

Living the Dream- A Rhetorical Analysis into the Morgan Wallen Racial Slur Scandal through  
William Benoit's Image Reconstruction Theory

By

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**Approvals**

This Master's Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from  
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### **Abstract**

Public figures often find themselves in controversies that result in a damaged image. In the field of communication image repair is conducted as a form of crisis communication. William Benoit's image repair theory views image repair through specific strategies which are mortification, corrective action, denial, evasion of responsibility, and reducing offensiveness. Benoit's image repair strategies can be found through country music star Morgan Wallen's rhetoric in his attempts at image repair through the four artifacts. Results of the rhetorical analysis of the artifacts show that image repair strategies work better for certain situations. Benoit's image theory is supported by Wallen's current image results.

*Keywords:* image repair theory, Morgan Wallen, Benoit, mortification, corrective action

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

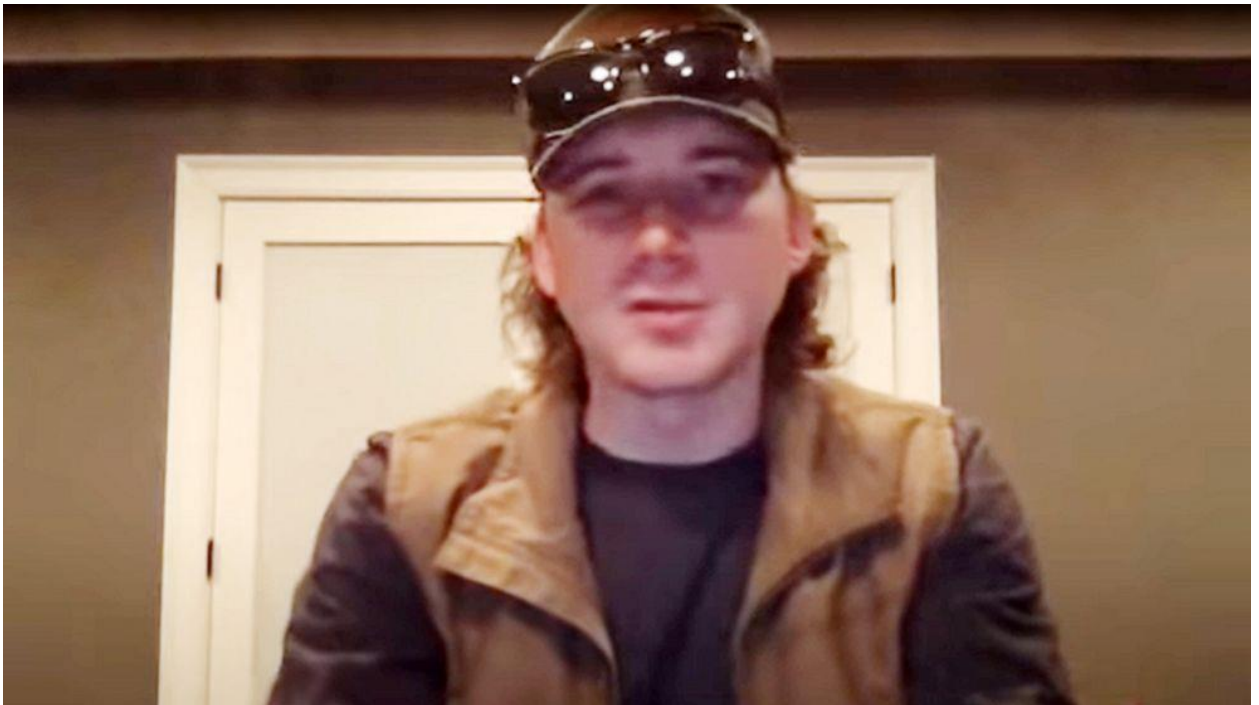
This proposal describes a proposed rhetorical analysis research study of the image repair of Morgan Wallen by applying William Benoit's image repair theory, after a video saying the n-word on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021, outside his home in Nashville, Tennessee. The study will judge whether it worked or not, based on Wallen current image at the end of the study. The purpose of this study is to analyze how someone held in high regard in the music industry can repair their damaged image by looking through Benoit's image reconstruction theory by evading responsibility, denial, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Using these steps to analyze the video statements and songs will show a difference in each step of the image reconstruction is going on. Wallen's public image repair can be analyzed using William Benoit's image repair theory as a framework, testing the theory on its effectiveness for image repair.

A limitation placed on this study is that it focuses on one person, as conducting a study on the entire industry would be too broad of a focus. The racial tensions that were present in the United States during 2020 would show a different reaction than in other years due to public unrest from the police-related deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Another limitation of this study is that it is a recent event; therefore, there is not a lot of research on the topic. This focus will require research about how Benoit's theory has been applied in other situations, particularly in the music industry. The findings of this analysis can be used for other artists in the industry. Finding articles about Benoit's theory being applied in other situations is the best method of study as they can be applied when analyzing Wallen's scandal. Another limitation to this study is that Wallen is not known personally, having this limitation helps keep any bias under control which would allow the research to be conducted properly.

## Background of the Study

### *Recent Event*

Shortly after crushing new sales records on the Billboard Hot 100 charts with the anticipated *Dangerous- The Double Album*, country music singer Wallen received backlash after a video leaked by TMZ of him while intoxicated addressing one of his friends with a racial slur.



Wallen's apology video (Stone & Fitzpatrick, 2021)

Before Wallen made his initial video statement on Instagram, Wallen released a statement shortly after the TMZ video was released.

I'm embarrassed and sorry. I Used an unacceptable and inappropriate racial slur that I wish I could take back. There are no excuses to use this type of language, ever. I want to sincerely apologize for using the word. I promise to do better (Jacobs & Coscarelli, 2021)

After the video leaked the immediate consequences involved Wallen being suspended indefinitely from his record label Big Machine Label Group, commercial singles being dropped from commercial radio airplay, tour cancellations, disqualification from awards, and an overall scolding from the industry. As recent as September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021 the Country Music Association banned Wallen from attending the 2021 CMA Awards with his most recent album being nominated for album of the year (Newman, 2021). Wallen's words led to a reckoning within the country music community with its roots of racial tension dating back to its birth in the south. For example, acts such as Lady Antebellum changed their name to Lady A due to the word 'Antebellum' and its relation to the Confederacy. Twitter conversations within the community showed a clear divide between the roots of the business and the more progressive side that dominates country radio today. Contrary to the consequences from the leaked video, Wallen's streams broke records recently set by himself and held the top 30 spots on the Apple Music all genre charts, due to fan support. This showed an anomaly of a public relations nightmare, but the fanbase showed up in droves of support.

This event also happened in a year of high racial tension after protests and uproar occurred because of the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor due to use of deadly force by local police. Wallen's physical image of a mullet hairstyle, cut-off flannel with boots quickly became the image of racism in the music industry. After the video when viral, Wallen posted a video on Instagram admitting to his mistakes and asking people not to defend him. Throughout the year he posted sporadically on social media and eventually sat down for an interview on Good Morning America to speak about the incident. Before the racial slur incident, Wallen came under fire for multiple incidents such as public intoxication and over videos leaked of him attending a college party at the University of Alabama in the middle of the Coronavirus

pandemic which led to the cancellation of his Saturday Night Live debut. These incidents reinforced a pattern of other country music celebrities showing inappropriate conduct involving alcohol abuse.

### ***Roots of the Confederacy in Country Music***

As mentioned earlier, the country music industry has had relations with racial bias since its existence. Evidence of this can be seen by the ratio of African American versus Caucasian artists played on country radio, a party due to the fact that Caucasian artists make up most country artists. Ever since the resurgence of these roots due to the Wallen scandal, the relevance of African American artists skyrocketed. African American veterans such as Charlie Pride, Jimmie Allen, Darius Rucker, and Mickey Guyton were joined by newcomers like Breland, and Tiera. Twitter mentions regarding country music's racially bias roots boomed with mentions of openly prejudiced artists like David Allan Coe, who is known for his use of the "n-word" and other racial slurs. Country radio must walk a fine line between playing what their listeners want to hear, while also making sure to be inclusive to everyone.

The area of the United States known as "The South" was not born as a distinct community until South Carolina succeeded from the union, thus creating the Confederate States of America. With country music having its roots from the south, it has connotations with the confederacy and words such as 'dixie' or 'Redneck'. In the days of the confederacy, tunes such as "Dixie" were sung as patriotic songs for confederate soldiers and citizens (Coleman, 2020). Any words or symbols that had anything to do with the confederacy were attacked and some phased out. Many famous songs in the genre include "Dixieland Delight", "Bury Me in Dixie", and even in Wallen's "Rednecks, Red Letters, Red Dirt" which all have this connotation that can be traced back to confederate roots. Some listeners still cling to "dixie" or "southern culture"

while country music has expanded across the globe, which shows that the industry has had to tread this line carefully over the past years. This sparked a debate of why the ‘n’ word should be acceptable in any kind of music, as it is used frequently in genres like Hip-Hop and R&B.

### ***Personal Interest and Experience***

Prior experience working in the entertainment industry drives interest in this topic. Because of the roles the scholar has served in, he views this study as an opportunity as critic to provide analysis beneficial to answering the research. While interning with event promotion company Premier Productions, he assisted in helping with the marketing teams when regarding tours and events. While working in conjunction with popular acts like for KING & COUNTRY and Skillet, he had to make sure that any social media posts or promotions put their public images in high regard. The writer’s eventual goal to work in either public relations, marketing or artist relations is a factor of how the analysis of the artifacts will be conducted.

Singletary is currently a member of the Nashville Songwriters Association and Broadcast Music Incorporated so his insight in the music industry is a factor of how the analysis is viewed. Being an insider, he can apply Benoit’s image reconstruction theory as someone would do while trying to clean up a public relations nightmare. The scholar works as a songwriter, which requires detail in crafting songs that not only tell stories but give messages revolving around the humanity within people which does include one’s image. This drives him to not only analyze the songs by Wallen, but to analyze Wallen’s personal convictions, experience, and motivations behind his songs. The scholar believes that the best songs come from real people, with real problems as that is one of the best ways to relate and connect with others. Wallen’s songs “Don’t Think Jesus” and “Thought You Should Know” are forms of expression and serve as an extension of himself. Country music is a genre that is known for telling stories and its

authenticity. The authenticity within Wallen's songs can be analyzed for image repair strategies using William Benoit's image repair theory.

While working with artists behind the scenes, the author has seen that celebrities are just normal people that have jobs that serve many people. They make mistakes just like anyone else does but for the sole reason of making money; crises are often ignored. Benoit's theory can be used to determine how to repair one's image which likely resulted as an outcome of the event. Singletary's personal interest and motivation for researching this scandal is that he plans on working in public relations or in artist relations in the music industry in Nashville, Tennessee. Scandals involving artists happen occasionally like Janet Jackson, Britney Spears, Justin Bieber, Sam Hunt, and many others. Handling events like this is the job of the public relations or artist relations departments. The author's work from being involved with the Nashville Songwriters Association has sparked his interest in how images like Wallen's are being handled. For example, Wallen's performance of Jason Isbell's "Cover Me Up" caused controversy with Isbell after the incident, which led to proceeds from the single being donated to the Nashville NAACP (Bernstein, 2021). Consequences going as far as individual song rights could be something that suggests a relationship between the severity of the scandal and the level of consequences.

### **The Problem Statement**

The research problem for this study is, how does Wallen go about repairing his image after saying a racial slur that damaged his career? The results of this study can then be applied to other celebrities, politicians and other people that live in the spotlight. With a frequent pattern of musicians finding themselves wrapped up in controversy, this will show a clear path to handle one's image reconstruction from a public relations aspect or from the individual aspect. The use

of William Benoit's image reconstruction theory on the Wallen racial slur scandal will show how his image has been repaired and what steps have been taken to do so.

### **General Purpose**

The general purpose of this study is to analyze Wallen's statement videos by applying the image reconstruction theory. After analyzing the scandal using Benoit's five phases of image reconstruction, a plan for other artists and individuals can be developed. With a pattern of artists and other people in the spotlight being involved in scandals frequently, applying this theory to one person can in turn work for others as well. The purpose of the research will be to analyze and to develop a plan for how one can repair their image using or improving on Benoit's model.

### **Professional Significance**

The proposed study is worth doing because it studies how a communication approach can be used to effectively clean up problems and messes brought by companies, artists in the music industry, which justifies the need for a public relations department. This study also tests William Benoit's Image Reconstruction Theory, to see how it has been applied within Wallen's videos, and some of his most recent singles since the incident. This brings a new application of communication to the field, which could result in growth in the field.

The field of communication has aspects from public relations and marketing in different fields like business, government, and entertainment. This study adds knowledge of Benoit's application to the field. When figuring out how to clean up a public relations nightmare, this research will be able to be used as evidence to back up methods used to clean up one's image. Studying Wallen's scandal further tests the theory because of his major successes and milestones recently reached; one of the biggest images requires the most reconstruction. This study also

tests image reconstruction theory by seeing if the success of the image repair depends on the size of the image and how severely the image was damaged.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In the world of public relations, image repair is just any day on the job. Fields such as entertainment, politics, and business help keep public relations representatives employed as there are images that need repairing time after time. An image is what is seen by the public, therefore can determine one's success. Wallen at a high spot in his career, had a long way to fall after footage of him saying the "n" word was leaked to the public. In this literature review, the research will show how other important figures handled their images through William Benoit's image repair theory.

### **Case Studies**

There have been rhetorical analyses applying Benoit's theory conducted on people held in high regard such as Presidents John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton, and Donald J. Trump. Benoit discusses Benoit's image repair theory by applying it to President Obama's attempts at repairing his image and Reverend Jerimiah Wright, President Obama's pastor. The former President was attacked during the 2008 Presidential campaign over Reverend Wright's harsh comments on United States foreign policy (Benoit, 2016). Benoit discusses how President Obama used denial and differentiation to repair his image while using attack accuser, bolstering, and differentiation to repair Wright's image. The scandal also stirred up worries over Obama's presidential campaign with the possibility of the United States electing the first African American president in history. President Obama's image had to be repaired again due to backlash from the flawed launch of Healthcare.gov and other broken promises made throughout the healthcare debate (Benoit, 2014). Apologizing for one's words is the same as what Wallen had to do for his image. Once Benoit's method of reconstruction is understood, it can explain how an image can be repaired.

Image repair can be seen frequently in politicians like former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her handling of the private email scandal (Smith, 2017). This scandal took place during her time in the Obama administration as Secretary of State when the invasion of the Benghazi embassy in Libya took place. Smith focuses on Secretary Clinton's use of minimization and attack accuser to repair her image. This scandal is relevant to the research because the methods used in this scandal can be applied to other scandals. Smith shows how image repair can fail and could show which image repair methods work best for certain situations. Understanding how certain methods work for different situations can help determine what methods are best for the situation.

Using denial can work as a defensive approach to image repair instead of actively repairing one's image. Secretary Clinton used simple denial to paint her use of a private email server as not harmful (Smith, 2017). This method backfired for Clinton because if someone uses denial in this manner, it can paint that person as being negligent or arrogant. If one uses this form of denial, this could result in him or her being viewed as insensitive and irresponsible. When conducting image repair, it is crucial to make sure that the methods used fit the current situation and image. Secretary Clinton's use of minimization brought forth issues throughout the investigation as her statements would be contradicted later by facts regarding her use of a private email server. This created Clinton's tarnished image as she was viewed as dishonest, arrogant, and reckless, which is often similar to other political figures. The first half of mortification for Secretary Clinton took place when she first accepted responsibility for her use of a private email server, and then expressed regret. Benoit's theory requires both accepting responsibility and regret for true mortification to take place, before one can ask for forgiveness.

Image repair usually is a lengthy process that requires planning each image repair method carefully. Compton (2016) discusses what steps are required before image repair can take place which are perceived responsibility for the act and perceived offensiveness of the act. An example of using corrective action and mortification is how BP attempted to repair their image after the Oil Spill scandal which occurred in the Gulf of Mexico. BP's statement of apology was first mortification as they admitted wrongdoing, and their plans for fixing the issue is their attempt of corrective action. Utilizing different methods of image repair can lead towards a restored image with the methods working together.

Image repair theory is something used in public relations offices worldwide. The theory separates image repair theory into five different categories and then into twelve message strategies which are simple denial, shifting blame, accident, defeasibility, good intentions, provocation, bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack, and compensation (Ferguson et al., 2018). The key to using these messaging strategies effectively is to know what strategy to use with what micro strategy which is also determined by the certain situation. Understanding what strategies work best, can lead to the most effective course of action to repair one's image. Ferguson argues that corrective action is one of the most effective strategies because it shows the public what actions have been taken and will be taken to make sure the incident does not happen again. Giving this reassurance to the public can help solidify any image repair that is being done.

Minimization is another method of image repair when putting together a crisis plan. The scholars discuss how companies use minimization to make their actions or consequences look not as bad as they really are. This can backfire on a company if the public believes that they are trying to trivialize a serious problem.

Every person or organization requires different methods or amounts of image repair. The size of the person's recognition could determine how much image repair is needed. After the outcomes of the 1948 and recent 2016 Presidential elections, the media and polling companies had to work towards image repair after predicting the wrong outcome (Myers & Russell, 2019). Sometimes, the reason for image repair does not have to be because of an offensive act, but it could be simply to repair one's credibility. The news media attacked polling organizations to help repair their image as they felt as though they were unreliable, which brought on the idea of "Fake News". Being deemed as fake news can lead to low ratings thus less money, just as Wallen being viewed as racist or irresponsible can lead to him, songwriters, producers, managers, and everyone else involved losing money.

Because the Earth is not a perfect world, some form of image repair is always taking place. While not every image is broken, some images need to be maintained to keep one's reputation intact. Benoit argues that "a core function of communication is achieving goals to maintain reputation". Maintaining credibility is important in any field as one's reputation is stuck with him or her forever, and it is difficult to salvage once it is damaged. A professional must keep their image in a positive light within the eyes of the public, however, the amount of image repair needed depends on the damage inflicted on the image in need of repair.

A part of image repair theory is an apology, which is often what starts the image repair process. Image repair strategies denial and bolstering are known to not attempt to change the offensive act committed but are more for focusing on the good qualities of the individual, while differentiation and transcendence are meant to change the audience's perspective (Arendt et al., 2017). Some offensive acts can be small enough that using denial or bolstering can take care of the situation and repair the image quickly. These strategies are good for creating distance

between one's image and the offensive act. According to the scholars, public relations experts recommend that when conducting image repair, it is best to shift the blame away as quickly as possible to reduce harm.

When one's image is in jeopardy, other people or organizations involved may retaliate by removing oneself, taking legal action, rehabilitation, etc. Benoit's image repair theory can be used to analyze Baylor University's report of multiple accounts of inaction and mishandling of Title IX cases. Baylor's title IX crisis caused donors to question if the university was able to follow its own mission, which is "*to provide an environment that fosters spiritual maturity, strength of character, and moral virtue*" (Riggs, 2019, p.34). With shareholders having questions such as these, Baylor University is limited to what methods of image repair can be used. Using mortification would be the best option because it is expressing regret and then accepting responsibility. Baylor engages in reducing offensiveness by firing the administrative people who were responsible for the negligence and replacing the positions.

Race can be a touchy subject and is an extremely relevant part of the political climate currently in the United States. Martin and Van Stee discuss the image repair strategies used by the University of Missouri- Columbia after multiple racially charged incidents that occurred during the 2015-2016 academic year (Martin & Van Stee, 2020). The crisis at the University of Missouri could be linked to the protests that occurred in Ferguson, Missouri involving accusations of police brutality. The university president and chancellor both engaged in image repair on behalf of the university. Image repair involving race can be a challenge because of the sensitivity of the subject. For example, using simple denial can result in the public viewing someone as negligent or, in the case of race, racist.

The media and politics go together when it comes to having to conduct image repair. Rush Limbaugh was one of the most influential voices in conservative politics and in the radio business. McGuire discusses how Limbaugh used Benoit's image repair theory after backlash from critics over comments made about college student Sandra Fluke. At the beginning of Limbaugh's statement he used the methods of evading responsibility by claiming he had good intentions, and mortification (McGuire, 2012). The body of his statement aimed to reduce offensiveness, using methods such as minimization and transcendence. Limbaugh using multiple methods of image repair serves as an example of how the methods of Benoit work together. While some have a hard time with forgiveness, some see growth in one's image as a sign of progress.

Every presidential election can be viewed as "which person does image repair better" which is what both candidates conducted in the 2004 Presidential Election. Benoit talks about President George W. Bush's image repair after weapons of mass destruction were not found, after the United States invaded Iraq to take down Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein (Benoit, 2006). President Bush uses transcendence to frame himself as a "war president" to repair his image towards the public eye. With this method not being successful, he mainly relied on defeasibility. Understanding what methods of image repair work best for certain situations is crucial for image repair to be successful.

When someone or an organization promises something, and then backtracks on that promise, that public image would take a hit. William Benoit analyses President Obama's attempts at image repair on the disastrous launch of HealthCare.gov and on his promise that anyone can keep their doctor if they so choose (Benoit, 2014). Obama's image repair mainly consisted of minimization, mortification, and corrective action. Even with Obama's attempts at image repair,

his approval rating slipped to a low of 42 percent. This shows evidence that image repair is not always successful. A damaged image usually leads to broken trust, which is something that easily broken, but hard to build back up. Minimization can be a risky strategy as it can be interpreted as ignorance or carelessness. This instance can show as evidence that certain image repair strategies work best or backfire in certain situations.

Politicians are always keeping their images in check by using methods of image repair. Sheldon and Sallot analyze former Mississippi Senator Trent Lott's image repair after making racial remarks at former South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party, referring to Thurmond's 1948 Dixiecrat presidential campaign (Sheldon & Sallot, 2009). William Benoit (2009) notes that image repair for politicians works much different than it does for celebrities, as taking responsibility of mistakes can be detrimental for politicians. This shows that celebrities can have more leeway when it comes to image repair, as while they too do have a public image to maintain, a politician relies solely on his or her voting record for their image repair.

Anti-Semitism is still present all over the world, and most political parties work to deny any within their parties. Heppell (2021) analyzes the British Labour party's attempts to repair their image with relation to anti-Semitism while under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. The accusations for anti-Semitism against the British Labour party were framed in offensiveness and responsibility. The scholar discusses how Corbyn conducted image repair using denial, evading responsibility, and reducing offensiveness, and then ended with corrective action and accepting responsibility. Image repair strategies work better than others for certain situations, as the British Labour Party saw more success with corrective action and accepting responsibility, while denial, evading responsibility, and reducing offensiveness was not as successful.

Image repair can be used for marketing purposes as well, particularly using certain methods. Meltzer analyzes how tobacco companies can use Benoit's image repair theory to move attention away from tobacco-related issues and instead to the philanthropic deeds of the company (Meltzer, 2001). Advertising relies heavily on a company's public image, thus using image repair can help. Phillip Morris uses transcendence, corrective action, and bolstering to deter attention away from the negative uses of tobacco. Sometimes, image repair can act as an image is being built, as some images start in a negative light due to no fault of their own, because of the negative opinions of the image from society.

### *Roots of Country Music*

Country music's roots in southern culture can be traced back to when the Confederate States of America was in existence. Coleman discusses the Confederate States of America and how the culture is still ingrained within the south, mainly the states that were formerly part of the Confederacy. It shows how deep the culture is ingrained in southern states such as Tennessee or South Carolina (Coleman, 2020). The scholar notes how the confederate music used words like “dixie” and other words within the confederate culture. Country music has been thought to partially produce “American Whiteness” with its historical links to the southern United States (Mann, 2008). Country music today still has a relationship with the south and is primarily dominated by white artists, while there is still plentiful representation from the African American community with newcomer Jimmie Allen winning new artist of the year at the 2021 Country Music Awards.

Words such as “dixie” are closely related with the confederacy and the south, which in turn are ingrained in the roots of country music (Coleman, 2020). With country music's use of words like “dixie” or “redneck” Black Lives Matter protests all over the country caused a



reckoning within the industry towards any language regarding its southern or confederate roots. This went further than just individual song lyrics or communication but caused some country music groups to change their names. For example, the country trio formerly known as the “Dixie Chicks” changed their name to “The Chicks” as a response to the Black Lives Matter protests that took place in 2020 (Sisario, 2020). This also brought up debate on if country music was at its core racist. Scholars like Mann try to defend the genre by noting successful African American artists like Charlie Pride and DeFord Bailey (Mann, 2008). Wallen’s songs like “Rednecks, Red Letters, Red Dirt”, “Still Goin’ Down”, and “Something Country” explicitly appeal to southern culture and therefore derive inspiration from the roots of country music.

Country music has long had its relations with cultures ingrained in the south, particularly conservatism. In the 1970’s country artist Merle Haggard released a song called “Okie from Muskogee,” which was transformed as an anthem for conservatives (Feder, 2006). While this song was not written with race in mind, the song gave Haggard the connotation of being a “racist cracker spewing out Johnny Reb songs for the segs.” This was the beginning of how country music has been politicized since the 1970’s and still is today. A negative representation of the genre’s roots is former Alabama Governor George Wallace, who was a known segregationist and had such a love for the genre that he became the first Presidential candidate to play country music while on the campaign trail. The genre, no matter how hard it can try to hide its roots, its roots are engrained in the south, therefore, have some inevitable racial tension.

### *Image Repair in Entertainment*

Musicians cleaning up their image is not anything new and is not tied to the same issues. California punk rock band NOFX found themselves under scrutiny after their insensitive comments on the mass shooting that occurred at the Route 91 Harvest Country Music Festival in

Paradise, Nevada, which is near Las Vegas where they were scheduled to play a show (Kristiansen, 2020). The scandal resulted in the band being dropped from numerous sponsorships and backlash from fans and critics on social media. Kristiansen analyses NOFX's statement using Benoit's Image Repair Theory by showing how they go through Benoit's steps of reducing offensiveness, mortification, and evading responsibility. Reducing offensiveness after comments, such as the ones made by NOFX, can involve bolstering one's true character. In NOFX's apology statement, Kristiansen notes that the audience is invited to remember the true character of the band members. Bolstering one's character can work as a method for any step of image repair. When a musical act like NOFX receives backlash from its fans and shareholders, if image repair is not conducted properly, the fans and shareholders will answer by not spending money to buy albums, merchandise, or concert tickets.

Image repair theory is used not only in the music industry, politics, or corporate America, but it is also used by filmmakers. Filmmakers and screenwriters have used image repair methods like mortification to take responsibility for bad films (Stein et al., 2021). For example, film director Steven Spielberg apologized and took responsibility for a controversial scene in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. "What people really jumped at was Indy climbing into a refrigerator and getting blown into the sky by an atom-bomb blast. Blame me. Don't blame George [Lucas]. That was my silly idea" (Stein et al., 2021, p. 20). Bad films can cost a director, producer, or screenwriter their career; therefore, image repair is needed to keep one's reputation intact to stay in the business. In any industry where relationships and credibility are important, having a solid image is crucial for success.

Actors have huge images to maintain as their images can make or break a film. The larger an actor's image is, the higher the amount they are paid for movies. Actor Christian Bale while

on set for *Terminator Salvation*, became annoyed at the director of photography, stopped the scene, and yelled out angry profanity at the director (Johnson, 2011). Johnson shows how Bale uses reducing offensiveness and works towards mortification. Emotions such as anger can cause people to act recklessly with their words and actions. Emphasizing good intentions can help a company change the public's perception (Ferguson et al., 2018). Bale could have used this method to explain why he got mad at the director. Relationships in the professional world matter, as no one wants to work with someone with a negative image.

In the world of reality television, actors, at times, have a whole different reality than what is seen on screen. Moody uses Benoit's image repair theory to analyze reality television stars Jon and Kate Gosselin and their highly publicized divorce (Moody, 2011). According to Moody, the way the media framed Gosselin's divorce influenced the public's view of the divorce. This likely made conducting image repair difficult, as attempting to paint one image while the media creates another one can be counterproductive. If the media coverage is positive, then that, combined with image repair, could create a successful strategy.

### ***Crisis Communication***

Crisis communication has been used to handle crises no matter the severity and public reception. Using crisis communication to communicate effectively can create order out of chaos (Fuller, et al., 2022). Chaos theory is young in the world of crisis communication but can often be used as a framework to handle events that bring unexpected uncertainty. Having as much control of one's environment as possible, helps one have the least amount of uncertainty. Crisis communication works to control an unexpected situation where their possible outcomes of uncertainty. According to Ulmer et al. p. 5 (2018) crises are separated from bad circumstances with three criteria which are that it comes as a surprise, poses a serious threat, and requires a

short response time. For an event to be viewed as a true crisis, it must have all three of these characteristics. The severity of a crisis is determined by the three characteristics. In an organizational crisis, the reputation or image to the organization is at stake with some crises being threatening enough to destroy an organization permanently. In crisis communication, the goal of a proper crisis strategy is important to keeping control of the situation, as one of the characteristics being uncertainty makes a crisis more difficult to control or predict.

According to Coombs (2018) situational crisis communication theory separates crises into different types of crises and with different crisis response strategies. Certain strategies under situational crisis communication theory working better for certain situations is the same idea as other theories such as image repair, corporate apologia, or renewal of discourse. The strategies under situational crisis communication theory are instructing information and adjusting information. Instructing information helps stakeholders deal with a crisis physically by showing them how to protect themselves from a threat. Adjusting information helps them deal with a threat psychologically such as through expressions of concern or sympathy.

According to Pang et al. (2022, p.219), when a crisis occurs, silence to it is not an option as it presents an organization with an “rhetorical exigency” to control the situation, decreasing uncertainty. Pang et al analyzes the power and risks that come from silence, when it is necessary, and what the effects are after breaking silence. When responding to a crisis using silence, it is important to exercise “strategic silence” which is intentional, communicative, and involves some levels of indirectness. Pang et al. explains that when strategic silence is broken it is either planned, to allow time for a proper response to a crisis, or forced, when a crisis escalades forcing an organization to break its silence or change position. Broken silence that has been forced could be the result of a change in circumstances and how the crisis appears to the public. The broken

silence could bring on by reporting from journalists that control how the crisis is presented to the public, according to media framing theory (Ulmer et al., 2018). A breaking story dropping from a journalist exposing a crisis involving the company could be the cause of a company having a forced break in strategic silence.

There are different types of crises in organizational crises communication, with two main separating categories of intentional and unintentional (Ulmer et al., 2018, p.8-10). Within both categories the point of crisis communication is to take control over the crisis and reduce any uncertainty that comes because of the crisis. According to Öhman et al. (2016) crisis communication is usually practiced and studied in an organizational context, focusing on how businesses protect themselves from injury, protecting their image and reputation. In organizational communication, the image that is needing to be protected involves the reputation and good will of the company. An individual's image is similar as it involves their reputation, good will, and public opinion.

When a crisis occurs an individual or organization's reputation is at stake. According to Coombs (2013) crisis management says that reputational damage is a by-product of a crisis, however, protecting people from the hazards of the crisis should be viewed as the priority. Managing the uncertainty of a crisis allows a company to protect people, while repairing their reputation by taking control of the crisis, decreasing uncertainty. Managing a crisis gives the organization control of the crisis through communication. According to Coombs, a crisis is managed through managing information and managing meaning. The managing of meaning and information could come from how the media covers the crisis as both agenda setting and media framing control how people view the crisis depending on if it is covered (ONWUMECHILI, 2018). Gaining control of a crisis is what a crisis manager wants to do in order to protect the

company or individual's reputation and the public. Crisis response strategies strive do more than just the repair the damage done from the crisis, but to come out of the crisis better than before.

Ulmer et al. (2018, p.94) conducted a study on General Motors and their crisis of having to recall ignition switches on almost 30 million cars worldwide after the switches were involved with 124 deaths. When General Motors CEO Mary Barra learned the details of the faulty switches, General Motors recalled the effected models. Renewal of discourse could be applied to General Motor's response because CEO Barra used the crisis as an opportunity to learn from their mistakes, demonstrate their commitment to safety, and evaluate company policies. Barra said "Something went wrong with our process in this instance, and terrible things happened. We will be better because of this tragic situation if we seize the opportunity" (Ulmer et al., 2018, p. 95). The renewal of discourse of a company gives them the ability to make the best out their mistakes by using them as a teaching moment to do better, while reducing uncertainty in the process.

According to Ulmer et al. (2018, p.24), an image refers to "how the organization is perceived by its stakeholders and publics." Benoit's image repair theory focuses on repairing the threat to the image, accounting for actions that caused the crisis, and communicates strategies to manage the crisis. This theory is like corporate apologia as it is often called the speech self-defense (2018, p. 22). Corporate apologia is different from image repair theory because it is more of a counter argument to accusations than it is an apology. The strategies with corporate apologia share denial with image repair theory, however, differ with counterattack, differentiation, legal, and apology.

Discourse of renewal theory refers to is used to see how an organization takes advantage of a crisis by using it as an opportunity for learning growth (Ulmer et al., 2018, p.25). This

theory when applied uses a crisis to create a new image, instead of trying to repair or defend it like image repair theory or corporate apologia would. Smith (2018) applies discourse of renewal to how former New Hampshire senator Kelly Ayotte's discourse changed after the *Access Hollywood* scandal involving Donald Trump during the 2016 election cycle. Smith argued that renewal of discourse in politics is "focused on forging a successful future while mitigating the damage from past transgressions" (Smith, 2018, p.125). In the study conducted by Smith it was found that Ayotte's renewal discourse began when she withdrew her support for Donald Trump as the Republican nominee for the presidency. "

I wanted to be able to support my party's nominee, chosen by the people, because I feel strongly that we need a change in direction for our country. However, I'm a mom and an American first, and I cannot and will not support a candidate for President who brags about degrading and assaulting women." (Smith, 2018, p. 125)

Ayotte Multiple theories can be applied to a crisis as in the study conducted by Smith, multiple different theories were utilized to analyze Senator Ayotte's handling of a crisis. Theories in crisis communication are used as tools to keep control of outcome of the crisis, reducing uncertainty. While Senator Ayotte was not in a crisis from her own doing, she was still affected by someone else's actions therefore had to find a way to set herself apart from a complicated situation affecting the public perception of her in the senate race. In Ayotte's case, a theory like discourse of renewal is more beneficial as she was able to have more control of the uncertainty surrounding her candidacy as a republican and just as other republicans running in that election cycle.

### **Media and Crisis Communication**

The media's role in crisis communication is important because they help control what the public thinks. Media framing theory is how reporters control how the crisis may look to the

public by how a crisis is framed positively or negatively through reporting (Ulmer et al., 2018, p.18-19). Other theories that explain the media's role in crisis communication are news diffusion, exemplification, and focusing events. All these theories can either paint a crisis in positive or negative light. In a negative light, the coverage of the crisis would be covered as not improving, while in a positive light it would be seen as the crisis being resolved.

Because crises create public interest, the media spreads the information of the crisis. Crisis news diffusion theory determines how people find out about crises, therefore have some control of what crises are known about by the public. Media outlets have some control over what crises people care about because it determines what crises are the most important to report on, therefore determine what crises the public know and care about. The media having control of the diffusion of the crisis can decide what the public know and do not know about the crisis.

Media framing theory is often confused with agenda setting theory; however, they work together in crisis communication. According to ONWUMECHILI (2018, p.4450) agenda setting theory focuses on creating awareness of issues, while media framing focuses on how those issues are being presented to the public. This shows that the media can have a grip on an individual or organization's image, as they can control what they believe is important, and how it looks to the public. Coverage of a crisis can sway the public's perception of a crisis, creating a set reality of what they want to the crisis to be viewed as. Companies can take advantage of this as well as it allows them to control what the crisis appears to be. Utilizing media framing theory, during a crisis a company can control the public perception by framing the crisis in a specific light.



*Wallen's Scandal*

Wallen's sophomore album *Dangerous* broke numerous records in 2021. His album *Dangerous: The Double Album's* success caused Wallen to be one of the only country artists to hold the top spot on the billboard charts for 3 weeks (Mamo, 2021).

*Dangerous- The Double Album*

His record label Big Loud Records in partnership with Republic Records, showed the largest streaming week ever for a country album. In the midst the success, Wallen was caught on video referring to someone with “N-word”. Wallen’s record label Big Loud Records released a statement, suspending his recording contract which stated, “In the wake of recent events, Big Loud Records has made the decision to suspend Wallen’s recording contract indefinitely.” After the incident Wallen made a statement via Instagram.

The video you saw was me on hour 72 of a 72 of a bender and that’s not something I’m proud of either, the natural thing do is to apologize further because you got caught and that’s not what I wanted to do ... I have also accepted invitations from some amazing black organizations, executives, and leaders to engage in some real and honest conversations (Hudak, 2021, para. 4)

After the Instagram apology video Wallen took a step back from the music industry not releasing any new music and canceled his tour for his album that had just been released the month before the scandal

Six months after the video of Wallen was leaked, Wallen appeared on Good Morning America on ABC with host Michael Strahan to talk about his use of the 'n'-word. (Griffin et al., 2021) In this interview, Wallen expanded on his words from the Instagram apology video and was still in a phase of recusal since the TMZ video was released. This interview discussed race in country music, Wallen's journey with sobriety, his thoughts on race, and his recollection of what happened.

Wallen has had his fair share of messes in the past, with most involving alcohol. On May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Wallen was arrested for public intoxication, after a night of drinking in downtown Nashville (Mamo, 2021). Wallen released a statement on Twitter saying, "We didn't mean any harm, and we want to say sorry to any bar staff or anyone that was affected." Another example of Wallen involving alcohol was him drinking at a bar in Tuscaloosa, Alabama which resulted in him missing his Saturday Night Live debut breaking social distancing rules set in place by NBC due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like many in the country music industry, Wallen has had his issues with alcohol which have had a part in the situation he is currently in now. Country artists tend to view alcohol or drunkenness as a part of country culture and music. According to Yahr (2018), an example of this country music star Kenny Chesney at a concert in 2018 referenced alcohol in 18 out of 23 songs in his set. Alcohol Since the culture of country music has become more inclusive throughout the 21st century, the industry tends to shy away from its confederate and primarily white roots.

When Wallen's music was pulled from radio and playlists, it had the opposite effect with his album sales as they skyrocketed on iTunes and Spotify streams, climbing to the number 1 spot on the Billboard charts for weeks. The album *Dangerous-The Double Album* reached 149,00 sales in the United States at its fourth week, two weeks after the video was dropped on TMZ (Sisario,2021). The streams kept growing after the video was released because Wallen's fans viewed it as them standing by Wallen and fighting what many call "cancel culture". Amid Wallen's controversy, his album *Dangerous- The Double Album* was the first album to hold the number 1 spot on the Billboard 200 since Shania Twain's "Up!" in late 2002 to early 2003.

The media's coverage of Wallen's use of the "n-word" was critical, however there was still room for encouragement for him (Moody, 2011). For example, country music radio host Bobby Bones made a statement on the *Bobby Bones Show* the day after the TMZ video broke saying, "I like Morgan Wallen as a person, this I don't like one bit, I'm also not a big cancel culture guy but I think I'm a go away for a while guy... he's got a lot of self-evaluation to do friends" (Huelsman, 2021, 2:16-2:40). Radio hosts like Bones discussing the incident on country radio before a full statement from Wallen likely pushed him to get his statement out sooner, while also choosing his words carefully. Wallen's image was not only damaged from the image his fanbase views him as, but more heavily the image the industry that shut him out holds for him. Because of the sway radio giants like Bones, other high-ranking officials have in the industry due to their credibility and public image in the industry, Wallen's public image is affected more by the industry than his fanbase.

### **Closing Statement**

William Benoit's image repair theory has been applied and used to repair the images for people and organizations worldwide. Almost every industry in society requires some form of

image repair. The entertainment and music industry Wallen's racial slur scandal knocked the country music star down from the top to a state of humbleness as he has worked to repair his image. His scandal caused an uproar within the country music industry regarding its southern roots and involvement in the confederacy. William Benoit's image repair theory can be applied by Wallen's use of Benoit's image repair strategies.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The methodology used in this study is rhetorical analysis. When using this method of study, the main source of information is the multiple statements made by country music star Morgan Wallen over backlash towards his use of the “N-word” along with other expletives. The other artifacts being analyzed are multiple songs that Wallen has released since the scandal, which are “Don’t Think Jesus” and “Thought You Should Know”. Rhetorical analysis involves looking at the rhetoric of the event, and then apply a theory to the research. This research is using William Benoit’s Image Repair theory, looking into the five image repair strategies with are denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification.

#### **Research Context**

Celebrities, politicians, and other people held up high in the public eye must work on image repair frequently. Wallen’s image was damaged by his use of the “N-word” which also occurred in a season of racial tensions and unrest due to the Black Lives Matter movement that surged all throughout the United States in 2020. Wallen was one of the largest country music acts of the year and broke numerous records in 202 and is still going strong. This scandal turned into a public relations nightmare and began a reckoning within the country music industry.

#### **Instruments Used in Analysis**

This research study will use the apologetic statements made by country music star Wallen and his record label and their means to repair his image. The first video for analysis is the offensive behavior which is the TMZ video of Wallen referring to his friend using the “n-word”. The second video for analysis is the apology video Wallen posted to his Instagram page. This video will be analyzed through William Benoit’s Image Repair Theory using Benoit’s methods of image repair. The other artifacts that will be analyzed will be two of Wallen’s recent releases

since the scandal, which are “Don’t Think Jesus” and “Thought You Should Know”. Another video for analysis is Wallen’s interview on Good Morning America with host Michael Strahan. Other documents for analysis will consist of articles about Benoit’s theory and social media posts from Wallen and other artists.

These are the artifacts because they best show the journey of how Wallen has repaired his image. Both the videos and the released songs show the beginning of how his image was damaged and then his journey to full image reconstruction. The songs also serve as a communication of Wallen’s internal struggles. This shows how songs can serve as a means of communication as it sends a message which is like how messages are sent by simple face-to-face communication.

### **Procedures used in Analysis**

The information is collected using William Benoit’s image repair theory. The analysis will be based on Benoit’s methods of image repair, which are denial, mortification, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, and corrective action. The first video of the incident will be analyzed to explain how Wallen’s image was damaged. The first apology video will be analyzed by applying the methods of image repair. Each method will be analyzed, and then the research will show what methods have been most effective in bringing Wallen’s image back to where it was before and improving from there. The last video to be analyzed will be Wallen’s interview on Good Morning America and his attempts at image repair. Instances of image repair by personal communication will be looked for in the videos. The two releases of “Don’t Think Jesus” and “Thought You Should Know” will be listened to as part of the results of Wallen’s image repair.

**How the Artifacts will be Analyzed**

The artifacts will be analyzed by applying William Benoit's image repair theory. The research will look at what methods of image repair are used. After learning what methods have been used, then the success of the image repair method will be analyzed to see if some methods work better than others when applied to Wallen's situation. When applying the theory, Wallen's image repair will be done by viewing the artifacts, and looking at behavior, and viewing the results of the overall image repair. The use of different image repair strategies will be taken into consideration like accepting responsibility, mortification, and corrective action. Analyzing these patterns will show what methods of image repair work for certain situations.

**Expected Conclusion**

This study will determine the effectiveness of Wallen in changing his image by looking at his current image at the same time as the conclusion of the study. Applying Benoit's theory to Wallen's image will test the theory on if it is an effective theory for repairing an image and does the theory work as a case study. The study is expected to show how an image is repaired, and if it is possible for an image to be repaired. The study will show what image repair strategies are best for certain situations, and if the effects of the strategies have common results with other case studies on image repair theory.

**Closing Statement**

Overall, this study will be a rhetorical analysis on Wallen's apologetic efforts after referring to someone as the "n-word" by applying William Benoit's image repair theory. The analysis will mainly consist of the video of the incident, the Instagram apology video, and his interview on Good Morning America. Other parts of the analysis will involve two of Wallen's recent releases, which are "Don't Think Jesus" and "Thought You Should Know". The data

collected will be analyzed for patterns, similarities, and differences with other instances of image repair. All research for this study will take place from January 15th, 2023 to March 16th 2023, with a full thesis completion date set for April 2023.



## Chapter 4: Analysis

This rhetorical analysis will focus on applying William Benoit's image reconstruction theory on how country music artist Wallen has repaired his image after the racial slur scandal. The four artifacts for the study will be the initial apology video on Wallen's Instagram, his interview on *Good Morning America*, and two of his releases, "Don't Think Jesus" and "Thought You Should Know". This study will analyze Wallen's image repair from the day after the TMZ video was released. This analysis will look for instances of image repair strategies according to William Benoit's image reconstruction theory, and the conclusion will show the results of the image repair. Wallen's current image measured by his current success at the conclusion of the study will serve as the results of his image repair efforts. The results will also show the validity of image repair theory as a useful tool to repair one's reputation in crisis communication.

### Living the Dream- Transition to the Problem

While Wallen's song "Living the Dream" was released before he was videoed referring to someone with the "n"-word, it does provide context for how Wallen felt about the life he was living. While Wallen was living his dream with success in the music industry, it also told a different story of the dark side of the music business that many artists do not talk about. The chorus can mainly be identified as mortification as it involves Wallen admitting his "rockstar-lifestyle". The lines "I look like a rockstar, in and out of cop cars, livin' out a suitcase, trashing hotel bars" paint the picture of Wallen's recent moments in the spotlight. The lines in prior verse describe Wallen's alcohol use and how he felt that contributed to his actions with "between alcohol and women, and Adderall and adrenaline, I don't ever get no rest". While this song came out before Wallen's image was damaged by the racial slur, it can still be identified as

mortification with admitting wrongdoing, which could be viewed as the beginning of his image repair journey.

Wallen was having success but still with its downsides as he notes in the song “this livin the dream is killing me.” Wallen’s use of phrases “mama, don’t pray for my success anymore, yeah but mama still prays for me,” which is referenced in his song, “Thought You Should Know”. Both “Thought You Should Know” and “Living The Dream” have similar strategies of image repair. The prayers that Wallen was receiving was not for his success in the music industry. He meant for the lifestyle he was living at the time. Wallen already had success in the industry, but he views the success what pulled him into the “rockstar-lifestyle” that he described at the beginning. Once the video of Wallen saying the racial slur was leaked on TMZ, many fans referred to the track “Living the Dream” and many of the lyrics in the song as a sign of Wallen’s eventual downward spiral towards an image-damaging event.

### **Wallen Apology Video**

Wallen made his apology video on Instagram days after being caught referring to one of his friends using the racial slur. His video was made only a day after the TMZ video was dropped and he was suspended by his label. Wallen uses this video to talk to the public to tell his side of what happened on the night. In the video Wallen aims to accept responsibility for his mistake, states his steps on corrective action, and he finishes by removing himself from the situation. This video was the start of Wallen’s image repair efforts that have been taking place since 2021. The content behind this video is developed further in the Good Morning America interview that will be discussed later in this study.

### *Accepting Responsibility*

The biggest strategy from this video could be the accepting responsibility part of mortification, as there are multiple realizations of wrongdoing. Wallen accepting responsibility can be seen as the first step of image repair. Accepting responsibility is a way one can humble oneself to admit that there is a problem. Wallen first starts the video by explaining that that he had spent time talking with his own advisors and collecting his own thoughts before making a statement. “I wanted to collect my thoughts, seek some real guidance, and come to you with a complete thought before I did” (see Appendix A, paragraph 1). In crisis communication, this is Wallen breaking his strategic silence with a planned break as it allowed Wallen and his advisors to craft a statement instead of being forced to break their silence without a proper statement. This showed that he was being careful with his words and thoughts, reminding the audience that he is still human just like them. Wallen noted that he did not want to constantly apologize, as he felt that people would think he was apologizing because he got caught, which is not what he wanted to do. “Obviously the natural thing to do is to apologize further and just continue to apologize. because you got caught and that's not what I wanted to do” (see Appendix A, paragraph 3). In Benoit’s theory, the intent behind one’s image repair must be obviously sincere, or the public will not believe it and will damage the image further. The intent behind Wallen’s apology is important towards accepting responsibility as it shows how serious he is to make sure people know the intent behind his actions.

Wallen accepts responsibility for his actions and notes how he feels upset by them. He notes his sorrows towards his fans, team, family, and most importantly himself. Wallen feeling like he “let himself down” is a key point to accepting responsibility, as it serves as a change that points him in the right direction toward image repair. Wallen said “I let my son down and I'm not

okay with that” (See Appendix A, paragraph 4). This shows that he deeply wanted to change and accepted responsibility and the consequences of his actions. Accepting responsibility started Wallen’s image repair by showing others that he sincerely expressed regret showed he truly wanted to correct his own behavior and showed the intent behind it.

The logos seen in Wallen’s beginning statements reflect the written statement he released the day after the incident. The statement shows that he was consistent with what he said before, therefore, not changing anything in the story, being completely honest and transparent. Wallen’s normal ethos before the video was more confident and bestowed a much larger image but Wallen’s body language and tone of voice showed a much humbler side of him. Wallen’s humbleness showed as he asked his fanbase not to defend him as he made clear that he felt that what he did was wrong. He said, “while I do appreciate those who have stood by me during this time, please don’t defend me, my actions were wrong” (Appendix A, paragraph 11). Wallen made note of his alcohol use as part of him accepting responsibility and understanding the consequences that come with those actions. Pride can often be one’s worst enemy, and Wallen knew that part of accepting responsibility required him to humble himself. Wallen encouraged others to learn from his mistakes, after accepting responsibility for them which helps his case in image repair because it shows his amount of remorse and awareness of his actions.

### ***Corrective Action***

Wallen was already under fire for an incident involving COVID-19 protocol and Saturday Night Live, so he knew that him being heard saying the “N”-word would damage his image even further. In his video, Wallen says he would step back for a while to reflect and work on himself. Wallen was living a lifestyle filled with alcohol, partying, and bars. Wallen said “So I decided to go off the grid for a little while and get used to making good decisions. I want my

team, my family, my friends, and even strangers to trust me” (Appendix A, paragraph 10). He mentions his lifestyle in the closing track in his album *Dangerous* “Living the Dream” in where he mentions “alcohol and women and Adderall and adrenaline, I don’t ever get no rest” and “I feel like a rockstar living outta cop cars”. This allows tensions to cool down and gives people a chance to see that he is serious about changing his actions, leading to a change his behavior, ending with the forgiveness in mortification. Wallen’s music was already dropped from country radio almost after a month of his number one single “Sand in my Boots” dominated the charts, and his label Big Loud suspended him. Wallen using his circumstances to correct his behavior is a good strategy. This also goes back to accepting responsibility as it shows Wallen is accepting the consequences of his actions and is using them to better himself. Dropping pride helps Wallen seem more human which could help people be more likely to forgive him for his actions.

Wallen states the steps he would take to change his behavior. One thing he noted was that multiple organizations reached out to him to spark conversations on how he could correct his behavior. “The very people I hurt. and they had every right to step on my neck while I was down to, to be, to not show me any grace. But they did the exact opposite. They offered me grace, and they, they also paired that with an offer to learn and to grow” (Appendix A, paragraph 5).

Wallen’s use of word “grow” shows his want for corrective action which serves as the middle part of his image repair. “Grace” shows Wallen’s thankfulness to those he offended the most and his want for forgiveness and the ability to change his behavior. These organizations such as the Black Music Action Coalition reaching out to Wallen and him being willing to listen show that he wanted to take to steps to better himself and win respect back from his industry. Wallen sparking dialogue with organizations that he directly offended shows that he not only wanted to correct his behavior, but he wanted forgiveness from those he hurt the most.

Another corrective action Wallen noted is that he would work towards sobriety as he had already been sobered for nine days at the time.

“Since that video was taken, I've been sober for nine days. It's not all that long of a time, but it's enough to know the man and that video is not the man that I'm trying to be. I've had this week to think about times when I'm sober and I'm really proud of who I am and, and my actions for most, for the most part in those.” (See Appendix A, paragraph 9)

Wallen's sobriety would be a direct correction of his behavior as he was intoxicated when he yelled the racial slur. Wallen had already been criticized for his alcohol use before after a public intoxication citation in downtown Nashville, and for breaking COVID-19 regulations in a bar in Tuscaloosa, Alabama near the University of Alabama. In the video, Wallen attributes most of his bad decisions are when he is not sober, as he says that he likes the person he is sober. His realization of sobriety can be analyzed as mortification as he has spent time in reflection of his actions while being sober minded. Taking steps toward sobriety is Wallen taking another step towards image repair. Wallen laying out these steps shows the audience that he has a plan on how to repair his image, with the goal of forgiveness. William Benoit views forgiveness through the lens of mortification as it is the full restoration of one's image, and Wallen laid out his own pathway towards achieving that.

Wallen focuses on how words can bring division between people. His corrective action is that he wants to work to get rid of the division that he caused. His journey to stop spreading division started in the video, as he said that he may have learned the hard way, but he is glad that he learned that actions and words can cause division without even knowing it. Being more mindful of his words is part of his steps of corrective action, as not being careful is what caused the scandal in the first place.

### *Mortification*

When applying Benoit's image reconstruction theory, Wallen's first steps towards sobriety are part of his mortification. Wallen makes his alcohol use known in the video, however, he does not blame that for him saying the 'n'-word, but he does note that his use contributed a factor. Wallen admitting wrongdoing is the first half of his mortification. Wallen said that he did not like the person he was when under the influence of alcohol. According to Wallen, his apology that he immediately submitted to TMZ after the video was released left out part of his statements. TMZ not posting his full statement hinders his image repair, as it makes the image repair, he was trying to do meaningless. Wallen does not excuse his behavior, but he does show some evidence of attacking accuser as he notes that TMZ left out some of his true statements, thus making him seem more nefarious and less remorseful for his actions.

Grace is a reoccurring theme with Wallen's statement as he talks about how some African American equality organizations reached out to him. He mentions that he was nervous to accept those invitations as they had every right to "step on his neck" but instead showed him grace. This mortification Wallen faced is part of what humbled him, to show others that he wanted to correct his actions. Wallen asking for forgiveness from the African American community can be viewed as second half of mortification taking place. Wallen notes that the kindness of the organizations that reached out encouraged him to dig deeper within himself and to understand the seriousness of his actions. Wallen showed image repair with mortification by saying that his words matter. Wallen said "I've had this week to think about times when I'm sober and I'm really proud of who I am and, and my actions for most, for the most part in those. When I look on the times that I'm not, it seems to be where the majority of my mistakes are

made” (See Appendix A, paragraph 9 -10). This also goes back to accepting responsibility as Wallen understands that his words can affect others both negatively and positively.

Wallen shows that just his meeting with African Americans and hearing their stories and struggles, opened his eyes to trials and tribulations that he had no idea about. “And one thing I’ve learned already is, I’m specifically sorry for is that it matters. My words matter. A word can truly hurt a person, and at my core, that’s not what I’m okay with (Appendix A, paragraph 6). When applying Benoit’s theory, Wallen’s discussions with these African American organizations spark his mortification, as he is spending time reflecting on his actions and how his words hold great power. Through his time of reflection and mortification he is working towards repair carefully. Wallen hopes to spend his time out of the public eye working to become an example versus being made an example, which means that he wants to show others he has changed instead of giving them a reason to think otherwise. To end his video, Wallen quoted the apostle Paul from 1 Corinthians 13:11 which says “when I was a child I spoke like a child, thought like a child, and reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways” (Appendix A, paragraph 13).

### ***Denial and Evading Responsibility***

Wallen’s apology video leans so heavily towards mortification, corrective action, and reducing offensiveness, that there are little to no uses of denial or evading responsibility. Wallen accepting responsibility and admitting wrongdoing is part of mortification as that is required when asking for forgiveness, therefore evading responsibility or denial would be contradictory to the other image repair strategies. Wallen does not shift the blame of his actions on anyone but takes full responsibility for them. There is no denial present in the rhetoric as Wallen confesses to his actions admitting they were wrong.



### ***Wallen's Image Repair Strategy with Apology Video***

In Wallen's apology video, multiple methods of image repair can be seen through Benoit's image reconstruction theory. Wallen uses the image repair methods of accepting responsibility, corrective action, and mortification. Accepting responsibility is the beginning of Wallen's image repair as it starts with admitting that his image has been tarnished. This leads into his steps of corrective action which are communication with African American organizations, sobriety, and removing himself from the public eye. His steps of corrective action also coincide with his time of self-reflection, which can also be seen as spending his time in mortification involving self-reflection and his road to sobriety. The video was the first step in Wallen's more than year-long journey of image repair.

### **Good Morning America Interview**

Wallen's next instance of image repair can be seen in his interview with Good Morning America's Michael Strahan approximately six months after the TMZ video was released. This video serves as the last video appearance that Wallen is seen attempting to repair his image. By answering the questions from Strahan, Wallen explained how the scandal happened and what he has done to better his image ever since. In the interview, Strahan and Wallen talked about what happened the night Wallen said the racial slur, and about roots of racism in the country music industry which had recently resurfaced since the scandal. The image repair strategies that can be seen in this interview are accepting responsibility, corrective action, and mortification.

### ***Wallen's Side of the Story***

Wallen started the interview with saying that he wanted to give his truth and that he knew he could not make everyone happy and then gave his recollection of what happened the night he said the racial slur. Some of his friends were in Nashville that weekend and they all

decided to party more than usual. Then this led to Wallen's racial slur in which Wallen described as "it just happened, we just say dumb stuff together, in our minds it's playful, I know that sounds ignorant but that's really where it came from, and it's wrong" (Appendix B, paragraph 7). This showed Wallen's true remorse of what happened by telling his story in full honesty and transparency. This can be identified as accepting responsibility, as he says his initial thoughts of words with his friends were only playful and that he felt that mindset was ignorant. This is Wallen showing honesty about his actions while not excusing them. His use of the word "ignorant" can be interpreted as accepting responsibility as he understands that his mindset can be viewed by some as arrogant. However, his use of ignorant can also be interpreted as evading responsibility because it could be viewed as him blaming his own ignorance for his actions. This use of "ignorant" is more likely closer to accepting responsibility, as it still admits to wrongdoing but does not use it as an excuse. The word "ignorant" was prevalent in the interview and served as Wallen's explanations for saying the word. Wallen accepted responsibility for his actions, and exhibited full transparency, which started his image repair journey.

### ***Denial and Accepting Responsibility***

Wallen explained the intent behind the racial slur as not ill intent at all, which can be interpreted as denial. This use of denial was used for denying of intent but not of action itself, which is what Wallen was trying to do to both repair his image while also defending it. Denial is a form of image repair that can come with some risks, with one being that it often involves evading responsibility. Wallen's use of denial is not as risky due to him accepting responsibility in both his initial apology video and the interview on Good Morning America. Denial has a hard balance with pride, as requires letting go of pride to admit to wrongdoing, while denial can come from pride within oneself. Wallen has enough pride to make known of his intent not being

nefarious, however since he is accepting responsibility for the action itself there is no denial that is damaging his image. Wallen making his intent known is part of his accepting responsibility, as while he is admitting wrongdoing, he is defending his image by defending his intent which is not nefarious as some artists in the industry argued initially when he said the racial slur.

### ***Mortification***

Michael Strahan asked Wallen about his knowledge of the n-word and the dark past of slavery that was part of the United States. Wallen said that before the conversations he had with leaders of African American organizations, that he had little to no knowledge of some of the hardships that many African Americans faced through history and currently in society. He found out from his conversations with African American organizations about the history about the racial slur, and how it can bring feelings of hurt and insignificance to African Americans. When applying William Benoit's theory, being honest about not knowing the history behind the "n"-word can be viewed as evading responsibility, however, Wallen having conversations with leaders of African American organizations can be used as mortification. His use of evading responsibility is not seen as nefarious as he says, "it's hard to understand what someone has gone through without walking in their shoes" (Appendix B, paragraph 15). His honesty about his lack of knowledge shows his vulnerability and him learning from leaders of African American organizations can be identified as mortification.

### ***Corrective Action***

Wallen talks about how he spent time in corrective action he started by talking with African American organizations with one being the Black Music Action Coalition along with the other African American organization leaders. After that he checked himself into rehab, starting his self-reflection as a form of mortification. Wallen questioned himself by asking things such as

“Why am I doing these things?”, “Do I have an alcohol problem?”, “Do I have a deeper issue?” (See Appendix B, paragraph 17). All these questions can be identified as Wallen experiencing mortification as he looked for answers to his behavior and searched for ways to correct it, thus the mortification driving the corrective action and reduction of offensive behavior. Because of the 500 percent spike in Wallen’s album sales after the incident, the album made nearly \$500,000 dollars. Both Wallen and his team decided to donate that revenue to the Black Action Coalition and other African American organizations. This move can be identified as corrective action, mortification, reducing offensiveness as they work cohesively with one another. Wallen’s donation to African American organizations is the action itself and accepting responsibility is the intent behind his donation. Mortification is how Wallen learned the things required to work on repairing his image. What Wallen learned in mortification helped him know what corrective action that he had to do. His time spent in mortification allowed him to use corrective action, which involved the donation of his album sales and his road to sobriety, reducing his offensive actions.

### ***Reducing Offensiveness***

Because of how Benoit’s image repair strategies can overlap, Wallen’s rhetoric exhibiting corrective action can also be identified as reducing offensiveness. Wallen said “I haven’t seen that with my eyes. That pain or that or that insignificant feeling or whatever it is that it makes you feel that” (See Appendix B, paragraph 13) which showed that he learned how his words can effect others, this drivng him to reduce offensive behavior.

### ***Wallen’s Image Repair Strategy from GMA***

Wallen’s image repair strategy from the interview has a linear plan starting with accepting responsibility to show that there was a problem, mortification for Wallen to spend time

in self-reflection and learning, and then ending in corrective action. Wallen's gained knowledge of racism in country music but not denying it shows how much Wallen wants to accept responsibility and admits something must be done about it, however, it is because of Wallen's time in mortification that he knows what corrective action to take. Wallen denied that the intent behind the racial slur was nefarious to protect his image from further damage, however, he still accepted responsibility for the action itself. Because of his time spent in mortification, he agreed that something must be done to correct instances of racism in country music. He shows the corrective actions that he had already taken such as donating album revenue and his time spent in self-reflection in rehab. Wallen gave an update on his image repair journey through his interview with Michael Strahan and was his last conversation involving image repair strategies.

### **Comparison of Both Videos**

Both of Wallen's apology videos tell a different story in his image repair. Wallen's initial apology video was the beginning of his image repair and mainly involved accepting responsibility, as he had not done much of any corrective action and was just beginning to conduct mortification by engaging in conversations with leaders of African American organizations. The video was fresh after Wallen referred to someone with the racial slur, while the interview was viewed in a different light as it was months after the initial video was released from TMZ. The image repair strategies between the videos both start with accepting responsibility.

Wallen's interview on Good Morning America focused more on what he did for mortification, which helped determine his direction for corrective action. The interview, Wallen talked about his gained experience and knowledge from having conversations with African American organizations, which can be identified as mortification when applying Benoit's image

repair theory. After knowing country music's history with racism, Wallen wants to make it right, by having a better understanding of what others have dealt with in relation to racism. While it may be impossible to fully understand someone's feelings to a subject matter like race, it can be seen in both videos that Wallen believes that he must do better, and that country music must do better. While these videos are Wallen's way of speaking directly to his audience, his songs are a whole different way of interpersonal communication that is being introduced and can be analyzed for image repair strategies according to William Benoit's image reconstruction theory.

### ***Accepting Responsibility***

Wallen spent more time accepting responsibility for his actions in the Instagram video than the Good Morning America interview, however, it was still the most prevalent strategy of image repair used. This method of image repair started the other image repair strategies, as this strategy showed Wallen's intentions behind his image repair efforts as if he worked to repair his image from a prideful attitude instead of a place of humbleness and gratitude, the response to his image repair could have a negative effect instead of a positive one.

### ***Reducing Offensiveness***

Wallen makes note of how his words matter in both videos and made known that he understood the power of his words. Wallen knowing the power of his words can be viewed as reducing offensiveness as he wanted to build people up, not break them down. In both videos Wallen explained his corrective action of stepping back from the industry for a while, by spending his time in rehab. Both reducing offensiveness and corrective action overlap in Wallen's image repair because they work with a reciprocal nature of one strategy helps the other strategy.

### ***Corrective Action***

Corrective action works as Wallen's middle ground in his image repair between the two videos. His corrective actions are influenced by him accepting responsibility and mortification as he had to start his image repair journey and then learn how to correct his actions. Wallen gave updates to his corrective actions in the Good Morning America interview, which were built upon his corrective action efforts that he noted in the first video. His main source of corrective action in both videos is sobriety as he noted his time in rehab in the interview and he said that he had been sober for multiple days when the first video was made. One distinction in the interview is that Wallen donating money from his album sales was a direct corrective action of image repair, which is different to his other forms of corrective action as they are all for Wallen's own betterment instead of others.

### ***Mortification***

In both videos, Wallen uses mortification to show what he had done to learn from others but to also repair his image, eventually leading to forgiveness. In both videos, Wallen's talks of sobriety serve as what he learned in his corrective action. Just as the other image repair strategies, Wallen's interview serves as a development of Wallen's image repair efforts in mortification. Wallen mentioned that he had conversations with leaders of African American organizations, then the interview built upon that by revealing those organizations and discussing what he learned from them.

### ***Don't Think Jesus***

Wallen stepped back from the industry after referring to his friend with the racial slur. While he did appear on Hardy's 2021 compilation album *HIXTAPE Vol 2* and on ERNEST's "Flower Shops" and other projects, Wallen did not release any new music until April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022

with “Don’t Think Jesus”, with the album cover showing three children singing in the pulpit of a sanctuary in black and white. This song had a lot of weight behind it as critics saw this as Wallen’s return to the industry, after being in silence since February 2021. This song was Wallen’s first real test of how his image repair efforts have helped his image, however it can still be analyzed using William Benoit’s image reconstruction theory to look for image repair strategies to how Wallen attempts to repair his image through the single.

### ***First Verse***

The first verse starts with telling the story of how Wallen got into the situation he found himself in. The only instance of image repair in this verse is accepting responsibility from the lyrics “Boy gets a guitar and starts writing songs, about whiskey and women and getting too stoned, he got all three at the first show he played” (Appendix C, Verse 1, lines 1-3). Wallen is admitting what lifestyle he was living and how the “Rockstar-life” can be filled with partying, alcohol, and other things that would not normally be associated with living as a Christian. “He got all three at the first show he played”, can be identified as accepting responsibility because he notes the start of the negative things sneaking into his life. After accepting responsibility, Wallen’s next line in the verse says, “hometown says, I don’t think Jesus done it that way”, which can be identified as mortification as this is Wallen’s realization that the lifestyle described in the preceding lines is unholy by comparing his life to how Jesus lived his life (See Appendix C, Verse 1, line 4). Jesus lived a sinless life of servanthood, while Wallen was living a life of alcohol and partying. Wallen comparing himself to Jesus can be identified as mortification as it works as self-reflection to how he was living his life versus how Jesus lived by stating that he did not think Jesus lived his life that way.



The second part of the first verse follows the same theme and strategy of accepting responsibility. The second part shows how Wallen knows that he was involved in the “rockstar-lifestyle” as he says, “boy moves to city lives fast and goes hard, starts chasing the devil through honky-tonk bars, Ignoring the voices in his head that say, I don’t think Jesus done it this way” (See Appendix, Verse 1, lines 5-8). These lines also showed Wallen’s thoughts when described what he was thinking when he said the racial slur, as he said that he was not thinking and that his friends and him say dumb stuff together. These lines can also be interpreted as Wallen accepting responsibility for him chasing enjoyment from things such as alcohol, bars, and just the “night-life” in general. Wallen in this verse comes from a place of humbleness and loss of pride showing how he got involved in the “rockstar life”. The line “chasing the devil” can be inferred as that he was being involved in things that are not holy such as drunkenness.

### *Chorus*

After the first verse, Wallen goes into the chorus and shows instances of accepting responsibility and mortification. The first line of the chorus starts with “If I was him, I’d say the hell with you, ain’t no helping you” (Appendix C, Chorus 1, line 1). This line distinguishes how Wallen shows his humanity when comparing himself to Jesus. This can be identified as mortification as Wallen is admitting his mistake and emphasizing how it is human nature to not give forgiveness easily or not give it at all. However, this line can be interpreted as Wallen asking for forgiveness as Wallen is making the clear distinction between Jesus and humanity, and that he feels that because of Jesus he is forgiven. Forgiveness is given for those who have done something wrong against someone else, and Wallen makes note of that with his line “ain’t no helping you” as forgiveness is usually not something that people want to give generously. While Wallen does not directly admit wrongdoing from saying the racial slur, he does accept

responsibility for his recent actions involving alcohol, partying, and disorderly conduct. Wallen is placing himself in the point of view where he would decide whether to forgive himself, which requires mortification as it is required to receive forgiveness.

The next part of the chorus takes heaven and associates it with a “gift” as the line says, “find someone else to give heaven to” (See Appendix C, Chorus, Line 2). This can fall under mortification as Wallen feels that he does not deserve forgiveness, as he feels that others are much more deserving of. Wallen shows mortification as a common theme as it shows that he understands what he did and felt that he is underserving of forgiveness. To feel underserving of forgiveness requires one to drop almost all pride, which shows true mortification as it is human nature to feel entitled to forgiveness. His view of heaven coincides with what he feels forgiveness is. Mortification within this line can be identified as finding out what forgiveness looks like, which is slightly different from how mortification usually works which involves acknowledging wrongdoing and then asking for forgiveness, but usually the one asking for forgiveness knows exactly what they are looking for.

The next part of the chorus moves Wallen to mortification as he talks about what he would do if forgiving someone like him. He says “I’d shame me, I’d blame me” which is human nature because forgiveness is felt as entitled too and not always easy to give (See Appendix C, Chorus, Line 3). This line shows it is human nature to shame and blame others, which would be closer to evading responsibility, but Wallen did the opposite. Wallen accepts responsibility for his actions by saying that if had to forgive himself he would do the opposite. The line closes with “I’d make me pay for my mistakes”, which goes back to mortification as Wallen talks about what he would do if asking himself for forgiveness. Wallen shows his sincerity behind his

mortification as it can be inferred that he does not expect forgiveness from anyone, which can also be associated with his gratitude for forgiveness as well.

The main idea of the chorus is in the last line which is “I don’t think Jesus does it that way” (See Appendix C, Chorus, line 5). This line show image repair in the form of mortification but shows that forgiveness from Jesus is the ultimate form of mortification. Wallen shows a direct contrast with how forgiveness works from the human point of view and how forgiveness comes from God. Mortification in this line can be seen as close to what Jesus would do while it would not be human nature to do the same. This line ties together the same idea in the verses which is “Jesus does not live this way” when talking about alcohol and partying, but at the same time Jesus would not shame or blame anyone for what they had done, extending forgiveness. Wallen in the line views Jesus as where mortification comes from, which is the direct admitting of wrongdoing and forgiveness for that wrongdoing.

The chorus can be as identified as mortification as Wallen indirectly asks for forgiveness for his actions, but he notes how hard getting forgiveness can be. Wallen does not deny his actions, but he does take full responsibility for them which requires a letting go of pride to admit wrongdoing. His knowledge of how forgiveness is earned, not expected shows his intentions behind his gratitude for forgiveness. The main idea of the chorus in Wallen’s image repair is that he understands that forgiveness is not easily given or earned, as it is human nature to not forget and forgive, but to blame and shame others for their actions. This from the lens of image repair, is showing the image of Jesus as a perfect image which would never need to be repaired, and making that his goal of image repair, to strive towards perfection even though it is human nature to not be perfect.

### *Second Verse*

Verse two expands on Wallen's view on mortification in image repair by showing what he was thinking during the time he was involved in controversial situations. The first line starts with "Boy's all alone, got no one to turn to" (See Appendix C, Verse 2, Line 1) which is how Wallen felt when the video of him saying a racial slur was recorded on video and released on TMZ. Wallen felt as if most of the world had turned against him after the video was released but he also recognized why he felt alone, which can be seen as mortification which is Wallen admitting wrongdoing and accepting the consequences of his actions. Him feeling alone also can be interpreted through Benoit's theory with shifting blame being impossible in this scenario, therefore he cannot evade responsibility, allowing him to work through mortification. When the video was released, his label suspended him, he lost eligibility for winning any awards in 2021, and was banned from performing at the 2021 Country Music Awards. This line saying "no one to turn to" has greater implication when knowing that a sizable amount of people backed away from Wallen. When connecting this line to Wallen's interview on Good Morning America, this can be identified as when Wallen spent time in rehab and in San Diego, California away from the public eye, as he was working on corrective action on his own. The line sparks the start of how Wallen started in his image repair, correcting himself.

The next line says "he figures he'll pray cause what else could he do" (See Appendix C, Verse 2, line 2) which brings in mortification and corrective action as they both combined can look like prayer, as that could change Wallen's attitude towards his consequences. As mentioned in the previous line, this emphasizes how he cannot evade responsibility by shifting the blame to someone else, or giving an excuse. Prayer in this sense works as multiple forms of image repair which are corrective action and mortification. Wallen views prayer as the only corrective action can do in the moment, which also brings in mortification as asking for forgiveness in prayer.

Prayer is part of Wallen's corrective action according to this verse, as it is part of how he corrects his behavior by correcting his attitude.

Line four of the second verse is Wallen talking to Jesus saying, "I wish you would've woke me up an easier way" (See Appendix C, Verse 2, line 4). This line brings in Wallen's faith more into his image repair as he is having a conversation with Jesus. Wallen was already living a life of partying and alcohol use before the he was videoed saying the "n"-word, however he was not changing much about the way he was living. The change came after the video was released to TMZ, which is what Wallen is referring to when he says he wishes he would have woken up an easier way. This can be identified as mortification as this is where Wallen admitted to himself that he had a problem. Wallen noted in the following line the main idea of the song which is "I don't think Jesus does it that way" (See Appendix C, Verse 2, line 4). This ties the whole verse together with the idea that image repair often starts when one's image is damaged so badly that repair is the last viable option. When all of the support Wallen had was ripped out from under him, it started his image repair with mortification, then spending time with corrective action.

### ***Third Verse***

Verse three serves as the down chorus of the song, which brings in the human aspect of mortification, which is arguably the hardest part of image repair, as humanity can find forgiveness to be hard to give, but easy to feel entitled to. The verse starts with "world likes to rear back and throw a few stones" (See Appendix C, Verse 3, line 1). This can be interpreted as the backlash Wallen received from the industry, as while there was talk about condemning him for his actions, there was not much talk about forgiveness. This line shows the main difference between mortification from others, and mortification within oneself, as when it is from others it tends to be harsher, especially when it there has not been any mortification within oneself.

Phrases like “rear back” and “throw a few stones” show how quick people are to condemn one another, instead of showing forgiveness, or when applying Benoit’s theory; extending mortification towards someone who has accepted responsibility.

The next line builds upon the previous line with “so boy wants to throw a few stones of his own” (See Appendix C, Verse 3, line 2). This line can be identified as shifting blame which would be classified as evading responsibility. Wallen asking for forgiveness and changing his behavior through corrective action would not need to evade any responsibility. Shifting the blame can also backfire when going through image repair as people can view the image repair as neglectful. Human nature would be not to accept responsibility for one’s actions, but for one to find a way to avoid all accountability. His use of the phrase “throw a few stones of his own” shows the normal first reaction of being held accountable, being blaming others to take away from his own actions. This shows a deeper message which says that it is human nature to not take responsibility, but to “fight fire with fire” meaning to accuse others of things they have done.

Wallen expands on the idea of casting stones in the next line, which says “but Lord knows I ain’t perfect and it ain’t my place” (See Appendix C, Verse 3, line 3) . According to image reconstruction theory, the tactic in this can be identified as evading responsibility, claiming that he is not perfect which could be interpreted as him making excuses for his behavior. However, when analyzing the line in context with the rest of the verse, shows that it can be hard to shift blame to others for their actions because human nature is not perfect. Humans make mistakes, which is the sole reason for Benoit’s theory in the first place, and Wallen shows that in “Don’t Think Jesus”. The whole verse is wrapped up by calling back to the main idea “I don’t think Jesus does it that way” (See Appendix C, Verse 3, line 4) , emphasizing

that a broken image is harder to repair because of humanity, as it requires correcting one's actions, reducing offensiveness, and admitting wrongdoing in mortification, which is hard for anyone to do as it forces one to drop all pride. Wallen in this verse points to his faith as his reason why he has been able to work on repairing his image. Wallen using phrases like "throwing stones" can be inferred that his first reaction could have been evading responsibility by involving painting other people into a more negative light, while attempting to shield his own image, but when applying Benoit's image repair theory to the song he did the exact opposite.

William Benoit's image repair strategies can be identified within Wallen's song "Don't think Jesus", but also goes into detail the work and intention behind those strategies. Wallen's rhetoric behind phrases such as "throw a few stones", "boy's all alone", and "boy moves to city lives fast and goes hard", tell his story of how he has repaired his image through repair strategies such as mortification and corrective action, which he supported by his Christian faith. In "Don't think Jesus", mortification is the most prominent image repair strategy, as forgiveness and admitting wrongdoing are the main themes in the song. The verses admit the wrongdoing by sharing how Wallen started living the lifestyle that led to him to drunkenness and unholy living, while the chorus show how forgiveness works from the human aspect and the spiritual aspect. Throughout "Don't Think Jesus" the image repair strategies of denial and evading responsibility were not present because the themes of grace and forgiveness would contradict using denial and evading responsibility. Wallen does not deny wrongdoing but does the opposite by accepting responsibility for his actions and life-choices.

### **Thought You Should Know**

Wallen released "Thought You Should Know" right in time for Mother's Day 2022, which was the second single released by the artist since the racial slur scandal which happened

over year prior to the release. This song being released around Mother's Day brought irony with it because the premise of the song is Wallen talking to his mother. When applying William Benoit's image reconstruction theory, multiple image repair strategies can be identified throughout the verses and choruses. This song talks about themes of prayer, unholy living, and other things that involve Wallen's choices and lifestyle that he had been living from the time he started seeing success in the country music industry, to when he had to start conducting image repair.

### *First Verse*

Wallen starts the first verse with "What's goin on momma, something just dawned on me, I ain't been home in some months" (See Appendix D, Verse 1, Lines 1-3). Wallen spending his time partying and living on the road is noted in this song, which is also referenced in his song "Living the Dream" which talks about how the dream he was living was also killing him from the inside. The line is then proceeded by "Been chasing songs and women" (See Appendix D, Verse 1, Line 4) which can be interpreted as the beginning of mortification as Wallen is admitting that he has been not living the most wholesome lifestyle. This notes that while Wallen has been successful in going to Nashville, songwriting, and having a successful career as an artist, he had also pursued other things in the process. While Wallen does not explicitly admit to referring to someone using the "n"-word, he admits that he was living without thinking clearly through his use of the phrase "dawned on me". This verse starts mainly focusing on the accepting responsibility side of mortification.

The next line of the verse mentions a blanket statement that not only covers Wallen referring to someone using a racial slur, but his lifestyle of alcohol and other things associated with the "rockstar-life". The line is "making some bad decisions, lord knows I'm drinking too



much” (See Appendix D, Verse 1, Lines 5-6). The use of the phrase “drinking too much” can be identified as the admitting wrongdoing part of mortification as Wallen is saying that he as a problem with alcohol, thus leading to his corrective action of sobriety. This references his corrective action of spending time in rehab closer to when the video was released, and his outspoken journey with sobriety. In Wallen’s Good Morning America interview he says he asked himself “Do I have a drinking problem,” and that is also shown in this line. Wallen’s use of “making bad decisions” according to image repair theory, shows that he has spent time in mortification to understand his mistakes, and that he did not engage in evading responsibility, which other artists, public figures, and organizations have done the opposite in their own image repair.

The lines before chorus carry the main theme of mortification throughout the song which are “Yeah, I know you’ve been worrying ‘bout me, you’ve been losin’ sleep since ’93” (See Appendix D, Verse 1, lines 7-8). Wallen’s use of the phrases “worrying about me” and “losing sleep” can be interpreted as he knew that he was causing the people he loved to worry about his actions. This is a different angle of mortification represented as Wallen is not only admitting his own wrongdoing, but he is admitting the effects that his actions have on others, thus serving as another incentive for his corrective action and reducing offensiveness. The phrases do not deny anything, but only accept responsibility for Wallen’s actions, and how they affect others, which is a much deeper level of mortification that is absent in “Don’t think Jesus”, the interview on Good Morning America, and his initial apology video on Instagram.

### *Chorus*

The chorus starts with the title and phrase saying, “I thought you should know, that all those prayers you thought you wasted on me, must’ve finally found their way on through” (See

Appendix D, Chorus, Lines 1-3). Wallen's use of "prayers" can be identified as what he believes was part of his corrective action in his image repair. In the prior verse, Wallen's phrase "you've been losing sleep since 93" refers to how his actions affected others, especially his mother who according to Wallen in the verse, prayed for him. The word "finally" can be identified as the beginning of Wallen's time in mortification, as while he had not fully received forgiveness from all, he did realize his alcohol use and unholy lifestyle when the TMZ video was dropped. The phrase "prayers you thought you wasted on me" can be identified as the accepting responsibility side of mortification as it can be inferred that Wallen would have understood if someone felt like prayers for him and his image would be wasted. This phrase also coincides with one of the main ideas of "Don't think Jesus" when applying Benoit's image repair theory, which is that mortification is the most difficult out of all the strategies as forgiveness is difficult for people to give but blame and shame are the first things people do.

The second part of the chorus goes into the results of the image repair from Wallen's point of view, which is "I thought you should know, I got me a new girl down there in Jefferson City, and She let's me fish whenever I want to" (See Appendix D, Chorus, Lines 4-6). When applying image repair theory, this is part of Wallen's corrective action which is sobriety. While he does not explicitly say he is sober, he is describing his current place in life, and according to chorus he is not living the same lifestyle of partying and drinking that he was before the video released. Wallen spending time fishing is less time he is spending drinking alcohol, keeping his sobriety. This line serves as the results of his image repair at the time of release. While there is not explicit image repair strategies that are seen in this part of the chorus, it does show the results of his image repair and what his image repair looks like, as it will look different for every person

or organization doing image repair. This makes Wallen's image repair look simpler and not overly complicated, basically just him doing anything else besides drinking and partying.

### *Second Verse*

The second verse goes more into Wallen asking how things are with his family, and while there is not explicit image related things in this verse, certain lines show the humanity of people and how image repair is not only for major situations or public figures, but is something that normal people have to do frequently because humans are not perfect. The verse starts with "Oh by the way momma, didn't mean to ramble on ya, how's everything back at home" (See Appendix D, Verse 2, Lines 1-2). This line does not talk about an image, however, it can be identified as the result of mortification as Wallen is showing care for someone else, which he references in his first apology video where he notes that he felt like he let his family down. This goes back to the central theme of "Don't Think Jesus" which is how forgiveness is difficult for people to give, but is something that is always wanted, and be identified through Benoit's theory as mortification.

The next lines in the verse show that all people must repair their images, in which Wallen shows how his parents have had some instances of image repair, with needing forgiveness for example. Wallen sings "how's that garden coming, is dad still doing dumb s\*\*\*t, and how'd he keep you this long" (See Appendix D, Verse 2 lines 3-5). This line can be interpreted as Wallen showing that his father has had to image repair in the past, which is like the central message of "Don't Think Jesus" which is that image repair is something that everyone does, and usually it starts with mortification with oneself.

### *Possible Instances of Denial and Evading Responsibility*

Because of the overwhelming instances of mortification, corrective action, and reducing offensiveness, there are no instances of denial or evading responsibility in “Thought You should Know”. Accepting responsibly by admitting wrongdoing is the first half of mortification, thus evading responsibility would be contradictory in messaging. There are no instances of denial as Wallen is admitting to his mistakes. Evading responsibility often includes shifting blame of one’s wrongdoing towards someone else, Wallen is doing the opposite of taking the blame for his actions.

### **Central Image Repair Theme Across Artifacts**

The central image repair theme across all Wallen’s image repair including his video statement on Instagram, on Good Morning America with Michael Strahan, and two of his singles “Don’t Think Jesus” and “Thought You Should Know” is mortification. Themes of accepting responsibility are half of the mortification prevalent in all the artifacts. Wallen using the phrase “I’d shame me, I’d blame me” in “Don’t Think Jesus” shows the same remorse and regret for his actions that he shows in the Instagram apology video, and the Good Morning America interview. His use of mortification with accepting responsibility changes his ethos, as it can be interpreted that his change is in his character and deeper than just a simple lifestyle change. Wallen in his Good Morning America interview said that he started questioning himself on if he had a drinking problem, which was part of why he submitted himself to rehab.

The other half of mortification being asking forgiveness is part of the central image repair theme as well as it is an essential part of image repair. “Don’t Think Jesus” brings in the idea that mortification is the hardest strategy in image repair as it requires a loss of all pride, which goes against human nature. Wallen talks about how his lifestyle led up to him saying the racial slur

across all the artifacts, with a central culprit of alcohol. Talks of sobriety in the Instagram video and his time spent in rehab mentioned in the Good Morning America interview, coincide with the lines “he got all three at the first show he played” and “Lord knows I’ve been drinking too much”. Wallen accepted responsibly, starting the first step of mortification, so he could know what steps he had to take in corrective action, so he could finish the second half of mortification being asking for forgiveness from the people he offended. Both videos and “Don’t Think Jesus” can be interpreted as Wallen’s image repair efforts, while “Thought You Should Know” shows more of the results of his image repair with lines such as “That all those prayers you thought you wasted on me, must’ve finally found their way on through.” Part of the central theme of image repair with mortification is how difficult it is for human nature to both give and get forgiveness, as everyone wants to get it but not everyone wants to give it out freely.

The corrective action across all artifacts focuses all on Wallen’s journey to sobriety. Since the racial slur scandal happened, Wallen gave updates to his journey to sobriety with steps including abstaining from alcohol, spending time in rehab, and removing himself from the public eye. Corrective action is the strategy of image repair is mainly prevalent in the two videos, while both songs are more towards themes of forgiveness and conviction, which can be identified as mortification. Wallen’s use of words like “drinking too much” and “figures he’ll pray cause what else could he do” show many of the corrective action steps he took towards sobriety and his time in prayer through his faith helped repair his image. Wallen’s journey of corrective action can be identified across the two videos and “Don’t Think Jesus” as reducing offensiveness, while “Thought You Should Know” serves more as the results of Wallen’s image repair efforts. While Wallen was not reducing his offensiveness in the artifacts, he did tell how he reduced his offensive behavior mainly in the two videos as he talked about how country music and himself

should do better at understanding that words and actions matter, especially when it comes to sensitive topics like race.

### **Closing Statement**

Wallen spent his time in image repair across a span of over a year, using a mix of different strategies to repair the damage done to his image. Wallen mainly showed instances of image repair with a mortification strategy, both accepting responsibility and ending with forgiveness while having corrective action conducted between the two strategies. Wallen's videos focus more on corrective action than the songs as he talks about the corrective actions that he did including sobriety, removing himself, and other people. The songs show his image repair with mortification being the focus. The forgiveness side can be identified through "Don't Think Jesus" and Wallen also shows how giving forgiveness is hard for people to give, but it is something that all people want. "Thought You Should Know" is Wallen using a mix of mortification and corrective action, by first admitting wrongdoing with his mention of drinking too much alcohol, and then talking about how his image had been changed so far. The videos and the songs work to clean up Wallen's image with all artifacts bring out his humanity by asking for forgiveness.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The research question for this study is “Did country music star Morgan Wallen successfully repair his image after the racial slur scandal?” The question asks if any image repair strategies can be seen and if so, are they successful in his image repair? The research questioned how Wallen repaired his image after a video was released of him saying a racial slur.

### Discussion

When viewing Wallen’s current image in culture, one can see evidence of image repair from his recent successes. While Wallen was banned from attending or receiving awards from The Academy of Country Music, the Billboard Music Awards, and the Country Music Awards, he was eventually welcomed back to perform his hit radio single “You Proof” which is filled with the clever wordplay Wallen is known for within his music and songwriting. Wallen’s first releases after the racial slur scandal showed similar strategies of image repair, with both singles sitting on his latest album *One Thing At A Time* that add to the overall theme of that album. Wallen’s album sales never truly suffered from the scandal, as Wallen dominated the Billboard charts, and the iTunes country charts for months. However, his image was what truly suffered as his singles were pulled from country radio and he was suspended from his label Big Machine.

The main image repair theme across both Wallen’s videos and his singles is Mortification, but forgiveness specifically. When analyzing for asking for forgiveness and mortification, forgiveness is positioned as something that all people want, however, it is something that most people do not want to give. Mortification in other situations starts with accepting responsibility just as Wallen’s image repair started. The pleas for forgiveness worked, as Wallen found himself invited back to award shows and into selling out arenas. However, while his image was repaired, Wallen still kept his “outlaw” persona. When looking at his

successes, it can be argued that nothing can slow him down, as his latest album *One thing at a Time* has broken record after record, while only being out since March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.



*One Thing At A Time*

Denial and evading responsibility were not present in the rhetoric in most of the artifacts due to Wallen's image repair strategies leaning so far towards mortification, corrective action, and reducing offensiveness. Wallen accepted responsibility for his actions, thus using denial and evading responsibility would have been counter intuitive.

William Benoit's image repair theory can be applied to repairing a damaged image by implementing specific strategies such as mortification, denial, corrective action, and reducing offensiveness. The results of the study showed that some repair strategies work better for certain situations than others. While Wallen's image repair efforts have been successful so far from the eyes of the industry, his image in the eyes of consumers was not as badly damaged in the first place. The results show that image repair can be successful when looking from the viewpoint of



this industry. However, after looking through the research, Wallen has two images to uphold. The two images are from the viewpoint of the industry, and the other from Wallen's most ardent supporters.

### **Why the Approach**

The approach of this study was to study Wallen's rhetoric look for image repair strategies within the artifacts. This approach was chosen for this study to analyze Wallen's efforts to repair his damaged image, while using Benoit's image repair theory as a framework. This approach also helped the scholar of the study control his bias while conducting the study. The scholar being a songwriter himself, he was able to use Benoit's theory to analyze the songs as artifacts for image repair strategies. The approach of using the theory as a lens for analysis on the two apology videos allowed for analyzing the transcript in conjunction with non-verbal communication from watching the videos. Image repair theory in rhetorical criticism looks for repair strategies allowing the researcher to look for the strategies across the different artifacts for patterns in image repair strategies.

### **Wallen's Current Image**

Wallen's current image in the eyes of the public can be viewed as if it never changed. He is often viewed as exhibiting the same "outlaw-persona" he did before the incident, which is still common in country music. His image from the eyes of the industry was repaired, as just like any industry, money is what keeps it afloat and Wallen's music, tours, merchandise, and songwriting make a lot of it. Wallen's last album *One Thing at A Time*, sold 501,000 units in its debut week, the biggest single-week number for any country album since Taylor Swift's *Red (Taylor's Version)* which released on 2021 (Lipshutz et al., 2023). Wallen also scored 36 spots on the Billboard Hot 100 chart, with the number one spot being his hit single "Last Night". When

viewing Wallen's success as evidence of his image repair results, a conclusion can be made that Wallen's image repair efforts have been successful.

Wallen does address his past dealings with alcohol in his latest release with songs such as "I Wrote the Book", "Dying Man", "Me + All Your Reasons", and with the two artifacts "Don't Think Jesus" and "Thought You Should Know". However, there are also other songs on the album that show themes of alcohol use not as a problem such as his hit "You Proof", and other songs like "Man Made a Bar", "Last Night", and "Born With A Beer In My Hand." While Wallen's image is repaired from the damage done from him using the racial slur, his image with regards to alcohol use has not changed much when looking at the themes present on his latest album. The major image repair theme of mortification is prevalent in Wallen's rhetoric in the album, as there is both acknowledging wrongdoing and asking for forgiveness, and both have been successful.

### **Two Images**

After analyzing the artifacts for evidence of image repair, two different images became evident as Wallen's financial success never slowed down with album sales due to his massive loyal fanbase, however he disappeared from country radio, shunned by the industry, and canceled a tour that was expected to sell out arenas across the globe. Applying image repair when analyzing the artifacts revealed that there two images that Wallen was putting on display, trying to manage.

#### ***Image from Supporters***

Wallen still had support from his most ardent supporters immediately after the scandal as they believed that he was a victim of cancel culture. Evidence of support for Wallen was seen with the \$500,000 album sales that skyrocketed as he was pulled off country radio. While Wallen

and his management team decided to donate the revenue to an organization supporting African Americans, the massive support from his followers is what made that happen. Wallen worked to repair the image from his supporters' point of view however, how he ended up being viewed as "country's favorite outlaw". Wallen's connection to southern culture is possibly what caused him to avoid as little damage to his image towards supporters as possible. The split image conclusion from this study shows that one image was more damaged than the other. The majority of Wallen's image repair was directed towards both images however, the image that needed repair was the industry that condemned his actions.

Because of Wallen's most loyal supporters not being offended by his actions enough to boycott his music, from their eyes Wallen did not have a broken image. Therefore, Wallen's image repair was geared towards the industry that condemned his actions. Wallen's loyal listeners likely come from areas of the south where "dixie" culture is still alive today and do not get offended by racial slurs as much as other cultures would. Wallen is still seen as an outlaw in the genre, however he has not been in the news for another scandal at the same caliber as the other since he said the racial slur. Wallen had a genuine change towards fans who were critical of his actions. Wallen asking people to not defend him showed that he understood his actions, and he was genuine about changing his behavior. Wallen currently is still marketed as "country's favorite outlaw" so his image was repaired but still kept many of same things he was involved with before the scandal such as alcohol, which is a part of "dixie" or southern culture.

### ***Image from the Industry***

The country music industry brought Wallen's consequences for his actions, as his most ardent supporters stood by him after he used the racial slur. Wallen's image from the industry was repaired as he was welcomed back to the spotlight through award show appearances, his

current tour, and being featured on radio hits with fellow country artists like HARDY's "Red" and ERNEST's "Flower Shops". Wallen's rhetoric when repairing his image appeared as he was seeking forgiveness from the people he had hurt and from the public, however, the rhetoric of the artifacts and Wallen's current success shows that his image repair had a greater effect on his image from the point of view from the country music industry. When a crisis occurs, it cannot be ignored, so Wallen could not just stay silent, and neither could the country music industry as it had an image or reputation to uphold as well. The industry practiced strategic silence and broke their silence at the time they thought it was right.

With Wallen breaking records through album sales, streams, and selling out arenas, industry professionals believed that the music industry would only let him be out for a season because he so much money. Since the United States was in political unrest due to instances of death of unarmed African Americans at the hands of police, the country music industry likely had to bluntly condemn Wallen's actions, causing to Wallen repairing his image to be welcomed back into the industry. The industry had a reckoning within itself with a past of racism, after Wallen's racial slur they forced him to repair his image, while also keeping theirs' intact.

### **Prior Expectations**

Just like other celebrities wrapped up in controversy, they sometimes come out of controversy unscathed due to money. Because of this, the scholar believed that Wallen's image would be repaired back to how it was before the racial slur scandal. Other studies using image repair theory have been conducted on other public figures and most results showed images being successfully repaired. The scholar being a songwriter himself, believed that themes of forgiveness and conviction would be prevalent in the artifacts that were songs when analyzed using the Benoit's theory instead of listening casually. Before analyzing the artifacts, the

researcher expected for there to be only one image present, with that being both Wallen's fans and the country music industry as one image.

### **How the Rhetoric Matched Expectations**

The rhetoric of Wallen's image repair was expected when viewing from the eyes of country music industry, as it has welcomed him back with open arms. However, his image from the eyes of a consumer was not repaired as heavily because they supported him either way. Since he has been welcomed back into the industry, his image repair outside of Benoit's theory has resulted in him embracing an "outlaw persona" which is seen in the themes of him accepting responsibility for his actions like alcohol use and forgiveness, but other themes of viewing alcohol in the opposite manner. The current debates over "cancel culture" also led the scholar to expect that Wallen's image would likely recover, since it can be inferred from his album sales skyrocketing, shortly after the scandal. The scholar knew of Wallen's success before the scandal, and was not surprised that he is currently breaking records with his most recent release *One Thing at a Time*.

### **Limitations and Bias of the Study**

One limitation of the study is the number of artifacts for analysis. With more artifacts, the scholar could have had more content to cross reference when drawing conclusions. Different artifacts could have also showed different image repair strategies, which could have shown different results in image repair strategies in Wallen's rhetoric. Another limitation in this study was not having the ability to interview Wallen personally, that would have allowed analysis of not only Wallen's words in his rhetoric, but his nonverbal communication as well. A limitation through bias of the researcher is that he listens to Wallen's music and grew up in the south, which makes him familiar with southern culture. Possible bias can be from the researcher

enjoying Wallen's music and country music along with his experience as a songwriter primarily writing country music. The researcher's enjoyment of country music could be possible bias as well, as he believes that country music is the "soundtrack to life" through its realism, true stories, and deep emotional connection.

### **Future Recommendations**

Another study involving Wallen's songs as artifacts could apply narrative paradigm as a lens to analyze what stories within those songs are being told and comparing them to his video non-music appearances. This study would test narrative paradigm to see if it is a theory on solid ground. Narrative paradigm could be used as a lens to analyze an album for storytelling strategies, to test if humans are natural-born storytellers. A development of this study would be to analyze Wallen's image over a longer period. More songs as artifacts in a future study for research would allow the researcher to criticize a full album, and could draw conclusions of how a full album tells a story, repairs an image, etc.

Other future recommendations of this study would be to get an interview with the public figure that is the focus of the research. This would allow more artifacts to be analyzed with using both documents and an in-person interview. An interview would be able to show non-verbal communication which would be another source of research.

### **Contributions to the Field of Communication**

The study contributes tested evidence of William Benoit's image repair theory. The results of this study encourage use of this theory, particularly in crisis communication. This study also brings in new kinds of artifacts in the form of songs as methods of communication that can be analyzed for rhetoric. Music can communicate a message and can be just as powerful as simple interpersonal communication. Music appeals heavily towards the pathos of listeners

through telling stories and sending messages. Artifacts in rhetorical analysis are usually speeches, films, or books, however the study brings in music as a different type of artifact in the field of communication. Using songs can bring in crossover appeal from songwriting and music academics to research how to communicate within songs. This study can grow new, similar studies that use theories such as narrative paradigm and para social relation theory to conduct rhetorical analyses through a similar perspective.

This study adds a possible counter to a hole in Benoit's image repair theory being para social relation theory as the answer to what happens if the public follows a celebrity or public figure, but the public figure has multiple images to uphold. The study shows the effectiveness of Benoit's image repair strategies and what strategies work best for certain situations. The study adds credibly to crisis communication and public relations in working to repair one's image after it is damaged by determining what strategies work best for the situation. The study contributes to the standard of what a crisis is, explains what an image is, and how to manage one better.

### **Closing Statement**

This rhetorical analysis studied the image repair efforts of country music artist Wallen by applying William Benoit's image repair theory to analyze the rhetoric of his initial apology video, his interview on *Good Morning America*, and two of his recent songs "Don't Think Jesus", and "Thought You Should Know". The analysis of the artifacts shows signs of mortification, reducing offensiveness, and corrective action in his rhetoric. Wallen's image repair efforts were successful as he is back to making albums and touring like he was before his image was damaged. This was a genuine change, as Wallen has not found himself back in headlines for a similar offense since he drunkenly said the racial slur. This study shows the success of

applying William Benoit's image repair theory, and how it is applied when there are two images present.



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## Appendix A

Wallen's apology video that was posted on his Instagram on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021

**Wallen:**

### Paragraph 1

Hey y'all, it's Morgan. I'm long overdue to make a statement regarding my last incident. I wanted to collect my thoughts, seek some real guidance, and come to you with a complete thought before I did. I was made aware of the video being posted to TMZ with hardly any time to think before it was released to the public.

### Paragraph 2

I was asking if I wanted to apologize, and of course I did. , I wrote many detailed thoughts and only a portion of those got used, which painted me in a even more careless light. I'm here to hopefully show you that that's not the truth. The video you saw was me on our 72 of 72 of a bender, and that's not something I'm proud of either.

### Paragraph 3

Obviously the, the natural thing to do is to apologize further and just continue to apologize, because you got caught and that's not what I wanted to do. I let so many people down and who mean a lot to me and who have given so much to me, and it's just not fair. I let my parents down and they're the furthest thing from the people, from the person in that video.

### Paragraph 4

I let my son down and I'm not okay with that. So, this week I've been waiting to say anything further until I got the chance to apologize to those closest to me that I knew I personally heard. I also accepted some invitations from some amazing black

organizations, some executives and, and leaders to engage in some, some very real and honest conversations.

#### **Paragraph 5**

I'll admit to you, I was pretty nervous to accept those, those invitations. The very people I hurt. And they had every right to step on my neck while I was down to, to be, to not show me any grace. But they did the exact opposite. They offered me grace, and they, they also paired that with an offer to learn and to grow.

#### **Paragraph 6**

And I'll be honest, you know, that kindness, really inspired me to, to dig deeper, on how to do something about. And one thing I've learned already is, I'm specifically sorry for is that it matters. My words matter. A word can truly hurt a person, and at my core, that's not what I'm okay with. This week I heard firsthand some personal stories from black people that honestly shook me and I know what I'm going through this week doesn't even compare to some of the trials I heard about from them.

#### **Paragraph 7**

I came away from those discussions with a deep appreciation for them. Clearer understanding of the weight of my words. I wish the circumstances were different for me to learn these things, but I'm also glad it started the process for me to do so. I've got many more things to learn, but I already know that I don't want to add to any division.

#### **Paragraph 8**

This week was a big lessons that sometimes we can do just that without even knowing it. Our actions matter, our words matter, and I just wanna encourage anyone watching to



please learn from my. , there's no reason to downplay what I did. It matters, and please know I'm carefully choosing my next steps in repair.

### **Paragraph 9**

I want to end this update hopefully on a more positive note. Since that video was taken, I've been sober for nine days. It's not all that long of a time, but it's enough to know the man and that video is not the man that I'm trying to be. I've had this week to think about times when I'm sober and I'm really proud of who I am and, and my actions for most, for the most part in those.

### **Paragraph 10**

When I look on the times that I'm not, it seems to be where the majority of my mistakes are made. So, I decided to go off the grid for a little while and get used to making good decisions. I want my team, my family, my friends, and even strangers to trust me. Hell, I want to trust me. Who knows if I'll be able to live down all the mistakes I made, but I'm certainly gonna try.

### **Paragraph 11**

I'm gonna spend some time taking back controls in my. living healthy and being proud of my actions. And lastly, I have one favor to ask. I appreciate those who still see something in me and have defended me, but for today, please don't. I was wrong. It's on me. I take ownership for this and I fully accept any penalties I'm facing.

### **Paragraph 12**

The timing of my return is solely upon me and the work I put in. I still had a lot of really good people in my corner trying to help me and I appreciate them more than you know. I

appreciate you more than. This entire situation is ugly right now, but I'll keep searching for ways to become the example instead of being made one in closing.

**Paragraph 13**

I'm not trying to be a holy roller or anything, but this week I remembered a passage from Paul that always stood out to me, and I'm thinking maybe a moment like this is why. In first Corinthians 13:11, it says, when I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, reason like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childishness. That's what I'm gonna be doing for the next little bit. God bless.

## **Appendix B**

Interviewer: Michael Strahan

Interviewee: Morgan Wallen

Date: July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021

Location: Good Morning America, ABC Studios, New York, NY

### **Paragraph 1**

There's gonna be a lot of people who are gonna watch this interview and say, he is only sitting down because he wants to clean up his image. It's all a performance. But what do you say to that?

### **Paragraph 2**

I understand that. You know, I understand that, that I'm not ever gonna make you know, everyone happy. I can only come tell my truth and, and that's all I know to do.

### **Paragraph 3**

When did you realize that what you had done was a big deal?

### **Paragraph 4**

My manager called me probably two hours before, before the video came out.

You know, he was like, are you sitting down? And, and no one's ever called me and said that before I went to one of my friends has a house, you know, out in the in the middle of nowhere.

Just sitting in that house. Trying to figure out what it is I'm supposed to do. So, so take me back to that night.

**Paragraph 5**

I had some, some of my, you know, longtime friends in town, you know, we had kind of just been partying all weekend and we figured we'd just go hard for the two or three days that they were there.

**Paragraph 6**

How did this happen? Out of nowhere? You just refer to someone with a racial slur?

**Paragraph 7**

No, I don't think it just happened, you know, I was around some of my friends and, we say dumb stuff together. It was. In our minds, it's playful. You know, I don't know if that sounds ignorant, but it, that's really where it came from. And it's wrong.

**Paragraph 8**

And had there been no video of the incident, we obviously wouldn't be sitting here right now. This is not the first time you said the word, this is the word that you use frequently amongst your friends.

**Paragraph 9**

I wouldn't say frequently. No, not frequently. It was just around this certain group of friends I would. In what way were it used? You know, it's one of my best friends. He, we were all clearly drunk and I was asking his girlfriend to, to take care of him because he was drunk and he was leaving. I didn't mean it any derogatory manner at all.

**Paragraph 10**

There are a lot of people gonna say, okay, we've been drunk. We never used the word. Even when you're drunk, there are certain things you do and you don't do. What made you think that the word was ever appropriate to use?

**Paragraph 11**

I'm not sure. I think I was just ignorant about it. I don't think I sat down and was like, Hey, is this right or is this wrong?

**Paragraph 12**

And do you know the history of the word?

**Paragraph 13**

Oh, yeah. I've heard some stories in the, in the initial conversations that I had after that. Just how some people are, treated even still today. And I'm just like, I haven't seen that with my eyes. That pain or that or that insignificant feeling or whatever it is that it makes you feel that

**Paragraph 14**

That goes back to slavery used by white people to dehumanize. Black people make them feel less than. It's, it's also, the thing is you dig deeper. A word that a lot of, a lot of black people heard before they were terrorized, beaten, or even possibly killed. So, it's a word that I've been called. Makes you mad, makes you angry, make you feel, um, good at all. So do you understand why it makes black people so upset.

**Paragraph 15**

I don't know how to put myself in their shoes because I'm not, you know, but I do understand, especially when I say that I'm using it playfully or whatever, ignorantly, I understand that that must sound, like he doesn't understand

**Paragraph 16**

Who did you speak with?

**Paragraph 17**

BMAC is one of the first organizations that I spoke with. Kevin Lyles, who spoke with Eric Hutcherson, with BB Winans is another one that I spoke with. I went and checked myself into rehab, and for 30 days I spent some time out in San Diego, California. You know, just trying to figure it out. Why, why am I acting this way? Do I have an alcohol problem? Do I have a, a deeper issue?

**Paragraph 18**

Before this incident, my album was already doing well, it was already being well received by critics and by fans. Me and my team noticed that whenever this whole incident happened, that there was a spike in my sales . So, we tried to calculate what the number of, how much it actually spiked, you know, from this incident. And we got to a number somewhere around \$500,000. We decided to do, to donate that money to some organizations. BMAC being the first one.

**Paragraph 19**

So, do you believe there is a race problem in country music overall?

**Paragraph 20**

I mean it would seem that way. Yeah. You know, I haven't really sat and thought about that..

**Appendix C**

**Song: Don't Think Jesus**

**Artist: Morgan Wallen**

**Written By: Jessi Alexander, Chase McGill, and Mark Holman**

**Produced by: Joey Moi**

**Sources: Big Loud Records/ Mercury Records/ Republic Records/ Warner Chappell Music**

**Verse 1**

Boy gets a guitar and starts writing songs

About whiskey and women and getting too stoned

He got three at the first show he played

Hometown said, "I don't think Jesus done it this way"

Boy moves to city lives fast and goes hard

Starts chasing the devil through honky-tonk bars

Ignoring the voices in his head that say, "I don't think Jesus done it this way"

**Chorus**

If I was him, I'd say "To hell with you, ain't no help with you"

"Find someone else to give Heaven to, I'm telling you"

I'd shame me, I'd blame me

I'd make me pay for my mistakes

But I don't think Jesus does it that way

**Verse 2**

Boy's all alone got no one to turn to

He figures he'll pray, 'cause what else could he do?

He said, "I wish you would've woke me up an easier way"

But I don't think Jesus does it that way

**Chorus**

If I was him, I'd say "To hell with you, ain't no help with you"

"Find someone else to give Heaven to, I'm telling you"

I'd shame me, I'd blame me

I'd make me pay for my mistakes

But I don't think Jesus does it that way

**Verse 3**

World likes to rear back and throw a few stones

So boy wants to throw a few stones of his own

But Lord knows I ain't perfect, and it ain't my place

And I don't think Jesus done it that way

Are y'all sure the Jesus done it that way?



**Appendix D**

**Song: Thought You Should Know**

**Artist: Morgan Wallen**

**Written by: Nicolle Galyon, Miranda Lambert, Morgan Wallen**

**Produced by: Joey Moi**

**Sources: Big Loud Records/ Mercury Records/ Republic Records/ Warner Chappell Music**

**Verse 1**

What's goin' on, mama?

Something just dawned on me

I ain't been home in some months

Been chasin' songs and women

Makin' some bad decisions

God knows I'm drinkin' too much

Yeah, I know you've been worrying 'bout me

You've been losin' sleep since '93

**Chorus**

I thought you should know

That all those prayers you thought you wasted on me

Must've finally made their way on through

I thought you should know

I got me a new girl down there in Jefferson City, and

She lets me fish whenever I want to

Yeah, I'm still proud of where I came from

Still your only dang son

Can you believe I'm on the radio?

Just thought you should know, thought you should know, thought you should know

### **Verse 2**

Oh, by the way, mama, didn't mean to ramble on ya

How's everything back at home?

Yeah, how's that garden comin'?

Is dad still doing dumb s\*\*\*t?

And how'd he keep you this long?

Yeah, I'm sorry that I called you so late

I just miss you, but anyways

### **Chorus**

I thought you should know

That all those prayers you thought you wasted on me

Must've finally made their way on through

I thought you should know

I got me a new girl down there in Jefferson City, and

She lets me fish whenever I want to

Yeah, I'm still proud of where I came from

Still your only dang son

Can you believe I'm on the radio?

Just thought you should know, thought you should know, thought you should know

### **Bridge**

Yeah, I know you've been worrying 'bout me

You've been losing sleep since '93

### **Chorus**

I thought you should know

That all those prayers you thought you wasted on me

Must've finally made their way on through

I thought you should know

That I really like this girl down in Jefferson City, and

Turns out she's a lot like you

Yeah, I'm still proud of where I came from

Still your only dang son

The bus is leavin' so I gotta roll

Just thought you should know, thought you should know, thought you should know

**Outro**

I thought you should know, thought you should know

I thought you should know, thought you should know, thought you should know