

Off Thin Ice: After Decades of Media Abuse, it Took Hollywood to Repair Tonya Harding’s Image and Reputation

By Adam Pitluk^{}, Courtney Hazlett[±] & Wendy Weinhold[°]*

*This qualitative study examines Tonya Harding’s experiences after she was excoriated by news media in the 1990s and given an opportunity in 2017 to tell her story through the film, *I, Tonya*. The critical thematic analysis of a semi-structured interview with Harding contends that her assessment of how her image was recuperated by the film is informed by her experiences with news media’s classism and sexism before and following the notorious attack on Nancy Kerrigan.*

Keywords: *image restoration, figure skating, classism, Olympics, Tonya Harding, media, communication*

Introduction

The 1990s and early 2000s were filled with news media coverage of scandals involving women, especially Tonya Harding. Scholarship about this period attests to the ways ideological issues such as classism and sexism informed news media coverage of women generally and particularly of Harding (e.g., Everbach, 2017; Foote, 2003). In his critical analysis of network news coverage of Harding, Gaines (1995) described the “patriarchal ideology” of journalists at the time (p. 1). Harding has been a part of the news spectacle for nearly 30 years, and the media’s hostility toward her has often been palpable. It wasn’t until Hollywood addressed her story in the 2017 movie *I, Tonya* (Gillespie & Rogers, 2017), based on Harding’s life story with emphasis placed on the period surrounding the 1994 Winter Olympics, that the record was finally set straight. The public was able to see a repaired image of Harding as a fallible-cum-sympathetic person who was not given a fair chance by the media institution that claimed its public service mission was to investigate facts and put forth truth. On the contrary, our research shows that the media was to blame for Harding’s sullied reputation from 1994 until 2017, even though she was neither the perpetrator nor the mastermind of the battery of teammate Nancy Kerrigan. As our research shows, she was more victim than villain, and Hollywood helped her to right the wrong.

*Assistant Professor, Coastal Carolina University, USA.

±Independent Researcher, USA.

°Associate Professor, Coastal Carolina University, USA.

Literature Review

According to Harding, the news media's role in her saga throughout the 1990s was one of nescient gossip-mongering. Our research for this project leads us to agree with her. The attack on Harding's U.S. Olympic skating teammate Nancy Kerrigan occurred on January 6, 1994. The Winter Olympic Games were held in Lillehammer, Norway, from February 12-27, 1994. As early as the second day of the Olympic Games, reporters discussed Harding as though she was a mastermind of the plot against Kerrigan, even before all of the facts of the case were in. Writing in the *Chicago Tribune* on February 13, 1994, a day after the Winter Olympics opening ceremony, reporter Michael Precker interviewed Stanford University business and ethics professor Kirk Hanson about the ethics of the Harding/Kerrigan situation, and Hanson made a wisecrack that made the print edition of the *Chicago Tribune*. Even though Harding had not been convicted of a crime, Hanson said, "I guess it isn't just Texas cheerleading that leads people to this," (Precker, 1994). Hanson was referring to another scandal that occurred around the same time as the Harding/Kerrigan situation in which a Texas woman attempted to arrange a murder so her daughter could make the school cheerleading squad.

This comparison is outrageous, as in the latter incident, the Texas woman was accused of attempted murder-for-hire, and in the former incident, Harding was not charged with any crime. Seemingly the only similarity the two women had in common is that they were women (the Texas woman was not even an athlete, her daughter was) (Thompson, 1992; Hatch & Hendricks, 2018). Still, the disconnect in subject matter did not stop Precker (1994) from quoting another academic, SMU's Department of Religious Studies Chair Lonnie Kliever, who implied Harding was part of a pattern of athletes who will do anything for a competitive edge. Perhaps the most disparaging and one-sided assertion in the *Chicago Tribune* article is when Precker used a dismissive lead-in to a Kliever quotation:

Regardless of whether Tonya Harding was involved, Kliever says, the attack on Kerrigan "isn't surprising if you see it in a longer history of efforts to maximize your advantage in ways that violate the canons of fair play." (Michael Precker, *Chicago Tribune*).

Journalists like Precker used Harding's purported crime to illustrate a larger point, even though prima facie, there was no correlation (Huisman, 2008; Thompson, 1992). Effectively, Precker (1994) did not care whether the article's premise of Harding's guilt was right or wrong. Moreover, the *Tribune* reporter doubled down on his devil-may-care insinuation that Harding is no better than the Texas cheerleader's mother accused of murder-for-hire. According to the *Tribune*, Harding was guilty of a crime even if she was not. The phrase, "Regardless of whether Tonya Harding was involved," is not only misleading for the readers, but it smacks of unethical journalism.

News media reporting on Harding seemed to delight in misogyny. Consider this story, also from the *Chicago Tribune* from four days after the Precker story,

whose headline boasts, “Oh, the excitement of seeing Kerrigan, Harding at Practice,” (Barry, 1994). A passage from that article reads:

You should have seen the media reaction Wednesday night when Tonya Harding’s breasts arrived at the main Olympic press center. OK, technically they were not her actual breasts; but they were actual photographs of her breasts in a British newspaper. They were immediately reproduced numerous times on Xerox brand copiers (The Official Breast Duplicators of the Olympic Games) and passed around the media center, where they became the subject of intense scrutiny and professional news analysis.

I just wish you young aspiring journalists out there could have witnessed, firsthand, this example of how the “pros” handle a big story. (Dave Barry, *Chicago Tribune*)

Young aspiring journalists reading this research should be aware Tonya Harding was only 24 years old when the *Chicago Tribune* sounded the starting gun for other media to take potshots at the Olympic athlete.

Thus commenced the long, sordid affair Harding unwittingly had with the news media throughout the remainder of the 1990s and early-to-mid 2000s. A ProQuest search of the terms “Tonya Harding” and “figure skating” returned tens of thousands of stories and news clips in print and broadcast about her, and a Google search for the same terms returned 9.8 million hits. However, very few reporters were granted interviews with Harding before her disastrous interview with Connie Chung on *Eye-to-Eye* in 1994. After Harding performed in a nervous manner answering Chung’s questions, news media responded by creating a narrative that Harding was aloof and difficult.

Theoretical Lens

Image restoration, also known as image restoration discourse (Benoit and Hanczor, 1994; Mishne, 2018), serves as the theoretical lens for this study. According to this theory, image restoration discourse is a way for a person to restore his/her image after alleged wrongdoing – assuming they are innocent of what is being alleged – through a rhetorical design (Benoit, 1994; Benoit and Brinson, 1994; Mishne, 2018). When a person’s image is threatened, that person feels a range of emotions and compulsions, including: a desire to offer explanations for their behavior; a desire to vigorously defend their behavior; a desire to offer justifications for their behavior; a desire to offer rationalizations for their behavior; and/or a desire to apologize for their behavior (Benoit, 1994; Benoit and Hanczor, 1994). These actions are an important part of persuasive discourse and image repair rhetoric.

Benoit and Hanczor (1994) critically analyzed Harding’s image repair efforts in her interview on the *Eye-to-Eye* television news program with broadcast journalist Connie Chung. They then applied the theory of image restoration discourse to Harding’s television appearance and assessed whether the figure skater successfully repaired her image. The episode aired on February 10, 1994, roughly a month after the 1994 Winter Olympic games, and Harding’s appearance

received scholarly attention from Benoit and Hanczor (1994) because, “during the 1994 Winter Olympics, news media shamelessly exploited the suspicion that Tonya Harding was involved in the attack on Nancy Kerrigan to fuel conflict and interest in the Games,” (p. 417). As such, Benoit and Hanczor ran Harding’s appearance on *Eye-to-Eye*’s news show through a battery of assessments by which image repair strategies are organized.

There are five broad categories to image repair theory, with three of those categories having variants or subcategories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness (by bolstering), corrective action, and mortification. According to Benoit and Hanczor (1994), Harding employed three of the techniques in her attempt to repair her image on Connie Chung’s program. Those techniques reduced Harding’s offensiveness by bolstering, denial, and attacking her accuser. According to Benoit and Hanczor:

Those accused of committing heinous acts may help their reputations through denial (assuming, of course, that they are innocent). Similarly, showing oneself to be a good person (bolstering) may counterbalance any residual negative feeling, and it could also reinforce one’s denial (a good person isn’t likely to do bad things). Attacking one’s accuser(s) may lessen the effectiveness of the accusations, thereby helping to restore one’s good reputation. Defeasibility makes the claim that events beyond one’s control are actually responsible for offensive actions, and is a plausible way to avoid blame (p. 425).

Previous research has established that, when operationalized appropriately, denial (Benoit, 1994; Benoit and Lindsey, 1987), bolstering (Benoit, 1994; Benoit and Brinson, 1994; Benoit et al., 1991; Benoit and Lindsey, 1987), and attacking one’s accuser (Benoit, 1994) can be effective image repair strategies. Benoit and Hanczor maintained that unless Harding was guilty, she selected appropriate strategies for repairing her image on Connie Chung’s *Eye-to-Eye* program.

Ultimately, Benoit and Hanczor (1994) believed Harding was unsuccessful in her image restoration attempt, a month after the 1994 Winter Olympics, because although the strategies she selected from image restoration theory were appropriate, “the defense she constructed to operationalize them was not very well developed” (p. 429). The authors conclude: “In sum, this instance of rhetoric from a sports celebrity provides insight into the effectiveness of image restoration discourse” (p. 430).

While we agree with the sentiment of Benoit and Hanczor (1994) vis-à-vis image restoration discourse as it pertained to Connie Chung’s television show in 1994, we disagree that Harding should be left with all the blame for not properly restoring her reputation. After all, a Gallup poll (1994) conducted shortly after the television interview reported that 73% of Americans had seen or heard a great deal of news about the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan incident; 20% had heard or seen some of the news; and only 2% said they knew nothing about it. That is a lot of public opinion generated by an insatiable media for a 24-year-old with a GED and limited social support to have to tamp down. Benoit and Hanczor did not explore the challenges Harding faced because of her family, her limited education, or her youth. It is important to remember she was a 24-year-old who was

essentially being stalked morning, noon, and night by domestic and international media.

Method

With this study, we worked to build on and forward the research begun by Benoit and Hanczor (1994) almost 30 years ago. This time, however, we sought Harding's assessment of Hollywood's role in restoring her image rather than exclusively looking at Harding's own attempts to restore her image. We worked to revisit Harding's position and let her tell us – in her own words – whether she believed news media of the 1990s and early 2000s were to blame for misinformation and a negative impression of her, and whether Hollywood helped restore her image in 2017 with the movie *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017).

Our research is rooted in critical approaches that inform our qualitative interview practices. We value critical perspectives that allow us to understand how Harding experiences the news media discourses, practices, and social systems that have covered her since the height of her figure skating career. We are guided by Lawless and Chen's (2019) operationalized critical method for studying interviews, which is grounded in critical epistemology. Qualitative interviews are flexible and powerful resources for collecting detailed information about a person's thoughts and attitudes (Boyce and Neale, 2006). Through our research and preparation for the interview with Harding, we knew we wanted to discuss news media's treatment of her along at least the four following critically informed themes: (1) classism, (2) misogyny, (3) domestic violence and (4) the consequences of getting caught up in the "media maelstrom" (Lewinsky, 2015). These themes guided our development of interview questions.

Because Harding is a celebrity, we worked to secure an interview with her by contacting her publicist and advisor, Linda Lewis. One of the researchers, who is a professional journalist based in Los Angeles with extensive experience covering celebrity news and the entertainment industry, coordinated and led all communication with Harding and Lewis, including the interview where both women were present. During the initial email conversation with Lewis, we were instructed we could ask four interview questions that had to be provided to Harding in advance. We were not given a time limit for the interview. Working collaboratively, we wrote the four questions. We informed Lewis and Harding that the method would be semi-structured interviewing technique, thereby allowing us to ask follow-up questions predicated on Harding's answers to the four IQs. Our interview questions were as follows:

IQ 1: How would you summarize the media's interpretation of you as a person and your role in the incident in the 1990s?

IQ 2: In the 1990s, male professional athletes like Dennis Rodman, Charles Barkley, Mike Tyson, and Brett Favre were given the space to "be themselves" yet you appeared to be punished for it on the ice and off. Why do you think that is?

IQ 3: Why did you feel comfortable having your story told in a scripted, theatrical format such as *I, Tonya*?

IQ 4: In what ways did *I, Tonya* help to repair parts of your reputation damaged by the media in the 1990s?

These questions formed our semi-structured interview guide, allowing for flexibility in addressing narratives as they emerged in the interview conversation with Harding. The day before the interview was originally scheduled to occur, Lewis contacted us to explain Harding was ill, and the interview was postponed for a few days. After Harding recovered, she joined us by phone from Portland, Oregon, where she lives. Harding was very open during the interview and excited to participate in our research. The interview lasted 42 minutes with subsequent follow-up questions answered over text during the writing of this research. The interview was recorded for accuracy and transcribed the day of the interview.

Using the transcripts, we conducted a critical thematic analysis of our semi-structured interview with Harding to explore how she makes sense of her experiences with and treatment by news media and the public during two distinct periods in her life: first, in the 1990s, and second, since the release of *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017). According to Lawless and Chen (2019), critical thematic analysis (CTA) provides a systematic method for studying interview data and examining the connections between discourses, social practices, power relations, and ideologies. This critical approach focuses on “connecting everyday discourses with larger social and cultural practices nested in unequal power relations” (p. 93). Lawless and Chen explain, “Qualitative researchers have a unique opportunity to elicit shared experiences under interpretive lenses and move to critical methodologies that interrogate power” (pp. 96–97). CTA is guided by acute awareness of the social, historical, political, economic, institutional, and ideological forces that shape individual and shared experiences of interview participants. This inductive approach identifies patterns in interview discourses using Owen’s (1984) criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, which guides coding of themes. All three authors engaged in repetitive reading of the interview transcripts.

Consistent with a critical analysis of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, we focused our analysis on Harding’s interview discourses as they relate to larger social ideologies. Our analytical process of CTA moved from open coding to closed coding. We began by identifying moments of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness in Harding’s discourses and then worked to connect the interview discourses with larger social forces, such as Harding’s economic conditions and the institutions that have shaped her life, including media, family, athletics, and law enforcement.

Results

- Timeline: Attack: January 6, 1994
- Film release date of *I, Tonya*: December 8, 2017
- Research interview with Tonya Harding: March 22, 2022

Based on our critical thematic analysis of our interview with Harding, we contend the reputational repair she has experienced since the January 6, 1994, attack on Kerrigan is a direct result of the release of the scripted feature film *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017). In the following pages, we discuss how, four years after the release of the film, and 27 years after the event itself, Harding believes *I, Tonya* merits credit for the shift in public opinion that she has experienced.

News Media Chose to Pin Guilt on Tonya from the Beginning

Media coverage of Harding in the years since the Kerrigan attack relied on the issue of class to conceal sexist codes about femininity that devalued her and reduced her to a common criminal. “They interpreted me like a piece of shit,” Harding said as we discussed the treatment she received from the media in the aftermath of the incident and throughout the 1990s. “The media convicted me the first day, of hurting someone, and being associated with these people that hurt someone.”

The media swiftly established their narrative of Harding, one that portrayed her as a highly suspicious, if not totally guilty figure (Benoit and Hanczor, 1994). Because of this, Harding was unable to move forward personally or professionally without the incident factoring into her life. Harding described news media’s toxic behaviors toward her:

I had never been put in that situation before—trying to defend myself for not doing a freaking thing. It was really difficult because I could not train because they kept flashing their cameras in front of me. I asked them so many times nicely to please turn off your flash. They were deliberately trying to hurt me. And I lived with this on a daily basis ever since then. I get my life threatened all the time, and people think it’s a joke.

Harding said the errors news media made in reporting about the incident were two-fold: They got her character wrong, and they got the role she played in the incident wrong. Regarding the latter, Harding said that she had nothing to do with Kerrigan’s attack before it was carried out, and she certainly had nothing to do with it when it was carried out:

I didn’t play any role. I did not know anything prior to what happened. It didn’t matter what I did, where I went. I was followed, I was harassed, pushed down, hit in the head with their freaking cameras. I was asleep when it happened. I got woke up by my choreographer, who told me what happened. And I was convicted of hindering the prosecution. That’s it. Period.

As for the former, the claim that that the media got her character wrong, Harding had a swift assessment: “I was treated differently basically my whole life because I came from the other side of the tracks, and I don’t come from money.” Class was a significant factor in the way Harding experienced and understood

news media's treatment of her. Her experiences with poverty and inability to afford expensive figure skating costumes made her a media target.

Male Athletes Got a Pass for Their Behavior; Harding Did Not

Professional sport in the 1990s was not without other notable expressions of athletes' personalities both within their respective games and outside of them. While many male athletes were given latitude for their mistakes by news media, Harding was not. For example, Chicago Bulls basketball player Dennis Rodman was characterized as having an "unpredictable" relationship with the media, and he was labeled "disruptive" and "counter-cultural," yet he was later lauded for having "redefined representations of gender, race, and desire" within American cultural imagery (LaFrance and Rail, 2002). He even wore a wedding dress to promote his 1996 autobiography, titled, *Bad as I Want to Be* (Magubane, 2002). Another example of differing media treatment given to male athletes is from professional boxer and convicted rapist Mike Tyson, who bit a chunk off of opponent Evander Holyfield's ear during a boxing match the year after the Kerrigan attack. While Tyson's role in the assault literally played out on live television, he experienced reputational repair via documentaries that relied on media coverage of his life and events (Fuhs, 2017).

Harding's situation could not be more different: After Kerrigan was attacked, news media painted a picture of Harding as a scorned athlete, one who was desperate to win by any means necessary, even if it meant colluding, planning and attacking a competitor (Benoit and Hanczor, 1994). To put it simply, news media treated Harding with hostility, and Harding told us it has everything to do with class and the fact that she was not a polished female athlete like her peers in figure skating. She explained: "I have a brain, and I think for myself. And sometimes I'll say stuff that comes out of my mouth but that's just who I am."

Among the "stuff" Harding referenced was when she was asked, after the attacks, how she felt about going to the Winter Olympics with Kerrigan. Harding said her response was, "I can't wait to get to compete against her and kick her butt." That, she said, was completely taken out of context by the media and played into the narrative that she was a violent criminal. Harding explained, "because that's what it's all about, it's a competition, it's just how I talk." In the context of the attack, news media treated the comment as if it were offensive.

Harding recognized class was one part of why she was treated differently, but she also recognized that her gender might have played a part, too, which would also separate her from the other salacious male athletes of the time. She explained: "It has to do with me being a woman, me being where I come from. I come from nothing, and yet I chose to be the best that I could, because I wanted to be better than my mother." Reporters could have reported about Harding's experiences that are documented in the film, but news media instead focused on the spectacle. The turbulent relationship with her mother was out in the open for any reporter willing to interview any of the coaches or fellow figure skaters in Portland, Oregon. Harding's mother was notorious. However, none of the familial tension was reported.

My mother was the horrible one. Beating me all the time. My coach was told and knew about it, and she told other people not to turn my mother in, and I just found that out when the movie came out.

I, Tonya Was a Theatrical Film, But There Were No “Theatrics” Involved

Given that Harding did not grant many interviews during the time immediately after the attack or since, a natural question arose about why she would participate in a scripted, theatrical version of her life. But “there were no theatrics about it,” Harding told us. She explained that her involvement with *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017) included sitting for hours of interviews with the film’s writer, Steven Rogers; her ex-husband, Jeff Gillooly, did the same. The script was then written, and the film was shot and edited, all without her further participation. After Harding’s interviews with Rogers, she said she had nothing to do with the film until she viewed it in a private screening in Oregon after its completion, just a few months before it hit theaters.

Harding said the film was extremely accurate, and there were only five instances of creative decision-making that stretched the truth. She said the first alteration was that her “mother was never smoking on the ice.” It is important to note that during the interview, Tonya emphasized the word “on.” Her mother smoked plenty, but storming the actual ice at the rink while smoking a cigarette was not a thing that happened.

The second point of creative license Harding highlighted had to do with a scene in the film where Tonya, the character, takes aim at her husband Jeff, the character, with a shotgun. Harding explained the facts:

And I never had a shotgun that I pulled out and fired at him although he did shoot me once, got away with it, blood all over my face. The cops had him and me, and they let him take me home. They don’t care if you’re from the other side of the tracks. To them, I never represented them the right way. Because I have a brain, I want to speak my own mouth. I want to skate to music that makes me happy, that makes me want to do it, so that the people can get into the music and make it fun for everybody. Because to me, I wasn’t competing for other people, I was competing against myself, because I’m there to show the judges what I can do. I’m not there to show the other skaters what I can do. I don’t care. I wanted to go out and be the best that I could be.

Harding’s third point of clarification was far more succinct: “I didn’t tell the judges to suck my dick.” But Harding, who has established that she likes to say what is on her mind, had more to share with us, which led her to point out inaccuracy number four:

I never spoke to the judges like that on the ice. I did speak to a judge, with my coach. In 1990, well it happened many times, but the most important one to me was in 1990 when I wore the bright pink dress.

It is important to note here that the “bright pink dress” is not just what she was wearing when she did not, in real life, suggest a judge suck on a specific part of the male anatomy. It is part of a larger plot point and an earlier scene in *I, Tonya*

(Gillespie and Rogers, 2017) that shows a young Harding sewing the dress herself because she did not have the money to buy one off the rack. Harding explained the background on the pink dress:

Well, I made that, and after I competed and one of the judges came back to me with my coach and said if I ever wear anything like that again, they will never give me the marks that I deserve because that was the shittiest, ugliest dress they had ever seen in their life. And I said, well, when you have \$5,000 like those other girls do to make a dress that is ok for you, then I'll start wearing that. But until then--and I turned around and kind of flipped her off as I walked away. Because I'm not going to be treated like that, I don't deserve to be treated like that ever.

This was a significant recollection, less so because of the accuracy that was or was not involved; after all it is a scripted film, not a documentary, which means creative license can and likely will occur. Instead, the recollection drives home the point that Harding, while being unapologetically herself, was constantly up against the fact that she felt othered by her social and financial status in ways that directly impacted how she was evaluated in her sport.

Harding's final fact check of the film was that when her dad left her family, she had just turned 14, not 9, as *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017) depicts. And while the film showed a young Tonya standing in the way of his car crying, doing everything in her power to get him to stay, Harding said she understood why he was leaving. And again, the reason had to do with money. She explained:

My dad talked to me every single day. I knew what he was doing was best for him and for me. I had to look at it that way. My dad had to move to Idaho for a nice job, that had a place for him to live.

If the attack on Kerrigan is the film's dénouement, the critical themes that bring us to that point are Harding's class, the abuse she endured at the hands of her mother, and her tumultuous relationship with her ex-husband Gillyooly. The latter of the three elements was widely known and served as media catnip. The fact that the film exposed class as it relates to Harding's experience as well as the abuse at the hands of her mother would be a new revelation about Harding with an outcome that was impossible to predict. But Harding said she had no reservations about the project. "I had nothing to lose. The truth will come out, which it did," she told us.

It did, and thanks to the film, it reached a lot of people. At the height of its theatrical release *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017) played all over the world and on 1,450 screens in the United States and Canada alone; worldwide the film grossed nearly \$54 million, according to <https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt5580036/boxoffice>. In 2018, the film received 25 major film nominations, and it won 8 of them. Among them, Allison Janney, who played Harding's chain-smoking (even when on the ice) mother, won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor, and Margot Robbie, who played Harding, won a Critics Choice Award for Best Actress.

***I, Tonya* made it Possible for the Real Tonya to Experience Reputational Repair**

Our final point of analysis attends to whether the release of *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017) was an effective form of reputational repair for Harding. While it was important for Harding that her truth come out, she said she also wanted something positive to come out of the experience. During the interview, she repeatedly referred to *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017) as “my movie.” Harding’s interview made it clear to us the movie has helped her. She told us: “I told my story and then everybody else told their story. And [ex-husband] Jeff admitted that he did it. What more proof can you get finally after all of these years?”

Conclusions

It is clear from our research Harding feels she has been exonerated as a direct result of the film, and that since *I, Tonya*, people “absolutely” have a better understanding of where she came from, what she was up against with her mom, and how her circumstances were different than the girls who could afford the \$5,000 dresses. When Harding said, “Jeff admitted that he did it,” Harding meant Gillooly admitted to his role in planning the attack, which was carried out by Shane Stant (Benoit and Hanczor, 1994). That revelation was enough for Harding, who shared her frustration that aside from those who have watched the film, “there are people still to this day who believe the media, that said that I hit Nancy Kerrigan on the knee with a stick.”

One of the few interviews Harding has granted since the 1990s was to the *New York Times*, around the time of the film’s release. The story ran with the headline, “Tonya Harding Would Like Her Apology Now (Brodesser-Akner, 2018). We asked Harding if she has gotten an apology yet, and Harding said she actually never wanted one in the first place: “I just wanted people to stop lying about me and treat me like a freaking human being instead of a piece of shit they want to stomp on.”

Harding said she has received positive feedback from viewers who are not necessarily offering apologies, but admissions of learning something new, of having empathy where it did not exist before. She described the public response to the film:

There are thousands and thousands of people that are truly nice people that have a heart and have said wonderful, wonderful things to me. And I thank them. People go on Instagram now and say, ‘I just watched your movie *I, Tonya*, and I can’t believe you went through that, you’re such an inspiration and you’re strong,’ and I write back and say, ‘Thank you so much’ and ‘God bless.’

Before we concluded the interview, Harding reiterated that while she experienced real reputational harm, “there’s no apologies necessary. I just want to see the media cleaned up for the future generation.”

And how would they clean up?

“It doesn’t matter if you’re a man or a woman. You need to speak the truth,” she said.

Harding has felt the tide of public opinion turn incrementally since the film’s release, but the harm she experienced left her with strong opinions about the media: “The media do not care about you. They do not care about anything except making a story and making money.”

Limitations

The main limitation was that we were told we would only have four questions with Harding, although we were not given a time limit. That somewhat hindered our preparation, as we felt we had a lot of ground to cover over a roughly-30-year period of time. That limitation subsided when Harding stayed on the phone as long as we needed and then responded to follow-up text questions. Additionally, we would have preferred this interview happen over Zoom, but Harding was ill and preferred to do a phone interview, which we honored. That said, according to Google Scholar, there have been 3,550 research papers published about Tonya Harding since 1994. This paper is the first and only scholarly research paper that has had Tonya Harding on the record for the sole purpose of scholarly research.

Future Research

Because of the successful outcome of our research about Harding as it pertains to Hollywood’s role in repairing and restoring an image of her that the media tarnished, we believe future research of similar celebrities could benefit from critical analyses informed by image restoration theory. Monica Lewinsky was a private citizen who had her affair with then-President Bill Clinton come to public light and become the object of shame (Everbach, 2017). The scripted television series, *Impeachment: Crime Story* might have created a milieu similar to Harding’s for reputational repair.

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