



IMAGE REPAIR IN POLITICS: AN ANALYSIS OF IMRAN KHAN'S STATEMENTS IN RESPONSE TO THE SITA WHITE SCANDAL

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Abstract:

This study examines Imran Khan's image restoration strategies in his public responses to the Sita White paternity scandal, elaborating on how he sought to manage his political image. Based on William Benoit's theory of image restoration, it analyzes which distant strategies are employed and how these strategies shifts and evolved over time in relation to shifting socio-political factors in Pakistan. Imran Khan's statements reported in major English and Urdu language newspapers, as well as selected televised and print interviews following the initial allegations, were collected and subjected to qualitative textual analysis guided by Benoit's typology. The findings reveals that Khan primarily relied on straightforward denial in the early phase of the scandal, but later incorporated strategies of minimization and bolstering, framing himself as a victim of political motives and highlighting his personal integrity and public service. This research contributes to scholarship on political scandal management by highlighting how a prominent South Asian political figure adapted image repair strategies over an extended period within a changing media and political environment.

Keywords: *image crisis, politics, image repair, manipulation, Pakistan, sex scandals*

Introduction

In democratic societies, the significance of political image cannot be ignored, as political parties and individual politicians equally seek out to uphold a favorable public reputation. Trent and Friedenberg (1992) postulate that voters' assessment is based on candidates and elected official' political image, which comprise not only party's policy but also personal integrity and moral character. Politicians and public figure remain under spotlight and thus, constantly under scrutiny, find themselves under crisis due to real or alleged misconduct. When an image crisis arises, individuals and institutions deploy various rhetorical strategies such as explanations, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, or excuses for behavior (Brinson & Benoit, 1996) to restore a tarnished image. William Benoit's Image Restoration Theory presents a foundational framework for examining such responses, identifying five primary strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Image restoration theory has frequently been applied in Western political contexts for example Benoit's theory, (2006) application on George W. Bush's Iraq War rhetoric whereas its application in non-Western settings, particularly South Asian political communication, remains underexplored.

This study researches a key gap by applying image restoration theory to Pakistani political scandals, a context where little research has systematically examined image repair within a socio-cultural milieu shaped by Islamic norms and constitutional requirements of moral probity. In Pakistan, extramarital relations are stigmatized as violations of Islamic prohibitions against zina (adultery; Quran 17:32), reinforcing familial and communal honor (Yasine & Khan, 2022). Article 62 of the Constitution of Pakistan further disqualifies candidates deemed "morally corrupt," further engendering the political career of the candidate (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973).

The Imran Khan-Tyrian White Scandal

The case of Imran Khan, former cricketer, philanthropist, and Prime Minister (2018–2022) exemplifies this tension. Imran Khan has been involved in a scandal that contravenes with the religious and socio-cultural norms of Pakistan. In 1996, Imran Khan's friend, Sita White alleged that he is the father of an illegitimate child and that he should accept his 4-year-old daughter Tyrian White as his biological daughter. When this news was published in *News of the World*, a mass-circulation British tabloid, in December 1996, it coincided with the period for submitting nomination papers for the election in Pakistan. At that time Khan was campaigning for general elections in Pakistan. This scandal sparked controversy, and he faced a significant image crisis. White filed a paternity suit in California; Khan, refused a DNA test, leading to a default judgment by the Superior Court of California (County of Los Angeles, Case No. BD128999, 1997) declaring him the legal father. The U.S. court issued a default judgment in Khan's absence, not a judgment after full evidentiary hearing.

According to Articles 62 and 63 of the Constitution of Pakistan, a political candidate must be of good moral character. Opponents' claims that Imran Khan violate the Article 62 of the constitution of, "no person shall be elected or elected as a member of the Majlis-e-Shura (Parliament) if he is morally corrupt"(constitution of Pakistan, 1973). Opponents, including Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, weaponized the scandal to invoke Article 62, threatening Khan's eligibility and vote bank in a conservative electorate. Hence, Imran Khan's political career was in jeopardy. It was the need of the hour that Imran Khan must repair his image, and he employed various image repair strategies in his statements regarding the case. Critics claimed that his alleged conduct brought him into conflict.

His responses to the allegations provide interesting examples for the analysis of image restoration strategies proposed by William Benoit. This research contributes to theory by extending IRT to a South Asian, Islam-influenced case. Locally, it fills a void in Pakistani political communication scholarship, informing future leaders on context-sensitive rhetoric. Future politicians may find it useful to review notable candidates' strategies when developing rhetoric to protect a candidate's political image.

Theoretical Framework: Image Restoration Theory

Based on William L. Benoit's Image Restoration Theory (IRT), which examines how individuals and organizations respond rhetorically when their image is threatened. Benoit (1995) postulates that image is a fundamental component of an individual's reputation and public standing; when that image is damaged, stakeholders are strongly provoked to defend or repair it. An image crisis occurs when

- a. an act is alleged as wrong, nasty, or unsuitable within a given social and cultural context,

- b. the individual or organization is held responsible for that act (Benoit, 1995). Under such circumstances, reputation and legitimacy are at risk.

Ryan (1982) notes that accusations usually challenges a person's character or political position, makes image restoration especially essential for public figures. In these situations, strategic public communication becomes essential for maintaining or regaining a favorable image. Brinson and Benoit (1996) perceive that when a reputation is threatened, individuals and organizations are motivated to present an image defense, including explanations, justifications, rationalizations, apologies, or excuses for behavior. Based on this perspective, Benoit (1995, 1997) systematized image defenses into a typology of image restoration strategies. Image Restoration Theory identifies five extensive strategies, three of which include several sub-strategies:



Figure:1

Importantly, Benoit (1995) emphasizes that image repair strategies are not mutually exclusive. Actors frequently combine multiple strategies in a single discourse for instance, denying certain facets of an accusation while simultaneously bolstering their past service or attacking the accuser. Over time, they may also shift from one dominant strategy to another as the situation and audience perceptions evolve. Benoit also acknowledges the possibility of non-response. In some cases, an actor may choose not to respond publicly to accusations, effectively ignoring the issue. This silence can itself be strategic for example, when the accused believes that responding would amplify the allegation or when legal or political constraints limit what can be said. Image Restoration Theory has been applied in a wide range of contexts, particularly in political and corporate communication. In the political sphere, Benoit (2006) examined President George W. Bush's usage of image restoration strategies such as denial, reducing offensiveness, and transcendence; regarding approval following the U.S. intervention in Iraq. Benoit and Brinson (1999) examined Queen Elizabeth II's image repair discourse after the death of Princess Diana, identifying strategies including denial, bolstering, defeasibility, and transcendence. These studies demonstrate that actors selectively deploy and combine strategies based on the nature of the crisis, the expectations of their audiences, and the broader socio-cultural context.

The effectiveness of particular strategies is context-dependent. Benoit (1995) argues that mortification admitting wrongdoing and apologizing is often the most effective means of



repairing a tarnished image because it aligns with public expectations of accountability and remorse. However, cultural norms, legal constraints, and political calculations can make other strategies more attractive or more feasible in specific situations.

In this study, Benoit's Image Restoration Theory provides the coding framework for analyzing Imran Khan's public responses to the Sita White scandal. The typology of strategies and sub-strategies is used to

- I. identify which image repair strategies he employs, in what combinations, and
- II. examine how his use of these strategies changes over time as the political, legal, and socio-cultural context shifts.

Previous Research

A lot of research has been done in analyzing the application of image repair strategies to restore one's image. In political sex scandals, studies reveal common strategies and their effectiveness. Moran (2012) analyzed 24 U.S. cases from 1987 to 2011, finding reducing offensiveness as the most frequent strategy at 37 percent, followed by mortification at 20 percent. Denial was less common at 6 percent. Cross-cultural variations show how strategies adapt beyond Western norms. García (2011) compared Bill Clinton and Silvio Berlusconi. Clinton used mortification successfully in the U.S., but Berlusconi favored denial in Italy's more tolerant culture. Experiments confirm mortification works best when fault is clear (Sheldon & Sallot, 2008). However, limitations exist. A study examined image restoration strategies such as evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, and denial adopted by Polish Minister Jacek Sasin in his official Twitter account in response to the May 2020 presidential election crisis and the effectiveness of these strategies. Among 16 tweets, 24 examples of image repair strategies were found, with reducing offensiveness as the most widely used strategy (Jonna Krunal, 2021). Moreover, Shari Veil's research analyzed the relationship between media coverage and multiple image restoration strategies employed by Bill Clinton in 1992 and George W. Bush in 1999 when questioned about past drug use during the respective election campaigns (Veil, 2005). Glen F. Roberts identifies the application of image restoration used by the U.S. Air Force in press releases relating to a series of sexual assaults done in the U.S Air Force Academy in 2002, highlighting the importance of various apology tactics in media coverage (F. Roberts, 2006). Benoit and Czerwinski critically analyze US Air's image restoration efforts after the plane crash near Pittsburgh in 1994, highlighting the use of bolstering, denial, and corrective action to address public concerns and repair corporate reputation (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997). Additional research on cultural influences in non-Western contexts further enriches the understanding of image repair. For instance, Low, Varughese, and Pang (2011) investigated how culture shapes image repair strategies in Western and Asian governments during crises, finding that Asian contexts often prioritize transcendence and bolstering to maintain collective harmony, contrasting with Western emphasis on mortification. Similarly, Wang et al. (2024) analyzed image restoration in Chinese and American COVID-19 political speeches, finding that Chinese leaders favored denial and attacking the accuser, leveraging state-controlled media, while American leaders used bolstering and corrective action, reflecting democratic accountability. Kamboh et al. (2023) analyzed Pakistan Railways' use of social media for image repair following service failures, finding that bolstering and minimization strategies increased public engagement by 25%.



The key research gap here is that, so far, no studies have examined the use of image repair strategies within Pakistan's political landscape. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the image repair strategies of Pakistan's political leader Imran Khan when questioned about the Sita White scandal.

Imran Khan found himself in crisis because of his scandal, and he used various strategies to repair his image. By analyzing the interviews and statements made by Imran Khan on various media forums, the present research aims to examine various image repair strategies employed by Imran Khan to repair his tarnished image after the Sita White Scandal applying Benoit's image repair theory. This research is aimed to extend the Image Repair Strategy (Benoit, 1995) to the political sphere in Pakistan and may help future researchers explore the effectiveness of these strategies.

Despite substantial literature on political image repair strategies in Western and select non-Western contexts, and the recent work on Pakistani institutions, there is a key research gap: no studies have specifically examined the use of image repair strategies by Pakistani political leaders. This research seeks to address that gap by analyzing the image repair strategies employed by Imran Khan in response to the Sita White scandal, utilizing Benoit's Image Repair Theory as a framework.

By critically analyzing Imran Khan's public interviews and statements, the current study aims to assess his strategic approach to image repair following the Sita White controversy. This research extends the application of Benoit's Image Repair Theory to the political sphere in Pakistan and may guide future scholars in evaluating the effectiveness of such strategies in similar sociopolitical contexts.

Methodology

This research employs qualitative discourse analysis using William Benoit's (1995) Image Restoration Strategies framework. The primary objective is to systematically code and analyze the strategies Imran Khan used in his public statements regarding the Sita White scandal. Qualitative content analysis guides the methodological approach. Coding is based on Benoit's typology, which includes five major strategies i.e., denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification each with several subcategories.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is each utterance or statement made by Imran Khan. Individual sentences or coherent ideas within longer quotations are assessed and coded, with the possibility of assigning multiple codes to a single utterance if warranted.

Time Frame

The scope of the study begins in December 1996, when the scandal became public, and traces the evolution of Imran Khan's image repair strategies over time.

Data Collection

Data consist of publicly available statements from diverse media sources:

- 20 news articles from newspapers including Nawa-e-Waqt (Urdu), The News, Dawn, The Irish Times, News of the World, The New York Times, and The Washington Post.
- 8 television clips sourced from Geo News programs such as Capital Talk (2018), Jawabdah (2007), and additional coverage from as early as 2002.



- Imran Khan's autobiography "Pakistan: A Personal History" (2011) provided one relevant quotation.

Purposive sampling guided the selection of data. Search keywords included "Imran Khan Tyrian White case" and "Imran Khan Sita White scandal." Data sources were identified through Google, specific newspaper archives (e.g., Dawn.com), and YouTube for TV clips.

Limitations

It's important to acknowledge potential limitations inherent in the chosen methodology. While qualitative research allows for in-depth exploration and interpretation of textual data, findings may be subjective and context-dependent. Additionally, the scope of the study may be constrained by factors such as access to primary sources.

Textual Analysis of Image Restoration Discourse

Extra-marital affairs are considered a taboo in conservative Islamic society like Pakistan. Imran Khan has been involved in a relationship that contravene religious and socio-cultural norms in Pakistan. When the scandal of Tyrian White surfaced in 1996, Imran Khan was a renowned cricketer and emerging political figure. Pakistan's general elections were not far, and it was crucial for him to repair his image. Despite a 1997 California court's default judgment declaring him the father after he refused a DNA test, Khan has consistently denied these claims. Since 1997, Imran Khan has employed multiple image restoration strategies when questioned about the Sita White case throughout his political career. While he eventually denied it, he later used ambiguity, along with other strategies such as bolstering, minimization, accusing the accuser, and transcendence.

Looking through the lens of William Benoit's Image restoration theory, Imran Khan first employed the strategy of *Simple Denial* to avoid association with Tyrian White and maintain a clean public image. Imran Khan said in 1997: "I have never seen Tyrian White; I don't know her". (The News, 1997, pg. 3).

He also used *denial in conjunction with differentiation*. According to the statement published in the Pakistani newspaper Nawa-e-Waqat on December 28, 1996, the politician Imran Khan said, "I don't have an illegitimate daughter'. Nawaz Sharif and Benazir should look at their rampant corruption." (Nawa-e-Waqat, 1996, pg.1). In this statement, he is not only denying the accusation of Sita White but also attacking his political opponents Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif for corruption implying that corruption is a more heinous crime and important issue than having a child out of wedlock.

Imran Khan employed the strategy of *Attacking the accuser*, a sub-category of 'Reducing the offensiveness'. Imran Khan claimed that the timing of this news indicated a conspiracy against him as the general elections of 1997 were ahead. He alleged that this scandal was a conspiracy done by his Political opponent Nawaz Sharif who had given 1 million dollars to Sita White to use her against him. He wrote in his book '*Pakistan, A Personal History*'

"They even stopped so low as to keep up calling a female friend of mine, Sita White, and publishing lurid interviews with her". (Khan, 2011, chap. 6, pg. 96)

Imran Khan used the technique of minimization implying that this act was not a big issue or central problem in conjunction with Transcendence and accusing the accuser in the following statement.



In an interview on the Geo News program Capital Talk, host Hamid Mir asked Imran Khan about the Sita White scandal, Imran Khan replied:

"The most important issue for a political leader is whether he is financially corrupt or not. Is he honest and fair? My opponents, the Sharif brothers, have no evidence against my corruption. They only accuse Shaukat Khanum or make accusations about my personal life. I have repeatedly said that do the investigation of the Shaukat Khanum case..... "There is a very easy way to solve this controversy just answer this issue in yes or no" Imran Khan responded, "This is a non-issue, why should I answer it?" (Geo News, 2018).

In the above statement, when asked about Sita White's case, he used the strategy of *transcendence* implying that other issues are more crucial to address, for example, the most important concern for a political leader is corruption. He should not be financially corrupt. By saying this he used the strategy of transcendence. In the next line, he used the strategy of *attacking the accuser* by attacking his political opponents of conspiring against him and *bolstering* that he is an honest and 'corruption-free' man. Bolstering means showing or emphasizing your positive traits or achievements to repair your tarnished image. Khan's statement implies that he is honest, truthful, and not a corrupt man and these are the main or basic qualities that are needed for good political leadership. In the above statement, he challenged his political opponents for the investigation of Shaukat Khanum but neglected the Tyrian white case completely. According to Imran Khan, the personal life of a candidate should not be a matter of concern as according to his own words 'a non-issue'.

However, according to the constitution of Pakistan, article 62, a political candidate should have good moral character otherwise he will be disqualified from membership of the national assembly. Perhaps this is the reason that because of his political career, Khan has employed different image restoration strategies to move away from the issue.

In 2018, a petition was filed against Imran Khan challenging Khan's eligibility to contest the elections, because he did not disclose that he had a daughter. The written reply filed by Mr. Khan dismissed the allegations. He stated: "All the objections are false, fabricated, and based on unverified documents". (Dawn News, 2018, pg. 1)

In the above statement, Imran Khan has again used the strategy of denial. He also used the strategy of Bolstering with minimization and transcendence in the following statement recorded while giving an interview on national television: "I am focused on serving Pakistan and will not be distracted by personal attacks or baseless allegations. " (Geo News, 2018)

Imran Khan in an interview with the Sunday Times of London in 1997, when he was responding to Sita White's accusation employed the strategy of *Differentiation* in conjunction with *bolstering and attacking the accused*. Imran Khan's statement, as reported by the Irish Times, was

"As I do not live in California or England, my response is to welcome Sita White to Pakistan, where I live. And I would more than welcome the opportunity to present my side of the story in a Pakistani court rather than conducting an undignified trial by media". (The Irish Times, 1997, p. 1)

In the above statement, Imran Khan said that he was ready to face trial. He shifted focus from personal allegation to a higher principle (fair trial by court), reinforcing his commitment to



fairness and transparency and at the same time attacking the accuser by implying that Sita White's accusations are false and are just "an undignified trial by media."

Imran Khan's statements demonstrate a range of image restoration strategies, including denial, bolstering, transcendence, attacking the accuser, minimization, and differentiation. By using these strategies, he attempted to repair and maintain his political image amidst controversies. However, the effectiveness of these strategies varies, and some statements may have caused additional damage.

Benoit (1997) also proposes the strategy of not responding. He proposes that individuals do not need to respond to the accusations and can simply ignore the issue. Imran Khan has frequently used the strategy of not responding with other strategies.

Imran Khan, in an interview with Iftikhar Ahmed on the Geo News program Jawabdah, when asked about Tyrian White stated, "Drop the Sita white case. Why leave? Because I don't talk about it" (Geo News, 2007) (Roothmens TV, 2017). In another interview to the Geo news, he stated: "The Tyrian White case is a closed chapter. I have moved on, and I will not comment further on it." (Geo News, 2002) In these two statements, he is using the strategy of not responding to move away from the offensive act.

Strategy	Stage	Effectiveness	Audience Reaction/Evidence
Denial	Early	Short-term, avoided immediate fallout	Local press, continued resurfacing
Attacking Accuser	Early/Mid	Sowed doubt, but framed as politicized smear	Politicized discourse, rival response
Minimization	Mid/Late	Downplayed issue, not resolved overall	Non-issue refrains, but case survived
Bolstering	Late	Helped shift narrative to anti-corruption	Support among base, lingering doubts
Transcendence	Late	Partial narrative reframing	Popular with core PTI base, not all
Non-response	Mid/Late	Reduced media cycle emphasis but not closure	Little change in cycle, persistent query

To analyze how Imran Khan's image repair strategies regarding the Sita White scandal evolved over time, it is essential to contextualize his responses within the political challenges he faced during each era. These challenges shaped his strategies, as he navigated controversies while building and sustaining his political career.

Early Stage (1997–2000): Denial and Attacking the Accuser:

Imran Khan entered politics in 1996 by founding the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). However, the Sita White scandal surfaced just before elections of 1997, threatening his moral credibility and emerging political career. This scandal was weaponized by his political opponents Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto to question his moral character, which was particularly damaging in conservative society like Pakistan. At this stage Imran Khan used strategies of simple denial, denial in conjunction with differentiation and attacking the accuser.

By employing Simple Denial, Khan outrightly denied any association with Tyrian White. He used denial in conjunction with differentiation by rejecting the allegations while attacking his opponents Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto and calling them corrupt (Nawa-e-Waqat, 1996). He alleged that Nawaz Sharif had paid Sita White to fabricate the accusations, framing the scandal as a politically motivated conspiracy.

Middle Stage (2000–2010): Minimization and Not responding:

During this period, Khan struggled to expand PTI's influence in a polarized political environment dominated by (PML-Q) and Pervez Musharraf's military regime. The early 2000s saw him leveraging anti-corruption rhetoric to appeal to Pakistan's middle class. Contrary to straight forward denial in early years, Imran Khan used the techniques of Non-response, minimization and attacking the accuser. Khan began avoiding direct engagement with questions about Sita White. For instance, he avoided giving answers about the Sita White scandal in interviews: "Drop Sita White case. Why leave? Because I don't talk about it" (Geo News, 2007). Khan began downplaying the significance of the scandal, referring to it as a "non-issue" and asserting that personal matters should not overshadow political issues. He used strategies such as avoidance, and not responding in the middle years as these were the beginning years of his political career.

Later Stage (2010–2018): Minimization and Refocusing

By this time, Khan had emerged as a prominent opposition leader. His anti-corruption campaign gained momentum after revelations like the Panama Papers implicated Nawaz Sharif. The PTI became a major political force during the 2013 elections and eventually won a plurality in 2018, enabling Khan to form a coalition government. However, controversies like Sita White resurfaced as opponents sought to discredit his moral standing under Article 62 of Pakistan's Constitution (requiring candidates to be of "good moral character"). In the later stage, he used the strategies of transcendence, minimization and bolstering rather than straightforward denial. By using transcendence, he shifted focus to broader issues like corruption and governance and downplayed the significance of scandal. For example, when asked about Sita White on Geo News' *Capital Talk*, he emphasized that the most important issue for a political leader is whether he is financially corrupt or not (Geo News, 2018). He relied heavily on bolstering by showing himself as a savior figure and dedicated leader serving the people of Pakistan and committed to fighting corruption.

In the early years (1997–2000), Khan relied heavily on outright denial and deflection due to immediate electoral pressures. Over time (2000–2018), he shifted toward avoidance strategies such as non-response and minimization. In the later stage he used the strategy of bolstering and transcendence. Imran Khan has used various image repair strategies in responding to questions of interviews regarding the Sita White scandal such as denial, bolstering, transcendence, differentiation and not responding. These strategies were useful for the time being but not effective in the long run as the case has continued till 2024.

Conclusion

Imran Khan used image repair strategies in his statements when asked about Sita White's accusations about Tyrian White. By coding the sample with Benoit's image repair theory, a few main strategies appeared. These were: denial (Simple denial), reducing offensiveness (attacking the accuser, bolstering, differentiation, minimization, and



transcendence), and not responding. Based on research results it appears that Imran Khan's most frequently used strategies were denial and attacking the accuser, usually by directly responding to them. His attacks were mostly about alleging his political opponents of doing conspiracy against him by attacking his personal life, corruption, hypocrisy, and lack of consideration for the national interest and caring only about their personal interest. There were no corrective actions or mortification strategies applied.

Imran Khan's image repair strategies regarding the Sita White scandal evolved alongside his political career from reactive denial during his early years to proactive avoidance and minimization to transcendence and bolstering in the later years. These shifts reflect both his growing political maturity and his ability to adapt strategies based on prevailing challenges. By leveraging broader narratives like anti-corruption and governance reform, he successfully mitigated potential damage from personal controversies while consolidating public support over time.

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