source of the crisis. However, “[i]f the audience agrees that the target should be blamed but continues to hold the source [company originally blamed] responsible as well, this strategy would probably be judged a failure” (p. 80).

Next, a company may attempt to evade responsibility, or “reduce perceived responsibility for the act” (Benoit, 1995, p. 73), as a strategy to rebound from a crisis. First, a company may claim that it was provoked to act, called provocation. Rhetoric reflective of provocation stresses that the company was not solely responsible for the crisis and the act leading to the crisis was performed in response to another wrongful act. If the audience believes the act was justifiably provoked, the company may not be held responsible. Second, a company may provide rhetoric reflective of defeasibility. This strategy involves claiming that the crisis occurred due to lack of information, ability, or control. Next, a company might state it had good intentions and meant to do the right thing. Benoit (1995) believed, “[p]eople who do bad while trying to do good are usually not blamed as much as those who intend to do bad” (p. 77). Moreover, “we tend to hold people more accountable for the effects they intended and to hold them less blameworthy for unintended or unexpected effects” (p. 72). A final attempt to evade responsibility involves claiming that crisis was an accident.

Additionally, Benoit noted six strategies a company might implement to reduce the offensiveness of the crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011). First, a company may inform the
public about the positive steps it is taking to fix the crisis, called bolstering, which “attempts to improve the accused’s reputation in hopes of offsetting or making up for the damage to the image from the undesirable act” (Benoit, 1995, p. 73). Bolstering works by redirecting attention to the positive traits or actions of the company, which then increases positive feelings toward the company. Bolstering is especially “effective if the positive traits or actions appear relevant to the accusations or suspicions” (p. 77). The company may also claim the crisis is not severe in an attempt to reduce the offensiveness of the crisis, called minimization. Minimizing the crisis can reduce the magnitude and downplay the negative perceptions of the company. Simply put, minimizing may work to “convince the audience that the negative act isn’t as bad as it might first appear” (p. 77). Minimization as a strategy may be dangerous, though, as making a serious problem seem minor can “be perceived as unethical, irresponsible, and inappropriate” (p. 163).

Next, a company might provide rhetoric reflective of differentiation by comparing the crisis to a worse crisis. The strategy works by making the crisis seem less offensive with potential consequences that are trivial in comparison. Or, the company may place the crisis in a different context, called transcendence. A company may also reduce the damage of the crisis by attacking the accuser. Benoit (1995) claimed, “if the credibility of the source of accusations can be reduced, the damage to one’s image from those accusations may be diminished” (p. 78). Essentially, attacking the accuser may divert attention away from the crisis and to the new prey. This strategy may also work to lessen the reliability of the original source. Finally, when attempting to reduce the offensiveness of the act, a company may pay the costs associated with the crisis, called compensation (Ulmer et al., 2011). Paying the costs reduces perceived severity and “offers to remunerate the victim to help offset the negative feeling arising from wrongful act” (Benoit, 1995, p. 78). It should be noted that the above strategies do not work to correct the
However, a company may take *corrective action* during a crisis to not only repair reputation and negative perceptions, but actually correct the problem at hand (Benoit, 1995). Corrective action promises stakeholders that the company is remedying the current effects and is working to prevent a similar crisis from occurring.

Benoit (1995) noted a final strategy that a company may implement when responding to a crisis, called *mortification*. Here, a company offers an apology during the crisis, which requires accepting responsibility and addressing stakeholder needs (Ulmer et al., 2011). Mortification involves the expression of regret and asking forgiveness. If the audience believes the apology is sincere, the crisis may be forgiven.

In his seminal work, Benoit (1995) discussed some limitations of image restoration theory. One limitation is that image restoration strategies tend to be more descriptive than prescriptive, meaning the theory is best applied after a crisis to determine how a company responded. Since each crisis is unique, there is no one-size fits all ideal response to a crisis, which means a list of best practices could not emerge. Ultimately, it is up to the researcher applying the theoretical framework to a particular crisis to determine which strategies were used and to defend whether or not the strategies implemented were effective.

However, after applying image restoration to several crises, Benoit (1995) did provide implications and universal guidelines for determining whether or not a strategy can be deemed effective. For example, he believed that the “use of multiple strategies may be beneficial in that they reinforce one another” (p. 157). He also firmly believed that if a company is at fault, this fault should be admitted immediately: “A person who initially denies responsibility for actions...
reasonably attributable to that person can suffer substantially damaged credibility when the truth emerges” (p. 160). Benoit claimed that some strategies may be more effective than others. In fact, “evidence suggests that denial and shifting the blame are not considered by those who are injured by the actions to be as appropriate or effective as other potential image restoration strategies” (p. 161). Conversely, corrective action is almost always viewed as an effective strategy, and “even those who are not guilty of wrong-doing can benefit from plans preventing recurrence of the problem” (Benoit, 1995, p. 162). Corrective action demonstrates a firm commitment to both repair the crisis and prevent future crises, which is crucial to restoring image and reputation following a crisis.

**Previous Crisis Communication Applications**

Several researchers have followed in Benoit’s footsteps and conducted crisis communication case studies, some focusing on image restoration, so that “a deeper understanding of dynamics and nuances of communicating during a crisis can be obtained” (Carroll, 2009, para. 10).

Roman and Moore (2012) implemented a case study to examine the contaminated peanut butter food crisis of 2009 to unveil the image restoration strategies used by the Peanut Corporation of America (PCA). They first stressed that during a highly publicized crisis, a company’s goal should be to restore public trust and foster stakeholder relationships. To begin, Roman and Moore stated, “every day we consume foods that we trust are going to be safe to eat” (p. 311). They stressed that “the reliability of our nation’s food supply depends upon a complex relationship among the state, the food industry and the public. . . . [W]e trust that companies are doing what they should to produce high quality products” (p. 311). Thus, their case study
suggested that companies handling food have an ethical obligation to produce high-quality products and foster trust with the public.

However, this particular crisis, a salmonella poisoning, resulted in at least five deaths and more than 400 illnesses. PCA engaged in communication strategies reflective of image restoration in an attempt to regain public trust. For example, PCA voluntarily recalled peanut butter, reflective of corrective action. PCA also apologized, or employed the mortification strategy. Furthermore, PCA provided messages reflective of bolstering by expressing its commitment to safety by following the USDA’s manufacturing practices. PCA also attempted to shift the blame by stating the FDA’s reports were inaccurate and deny certain claims regarding poor ratings and lack of inspections. Ultimately, PCA’s attempt at image restoration was ineffective and PCA had to file for bankruptcy, as “this crisis was much too large to be permanently restored” (Roman & Moore, 2012, p. 317). Even though image restoration strategies did not work to emerge from a crisis in this instance, Roman and Moore concluded by stating image restoration theory can, and should, be utilized as an ethical framework for responding to a crisis.

Carroll (2009) also conducted a crisis communication case study. Carroll analyzed Cadbury Schweppes’ response following a food crisis when seven of its products were recalled due to salmonella contamination. However, Cadbury Schweppes had known about the possible contamination as early as six months before the recall and did not implement the recall until after the media reported it. Cadbury Schweppes eventually did implement a recall and later apologized in an effort to repair its image. Despite this non-traditional crisis communication approach, Cadbury Schweppes was able to successfully rebound in part due to the strength of the brand, the organization’s reputation, and its ability to understand differing stakeholder needs.
The findings demonstrated that a strong reputation and stakeholder relationships prior to crisis significantly helps a company’s chance of recovery should a crisis arise.

This literature review first discussed the agenda setting theory and the media’s ability to influence public thought and drive public agenda. Studies involving the agenda setting theory in relation to food controversies were discussed as well, which conclude that media reports influence consumer demand. Next, the review of literature detailed the evolution of the image restoration theory and claimed that it is the “dominant paradigm” for responding to a crisis (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007, p. 131). The theory ultimately provides a lens to analyze and evaluate communication efforts throughout a crisis.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Case Study

To most effectively apply the agenda setting and image restoration theoretical frameworks to the ABC “pink slime” media uproar, this thesis utilized the case study method, which involves deconstructing a specific event (Yin, 2009). Pegram (2000) provided a succinct definition of the case study design, which summarizes the goal of this research: “Case study research is a single, in depth investigation” (para. 1). The method is widely accepted in the study of crisis communication and allows researchers to gain extensive knowledge regarding a specific phenomena “to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2009, p. 4), which was precisely within the scope of this study.

Wiebe, Elden, Durepos, Gabrielle, and Mills (2010) provided a more in-depth description of a specific type of the case study, called explanatory case studies. They said, “explanatory case study methodology . . . can be employed to test theories and hypotheses and to set the stage for richer, more in-depth acquisition of knowledge” (p. 371). Explanatory case studies first explore
and describe a specific, bounded phenomena, in this instance the ABC coverage of “pink slime” and the initial repercussions it presented for BPI, and then analyze the case using theory to explain a causal relationship (Wiebe et al., 2010). Specifically, explanatory case studies explain complex causal links in real-life interventions, describe the real-life context in which the interventions have occurred, and describe the interventions themselves (Wiebe et al., 2010). Yin (2009) provided a cogent rationale for choosing to conduct this type of research: “The most important [reason] is to explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies” (p. 15).

This particular case study analyzed the causal link between extensive ABC “pink slime” reports and BPI’s downfall using the agenda setting theory. Further, the case study method allowed for analysis and evaluation of BPI’s initial image restoration response to the media coverage, from its implementation of beefisbeef.com through the filing of the defamation lawsuit.

Research Design and Data Sources

A case brief that investigated and described the ABC “pink slime” coverage and its initial repercussions was first developed. This case brief, beginning on page 21, is divided into pre-crisis, crisis development, crisis, and initial post-crisis stages. Following, the researcher analyzed this case brief by applying theoretical framework.

The pre-crisis segment establishes a background of BPI, including the organization’s history, philosophy, customers, and economic position to reveal the state of BPI prior to the ABC coverage. BPI’s website and lawsuit complaint served as the primary data sources for this information.
Next, the case brief explores the crisis development by discussing the controversy surrounding the product and treatment process in question. Data sources included articles from *The New York Times*, online articles and television segments from ABC, documents from the USDA and FDA, coverage from *Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution* and *Food Inc.*, and BPI’s complaint.

The case brief then provides a timeline of events as the crisis unfolded. Sources included articles from ABC with dates ranging from March through April 2012, the timeframe of the crisis, to show frequency and content of the coverage. Data sources also included official statements from customers such as Wal-Mart, McDonald’s, and Safeway explaining decisions to discontinue using lean finely textured beef. Finally, BPI’s complaint and beefisbeef.com website served as data sources to outline how BPI responded throughout the crisis.

Following, the case brief explores the initial post-crisis repercussions. Data sources included news articles discussing the change in consumer demand resulting from the media reports, and BPI’s complaint detailing the economic impact of the crisis.

The agenda setting theory is then applied to the case brief as a way to explain the causal relationship between ABC reports and BPI’s downfall. Data sources included ABC reporters Diane Sawyer and Jim Avila’s biographies, ABC press releases, BPI’s complaint, and touched back on studies presented in the review of literature.

Finally, this research concludes with an analysis of rhetoric put forth by BPI through various stages of the crisis. To best capture BPI’s response, the researcher analyzed and evaluated the four sections of the website beefisbeef.com, which contained BPI’s initial crisis response (home page, “About LFTB,” “FAQ,” and “Resources”) as well as BPI’s complaint against ABC, which was BPI’s final crisis response. These sources were analyzed for rhetoric
reflective of the sample image restoration strategies presented in the table below to determine which strategies emerged.

Table 1

*Image Restoration Strategies and Sample Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple denial</td>
<td>We did not do it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifting the blame</td>
<td>Someone else did it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evasion of responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provocation</td>
<td>We were provoked to act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defeasibility</td>
<td>We did not have enough information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident</td>
<td>We did not mean for this to happen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good intentions</td>
<td>We meant to do the right thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing the offensiveness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>We have done some good things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimization</td>
<td>The crisis is not that bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>Others have had worse crises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>We should focus on other issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack the accuser</td>
<td>The accuser is irresponsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>We will cover the costs of the crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrective action</td>
<td>We will solve the problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortification</td>
<td>We are sorry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The case study research design ultimately served as an appropriate method to create a case brief of the ABC “pink slime” media coverage and the subsequent repercussions the coverage presented to BPI through the initial post-crisis stage. The research design also allowed for an analysis of the case brief through the lens of the agenda setting and image restoration theories. Subsequent pages provide a contextual overview of the conditions leading up to and a detailed account of the “pink slime” crisis before offering analysis and discussion.
CHAPTER 4
CASE BRIEF

Pre-Crisis

BPI’s history traces back to 1971 when Eldon Roth launched Roth Refrigeration. The company was the first to use the Roller Press Freezer, invented by Roth himself, to reduce meat’s freezing time from several days to just two minutes to lock in flavor and moisture (“Beef Products Inc.,” 2012). The invention revolutionized the meat industry, so Roth expanded business opportunities and created BPI in 1981 with its first plant in Amarillo, Texas. After becoming a successful company, BPI expanded operations to include three plants located in Finney County, Kansas (1988); Waterloo, Iowa (1992); and South Sioux City, Nebraska (1998) (“Beef Products Inc.,” 2012). The family-owned company—headquartered in Dakota Dunes, South Dakota—was most known for its signature product, lean finely textured beef, now also known as “pink slime.”

BPI committed, and continues to commit, to providing products that are “fresh, USDA inspected, and produced using proven/validated food safety systems” (“Beef Products Inc.,” 2012, para. 1). The company processes meat leftover from larger cuts of beef, called trim, to produce its final product. The treatment process removes fat from the trim, which leaves 94–97% lean beef, taking on the name lean finely textured beef. This lean finely textured beef then became part of 300 billion meals annually at home and in restaurants when mixed with fresh ground beef. BPI prides itself in producing “the safest and highest quality lean finely textured beef for consumers and customers, and we expect a higher standard for ourselves than set by anyone else” (“Beef Products Inc.,” 2012, para. 4). The International Association for Food Protection ultimately recognized BPI for this commitment to food safety in 2007 with the Black Pearl Award (“Beef Products Inc.,” 2012).
BPI served many well-known, large companies from the restaurant and supermarket industries prior to the ABC coverage. McDonald’s, Taco Bell, and Burger King were among the restaurants that once purchased lean finely textured beef. Customers also included several supermarket chains including SUPERVALU, Food Lion, and Safeway, the second largest supermarket chain in the United States (Avila, 2012d). The National School Lunch Program purchased the product as well. In 2009 alone, the program used about 5.5 million pounds of lean finely textured beef in school lunches (Moss, 2009). Finally, BPI sold lean finely textured beef to National Beef, Tyson, Fresh Meats, and American Food Group, which “are some of the largest and most successful ground beef processors in the world” (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 115).

Prior to the “pink slime” media coverage, “BPI sold approximately five million pounds of LFTB [lean finely textured beef] per week, operated four state-of-the-art processing facilities, had over 1,300 employees, and earned annual revenue over $650 million and profits over $115 million” (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 2). BPI in fact sold more than 3.7 billion pounds of lean finely textured beef to its customers between 2003 and 2012 (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 27). However, BPI would soon find that its food safety and quality would be challenged regardless of receiving prestigious awards such as the Black Pearl, its large number of customers, its previous economic success, and its adherence to USDA and FDA standards.

**Crisis Development**

The “pink slime” media coverage and subsequent BPI downfall stemmed from controversy surrounding the treatment process of lean finely textured beef and the end product itself. To get to the heart of the crisis and better assess the damage to BPI, it is necessary to understand the controversy and discrepancies between the media reports and BPI’s descriptions of the treatment process and product.
First, one must have a general understanding regarding how lean finely textured beef is produced. BPI receives leftover trimmings from larger cuts of beef, such as sirloins and ribeyes, from other beef producers. These trimmings “often contain a significant portion of lean that is too difficult to remove with a knife” (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 16). The trimmings enter a desinewer to remove tissue, cartilage, and other unwanted pieces (“FAQ questions and answers,” 2012). The trimmings are then tempered to around 105 degrees. Once tempered, trimmings are put through two centrifuges to separate lean meat from fat, which leaves beef that is typically between 94 and 97% lean (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 18). This lean beef is introduced to ammonium hydroxide, flash-frozen, and sent to customers where it is mixed with fresh ground beef and sold on the open market.

The first controversy rests with using ammonium hydroxide to treat the beef trimmings. Specifically, the difference between ammonium hydroxide, an anti-microbial agent used in food production, and ammonia, a product commonly used in household cleaners, is relatively unfamiliar to the general public (“Questions and answers about ammonium,” 2009). Thus, confusion and controversy surrounding the safety of ammonium in lean finely textured beef quickly surfaced following reports that BPI used the agent in its treatment process.

When most people hear the word “ammonia,” what likely comes to mind is the colorless, pungent-smelling product used most commonly in commercial household cleaners (“Difference between ammonia and ammonium hydroxide,” 2011, para. 2). Ammonia is also used “as a refrigerant gas, for purification of water supplies, and in the manufacture of plastics, explosives, textiles, pesticides, dyes, and other chemicals” (“The facts about ammonia,” 2005, para. 3). The high concentration of ammonia used in these products is hazardous and can cause burns on the skin, eyes, mouth, and throat (“Public health statement,” n.d. p. 2).
However, when small amounts of ammonia are mixed with water, ammonia becomes chemically altered and weakened, taking on the name ammonium hydroxide. Ammonium hydroxide has been “used extensively in food processing” as an anti-microbial agent since declared safe by the FDA in 1974 (“Questions and answers about ammonium,” 2009, para. 3). The agent is used in the production of baked goods, cheeses, chocolates, and puddings (“Questions and answers about ammonium,” 2009).

Ammonium hydroxide has also been widely used in the meat industry, and the USDA approved its use in the treatment process of lean finely textured beef in 2001. BPI’s primary purpose of using the agent was to delay the spoilage of meat. Intestines of cattle contain food pathogens, such as E. coli. These pathogens have the potential to survive and grow, which could cause illness if consumed by humans. The use of ammonium hydroxide makes it difficult for these pathogens to survive. A puff of food grade ammonium hydroxide regulates acidity and destroys bacteria (“Questions and answers about ammonium,” 2009). The process has “been used safely for decades” (Questions and answers about ammonium,” 2009, para. 12), and the FDA stated: “There is no evidence in the available information on . . . ammonium hydroxide . . . that demonstrates, or suggests reasonable grounds to suspect, a hazard to the public when they are used at levels that are now current or that might reasonably be expected in the future” (“Database of select committee,” 2006, p. 1). The use of ammonium hydroxide in food production was ultimately meant as a safety precaution, but its use has remained little known to the public. Dana Hanson, a food scientist at North Carolina State University, said it best: “It’s not as if you’re taking floor-cleaning household ammonia and dumping it in a washtub like some folks have illustrated. When ammonia in a gas form comes in contact with meat, it ceases to exist as the ammonia we commonly think of” (Sanburn, 2013, p. 3).
Even so, former USDA scientists Zirnstein and Custer believed lean finely textured beef’s treatment process, using ammonium hydroxide, posed a “potential safety risk” (Moss, 2009, para. 33). They believed if BPI used too much ammonia in ammonium hydroxide, the treated lean finely textured beef would have the potential to cause not only unpleasant smells and taste, but also contamination and illness. Zirnstein and Custer were also upset that ammonium is not categorized as an ingredient and thus not listed on labels of ground beef containing lean finely textured beef (Moss, 2009; Derfler, 2003). Hanson, again, explained why Zirnstein and Custer and the general public were upset to learn that ammonium is not categorized as an ingredient: “More than ever, Americans want to understand where their food comes from and the processing it went through along the way. As a result, many of us are disturbed—even indignant—to learn that a product that isn’t processed like traditional ground beef can be labeled as such” (Sanburn, 2013, p. 3). BPI’s lack of transparency, although legal, in addition to the general public’s misunderstanding regarding the difference between ammonia and ammonium, later proved fatal to BPI, and the company was left to defend using ammonium in its treatment process.

Another controversy involves the end product itself. Lean finely textured beef “is not a stand-alone product,” meaning it must be mixed with fresh ground beef before consumers can purchase it on the open market (Avila, 2012a, para. 5). When asked why lean finely textured beef is not sold as an independent product, a BPI spokesperson said “consumers would not respond positively to the fine texture of the product” (Boettcher, 2012, para. 15). Further, because of its fine texture, the product could not be ground up and pounded into a hamburger (Boettcher, 2012). Thus, the categorization and value of lean finely textured beef, as an
independent product, is open to interpretation by various parties (i.e. the industry, the media, and the consumer).

To elaborate, BPI categorized the product as 100% beef and focused on its positive qualities. BPI stated that lean finely textured beef is “the meat and fat remaining after larger cuts of beef have been ‘trimmed’ to meet customer specification” and claimed that the product is an “essential ingredient” in fresh ground beef (“Beef Products Inc.”, 2012, para. 1). BPI continuously reiterated that lean finely textured beef is pure beef, not a filler. Adding the product to fresh ground beef allows for less waste per animal, and if lean finely textured beef were not produced, “1.5 million additional cattle would need to be raised and harvested annually” (“Beef Products, Inc.”, 2012, para. 4).

The media, though, categorized lean finely textured beef as a beef waste product and included in news stories the product’s negative properties. For example, ABC quoted Custer who said that the product is nothing more than “a salvage product” (Avila, 2012c, para. 6). ABC also reported that the product “is not the same as ground beef” and “has the consistency of ‘meat jello’ according to a former USDA microbiologist who studied the material” (Avila, 2012a, para. 6). Finally, the media used the nickname “pink slime” in reports instead of “lean finely textured beef.” Ultimately, discrepancy in the product’s name—lean finely textured beef versus “pink slime”—and the product’s categorization and value developed into a controversy much larger than semantics.

Moreover, labels of fresh ground beef mixed with lean finely textured beef do not list lean finely textured beef as a separate ingredient (Derfler, 2003). BPI claimed that lean finely textured beef is not listed as a separate ingredient because the product is, in fact, beef. BPI obtained approval from the USDA in 1993 to label its product as lean finely textured beef and
include it in ground beef “with no requirement that it be labeled as a separate ingredient” (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 22; Derfler, 2003). Despite adhering to approved regulatory standards, BPI was left once again to defend not only its treatment process, but end product as well. In short, public concern grew when a series of media reports raised awareness about a treatment process and product that was once unknown to many: “[I]t [lean finely textured beef] has remained little known outside industry and government circles” (Moss, 2009, para. 16).

The controversial treatment process and product garnered public attention and spurred a decrease in consumer demand after Zirnstein and Custer stepped forward to ABC in March 2012. They shared their negative opinions of lean finely textured beef, or, as they had dubbed it, “pink slime.” Zirnstein coined the phrase back in 2002 in an email to his colleagues after touring BPI. Zirnstein believed lean finely textured beef was “a salvage product,” not beef (Avila, 2012c, para. 6). ABC launched an extensive, concentrated series of news reports and breaking headlines after Zirnstein and Custer stepped forward.

This was not the first time the controversies had been made public, though, as the 2008 documentary, Food, Inc., featured a segment on BPI and its process of using ammonium in treating lean finely textured beef. Also, The New York Times ran an article titled “Safety of beef processing method is questioned” in 2009, mentioning Custer and Zirnstein and their now infamous nickname for the product. Finally, the season premier of Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution featured “pink slime.” Oliver demonstrated where popular beef cuts are located on a live cow. He then showed leftover trimmings from large beef cuts and described to the audience how the trimmings are “the bits that no one wants” and are inedible in its natural form (“Jamie Oliver,” 2012). Oliver provided his version of a live demonstration of the process necessary to turn this trim into lean finely textured beef; this included pouring household ammonia, with a
picture of a skull and crossbones on the bottle, over the beef product. According to Oliver, lean
finely textured beef is not fit for human consumption. Arguing that the process (using
ammonium) and end product lacked respect for consumers, he advocated for better product
labels on fresh ground beef mixed with lean finely textured beef (“Jamie Oliver,” 2012).
Oliver’s demonstration can be viewed on YouTube under “Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution: Pink
Slime – 70% of America’s Beef is Treated with Ammonia” at

Following Jamie Oliver’s television broadcast, McDonald’s, Burger King, and Taco Bell
quietly discontinued the use of lean finely textured beef (Rosenbaum, 2012). However,
McDonald’s stated, “this decision was long in the works” and “denied that Oliver’s show had
anything to do with the decision” (Rosenbaum, 2012, para. 4 & 5). McDonald’s statement read,

Burgers are at the heart of the Golden Arches, and the fact is, McDonald’s USA serves
100% USDA-inspected beef- no preservatives, no fillers, no extenders- period. For a
number of years prior to 2011, to assist with supply, McDonald’s USA used some lean
beef trimmings treated with ammonia in our burgers. We were among other food
retailers who used this safe product. At the beginning of last year, we made a decision to
stop using this ingredient. It has been out of the McDonald’s USA supply chain since
last August [2011]. We wanted to be consistent with our global beef supply chain and
we’re always evolving our practices. – McDonald’s USA. (“Discontinued use of select
lean beef trimmings,” 2012)

Even though “pink slime” received some media attention and a few customers
discontinued purchasing lean finely textured beef prior to the ABC reports, it was not until the
ABC coverage beginning March 7, 2012 that BPI suffered significant economic and reputational
damage.

Crisis

March 7, 2012, marked the beginning of BPI’s nightmare when ABC began a series of
media reports centered on “pink slime” after producers were contacted by Zirnstein and Custer
The initial broadcast claimed that lean finely textured beef was “once used only in dog food and cooking oil” and deemed the product “a cheaper filler” (Avila, 2012c, para. 2). BPI later challenged these claims and called them defamatory statements. The initial report also briefly described the controversial treatment process, including the use of ammonium hydroxide.

ABC coverage did not stop there, as the following day reporters traveled across the country to visit various grocery store meat sections. They wanted to find out how many were using lean finely textured beef in ground beef. They learned Publix, Costco, HEB, and Whole Foods did not carry ground beef containing lean finely textured beef and reported the story online (“Is pink slime in the beef at your grocery store?,” 2012). ABC also televised a story titled, “Pink slime: Tips for checking your beef.” Here, Diane Sawyer and Jim Avila reported that a “whistleblower” told ABC about “a type of filler” used to “pump up the volume of meat” (“Pink Slime: tips for checking your beef,” 2012). The broadcast continued on to compare lean finely textured beef to play-dough and gelatin, again, comparisons that BPI would later claim were defamatory statements.

For the third day in a row, on March 9, 2012, ABC continued broadcasting stories about “pink slime” and published an online article titled, “Where you can get ’pink-slime’-free beef,” which listed statements from 7 grocery chains in America regarding use of lean finely textured beef in ground beef (Avila, 2012g). ABC also televised a story titled, “‘Pink slime’ outrage: Beef industry responds’” (2012). The story showed that the beef industry fully supported lean finely textured beef; however the broadcast also discussed a significant increase in consumer concern.

Simultaneously, BPI hired “one of the largest and most geographically diverse PR [public relations] agencies in the world” (“Ketchum,” 2014, para. 1), Ketchum, and launched the website
“beefisbeef.com” as an initial public relations effort to defend its product. The website provided news articles and answered frequently asked questions about lean finely textured beef (“The facts on lean finely textured beef,” 2012). On March 10, 2012, BPI posted two articles to the site titled, “Why is ammonia used in some foods” and “100% beef- High quality and safe” (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 46).

This public relations effort failed. Just days after the launch of beefisbeef.com, the USDA stated in an official news release on March 15 that while it “continues to affirm the safety of Lean Finely Textured Beef for all consumers” and “only purchases products for the school lunch program that are safe, nutritious, and affordable – including all products containing Lean Finely Textured Beef” (“USDA announces additional choices,” 2012, para. 3 & 2), it would offer school districts nation-wide the choice to purchase beef made without the product. The USDA said this decision stemmed from “requests from school districts” and a recent decrease in consumer demand (“USDA announces additional choices,” 2012, para. 1). Subsequently, many school districts announced that they would no longer use ground beef mixed with lean finely textured beef. ABC followed the announcements by publishing articles online titled, “‘Pink Slime’ will be a choice for schools” (Forer, 2012b) and, “Schools can opt out of ‘pink slime’ beef” (Avila, 2012f). ABC also televised a story titled, “‘Pink Slime’ in school cafeterias, supermarkets” (2012). On the same day, BPI posted an article to beefisbeef.com titled, “Top 8 myths of ‘pink slime’” (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 46).

The following day, March 16, ABC published another article online and televised a story featuring “pink slime” titled, “‘Pink slime’ taste test,” (Forer, 2012a). The story featured Associated Press food editor, J.M. Hirsch, saying that burgers made without lean finely textured beef tasted better and had a better consistency. He claimed burgers with lean finely textured beef
had an off, chewy, gristly texture and the flavor is more muted. However, he also claimed that he would not reject a burger made with lean finely textured beef, simply that it was not preferred to burgers made without the product (Forer, 2012a).

Meanwhile, the surge in coverage surrounding lean finely textured beef was met with continued increase in consumer concern and, ultimately, decreased consumer demand. Wal-Mart and Albertsons, a national grocery provider, both released statements about lean finely textured beef on March 21, 2012. Wal-Mart’s statement read,

As a result of customer and member feedback, Walmart and Sam’s Club will begin offering fresh ground beef that does not contain lean finely textured beef (LFTB). We are working aggressively with our suppliers to have new offerings in our stores and clubs as quickly as possible. As these products become available, associates in our meat department and at our customer service desks will share updates with customers who inquire. While the USDA and experts agree that beef containing LFTB is safe and nutritious, we are committed to listening to our customers and providing the quality products they want at prices they can afford. (“Walmart statement regarding lean finely textured beef,” 2012)

Also on March 21, ABC televised two stories, “‘Pink slime’: Safeway pulls meat filler from shelves” (2012) and “‘Pink slime’ discontinued at Safeway” (2012). ABC published two articles online as well, supplementing the televised stories: “Safeway to stop selling ‘pink slime’ textured beef,” (Avila, 2012e) and “Safeway, SUPERVALU and Food Lion to stop selling ‘pink slime’ beef” (Avila, 2012d). The stories said that while the USDA had deemed lean finely textured beef safe to eat, critics claimed it is “made from low quality scraps” and “is less nutritious than pure ground beef” (Avila, 2012e, para. 4).

The following day, Safeway, SUPERVALU, Kroger, and Food Lion publicly announced that they would no longer carry products with “pink slime” because “public pressure . . . helped spur the supermarkets to change” (Avila, 2012a, para. 9). Safeway also stated, “While the USDA and food industry experts agree that lean, finely textured beef is safe and wholesome,
recent news stories have caused considerable consumer concern about this product. Safeway will no longer purchase ground beef containing lean, finely textured beef” (Shaffer, 2012, para. 2).

With this sudden decrease in customers, BPI sought to provide its side of the story and posted an article titled, “Support for the safety, quality and nutrition of lean finely textured beef” on beefisbeef.com (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 46). BPI also ran a full-page advertisement in The Wall Street Journal supporting lean finely textured beef. President and CEO Eldon Roth provided the quote, “[i]t is simply amazing how this mis-information campaign can take a company and product that has long been recognized for its quality and safety and turn the public perception so negative that it now may result in the loss of over 3,000 jobs” (Brion, 2012).

However, due to decreased consumer demand and a sudden decline in customers, BPI closed plants in Amarillo, Texas; Garden City, Kansas; and Waterloo, Iowa, losing a total of more than 650 jobs on March 25 (“Beef company closing 3 plants due to ‘pink slime’ controversy,” 2012).

It appeared that BPI’s nightmare was nowhere near over, as the following day yet another customer, Lowes Food, stopped selling lean finely textured beef. Lowes Food stated, “consumers’ growing awareness has sparked a backlash” and “customers have expressed concern about it” (“Lowes food to stop selling ‘pink slime’ beef,” 2012).

BPI once again attempted to counter the effects of the media reports. It posted an article on beefisbeef.com titled, “Get the facts” (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 46), and on March 29, 2012, BPI invited Governors Rick Perry, Terry Branstad, and Sam Brownback to tour a BPI facility while also welcoming camera crews (Dreeszen, 2012). Following, they defended lean finely textured beef in a press conference. They grilled and consumed hamburgers made with lean finely
textured beef in a further effort to support BPI. Many held up shirts for cameras that said, “Dude it’s beef!” (Avila, 2012b).

Customers and consumers alike did not respond favorably to the campaign, and on March 30, Wendy’s ran advertisements in 8 major newspapers, including *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and *The Chicago Tribune* stating, “We’ve never used fillers, additives, preservatives, flavor boosters or ammonia treatments. We’ve never used ‘pink slime,’ and we never will” (Brandau, 2012, para. 6). Further, on May 18, 2012, Chris Burns, the director of sales for the Defense Commissary Agency, announced that commissaries (grocery stores on military installations) would no longer sell beef products containing lean finely textured beef by the end of May (McMichael, 2012). Burns provided the statement,

> Although the USDA continues to assure us this process is safe, we have listened to our customers and modified our contracts to require that our ground beef suppliers only sell us products not treated with LFTB process. (McMichael, 2012, para. 1)

As a final crisis response, BPI filed a $1.2 billion defamation lawsuit against ABC on September 13, 2012, also naming anchor Diane Sawyer and reporters Jim Avila and David Kerley as defendants. It claimed ABC ran a mis-information campaign (Carman, 2012). BPI noted an 80% drop in sales at this time (Carman, 2012).

**Post-Crisis**

The above detail of accounts revealed that many BPI customers, such as grocery chains and restaurants, discontinued purchasing lean finely textured beef in response to the negative consumer reactions following the media coverage. Upset consumers voiced concerns directly to grocers. For instance, official statements from BPI customers, including Safeway, SUPERVALU, and Wal-Mart, claimed the decision to stop purchasing lean finely textured beef
stemmed solely from consumer requests following the media attention, not due to the quality or safety of the product.

Social media sites, including Facebook, also became a popular medium in which the public voiced concern. When national grocery provider Albertson’s posted a Facebook status confirming its decision to stop carrying products made with lean finely textured beef, the public responded positively with comments such as, “And this is one of the reasons I love Albertsons! Thank you,” and “Excellent decision! Thank you for listening!”

When ABC posted a status asking viewers to weigh in on lean finely textured beef, consumers’ comments again showed disgust toward the product, such as “I will not buy ground beef with ‘pink slime’ in it. If the company wants to sell it, they need to think of a new way to market their product, but they shouldn’t be able to call it beef,” and “I would consider it more of a ‘beef by-product’ than ‘BEEF.’”

As a result of this negative consumer response and a decreased demand, BPI suffered a significant economic downfall. Nick Roth, Director of Engineering for BPI and son of founder Eldon Roth, said it took “thirty years to build a business and 30 days to take it down” (Heller, 2012, para. 2). BPI was indeed taken down, as “sales declined to less than two million pounds per week, BPI was forced to close three of its processing facilities, and BPI had to let go over 700 employees. BPI is losing more than $20 million in revenue every month” (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 7). Specifically, the “media uproar prompted Beef Products, Inc. to suspend operations at plants in . . . Texas . . . and Iowa” (Schulte & Brokaw, 2012, para. 10). The plant in Kansas was also forced to suspend operations. BPI estimates the negative media coverage and subsequent decreased consumer demand will cost the company over $400 million in profits by 2017 (Watson, 2012; “Complaint,” 2012, p. 129).
However, BPI is seeking $1.2 billion from ABC to compensate for the financial loss and damages as a result of what it claims stemmed from a “massive and destructive, focused attack on our product and our business” (Lopez, 2012, para. 5). Moreover, lawyers for BPI claimed that ABC “coverage of the ‘pink slime’ controversy misled consumers into believing the product was unsafe, even though it had been approved for human consumption by the U.S. Department of Agriculture” (Lopez, 2012, para.3).

The employees also felt the economic impact due to widespread layoffs. Bruce Smith, a former BPI employee, filed a $70,000 civil suit against American Broadcasting Cos. Inc., ABC journalists Diane Sawyer and Jim Avila, Jamie Oliver, food blogger Bettina Siegel, and ten other co-defendants in December 2012. Smith believed the media reports were unfair, which resulted in the loss of his job (Eaton, 2012). Specifically, he claimed to have “suffered the negligent infliction of emotional distress due to the loss of his job” (Siegel, 2012, para. 3). He also went insofar as to write and self-publish a book titled “Pink Slime Ate My Job,” which detailed his account of the “pink slime” coverage. However, in February 2013, Smith voluntarily dismissed his lawsuit but has not made a public comment regarding this dismissal (Siegel, 2013).

As of March 7, 2013, one full year after the initial ABC “pink slime” report, BPI remained in a weakened economic state. Only one BPI plant remained in operation at this time, as lean finely textured beef was added to merely 5% of ground beef, down from 70% the year before (Sanburn, 2013, p. 1). Further, while the USDA had originally planned on purchasing 7 million pounds of ground beef with lean finely textured beef for use in public schools for the 2012-2013 school year, only 1.2 million pounds was ordered. The little support left for BPI stemmed primarily from local communities and politicians. For instance, “three states, in fact—Nebraska, Iowa, ad South Dakota, all home to a current or former BPI plant—still serve[d] BPI’s
product in its schools” (Sanburn, 2013, p. 3). With the defamation lawsuit still pending as of March 2014, the Roth family and BPI employees communicate exclusively through lawyers.

CHAPTER 5
AGENDA SETTING ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The case brief demonstrated that ABC played a prominent role in making the phrase “pink slime” go viral and raising awareness about the controversial process and product. While lean finely textured beef was mentioned in several newspaper articles and again on Jamie Oliver’s food show in 2011, it was not until the series of ABC reports during March 2012 that the media was successful in bringing the topic to the forefront of the public’s attention.

As a theoretical frame, agenda setting provides useful insight for explaining this causal relationship between the ABC coverage of lean finely textured beef and BPI’s subsequent downfall. The agenda setting theory centers on the media’s ability to influence public perception and consumer demand, which is precisely what the case brief demonstrates. The basic tenets of the theory state that the media is able to most effectively influence the public when the audience is broad, credibility of the media is high, the audience has a need for guidance, conflicting evidence is low, reporting is concentrated, the content of the coverage is negative in nature, and reporting is sustained (Bharad et al., 2010; McCombs, 2004; Littlejohn and Foss, 2011; Frewer et al., 2002; Kalaitzandonakes et al., 2004; McCluskey and Swinnen, 2011). The ensuing analysis addresses these tenets in relation to the “pink slime” case brief, to offer the agenda setting theory as a productive lens for analyzing the causal relationship between the ABC reports and BPI’s downfall.

First, a study conducted by McCombs (2004) demonstrated that agenda setting effects are particularly strong when coverage reaches a broad audience. ABC does have a broad audience,
which, consistent with basic tenets of the agenda setting theory, works to explain why it was successful in bringing a controversial process and product to the forefront of public attention:

    ABC News promotes World News as the most innovative evening news program on television. It airs from 5:30 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. (Central) and averaged over seven million viewers per evening in March and April 2012. Through its broadcasts and online reports, ABC News reaches one of the broadest audiences of any news organization in the world. (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 32)

Further, an ABC press release from March 7, 2012, titled, “Yahoo!-ABC News Network Becomes the New #1 Online News Source,” claimed that ABC online “reached a total audience of over 89 million people” in February 2012, just one month before the “pink slime” coverage (Amato, 2012, para. 1). The press release also stated that more people obtained their news online from the ABC network than any other website. Digital videos posted online were streamed approximately 100 million times during this time. February 2012 also “marked ABC News Digital’s most trafficked month in its history with over 421 million page views to ABC News content across various platforms” (Amato, 2012, para. 5). Data collected from this press release prove that ABC News has a large audience, which works to explain why it was able to bring “pink slime” to the surface of public attention and ultimately drive consumer demand.

    Next, Littlejohn and Foss (2011) stated that the media is successful in influencing the public when the credibility of the media source is high. ABC is highly credible. It is considered one of the “Big Three nightly newscasts on American television” alongside CBS and NBC (Stelter, 2012, para. 1). ABC held the slogan “more people get their news from ABC News than from any other source” through 2011, and it has since changed its slogan to “See the whole picture” (“ABC News debuts new slogan,” 2011). Both slogans imply that ABC is a credible source of information. Not only is ABC as a whole credible, but individual journalists who reported on lean finely textured beef are advertised to be highly credible as well. In fact, ABC
claims to have an “unrivaled lineup of trusted anchors and reporters” (Amato, 2012, para. 4). In particular are Jim Avila and Diane Sawyer. Both reported heavily on “pink slime,” and both have outstanding credentials.

For instance, Diane Sawyer’s official biography states that she joined ABC in February 1989 and is “one of the most respected journalists in the world, she has traveled the globe delivering in-depth and breaking news reports…” Sawyer is also the anchor of ABC World News (“Diane Sawyer’s Biography,” 2012, p. 1). She has traveled to Afghanistan and Haiti, conducted award-winning coverage after 9/11, and has conducted interviews with multiple presidents, including President Obama. Sawyer’s primetime documentaries “have won critical acclaim” and her reporting has received numerous awards, such as dePonts, Emmys, and Peabodys (“Diane Sawyer’s Biography,” 2012, p. 1).

Avila is also described as an “award-winning journalist” in his official biography (“Jim Avila ABC News official biography,” p. 1). He is most known for reporting on food, drug, consumer, transportation, environmental, and other regulatory issues. Moreover, Avila reported on breaking news surrounding both Michael Jackson and OJ Simpson and some of the other “biggest stories around the country” (“Jim Avila ABC News official biography,” p. 1).

Ultimately, because of the credible nature of ABC and individual reporters, consumers may have been influenced by the “pink slime” reports. This correlation between the credibility of ABC, its reports, and a change in public perception, is consistent with the agenda setting theory.

Littlejohn and Foss (2011) also claimed that agenda setting effects are strong when the audience has a need for guidance. Because lean finely textured beef is a food product and the public has an interest in what they consume, the audience does have a need for guidance: “We
In fact, when Roman and Moore (2012) conducted a case study examining the 2009 PCA crisis, they learned that the public trusts that food companies are producing high quality foods. If companies do not produce high quality foods or the production or end product is controversial, the public would naturally want to be informed. Ultimately, there is controversy surrounding the value of lean finely textured beef, and Moss (2009) stated that the product was not well known outside the industry. Hence, when ABC began frequent reporting on the product that was once unknown to many, the public felt a need for guidance.

Agenda setting effects are also strong when conflicting evidence is low. This was partially the case for the “pink slime” crisis. For instance, ABC ran stories discussing the use of ammonium in the lean finely textured beef treatment process, which is not untruthful. Stories also made consumers aware that ammonium and lean finely textured beef were not listed as ingredients on packages of ground beef mixed with the product, which is also not untruthful. Ammonium is, indeed, used when producing lean finely textured beef. Further, the USDA decided that lean finely textured beef does not need to be listed as an ingredient on packages of beef (Derfler, 2003). There was simply a lack of awareness surrounding these facts, though. Sanburn (2013) offered his opinion: “perhaps the most persuasive criticism of LFTB [lean finely textured beef] is not a criticism of the product itself, but of the fact that very few of us knew it was in our beef” (p. 3). Sanburn continued, “we’re also turned off when food processing doesn’t look like something we could do at home—even though most modern, large-scale food production involves unfamiliar industrial processes” (p. 3). Thus, ABC was successful in bringing “pink slime” and its surrounding controversies to the forefront of public attention in part
because the reports were not wholly untruthful, but perhaps rather unpleasant in nature and relatively unknown to the public, and conflicting evidence was low.

Next, studies conducted by Frewer et al. (2002) and Kalaitzandonakes et al. (2004) revealed that agenda setting effects seem to be most powerful during concentrated reporting. ABC reports were concentrated, as ABC aired 11 broadcasts and published 14 online articles between March 7 and April 3, 2012 (“Complaint,” 2012, p. 3; Gainor, 2012). Gainor (2012) also stated that ABC used the phrase “pink slime” 52 times and ran about 10 stories in two weeks. Because ABC delivered concentrated reporting about lean finely textured beef throughout the course of about a month, it was successful in bringing “pink slime” to the forefront of public attention and influencing consumer demand, which is consistent with the agenda setting theory. However, Kalaitzandonakes et al. and Frewer et al. also learned that in order for public concern to remain sustained, media reports must also be sustained. Once levels of reporting drop, so does public concern. Future studies surrounding lean finely textured beef and the agenda setting theory could focus on current public perceptions of lean finely textured beef to see if negative opinions have alleviated since the drop in coverage.

McCluskey and Swinnen (2011) offered additional insight that is applicable to the “pink slime” crisis and explains why the effects of the agenda setting theory were strong. They discovered that audiences assign more weight to stories that are negative in nature because they are diagnostic and more impactful than positive stories. Researchers concluded that an audience is still influenced by a negative story even if they know the information is biased. Further, media tends to focus on negative stories because the agenda is to favor “sound bites” and “simplistic conclusions,” even if this means failing to provide a balanced analysis (McCluskey and Swinnen, 2011, p. 1). In short, negative stories sell. The case brief showed that ABC reports did focus on
the negative properties of lean finely textured beef and its production, which is a factor in ABC’s success in influencing public perception regarding lean finely textured beef, again consistent with the agenda setting theory.

This analysis and discussion demonstrates that the agenda setting theory is one way to explain the causal relationship between ABC reports, increased public concern, and BPI’s downfall. Application of the agenda setting theory to the “pink slime” crisis suggests that the media has the ability to influence public perception, drive consumer demand, and induce a crisis.

CHAPTER 6
BPI’S RESPONSE: IMAGE RESTORATION ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

BPI responded to the negative agenda setting effects by defending its product and placing blame on extensive media coverage, namely ABC, for the public’s sudden disapproval of lean finely textured beef (Lopez, 2012). To best deconstruct BPI’s response and provide a discussion surrounding its effectiveness in rebounding from the agenda setting effects, this thesis analyzed BPI’s rhetoric through the lens of image restoration.

**Beefisbeef.com**

As one of the first reputation management and crisis communication responses, BPI, with help from international public relations firm Ketchum, launched beefisbeef.com, a “website that aims to dispel rumors about finely textured beef” (Dickson, 2012, para. 4). The website contains a homepage that answers four questions:

- What is lean finely textured beef?
- How is lean finely textured beef made?
- Is there ammonium in ground beef
- Is LFTB [lean finely textured beef] ground beef?
Because the website was BPI’s initial crisis response, the researcher began the image restoration analysis by selecting each of the four segments on the site’s home page and noted rhetoric reflective of image restoration strategies. Results are as follows:

Table 2

*Beefisbeef.com Homepage Image Restoration Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple denial</td>
<td>100% beef, no additives, no fillers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifting the blame</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evasion of Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provocation</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defeasibility</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good intentions</td>
<td>In our process, the natural amount of pure ammonium in beef is increased by a minute amount because it is a powerful defense against potential germs. Although not required to make LFTB, we added this innovative step because it is important to us to provide the safest beef possible to our customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing the offensiveness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>This makes ground beef more affordable and available. In numerous taste panels, consumers consistently choose hamburgers made with LFTB for their taste and tenderness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LFTB is 100% USDA inspected beef from only the best beef producers in the world… These trimmings are just a knife cut away from being a steak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having been thoroughly reviewed and approved by the USDA and FDA, ammonium has proven to be one of the most effective advances in food safety today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Same beef, different process. A process that makes better tasting and leaner burgers, saves consumers money, and makes the most of our limited natural resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>For over twenty years this lean beef has helped make ground beef a healthy choice while maintaining the quality consumers expect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We are proud of our lean beef and our history in creating better, leaner, more consistent, and more flavorful ground beef burgers that Americans have been enjoying for decades.

| Minimization | N/A |
| Differentiation | N/A |
| Transcendence | N/A |
| Attack the accuser | N/A |
| Compensation | N/A |
| Corrective action | N/A |
| Mortification | N/A |

The beefisbeef.com homepage contained strategic rhetoric reflective primarily of the image restoration strategies bolstering and good intentions. Word choices such as: best; safest; most effective; better tasting; quality; and proud; to name a few, show that BPI initially attempted to redirect public attention to the positive aspects of lean finely textured beef. Benoit (1995) claimed that bolstering and good intentions are effective image restoration strategies when the positive aspects and actions are relevant to the accusations. The bolstering rhetoric was, in fact, related to the accusations and attempted to counter the negative comments about lean finely textured beef by showing the positive aspects of the product.

Next, the researcher analyzed the first tab, “About LFTB,” on the beefisbeef.com website. Results are as follows:

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beefisbeef.com “About LFTB” Image Restoration Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple denial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifting the blame</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evasion of responsibility  
Provision  
Defeasibility  
Accident  
Good intentions  

If LFTB were not produced, 1.5 million additional cattle would need to be raised and harvested annually. In a world where population is increasing, red meat consumption is rising, and available supply is declining, it would seem that getting all the lean meat from every animal is the absolute necessary and responsible thing to do.

Reducing the offensiveness  
Bolstering  

To keep up with consumer demand for leaner beef, some of the beef trimmings that are used to make ground beef are sent to experts who can remove the fat from the lean beef. It’s not only a more efficient, more respectful use of the animal, it feeds a whole lot more people. And it keeps burgers leaner.

At BPI, our commitment to food safety impacts everything we do. We’ve invested and re-invested in our facilities in order to make sure we are always able to produce the highest quality and safest lean beef possible. We set a higher standard for ourselves than anyone else would require. Our values demand that even if something isn’t broken, we’re still going to improve it.

We’ve designed and built our facilities with attention to every food safety related detail. Then, we operate them to standards we set for ourselves, including use of the most effective food safety ‘interventions’.

BPI is recognized throughout the food industry for making the highest-quality lean beef and is widely considered the industry leader in food safety and food safety innovations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimization</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack the accuser</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Corrective action  
Mortification  

N/A
The “About LFTB” portion of beefisbeef.com once again contained rhetoric reflective primarily of bolstering and good intentions. Here, BPI used words such as: responsible; more efficient; more respectful; commitment; invested; higher standard; values; highest-quality; industry leader; and safety innovations, to show all of the good things the company is doing or has done. This rhetoric is consistent, strategic in nature, and reflective of image restoration strategies.

The researcher then analyzed rhetoric in the second tab, “FAQ,” on beefisbeef.com. Results are as follows:

Table 4

\textit{Beefisbeef.com “FAQ” Image Restoration Analysis}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Denial</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple denial</td>
<td>Some misleading media reports have raised concerns about LFTB without the benefit of facts from those that produce or use it. These questions and answers aim to provide those facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experts such as Dr. Gary Acuff, Director of Food Safety and Professor of Microbiology at Texas A&amp;M University and Dr. James Dickson, Professor of Animal Science and a Microbiologist with Iowa State University, among many others, have consistently reaffirmed that LFTB is 100% wholesome, safe, and nutritious lean beef</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Many meat scientists, academics, food and safety experts, governmental officials, and consumer advocacy organizations have spoken on behalf of the food safety record and quality of LFTB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shifting the blame</strong></td>
<td>BPI Technology, Inc., Beef Products, Inc., and Freezing Machines, Inc. (collectively, “BPI”) filed a suit against the American Broadcast Companies, Inc. (ABC), ABC News, Inc., three ABC News reporters, and others for knowingly and intentionally publishing false and disparaging statements regarding BPI and its product, lean finely textured beef (LFTB)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evasion of responsibility
  Provocation     N/A
  Defeasibility   N/A
  Accident        N/A
  Good intentions According to industry calculations, if LFTB were not produced, 850,000,000 lbs. of lean beef a year would need to be generated from some other source to meet consumer demand. It would be like throwing away 5,700 cattle a day

Reducing the offensiveness
  Bolstering      Yes! LFTB is a safe beef product that has an unsurpassed food safety record. It undergoes rigorous and comprehensive testing, is processed using validated food safety systems and meets toughest quality control standards in the industry

  Minimization    N/A
  Differentiation N/A
  Transcendence   N/A
  Attack the accuser N/A
  Compensation    N/A

Corrective action   N/A
Mortification      N/A

Overall, the FAQ section sought to provide the public with BPI’s side of the story. It attempted to diffuse claims put forth by ABC about lean finely textured beef, thus reflective of simple denial and shifting blame. Also, BPI continued to provide rhetoric reflective of good intentions and bolstering. As Benoit (1995) discussed, denial, as an image restoration strategy, should be supplemented with explanations and evidence contrary to the damaging claims. This is precisely what BPI did when coupling denial with good intentions and bolstering.

Finally, the beefisbeef.com image restoration analysis concluded by analyzing the third and final tab, “Resources.” Results are as follows:
Table 5

**Beefisbeef.com “Resources” Image Restoration Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple denial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifting the blame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evasion of responsibility</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provocation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defeasibility</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good intentions</td>
<td>“Innovations in Food Safety” video, published by BPI on Nov 7, 2011 and viewed 4,423 times as of January 12, 2014—(4:51 min) discussed the growing population and increased demand for food supply. It claimed that BPI developed a unique way to meet this challenge in a safe and efficient way and enhanced innovation. BPI was also one of the first to do so. The video featured statements from university professors, lawyers, and engineer experts in the food industry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing the offensiveness</td>
<td>“Ammonia in Foods” video, published by BPI on Nov 7, 2011 and viewed 22,256 times as of January 12, 2014—(5:01 min) discussed the misconceptions surrounding ammonia and ammonium. It also described BPI’s intentions behind using ammonium in the LFTB treatment process. It claimed the decision was made out of safety to kill e. coli and went on to claim that it would be a mistake to not utilize a technology that can reduce the risk of food contamination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>Interview with Regina Roth (wife of BPI CEO) stated that everyone at BPI has been committed for all of their careers to trying to make a great product, great facilities, safe products, and focus on food safety and lower fats. “We feel we accomplished that very well” (00:24). She went on to say she was proud of the company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Since their inception, BPI has been recognized as a meat industry leader for food safety and innovations and their commitment to making the highest-quality lean beef. The International Association for Food Protection honored BPI with its most prestigious award, the Black Pearl Award, for BPI’s efforts in advancing food safety and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
quality through consumer programs, employee relations, educational activities and adherence to standards”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimization</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack the accuser</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrective action</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortification</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher first analyzed two of the three videos posted in this “resources” section, which both focused heavily on good intentions and bolstering by explaining BPI’s mindful intentions behind the use of ammonium in lean finely textured beef’s treatment process. A third video, “The Facts About Lean Finely Textured Beef,” was posted as a “resource” as well but was created by the American Meat Institute rather than produced by BPI. Ultimately, this thesis limits the scope of image restoration analysis to rhetoric and actions solely of BPI rather than the industry as a whole, so the third video was not analyzed.

On a similar note, only one of the statements, “BPI Supports Giving Consumers a Choice,” from the “statements” section of “resources,” could be analyzed because the others were rhetoric put forth by stakeholders (i.e. governors in the tri-state area, American Meat Institute, etc). Again, this thesis seeks to unveil rhetoric and actions conveyed solely by BPI.

Overall, rhetoric presented in beefisbeef.com revealed that BPI’s main objective was to dismiss claims surrounding the negative properties of lean finely textured beef, reflective of denial. To accomplish this task, BPI reiterated the positive properties of the product, reflective of bolstering and good intentions. Coupled, bolstering and good intentions supported denial by offering evidence contrary to the ABC coverage. However, it is uncertain how many views the website received. It is known, though, that the two videos posted by BPI, “Ammonia in Foods”
and “Innovations in Food Safety, were viewed 22, 256 and 4,423 times, respectively, as of January 12, 2014. These videos, which were part of BPI’s crisis communication efforts, and the image restoration strategies incorporated in them, did not reach near the audience that the initial ABC reports reached. Further, the case brief showed that just five days after launching beefisbeef.com, the USDA offered the school lunch program the option of purchasing beef made without lean finely textured beef due to a decrease in consumer demand, which meant BPI lost a major customer. Ultimately, the initial response of launching beefisbeef.com can be deemed relatively ineffective.

This finding conflicts with McCluskey and Swinnen’s (2001) claim that agenda setting effects can be countered if companies whose products are under scrutiny use the internet to “communicate correct and nuanced information” (p. 7). BPI’s initial reputation management strategy was, indeed, to use the internet, specifically beefisbeef.com, to distribute information about lean finely textured beef; however the initial agenda setting effects overshadowed BPI’s internet response. Despite delivering rhetoric reflective of consistent, strategic, image restoration strategies, BPI’s beefisbeef.com website was simply unable to counter the media effects and drive consumer demand.

**Dude, it’s Beef!**

As a further, and more publicized, public relations effort, BPI invited several governors, Texas Gov. Rick Perry; Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad; and Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback, to tour the facilities and also welcomed camera crews. The event featured a publicized press conference where the governors and BPI employees alike grilled hamburgers containing lean finely textured beef and held up shirts for cameras reading ‘Dude it’s beef!’ (Avila, 2012b). The press conference was part of a larger effort to “fight negative press coverage and win back consumers”
Gov. Terry Branstad assisted in organizing the event and publicly stated, “We need to stand together to clear up the misinformation that has been circulating in the media” and also said he is proud to announce that he, and his family, have been eating lean finely textured beef for 20 years (Bottemiller, 2012, para. 3). The crisis response and effort ultimately aligned with the image restoration strategy bolstering. This response, like beefisbeef.com was also ineffective in easing consumer concern, as the following day Wendy’s ran national advertisements to make it publicly known that it did not use lean finely textured beef in its food. Further, the case brief showed that grocery stores on military installations nation-wide decided to stop selling products with lean finely textured beef, even after the press conference. Again, while BPI continued to deliver a response reflective of consistent, strategic image restoration strategies, the strategies were simply ineffective.

**Defamation Lawsuit**

As a final crisis response, BPI filed a $1.2 billion defamation lawsuit against ABC. This act alone aligns with image restoration strategy “attack the accuser.” However the following table shows additional image restoration rhetoric found within BPI’s complaint:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>The month-long campaign, in which all Defendants participated, manufactured a baseless consumer backlash against BPI and LFTB (p. 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple denial</td>
<td>LFTB has always been safe for public consumption, and the beef trimmings used by BPI came from USDA-inspected and approved beef (p. 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LFTB is lean beef, made from muscle meat, and it has significant nutritional value. Defendants had no reliable,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
scientific basis for stating and implying anything to the contrary (p. 4)

Zirnstein and Custer last visited a BPI facility in 2002. They have no firsthand knowledge regarding BPI’s process or LFTB after that date (p. 51)

LFTB is not a filler. LFTB is beef (p. 69)

These statements were false. LFTB is not a gelatin and is not made from connective tissues. LFTB is beef and is made from beef (p. 71)

LFTB is not gelatin (p. 99)

Zirnstein was not involved in the USDA’s approvals in 1991, 1993, or 2001, so he could not possibly have raised any objection during those approval processes regarding ‘pink slime’… Custer and Zirnstein knew no USDA scientists considered LFTB to be ‘pink slime’ when it was approved, based on their employment with the USDA (p. 106)

All of these statements were false because LFTB is not pink slime, which is a noxious, repulsive, and filthy fluid. These statements were unprivileged, and defamatory because they exposed BPI and its product, LFTB, to hatred, contempt, ridicule, obloquy, caused LFTB and BPI to be shunned or avoided, and/or injured BPI’s business (p. 152)

BPI has not engaged in any fraud, and selling ground beef with LFTB is not fraud. LFTB is beef and BPI obtained approval from the USDA to include LFTB in ground beef without additional labeling (p. 166)

LFTB is not a substitute for beef. It is beef (p. 203)

Shifting the blame

Defendants published false statements regarding BPI’s use of ammonium hydroxide. Defendants made false statements regarding the method, volume and purpose of BPI’s ammonium hydroxide process (p. 222)

ABC hoped to increase viewership by broadcasting a ‘startling’ investigation of BPI and LFTB (p. 52)
Defendants ABC and ABC News also failed to exercise due care to prevent the publication or utterance of these defamatory statements during their broadcasts and publications (p. 157)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evasion of responsibility</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provocation</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defeasibility</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good intentions</td>
<td>BPI concluded that the use of ammonium hydroxide was the most effective food safety intervention for raw material and that this was yet another way to ensure that it was making the safest lean beef possible (p. 23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing the offensiveness</td>
<td>In fact, food safety experts have praised BPI’s use of ammonium hydroxide as an additional safety tool when processing beef (p. 87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>…produced a safe, nutritious beef that has lowered the cost of lean ground beef sold to consumers for nearly 20 years (p. 1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BPI has invested millions of dollars to produce the healthiest and safest lean beef possible. BPI invented state-of-the-art equipment to ensure the quality of its lean beef. BPI developed quality assurance protocols that allow it to precisely monitor the process for producing lean beef from beef trimmings. BPI also implemented safety testing protocols that are more rigorous than those recommended by Regulators. This commitment to health and safety has paid off. There has not been a single reported case of an individual becoming ill or sick due to consuming LFTB (p. 24)

In the last five years alone, BPI spent over $60 million on research and development. BPI spends that much money on research and development because the Roth family is passionate about food safety and the quality of lean beef they produce (p. 24)

BPI’s commitment to continuous improvement is demonstrated by BPI’s use, in renovations of existing plants and design of new operations, of 3/8”-thick stainless steel walls and ceilings, which are impenetrable to contaminants. All operations within the facilities are continuously monitored by an extensive network of sensors and computer-controlled systems to maintain quality, consistency and safety at all times (p. 24-25)
In short, BPI’s testing protocols are among the most rigorous in the beef industry and are considered industry-leading by many food safety experts (p. 25)

BPI has been recognized by various organizations for its innovative approach to producing the safest and healthiest beef possible (p. 25)

BPI’s production of LFTB decreases the number of cattle that must be raised by increasing the meat produced from each animal. Fewer bovine animals means less environmental impact from cattle production (p. 28)

BPI has sold over 5.4 billion pounds of LFTB since gaining approval from the USDA in 1993. In that time, no one has reported an illness caused by consuming LFTB, and no federal, state or local agency has reported that someone has become ill as a result of the LFTB included in ground beef (p. 78)

BPI has received multiple awards from the beef industry and food safety organizations for its commitment to producing safe beef (p. 78)

Minimization

Differentiation

Transcendence

Attack the accuser

N/A

No one has reported an illness caused by consuming LFTB, and no federal, state or local agency has reported that someone has become ill as a result of the LFTB included in ground beef (p. 78)

N/A

This action is brought by BPI to recover for defamation, product and food disparagement, tortuous interference with business relationships, and other wrongs committed by Defendants (p. 1)

Defendants engaged in a month-long vicious, concerted disinformation campaign against BPI” (p. 1)

There is not a more offensive way of describing a food product than to call it ‘slime,’ which is a noxious, repulsive, and filthy fluid not safe for human consumption. Defendants used this false description to rename LFTB in an effort to incite and inflame consumers against BPI and LFTB (p. 3)

Defendants’ disinformation campaign was not the product of merely negligent reporting (p. 5)
Defendants knew they were making false statements about BPI and LFTB, or they acted with reckless disregard for the truth (p. 5)

Defendants were provided, or had access to, over 60 letters, articles, press releases, reports and studies showing that their statements about BPI and LFTB were false (p. 5)

In this lawsuit, BPI seeks to hold Defendants responsible for the consequences of their actions (p. 8)

ABC did not issue and apology. ABC did not issue a retraction (p. 31)

Defendants had no reliable, scientific basis for stating and implying anything to the contrary regarding nutritional value (p. 38)

Defendants made these statements with actual malice (p. 73)

They even went so far as to repeatedly publicize blacklist of grocery store chains that carried ground beef with LFTB, to force the chains into dropping the product (p. 113)

[E]ach segment was defamatory in and of itself because the totality of the segment created the false impression that BPI’s product, LFTB, was not safe for public consumption based on the way Defendants ABC and ABC News covered, portrayed, and juxtaposed information regarding LFTB (p. 225)

As a direct result of these Defendants’ disparaging statements, BPI has suffered actual and consequential damages in an amount that will be proven at trial (p. 245)

BPI’s rhetoric centered heavily on simple denial, or denying claims put forth by ABC, stating that the coverage was baseless. Instead, BPI reiterated that LFTB is beef—not a filler, not a substitute, not gelatin, but 100% beef. BPI stood firm and continuously denied that ABC’s
coverage had any validity. Rhetoric in this last crisis response is presented much stronger than rhetoric in beefisbeef.com, which was BPI’s initial crisis response.

Also in the complaint, BPI continuously shifted the blame by pointing back to the USDA. While doing so may not seem like shifting blame on the surface level, it appears to be a tactic used to take blame off of BPI. As discussed in the image restoration literature review, shifting blame works to answer the question, “if you did not do it, who did?” BPI provided an answer to this question by stating that the USDA was involved in the decision making process as well.

Next, BPI provided rhetoric reflective of bolstering and good intentions. In particular, it stated that using ammonium in the production of lean finely textured beef was strategic in nature. It was meant to be a mindful decision. Not only does the rhetoric reiterate the “good things” that the company has done in the past, but it also reveals the thought process and intentions behind choosing to use ammonium. BPI also focused on its commitment to food safety and multiple awards it has won. Statements contain words like: commitment; safest; healthiest; quality; passionate; and nutrition, in an attempt to show that BPI has a track record that is not consistent with claims put forth by ABC.

Unlike typical food crises, this specific case did not stem from illness or contamination, but rather controversies surrounding lean finely textured beef and its treatment process. Providing a statement reflective of this differentiation attempts to demonstrate that the product is safe and is not as severe as other food crises.

While analysis of BPI’s complaint shows that BPI provided rhetoric reflective of several image restoration strategies, attacking the accuser emerged as perhaps the most utilized. Of course, the artifact is a complaint, so it is appropriate that attacking the accuser is the most prevalent of the strategies. Here, BPI used words such as: offensive; wrongs; false impression;
disparaging statements; actual malice; not reliable; scientific basis; and that ABC needed to be held responsible for the consequence of their actions. Word choices that deviate far from neutral demonstrate BPI’s disgust with ABC. The act of choosing to file a $1.2 billion lawsuit also shows that BPI felt threatened and needed to attack the accuser.

Overall, BPI’s initial response, beefisbeef.com, contained subtle image restoration strategies in the form of simple denial, good intentions, and bolstering. However, consumer demand continued to steadily decrease despite this effort, which means the initial response can be deemed ineffective. Going forward, BPI was more aggressive in its response and invited governors to tour the facility, ate burgers made with LFTB, and held up “dude it’s beef!” shirts, all publicly, which was a stronger form of bolstering. That failed as well, as customers discontinued purchasing lean finely textured beef and consumers continued to voice concern. Finally, BPI filed the complaint as its last attempt, which explains the stronger language and more aggressive approach of attacking the accuser.

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

Consistent with previous studies (Bharad et al., 2010; Frewer et al., 2002; Kalaitzandonakes et al., 2004; McCluskey & Swinnen, 2011), this case study demonstrated that food production is little known outside the industry; thus the public forms opinions about food production and safety based on what is said in the media. When ABC began heavy reporting on lean finely textured beef and its treatment process, which were once unknown to many, the general public was quickly influenced. The reports focused solely on the negative properties of the product, even though the product had not caused illness or death. Missing from the extensive ABC news coverage was the fact that BPI had received numerous safety awards, and the use of
ammonium hydroxide in the treatment process of lean finely textured beef was meant to be a mindful decision.

What was perplexing, the phrase “pink slime” was coined back in 2002, and several media outlets even featured stories about the product and its treatment process prior to the ABC coverage; yet it was not until the series of ABC reports, a full decade after “pink slime” was coined, that the phrase went viral, public concern instantaneously increased, consumer demand plummeted, and BPI suffered a significant economic downfall. So why did it take until March 2012 for the public to become concerned?

This study first offered the agenda setting theory as a way to answer this question and explain the causal relationship between BPI’s downfall and the ABC reports. To reiterate, other media outlets reported on “pink slime” and its treatment process prior to March 2012, but it was not until the series of ABC reports that “pink slime” rose to the forefront of public attention and consumers became concerned. Specifically, this thesis argues that ABC was successful in raising awareness about “pink slime” because it has a broad audience, ABC is a credible source, ABC delivered concentrated reporting surrounding “pink slime,” and the audience had a need for guidance, all of which align with basic tenets of the agenda setting theory. However, the review of literature presented in this thesis revealed that in order for agenda setting effects to have a lasting impact, media reports must be sustained. Since media reports were not sustained, future studies could focus on current public opinions of lean finely textured beef to see if the initial agenda setting effects have since weakened.

In an attempt to counter the initial agenda setting effects, BPI put forth rhetoric reflective of image restoration strategies. First, BPI launched beefisbeef.com, which is reflective primarily of bolstering and good intentions. When this subtle rhetoric failed to drive consumer demand,
BPI took a more aggressive approach with rhetoric reflective of denial and attacking the accuser. However, BPI’s response simply did not reach near the audience that the initial ABC reports reached, and consumer demand continued to plummet. Overall, BPI’s response, although internally consistent, strategic in nature, and incorporating several image restoration strategies, was ineffective in rebounding from the initial agenda setting effects following the “pink slime” reports. The media was simply more powerful in influencing public opinion than BPI’s reactive rhetoric presented during and following the crisis.

Although image restoration strategies are typically used to emerge from and restore reputational damage following a crisis and are descriptive rather than prescriptive in nature, this study suggests that in order for image restoration strategies to be effective in countering agenda setting effects, a food-producing company must be mindful of the media’s agenda, be proactive in forming positive public relations, and provide rhetoric reflective of good intentions and bolstering prior to the onset of a full-blown crisis. For instance, BPI could have launched beenisbeef.com or a similar initial public relations campaign following the first wave of coverage (i.e. Jamie Oliver’s show, articles published in The New York Times and The Washington Post, and the release of Food, Inc.). However, BPI waited to provide its side of the story until the public was already heavily influenced; even a top international public relations firm was unsuccessful in helping BPI restore its image following the negative agenda setting affects. Conducting this case study demonstrates that the image restoration theory may need to be revisited and expanded to reconceptualize how agenda setting effects may decrease the effectiveness of reactive image restoration strategies.
Ultimately, this case study demonstrates that the media has the capacity to influence public thought, drive consumer demand, and induce a crisis. BPI’s crisis response incorporating several image restoration strategies simply failed in countering initial agenda setting effects.

REFERENCES


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