

# Enacting Compassion: Enactment and the Theory of Image Restoration in Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk, "The Price of Shame."



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# Enacting Compassion: Enactment and the Theory of Image Restoration in Monica Lewinsky's TED Talk, "The Price of Shame."

Eric Mishne

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*Cyberbullying is an ever-growing concern, and its effects are not escaping the public eye. Monica Lewinsky spoke at TED Vancouver in 2015 about the effects of cyberbullying and suggested a change in the cultural attitude online toward one of compassion. This paper argues that components of William Benoit's Theory of Image Restoration (TIR) are relevant to understanding Lewinsky's speech, but principles of enactment (Daughton, 1989) are more salient to her message and achievement of her mission. In light of the complexity of Lewinsky's story, the author explores an expansion of TIR labeled image renovation that adds variance to the function of TIR strategies.*

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*Key Words: Enactment, Theory of Image Restoration, Lewinsky, Rhetoric, TED Talk, Speeches, Cyberbullying*

When Monica Lewinsky's name first appeared in the media, impressions of her were far from positive. For the intern who had an affair with the President of the United States, Bill Clinton, there was no shortage of malicious insults broadcasted by the media. Her public image was instantly marred by all manner of crass and vulgar remarks one can imagine about a woman, and due to Clinton's refusal to say her name in public, she became known as "that woman." However, while the President was elusive in his word choice, the media adhered to no such discretion. The "media maelstrom," (Lewinsky, 2015) as Lewinsky calls it, played a significant role in her downward spiral into depression and self-destructive emotions. In the about-to-boom early days of the Internet, online public shaming was only just beginning, and Monica Lewinsky was one of its first victims.

2018 marks the 20 year anniversary of the scandal that rocked the Clinton presidency. Monica Lewinsky's role in this scandal began as an intern in the White House. In early 1998, rumors of an affair between Lewinsky and Clinton were shared with a committee investigating a wholly separate issue related to the president. However, throughout the following months, the extensive federal investigation into the alleged affair led by Kenneth Starr dominated news media and continued to cast shame and guilt on Lewinsky. Grand jury testimonies, recorded

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phone conversations, and a 445-page report (Waxman & Fabry, 2018) resolved in early 1999 with an impeachment trial and full acquittal for President Clinton. *TIME* magazine reports that over 2,000 minutes of broadcast time had been devoted to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal (Waxman & Fabry, 2018).

No doubt, Lewinsky's self-concept as well as her public identity were shaped by the prevalence of media influence. Spurred on by news media and the Internet, her identity was marred by all manner of degrading terms. In her 2015 TED Talk, Lewinsky explains that the "mobs of virtual stone throwers" branded her "as a tramp, tart, slut, whore, bimbo, and, of course, that woman." In the late 90s, Lewinsky, who was at the time 22-years-old, became the personification of an adulteress. Even the music industry tapped into her story with over 70 songs containing direct sexual references in conjunction with her name (Davis, 2015). Finally, shrouded in shame and humiliation, she retreated from the spotlight and avoided the public eye. However, her reputation followed her relentlessly.

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Although several publications and even HBO approached Monica Lewinsky over the past two decades (Lewinsky, 2014), she often declined any formal interviews or stories. The few times she granted an interview in hopes that someone will finally listen to her side of the story, it backfired, confirming that people only wanted to make a spectacle out of the events of 1998. In her 2014 *Vanity Fair* article, "Survival and Shame," she shares a side of the story that describes her difficult journey since 1998. She recounts how even when seeking employment, her past would come up. Lewinsky describes how some interviewers even made jokes about what she may or may not do on the job – a not-so-subtle reference to sexual favors (Lewinsky, 2014). Monica Lewinsky had a public image problem. She was trapped in an identity that she desperately wanted to change.

When Lewinsky published her article in *Vanity Fair*, she was able to tell the story in her own way and made efforts to change that identity. In addition to recounting some of the struggles she has had since 1998 and the sexist treatment that was magnified due to her reputation, her article makes strong claims that she is ready to "burn the beret and bury the blue dress, and move forward" (Lewinsky, 2014, para. 56). Her dedication to put the past behind her and look toward more important social issues is what set the stage for her 2014 presentation at the *Forbes' 30 under 30 Summit*, and for her TED Talk in Vancouver in 2015.

This article explores Lewinsky's TED Talk as a form of image restoration by suggesting that she engages in rhetorical enactment to build her reputation. Her talk titled "The Price of Shame" focuses on internet harassment, and online shaming, encompassed by the term *cyberbullying*. She uses her own experiences to describe the pain felt when it feels like the entire world is able to lash out at you and demean your very existence. The speech moves seamlessly from her personal narrative, to a critique of cultural values that permit shaming and harassment to exist online, to a proposed solution for this "epidemic." Her critique appropriately presumes a lack of compassion from media producers and Internet users. She calls her audience to "communicate online with compassion, consume news with compassion, and click with

compassion.” This theme of a compassionless climate on the Internet permeates her talk, and she identifies it as the primary cause of cyberbullying. Lewinsky enacts compassion throughout her speech as she shows compassion for her former boss, for the victims of cyberbullying, and for the perpetrators of internet shaming.

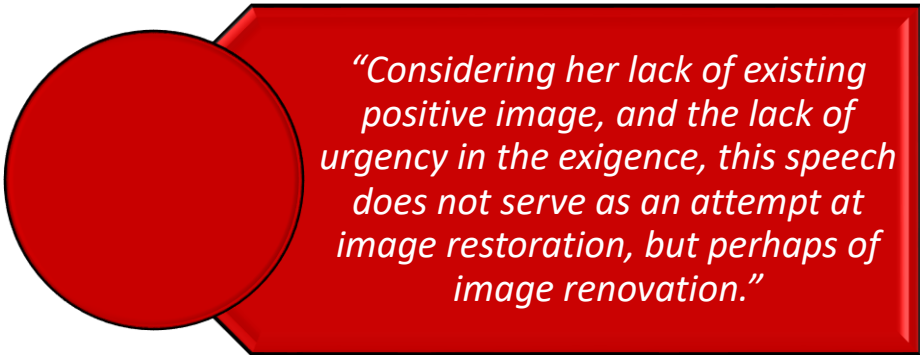
### **The Possibility of the Theory of Image Restoration**

When considering a damaged public image such as Monica Lewinsky’s, rhetoricians often turn to William Benoit’s Theory of Image Restoration (TIR; Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). This theory posits five strategies rhetors use when attempting to restore their image (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). TIR is largely used to explain how public figures who have held a positive reputation overcome events that have tarnished their public image (Benoit, 1997). When a public figure is caught in a scandal, or is perceived to have done something disagreeable, they engage strategies that would restore their former reputation.

In order for this theory to be applicable, two criteria must be fulfilled. First, the individual in question must be guilty of the infraction. Or at least, they must be perceived to be guilty by many people (Benoit, 1997). Additionally, the offense must be distasteful to a salient audience (Benoit, 1997). Once the individual meets these criteria, they begin attempts to repair the damage that has been done. There are five strategies that Benoit suggests one employs to restore their image in the aftermath of an accusation: *Denial*, *evasion of responsibility*, *reducing offensiveness of event*, *corrective action*, and *mortification* (Benoit, 1997). One could deny that the event occurred at all, eliminating the possibility of their involvement (Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002), or one could engage in denial by shifting the blame off of themselves and onto someone else (Benoit & Brinson, 1999). Second, a rhetor may engage in the evasion of responsibility, in which they may assert that they were provoked to do the action or say they were simply reacting to something done against them therefore absolving them of responsibility (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994), claim that they acted without proper information or without control over the situation (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002), or claim the incident was an accident (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002). When attempting to reduce the offensiveness of an event, a rhetor can attempt “to identify himself with something viewed favorably by the audience” (Ware & Linkugel, p. 277, 1973) or, similarly, attempt to minimize the negative feelings toward the action (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). A more aggressive approach is for the rhetor to vilify their accuser in an attempt to make themselves seem like a victim (Benoit, 1997) or offer “payment or restitution to the victim of the offensive act” (Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002, p. 381). The fourth strategy rhetors could employ in their efforts to restore their image is corrective action. This is when one pledges or attempts to restore things to the “state of affairs existing before the offensive action” (Benoit, p. 254, 1997). The final strategy of image restoration is mortification, and suggests that one might confess and acknowledge their wrongdoing as an effort to regain respect (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994). Taking responsibility for your actions can mitigate negative repercussions from the wrongdoing (Benoit, 1997).

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There is potential for TIR to be applied to Lewinsky's TED Talk as she seems to have engaged in a number of the strategies outlined by TIR. For example, she engages in evasion of responsibility saying "so like me, at 22, a few of you may have also taken wrong turns and fallen in love with the wrong person, maybe even your boss." She names "love" as the guilty party. She also engages in reducing the offensiveness of the action by attacking her accusers, the media. Statements like "news sources plastered photos of me all over to sell newspapers, banner ads online, and to keep people tuned to the TV" make it clear that she is unhappy with the way the situation was handled by those in the media and on the Internet. She also engages in mortification, explicitly saying "not a day goes by that I'm not reminded of my mistake, and I regret that mistake deeply."



*"Considering her lack of existing positive image, and the lack of urgency in the exigence, this speech does not serve as an attempt at image restoration, but perhaps of image renovation."*

However, use of TIR in this way presents three challenges, requiring three divergences from traditional TIR analysis. First, there is no exigence for Lewinsky to begin repairing her reputation. Lewinsky is under no urgency to repair her image. By her own admission, there is

nothing external that prompts her to re-enter the spotlight. She simply said "it's time" (Lewinsky, 2014). Second, Lewinsky's positive public image cannot be restored since it never existed. From the first time the public heard her name, Monica Lewinsky had a negative reputation. Therefore, saying that she could "restore" her image would be inaccurate. Finally, it does not seem that her primary intention is to change her own public image. Her TED Talk dissects the tragic phenomenon of cyberbullying and proposes ideological shifts toward a more compassionate and empathetic Internet that, if accepted and acted on, would reduce the amount of online harassment and abuse.

Considering her lack of existing positive image, and the lack of urgency in the exigence, this speech does not serve as an attempt at image restoration, but perhaps of image renovation. The idea of renovation encompasses taking something and making it significantly better. Consider a home renovation, wherein the goal is not only to repair, but to improve function and add value.

### **Principles of Enactment**

Lewinsky's oration employs narrative accounts and empathetic pleas for the general population to join her in stopping the practice of internet shaming. Lewinsky exemplifies this message by engaging in an empathetic inspection of the causes and repercussions of cyberbullying – a message that would not be as poignant had she not taken time to recount her narrative in the speech. She discusses people and events from her past and connects them to the topic at hand. She offers both compassionate critique and empathetic admonition toward those

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who might engage in malicious online activity. Her address is not angry, hateful, or even aggressive in her reproaches. Throughout her address, she personifies rhetorical principles of enactment.

The principle of enactment concerns a rhetor who exemplifies the message that they are sharing (Charland, 2007). Daughton (1989) discusses how Angelina Grimke spoke at Pennsylvania Hall in 1838 on the topic of abolition and feminism encouraging her female audience to become active in the fight against these injustices. Grimke's act of speaking was in and of itself an enactment of her message (Daughton, 1989). The way a rhetor presents their message can both demonstrate a need, and satisfy that need (Darr, 2005). For example, when a speaker addresses civility in a civil way, they are both identifying the need and satisfying it (Darr, 2005). Similarly, since at that time of Grimke's Pennsylvania Hall speech, rhetoric was an activity shared only by men (Daughton, 1989), Grimke's speech defied expected gender roles, directly aligning with her message and serving as "the proof" of her own rhetoric (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). Grimke "enacts her advice to the audience and serves as an inspirational example to the sympathetic" (Daughton, 1989, p. 6). Grimke put herself into the public eye as an advocate for women's involvement in abolition and demonstrated the very type of involvement for which she was advocating. As a woman in the 1830s, Grimke was a part of an oppressed group speaking out on behalf of another oppressed group. Additionally, Grimke was a slave owner turned abolitionist. In light of her own experiences on both sides of oppression, her message carried power. Her own experiences "make her an expert" (Daughton, 1989, p. 8) and gives credence to her enacted message. When a rhetor embodies the strength of their message they "can empower themselves, and listeners who identify with them, as they speak" (Daughton, 1989, p. 7).

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Compassion is "a strong feeling of sympathy and sadness for other people's suffering or bad luck and a desire to help" (Cambridge Dictionary). The concept of compassion hinges on one harboring feelings of hurt for another's misfortune or pain and includes not only empathetic feelings, but the desire to minimize someone's pain. The commonly confused empathy and sympathy culminate at compassion and Lewinsky demonstrates the difference as she shows sympathy by expressing her concern for victims of cyberbullying, and shares her empathy by recounting her own similar experiences that allow her to relate to those victims.

While Lewinsky's primary directive may not be to change her public image, she uses the events that shaped her reputation as the platform from which she begins her mission. Her speech begins by relaying a simplified version of her tragic story. In re-counting these events, she does not paint herself as a victim, but rather positions herself to be the ideal spokesperson to defend the cyberbullied and publicly shamed. Without this narrative, her enactment of compassion would not carry the weight that she desires. While recounting her own pain is emotionally

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difficult for her, it's inclusion in her oration is essential to her goals. With that in mind, it becomes easy to identify the rhetorical significance of her choices.

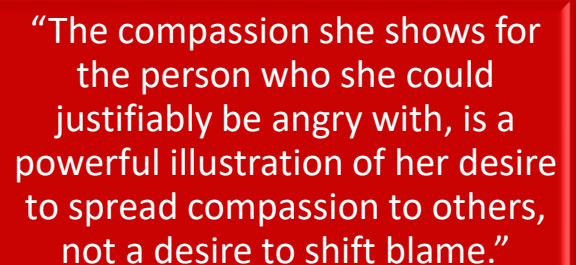
Lewinsky demonstrates compassion in two ways. The first is in how she speaks about certain people or groups of people with active words of kindness, and omission of malice. Her word choice is careful and kind. The presence of caring words and conscientious content is one way she shows compassion. She demonstrates the same kindness that she asks of her listeners fulfilling what Daughton calls enactment of the message (1989). The second method of demonstrating compassion is a little more unconventional. Lewinsky enacts compassion through omission. By avoiding certain attitudes and comments in her oration, and by being sagacious in her critique of the status quo, she demonstrates that she wants to spare her audience the humiliation that she still carries with her.

**Compassion Toward Bill Clinton**

As one examines Lewinsky's talk and notices various ways she enacts compassion, what stands out quite clearly is the absence of name dropping. Lewinsky offers her perspective on the 1998 controversial affair with Bill Clinton. However, she does not once mention the name "Bill Clinton." She does not even say "Clinton." She only mentions him as her "boss" two times in the speech, and she uses the titles "President of the United States," or "President" only once each. When setting up her story she says, "At the age of 22, I fell in love with my boss." This reference is necessary to illustrate the significance and novelty of her experience, but still leaves his name out of the narrative. One of the traditional strategies, for TIR is to shift blame or suggest that one is not as responsible as the public perceives (Benoit, 1997). In leaving Clinton's name out of the narrative she excludes him from her own shame and humiliation in contrast to TIR strategies. Another mention of Mr. Clinton is as a joke, when she suggests that some in her audience may have even fallen in love with their boss, followed with "though your boss probably wasn't the President of the United States of America." Even through her wit, she is respectful toward Mr. Clinton by not using his name. Her entire narrative, which takes up the first eight and a half minutes of her speech, focuses on

her own experience and emotions in the aftermath of the affair. It would have been easy for her to put some of the blame on Mr. Clinton.

However, she shows compassion for him by leaving him out of the conversation, and sparing him from more drama and negative talk.



"The compassion she shows for the person who she could justifiably be angry with, is a powerful illustration of her desire to spread compassion to others, not a desire to shift blame."

She delivers a speech that, when referring to Mr. Clinton, has a soft and kind tone. Immediately after the joke about falling in love with the President of the United States, she comments "life is full of surprises." Her lighthearted delivery is not condemning, but rather is empathetic and kind toward his role in the affair. Lewinsky presents her situation as an

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“improbable romance” and her own “mistake.” She does not blame Mr. Clinton, but rather takes responsibility herself. The compassion she shows for the person who she could justifiably be angry with, is a powerful illustration of her desire to spread compassion to others, not a desire to shift blame.


As Lewinsky demonstrates compassion, specifically toward Mr. Clinton, she addresses the unique situation she is in and acknowledges that she is not unaware of her past. This tactic is helpful to her as she establishes her credibility in the way Grimke describes her status as a former slave owner (Daughton, 1989). Not only does Lewinsky enact compassion, but she positions herself as one who can speak to the specific context of cyberbullying. Her enacting of compassion begins not with strangers on the Internet, but in her darkest memories.

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### Compassion Toward Victims of Internet Shaming

In a speech about cyberbullying, one would expect a speaker to come alongside the bullied. This is certainly the case in this speech. In her closing remarks she emboldens those who suffer from cyberbullying with the encouragement that “you can survive it...you can insist on a different ending to your story.” Additionally, she defends the privacy of celebrities like “Jennifer Lawrence and several others” asserting that public humiliation through private moments has “maximum public embarrassment.” Her positive tone and uplifting attitude display the type of

empathy and compassion for which she advocates.



“[Lewinsky’s] enacting of compassion begins not with strangers on the Internet, but in her darkest memories.”

Additionally, Lewinsky enacts compassion toward the victims of online harassment in how she talks about young people who are bullied.

She shows compassion when she addresses some of the reasons that population is specifically affected. Lewinsky suggests that younger victims are “not developmentally equipped to handle this.” The acknowledgment of a lack of maturity and emotional development is not a slight, or a critique of the bullied, but rather an expression of understanding. She is addressing a contributing factor to the emotional turmoil felt by victims of cyberbullying. At the same time, she is pulling the focus off of the victim and onto the reason the effects of bullying are so great.

Second, we not only see compassion enacted through the presence of encouragement, but also in the absence of blaming or further victimization. When Lewinsky talks about specific examples of victims of cyberbullying, her emotions are raw and visible. She does not hide her passion and heartache. At one point her voice cracks and she begins to cry. Her primary illustration is the story of Tyler Clementi. She tells his story in as little detail as possible, giving her audience only enough background to know what led to the tragic end of Tyler’s life. She describes the situation without using phrases like “gay,” “homosexual,” or “suicide,” words that can sensationalize the situation. Instead of a blunt and insensitive description for the events that



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led to Tyler's bullying, she says that he was "secretly webcammed while being intimate with another man." Similar to the way in which she leaves out details related to Mr. Clinton's involvement in the scandal, she also leaves out details of Tyler Clementi's story. Her tact in the specifics of her storytelling and her soft-spoken delivery enacts compassion.

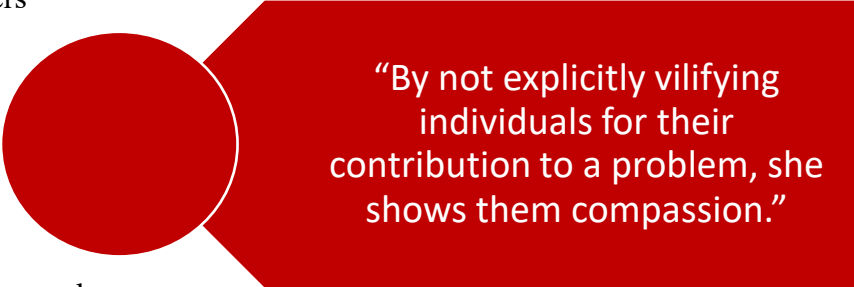
**Compassion Toward the Bullies**

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One of the biggest surprises of Lewinsky's talk is the way she addresses the perpetrators of internet shaming. The expected tone to be taken toward a bully is one of condescension and criticism. However, Lewinsky takes a different approach. She states that "compassionate comments help abate the negativity." She enacts that compassion even toward the "mobs of virtual stone-throwers" by first, not speaking in direct condemnation of the individuals who carry out this injustice, and second, by not placing the blame on individuals.

First, Lewinsky does not once attack any specific person, or even call out bullies as individuals. There is no call to action for people to stop bullying. While at first glance this was bothersome, an examination through the lens of enactment hints at this being strategic. By not explicitly vilifying individuals for their contribution to a problem, she shows them compassion. She uses phrases like "millions of people," "culture," and "we" to illustrate that it is not a problem with a few individuals, but is a problem facing the entirety of society.

There is no shortage of criticism against social villains, and it is counter-cultural to show compassion toward someone who has done something wrong. However, putting someone on the defensive is certainly not the most compassionate way of encouraging change, no matter how egregious the offense. Instead of demanding that people stop doing something, Lewinsky implores all of us to work toward a common goal together saying the issue is "not just about saving myself... what we need is a cultural revolution." Her call to "return to a long-held value of compassion" and to be "upstanders" implores her audience to join her in being compassionate toward those experiencing "ridicule and cyberbullying." She asks all of us to imagine "walking a mile in someone else's headline." This compassionate approach to bringing people together is to Lewinsky's credit as she exemplifies enactment.



**"By not explicitly vilifying individuals for their contribution to a problem, she shows them compassion."**

Second, instead of vilifying these bullies, she discusses internet shaming as a symptom of our culture. She is not blaming any one person, any one type of person, or any specific establishment, but rather is pointing out that we have "slowly been sowing the seeds of shame and public humiliation in our cultural soil." Her condemnation is not against those "stone throwers" who she mentions early in her speech, but rather at society's enabling of such practice. She refrains from throwing her own stones at any particular organization or entity. In speaking to unite her audience from all walks of life, she avoids alienating those who may most need to hear

the message. This method of enactment may very well be her most effective strategy for uniting people under the umbrella of “a long-held value of compassion – compassion and empathy.”

### **Implications for the Extension of TIR**

Because Lewinsky’s strategies’ closely align with TIR, we must consider implications that call for an expansion of TIR. It is noteworthy to see strategies of TIR such as mortification and evasion of responsibility being used in a situation that does not neatly line up with previous TIR analysis. Yet, in light of Monica Lewinsky’s past, and her long sabbatical from anything that would draw public attention, her recent return to the public eye functions to renovate her public image. Her article in *Vanity Fair* and talks given at *Forbes* and TED may not be intentional efforts to reshape her image, but they certainly serve her to that end. Not only do those appearances reshape her public image, but they direct attention away from herself and onto issues she believes are important. Lewinsky uses both the written word and the spoken word to influence the way the public views her. However, given Lewinsky’s 20-year separation from the events that first propelled her into the spotlight, and knowing that her image could not be restored, we must contemplate an extension of the principles of TIR.

I argue that scholars could use TIR to understand how Lewinsky, or anyone finding themselves in the public eye under similar circumstances, attempts to renovate a negative public image into a positive one. When someone enters the public eye under less negative circumstances, they will engage in these strategies of TIR. However, with the goal of renovation one’s purpose would be to establish a positive identity and credibility where such characteristics did not previously exist. George Zimmerman entered the public eye after he killed Trayvon Martin in 2012 (Glynn, 2013). Though he was acquitted of charges for the murder, Zimmerman still has a negative image in many people’s eyes. Paris Hilton entered the public eye amidst a controversial sex tape, and though has since made a name for herself in reality TV, she emerged with a less than reputable image (McLaughlin, 2011). Anthony Weiner was largely unknown outside of his congressional district until a sex scandal propelled him into the spotlight (CNN, 2011). Individuals who have become infamous due to some negative action or accusation must either accept their bad reputation, or make attempts to change it. If the strategies these individuals use to change their public image were to be examined, a theoretical foundation of image renovation would be suitable, and the strategies of TIR can be used if they are reframed. Thus, I argue that the principles of TIR could be extended to include renovation of public image.

An extension of TIR to include image renovation includes two components. First, the reason for engaging in strategies of TIR must be found in a situation where a person desires to change the only public image they have ever held, not return their image to a former state. In other TIR literature, each individual examined has at one time held a generally positive reputation. The approach of “image renovation” would open the door for the actions of individuals like Lewinsky, Zimmerman, and Hilton to be examined. Thus, the second component of image renovation requires that the rhetor be striving to show that they are a person worthy of a positive image. Lewinsky achieves this by attaching herself to a social justice issue. However,

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one could also strive for this goal by highlighting the accomplishments of their past and emphasizing their continued and improved work in that area. In either case, individuals may engage in these same strategies of TIR in an effort to reshape their image, and to shed the only public identity that they hold. Further nuances in the differences between how one attempts to rebuild their identity and how one may attempt to renovate their identity may provide valuable insights into how public figures treat undesirable situations. More concentrated study of image renovating scenarios is required for a robust understanding of this extension of Benoit's theory.

**Conclusion**

Monica Lewinsky's rhetoric in "The Price of Shame" compels her audience to rethink how they view online harassment and cyberbullying. But more than the practical takeaway of showing compassion toward people, one can also understand her demonstration of compassion as a strong illustration of enactment. The compassion she shows toward her former boss, the victims of internet shaming, and the perpetrators of these actions, urges us to take her message to heart, and to judge her rhetoric consistent and compelling.

The principles of TIR that are observed in Lewinsky's talk are insightful and in alignment with the enactment of compassion, but take a new form divergent from former applications. Thus, a new application of TIR is warranted. Enactment as a rhetorical concept is also seen to take a different form throughout Lewinsky's talk. Her cautious omission of certain topics and rhetorical devices lead to the conclusion that enactment could also take form through inaction.

While Monica Lewinsky is still not a respected public figure in the entirety of the public eye she has started renovating an image of a passionate advocate. Her platform will undoubtedly continue to draw attention and inspire others to live out compassion both in their lives and rhetoric. Lewinsky asks her audience to "acknowledge the difference between speaking up with intention and speaking up for attention." The former is what her rhetoric revolves around, and she embodies this concept as she enacts compassion in her words and actions.

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