

Assignment Guidelines – Paper

Find a recent (last 10 years) Canadian PR crisis case. Apply the theories you've learned from the readings to that Canadian PR crisis case. Write a 10-page, 3000 word paper that explains the case and then analyzes it. No outside sources beyond the readings are needed, but engagement with the readings is vital. Reference some of them, and cite accordingly. Include a Works cited.

I recommend taking notes each week from the readings as you progress through the course – then when you write the paper you do not have to reread the articles to find secondary material. Include citations to course readings & a bibliography in MLA format.

We're Sorry and It Won't Happen Again:
The Strength of Mortification and Corrective Action Following Saint
Mary's University "Rape Chant" Crisis

Abstract

This case study explores Saint Mary's University "rape chant" crisis by explaining the incident, noting relevant social contexts, and examining their crisis response strategies, following with an analysis of the crisis response in relation to two major crisis communication theories: Image Restoration Theory and Attribution Theory. The study concludes with a brief evaluation of Saint Mary's and their Student Association's crisis response strategies.

The Case

On Monday, September 2, 2013, a 15 second video uploaded to Instagram sparked a great deal of publicity and with it an image crisis that threatened to potentially ruin Saint Mary's University's previously untarnished reputation. The video clip in question featured student leaders performing a chant during Saint Mary's 2013 "Welcome Week", a social orientation for first year students, which explicitly mentioned and, in the eyes of many, promoted underage sex and sexual assault. The lyrics of the chant are as follows: "SMU boys we like them young. Y is for your sister, O is for oh so tight, U is for underage, N is for no consent, G is for grab that ass" (Tutton, 2013). The chant had apparently been sung for several years and was not exclusive to the east coast, as the University of British Columbia faced backlash for a similar chant just days after articles of the SMU scandal were published (Logan, 2013; CBC News, 2013).

The video quickly garnered attention from both news media and social media, with great outrage over the fact that the chant blatantly celebrates sexual activity with underage persons without consent. The anger is not unjustified. As Burns and Bruner note in their article about image restoration, a crisis ought to be studied with consideration for contributing structural factors and by extension, its social context. The structural factor in this instance is rape culture. Rape culture is "a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports

violence against women” (Buchwald, et al., 1993). Chants such as the one sung at SMU and UBC normalize sexual violence against women, which is especially concerning when statistics report that college-age women aged 18-24 experience the highest rates of sexual violence in Canada and as many as one in three female undergraduate students will experience some form of sexual assault (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993; Sinha, 2013).

Crisis Response

In response to the uproar from the media, the student population, and the general public, the Saint Mary’s University Student Association (SMUSA) posted a statement on their Facebook page on September 5, 2015 that explicitly apologized for the incident, took complete responsibility, recognized the damage done, and stated their commitment to ensuring not only that the incident never be repeated, but also commitment to creating “a respectful, safe and inclusive environment” for students of the university.

The same day, the University itself issued a statement through their social media accounts and the news section of their website. The statement was blunt, stating that the University found “the actions of the student leaders depicted on the video to be deplorable”, promising a meeting with SMUSA and mandated sensitivity training for all 80 student leaders within the month, additional training for the event organizers concerning consent and sexual assault, and the distribution of information about consent and sexual assault to the campus (Saint Mary’s University Halifax, 2013). They concluded by saying: “The University takes this matter very seriously and this incident makes it clear that despite the high profile attention the issue has received, there is still more work to be done. Saint Mary’s is committed to making sure that happens” (Saint Mary’s University Halifax, 2013). Steve Proctor, a spokesperson for SMU,

added in another interview that the University was not aware of the chant, however students have reported that the chant has been sung “for at least four years” prior to the incident (Wong, 2013).

The following day, SMUSA announced the resignation of their President, Jared Perry, as well as their VP Student Life, Carrigan Desjardins, who was the lead organizer for Saint Mary’s orientation week program. Perry, through the SMUSA Facebook page, stated his resignation “allows the Association and its leaders to focus exclusively on the work of re-mediating the damage earlier this week to the reputation of the Association and Saint Mary’s University” (SMUSA, 2013b). In another statement, he addressed the chant directly, explaining that SMUSA doesn’t “necessarily look at the message” of their chants, but the rhyme and energy instead (Logan, 2013). Perry expressed deep regret for the incident, saying “It’s definitely the biggest mistake I’ve made throughout my university career and probably my life” (Logan, 2013).

Later that week, the University announced that two students would be facing disciplinary action for violations of the University’s student code. Saint Mary’s also announced that they had created the President’s Council to “change the culture around the issue of sexual violence prevention, respect and safety within the Saint Mary’s Community” (Saint Mary’s University, 2013). The Council comprises five women and three men, including several professors, a lawyer, a student, and current and former provincial government ministers to provide “a wide range of perspectives to the issue”, according to the University’s President (Saint Mary’s University, 2013).

The President’s Council has been compiling regular reports and conducting analyses of their campus culture since the incident. Their first major publication was published on December 15, 2013. The 110-page document explained the incident, the Council’s mandate and process, the cultural context in which the incident occurred, the greater context of sexualized violence on a

general, province-wide, and university-wide level, input from the community and experts in the relevant disciplines and fields, and finally delivered 20 immediate, short-term, and ongoing recommendations. The recommendations were sorted into three categories, and remain guiding principles for the university. The first, “Build a Foundation for Cultural Change”, includes: communicating a commitment to action, redesigning Orientation Week, identifying a sexual violence response team and improving access to resources and training, formally investigating and appropriately disciplining perpetrators of sexual violence, and encouraging faculty research in sexualized violence and related areas (President’s Council, 2013). The second category, “Drive Cultural Change”, notes: increasing the understanding of consent, addressing alcohol and other drug use, empowering bystanders, improving safety standards and programs, engaging the university and broader community, and collaborating with other educational institutions, the Province of Nova Scotia, and other partners (President’s Council, 2013). Lastly, the category “Demonstrate Accountability” calls for evaluating their progress through regular reports from the University’s president (President’s Council, 2013).

The year following the incident saw changes to how orientation week worked at Saint Mary’s. Student leaders had to sign a Charter of Responsibility, and all of the activities in the orientation week program had to be “organized and vetted by a steering committee comprised of faculty, staff and students”, in addition to new training programs about being active bystanders and “understanding and preventing sexualized violence” (Lau, 2014). Orientation week of 2015 continued to develop these changes, with a new session called “Safe at SMU”. The program focused on “cultural safety, sexual consent, and academic safety” and over 600 first-year students attended the mandatory seminar (Rhodes, 2015; Wong, 2015).

Analysis

IMAGE RESTORATION THEORY

Saint Mary's crisis can easily be analyzed through the lens of William L. Benoit's Image Restoration Theory, as the crisis fits the qualifications for an attack that Benoit outlines in his 1997 article "Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication". The incident was perceived as offensive and not only did the student leaders under the Saint Mary's University Student Association perform the act, but the University itself could be targeted for having poor management that allowed the incident occur. Of course, the incident posed serious potential damage to Saint Mary's image and reputation.

Both the University and the Student Association engaged in heavy amounts of mortification and corrective action, with some smaller instances of evasion of responsibility. Under evasion of responsibility, SMUSA, or more specifically their president Jared Perry, stated that they had not had malicious intentions with the chant and that they did not realize the message it was conveying. Benoit categorizes this as the accident/good intentions strategy. It was certainly wise of SMUSA to not use this as their sole strategy, as a chant that cheers the words "underage" and "no consent" wouldn't hold up as well-intended in the face of public scrutiny. The University engaged in defeasibility, as they "[alleged] a lack of information about or control over important elements of the situation" when they claimed that they were not aware of the chant being sung (Benoit, 1997, 180). Again, this likely would not have been a strong enough strategy to use on its own, as evading responsibility is not often met with forgiveness and Benoit himself recommends using more than one strategy in an organization's response to crisis.

Benoit (1997) notes in his article that "it can be extremely important to report plans to correct and/or prevent recurrence of the problem", especially when the organization has taken responsibility (184). The Student Association performed corrective action through the

resignation and re-election of their President and VP Student Affairs and engaged in mortification through taking full responsibility for the incident and publicly apologizing for its occurrence. The University engaged in mortification when they apologized for the harm caused in their social media releases. They performed corrective action thoroughly and quickly with the enactment of the President’s Council and the disciplinary action held against responsible students.

The use of corrective action and mortification were the strongest strategies the University and Student Association could have taken. Honesty on the Student Association’s part and intent to rectify the situation arguably reframed the crisis as an opportunity for growth. In addition, it was extremely valuable that the corrective action was ongoing. The University released a follow-

Table 1: Progress on the President’s Council’s Recommendations as of June 2015

Build a Foundation for Cultural Change	Completed	Underway and Ongoing
Communicate a Commitment to Action	✓	
Identify a University Lead and Create Action Team	✓	
Develop a University -Wide Code of Conduct	✓	
Gather Data and Shed Light on the Problem	✓	
Re-claim and Re-design Orientation Week	✓	
Revise the University's Sexual Assault Policy	✓	
Identify a Sexual Response Team and Improve Access to Resources and Training	✓	
Investigate and Discipline the Perpetrators	✓	
Clarify and Formalize the University's Relationship with Student Associations	✓	
Create the Right Structure, Clarify Roles, and Allocate Appropriate Resources		✓
Encourage and Create the Infrastructure for Teaching and Research Excellence in Areas Related to Sexualized Violence		✓
Drive Cultural Change	Completed	Underway and Ongoing
Increase the Understanding of Consent		✓
Address Alcohol and Drug Use		✓
Empower the Bystanders		✓
Communicate Constantly and Purposefully about Expectations and Risks		✓
Promote a Culture of Equity		✓
Improve Safety		✓
Continue to Engage the University and Broader Community		✓
Collaborate with Others		✓
Demonstrate Accountability	Completed	Underway and Ongoing
Evaluate Progress and be Accountable		✓

Source: (President’s Council, 2015)

up document to the initial President's Council Report that tracked the progress of many of the recommendations the Council had suggested, as per Table 1. Also worth noting is this table uses what Benoit calls image restoration rhetoric. Tasks that are not completed are labeled "underway" / "ongoing", which frames their completion as pending as opposed to failed.

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

The Saint Mary's crisis can also be analyzed through Coombs' Attribution Theory. While Coombs' theory of Situational Crisis Communication Theory also has valuable insight, Coombs' article about Attribution Theory focuses a great deal more on how to deal with the crisis, while SCCT is better with determining how much of a threat a crisis poses to an organization. In the interest of conciseness, this case study focuses on Attribution Theory as there is much more to say about how SMU handled the crisis than how much of a threat the incident was to their reputation.

Attribution Theory states that "people make judgements about the causes of events based on the dimensions of locus, stability, and controllability" (Coombs, 1995, 448), meaning people will attribute the cause of an incident based on whether the cause was internal or external to the organization, whether or not the potential for the event was always there, and whether or not the prevention of the event was within the organization's control.

Table 2: Coombs' Crisis Type Matrix

	UNINTENTIONAL	INTENTIONAL
EXTERNAL	Faux Pas	Terrorism
INTERNAL	Accidents	Transgressions

Source: (Coombs, 1995, 455)

Coombs provides a chart (Table 2) to sort a crisis into one of four categories based on the relation of the cause (internal/external) and the intent (unintentional/intentional). The incident at Saint Mary's University could be considered a faux pas, which Coombs (1995) defines as "an unintentional action that an external agent tries to transform into a crisis" (455). From one perspective, the Student Association didn't intend offense and it was external audiences, the media and the community, that escalated the action into a crisis. However, the agent could also be seen as internal as it was acts committed by the Student Association that truly created the crisis and dismissing the incident as innocent actions that offended an outside audience undermines the seriousness of the aforementioned rape culture the chant contributed to. In this case, Coombs would classify the incident as an accident—unintentional, but internal. On a more extreme interpretation, the incident could be seen as a transgression, because the actions were taken by institutional representatives (internal), and one could argue it was "intentional" in the sense that so many people had heard the chant over four years and had continued to ignorantly see no fault in it. The chant did violate the student code, as the University confirmed, and some may not to believe the University's and Student Association's excuses and wish to hold them both fully accountable to their intentional ignorance.

Coombs (1995) has several flowcharts that address the other factors of Attribution Theory to determine the appropriate course of action for a crisis: veracity of evidence, damage, performance history, and whether there were victims or nonvictims—“those who suffer physically, mentally, or financially” or those who want “assurances that the crisis will not affect other groups, especially themselves”, respectively (459).

The veracity of evidence for the Saint Mary’s University incident is undoubtedly true, as it was caught on film. The damage is difficult to categorize, but ultimately is to be seen as minor as there were no deaths or other crisis intensifiers present. There weren’t necessarily direct victims to the event, though one could argue there may have been indirect victims as the chant contributed to rape culture, as it normalized sexual violence against women. While Saint Mary’s University does not seem to have security reports visible to the public, a study about sexual assaults on campus confirmed that in 2015, 6 sexual assaults were reported at SMU, representing almost 9.5 students for every 10,000, which also doesn’t account for any unreported sexual assaults (Ward, 2015). While there is little data for the years prior to this study or the incident at SMU, it is worth noting that SMU had the fifth highest rate per 10,000 students figure out of the 87 Canadian post-secondary institutions included in the study. The “Welcome Week” incident could also have had direct victims in the sense that the incident could have been very triggering for any students who were victims and/or survivors of sexual assault. So, this incident has the potential to have had both victims and nonvictims. Finally, the past performance history of SMU is generally very positive; this was the only major PR crisis the University has faced recently.

Looking at these factors under the crisis category of faux pas, Coombs recommends ingratiation and distance. As an accident, Coombs recommends mortification the most, but also ingratiation, excuse, and distance depending on how severe the damage is perceived to be. As a

transgression, Coombs puts a lot of emphasis on mortification, but also noted justification and ingratiation. Excuse and justification are both distance strategies; excuse “tries to minimize the organization’s responsibility”, while justification “seeks to minimize the damage associated with the crisis” (Coombs, 1995, 451). Ingratiation describes efforts such as bolstering positive values of the organization and placing the crisis in a “larger, more desirable context” (Coombs, 1995, 452). Mortification involves offering help to victims, apologizing and asking for forgiveness, and “taking action to prevent a recurrence of the crisis in the future” (Coombs, 1995, 452-3).

According to Coombs’ typology, SMU’s response consisted mostly of mortification, as they apologized and took action to prevent recurrence. However, Saint Mary’s University did use some excuse strategies by claiming they had little knowledge or control over the Student Association’s actions, as did SMUSA when Perry claimed to have not realized the message the chant was conveying. Had the University or Student Association tried justification or ingratiation as their primary crisis response strategies, the incident may not have smoothed over as much as it did. Using a misrepresentation of the event and minimizing injury argument would have been insulting to everyone who was justly offended. The ingratiation techniques also could have been seen as skirting around the issue, so taking a direct approach through mortification was likely the most appropriate choice.

Conclusion

Following the analysis of the Saint Mary’s University “rape chant” controversy, it is clear that mortification and corrective action were appropriate crisis response strategies for the University to confront and overcome their crisis. While elements of avoidance and defeasibility were present in the University’s and Student Association’s statements, their actions took full responsibility and showed commitment to the prevention of the incident’s reoccurrence. Since

the initial incident, there have been no other major events at SMU and the media have held a neutral and sometimes positive tone in their articles that reported on the incident and those that followed up on the changes to Saint Mary's Welcome Week. Thus, the use of mortification and corrective action were successful in deescalating and mediating Saint Mary's crisis through its acute and chronic stages and ultimately guiding Saint Mary's crisis into the resolution stage.

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