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Disclosure and identification information increase the benefits of stealing thunder

Thomas I. Vaughan-Johnston[a], Joshua J. Guyer[b], Katie L. Lawrence[c] and Leandre R. Fabrigar[c]

[a]Department of Psychology, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK; [b]Department of Human Science and Technology, IE University, Madrid, Spain; [c]Department of Psychology, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

ABSTRACT

Research shows that preemptively confessing a transgression (stealing thunder) enhances trustworthiness, credibility, or expertise compared to third-party revelations. Recent findings suggest that detailed disclosure about the transgression is key to this effect, yet people often hesitate to share comprehensive details before all facts are known. We propose that sharing information about the confession itself can improve reputation without divulging more about the transgression. Across one main and five supplementary experiments, an integrative data analysis revealed that messages elaborating on why the confession was made (disclosure information) or how the transgressor realized the wrongdoing (identification information) enhanced trustworthiness and credibility, but not expertise, for targets like doctors and politicians. These benefits occurred even without reparative actions.

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Transgressors often face a difficult choice: publicly acknowledge responsibility for their actions, or keep quiet, hoping that a third party does not discover their transgression and publicly reveal the information. Crisis communication practitioners consider both options tempting (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). The act of publicly confessing one's transgression before a third party reveals can do so is known as 'stealing thunder' (Dolnik et al., 2003; McElhaney, 1987; Williams et al., 1993), a social influence tactic shown by legal, marketing, and psychological research to elicit more positive evaluations of a transgressor than if a third party reveals the information first (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012; Dolnik et al., 2003; McElhaney, 1987; Nguyen et al., 2021; Wigley, 2011; Williams et al., 1993; Zhou & Shin, 2017).

The process of stealing thunder is distinct from apologizing, and when stealing thunder the transgressor may not provide an explanation or an apology, nor necessarily express remorse or guilt for their actions. Although most past stealing thunder research has established the reputational benefits derived from the mere act of stealing thunder, surprisingly little is known about the amount of detail transgressors must provide when

CONTACT Thomas I. Vaughan-Johnston Vaughan-JohnstonT@cardiff.ac.uk
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stealing thunder. In other words, while we know that stealing thunder *can* have reputational benefits, less is known about *how* a transgressor should ideally engage in stealing thunder. Existing research on this question suggests that providing highly specific information about one's transgression is essential to obtaining stealing thunder benefits. Indeed, highly detailed messages dilute the perceived scarcity and thus perceived importance of information (consistent with the commodity theory of information; Brock, 1968; Brock & Brannon, 1992), and increase reputational benefits relative to less detailed messages, including perceptions that the transgressor is transparent and remorseful (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Although Nguyen et al. (2021) focused on one key type of information related to stealing thunder – information about the transgression itself – there are several distinct types of information that would likely be of interest to recipients of stealing thunder messages. For example, recipients may also want to know about why the transgressor has chosen to confess when they might obviously have been motivated to keep the transgression secret. Similarly, recipients might want to know how the transgression was detected in the first place such that the confession could occur. Sharing these types of confession-related information might satiate recipients' desire for transparency from the transgressor without forcing the transgressor to give information about the transgression itself, a useful social strategy especially if the transgressor does not (yet) have certain, comprehensive information about the transgressive act. In the present work, we investigate whether sharing confession-related information bestows similar reputational benefits to transgression-related information.

Specificity within stealing thunder messages

There is theoretical basis to suspect that, beyond the act of stealing thunder, the particular information that transgressors share should meaningfully affect their reputation. Transgressions (e.g., crimes, illicit behaviors) are often vivid events that capture people's attention (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) and elicit powerful, negative emotions (Brady et al., 2017), which frequently prompt a careful examination of the transgressor by message recipients. Indeed, both empirical and anecdotal evidence indicates that real-world transgressors are often closely scrutinized, as in cases such as David Letterman's acknowledgment of sexual misconduct with several employees, which was later examined closely by journalists and researchers (see James & Goldwert, 2009; Wigley, 2011). Recipients, often composed of the general public, are motivated to acquire information about the transgressor and their transgression.

At the same time, however, for most transgressors sharing highly specific information about their illicit behavior is probably an unappealing proposition. A key reason is that although stealing thunder is a time-sensitive action (information must be revealed before a third party does so), transgressors may not have all the facts during the early stages of a crisis. Indeed, in some cases (e.g., an accidental offense, a cultural misunderstanding, a change in rules/regulations that the transgressor was not aware of prior to engaging in a certain behavior, etc.), transgressors may not initially know that they have committed a transgression, only later discovering that an offense has been committed, and making the decision to steal thunder. One high-profile example of this was seen when tennis star Maria Sharapova publicly confessed via a press

conference that she had been using a health supplement that had been permitted by WADA and approved by her doctor, but later moved, without her knowledge, to the banned substances list when WADA changed their rules (Piedra, 2016). Interviews with crisis communication practitioners show that transgressors often avoid providing information about their transgressions early on, because little is known and so information might have to be changed or updated later (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Therefore, transgressors will not always have the luxury of following Nguyen et al.'s sound advice about sharing transgression-specific information – even if they want to be (and/or appear to be) transparent. Consequently, it is valuable to know the dimensions of information that transgressors are socially rewarded for sharing. If they cannot, should not, or will not share transgression-related information, then what else can they offer the public?

Confession-specific information: disclosure and identification messages

We suggest that transgressors may benefit by employing a multidimensional approach to stealing thunder that also includes information about how and why they are engaging in a confession. Thus, in addition to providing highly specific information about the transgressive act when stealing thunder (i.e., *transgression information*), we propose that a conceptually distinct action involves explaining the confession itself (i.e., *confession information*). Transgression and confession information are conceptually orthogonal: a transgressor may share no, little, or much transgression information; and may share no, little, or much confession information. The distinction also has practical utility because transgressors may be more able or willing to share specific details about why they are confessing than specific information about the transgression. Transgressors might intuitively prefer to share confession rather than transgression information because confession information seems to focus recipients on the 'silver lining' of the crisis – that the transgressor chose to address it proactively – rather than focusing recipients on the reputationally damaging transgression itself.

Understanding why confession information would be valued requires a theoretical analysis of how people appraise credibility. People are generally viewed as credible (i.e., believable) insofar as they are judged to be trustworthy (i.e., honest), expert (i.e., knowledgeable, competent; Hovland et al., 1953; McGinnies & Ward, 1980), and unbiased (Wallace et al., 2020). Research indicates that stealing thunder is often successful between it enhances perceptions of transgressor credibility (Edwards, 2022; Howard et al., 2006; Williams & Dolnik, 2001). Thus, a transgressor who chooses to provide specific details of their transgression (versus general or moderately detailed information) may improve the effectiveness of this tactic because the recipient may reason that the provision of specific information implies that the transgressor is sincere, honest, transparent, and genuinely remorseful (Nguyen et al., 2021). With this in mind, we propose a conceptual distinction between two subtypes of confession information: disclosure and identification.

First, a transgressor might explain the processes that underpinned their decision to disclose information (i.e., why they are confessing). Disclosure information may, for example, explain the transgressor's engagement in active moral deliberation and how they acted against self-protective motivations by choosing to reveal negative information about the self. Research suggests that recipients of crisis management messages are

attentive to information suggestive of moral deliberation. For instance, organizations may be perceived as more credible when they disclose information in a way that conveys sadness about the consequences of a crisis versus an unemotional disclosure (Claeys et al., 2013). In this context, sadness may imply regret or guilt, moral emotions that indicate that an agent is self-aware and recognizes his/her own accountability (Howell et al., 2012; C. A. Smith & Lazarus, 1993; Tangney et al., 2007). Thus, Claeys and colleagues' findings may speak to a reputational benefit derived from transgressors' signaling their moral self-scrutiny. In the present research, transgressors directly state why they are disclosing negative self-information, thus our use of this tactic is very explicit.

Using an identification-focused approach, a transgressor might focus on describing how and why the transgressive action was detected. Consequently, an identification-focused confession may prompt recipients to infer that the transgressor is trustworthy (relative to a third party revealing the information) because they were honest and humble enough to self-scrutinize, and competent because they were able to identify the cause of the problem (Hendriks et al., 2016). Indeed, research has shown that people/firms who recognize their own faults (a rare ability; Kruger & Dunning, 1999) may gain social approval. Furthermore, sources who identify their faults may be seen as credible because they detected information contrary to their personal interest (making them seem unbiased; Wallace et al., 2020).

Of course, the transgressor's reasons for confessing and the way that the transgression was identified may speak negatively rather than positively to the transgressor's character. What if the transgressor is coming forward because a low-ranked employee threatened to whistle-blow unless they came forward (disclosure information) and they detected the transgression by fluke despite a lack of regular safety checks (identification information)? We are not claiming that provision of *any* confession-related information will benefit the transgressor's reputation, but rather that providing this sort of information can sometimes 'substitute' for the benefits of transgression-related information in cases where at least some of the confession-related specifics are favorable to the transgressor.

Overview of the experiments

We propose that stealing thunder efforts can be enhanced by giving more information about the confession itself. This complements Nguyen et al.'s (2021) studies, which focused on testing the efficacy of stealing thunder by manipulating the specificity of the information provided to recipients about the transgression. We conducted six experiments. For brevity's sake and because of the general similarity in the methods of all experiments, we present one experiment in detail to establish our general procedural and analytic approach, then present an integrative data analysis (IDA) that combines all experiments to maximize statistical power and generalizability, and to maintain transparency regarding the results of our 'file drawer' studies (Rosenthal, 1979).

In all experiments, participants learned that a target named Brian (i.e., a politician, or a medical doctor) had committed a transgression (i.e., either accepted inappropriate financial support, or engaged in malpractice). However, they either learned this information from an unrelated party (i.e., control *Third Party* condition), or from Brian himself (*Standard Stealing Thunder* condition). All experiments contained at least two other conditions: one in which the standard stealing thunder approach was modified to

emphasize why Brian went public (*Disclosure Information*), and another in which the message was modified to emphasize how Brian identified the problem (*Identification Information*).[1] Other conditions are discussed in the IDA section.

Main experiment

Our goal was to provide evidence that disclosure and identification information produce reputational benefits after transgressing, beyond the benefits of standard stealing thunder. We hypothesized that identification and disclosure information should increase Brian's credibility, trustworthiness, and/or expertise, relative to standard stealing thunder.

Methods

All measures, manipulations, exclusions, and our sample size determination method (set before data analysis), are disclosed. All participants gave informed consent before participating. Materials are openly available (see Supplementary Online Materials, SOM-1) and descriptive information for all scales is available in SOM-2.

Participants

201 Canadian undergraduate students (69% women, 25% men; $M_{age} = 18.7$, $SD_{age} = 1.6$) completed these materials online for partial course credit. 75% identified as White/European-American, 11% East Asian, 3% East Indian, 3% Black/African-American, 2% Indigenous, and 6% other.[2]

Procedure

Participants read a written passage introducing an ostensibly real politician named Mr. Brian Wallace, who publicly opposed political corruption. Next, participants learned that Brian's team accepted donations from a source on a prohibited donors list (henceforth, 'the transgression'). We reasoned that a politician making a political statement that he then hypocritically acted against would elicit strong negative evaluations from targets (Teeny et al., 2023; Vaughan-Johnston, 2024). We counter-balanced whether Brian's transgression was caused by incompetence or dishonesty. All conditions mentioned that Brian returned the inappropriately-obtained money to avoid having the confession-related conditions imply a greater likelihood of this action.

Information conditions. Participants in the *third party* condition learned about the transgression from a committee ostensibly responsible for 'overseeing the acceptance of donations by elected government officials.' All remaining participants read about the transgression from Brian. In the *standard stealing thunder* condition, Brian stated that his team accepted the prohibited donation. The other two conditions then added new information to this stealing thunder message. The *disclosure information* condition added Brian's rationale for disclosing: (i) to avoid breaking the public's trust, and (ii) because dishonesty is unjust. The *identification information* added how Brian identified the problem. Specifically, (i) Brian and his team conducted an 'extensive investigation' to identify the illegal source of funds, and (ii) the team successfully identified the prohibited

donation. Thus, both novel conditions provided new information about the confession but did not add substantive new facts about the transgression (cf. Nguyen et al., 2021). A 'combined' condition gave both information types for an exploratory probe of any benefit from giving disclosure and identification information together.

Dependent variables were adapted from Wallace et al. (2020) and were anchored at 1 (*Not at all*) and 9 (*Extremely*). Participants rated Brian's trustworthiness (five items, e.g., 'is trustworthy,' 'is sincere,' α = .93), expertise (three items, e.g., 'is an expert,' 'is knowledgeable,' α = .87), and credibility (two items, e.g., 'is credible,' 'is believable,' α = .87) in randomized order. Scores were averaged; high scores indicate higher levels of the variable.

Participants then completed the manipulation check items in randomized order. Specifically, we asked participants if Brian had 'admitted publicly to his own behaviour'[3] using scales from 1 (*Not at all true*) to 9 (*Definitely true*). To check if participants recognized the confession information conditions, they were asked if Brian had 'thought carefully about the morality involved in this case,' and if Brian had 'conducted research to learn more information about this case,' using the above scaling.

Results

Data and code are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://osf.io/w4kfr/?view_only=ccc341c4238e45669b51b9ca6d25047a.

Manipulation check: source of information

For each manipulation check variable, we used ANOVA, testing if information source affected the perceived source of information and/or Brian's having engaged in relevant types of thinking. Concerning if Brian had admitted to his own neglectful behavior, we found a main effect of apology type as expected, $F(4, 196) = 5.79$, $p < .001$, $r = .33$ [.17, .42], such that people endorsed this item less given the third party confession ($M = 4.28$, $SE = .33$) compared to the standard stolen thunder ($M = 6.00$, $SE = .34$), disclosure information ($M = 6.15$, $SE = .36$), identification information ($M = 6.15$, $SE = .37$), and combination ($M = 6.38$, $SE = .36$) conditions. A planned contrast supported our hypothesis that the third party confession (−.5) would receive lower scores than the other conditions (each coded + .13), $t_{contrast}(196) = -5.33$, $p < .001$, $r = -.23$.

Relatedly, when rating whether 'somebody other than' Brian had revealed his neglectful behavior, we found a main effect of apology type, $F(4, 200) = 8.71$, $p < .001$, $r = .39$ [.24, .48], such that this was endorsed more given the third party confession ($M = 6.75$, $SE = .24$) compared to the standard stolen thunder ($M = 5.35$, $SE = .32$), disclosure information ($M = 4.72$, $SE = .38$), identification information ($M = 4.73$, $SE = .37$), and combination ($M = 4.18$, $SE = .35$) conditions. A planned contrast supported that the third party confession (coded +.5) received higher scores than the other conditions (each coded −.12), $t_{contrast}(196) = 5.91$, $p < .001$, $r = .25$.

Manipulation check: stealing thunder information

We found a significant effect of apology type on Brian's 'thinking carefully about morality,' $F(4, 200) = 7.28$, $p < .001$, $r = .36$ [.20, .45], whereby the disclosure information produced high endorsement ($M = 6.28$, $SE = .28$) compared to the third party condition

($M = 4.68$, $SE = .32$; $t_{contrast}(196) = 3.70$, $p < .001$, $r = .20$), standard thunder ($M = 4.93$, $SE = .33$; $t_{contrast}(196) = 3.12$, $p = .002$, $r = .10$); but not higher endorsement than identification information ($M = 6.46$, $SE = .29$; $t_{contrast}(196) = -.44$, $p = .661$, $r = -.03$); or combination information ($M = 6.08$, $SE = .31$; $t_{contrast}(196) = .46$, $p = .644$, $r = .03$). This partially confirmed our manipulation's success, in that disclosure information should make recipients feel that Brian engaged in more moral deliberation than standard stealing thunder.

We also found a main effect of apology type on Brian's 'conducting research to learn more information,' $F(4, 200) = 6.08$, $p < .001$, $r = .33$ [.17, .43], revealing the highest endorsement in the identification information ($M = 6.10$, $SE = .33$) versus the third party condition ($M = 4.53$, $SE = .30$; $t_{contrast}(196) = 3.65$, $p < .001$, $r = .20$), standard stealing thunder ($M = 5.10$, $SE = .27$; $t_{contrast}(196) = 2.32$, $p = .021$, $r = .13$), and the disclosure information condition ($M = 5.00$, $SE = .34$; $t_{contrast}(196) = 2.55$, $p = .012$, $r = .14$); but not compared to the combined condition ($M = 6.28$, $SE = .28$; $t_{contrast}(196) = -.41$, $p = .681$, $r = -.02$). This was all consistent with our aims: identification information was uniquely higher on this variable compared to standard stealing thunder.

Primary analysis: effects on target reputation

We analyzed if message type affected trustworthiness, expertise, or credibility through ANOVA tests with planned contrast follow-ups.

Trustworthiness. An omnibus effect of Message Type, $F(4, 196) = 9.28$, $p < .001$, $r = .40$ [.25, .49], indicated that information source affected trustworthiness judgments. First, Brian was seen as more trustworthy when he stole thunder ($M = 4.75$, $SE = .26$) than when a third party revealed his transgression ($M = 3.76$, $SE = .32$), $t(196) = 2.52$, $p = .013$, $r = .14$ [.03, .24]. Furthermore, the disclosure information condition ($M = 5.63$, $SE = .25$) improved Brian's perceived trustworthiness significantly more than standard stealing thunder, $t(196) = 2.26$, $p = .025$, $r = .12$ [.02, .23]. As Figure 1 shows, the increase from standard stealing thunder to disclosure information is similar in magnitude to the difference between third party reveal and standard stealing thunder. Likewise, the identification information condition significantly increased Brian's perceived trustworthiness ($M = 5.73$, $SE = .28$) compared to standard stealing thunder, $t(196) = 2.54$, $p = .012$, $r = .14$ [.03, .24]. Thus, each type of confession information produced expected reputational benefits.

Similarly, the combination condition increased Brian's perceived expertise ($M = 5.58$, $SE = .27$) compared to standard stealing thunder, $t(196) = 2.13$, $p = .034$, $r = .12$ [.01, .22]. Finally, we contrasted the combination condition against the average of the disclosure and identification conditions to determine if providing both pieces of confession-specific information was more beneficial than either piece of information alone, which was not supported, $t(196) = -.29$, $p = .776$, $r = -.01$ [−.11, .08].

Expertise. A significant omnibus effect of Message Type, $F(4, 196) = 7.11$, $p < .001$, $r = .36$ [.20, .45], indicated that Brian was not seen as equally expert across conditions. First, a contrast test confirmed that participants saw Brian as more expert when he stole thunder ($M = 5.40$, $SE = .23$) versus the third party reveal ($M = 4.66$, $SE = .29$), $t(196) = 2.11$, $p = .036$, $r = .12$ [.01, .22]. Furthermore, the disclosure information

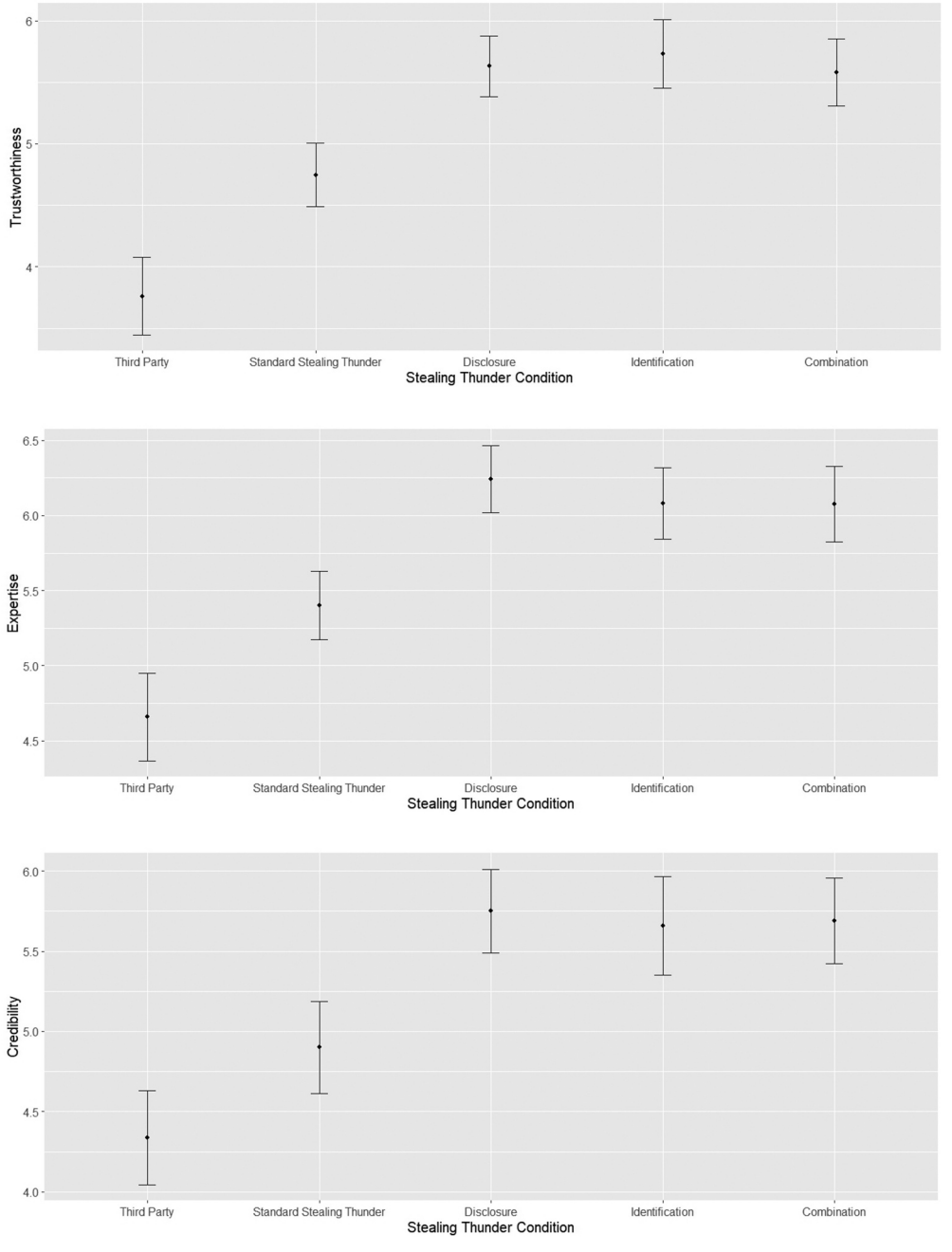

Figure 1. Effects of stealing thunder information on politician's reputational outcomes. Error bars indicate standard errors.

condition ($M = 6.24$, $SE = .22$) improved Brian's perceived expertise significantly more than standard stealing thunder, $t(196) = 2.39$, $p = .018$, $r = .12$ [.03, .24]. The identification information condition only marginally increased Brian's expertise ($M = 6.08$,

SE = .24) compared to standard stealing thunder, $t(196) = 1.95$, $p = .053$, $r = .11$ [−.002, .22], but significantly increased expertise compared to third party, $t(196) = 4.03$, $p < .001$, $r = .22$ [.11, .32]. Similarly, the combination condition marginally increased Brian's expertise ($M = 6.08$, $SE = .25$) compared to standard stealing thunder, $t(196) = 1.92$, $p = .056$, $r = .11$ [−.003, .41], but significantly increased expertise compared to third party, $t(196) = 4.03$, $p < .001$, $r = .22$ [.11, .32]. Finally, we contrasted the combination condition against the average of the two 'single frame' (disclosure; identification) conditions to determine if using both was beneficial, which was not supported, $t(196) = -.29$, $p = .776$, $r = -.02$ [−.11, .08].

Credibility. A significant omnibus effect of Message Type, $F(4, 196) = 4.82$, $p = .001$, $r = .30$ [.14, .40], indicated that Brian's credibility varied across conditions. First, a contrast test revealed non-significantly higher ratings of credibility when Brian stole thunder ($M = 4.90$, $SE = .29$) than when a third party revealed his transgression ($M = 4.34$, $SE = .29$), $t(196) = 1.40$, $p = .164$, $r = .08$ [−.03, .19]. Crucially, however, the disclosure information condition ($M = 5.75$, $SE = .26$) improved Brian's perceived credibility significantly more than standard stealing thunder, $t(196) = 2.11$, $p = .036$, $r = .12$ [.01, .22], which again supported that merely explaining why one is confessing can boost one's reputation. The identification information condition only marginally increased Brian's credibility ($M = 5.66$, $SE = .31$) compared to standard stealing thunder, $t(196) = 1.89$, $p = .060$, $r = .10$ [−.01, .21], but significantly increased expertise compared to third party, $t(196) = 3.30$, $p = .001$, $r = .18$ [.08, .28]. Similarly, the combination condition marginally increased credibility ($M = 5.69$, $SE = .27$) compared to standard stealing thunder, $t(196) = 1.95$, $p = .052$, $r = .11$ [−.001, .20], but significantly increased expertise compared to third party, $t(196) = 3.35$, $p = .001$, $r = .18$ [.08, .29]. Finally, we contrasted the combination condition against the average of the disclosure and identification conditions; we found no difference, $t(196) = -.05$, $p = .962$, $r = -.01$ [−.09, .09].

Discussion

We found that explaining why (disclosure information) and how (identification information) a transgressor came forward bolstered the transgressor's reputation relative to the simple act of stealing thunder itself. Crucially, these benefits emerged despite ensuring that all conditions provided only moderately specific transgression information, and despite always stating that Brian returned the inappropriately obtained funds. This weighs against the risk that reputational benefits were accrued because Brian might simply have been seen as more likely to have engaged in reparative behaviors when he shared the confession information. In short, the main experiment provided initial support that information explicating the unique virtues perhaps implied by stealing thunder (i.e., confession information) help people recognize why someone who steals thunder should be socially venerated.

Integrative data analysis

Five supplementary experiments using generally similar materials as the present research but with important procedural variations were conducted to eliminate several alternative

explanations (see Table 1, also SOM-3 for procedural variations/details). Not all experiments individually revealed significant benefits of each information type. Thus, we tested whether disclosure and identification information each benefits trustworthiness, expertise, and/or credibility. Second, some experiments suggested that disclosure information was more effective than identification information, whereas others found no difference. Consequently, we tested whether disclosure information produced stronger reputational benefits than identification, in an exploratory spirit. Third, across experiments, reparative behaviors by the transgressor were included in some, all, or none of the conditions. Therefore, we tested whether reparative behaviors shaped/moderated our effects. Fourth, we also tested our predictions using a medical doctor who failed to properly care for a patient who consequently suffered health complication as the transgressor. This alternative paradigm allowed us to test the generalizability of our results to different target/transgressions.

Results

For the subsequent analyses, we used integrative data analysis (IDA), a form of internal meta-analysis, which Curran and Hussong (2009) recommend over meta-analysis when researchers have access to all original datasets. The IDA analysis combines all datasets into a single file, with statistical adjustments made for heterogeneity introduced by the different samples. We did this by including fixed factors for apology type, behavior type (reparative action vs not), and target type (politician vs doctor). As revealed in Table 2, we ran an ANOVA test in which message type, reparative behavior (yes vs no), and target type (politician vs doctor) were analyzed together as factors predicting each dependent variable. We also included two-way interaction terms of message type with each variable to determine if they moderated our effects. Across all three dependent variables, the same core pattern emerged: message type mattered even when behavior and target were held constant, people preferred the doctor to the politician, and no evidence indicated that message influence was qualified by other variables despite collecting over 1,500

Table 1. Complete set of experiments used in the integrative data analysis.

Exp. # (*N*)	Population	Transgressor	Combined Condition?[a]	Reparative Action
Main Experiment (201)	Canadian undergraduates	Politician	Yes	Yes (All conditions)
Supplementary 1 (198)	Canadian undergraduates	Doctor	No	No
Supplementary 2 (186)	Canadian undergraduates	Doctor	No	No
Supplementary 3 (400)	Canadian undergraduates	Politician	Yes	No
Supplementary 4 (213)	Spanish undergraduates	Politician	No	Yes (Set as additional experimental factor)
Supplementary 5 (375)	Canadian undergraduates	Politician	No	Yes (Disclosure, Identification only)
$N_{total} = 1{,}573$				

[a]All experiments contained a third party reveal control, standard stealing thunder, disclosure information, and identification information conditions. Those marked 'yes' in this column additionally included a 'Combined' condition that gave both the disclosure and identification types of information.

Table 2. Effect of experimental manipulations of message type, reparative behavior, and transgressor identity on transgressor evaluations (IDA).

	F-test	Effect size *r*
Trustworthiness		
Message Type	$F(1, 1533) = 18.67$, $p < .001$	.11 [.06, .16]
Reparative Behavior	$F(1, 1533) = .00$, $p = .992$	.00 [.00, .00]
Target	$F(1, 1533) = 67.34$, $p < .001$	.20 [.16, .25]
Message X Behavior	$F(1, 1533) = 1.33$, $p = .249$	.03 [.00, .08]
Message X Target	$F(1, 1533) = .69$, $p = .406$	.02 [.00, .07]
Expertise		
Message Type	$F(1, 1532) = 6.41$, $p = .011$	.06 [.01, .11]
Reparative Behavior	$F(1, 1532) = 1.88$, $p = .171$	.03 [.00, .08]
Target	$F(1, 1532) = 44.36$, $p < .001$	.17 [.12, .21]
Message X Behavior	$F(1, 1532) = .17$, $p = .680$	.00 [.00, .06]
Message X Target	$F(1, 1532) = .72$, $p = .396$	.00 [.00, .07]
Credibility		
Message Type	$F(1, 1532) = 9.84$, $p = .002$	.08 [.03, .13]
Reparative Behavior	$F(1, 1532) = .63$, $p = .426$	.00 [.00, .07]
Target	$F(1, 1532) = 59.21$, $p < .001$	.19 [.14, .24]
Message X Behavior	$F(1, 1532) = 1.03$, $p = .310$	.03 [.00, .08]
Message X Target	$F(1, 1532) = .40$, $p = .527$	.00 [.00, .06]

Effect sizes were converted from partial eta-squared to put them on the same scale as the other statistics reported throughout the manuscript. Thus, the 90% confidence intervals reported above in square brackets cannot fall below 0 because eta-squared values cannot be negative.

observations. This weighs heavily against reparative behavior driving our results and suggests that confession information was valued when evaluating the medical doctor/post-surgery issue as the politician/illegitimate funds issue, enhancing external validity.

Trustworthiness

Next, we tested our critical contrasts. First, standard stealing thunder bolstered trustworthiness relative to a third party reveal, $t(1542) = 6.97$, $p < .001$, $r = .13$ [.09, .17]. Importantly, disclosure information further bolstered trustworthiness relative to standard stealing thunder, $t(1542) = 3.61$, $p < .001$, $r = .13$ [.09, .17]. Thus, including all file drawer data we have collected on this topic continued to support this effect with a modest effect size. Identification information boosted trustworthiness relative to standard stealing thunder, $t(1542) = 3.60$, $p < .001$, $r = .13$ [.09, .17], with an identical effect size to disclosure information's benefit. Disclosure and identification information equally affected trustworthiness and identification, $t(1542) = -.003$, $p = .998$, $r = .00$ [−.04, .04]. Finally, the combined conditions weakly *decreased* Brian's perceived trustworthiness relative to the single frame conditions, $t(1542) = -2.03$, $p = .043$, $r = -.05$ [−.10, −.002]. These results are shown in Figure 2, which reveals (from left to right across the x-axis) a substantial increase in trustworthiness from third party control to standard stealing thunder, and a further increase when using either information condition, but also shows how the combination information reduces trustworthiness slightly. However, the larger error bars on 'combination' reflect that we deployed this condition in only two of six experiments, hence the less precise estimate than the other conditions. Incidentally, this argues against the possible objection that our information conditions only benefitted the

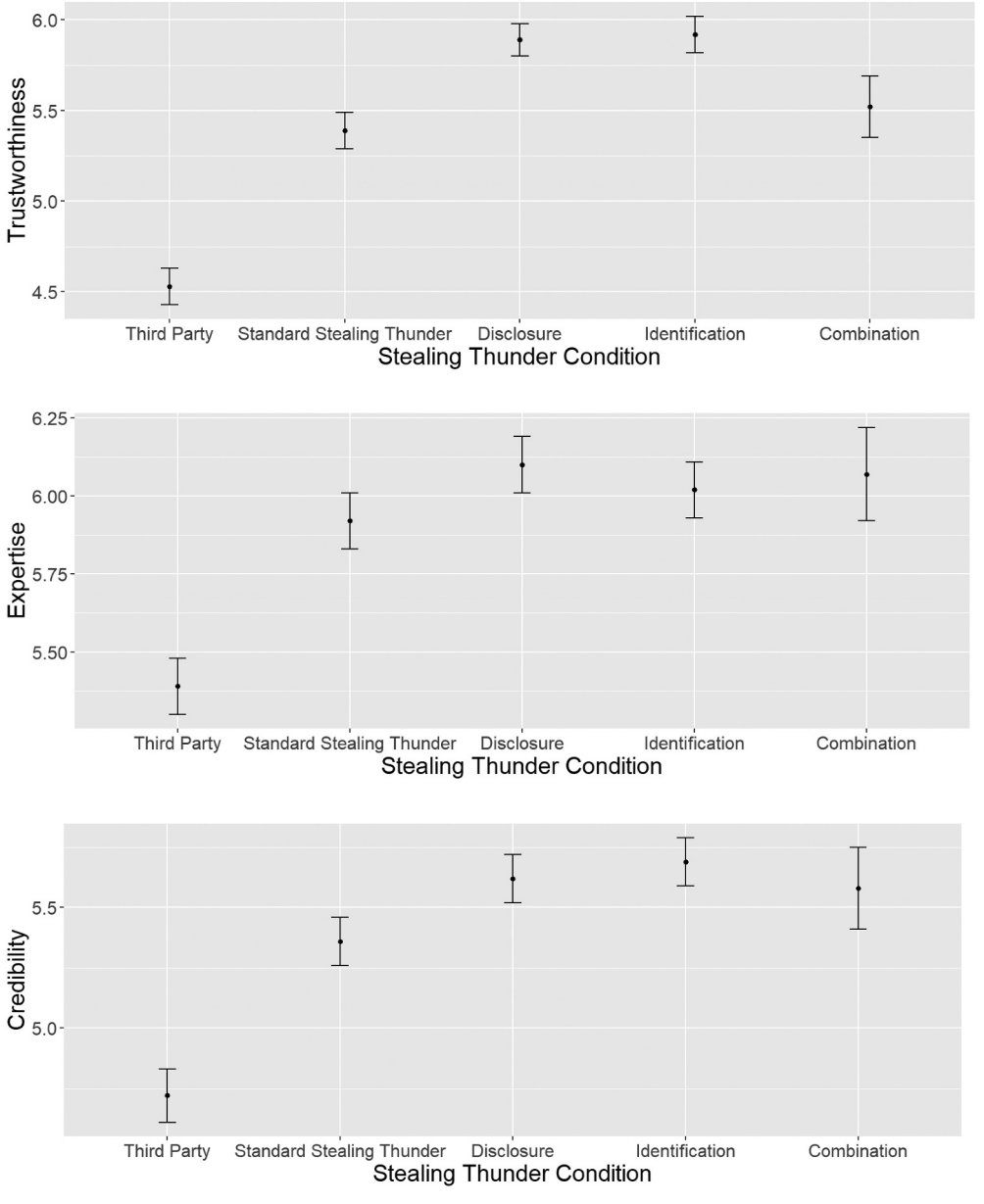

Figure 2. Effects of stealing thunder information on politician's reputational outcomes. (IDA). The presented data points are estimated marginal means from the Integrative Data Analysis. Errors bars represent standard errors.

target's reputation because they were longer than standard stealing thunder (i.e., if participants used the number of arguments or message length as a heuristic to rate the transgressor; e.g., Chaiken, 1980). This objection falters because the combination information message was longer than the single-frame conditions, yet was not more persuasive than the single-frame conditions.

Expertise

First, standard stealing thunder increased perceived expertise relative to a third party reveal, $t(1541) = 4.32$, $p < .001$, $r = .08$ [.05, .12]. Second, neither disclosure information nor identification information increased perceived expertise compared to the standard stealing thunder, ts <1.28, ps > .202, rs < .03. This is inconsistent with the main experiment (i.e., where disclosure boosted expertise). Unsurprisingly, disclosure did not boost expertise more than identification, $t(1541) = -.62$, $p = .538$, $r = -.01$ [−.05, .03]. Finally, combination information did not boost expertise beyond the single-information techniques, $t(1541) = .37$, $p = .712$, $r = .01$ [−.04, .06]. These results are shown in the second panel of Figure 2, which shows all stealing thunder conditions clearly producing more favorable judgments than a third party reveal.

Credibility

Once again, standard stealing thunder bolstered trustworthiness relative to a third party reveal, $t(1541) = 4.87$, $p < .001$, $r = .09$ [.05, .13]. Importantly, disclosure information bolstered credibility relative to standard stealing thunder, $t(1541) = 2.12$, $p = .034$, $r = .04$ [.01, .07], and identification information was comparable to standard, $t(1541) = 2.38$, $p = .018$, $r = .04$ [.01, .08]. Disclosure did not boost credibility more than identification, $t(1541) = .26$, $p = .795$, $r = .01$ [−.03, .04]. Finally, the combination condition did not increase credibility beyond single information, $t(1541) = -.44$, $p = .661$, $r = -.01$ [−.06, .04].

General discussion

Research supports the stealing thunder effect: communicating one's wrongdoing to others has reputational benefits compared to a third party revealing the information, with major implications across marketing (Beldad et al., 2018), political (e.g., Benoit, 2022), and other domains. Six datasets ($N_{total} = 1{,}573$) demonstrate the relative benefits (for trustworthiness and credibility, but not for expertise) of also providing confession information when stealing thunder.

Theoretical insights

Our research suggests that stealing thunder framing is a multidimensional social action. The present data indicate that *how* a transgressor explains their act of stealing thunder is consequential, above and beyond *that* they stole thunder. Benefits manifested on both recipients' perceptions that the transgressor was trustworthy and credible, which has important implications for how recipients are likely to behave toward the target (Williams et al., 1993) and how effective the targets would be at social influence (Brodsky et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2013). Contrary to our hypothesis, benefits did not extend to expertise judgments, an important boundary condition of the benefits of sharing confession information.

These data also provide interesting theoretical insights. At times, stealing thunder can be perceived as a self-serving rhetorical tactic of the transgressor (Dolnik et al., 2003):

a concern raised about stealing thunder in general (Lee, 2016). However, explaining the self-scrutinizing moral processes involved in going public may highlight one's authenticity (Gino et al., 2015) by revealing why and how one chose to reveal the information. Disclosure (identification) information may remind participants of the counterfactual possibility that the speaker could have remained silent (failed to notice the transgression). Indeed, people who steal thunder are judged as more credible when the chances are low that the transgression would have been discovered by a third party (Krylova et al., 2018).

Our work may have implications for theories of stealing thunder. For instance, stealing thunder has sometimes been explained via commodity theory, which argues that information circulated by a transgressor seems less secretive, less valuable, and is therefore less impactful (e.g., Brock & Brannon, 1992; Nguyen et al., 2021). At first blush, confession information might seem irrelevant to commodity theories of information because they do not actually provision a recipient with additional transgression-relevant information. However, the present work might develop the commodity perspective in an interesting new direction. Confession information might make the transgressive information seem even less secretive because now recipients know what led the transgressor to go public (disclosure) and/or how the information was obtained (identification). A third party reveal leaves ambiguous why the transgressor did not come forward (i.e., did they keep information secret deliberately, or because they were unaware it was transgressive, or did they plan to come forward later?), generating more ambiguity and thus perhaps interest. And even a standard stealing thunder message leaves unclear why the confessor decided to break the veil of silence, which without confession information may invite intrigue (i.e., a perception that information involving the transgression is valuable).

Although the present work focused on stealing thunder, confession information might have broader relevance in shaping public opinion. Crisis management scholars studying apologies (e.g., van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014) have compared 'diminish' strategies which downplay the severity of a transgression (pertinent to transgression-focused information), versus 'rebuild' strategies which emphasize guilt and intentions to improve in the future (analogous to our confession-focused information). Generalizing from our findings, might it be advantageous for an any apologizer to highlight what led them to decide to apologize to a target (guilt, desire for relationship repair)? Extending identification information to apologies, future research could test whether, when, and how an apologizer discloses their realization that their behavior was problematic.

Applied insights

The reputational benefits examined in these experiments are crucial for positive public relations and are predictive of favorable downstream consequences, such as people's increased willingness to interact with and favorably receive the campaigning strategies of trustworthy targets (Christen, 2004; Yoon et al., 2005). Indeed, our work may help account for the outcomes of high-profile cases. For instance, the famous tennis star Maria Sharapova disclosed the results of a positive drug test via a press conference in 2016. In her public statement, Sharapova repeatedly highlighted that her decision to proactively share this information was driven by a sense of moral obligation to ensure that the public was informed of her unprofessional conduct (Piedra, 2016). Although this revelation cost her several high-profile sponsors, Sharapova garnered widespread support

(Piedra, 2016). Our theory and evidence may help to explain the reputational benefits that Sharapova enjoyed from her honesty.

Past work shows that simply providing large amounts of detail about a transgression benefits stealing thunder messages (Nguyen et al., 2021). Yet for different reasons, transgressors may not be able or willing to provide comprehensive information about their transgression. Such contexts might be highly conducive to confession-focused information because such messages focus on internal experiences of the transgressor (i.e., realizing they acted badly; realizing they are duty-bound to tell others), making them potentially difficult to counterargue (Kubin et al., 2021). Confession-focused information is in part intriguing because it leads recipients to more favorable views of the transgressor but through a different currency – that is, without having to disclose valuable, unstable, and possibly salacious information about the transgression itself, but nonetheless sharing some information about the confession process (how the transgression was caught, and how they came to be speaking about it).

Limitations and future directions

Some readers might wonder if our effects would still emerge if the transgressor's motives for their transgression were very negative (e.g., does a disclosure message still matter if the politician intentionally scammed people out of their money due to being greedy?) rather than the present context where the transgressions seem more accidental. Although very negative transgression-related motivations would overarchingly produce more negative judgments of the transgressor, we still think disclosure information could create its relative benefit in this context, because it draws perceivers' focus away from the past negative motivation (for the transgression) and onto the more positive present motivation (for disclosing) – that is, on redemption or personal reform (Dawson et al., 2023; McAdams et al., 2001).

Identification information is more complex considering intentional transgressions. To explain how one came to realize a transgression occurred does not make sense if one performed the transgression intentionally (i.e., assuming one remembers this). However, we distinguish between knowing one performed a problematic process, and knowing that this process caused a problematic outcome. For example, in our doctor paradigm (see SOM-3), the doctor knew that post-surgery checks were not being performed (the process), and his 'identification' consisted of thoroughly examining his processes until realizing what was responsible for the transgressive outcome (patient harm). Thus, identification information may still yield benefits to a transgressor even if they knowingly engaged in a bad process; it simply requires that 'there is something to identify' (i.e., either realizing a bad process was undertaken, or realizing the relation between a bad process and a bad outcome).

The present work conforms to most stealing thunder work by contrasting various stealing thunder conditions against a (relatively certain) third party reveal. The third party reveal could be made less 'powerful' in several respects: (1) derive from fewer or less credible sources; (2) be uncertain or unclearly detailed; (3) contain logical or empirical inconsistencies. In such cases, a denial strategy (Fuoli et al., 2017) might work better for an accused than stealing thunder (and thereby conceding guilt), at least temporarily (i.e., unless stronger information is forthcoming). We propose that the relative benefit of

stealing thunder versus denial is moderated by the strength of the information produced in an accusation. That is, high-confidence accusations might best be contested with stealing thunder (i.e., by stealing thunder one surrenders an unwinnable dispute about the accusation's truthfulness and tries to repair reputation other ways) but low-confidence accusations may be better addressed with denial (i.e., because stealing thunder makes it clear that the accused is really guilty, which might have been disputed).

Our effect sizes detected are often small; for instance, the $r = .13$ benefit of disclosure framing versus standard stealing thunder on trustworthiness (IDA analysis). Yet these effect sizes should be contextualized. First, it might also be noted that the benefit of stealing thunder *at all* (vs a third party reveal) in our data was also $r = .13$ for trustworthiness! Thus, disclosure information roughly doubled the benefit of stealing thunder on trustworthiness. Second, modest effect sizes brought to scale often have large practical consequences (for an analogous argument in the context of implicit measures of prejudice, see Greenwald et al., 2015). For instance, statistically small changes in shareholders' perceptions of a company could translate into billions of dollars, and even small nudges in voter perceptions could translate into millions of votes. Even, in the wake of revealing very damaging information about oneself or one's company, a small boost to trustworthiness or credibility might count for a lot for those who undertake a serious reputational risk by being honest with the public.

Furthermore, given our use of self-report data, one might question the generalizability of our findings to real-world actions (e.g., voting or purchasing behaviors). However, self-reported judgments of transgressor credibility are crucial because perceived credibility mediates between stealing thunder and recipient behaviors, such as juror decision-making (Williams et al., 1993). Furthermore, evaluations of high-status individuals like politicians often powerfully influence behaviors (Fazio & Williams, 1986; Fazio & Zanna, 1981). In short, information has potential to exert subtle but meaningful influences on a variety of 'real-world' outcomes.

Conclusion

In summary, we have put forward a conceptually novel take on stealing thunder that may serve as a useful conceptual advance for crisis management practitioners and scholars. Merely explaining why and how one has come forward with a confession can provide reputational benefits above and beyond stealing thunder itself, providing an interesting alternative to provisioning recipients with information about the offense itself. Future work may fruitfully address related questions that emerge from this framework. How variables relating to recipients, transgressors, or transgression types might moderate the relative utility of transgression versus confession information? What unique or common factors might lead recipients of each type of information to suspect ulterior motives when each type of information is deployed? In these and other ways, we think that the distinct between confession-focused and transgression-focused information may guide future research endeavors in exciting new directions.

Notes

1. For several reasons, we did not include a second control group, in which no transgression occurs, as some past work has included (e.g., to demonstrate that the transgression resulted in negative judgments compared to no transgression). First, because the stealing thunder effect is by definition a comparison against third-party reveals of information rather than against an absence of transgression. Second, because we wanted to focus our attention on the relative benefit of confession details relative to standard stealing thunder messages. Third, because this allowed us to focus our statistical power on the contrasts of interest to our research questions. Fourth, because we had little doubt that a politician endorsing fiscal responsibility shortly before hypocritically engaging in dubious financial behavior would result in negative judgments of that target.
2. We used a time-based stopping rule covering one academic semester, aiming for 40 participants/cell. According to a sensitivity analysis conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), this provided us with 94% power to detect the ANOVA main effect of $r = .30$ detected in Supplementary Experiment 5 (which ran first chronologically) for trustworthiness. Moreover, we planned and conducted an integrated data analysis on six datasets with over 1,500 participants, which is the more relevant statistical power consideration (see Kenny & Judd, 2019).
3. We also asked if 'somebody other than Brian publicly revealed his behavior'. This question consistently produced the reverse of the first question (as expected), $ps < .001$, thus we do not expand further.

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Author's note

The manuscript is not under consideration by any other journal. All data were collected in a manner consistent with the APA's Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants, and participants completed informed consent prior to participating. The data are open, are described in the manuscript. We have no actual/potential conflict of interest with these data.

Data availability statement

Data and code are available on OSF at https://osf.io/w4kfr/?view_only=ccc341c4238e45669b51b9ca6d25047a.

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