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Sarah Stone Watt

Pepperdine University, Sarah.StoneWatt@pepperdine.edu

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# A Postfeminist Apologia: Susan G. Komen for the Cure's Evolving Response to the Planned Parenthood Controversy

Sarah Stone Watt\*

*Susan G. Komen for the Cure made the decision in early 2012 to end its longstanding grant funding of Planned Parenthood on the heels of a controversial federal investigation into Planned Parenthood's spending practices. This decision sparked a heated public debate over the politics of women's health and highlighted a possible rift in the feminist movement. Komen CEO Nancy Brinker crafted an apologia for the controversy through a series of statements that emphasized Komen's focus on financial responsibility above all else. In doing so, Brinker employed a postfeminist rhetorical strategy that highlighted the distance between Komen's goals and those of the larger women's health movement.*

**Keywords:** apologia, breast cancer, cause-related marketing, feminism, image repair, postfeminism, women's health

In early February 2012, Susan G. Komen for the Cure (Komen), "the world's largest breast cancer organization,"<sup>1</sup> announced it would withdraw \$700,000 in grant money from Planned Parenthood, "the nation's leading sexual and reproductive health care provider and advocate."<sup>2</sup> For the next week, these two iconic advocates for women's health dominated the news cycle in what was characterized as a "raging women's health battle."<sup>3</sup> A few months earlier Planned Parenthood found itself at the center of controversy and under federal investigation for misusing government funds. Despite a longstanding partnership between the organizations, Komen publicly distanced itself from Planned Parenthood as a result of the controversy. Komen's actions prompted an overwhelming barrage of criticism on multiple social media sites, as well as public statements from Komen affiliates in several states declaring opposition to the decision.<sup>4</sup> The public reaction indicated that supporters of both organizations now felt forced to choose between

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\* Sarah Stone Watt (Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University) is an Assistant Professor and Director of Forensics at Pepperdine University. She would like to thank Denise Fergusson and Jill Weber for their feedback on this manuscript. She can be reached for comment on this essay by phone at 310.506.6804 or by email at Sarah.StoneWatt@pepperdine.edu.

<sup>1</sup> "About Us," Susan G. Komen for the Cure, 2012, <http://ww5.komen.org/AboutUs/AboutUs.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "About Us," Planned Parenthood Federation of America, 2012, <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Andrea Mitchell Interviews Susan G. Komen's Nancy Brinker," NBC News, February 2, 2012, [http://firstread.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2012/02/02/10303379-andrea-mitchell-interviews-susan-g-komens-nancy-brinker](http://firstread.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/02/02/10303379-andrea-mitchell-interviews-susan-g-komens-nancy-brinker).

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Preston and Gardiner Harris, "Outcry is Fierce to Cut in Funds by Cancer Group." *The New York Times*, February 2, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/03/us/komen-foundation-urged-to-restore-planned-parenthood-funds.html>.

supporting Komen's mission of preventing and curing breast cancer, and supporting Planned Parenthood's mission of providing "trusted community healthcare" for women.<sup>5</sup> People overwhelmingly chose Planned Parenthood.<sup>6</sup> The controversy erupted so quickly and loudly that it prompted *Advertising Age* to call the break-up "a case for the marketing textbooks," saying that Komen had demonstrated "how a brand can boomerang from one of the most loved to one of the most reviled in a head-snapping two days."<sup>7</sup> In the days following the announcement, press releases and internal documents demonstrated that Komen had not made this decision hastily. However, they also had not foreseen such an overwhelmingly negative response.<sup>8</sup>

This essay examines the evolution of CEO Nancy Brinker and Susan G. Komen for the Cure's apologetics for de-funding Planned Parenthood. I argue that Brinker employed postfeminist rhetoric in an attempt to transcend the political implications of Komen's decision and, in doing so, fueled the controversy by highlighting the distance between the goals of her organization and the goals of the women's health movement. Brinker's insistence that the decision "was not political" combined with her over-emphasis on finances exposed an ideological rift between the postfeminist marketing of breast cancer fundraising and the feminist advocacy of the women's health movement.

### Breast Cancer and Feminism

Breast cancer awareness became a prominent part of the second wave feminist agenda, which brought public attention to women's health issues that had long been considered private. Since the 1970s breast cancer activism has grown into a health social movement focused on framing the disease as an issue of major public concern and establishing a culture of enthusiastic public support for breast cancer research.<sup>9</sup> In the 1970s and 80s women began to come forward with their breast cancer experiences to advocate for increased funding of breast cancer research, more control over treatment options, and prevention efforts.<sup>10</sup> By the 1990s the movement had raised the level of social legitimacy for breast cancer, prompting increasing numbers of magazines to publish breast cancer-related arti-

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<sup>5</sup> Planned Parenthood, "About Us."

<sup>6</sup> Laura Bassett, "Susan G. Komen Loses Support After Planned Parenthood Decision," *The Huffington Post*, February 1, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/01/susan-g-komen\\_n\\_1247262.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/01/susan-g-komen_n_1247262.html); Lucy Madison, "Backlash Grows Over Susan G. Komen-Planned Parenthood Flap," *CBS News*, February 2, 2012, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544\\_162-57370867-503544/backlash-grows-over-susan-g-komen-planned-parenthood-flap/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-57370867-503544/backlash-grows-over-susan-g-komen-planned-parenthood-flap/).

<sup>7</sup> Alexandra Bruell, "Can Komen Recover From PR Crisis?" *Advertising Age* 83, no. 6 (February 2012): 1-22.

<sup>8</sup> The organization did anticipate *some* push-back and provided some employees with talking points to respond to any accusations that their decision as a political one (see Erin Gloria Ryan, "Meet the Komen Exec. Behind the Planned Parenthood Defunding," available at: <http://jezebel.com/5881642/meet-the-komen-exec-behind-the-planned-parenthood-defunding>).

<sup>9</sup> Emily S. Kolker "Framing as a Cultural Resource in Health Social Movements: Funding Activism and the Breast Cancer Movement in the U.S. 1990-1993," *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 26, no. 6 (2004): 820-824; Phaedra C. Pezzullo, "Resisting 'National Breast Cancer Awareness Month': The Rhetoric of Counterpublics and their Cultural Performances," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 89 no. 4 (2003): 345-365.

<sup>10</sup> Samantha McCormick, Phil Brown, and Stephen Zavestoski, "The Personal is Scientific, the Scientific is Political: The Public Paradigm of the Environmental Breast Cancer Movement," *Sociological Forum* 18, no. 4 (2003): 545-576.

cles.<sup>11</sup> Articles in the early 1990s focused on the movement's attempts to raise awareness and increase survivors' influence over the scientific and government agendas for research. In the mid-1990s the focus shifted toward the popularity of breast cancer as a charitable cause.<sup>12</sup> Although many diverse groups make up the breast cancer movement, organizations like Susan G. Komen for the Cure—which “market personal experiences, empowerment rhetoric, and social networks to increase publicity while raising funds”—came to dominate the conversation.<sup>13</sup>

Komen's founder and CEO, Nancy Brinker, is “widely credited with turning the disease into a marketable product with which consumers, corporations, and politicians are eager to associate.”<sup>14</sup> Brinker created the Komen Foundation in her sister's name in 1982 to respond to the lack of treatment, support, and discussion her sister faced when she was suffering with breast cancer. She promised her sister, who lost her battle with breast cancer at age 36, “that she would do everything possible to end the shame, pain, fear, and hopelessness caused by this disease.”<sup>15</sup> The organization “pioneered cause-related marketing,”<sup>16</sup> making the pink ribbon synonymous with the disease and carving out a niche market of survivors and supporters of breast cancer research.<sup>17</sup>

The widespread marketing of pink products resulted in alliances between Komen and more than 200 corporations attempting to attract customers using cause-related marketing.<sup>18</sup> Partnering with companies ranging from Ford to Yoplait, Komen and other breast cancer organizations fostered “an entire industry devoted to marketing products with a breast cancer theme.”<sup>19</sup> The marketing messages associated with breast cancer fundraising are reliant on the static notions of femininity, materialism, and overwhelming optimism, characteristic of postfeminism. Postfeminism gained popularity in the 1980s as anti-feminist backlash promoted the idea that women had achieved equality and feminist politics were no longer necessary.<sup>20</sup> Taking into account feminist ideals such as empowerment and choice, postfeminist discourse refashions women's politics into a drive for personal empowerment through sexuality and material consumption.<sup>21</sup> When it is used in breast cancer marketing, the postfeminist approach invites people to participate financially in the women's health movement without having to identify with feminist politics. Sociologist Gayle Sulik argues that this approach to activism “has transformed breast cancer

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<sup>11</sup> Gayle A. Sulik, *Pink Ribbon Blues: How Breast Cancer Culture Undermines Women's Health*, Kindle ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 119.

<sup>12</sup> Samantha King, *Pink Ribbons Inc.: Breast Cancer and the Politics of Philanthropy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): viii.

<sup>13</sup> Sulik, *Pink Ribbon Blues*, 121.

<sup>14</sup> King, *Pink Ribbons Inc.*, vii.

<sup>15</sup> “Our People: Nancy G. Brinker, Founder and Chief Executive Officer,” Susan G. Komen for the Cure, 2012, <http://ww5.komen.org/AboutUs/NancyBrinker.html>

<sup>16</sup> Susan G. Komen for the Cure, “Our People: Nancy G. Brinker.”

<sup>17</sup> Sulik, *Pink Ribbon Blues*, 121.

<sup>18</sup> Bruell, “Can Komen Recover?”

<sup>19</sup> King, *Pink Ribbons Inc.*, xxiii

<sup>20</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed treatment of postfeminism see Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2009), and Tasker and Negra, *Interrogating Postfeminism*.

from an important social problem that requires complicated social and medical solutions to a popular item for public consumption.”<sup>22</sup>

Pink marketing has become so ubiquitous that it has largely overwhelmed voices of dissent within the larger breast cancer and women’s health movements and has raised billions of dollars for breast cancer research.<sup>23</sup> The prominence of their marketing campaign and their political influence in Washington has allowed Komen to marginalize dissenting voices such as Breast Cancer Action (BCA) who actively critique the commodification of breast cancer and companies that participate in it. Komen’s ability to overwhelm detractors and endear themselves to consumers, as well as Planned Parenthood’s contentious political position, may have contributed to Komen’s underestimation of the controversy they would cause in revising their granting guidelines and distancing themselves from Planned Parenthood.

### The Controversy

Komen’s decision to change its granting guidelines came as a result of a political situation that had been mounting over the course of the previous year. In 2011 Americans United for Life (AUL) released a report pointing to “systemic financial irregularities and other abuses” apparent in its investigation of over twenty years of Planned Parenthood records.<sup>24</sup> The report called for a federal investigation claiming Planned Parenthood misused more than \$300 million per year of tax payer money.<sup>25</sup> Building on existing state investigations and decisions to defund Planned Parenthood, House Republicans placed Planned Parenthood at the center of already contentious partisan debates about government spending and health care reform.<sup>26</sup> The House launched an investigation into Planned Parenthood’s financial practices, looking specifically at how the organization was keeping federal funds from going to abortion services.<sup>27</sup> This decision drew criticism from feminist organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), and added to feminist concerns over a mounting “war on women” evident in ongoing debates about budgets, healthcare, and abortion.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, Komen, a major funder of Planned Parenthood, was bracing for an investigation of its own. In January 2011 Komen hired Karen Handel, an outspoken advocate against Planned Parenthood, as the senior vice president of public policy. By spring Komen had begun investigating the organization’s grant funding of Planned

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<sup>22</sup> Sulik, *Pink Ribbon Blues*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Bruell, “Can Komen Recover?”

<sup>24</sup> Cheryl Wetzstien, “Report Seeks Probe of Planned Parenthood; Pro-Life Researchers Claim to Find Financial Problems,” *Washington Times*, July 7, 2011: A6.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Cheryl Wetzstien, “GOP has ‘Blueprint for Action’ on Planned Parenthood; House Implored to Probe Funding,” *Washington Times*, July 15, 2011: A3.

<sup>27</sup> Meghan McCarthy, “Republicans Open Sweeping Investigation into Planned Parenthood.” *National Journal*, September 28, 2011, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/healthcare/republicans-open-sweeping-investigation-into-planned-parenthood-20110927>

<sup>28</sup> “The War on Women,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/26/opinion/26sat1.html>

Parenthood.<sup>29</sup> In November, two months after the federal investigation was announced, Komen's board voted to eliminate funding of Planned Parenthood. The next day the senior official in charge of community grants, Mollie Williams, resigned. Two weeks later Komen's president, Elizabeth Thompson, informed Planned Parenthood of the board's decision. The decision remained private until January 31, 2012 when a Komen spokesperson announced the board's decision and linked it to the ongoing federal investigation.<sup>30</sup>

The public reaction was swift and loud. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter helped everyone from senators and celebrities to average citizens weigh in on the issue. Actor Chad Lowe tweeted, "If you're not outraged by what the Susan G Komen organization has done by ending support for Planned Parenthood, you're not paying attention." U.S. Senator and comedian Al Franken tweeted, "Planned Parenthood provides indispensable services to women in countless communities across the country RT @PPact RT if you #standwithPP." @furrygirl chimed in with her personal account "Planned Parenthood has been my primary provider of healthcare for HALF OF MY LIFE now. #PPSavedMe #StandWithPP."<sup>31</sup> The reaction extended beyond social media as New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg pledged \$250,000 to Planned Parenthood to help sustain their level of care for women's health.<sup>32</sup> The debate attracted people from all parts of the political spectrum. While most critics of the decision focused heavily on the implications for women's health, feminist advocates also examined what the decision meant for the larger women's movement. Amy Schiller argued that the brief break-up between these two organizations "provided a long overdue spotlight on the difference between feminism as a brand and feminism as a political movement."<sup>33</sup> With a sea of voices from across the nation weighing in on the decision, Susan G. Komen for the Cure was compelled to respond.

### Brinker's Apologia

Organizations like Susan G. Komen for the Cure are regularly called to account for their actions in order to maintain a positive public image. An organization can jeopardize its image by failing to uphold a certain degree of social responsibility, prompting a hostile public reaction. Public relations scholar Keith Michael Hearit explains that, "this hostility is a form of social sanction by which the supra-system (e.g. media, opinion-leaders, consumers, etc.) in effect says, 'we don't approve of what you have done.'"<sup>34</sup> In this situation the organization must offer a defense of its actions in order to maintain its image. In do-

<sup>29</sup> Washington Post Staff. "Timeline of Key Events in Komen Controversy." *The Washington Post*, February 7, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/timeline-of-key-events-in-komen-controversy/2012/02/07/gIQAX4EWxQ\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/timeline-of-key-events-in-komen-controversy/2012/02/07/gIQAX4EWxQ_story.html)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Drew Bowling, "Susan G. Komen/Planned Parenthood Ordeal: Twitter Reactions [Updated]." *Web Pro News*, February 3, 2012, <http://www.webpronews.com/susan-g-komenplanned-parenthood-ordeal-twitter-reactions-2012-02>

<sup>32</sup> Preston and Harris "Outcry is fierce"

<sup>33</sup> Amy Schiller, "Why the Komen/Planned Parenthood Break-up—While it Lasted—Was Good for Feminism." *The Nation*, February 3, 2012, <http://www.thenation.com/article/166072/why-komenplanned-parenthood-breakup-while-it-lived-was-good-feminism>

<sup>34</sup> Keith Michael Hearit, "Mistakes Were Made: Organizations, Apologia, and Crises of Social Legitimacy," *Communication Studies*, 46 no. 1-2 (1995): 3.

ing so, organizations rely on a collection of strategies referred to as apologia, or speeches of self-defense.<sup>35</sup>

Rhetorical scholars Robert Rowland and Angela Jerome explain that when offering an organizational apologia the rhetor faces the difficult task of simultaneously maintaining the organization's positive public image and "presenting justification of action or denial of guilt in the particular case (image repair)."<sup>36</sup> Rowland and Jerome identify image maintenance as a universal goal of organizational apologia because "organizations want to maintain important and ongoing relationships with stakeholders, including employees, shareholders, key partners, the public, and government."<sup>37</sup> Regardless of whether image repair is necessary or not, the organization must always focus on image maintenance in order to protect and bolster credibility.

While image maintenance is a necessity, it may not be possible for an organization to maintain its reputation without denying wrongdoing or justifying actions. When an organization is addressing "accusations of serious wrongdoing," its spokespersons may utilize a variety of image repair strategies to manage the way in which the organization is perceived in relation to the accusations.<sup>38</sup> The strategies employed depend on whether the organization chooses to admit guilt, which must then be absolved, or to avoid such an admission altogether.<sup>39</sup> To be successful, the organization must present an apologia strategy that addresses the perceived wrongdoing without contradicting "the general perception or reputation of the organization."<sup>40</sup>

Komen's strategy began to emerge after 24 hours of criticism circulating on the Internet. The first statement, offered in the form of a press release, did little to quiet the firestorm of controversy. Over the next week Nancy Brinker went on to release a YouTube video, appear on a major news program, and offer two additional press releases to address the criticisms of her organization. As her message evolved, Brinker repeatedly attempted to transcend the criticisms by emphasizing Komen's established role as a leading fundraiser for breast cancer. This attempt at image maintenance prevented her from repairing the rift Komen's decision created with supporters of the larger women's health movement. In the remainder of this essay I examine Brinker's attempt to transcend the controversy by shifting the focus of concern away from politics and toward the fight against breast cancer, and argue that her strategy relied on a postfeminist understanding of wom-

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<sup>35</sup> The rhetorical and public relations scholarship on apologia is extensive. For more general treatment of the concept, see for example B.L. Ware and Wil Linkugel, "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 273-283; William L. Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); William L. Benoit, "Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication," *Public Relations Review* 23 no. 2 (1997): 177-186; Joseph R. Blaney, William L. Benoit, LeAnn M. Brazeal, "Blowout!: Firestone's Image Restoration Campaign," *Public Relations Review* 28 (2002): 379-392; Joseph M. Valenzano, III and Jason A. Edwards, "The Debate Confessional: Newt Gingrich, John King, and Atoning for Past Sins," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 2 no. 2 (2012): 30-38.

<sup>36</sup> Robert C. Rowland and Angela M. Jerome, "On Organizational Apologia: A Reconceptualization," *Communication Theory* 14 no. 3 (August 2004): 195.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Rowland & Jerome, "On Organizational Apologia," 195.

<sup>39</sup> Hearit, "Mistakes Were Made"

<sup>40</sup> Rowland & Jerome, "On Organizational Apologia," 195.

en's health that appealed to corporate sponsors while distancing her organization from the larger women's health movement.

### **Transcending Politics**

Transcendence is a form of apologia in which the rhetor avoids admitting guilt for any wrongdoing, and instead redefines the act using a frame of reference which appeals to a higher purpose.<sup>41</sup> A transcendent strategy relies on two primary elements: "redefinition and an appeal to higher values."<sup>42</sup> In redefining, the rhetor dissociates the act from the current prevailing interpretation, and emphasizes a more noble purpose that the act will serve in the long-term. Brinker's strategy distanced Komen's decision from its immediate political implications and emphasized the measurably larger impact that future grants would have in the fight against breast cancer.

Hearit explains that a successful transcendent appeal will typically employ "three forms of dissociations in particular: opinion/knowledge, business interests/social interests, and current/future."<sup>43</sup> The opinion/knowledge dissociation contends that the prevailing interpretation of the situation is based on uninformed opinions, and when the public understands the knowledge upon which the organization based its decision, the organization's guilt will be absolved. The second dissociation relies on the assertion that the organization is acting not out of self-interest, but out of concern for the greater good. The third form of dissociation prioritizes a future-oriented view of the event and minimizes any potential short-term concerns. Taken together, these strategies are designed to show a higher moral purpose for the organization, legitimize its mission as socially responsible, and show that the organization has the "backbone" to stand up for what is right, even in the face of controversy.<sup>44</sup> My analysis of Brinker's strategy reveals that she attempted to redefine the controversy as apolitical by employing the opinion/knowledge and current/future dissociations and contending that the controversy was the result of a simple misunderstanding. Then, as she looked to the future, she conflated business and social interests to focus on Komen's fiduciary responsibility to its donors. The overwhelmingly negative response to her strategy demonstrates what scholars have identified as a major drawback to the transcendent approach; by appealing to a larger moral code the rhetor may alienate that portion of the audience that does not share the rhetor's values.<sup>45</sup>

### **Redefinition: "This is not a Political Decision"**

When Komen announced the revision of its granting guidelines to exclude organizations under investigation on the heels of a congressional fight over Planned Parenthood, stakeholders in both Komen and Planned Parenthood interpreted the decision as a political

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<sup>41</sup> Barry Brummett, "Burkean Scapegoating, Mortification, and Transcendence in Presidential Campaign Rhetoric," *Central States Speech Journal* 32 (1981): 254-264; Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 77; Hearit, "Mistakes Were Made," 221.

<sup>42</sup> Hearit, "Mistakes Were Made," 220.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>45</sup> Hearit, "Mistakes Were Made," 221; Emil B. Towner, "A <Patriotic> Apologia: The Transcendence of the Dixie Chicks," *Rhetoric Review* 29 (2010): 293-309.



statement related to Planned Parenthood providing abortions.<sup>46</sup> Komen affiliates in multiple states spoke out against the decision and emphasized the importance of their relationship with Planned Parenthood.<sup>47</sup> After the announcement affiliates received calls demonstrating the divisiveness of Komen's decision. Andrea Higgins, Executive Director of Komen's Houston affiliate, said,

People have been calling us very angry. We understand why. Then, there have been people who see this as very political and they've been on the other side of the issue and they applaud us. We don't want them to do that either . . . We see this as access to care for women and we are not red or blue here.<sup>48</sup>

At the same time, Planned Parenthood issued a press release saying that "Anti-choice groups in America have repeatedly threatened the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation for partnering with Planned Parenthood to provide these lifesaving cancer screenings and news articles suggest that the Komen Foundation ultimately succumbed to these pressures."<sup>49</sup> While Komen and its affiliates worked to distance themselves from the political disagreement, and Planned Parenthood publicly voiced disappointment, citizens and congressional representative signed petitions urging Komen to reverse the decision and donors vowed to stop supporting Komen and send their money to Planned Parenthood instead.<sup>50</sup>

As the political debate grew louder, news outlets rushed to expose Komen's conservative political ties. In addition to heavy coverage of Komen's hiring of Karen Handel and her vociferous opposition to Planned Parenthood, reporters highlighted Brinker's ties to the Republican Party and a new partnership between Komen and the George W. Bush Institute to provide breast and cervical screenings in Africa and Latin America. They also explained that the program was funded by drug maker Merck, a longtime donor to Republican presidential candidate Rick Perry.<sup>51</sup> Further, there were reports that anti-abortion groups "may have been tipped off to the decision well before it was public," and that

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<sup>46</sup> David Morgan, "Komen Move on Planned Parenthood Sparks Abortion Row," *Reuters*, February 2, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/02/us-usa-healthcare-komen-idUSTRE8111WA20120202>

<sup>47</sup> "Arguments Against Komen Decision to Defund Planned Parenthood," *The Daily Beast*, February 4, 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/02/04/arguments-against-the-komen-decision-to-defund-planned-parenthood.html>; Sarah Kliff, "Seven California Affiliates Oppose Defunding Planned Parenthood," *Washington Post*, February 2, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/post/seven-california-komen-affiliates-oppose-defunding-planned-parenthood/2012/02/02/gIQAncMJlQ\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/post/seven-california-komen-affiliates-oppose-defunding-planned-parenthood/2012/02/02/gIQAncMJlQ_blog.html); Cindy George, "Houston Affiliates Respond the Komen, Planned Parenthood Uproar," *Houston Chronicle*, February 2, 2012, <http://blog.chron.com/medblog/2012/02/houston-affiliates-respond-to-the-komen-planned-parenthood-uproar/>.

<sup>48</sup> George, "Houston Affiliates Respond"

<sup>49</sup> Planned Parenthood, "'Alarmed and Saddened' by Komen Foundation Succumbing to Political Pressure, Planned Parenthood Launches Fund for Breast Cancer Services," January 31, 2012, <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/newsroom/politics-policy-issues/press-releases-5593.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> Bassett, "Susan G. Komen Loses Support"

<sup>51</sup> Lori Stahl, "Komen's Planned Parenthood Decision All About Politics," *The Washington Post*, February 1, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/post/komens-planned-parenthood-decision-all-about-politics/2012/02/01/gIQAJSlxhQ\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/post/komens-planned-parenthood-decision-all-about-politics/2012/02/01/gIQAJSlxhQ_blog.html).

Komen was not cancelling grants to other organizations, such as The Pennsylvania State University, which were also under investigation.<sup>52</sup>

Despite evidence to the contrary, in each of her public statements Brinker insisted that the change to Komen's funding guidelines was not about politics. The first response to the controversy on the Komen website offered to "set the record straight," and expressed disappointment that the decision had been "mischaracterized." Both the initial press release and Brinker's YouTube video explained that in 2010 Komen began measuring the impact of community grants and, as a result of the findings, was simply strengthening performance criteria for grantees.<sup>53</sup> The initial statement concluded with regrets that the organization's decision would end some longstanding relationships, including the one with Planned Parenthood, but clarified that the decision was "not about politics."<sup>54</sup> Brinker's attempt to dissociate the decision from any political motivation remained consistent even as other elements in her apology evolved throughout the week.

Brinker employed both the opinion/knowledge and current/future dissociations to re-define the situation as a simple misunderstanding, and was adamant that as people learned more about the decision they would see the benefits of changing the granting structure to advance the fight against breast cancer. On February 2, Brinker appeared on MSNBC talking to reporter, friend, and long-time Komen supporter, Andrea Mitchell, about the decision. Mitchell conveyed the shock and disappointment that many Komen supporters felt with the decision and pressed Brinker to explain. In response, Brinker again insisted that the decision was not political. To bolster her point, Brinker claimed that Karen Handel had nothing to do with the decision. While Mitchell focused on the critics, pointing to donors backing away from Komen and images of people on Komen's Facebook page "cutting pink ribbons in half," Brinker said that her organization was getting very favorable responses as well. Invoking the opinion/knowledge dissociation, Brinker claimed that the favorable responses came from "people who have bothered to read the material, who have bothered to understand the issues," implying that those who were opposed to the decision did not have a sophisticated understanding of the situation.<sup>55</sup> Brinker contended that the prevailing interpretation was based on uninformed opinions and that those who had accurate knowledge of the situation recognized the organization's wisdom in strengthening guidelines.

The following day, the Komen website featured another press release that began: "We want to apologize to the American public for recent decisions that cast doubt upon our commitment to our mission of saving women's lives."<sup>56</sup> Although this statement started with a more explicit apology, it too relied on the opinion/knowledge dissociation. The organization recognized that the events of the preceding week had been "deeply unsettling" to many Komen supporters and it went on to explain that the problem was not the

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<sup>52</sup> Katie Shepard and Adam Serwer, "Komen's Planned Parenthood Decision: It Sure Seems Like It's About Abortion," *Mother Jones*, February 2, 2012, <http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2012/02/komens-planned-parenthood-decision-yes-it-about-abortion>.

<sup>53</sup> "Statement from Susan G. Komen for the Cure," Susan G. Komen for the Cure, February 1, 2012, [http://ww5.komen.org/KomenNewsArchive.aspx?FolderName=News](http://ww5.komen.org/KomenNewsArchive.aspx?FolderName=News;); "Straight Talk from Ambassador Nancy G. Brinker," February 3, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMe8IvEHvoc>

<sup>54</sup> "Statement from Susan G. Komen for the Cure."

<sup>55</sup> "Andrea Mitchell Interviews Susan G. Komen's Nancy Brinker."

<sup>56</sup> "Statement from Susan G. Komen Board of Directors and Founder Nancy G. Brinker," Susan G. Komen for the Cure, February 3, 2012, <http://ww5.komen.org/KomenNewsArchive.aspx?FolderName=News>

change itself, but “the *presumption* that the changes made to our funding criteria were done for political reasons or to specifically penalize Planned Parenthood. They were not.”<sup>57</sup> This statement affirmed Brinker’s redefinition of the situation as a strengthening of guidelines. It emphasized that claims made about the political nature of the organization’s decision were based on uninformed presumptions rather than facts. To ensure that these presumptions were not made in the future, and that “politics has no place in [the] granting process,” the statement explained that the organization would amend the guidelines again to guarantee “that disqualifying investigations must be criminal and conclusive in nature.”<sup>58</sup>

The overt apology at the beginning of the statement led many news outlets to report that Komen had completely reversed their decision, yet others reported that was not the case.<sup>59</sup> This second press release offered an explicit apology, but not for the political decision. Instead, it acknowledged that in making the appropriate and informed decision to strengthen granting guidelines, Komen had failed to guard against the presumption that the decision was political. Revising the guidelines a second time would clarify Komen’s position so that these sorts of presumptions would not be made in the future. The statement went on to call for “the public’s understanding and patience” as Komen worked with its affiliates to determine how to proceed.<sup>60</sup> This language reinforced the point that the problem stemmed not from Komen’s actions, but from misunderstanding and a rush to judgment on the part of the public.

Rather than admitting wrongdoing and seeking to repair its image, Komen insisted that its actions had simply been misinterpreted. Komen’s CEO sought to transcend the situation by redefining the conversation away from one concerned with the political implications of the action and toward a discussion of the way funds could be used to fight breast cancer more effectively in the future. Brinker’s statements reinforced the organization’s 30-year history of serving women and argued that the change in granting guidelines would help Komen to “continually evolve and do a better job of measuring and achieving impacts.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> “Statement from Susan G. Komen Board of Directors and Founder Nancy G. Brinker,” emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> For example, see Cecile Richards, “Komen Reverses Decision to Cut Planned Parenthood Funding,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/feb/03/news/la-heb-komen-planned-parenthood-reversal-20120203> ; Amina Khan, “Komen Reverses Decisions to Deny Funding to Planned Parenthood,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/feb/03/health/la-he-komen-reversal-20120204> ; “Komen Foundation Reverses Funding Decision of Planned Parenthood,” *Cnn.com*, February 3, 2012, [http://articles.cnn.com/2012-02-03/politics/politics\\_planned-parenthood-komen-foundation\\_1\\_planned-parenthood-komen-foundation-susan-g-komen?\\_s=PM:POLITICS](http://articles.cnn.com/2012-02-03/politics/politics_planned-parenthood-komen-foundation_1_planned-parenthood-komen-foundation-susan-g-komen?_s=PM:POLITICS); Tom Benning, “Planned Parenthood President. Komen was target of ‘Political bullying,’” *Dallas Morning News*, February 3, 2012, <http://www.dallasnews.com/incoming/20120203-komen-for-the-cure-reverses-decision-to-cut-planned-parenthood-funding.ece> ; Tito Edwards, “Susan G. Komen did not Reverse Course, but it’s an Epic P.R. Failure on Their Part,” *The American Catholic*, February 3, 2012, <http://the-american-catholic.com/2012/02/03/susan-g-komen-foundation-did-not-reverse-course-but-its-an-epic-p-r-disaster-on-their-part/> ; Laura Bassett, “Susan G. Komen Reverses Planned Parenthood Decision, Does not Promise to Renew Grants,” *Huffington Post*, February 3, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/03/susan-g-komen-planned-parenthood\\_n\\_1252651.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/03/susan-g-komen-planned-parenthood_n_1252651.html)

<sup>60</sup> “Statement from Susan G. Komen Board of Directors and Founder Nancy G. Brinker.”

<sup>61</sup> “Statement from Susan G. Komen for the Cure”; Brinker, “Straight Talk.”

## Moving Forward with an Appeal to Higher Values: “Fiduciary Duty”

As Komen looked to the future, supporters of Planned Parenthood largely focused on the past, highlighting the important role Planned Parenthood played in saving lives. One of many outlets for supporters’ stories was a Tumblr site, “Planned Parenthood Saved My Life,” in which women and men offered their testimonies of survival relating to cancer, organ transplants, sexual violence, and more.<sup>62</sup> These posts, along with t-shirts and protest signs saying, “protect women’s health,” “real reform includes women’s health care,”<sup>63</sup> “women’s health matters,” and “stop the war on women,”<sup>64</sup> rhetorically situated Planned Parenthood within the women’s health movement by using women-first language and highlighting the need for women’s control over their health. Using language often employed by the movement, supporters focused on Planned Parenthood’s commitment to equipping women with the resources to make the best decisions for their bodies.<sup>65</sup>

Rather than engage the personal testimonies, Brinker attempted to transcend the controversy and account for concerns about women’s empowerment by emphasizing Komen’s image as a prominent fundraiser. Her rhetorical strategy distanced the organization from the women’s health movement and instead employed a postfeminist rhetoric which focused on consumption-based fundraising and donations coming from “the healthy financial resources of particular classes.”<sup>66</sup> Whereas Planned Parenthood supporters revealed that women still lacked the ability to control their health, particularly reproductive health, Brinker claimed that what women needed was more financial investment in expert medical solutions. The more that Brinker relied on Komen’s existing image as a fundraiser, the more she highlighted the organization’s postfeminist approach to women’s health.

Throughout the week Brinker and the Komen Foundation emphasized the granting process above all else. In attempting to maintain its image, the organization conflated social interests with business interests and appealed to a “fiduciary duty to our donors.”<sup>67</sup> In the first press release on the Komen site attempting to “set the record straight,” Komen explained the decision saying,

Starting in 2010, Komen began an initiative to help us do a better job of measuring the impact of community grants. This is important because we invest significant dollars in

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<sup>62</sup> Planned Parenthood Saved Me, 2012, <http://plannedparenthoodsavedme.tumblr.com/archive>

<sup>63</sup> Eric W. Dolan, “Susan G. Komen Charity Cuts Off Grants to Planned Parenthood,” *The Raw Story*, January 31, 2012 <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/01/31/susan-g-komen-charity-cuts-off-grants-to-planned-parenthood/>

<sup>64</sup> Amanda Marcotte, “Why the Komen/Planned Parenthood Debacle Blew Up,” *Slate*, February 2, 2012, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx\\_factor/2012/02/02/anti\\_choice\\_dirty\\_tricks\\_make\\_everyone\\_involved\\_look\\_slimy\\_.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2012/02/02/anti_choice_dirty_tricks_make_everyone_involved_look_slimy_.html)

<sup>65</sup> Although women’s health movements are diverse in both the issues they emphasize and tactics they employ, they tend to be unified by an overarching focus on empowering women to make their own decisions regarding what is best for their body. For more on these movements, see Sandra Morgen, *Into Our Own Hands: The Women’s Health Movement in the United States, 1969-1990* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

<sup>66</sup> D. Travers Scott, “Feminism and Media Theory in Two Interactive Media Properties,” *Feminist Media Studies*, 10 no. 4 (2010): 458.

<sup>67</sup> “Statement from Susan G. Komen Board of Directors and Founder and CEO Nancy G. Brinker”

our local community programs—\$93 million in 2011, which provided for 700,000 breast health screenings and diagnostic procedures. Following this review, we made the decision to implement stronger performance criteria for our grantees to minimize duplication and free up dollars for direct services to help vulnerable women.<sup>68</sup>

This statement sets the tone for later iterations of the apologia strategy, arguing that the new granting strategy “implemented more stringent eligibility standards to safeguard donor dollars.”<sup>69</sup> This framing of the decision emphasizes the importance of financial investment as a means to help women. As the statement unfolds further, it also offers the clearest illustration of Komen’s conflation of social and business interests claiming, “over the past three decades people have given us more than just their money. They have given us their trust and we take that responsibility very seriously.” Although these two sentences could be read as elevating trust in the organization over financial investment, subsequent statements demonstrate that Komen sees these two elements as inextricably linked.

The second press release from Brinker and the Komen Board of Directors demonstrates the conflation of trust and financial investment in the attempt to appeal to higher values. They explain that the decision stemmed from their “original desire,” which “was to fulfill our fiduciary duty to our donors.”<sup>70</sup> Here Brinker and the Board of Directors elevate the responsibility to donors above all else. Even later in the statement when they mention that the “only goal for our granting process is to support women and families in the fight against breast cancer,” the grants take center stage. The focus on finances is also evident in Brinker’s interview with Andrea Mitchell. During the interview Brinker explains that “the investigation [of Planned Parenthood] isn’t the only issue,” it’s about “taking these grants into communities and being excellent grant-givers.”<sup>71</sup> When Mitchell attempts to highlight supporters’ arguments for Planned Parenthood, Brinker argues that “Our issue is grant excellence” and explains that the services offered by Planned Parenthood, no matter how valuable women find them, are “pass-through grants” and that Komen has shifted focus to “direct service grants.”<sup>72</sup> This emphasis on grants as the highest priority again causes Brinker to conflate business and social interests, saying, “This is about the restructure of our grant program. Now, as an NGO and a leader in the breast cancer space, we have an obligation to the community we serve, to donors, and to this country to translate cancer care in the way we know how.”<sup>73</sup>

Brinker’s conflation of business and social interests not only reveals a focus on financial investment as the means of achieving women’s health, it also prefers Komen and medical expert knowledge of the disease over women’s embodied agency. Whereas the women’s health movement seeks funding and research into women’s health issues as a means of equipping women to make the best choices for their individual bodies, Brinker’s rhetoric constructs women as simply the target population for breast cancer services. When Andrea Mitchell presses Brinker about the political nature of the decision, pointing out that Planned Parenthood appears to be unfairly targeted by the new policy, Brinker

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<sup>68</sup> “Statement from Susan G. Komen for the Cure”

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> “Statement from Susan G. Komen Board of Directors and Founder and CEO Nancy G. Brinker”

<sup>71</sup> “Andrea Mitchell Interviews Susan G. Komen’s Nancy Brinker.”

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

again diverts the conversation to the higher goals of grant-making within her organization. Brinker says,

The investigation isn't the only issue, Andrea. In 2010 we set about creating excellence in our grants. Not just in our community grants, but in our science grants. Putting metrics, outcomes, and measures to them so that we can translate all of the science we've funded over the years.<sup>74</sup>

In this moment Brinker emphasizes the organization's honorable record of advancing scientific research in the area of breast cancer and translating that research into care. However, rather than rhetorically aligning with the women's health movement by demonstrating the potential for that research to empower women with the information necessary to choose the right path to care for their cancer, she distances herself from the movement by occupying the space of an expert who will prescribe for women the path they should take. To legitimize her role reversal, she uses the large amounts of money her organization has invested to reposition Komen as the expert on breast cancer and what should be done to stop it.

In each iteration of her apologia Brinker attempts to redefine the situation and appeal to higher values by conflating business interests and social interests and insisting that, in the long run, financial investment in scientific research will save women's lives. In her YouTube video Brinker explains that, thanks to Komen supporters, Susan G. Komen invested \$93 million over the past year in community grants. She emphasizes the importance of increasing the funding each year and re-emphasizes what she sees as the highest value, saying "we have the highest responsibility to insure that these donor dollars make the biggest impact possible."<sup>75</sup> Secondly she says, "These changes mean that we will be able to do more to help women advance the fight against breast cancer." Then she goes on to talk more about grants and to reiterate a point from the first press release that, "over the past three decades people have given us more than just their money, they have given us their trust."<sup>76</sup> Although Brinker again accounts for women as the target population for grants, she blatantly declares that the highest priority for her organization is donor dollars.

### **Implications for an Evolving Apologia**

In attempting to transcend the situation, Brinker's postfeminist rhetoric betrayed her organization's roots in the women's health movement and instead relied on a new incarnation of an old idea—that those with the most money and power ought to decide what is best for women and their bodies. Brinker's attempt to redefine the situation relied on her insistence that the public failed to understand the informed decision her organization was making. This strategy distanced Komen from the women's health movement by implying that Komen's knowledge of cancer care was superior to women's personal and collective experiences of empowerment within the Planned Parenthood model. She called women to

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<sup>74</sup> "Andrea Mitchell Interviews Susan G. Komen's Nancy Brinker."

<sup>75</sup> Brinker, "Straight Talk"

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

move past their personal experiences and look toward the future when donor dollars could be put to work saving them.

In her book, *Pink Ribbons Inc.: Breast Cancer and the Politics of Philanthropy*, Samantha King argues that the increasing role of organized giving “in the politics of breast cancer requires that we rethink some key assumptions about the movement and the meaning of breast cancer in the contemporary United States.”<sup>77</sup> The Komen/Planned Parenthood controversy demonstrates further the need for that rethinking. Brinker’s decision to adopt a postfeminist emphasis on money and expertise in place of women’s empowerment exposed the distance between the goals of fund-raising organizations such as hers, and the larger women’s health movement. Rather than enabling her to transcend the controversy, Brinker’s repeated insistence that the decision “was not political” combined with her focus on “donor dollars” highlighted the ideological rift between the postfeminist marketing of breast cancer fundraising and the feminist advocacy of the women’s health movement.

At the end of a long week of heated debate over Komen’s decision Brinker gave her final public statement on the issue. In the press release she accepted the resignation of Karen Handel and offered a markedly different take on the controversy. Rather than continuing to emphasize donor dollars and medical expertise, Brinker appeared to refocus on the women she created the organization to serve. She said,

Susan G. Komen for the Cure’s mission is the same today as it was the day of its founding: to find a cure and eradicate breast cancer – We owe no less to our partners, supporters and, above all, the millions of people who have been and continue to be impacted by this life-threatening disease. We have made mistakes in how we have handled recent decisions and take full accountability for what has resulted, but we cannot take our eye off the ball when it comes to our mission.<sup>78</sup>

Rather than attempting to transcend the controversy, as she accepted Handel’s resignation Brinker shifted from image maintenance to image repair as she admitted responsibility for mistakes made in the changing of granting guidelines. She added that the organization “must learn from what we’ve done right, what we’ve done wrong and achieve our goal for the millions of women who rely on us. The stakes are too high and providing hope for a cure must drive our efforts.”<sup>79</sup>

Apologias such as Brinker’s are unique in that they evolve over time, adapting to a constantly changing rhetorical situation. In these moments, Judith Hoover calls upon rhetorical critics to acknowledge that each strategy the rhetor deploys over time must build on the antecedent strategy even as they seek a shift to adapt to the changing nature of the situation.<sup>80</sup> In Brinker’s final apologia she did not apologize for her earlier characterization of opponents as misinformed, nor did she deny the importance of donor dollars to her organization. Instead, she offered a vague apology for “mistakes” that allowed opponents to fill in the mistakes that offended them. She realigned her rhetoric with that of women’s health advocates by refocusing on the women they serve and their ability to help provide

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<sup>77</sup> King, *Pink Ribbons Inc.*, xxii

<sup>78</sup> “Statement from Susan G. Komen Founder and CEO Nancy Brinker”

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Judith D. Hoover, “Big Boys Don’t Cry: The Values Constraint in Apologia,” *Southern Communication Journal* 54 no. 3 (1989): 235-252.

“hope for a cure,” rather than mandate a particular course of action. Yet, after such a dramatic week, this resolution seems all too easy. This case should serve as more than a lesson to rhetoric and public relations scholars on the successes and failures of apologia. This controversy demonstrated that there are real consequences to allowing the financial power demonstrated by breast cancer fundraising organizations to usurp individual women’s agency over their healthcare decisions, which is at the heart of the women’s health movement.