

Application of Crisis Communication Theories during the 2019 College Admissions Scandal:
Operation Varsity Blues

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Abstract

Operation Varsity Blues was a federal investigation in 2019 that discovered an enormous college admissions scandal, where wealthy parents were paying to have someone bribe school officials or coaches with the end goal of having their child accepted into an elite university. As the investigation was released, each of the eight universities involved sent out press releases that explained where the university stood regarding the scandal and what they were doing in response. Using the well-established crisis communication theories of Benoit's Image Repair Theory (1995) and Coomb's Situational Crisis Communication Theory (2007), a qualitative content analysis on the communications from the universities, specifically their press releases, surrounding the crisis, allows a better understanding for what specific response strategies were applied in this situation. The study concludes that while the universities each denied responsibility regarding the scandal itself, they also communicated that they would take full responsibility in preventing the crisis from happening again. This combination of strategies allowed the universities to maintain their innocence while reassuring the public that they were making changes to prevent cheating in the future. Understanding how the theory's recommended strategies were applied to this situation provides further clarity in understanding how the theories in general are applied, and how universities use them under these specific circumstances.

Crisis Communication Theories during the 2019 College Admissions Scandal

In 2019, an admissions scandal at universities in the United States (U.S.) that involved wealthy parents and underqualified students being admitted into eight elite universities came to the news and quickly went viral, infuriating many students and their support systems who had undergone the normal, expected work of college admissions (Witz et al., 2019). In each of the eight universities, individuals in different roles were involved or held responsible, and each university had to both handle the situation itself and actively participate in how the public perceived the scandal and the university's responsibility in the issue (Friedman, 2019; United States Attorney's Office, 2020). The universities had to manage organizational reputations, and this situation and its resulting actions have become one of the most recent, large-scale examples of crisis communication.

While crisis communications and management have been the subject of a multitude of past papers, case studies, and theories (Benoit, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2019; Watson, 2007), no studies currently exist using this scholarship to analyze the responses of the eight large universities surrounding the college admissions scandal. These well-known universities – University of Southern California, Yale University, Georgetown University, University of California at Los Angeles, Wake Forest, Stanford University, University of Texas at Austin, and University of San Diego (United States Attorney's Office, 2019a) – are among the most elite academic establishments in the nation, and therefore have the great potential to influence the overall academic community. Consequently, using established crisis communication theories, most notably, Image Restoration Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory, to analyze their public communications regarding the scandal would provide a significant contribution to the world of crisis communication. Such a study provides understanding of the

extent to which several renown academic institutions actually apply established crisis communication theories, or whether the universities in these types of crises use them at all.

Two of the most respected and foundational crisis communication theories, Image Restoration Theory (Burns & Bruner, 2000) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2019), include recommended steps for approaching different types of crises and have been used and applied in various crisis situations. An examination of the public communications of the eight universities surrounding the admissions scandal and looking for evidence of theory application would result in strong insight for how these theories are being used today in specific university crisis settings. Proper study of the crisis communications involved in the 2019 College Admissions Scandal in light of established crisis communication theories creates another valuable contribution for crisis communication scholarship.

“Operation Varsity Blues”

On March 12, 2019, news was released about an FBI investigation called “Operation Varsity Blues” that had unburied a “nationwide conspiracy” of a college admissions scandal (Friedman, 2019, para. 3). A large group of wealthy parents, among the most recognizable being Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman, had paid a total of \$25 million to William “Rick” Singer to guarantee their children places in several elite universities across the United States. Singer’s assistance usually included either arranging for a child’s SAT score to be improved or having the child recruited as an athlete by university coaches into a college sport they sometimes did not even play (Westfall et al., 2019). Eight elite universities had to answer for the news that they had each accepted students who had deceitfully gotten in with the assistance of hired test takers, bribed coaches and admissions counselors—including people on their own staff. These eight

universities were all immediately thrown into a crisis situation (United States Attorney's Office, 2020).

The investigation of this “college admissions and testing bribery scheme” began after an individual found guilty in a different fraud case volunteered information to the authorities about William “Rick” Singer, while negotiating for leniency in his own sentence (Westfall et al., 2019, United States Attorney’s Office, 2020, para. 1). Investigators discovered that, since 2011, Singer had created and used a network allowing him to give families who would pay for it guaranteed admissions for their children into highly selective universities through a “side door” (Westfall et al., 2019, p. 44). To do so, he would bribe college entrance exam (SAT or ACT) officials to facilitate cheating or bribe coaches and administrators to falsely categorize the student as a recruited athlete (Friedman, 2019). In return, the parents paid anywhere between \$200,000 and \$6.5 million to Singer, disguising the payments as charitable donations to Singer’s fake charity, Key Worldwide Foundation (Friedman, 2019; Westfall et al., 2019).

After pleading guilty to charges of money laundering, racketeering, conspiracy, and obstruction of justice, Singer agreed to cooperate with authorities. He shared information to assist the government investigation and started recording his phone conversations with his clients for them (United States Attorney's Office, 2020; Westfall et al., 2019). His cooperation helped to incriminate parents, coaches, and test administrators involved in the scheme (Friedman, 2019).

While Singer claims to have helped 760 rich families cheat in 2018 alone, a fraction of the individuals who have passed through the conspiracy over the years were actually charged (Westfall et al., 2019). The 10-month investigation concluded with the U.S. Attorney in the District of Massachusetts charging over 50 individuals from across the nation for participating in a conspiracy to illegally provide admission for students into elite universities (Friedman, 2019,

United States Attorney's Office, 2019a). Arrests spanned multiple states and included 33 parents, 13 coaches, and several of Singer's associates. Among the parents who eventually pled guilty were celebrities Lori Loughlin, Mossimo Giannulli, Jane Buckingham, Felicity Huffman (Craig, 2019; Friedman, 2019). John Vandemoer, former head sailing coach at Stanford, and Rudolph Meredith, former head soccer coach at Yale University, were among the university coaches also pleaded guilty (Lorin, 2019; United States Attorney's Office, 2020a). Mark Riddell, who had been paid to change standardized test answers, give students the correct answers as they took their tests, or even take the tests in the place of students, also pleaded guilty to multiple charges (United States Attorney's Office, 2020; Westfall et al., 2019). No students were charged (United States Attorney's Office, 2019).

Sentences for those who pled or were found guilty included prison, supervised release, community service, forfeitures, fines, and restitutions (United States Attorney's Office, 2020). While many of the sentences were only a few weeks or months, the longest prison sentence so far imposed by the court was nine months for actor and director George Hodge (United States Attorney's Office, 2020). As of the date of this research, trials continue and more individuals allegedly involved in the admissions scandal will be tried and possibly sentenced (United States Attorney's Office, 2020).

Consequences for the guilty celebrities and business leaders have gone beyond legal ramifications. Parents from both Wall Street and Hollywood have been dismissed from work or placed on leave (Korn, 2019). Reputations have been tarnished if not destroyed. For example, Jane Buckingham and Felicity Huffman had established themselves with the reputation of exemplary mothers and wrote blogs, published books, and sold mom merchandise; now, they are considered hypocrites by the public (Craig, 2019).

Summary of Response

As the investigation and trials began, universities caught up in the admissions scandal were responding. Each university was forced to uncover how much money was donated to the school as part of the fraud, and several received outside counsel on what to do with those funds (Korn, 2019). Universities redirected funds from bribery gifts, fired involved staff, and initiated changes in their admissions or athletic recruitment processes to increase scrutiny and avoid similar problems in the future (Korn, 2019; Lorin, 2019).

As news of the scandal broke, lawmakers from different states also responded. New legislation was introduced to prevent future admissions scandals in multiple ways. Some legislation would require institutions receiving any state financial aid to annually report any preferential treatment in admissions, including to donors and alumni (Smalley, 2020). Other legislation would prohibit admission by exception, where a university accepts a student with lower academic merits only because of a special talent in athletics or the arts, without the approval of at least three senior campus administrators (Smalley, 2020). In total, 13 states introduced bills relating to admissions following the scandal in 2019; and, while not all were directly related to the scandal, 17 became law and have changed the admissions and funding world for some state universities (Smalley, 2020).

Crisis Communication

The definition of crisis is an unexpected event that disrupts an organization and poses a threat physically, emotionally, economically, or reputationally to an organization and its stakeholders (Coombs, 2007; Ho et al., 2017). While typically thought of as negative, a crisis “can be a turning point for better or worse” (Marcus & Goodman, 1991, p. 284). However, for a crisis to be a turning point for good in the organization, crisis management is crucial. Crisis

management is simply the “preparation and readiness to respond” to crises in a way that will lessen possible damages and includes both planning and communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2019, p. 17). Crisis planning and crisis contingency plans allow an organization to anticipate possible crises and prepare appropriate responses before they occur, avoiding mistakes that could be made in the high-pressure moment of an actual crisis (Benoit, 1997). Crisis planning often defines the speed and quality of an organization’s response to a crisis and improves the odds of success for an organization handling a crisis -- without guaranteeing it (Bechler, 1995).

While crisis planning is vital, communication is “the essence of crisis management” (Coombs & Holladay, 2019, p. 25). Crisis communication involves collecting, processing, and disseminating information from an organization to address a crisis situation (Coombs & Holladay, 2019). Both crisis knowledge management (internal communications) and stakeholder reaction management (external communications) are encompassed in crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2019). Communications defines a crisis, brings resolution to a crisis, and allows an organization to rebuild confidence after a crisis; nothing happens without communication (Bechler, 1995). As Bechler (1995) defined it, crisis is “the vehicle which drives the exigency” (p. 3). When both planning and communication are done well in managing a crisis, the results can actually benefit an organization (Bechler, 1995).

Image Repair Theory

In the 1990s, William Benoit, a long-time professor of communication, developed a theory to explain different strategies and responses for repairing reputational damage to either individual or corporate entities, originally called Image Restoration Theory (Benoit, 1997). His theory built on many others’ past work on communication, especially Rosenfield’s 1968 Theory on Mass Media Apology, Burke’s Theory of Dramatism, and Ware and Linkugel’s Theory of

Apologia (Burns & Bruner, 2000; Elsbach, 1997). Since its conception, Image Restoration Theory, or more recently called Image Repair Theory by Benoit, has become a leading concept in the world of crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Ho et al., 2017). Some critics have suggested the theory is an oversimplification of corporate image and the process of crisis communication and should leave more room for individual crises' context, but too much context would multiply the difficulty of completing any study (Benoit, 2000; Burns & Bruner, 2000). To account for situational complexity separately, Benoit (2000) agrees that employing other tactics like focus groups, survey studies, or ethnography as well as experimental research in addition to Image Repair Theory would help the researcher better understand the audience and individual crisis details (see also Burns & Bruner, 2000). However, even on its own, this image repair framework plays a key part in a plethora of published case studies and is frequently applied in crisis situations even today (Coombs & Holladay, 2019).

Audience Perception in a Crisis

Image Restoration Theory begins and rests on the assertion that image or reputation is an essential asset for organizations (and individuals), and an entity's actions can help prevent or restore image problems (Benoit, 1997). Benoit (1997) explained how an organization should know when its image is threatened and should respond. He says two criteria must be met for a reputational attack to occur: the organization is being "held responsible for a specific action" and "that act is considered offensive" (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). However, for both of these factors, Benoit (1997) emphasizes that "perceptions are more important than reality" (p. 178). For example, while a business may not have actually been responsible for a specific negative act, its reputation is still at risk as long as its relevant audiences consider it their fault. He also notes that a business should always use the truth of the situation as an important component to crisis

response. However, when it comes to image restoration, the business must respond to the public's perception of the crisis, which is usually different than the reality of the situation (Benoit, 1997). To properly respond to these perceptions also requires knowledge of the different audiences that must be addressed. Organizations usually have multiple audiences, with potentially different interests, concerns, or goals that need to be communicated with in different ways to properly respond to an image crisis (Benoit, 1997).

Five Response Categories

After establishing what defines an attack to an organization's reputation and how audiences influence crisis response, Benoit shares five broad categories of strategies or "message options" for responding to different types of threats: "denial," "evasion of responsibility," "reducing offensiveness," "corrective action," and "mortification," some with variants (Benoit, 1997, p. 178-179; Burns & Bruner, 2000, p. 29). With each of these components, the "accused" refers to the organization being held responsible for an offensive act and trying to address the reputation crisis resulting from it (Benoit, 1997, p. 178).

The strategy of "denial" includes two variants (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). With this strategy, the organization accused of an offensive act either rejects the charge as false or shifts the blame. When rejecting a charge, the entity completely denies "that the act occurred, that the firm performed the act, or that the act was harmful to anyone" (Benoit, 1997, p. 179). The other option "shifting the blame" instead argues that a completely different "person or organization is actually responsible for the offensive act" (Benoit, 1997, p. 180). With either of these variations, the use of denial tries to remove the presence of the two criteria needed for a reputational attack to occur—that the organization is responsible for an act and that the act is offensive (Benoit, 1997). The strategy of denial is to remove the public perception of these criteria by arguing that

the act never happened, the act was not offensive, or the organization was not responsible for the act (Burns & Bruner, 2000).

Benoit's second strategy, "evasion of responsibility," includes four approaches (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). First, the organization could say that the action was in response to another party's offensive act, and make this reaction seem reasonable under the circumstances (Benoit, 1997). Second, the organization could use defeasibility as its defense, claiming that there was "a lack of information about or control over important elements of the situation" (Benoit, 1997, p. 180). Third, the organization could claim the offensive act happened by accident, or fourth, that the action was done with good intentions (Benoit, 1997). Any of these approaches to evading responsibilities attempts to either reduce the responsibility of the organization for the offensive action or justify the actions themselves (Burns & Bruner, 2000).

The third response option, "reducing offensiveness," tries to "reduce the perceived offensiveness" of the act in question (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). There are six versions of this approach. The organization could choose to bolster the positive feelings of the audience towards the business itself to "offset the negative feelings associated with the offensive act, or it could actually attempt to minimize those negative feelings themselves" (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). Other options are differentiating the act from similar, but much more offensive actions to make the original action not seem as bad in comparison or attempting transcendence, which would "place the act in a more favorable context" (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). The last two versions include the organization either attacking its accusers or appropriately compensating the victims of its offensive action (Benoit, 1997). If the compensation is actually accepted by the victims, the image of the organization should improve, as the reputation should if any of these options are executed appropriately.

“Corrective action,” the fourth strategy proposed by Benoit, involves the company promising to correct the issue by “restoring the state of affairs existing before the offensive action, and/or promising to prevent the recurrence of the offensive act” (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). Making promises, however, is not enough. Audiences may not accept the promises made by an organization until they see the actual fruit of the promised corrective actions (Benoit, 2000; Burns & Bruner, 2000). Without follow-through, corrective action will not restore or prevent anything, including damage done to the organization.

The final strategy is “mortification” (Benoit, 1997, p. 179). This involves the organization accused of an offensive action simply confessing and asking for forgiveness (Benoit, 1997). This means that the organization takes full responsibility for its offensive action and appeals to audiences for forgiveness in an open apology (Burns & Bruner, 2000). This strategy may seem the most straight-forward in response to an accusation, but it requires the organization to essentially claim guilty and hope its audiences extend forgiveness back, the only way to repair such a damaged organizational image.

Steps for Crisis Response

To best determine how to use the five strategies in a given crisis, the theory provides suggestions for handling a crisis in three different areas: pre-crisis preparation, crisis analysis, and response (Benoit, 1997). Proactively preparing crisis contingency plans is an important way to save time and trouble when a crisis inevitably happens in the future. These plans should be prepared for as many potential crises as can be anticipated and include public relations (PR) plans and scripts, plans for resources and a distribution of tasks and responsibilities (Benoit, 1997). This allows the organization to respond faster with fewer mistakes when a crisis initially arrives. When a crisis actually happens, analysis is necessary to accurately understand both the

problem itself, including suspicions, accusations, and severity, and the relevant audiences and their perception of the problem (Benoit, 1997; Benoit, 2000). Only once an accurate picture of the situation has been created should an organization decide how to proceed. In some cases, a response may not be necessary; the organization can simply redefine the attack, attempt to refocus public attention on other issues, or simply not respond because the accusation is not a legitimate threat (Benoit, 1997). However, if a response is deemed necessary, the organization should continue with the third step of planning and follow an appropriate response strategy.

When using any of these types of strategies, it is important to remember what Benoit (1997) also includes about them in his theory. He cautions against making false claims when using any strategy, advising instead to “provide adequate support for claims, develop themes throughout a campaign, [and] avoid arguments that may backfire” (p. 183). In alignment with this warning, an organization at least partially responsible for a problem should not attempt a strategy centered on denial, instead choosing the one that most closely reflects their actual situation. Benoit (1997) also clarifies that organizations may effectively incorporate more than one strategy into their crisis response (using both mortification and corrective action strategies). With these guidelines in mind, it is possible to find an appropriate strategy and use it in creating the most appropriate response to a crisis.

Case Studies

It is not enough to have a brief explanation of a theory; actual studies with practical examples are important for further understanding Image Repair Theory and how to apply it to crises and other studies.

In 2009, Hotzhausen and Roberts conducted a content analysis examining the news releases from the United States Air Force surrounding an investigation of sexual assault

allegations in 2003, to “evaluate the effectiveness of image repair strategies the U.S. Air Force used” (p. 20). They found that more than one tactic from image repair theory was often used within one release, and that the most frequent were corrective action, bolstering, defeasibility, and mortification (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). Then, from their analysis on related news coverage, they were also able to conclude that bolstering was the most helpful tactic used and discovered the correlation between prompt timing for news releases and positive news coverage (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). The value of proper time and the ability to adapt and learn through the process of responding to the situation are both important aspects that this study brings to the front regarding Image Repair Theory.

In 1997, Benoit and Czerwinski used Image Repair Theory when conducting a critical analysis of the full-page letter advertisements USAir used in response to a series of deadly plane crashes and public attacks to the company’s safety record in 1994. The researchers’ goal was to “analyze the effectiveness of USAir’s image repair strategy after the Pittsburgh crash” (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997, para. 28). Their study identified the bolstering, denial and corrective action tactics that were used in the advertisements, but also concluded that improper implementation of each strategy led to an enormous downfall in the effectiveness of USAir’s overall response (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997). In the end, the authors of this study hoped to not only investigate this specific attempt at image repair but provide an example for future students in studying and analyzing other crisis responses.

In 2009, Coombs and Schmidt conducted an empirical study in an effort to understand which image repair strategies had made Texaco’s response to a racism incident involving several executives in 1995 so successful. They created five different scenarios describing the same Texaco crisis events but using various combinations of the five strategies Texaco employed

to communicate the situation and discovered which tactics most influenced participants attitudes towards the situation. The study concluded that the tactics of bolstering, corrective action, shifting blame, mortification and separation each had important roles in properly responding to Texaco's crisis (Coombs & Schmidt, 2009). The researchers also concluded with the hope that their study would encourage others to empirically test on different response strategies for a clearer picture of what works in a given situation and give more scientific grounding to ideas like Image Repair Theory.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) builds on several other, established theories, particularly Neoinstitutionalism, Attribution Theory, and Image Repair Theory (Coombs, 2007). Neoinstitutionalism is a theory which focuses on an organization's right to continue operations, while Attribution Theory focuses on how publics decide who is responsible for an event (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Building on these previous works, Coombs created SCCT to take a step beyond the older theories, and it has since become widely used and cited across crisis communication scholarship more than any other theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). SCCT does not depend on case studies like previous theories, but uses experimental methods to provide "conceptual links between crisis response strategies and elements of the crisis situation" (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). In short, this theory takes the strategies mentioned in Image Repair Theory and uses experimental evidence to incorporate them into a framework of guidelines that can be more broadly applied in crisis communication (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Now, organizations facing a crisis can refer to the framework and understand strategies that would best apply for addressing their situation (Coombs, 2007). This is something that using case studies alone cannot do. As it continues to develop, Situational Crisis

Communication Theory has been found by several outside studies to be consistently reliable and has become essential for organizations actively addressing crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). As such, fully understand this theory and its framework is essential to understanding modern crisis communication.

Initial Crisis Response

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) begins by recognizing the intangible value of an organization's reputation, and the benefits a strong reputation can have on attracting customers, hiring top-employee talent, and increasing financial success (Coombs, 2007). As stakeholders interact with an organization and receive second-hand information from other people and especially news media, this reputation develops (Coombs, 2007).

When a crisis ("sudden and unexpected event") occurs, it can not only threaten this reputation, but also the financial state of the organization, its operations, and the physical, emotional, or financial well-being of stakeholders (Coombs, 2007, p. 164). Before SCCT begins its concentration on how to preserve the organization's reputation in the midst of crisis, it discusses the importance of an organization focusing first on protecting stakeholders before protecting the reputation. Only after communicating concern to people and explaining the steps for how they can keep themselves safe should the organization move on to SCCT's recommendations for handling their reputation.

Assessing Reputational Threat

After ensuring the safety of stakeholders, there is a two-step process the organization should go through to assess the reputational threat created by a crisis. First is assessing how much responsibility the stakeholders have attributed to the organization for the crisis (Coombs, & Holladay, 2019). Initial crisis responsibility falls into one of three main clusters: the victim

cluster (e.g., natural disasters or false rumors), the accidental cluster (e.g., technical errors or uncontrollable mistakes), and the intentional cluster (e.g., human error accidents or organization misdeed) (Coombs, 2007).

The second step in assessing the reputational threat of the crisis is examining two specific intensifying factors. First, according to the Crisis History Proposition, any similar crises in an organization's history will automatically attribute them greater crisis responsibility in the recent crisis and there will be "more direct and indirect reputational damage than an organization with no history of crisis" (Coombs, 2007, p. 169). Second, the prior state of an organization's relationship with their stakeholders will affect how much stakeholders' outlooks are affected by the crisis. According to the Halo Effect, "an organization's favorable relationship history with stakeholders and crisis history insulate it from repetitional damage during a crisis" (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 207). Meanwhile a negative performance history does the opposite and "attracts and snags additional repetitional damage," creating the aptly named Velcro Effect (Ho et al., 2017, p. 542). These prior relationship effects and any crisis will have a strong influence on how stakeholders view and react to a crisis and how responsible they believe the organization is for that crisis (Coombs, 2007).

Crisis Response Strategies

Once the reputational threat has been properly assessed, including understanding initial crisis responsibility and any intensifying factors that may alter stakeholder's perception of the crisis, an organization can move forward to choosing their crisis response strategies. The goal of crisis response strategies is to reduce negative emotions among stakeholders for the organization, repair the reputation, and "prevent negative behavioral intentions" (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). While Coombs admits, "a researcher cannot hope to craft the one, perfect list of crisis response

strategies,” what he offers is a useful list that can match strategies to the level of reputational threat by the crisis, using perceived responsibility as the conceptual connection between the two (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). For the three clusters of responsibility (victim, accidental, and intentional), there are three separate groups of primary crisis response strategies: “deny,” “diminish,” and “rebuild” (Coombs, 2007, p. 170).

The first group, the denial strategies, are recommended for situations where the organization is not responsible for the crisis, such as natural disasters or rumors (Coombs, 2007). There are three different deny crisis response strategies, each of which involves the organization distancing itself from responsibility for the event (Sisco, 2012b). The first is to assert there is no crisis, the second is to attack the accuser, and the third is to use a scapegoat, or blame an outside party is responsible for the situation (Coombs, 2007). These three strategies are simply different ways for the organization to inform and adjust information regarding a crisis where that may be all that is necessary, meaning they aren’t considered more than minimally responsible, have not had similar crises in the past, and have either a positive or neutral reputation regarding their relationship with stakeholders (Coombs, 2007).

The second group, diminishing strategies, are intended for addressing crises that fall under the accident cluster and have a moderate reputational threat, such as technical-error accidents (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). The two strategies within this category are excusing, or minimizing organizational responsibility, and justification, or minimizing how damaging people see the effects of the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Either of these diminishing strategies should be used only when low crisis responsibility has been attributed to the organization, there is no history of similar accidents, and there is no negative prior relationship reputation.

The third primary group, rebuilding strategies, should be used in response to crises stakeholders consider preventable or were intentionally caused by the organization, such as human-error accidents or leader misdeeds. These crises create the strongest threat to the reputation of an organization, and therefore require the most work to respond correctly. The two responses under this group are compensating the victims of the crisis and taking complete organizational responsibility for the crisis and asking for forgiveness (Coombs, 2007).

An organization can incorporate more than one primary strategy in their crisis response strategy as long as they do not mix strategies from different groups of attributed responsibility levels (Coombs, 2007). In addition, there are three secondary strategies described in SCCT that can be used in any combination to strengthen the primary strategies in effect. These three options for bolstering are to remind stakeholders of the past good works the organization has done, have the crisis manager praise stakeholders “and/or [remind] them of past good works by the organization,” and to use “victimage” to remind stakeholders “that the organization is a victim of the crisis too” (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). While Coombs cautions against using these three strategies to replace a primary response, they can be very helpful in supplementing those responses (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

Unlike many other theories that are based only on case studies, Strategic Crisis Communication Theory provides the conceptual link necessary to actually recommend strategies for future cases. With a total of 10 different strategies, SCCT manages to provide “concrete guidelines for managing all types of crises” (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 338). While it is still a developing theory, studies done since its creation have concluded that this theory is equally accurate and useful both in its informational content and response recommendations (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Sisco, 2012b).

Case Studies

Situational Crisis Communication Theory has been used and applied in many different situations and studies and examining a few such examples is beneficial to understanding the theory better as a whole and how it can be used.

In 2012, Eaddy used SCCT to create a coding scheme to analyze the content in newspaper coverage surrounding Johnson and Johnson's (J&J) 1872 Tylenol poisonings, where cyanide-laced pills had killed seven people. The focus of the analysis was to see how much media included the organization's own communicated messages in their coverage of the situation and to examine which response strategies the media reported J&J to have used. The study revealed that J&J "used deny, diminish, and rebuild strategic response categories" that were covered in the news (Eaddy, 2012, p. 71). The conclusions also supported SCCT's emphasis of choosing strategies tailored to the crisis and showed that news media tend to report more on information that is in the best interest of the public, not necessarily the organization in crisis (Eaddy, 2012). This is valuable for crisis managers to understand when creating messages and interacting with the media.

Sisco (2012a) used SCCT to perform a post hoc analysis on how the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) responded to a series of damaging public attacks that resulted in the nonprofit organization completely losing public support and shutting down (Sisco, 2012a). The media coverage analysis found that ACORN consistently relied on the denial and bolstering response strategies, when rebuild and diminish strategies would have been recommended, and the study concluded that by poorly addressing each crisis, the organization contributed significantly to its own downfall (Sisco, 2012a).

In 2011, Supa and Lai used SCCT to create a case study analyzing TJX's personal information leak due to hackers in 2005, specifically studying whether the organization's successful response strategy matched with the strategy SCCT recommends for that particular crisis's level of responsibility. The analysis found that TJX implemented responses from both the diminishing and rebuilding strategy groups, which all lined up with the recommended SCCT strategies for that particular crisis (Supa & Lai, 2011). The conclusions of this case study supported the value of SCCT and its effectiveness in recommending particular strategies based on attributed crisis responsibility.

Method

For this study, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on the press releases from each of the universities surrounding the college admissions scandal. Qualitative content analysis allows a researcher to study data "presented in words and themes which makes it possible to draw some interpretation of the results" (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 10). Therefore, to study messages and investigate how crisis communication response strategies were used by the eight universities during the admissions scandal, a qualitative content analysis was chosen.

This study intended to discover themes in the responses the universities regarding the admissions scandal and to specifically identify which, if any, crisis response strategies from Image Repair Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory the universities used in their responses.

This analysis examined all relevant press releases from each university. To gather the content to be analyzed, each university's website was searched, both through their press room and athletics webpage, for the key terms "admissions investigation," "university admissions investigation," and "college admissions investigation." From there, any results not related to the

2019 college admissions scandal were omitted and repeats were eliminated, leaving 31 relevant press releases to examine.

As a qualitative study, the content analysis involved the researcher analyzing the latent data of each press release and coding them based on the ideas within them, in a similar method to Eaddy's analysis when studying Johnson and Johnson's 1982 recall (Eaddy, 2012). To find common themes in messaging among the press releases, each article was coded by paragraph to note the emphasized points of each and draw attention to patterns. Repeated messages, especially exact terms, were used to identify major themes among the press releases between the different universities. Then, to analyze the releases for crisis strategy applications, each paragraph was also examined again for indications of crisis response strategies – separately for Image Repair Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory - and using the list provided from each theory and their individual descriptions.

Results

After examining the press releases and coding each paragraph, the universities' usage of different repeated messages, points of emphasis, and strategies revealed several significant patterns and themes.

General Themes

Several key messages appeared frequently throughout the eight universities press releases, including statements about protecting the integrity of their system, reviewing and improving their admissions processes, and keeping individuals accountable.

Victimage

Many press releases expressed the universities' surprise, disappointment, anger, or sadness at what the investigation had exposed and how deception and fraud could possibly

happen. Each also stated how the actions of the criminally accused, including the individuals at each of their own universities, were horribly against the ethical codes, values, and standards of their university and the admissions process. A common message was restating the value of honesty and excellence in the university and their commitment to protecting and upholding it.

Sharing Action Steps

Each university also assured the public they were cooperating with the federal investigation and went further to explain how they were also taking initiative to review and make changes for the future. First, any university that had a student, coach or staff member involved in the scandal was quick to explain their course of discipline regarding those individuals, to show justice had been served. Then, they discussed their current steps. Each university discussed what they were doing above and beyond cooperating with the federal investigation. While most were voluntarily having an internal review of their system to look for weaknesses and areas for improvement, the rest had an outside party do the review for them. They all explained how far into the review they were, and the steps that they were already planning to take based off of the results they had so far. Through the releases, they all promised to keep diligently searching for any other corruption left behind by “Operation Varsity Blues” and for ways to prevent a recurrence of a similar scandal. Each one also promised to take further actions to improve and change their admissions or accountability processes as they discovered need.

Thanking Stakeholders

Another theme throughout the press releases was expressing gratitude to the public and/or university members for their patience during the investigation and their loyalty to fairness and truth. This one varied more than other themes on how it was expressed but was nonetheless still present in many of the messages.

Discussion

It was clear from the themes and response strategies used that related to both theories that all the universities used messaging and strategies that would allow them to take the least amount of responsibility for the admissions scandal. Under both Image Repair Theory and SCCT, the universities used denial strategies frequently, and the themes showed that the universities communicated themselves to be victims of the situation and just as upset about the scandal as the rest of the public.

Themes

What was also apparent from the results was each of the universities' efforts to correct the problem and prevent it from happening again. The universities each discussed what next steps they were taking to review their admissions processes and make changes to add more accountability in their system and ensure no one else is able to cheat their way into the university. This second component of their communication strategy shows that, while the universities all considered themselves victims of the academic scandal being investigated, they were choosing to take full responsibility for making sure the problem was fully resolved and prevented from happening again. This combination of strategies was the universities' attempt to regain their stakeholders' confidence by reassuring the public that, while they were not responsible for the admissions scandal, they would take thorough steps to ensure it never happened again.

Image Repair Theory Strategies

The universities incorporated segments from several different groups of strategies from Image Repair Theory in each of their press releases. Denial, stating their innocence or claiming someone else is guilty instead, was one of the most frequently used strategies, used by all of

them. For example, this was used every time they explained that they were not responsible for the scandal and that the individuals accused of cheating were the only ones at fault.

Corrective action was also a frequently used strategy across all the universities. Any explanations sharing each university's plans to solve or prevent admissions problems in the future was considered corrective action and created the most used and discussed primary strategy in the press releases.

Considered more of a secondary strategy, "bolstering," or stressing the good traits of the university, was a very consistent practice for all eight universities throughout their press releases. Each explanation of their admissions standards, ethical values, and quick responses to the crisis all contributed to this category of response strategies.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory Strategies

Of the 10 SCCT strategies, six were used at least once during the press releases, but a select few were applied across the board, by all eight universities.

Of the deny cluster strategies, both "denial" and "scapegoat" were used. This included all the universities' statements about the broad scope of the admissions scandal and accompanying investigation being completely unassociated with them. Clarifying that only one or two staff or students had committed crimes and that the university was completely innocent was a frequent message and use of denial strategies.

Under diminish crisis response strategies, only "excuse" was used – and even then, only lightly. When the university claimed they simply had no knowledge that the cheating was going on, was a less frequent strategy in the messages, but still present.

For secondary bolstering strategies, which are meant to supplement the primary strategies like deny and diminish, several were used. The "reminder" strategy was used wherever a

university decided to remind the public of their standards and the good they do; for example, this included references to the general fairness of their admissions process and their financial aid opportunities. “Ingratiation” was used occasionally when the universities thanked their students, staff, and community for their patience and continued support for them during the investigation. Finally, “victimage” occurred frequently, wherever a university communicated that they were attacked by the fraud of the situation, or where they specified that they were considered by the investigators to be victims in the scandal.

Limitations

This study was constrained by the availability of material the universities allowed to remain online over a year after the crisis had passed, which means that some of the initial university responses are no longer accessible and could not be analyzed.

Additionally, by limiting the analysis to only press releases, this study did not examine any additional response nuances that came from the universities through social media, videos, or their interactions with the news media. There is room for more research both in examining these communications and in studying how well university response messages were translated into outside media.

Another valuable study would be to compare how the universities responded to “Operation Varsity Blues” and the strategies they used in their responses for a different crisis, such as the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Conclusion

In using Benoit’s Image Repair Theory (1997) and Coomb’s Situational Crisis Communication Theory (2007) to perform a qualitative content analysis on the university press releases surrounding Operation Varsity Blues, all eight universities used several specific

strategies from the theories to both communicate their innocence in the scandal and their determination to prevent the situation from happening again. This study also shows the value in using trusted theories to examine modern crises and analyze the responses for strategies. While examining the effectiveness of the strategies used was undeterminable based on the current study, simply understanding which strategies were applied is valuable in understanding how these theories are used in real crises and how their strategies can be applied.

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