

**“ It doesn't feel human: Students angry U of T not
acknowledging campus suicides”: An Analysis of Crisis
Communication**

Abstract

In a globalized community in which news, events, and opinions transcend borders, there is a drastic shift in how crises are handled. Stakeholder expectations of organizations are greater than ever, and the importance of meeting those demands cannot be ignored. With stakeholder theory putting increasing emphasis on the importance of nurturing critical relationships with all stakeholder groups, organizations must effectively implement “standards of corporate responsibility”¹ to command social legitimacy.

In light of the changing dynamics of crisis management, this analysis will study a case titled “It doesn’t feel human: Students angry U of T not acknowledging campus suicides” published on March 18th, 2019 in *CBC News*. This case uses U of T’s recent tragic campus suicide as a basis to explore various crisis management techniques in a number of systematic stages. After providing a high-level summary of the case, a focused discussion entailing U of T’s application of traditional crisis communication theories laid out by Benoit and Coombs will ensue. Once we dissect the usage of specific Image Restoration Theory (IRT) and Social Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) elements, we can then evaluate how effective these tactics were in managing the perception the public had for the institution and how U of T could have differed in their approach to mitigate the damage inflicted by this event. From this critical analysis, the conclusion shall be drawn that U of T did not handle this crisis as effectively as they could have, and recommendations for improvement shall be provided.

Summary of the Case:

At 8:40 pm on Saturday March 16th, 2019, a student committed suicide at the downtown U of T campus after facing ongoing mental health challenges, making this the school’s second suicide in less than 12 months. While this is indeed a tragic event that U of T acknowledged, they refused to say the word suicide in their response which they issued two days later. Students showed their distaste for U of T’s trend in lack of acknowledgement for the suicides that have taken place by gathering outside the office of the president and along hallways to mourn the loss of their own and display their protest. The school received further backlash from student bodies calling this a “mental health crisis” and calling for the school to change the system to make it a more proactive environment that encourages open dialogue between students and the president to ensure the wellbeing of every student. This demonstrates the shift in communication trends where stakeholders demand two-way dialogues in which the organization is responsible for being authentically omnipresent through a genuine voice.

By refusing to say the word suicide and given the prior organization reputation U of T has with dismissing mental health as a factor contributing to past student suicides, the students (i.e. major stakeholders) are not satisfied with the organization’s lack of sympathy and human characteristics, reducing U of T’s social legitimacy. The students’ call for action by issuing open letters, going to the media, and posting on social media are all evident proofs that this event has turned into a crisis, defined as “an unpredictable major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization...”². The intensifiers making this crisis inevitable for U of T to sweep under the rug include the media exemplar this had become, the missing invariant by the lack of sympathy for those facing mental health

¹ (Ulmer, 2001)

² Coombs qtd. Wrigley

challenges, subtle stonewalling by diminishing the fact that this was a suicide, hypocrisy by stating their values include supporting their students when this incident suggests otherwise, and of course, the death that is at the centre of this case. In my opinion, among all the listed intensifiers, it is death that is perceived with the greatest magnitude as it is irreversible regardless of how many invariants the university uses to try to rectify the situation.

Despite the backlash and the severity of the crisis, U of T had realized that they must address the public and try their best to regain a positive perception to restore their social image.

The first response

On Monday March 18th, two days after the suicide, the school had turned to Twitter to issue their first response. They tweeted that “something” had happened but did not say what. The tweet elaborated simply by stating that the “incident” had taken place at the Bahen Centre on campus. The following tweets in the thread did not provide greater insight as to what happened, but only gave phone numbers to contact if students felt distressed. This tweet received minimal engagement from stakeholders with only 75 retweets and 95 likes (see Appendix A).

We can see, when looking to which of Benoit’s IRT strategies the university used, how he turned to the cluster of evading responsibility as well as reducing offensiveness of the event. U of T evaded responsibility by specifically using the defeasibility and accidental strategies. Defeasibility is prominent with the lack of information provided about the suicide, while the accidental strategy is seen by calling the suicide an “incident” which implies the act was a mishap. The school tried to reduce the offensiveness of the event by using minimization in trying to make the suicide appear less serious than it is.³

When applying Coombs’ Crisis Response Strategies, we see U of T had utilized distance justification strategies which tried to convince the public that the damage was not as bad as it appeared. This is very similar to Benoit’s minimization strategy explained previously.⁴

This was a horrible response in my opinion as it did not provide information to the community, did not show sympathy for the tragic event, mitigated the severity of the suicide by calling it an incident, and was simply not genuine. I believe this reduced U of T’s credibility as the lack of transparency suggests that the governing body is trying to hide something and that they are not remorseful about the loss of one of their community members. The lack of empathy, remorse, and mortification shows hypocrisy in the sense that U of T’s values include giving students a home⁵. A home, to the majority of society, is accepted as a place of sanctuary where all are included and made to feel welcome. Yet, the suicide which took place, or, as the school defines it, “the incident”, begs to differ. While this may seem to be a dramatic statement, it is clear that students of the U of T community seem to have similar opinions to my own as one student stated, “it just seems like an office with a phone number, an email, a fax line – it doesn’t feel human.” Another student tweeted back in response to U of T’s tweet with a list of instances they faced, showing how U of T had dismissed their mental health challenges. This tweet

³ Benoit, W. L. (1997b).

⁴ Coombs, W. T. (1995).

⁵ (University of Toronto Mission, 2019)

had received much more engagement than U of T's response with 1693 tweets and 408 comments. This tweet resonated with many more users and highlights the power of social media in managing crises in this era.

Social media gives rise to dialogues instead of monologues and has therefore changed the way organizations communicate with stakeholders as stakeholders evaluate these dialogues based on soft variables such as perception of credibility, reliability, accountability, and trustworthiness instead of focusing on traditional means of crisis communication like denial and justification. U of T failed to leverage these soft variables in creating an authentic voice as they resorted to the traditional forms of IRT and SCCT crisis management techniques. Perhaps they failed to realize that social media allows the public to share their emotions instantaneously, with the fastest spreading emotion being anger. When U of T failed to humanize their response and minimized the suicide, they fuelled anger. By fueling this negative emotion, U of T increased the amount of emotional charge in the interaction, causing the crisis to move higher up in the Beaufort shitstorm scale.⁶ As the crisis was not going away, U of T issued a second statement which must be analyzed.

The second response

One day after their initial tweet, the school's vice provost Sandy Welsh acknowledged that a student fell to his death and recognized the need for more mental health services on campus and in the wider community. It's important to note that the word suicide was still not used. I believe this is because the word in itself acts as an intensifier, more so than the word "death." This is because the word "suicide" ultimately brings light to the fact that the root cause behind a student resorting to death was a mental health issue caused by school related stress that the institution failed to proactively manage. Furthermore, it would also reemphasize the fact that this is the second suicide at U of T, allowing the negative prior reputation to hinder the school from regaining their social legitimacy.

The second observation from this response that must be discussed is Welsh's call for more mental health services to be available not only on campus, but in the community as a whole. She turned to Benoit's IRT cluster of denial by shifting the blame by suggesting that the fault for this death falls on the shoulders of each member of society for not having enough resources available. This can also be utilizing the corrective action strategy of IRT by planning to prevent future suicides through the availability of greater resources.⁷

While the school demonstrated that they were upset about the event by calling it tragic, I don't think they demonstrated mortification. This is because a mortified type of apology suggests atonement and corrective action. However, as this is the second suicide at U of T within 12 months, clearly the school's corrective action is not effective. In fact, U of T did not seem apologetic at all. U of T might have believed that they should not have apologized at all as this would make them, according to Hearit, responsible for the suicide, as he defined an apology as a "person or corporation acknowledging guilt and expressing regret."⁸ While I do believe that U of T made a good decision in not using atonement or a conspicuous apology, I do think their crisis management strategy could have benefitted from showing some sort of regret for what happened and accepting that they could have done more for this student,

⁶ Ott, L. and Theunissen P. (2015)

⁷ Benoit, W. L. (1997b).

⁸ Hearit, K. M. (1995).

as well as for all their students who are suffering from mental health challenges. By moving slightly away from the diminish cluster, U of T could have resonated more with stakeholders by creating an authentic and genuine voice, which would have humanized them and created an emotional bond with their grieving stakeholders who were upset. Their inability to build these soft variables led to a deteriorating image which they have unfortunately not repaired.

U of T also failed to recognize the importance of buffers in society. With society placing greater importance on eradicating mental health stigmas, stakeholders will not appreciate the school's dismissal of mental health. This further destroys their social legitimacy. While U of T is seen as a reputable institution, I don't think their social capital is enough to repair their image as they do not have a monopoly over the post-secondary education industry.⁹ With more and more students making university choices on factors other than prestige, such as a school's culture and the value given to a balanced lifestyle, I believe this crisis has severely damaged the reputation of U of T, and their ineffective crisis communication strategies did not help rectify the situation.

Conclusion:

Therefore, U of T ineffectively used both Coombs' and Benoit's traditional crisis communication theories to repair their image and restore their social legitimacy. Unfortunately, they unconvincingly diminished a suicide and did not use any invariants such as bolstering their values, making it clear that no harm was intended, or even offering convincing corrective action. Collectively, this reduced their credibility and added to their negative past reputation, hindering them from restoring a positive perception from stakeholders in society.

⁹ Koerber, D., and Zabara, N. (2017)

Appendix A: First response by U of T on Twitter



Source: *'It doesn't feel human': Students angry U of T not acknowledging campus suicides.* (2019, March 18). Retrieved from CBC News : <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/university-toronto-suicide-campus-1.5061809>

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