

The Man Behind the Persona: Bill Cosby was Never “America’s Dad”

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Catastrophic Identity Crisis

The allegations made against Bill Cosby in 2014 shocked the nation. For many Americans, Bill Cosby was their childhood hero. *BBC News* described *The Cosby Show* as a “transformational piece of American culture” and the most popular television show of the 80s, reaching about 30 million viewers each week.¹ The man who was once known as “America’s Dad” was now being accused of drugging, sexually assaulting, and raping over fifty women.

To many Americans, this news was too much to bear. They did not want to face the reality that the man who became such a fond and memorable face in their childhood could be an entirely different person behind cameras. In many ways, this was a typical reaction to a sexual assault case. There has been a plethora of recent societal tension surrounding rape culture and the shaming of women for making such forms of allegations. The sheer number of women who made accusations against Cosby enlarged the severity and publicity of his case. However, Bill Cosby had a defense mechanism not many others who are faced with such allegations possess, and that was a wholesome, honest, and kind television character.

According to Adrian Humpreys, “in the 1980s, Mr. Cosby's broad appeal made him one of the most sought-after celebrity endorsers, with a Coca-Cola executive once saying the ‘three most believable personalities are God, Walter Cronkite, and Bill Cosby.’”² When the news of allegations against Cosby initially broke, many Americans refused to believe their “beloved dad” could commit such horrendous acts. Fans and celebrities announced their disbelief through social media and television talk shows. Public figures such as Raven Symone publicly defended him on *The View*.³ Actress Stacey Dash tweeted on November 19, 2014, “I worked with Bill Cosby in ‘86 when I was 19. We were alone together many times. He was a perfect gentleman and became a mentor to me.”⁴ Another fan advocated for Cosby, “I defend Dr. Cosby until God, or DNA says different! Why not bash a black Icon?! Amerikkka eats it’s young and old.”⁵ It became evident that there were many people who did not believe Cosby was guilty.

How did so many Americans side with a man who had been accused of sexually assaulting over fifty women? The more likely truth was these Americans were not siding with a man, but rather with a character in a television show. The following analysis shows, in part, that it could be possible Bill Cosby was being confused with his persona, Dr. Huxtable, on *The Cosby Show*. Cosby’s character, Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable, was not only a wonderful father but a gynecologist and obstetrician; a doctor who both respected and cared for women’s bodies.⁶ The wholesome, kind hearted, morally sound man on television was, of course, not necessarily who Bill Cosby was. Part of what could have made viewers confuse the two identities was that although the family name was “Huxtable,” the television program was still called *The Cosby Show*!

Bill Cosby and his public relations personnel used his television personality to their advantage when responding to the press. They used a series of apologia strategies to focus on image restoration. By extensively analyzing these strategies, Americans can recognize why they were persuaded to side with Bill Cosby. Regardless of his innocence or guilt, Bill Cosby was not “America’s dad.” “America’s dad” was the fictional character on *The Cosby Show*. This research will analyze the apologia genre from three main perspectives: Cosby, his public relations

personnel, and his surrogates. The defense of Bill Cosby was achieved by the attempt to attack his accusers, the use of the strategy of avoidance and confusion, and the bolstering of both his philanthropic and fictional images.

Current Research

Since allegations against Bill Cosby were released in 2014, there has been plenty of media coverage regarding the situation. Interviews with Billy Cosby, his lawyers, his wife, celebrity supporters, and fans are easy to access. When first questioned about the allegations in an interview with *Associated Press* he stated, “I do not talk about that.”⁷ As the allegations continued to persist, he commented to *Florida Today*, “I know people are tired of me not saying anything, but a guy doesn't have to answer to innuendos. People should fact check.”⁸ However, he and his public relations team could not stay silent for long. Many networks such as *CNN*, *CBS*, *ABC* and *The New York Times* would not rest until they received answers.

Scholars are beginning to address the persona versus person debate of Bill Cosby. In an article written in New York's *Daily News*, Shaun King wrote, “For me, and for millions of Americans, it is nearly impossible for us to separate Heathcliff Huxtable, the perfect doctor, dad, son, and husband, from Bill Cosby.”⁹ It was hard for America to distinguish his wholesome, clean television characters from his personal life.

What seems to be missing from the scholarly conversation is an analysis of the rhetorical tactics of Bill Cosby and his supporters. This analysis will look at the way traditional apologetics and image restoration strategies such as Benoit's attack the accusers and bolstering are used in defense of Cosby.¹⁰ Apologia is a rhetorical genre defined in 1973 by Ware and Linkugel as the speech of self-defense, and is often used in times of crisis.¹¹ In 1994 Hearit added to the scholarly conversation by clarifying that apologetics genres should not be confused with an apology. Hearit wrote, “An ‘apologia’ is not an apology...but a defense that seeks to present a compelling counter description of organizational actions.”¹²

Recent additions to this rhetorical genre were made by Benoit through his image restoration theory.¹³ This theory builds on former identity theories and crisis rhetoric. Concepts such as altercasting and face contribute to the understanding of identity communication. According to Tracy and Robles, “altercasting references the work a person's talk does to maintain, support, or challenge the conversational partner's identities. The term highlights how the way we talk and act toward others (alters) put them in roles (casts them).”¹⁴ Face is the counter component of the argument which is referred to as the “the positive image of self that is desired in a particular situation.”¹⁵

According to Benoit image restoration is a combination of apologetics and identity theories, “Image restoration is a typology that is based on this early work, but goes beyond specific orientations, such as Ware and Linkugel (1973) to provide a more comprehensive theory. Image repair strategies are organized into five broad categories, three of which have variants or subcategories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification.”¹⁶

This analysis will interpret these rhetorical strategies with a new perspective. Specifically, this research will decipher the way Cosby's surrogates bolstered his image with the use of his television persona, how his public relations personnel responded by attacking the accusers, and Cosby's unique use of the strategy of avoidance and

confusion. Through this research, the nation can come to a better understanding of how to interpret responses to Cosby's allegations.

The Man Behind the Persona

Bill Cosby was known to America as a famous comedian, actor, and entertainer, and rightfully so. He has won seventy-two national and international awards in the past fifty-two years including two Golden Globes, eleven Emmy Awards, nine Grammy Awards and ten People's Choice Awards.¹⁷ His most recent recognition was in 2014 as the recipient of the American Comedy Award.¹⁸ He was known to many as both the "Doctor of Comedy" and "America's Dad" who was family friendly, kind, and highly successful. He not only found success in the entertainment world but, in fact, has always been a high achiever.

Bill Cosby was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania on July 12, 1937. Although he dropped-out of tenth grade to join the Navy in 1960, he eventually made his way back to education. After he received his GED with the Navy, he enrolled at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on an athletic scholarship for football and track. He spent two years at Temple before entering the world of entertainment and comedy.¹⁹

His rise to fame was quick; within three short years of leaving Temple University he released his first comedy album, *Bill Cosby is a Very Funny Fellow...Right!*, began starring on the comedy show, *I Spy*, and was winning Emmy Awards.²⁰ His humor was inspired by "his own experiences, childhood, everyday occurrences and commonly held beliefs."²¹ It was no surprise he earned an honorary bachelor's degree from Temple University in 1971 due to "life experience."²²

His commitment to education was a quality he carried with him throughout his lifetime. In 1971, he went on to earn a Master's degree in education from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst where he also received a Ph.D. in education (Ed.D.) six years later.²³ Even while earning his dissertation he was committed to making people laugh. Throughout 1971 to 1975, he appeared regularly on children's television shows such as *The Electric Company* and *Sesame Street*, created the famous Saturday cartoon, *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, created two short-lived primetime television series, and starred in three feature films.²⁴

Eventually, through his path to fame, he was recognized not only as a world class entertainer but also as a humanitarian and civil activist. His research in education became a valuable component of his television shows. In fact for his show, *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, "Cosby employed a panel of educators to act as advisers so that his audience would learn good behavior and solid values. He also appeared in each episode to discuss its message with its estimated six million viewers."²⁵ This program was nominated for many awards and won a Daytime Emmy Award in 1981.²⁶ His efforts to educate youth within America have always been a critical part of his mission.

Although his desire to educate and influence children was commendable, his will to be seen as a role model did not stop there. In his 1984 NBC television series, *The Cosby Show*, "he broke television's racial barrier, becoming the first African American to costar on a television series and win three consecutive Emmys for 'Outstanding Lead Actor' in a dramatic series."²⁷ Not only was his career recognized as historic, but so was the character Cosby played on the show. For the first time, an upper-class African American family was being portrayed in the entertainment world. In addition, this show was the most watched prime-time television show for

three consecutive years following its debut.²⁸ Not only was this impressive, but it was incredibly influential to the future of American television.

In addition to his seventy-two entertainment awards, Bill Cosby has been recognized for his humanitarianism and civil activism. After being inducted into the Television Hall of Fame in 1992, he received the Kennedy Center Honor Award (1998).²⁹ Four years later, Cosby was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and America's Highest Civilian Honor.³⁰ With all of the work Bill Cosby has done to contribute to children's education and to break down racial barriers in entertainment, it was no surprise he received a plethora of recognitions and accolades.³¹

Bill Cosby's success within the entertainment industry was rare and special. His persona to the public eye was nothing but respectable, honorable, and truly commendable. He was many people's childhood hero, someone they grew up watching on television with their family, and someone they would least expect ever to do anything distasteful, let alone criminal. In 2014, everything changed.

According to *ABC News*, on October 16, 2014, comedian Hannibal Buress was performing in Germantown, Pennsylvania, Cosby's hometown. During his show, he imitated Cosby saying, "Pull your pants up black people, I was on TV in the '80s," he said on stage. "Yeah, but you rape women, Bill Cosby, so turn the crazy down a couple notches."³² Buress was referring to accusations women made against Cosby approximately ten years prior. According to the *Huffington Post*, "Cosby was never criminally charged, and in 2006 he settled a civil suit with one of the women."³³

In an effort to diffuse the situation, Cosby's public relations personnel launched a meme generator to distract fans from Buress's comedy skit. The generator was designed for people to scroll through a series of Bill Cosby photos and add their own text. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the plan backfired. People quickly began making memes that actually assumed Cosby's guilt, using crude humor derived from his past causing allegations to unravel further.³⁴

On November 13, 2014, less than a month following Buress's comedy act, Barbara Bowman, the woman who first publicly accused Cosby of sexual assault in 2006, published an article in the *Washington Post*. The article was titled "Bill Cosby raped me. Why did it take 30 years for people to believe my story?" In this article, Bowman claimed it was only after a male comedian called Cosby a rapist that the "public outcry [began] in earnest."³⁵ Following Bowman's article, more women started coming forward.

Soon, Cosby began to see the repercussions of his accusations. *ABC News* stated that on November 20, 2014, repeats of *The Cosby Show* were removed from the programming schedule of the nostalgic network *TV Land*. Likewise, *NBC* and *Netflix* had similar hesitations to work with the entertainer and postponed their current projects with him.³⁶ Before long, Cosby was forced to resign from Temple University's Board of Trustees and "the Navy announced in a statement to the *Associated Press* that it [had] revoked Cosby's title of honorary chief petty officer, saying allegations of sexual abuse made against the comedian are serious and conflict with the Navy's core values."³⁷ Cosby's seemingly perfect life was falling apart, and the world could do nothing but watch. Between October 16, 2014 and December 30, 2015, over fifty women had come forward, claiming Bill Cosby had drugged and sexually assaulted them.³⁸

The following sections will analyze the rhetoric used by Cosby and his surrogates following Hannibal Buress's comedy skit in Germantown, Pennsylvania. Every news station's top conversation was related to the Bill Cosby allegations during this time period. This analysis will examine the rhetoric used by Bill Cosby, his public relations personnel, and celebrities and

fans. Through this analysis, not only will there be evidence of persona and person misconceptions, but also of the apologia and image restoration strategies used to reinforce them.

Method of Defense

This analysis demands a deep understanding of the rhetoric used by Bill Cosby and his supporters. Their responses to the allegations support the persona versus person debate and how people were comparing Bill Cosby to his character in *The Cosby Show*. This is why it is crucial the interviews and reactions are analyzed in chronological order.

The majority of the research materials will be from credible news sources such as *BBC*, *CBS*, *ABC*, and *CNN*. By analyzing the statements made by Bill Cosby and his supporters regarding his allegations concrete examples of apologia and image restoration are exposed.

This research will study the apologia genre from three main perspectives. The first of which will look specifically at the rhetoric used by Bill Cosby's public relations personnel. Through this analysis, there will be evidence of Benoit's strategies to attack one's accusers and bolster an image.³⁹ In addition to these common apologia strategies, this analysis will reveal another approach used by Cosby himself. Cosby used a strategy of avoidance and confusion in attempt to distract viewers and cause perplexity.

Cosby did not have to extend much effort to bolster his image; his surrogates did most of the bolstering for him. The final analytical perspective of this analysis will look at the rhetorical tactics celebrities and fans used in defense of the allegations. Unlike Cosby's public relations team who bolstered his philanthropic image, this research will reveal how his surrogates attempted to bolster Cosby through the use of his television characters. This is a unique approach to apologia theory and can be applicable to similar cases of celebrities faced with serious accusations.

Although research exists related to celebrities' fans not accepting the reality of a situation, the allegations made against Bill Cosby present a new case. In most situations, the people who defend celebrities with serious accusations are people who do not know them personally. This is definitely the case for Bill Cosby; many people who were defending him did not, in fact, know him on a personal level. However, Bill Cosby had an additional group of supporters. Unlike ever before, fellow celebrities who claimed they did have a personal relationship with the comedian were publicly defending him. Whether or not they ever changed their minds and rebuked their initial support is irrelevant. Their public support of a man who had been accused of such horrific acts was an uncharacteristic response. This analysis will attempt to discover evidence of ways these celebrities confused a television persona with Bill Cosby himself.

In a similar way, this research should help America realize that there is not one "type" of person who commits sexual assault. Although this research will not analyze whether or not Cosby was guilty or innocent, this issue will be addressed through the analysis. Because so many supporters claim "he was not the type to do this," the image of someone who commits sexual assault will be addressed by default.

Defense of Man Who Played "America's Dad"

For the weeks following Buress's comedy show, Cosby received negative media attention. It was only a matter of time before Cosby was asked about these allegations. Cosby

and his public relations personnel had a different approach to his defense than his surrogates. Cosby and his team evaded responsibility and reduced offensiveness by attacking his accusers, bolstering his image, and at times, avoiding the allegations all together. His surrogates attempted to bolster his image by associating him with his fictional characters on television. At times it remained unclear whether they knew the difference between his television persona and him as a person, or if they were confused by the two identities.

Attack the Accuser and Bolster Cosby's Image

Cosby's public relations personnel used a variety of strategies in attempt to evade responsibility and reduce the offensiveness of his actions. The strategies they implemented were not unusual; in many ways they aimed to attack the accusers and bolster his image. Bill Cosby's lawyers and public relations professionals wanted to publicize the inconsistencies of the victims' stories and criticize why it took decades for the allegations to resurface. At the same time, they wanted to remind America of the adored characters Cosby played on television.

When Buress's joke went viral, Bill Cosby's face was threatened. Cosby needed to figure out how to respond, and do so quickly. According to Benoit's image restoration theory, the first variant used to diffuse the situation is usually denial. Although Bill Cosby does attempt to deny the situation in weeks following, this is not the initial response. Bill Cosby's social media specialist used Benoit's reduction of offensiveness in an effort to force fans to concentrate on the positive qualities of Bill Cosby.⁴⁰ More specifically, the strategy used to reduce offensiveness is known to apologia genre as bolstering.⁴¹

According to Benoit, "bolstering (Ware & Linkugel, 1973) attempts to strengthen the audience's positive affect for the rhetor, hoping to offset the negative feelings associated with the wrongful act. People accused of a wrongdoing could describe positive characteristics they possess or positive actions they have taken in the past."⁴² When Cosby's social media specialist created a meme generator on Twitter in response to the negative media attention, the intention was to associate Bill Cosby with his television persona.⁴³ Famous images of Dr. Huxtable and other characters portrayed by Cosby were selected for people to choose from. By associating fans with positive thoughts and images regarding the comedian, fans would not be focusing on the negative attention Cosby was receiving.

Additionally, Cosby's attorneys attempted to attack the accusers. On November 15, 2014, his lawyer, John Schmitt published a statement on Bill Cosby's website, "Over the last several weeks, decade-old, discredited allegations against Mr. Cosby have resurfaced. . . . The fact that they are being repeated does not make them true."⁴⁴ Schmitt wanted the public to understand the allegations were not only invalid but have already been resolved appropriately. Schmitt attempted to attack the accusers to make them appear guilty of wrong doing, and Cosby the victim.

About a week later, another one of Cosby's attorneys, Martin Singer, spoke out with the use of similar strategies. In his statement to *ABC News* on November 21, 2014, he addressed the inconsistencies within the stories of the additional women who made recent accusations. Singer states:

The new, never-before-heard claims from women who have come forward in the past two weeks with unsubstantiated, fantastical stories about things they say occurred 30, 40, or even 50 years ago have escalated far past the point of absurdity. These brand new claims

about alleged decades-old events are becoming increasingly ridiculous, and it is completely illogical that so many people would have said nothing, done nothing, and made no reports to law enforcement or asserted civil claims if they thought they had been assaulted over a span of so many years.⁴⁵

Like Schmitt, Singer attempted to evade responsibility and reduce offensiveness by attacking the accusers. Singer strongly proposed the irrationality of the situation and exposed the logistical and missing practical components of the allegations. In the case of Bill Cosby, Singer had to address many accusers. By addressing the notion that the sheer number of women discredited the claim, he attempted to make the women seem irrational and misleading. Cosby's attorneys overtly used Benoit's image restoration strategies in attempt to defend Cosby from his allegations.

The apologia strategies used by Cosby's lawyers and public relations personnel were not particularly unusual. Their attempt to use Benoit's image restoration strategies to evade responsibility by attacking his accusers and bolstering his image are standard defense mechanisms used in crisis rhetoric.⁴⁶

Strategy of Avoidance and Confusion

A method often used by Bill Cosby himself in addition to attacking the accusers was a strategy of avoidance and confusion. Rather than providing a direct response to the kategoria, or accusations, he overtly avoided talking about the rumors of sexual assault. On November 15, 2014, Cosby was interviewed for the first time following his resurfaced allegations. National Public Radio (NPR) interviewed him about an art exhibition in Washington, D.C. At the end of the interview, Scott Simon asked Cosby three different questions regarding the allegations. In response to all of these questions, Cosby silently shook his head, presumably to mean "no," although the nonverbal behavior could be interpreted in many different ways.⁴⁷ One could interpret the shaking of his head simply to be disappointment at being asked the question, or a moment of being surprised, or any other number of possibilities. Lacking any clear, unambiguous verbal response functioned more as a strategy of complete avoidance than any form of denial, ultimately leaving audience members confused.

Cosby used this same strategy of avoidance and confusion again four days later. On November 19, 2014, *Associated Press* released an interview with Bill Cosby from November 6. When questioned about the allegations in this interview Cosby responded verbally, "There's no response," and "there is no comment about that. And I'll tell you why. I don't want to compromise your integrity. But I don't, we don't talk about that."⁴⁸ Cosby clearly was still trying his best to disassociate himself from the allegations by not responding. Although he seemingly acknowledged the allegations, he managed to avoid directly responding to them. Instead, he chose to attempt to confuse the interviewer with a statement about his integrity. The interviewer was in no way jeopardizing his own integrity by questioning Cosby about the allegations; in fact, he was doing his job! Cosby's unclear statements seemed to, initially, accuse the journalist of lacking integrity, but ultimately were so unclear that they resulted in confusion.

On November 21, 2014, Bill Cosby finally seemed to respond more directly to the allegations. Yet, ultimately, he only offered more ambiguous statements that functioned more to avoid the accusations and confuse the listeners. Just before he gave a show in Melbourne, Florida, he was informed that audience members had been paid by local news stations to interrupt the show and ask him about the allegations. Cosby responded with a statement to a

local newspaper, *Florida Today*, “I know people are tired of me not saying anything, but a guy doesn't have to answer to innuendos. People should fact check. People shouldn't have to go through that and shouldn't answer to innuendos.”⁴⁹ Through this statement, Cosby suggested the facts reveal the truth of the situation, and implied his accusers' stories were incoherent and incomplete, but also untruthful. At the same time his reference to “innuendos” was ambiguous, suggesting his use of the strategy of avoidance and confusion.

After several months of hearing the same story repeatedly on the news, apparently Bill Cosby knew he needed to escalate his use of the strategy of avoidance and confusion. Perhaps he knew he could no longer rely on his fans comparing him to Dr. Huxtable. In an interview with *Good Morning America* on May 15, 2015, Bill Cosby addressed his allegations like never before. In the interview with Linsey Davis, Cosby began by explaining his new outreach initiative to “bring awareness to the underfunded schools in Selma, Alabama.”⁵⁰ This was an attempt to bolster his image and of course, was a not a new strategy; Cosby had been attempting to use this to his benefit since the crisis began in November.

However, when questioned about the allegations, his response was anything from the usual. In fact, it was as if he was rambling about nonsense. His response when questioned was exactly as follows, “Okay, listen to me carefully. I'm telling you where the road is out...Now, you want to go here, or you want to be concerned about who's giving you the message.”⁵¹ When pressed to clarify, he continued, “I really know about what I'm going to do tomorrow. I have a ton of ideas to put on television about people and their love for each other.”⁵² This response was not the Bill Cosby his audience had grown to know. This was a new face. It was the face of a seventy-seven year old man who used to be on a show called *The Cosby Show*; a face of someone who was accused of drugging and sexually assaulting many women. This interview revealed Bill Cosby was someone who nobody knew anymore.

Cosby's strategy of avoidance and confusion is a new concept to the apologia genre. In the early stages of the allegations, his non-responsive methods were done in attempt to avoid responding to the press. As the accusations persisted, his responses became more and more unclear and even completely confusing to listeners. Cosby was either pretending to be, or truly was, a befuddled old man. Such a posture has potential to evoke sympathy, whether Cosby acted that way intentionally, or truly had been that confused and nonsensical about the allegations and his unclear responses.

Bolstering his Television Character

Cosby's surrogates heavily focused on bolstering Cosby's image by linking him to his fictional television characters. Perhaps they comprehended the difference between the two identities of his person and persona and they were using his television image as an intentional strategy. However, they were also conflating “Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable” with “Dr. Bill Cosby.” Professional communication analysts, celebrity friends, and fans of Cosby revealed evidence of this identity confusion.

Following the release of the interview with National Public Radio, Bill Cosby's television persona began to be confused with his identity as a person. On November 20, *CBS News* spoke with Frank Luntz, expert of crisis communication from Washington, D.C. Luntz stated, “Reporters don't want to challenge Bill Cosby because of what he represents for America. He really was America's Dad.”⁵³ Evidently, Luntz, a communication expert, was mistaking Bill Cosby's television persona with Cosby's personal life. “America's Dad” was Dr. Huxtable, not

Bill Cosby. At the very least, Luntz was being unclear about the distinction between Bill Cosby the real person and the characters Cosby had played on fictional television shows.

In addition to the television media coverage, several New York newspapers including *New York Times* and *Daily News* featured front-page stories regarding the allegations. Publications within the state of New York were significant; it was the place *The Cosby Show* was filmed as well as where Cosby and his family lived.⁵⁴ A front page headline for *Daily News* read, “It’s Time for America’s Dad to Talk.”⁵⁵ Bill Cosby being featured on the front page of multiple major newspapers illustrated the evident discomfort people had with the situation. During this time, charges were not being pressed, there was not a trial, nor had Cosby made any statements. All of this media attention was being based on rumors and allegations that had presumably been resolved a decade ago. There was a clear identity crisis; Bill Cosby’s “father” image was being questioned and the nation was upset by the situation. Perhaps not just upset, but mourning the loss of Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable.

Co-host on *The View*, Rosie O’Donnell, made references to the misunderstanding of identities as well. She commented on November 22, 2016, “I know it’s hard for us to talk about him this way because he is our ‘beloved’ father. To think someone you love or know could do that is a very difficult thing.”⁵⁶ With these words she was confusing Bill Cosby with his television persona. She, just as many others did, referred to him as a “father.” However, O’Donnell took it one step further. She stated that America not only “loves” him, but “knows” him, too. America did not “know” him. They knew Dr. Huxtable, but Dr. Huxtable was a fictional character, whereas Bill Cosby was the man who played that role.

Many people who claimed they were supporting Cosby did not actually know him personally. An interesting phenomenon is that several celebrities attempted to bolster their colleague’s image to defend him. Actress Raven Symone was a cast member of *The Cosby Show* from 1989 - 1992. As the allegations began to unfold, rumors were spreading that she was sexually assaulted by Cosby. In response, she tried to reduce the offensiveness and evade his responsibility. On November 20, 2014, she posted a photo on Instagram of herself on *The Cosby Show*. The caption of the photo was as follows, “I was NOT taken advantage of by Mr. Cosby when I was on the Cosby Show. I was practically a baby on that show and this is a disgusting rumor I want no part of! Everyone on that show treated me with nothing but kindness.”⁵⁷ With this post, she was associating positive memories with Bill Cosby, hoping to momentarily diffuse the reality of the situation. By bolstering his image, she was aiming to restore his face.

Symone was not Cosby’s only colleague who attempted to publically defend him. On November 30, 2014, Singer Jill Scott responded to a tweet asking support of a petition to Temple University to end their relationship with Bill Cosby. Her tweets clearly demonstrated that Scott had conflated Cosby the person with his characters. Scott’s response, “U know Cosby? I do child and this is insane. Proof. Period.”⁵⁸ On December 1, 2014, she wrote, “I’m respecting a man who has done more for the image of Brown people than almost anyone EVER. From Fat Albert to the Huxtables.”⁵⁹ This statement implied although Scott knew him personally, she was confusing him with his characters within his television programs. What is interesting was that she and Bill Cosby did have a personal relationship; in fact, the comedian gave her an honorary degree from Temple University in May 2014.⁶⁰ However, clearly she was confusing his characters with his true identity.

Celebrities who claim they knew him personally in midst of the allegations should support their friend. However, when the support is based on a television persona rather than a personal relationship, it can be perceived two ways. On the one hand, these celebrities used

Benoit's image restoration theory strategically by bolstering through the linkage of a fictional character. By acknowledging his television persona, they were associating positive characteristics with Cosby. By forcing positive connotations with Cosby, one temporarily dissociated him from the negative media attention. On the other hand, when one associated Cosby with his television character, they were clearly confusing his television persona with his real identity. This supports the notion that even celebrity close friends who defended Cosby often supported him because of his television persona.

The allegations made against Bill Cosby were the center of the media in 2014. Until Buress's comedy skit went viral, Cosby's face was one of honor, success, and respect. It shocked the entire nation, and Bill Cosby and his public relations personnel were scrambling for ways to defend the legendary comedian and actor. While his team focused on familiar tactics such as attacking the accuser and bolstering his philanthropy image, there were a few new strategies used by Cosby himself and his surrogates. Cosby used a strategy of avoidance and confusion to distract his audience from the allegations. Through this strategy he appeared as a confused, befuddled old man.

Although these surrogates bolstered his image in effort to restore Bill Cosby's face, they used a slightly different approach. Unlike Cosby's lawyers and public relations personnel, celebrities and fans used his fictional character in attempt to protect his image. However, that face was Dr. Huxtable from *The Cosby Show*. When America realized Dr. Huxtable and Bill Cosby were two separate identities, they grieved his loss. Celebrity friends needed to face this reality as well; they too were caught in the middle of the identity crisis and wanted to believe Bill Cosby was who everyone else thought he was, too.

Implications of Cosby Case

The accusations made about Bill Cosby in 2014 arguably caused one of the most unexpected, catastrophic identity crises in American history. Bill Cosby was seen as American hero, role model, and inspiration to people everywhere. These allegations have been so upsetting that the case has yet to be resolved over two years later. On December 14, 2016, a judge in Pennsylvania finally set a trial date for June 5, 2017.⁶¹ The efforts to defend Cosby's face have persisted throughout this two year period.

This analysis of rhetoric pertaining to the Bill Cosby allegations revealed the strategic use of the apologia genre. A consistent defense strategy was to compare Bill Cosby to his television persona, Dr. Huxtable. This was likely the selected approach because this persona supported the face Cosby had portrayed to America for over fifty years. Because of this face the public had altercasted him with certain expectations and particular characteristics, none of which align with sexual assault allegations. However, this television face or persona was not Bill Cosby.

This research explains exactly how Bill Cosby, his public relations personnel, and his lawyers attempted to use this identity confusion to their advantage when defending the allegations. This approach to bolstering through the use of a television character is new to the apologia genre. It is interesting to consider what it would have been like if Cosby was a different character on television. What if he was often portrayed as villain or malicious character? If this were the case, fans, celebrities, and public relations personnel could not bolster Cosby with his television persona.

When the Cosby's social media specialist created the Cosby meme generator in an attempt to use Benoit's reduction of offensiveness, only famous images of Cosby performing on

television were available to be selected. This was done in an effort to force people to think about positive characteristics of Cosby as opposed to the allegations. However, they were not thinking about positive characteristics of Cosby, but rather his persona on television.

Unfortunately for Cosby, the meme generator was overwhelmingly ineffective. Although fans could not control which pictures they used with the social media device, they could add their own text. Derogatory memes with #CosbyMeme claiming Cosby to be a “rapist” circulated Twitter.⁶² One example was a famous photo of a smiling Cosby posing with thumbs up with the text, “when you realize you got enough cash to pay off the victim.”⁶³ Another famous image of him from *The Cosby Show* read, “that feeling you get from being America’s most beloved serial rapist.”⁶⁴ By the time Cosby’s public relations team had time to figure out what was happening, it was too late. This attempt to reduce the offensiveness did just the opposite; it increased awareness and hurt his reputation.

What is particularly interesting about the Bill Cosby fan base is the surplus of celebrities who publicly defended him in the climax of the media criticism. These celebrities, such as Jill Scott and Raven Symone, were individuals who knew him on a personal level. They were people who have collaborated on projects with him, received awards from him, and knew his family well. To them, Bill Cosby was more than just a role model, he was a friend. Through the analysis of the rhetoric used by these celebrities it became increasingly evident that Cosby’s persona was being confused with his true identity. And their only arm of defense for this friend was to reference this persona with apologia strategies.

When these allegations first entered the major media circuit in November 2014, the strategy to constantly compare Bill Cosby to his television persona was appropriate. It was the only face America had ever known. The nation had to get past their shock, their disbelief, and embrace the reality their childhood memories were just that, a memory. They had to get used to Bill Cosby’s new face and grieve the loss of the old one.

Cosby himself did not need to focus on bolstering his image; his public relations personnel and surrogates took care of that for him. His approach to use the strategy of avoidance and confusion was new to the apologia genre. Cosby was seventy-seven when these allegations began to unravel in 2014.⁶⁵ He was an elderly man who had built a successful career for himself in the entertainment circuit. His decision to overtly avoid interview questions regarding the allegations by silently shaking his head “no,” using obscure language, and indirectly responding to accusations made his viewers confused. It can be argued he was pretending to be, or truly was, a befuddled old man. Perhaps he was using this non-responsive method in an attempt to build himself to plead insanity, or perhaps he had truly lost his mind.

Future research could include analyzing the rhetorical strategies used by Bill Cosby in the following years. How long did Bill Cosby use his Dr. Huxtable persona to his benefit? Did he and his public relations personnel utilize all five of Benoit’s image restoration categories? Are there more effective strategies they implemented? Additionally, it would be beneficial to the apologia genre to compare these allegations with those of other entertainers and athletes who faced a crisis situation. Did they use their television faces to help defend themselves as well? And if so, did they do this more or less effectively than Bill Cosby? Was the reaction from the public similar? Were their signs of grief and despair? Or did they present a different emotional response? Regardless, this analysis would be of value to this conversation.

Similarly, the exploration of celebrities who defend fellow celebrities in midst of identity crisis should be researched further. Did they support the persona versus person debate? Did they

provide evidence of the two identities being similar to one another? The analysis of this specific rhetorical situation could be beneficial to the apologia genre.

Throughout his fifty-two years in the entertainment business, Bill Cosby made a multitude of milestones for both him and American culture. His efforts to break down racial barriers within prime-time television, educate youth with life lessons, and make the world laugh will most likely never be forgotten. Whether or not Bill Cosby's sexual assault allegations are true or false, the nation needs to understand that *The Cosby Show's* "Dr. Huxtable" was not Bill Cosby, but a persona he portrayed. The world did not know who he was, they knew his television characters. He and his public relations personnel attempted to use this identity to his defense through the use of apologia and image restoration strategies.

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