

Collab King to Killer: Repairing Travis Scott's Image After Astroworld 2021

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Abstract

This thesis explores the effectiveness of communication strategies employed by Travis Scott in an attempt to mitigate reputational fallout and repair his public image following the 2021 Astroworld Festival. This case study uses Benoit's Image Repair Theory to determine the effectiveness of Scott's communications. This study creates a timeline of events following the Astroworld tragedy including communications put out by Scott and his team and subsequent public responses.

Keywords: Crisis communication, Image Repair Theory, Celebrity Endorsement, Travis Scott, Astroworld Festival 2021

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my loving parents. As you celebrate 25 years of marriage, I would like to thank you for your lifelong unconditional love and support. Without you, I would not be the woman, nor the scholar I am today.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Before the Astroworld tragedy, Travis Scott was the king of collaborations. The artist created everything from candles to alcoholic seltzers to fashion. In partnership with Anheuser-Busch, the artist created cacti blue agave spiked seltzers in three flavors: pineapple, lime, and strawberry. These seltzers sold out within a week of being released to the public (Lenthang, 2021). Scott also worked with Epic Games to create his “Astronomical” concert series on the platform Fortnite. Over 27 million users attended the event on the gaming platform (Sgherri, 2021). This collaboration also included exclusive character skins, as well as dances to his most popular songs. In his collaboration with McDonald's, Scott admitted to making \$20 million from the partnership. This included \$5 million from the original endorsement and an additional \$15 million from selling merchandise associated with the campaign (Saxena, 2020).

This all changed on Nov. 5, 2021. For the first time since the onset of COVID-19, the Astroworld Music Festival was set to take place in Houston, Texas, at NGR Park. The festival included a star-studded lineup of musical talent including artists like Baby Keem, SZA, Chief Keef, and Bad Bunny just to name a few (Stewart, 2021). This two-day festival was meant to end on Nov. 6. However, overcrowding of the venue and rioting within the crowds led to the death of eight individuals onsite, two later in the hospital, and hundreds of injuries (Brown, 2021). The crowd experienced crowd collapse, a phenomenon where instead of standing next to each other, concertgoers were stacked on top of each other. Concert attendees describe being unable to move because of how tightly packed the crowd was, and tragically some of them were crushed to death. Medical personnel was ill-equipped due to the venue being over its capacity and were unable to get to concert-goers to give needed emergency medical attention. The injuries and

death occurred during the set of the festival originator and headliner Travis Scott. Authorities declared the event a mass casualty at 9:38 p.m. Scott claims he was unaware of this and continued to play his set for an additional 37 minutes, finishing the concert (Brown 2021).

As of January 2022, Scott is being sued for \$10 billion for physical and psychological damages and injury at the 2021 Astroworld Festival. The lawsuits include damages for brain injury, heart attacks, and death that occurred as a direct result of attendance (Abraham 2021). Scott is denying any wrongdoing associated with what happened at the music festival. Scott and his team followed the traditional celebrity apology formula as an initial response to the event (Harris, 2021). Scott released an Instagram story text post stating, "I'm absolutely devastated by what took place last night. My prayers go out to the families and all those impacted..." (Scott, 2021). Travis followed up this text post with an apology video so disingenuous it became a meme overnight.

Clearly, the artist was a profitable collaborator. His partnerships with brands garnered international attention and were mutually beneficial. However, after the events of the Astroworld tragedy, working with the artist became a reputational albatross. After his poor response failed to win the public's approval back, brands began to distance themselves from the rapper. Epic Games removed all Travis Scott songs and character skins from their gaming platform Fortnite. Additionally, Anheuser-Busch discontinued the Cacti seltzer it made in collaboration with Scott. Upcoming fashion collaborations with Dior menswear and Nike were also postponed. Nike specifically said this was done, "out of respect for everyone affected by the tragic events of the Astroworld Festival, we are postponing the launch of the Air Max 1 x Cactus Jack" (Pruitt-Young, 2021). This is especially telling given the success of previous shoe collaborations between the artist and Nike.

Aside from collaborations, Scott's music career also took a big hit. In tandem with the music festival, Scott released two new songs titled "Mafia" and "Escape Plan" (ironically) from his highly anticipated album *Utopia*. These tracks failed to gain radio and streaming play amidst the controversy. The album was scheduled to be released before the end of 2021, but the album was pushed back following the Astroworld tragedy (Lamarre, 2021). His upcoming tour dates and concerts were canceled after the events of Astroworld. Additionally, he was removed from the Coachella headliners lineup after a petition calling for his removal garnered over 60,000 signatures (Chan, 2021).

Seeing the initial response, which was fueled by legal teams instead of crisis communicators, was not received well, Scott's team began to pivot slowly. Scott's team has been working hard to negate the image their client has garnered. After the music festival, Scott offered to pay for the funeral costs of the victims of the Astroworld tragedy. He additionally offered free online therapy for those in attendance by partnering with BetterHelp. This partnership was widely criticized as it appeared that Scott was profiting from the tragedy. BetterHelp later clarified that Scott would not make any money from the partnership (Blistien, 2021). Later, Scott launched project HEAL through the Cactus Jack Foundation. According to the website, project HEAL is a "multitier initiative dedicated challenges facing today's youth." The project offers mental resources and scholarship opportunities among others (Mims, 2022).

Clarifying the problem

Examining the shortcomings of Scott and his team in its response to Astroworld may allow crisis communicators to better mitigate the negative effects on reputation in future crisis scenarios. The Astroworld case is an example of when a client relied on the council of legal to determine a crisis response. While there may be legal ramifications for admitting fault in a crisis,

the reputational damage of denial and downplay, like in the Travis Scott case, have adverse effects on reputational capital. This can have financial consequences as reputation is a monetary asset to public figures. Reputation is an intangible, yet invaluable asset to both public figures and everyday people alike. It is “an aggregate evaluation” that stakeholders make about a person or corporation based on past behaviors (Coombs, 2007, p164). A good reputation attracts customers and talent, improves financial performance, and can overall monetarily benefit an organization or brand. Celebrities are individuals. However, because of the profit of their public persona, their personal image is also a brand identity. Their public image accounts for the livelihood of their teams, employees, etc.

A blow to reputation and public image among the general public can have monetary consequences not only for the celebrities as individuals but also for them as a brand. In the face of a crisis, crisis management professionals need stakeholders to accept and believe the response from the celebrity or public figure to minimize capital loss. This honors thesis case study will argue that good crisis communication is a key component of reputation management because poor crisis communication can have negative monetary effects on celebrities. Therefore, this is a monetary value to the reputation of a public figure as a brand and should be treated as a monetary asset.

The extent of this damage will be accessed by examining the Travis Scott case closely. This will be done by studying new articles, social media posts, and YouTube videos made about the case to learn the facts. When this event occurred, it was documented in real-time by members of the crowd via social media posts and stories. As a collection, these serve as primary sources of the crisis in real-time. These sources will allow this research to determine the effects of the Astroworld tragedy on the career of Travis Scott.

This exploration takes place through the theoretical framework of Image Repair Theory (IRT). As theorized by William Benoit (1995), IRT is within the field of crisis communication with the end goal of successful reputational management. Within the approach of Image Repair Theory, communication occurs under two assumptions: (a) that communication is an activity and (b) it has the overall goal of maintaining a positive reputation (Benoit, 2018). Traditional crisis communication, specifically when legal gets involved, tends to focus on denial and downplay to mitigate corporate liability in the face of crisis. However, this tactic is arguably no longer effective with the rise of social media and cancel culture. This is perhaps because people are allowed to share information almost instantaneously as a crisis occurs and fact-check and downplay what crisis communicators attempt to do.

Cancel culture has caused the ideological purging of celebrities. Gen Z cares more than any other generation about supporting all things sustainable and ethical (Uche, 2018). The same can be said for celebrities they support. Essentially, the “virtual collective consciousness” mindset of social media users (with obvious outliers) come together to take the power and prestige of celebrity away from an individual (Velasco, 2020). As theorized by Alperstien (2019), “virtual collective consciousness” is the manifestation of our conscious and subconscious thoughts and opinions that are partly formulated by “mediated social connections with celebrities and other people who are present and active on the social network” (Alperstein, 2019, p 197). This causes them to cancel, or purge celebrities who do not meet their ideological standards from the power and privilege of good favor within the public eye.

This case study was constructed to address the following research question:

RQ: How and to what extent did Travis Scott repair his public image following the 2021 Astroworld tragedy?

The events of Astroworld and its effects on Travis Scott's career is a complex issue briefly introduced above. The evidence shows a clear difference between his collaborations and his music career success before and after the Astroworld tragedy. The purpose of this case study is to dive deeper into the long-lasting effects this will have on his career. By examining the failures of his team when dealing with this unprecedented shift in public opinion, communications practitioners may be able to better mitigate the loss of reputational capital for future clients.

POSITIONALITY AND PROFESSIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

“Positionality is the social and political context that creates your identity.” This sense of identity can be influenced by your perceived race, gender, sexuality, ability status, religion, and social class (Dictionary.com, 2018). Essentially, it is the lens through which one views the world. It is the context that determines opinions based on one’s background and life experiences. Positionality and professional assumptions are important for an argument to be heard because we are all human. We all have our own thoughts, opinions, and biases that both consciously and subconsciously affect how we interact with and view the world around us.

As a disclaimer, here is a little bit about me. I am a White woman raised in an upper-middle-class family in the American midsouth. Both of my parents are college educated and work in medicine. I was raised in a protestant Christian household. Some of those beliefs still hold weight in my decision-making process and overall worldview. While I live in a red state, I tend to vote blue. I would consider myself a moderate on the grand political spectrum. I believe that love is love and black lives matter. Personally, I was never a fan of Travis Scott’s music.

While I enjoy it in passing, I have never been a diehard fan of his work. I probably could not name more than a few songs, and those would be the popular ones.

When it comes to my biases, I will try to be impartial as possible. I am here to explore the communication efforts following the ready event which took the lives of many and forever changed the lives of their loved ones. I am writing this case study so that something can be learned from this incident, and future communication could be handled with the utmost consideration for the victims and their families. When not considered in making decisions, history tends to repeat itself. Those who choose to read this case study are probably wondering about my personal opinion on this incident. Do I think Travis Scott is a monster for not stopping the concert? Who do I hold responsible for the loss of life at this music festival? Is it his team? The venue? The security and medical teams? The crowd? No, it's more complicated than that. Frankly, my personal opinion of the events of that night does not matter when discussing the topic. This is because this article will not focus on the events of the night but rather on the aftermath of poor crisis communication.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many theoretical approaches to understanding crisis communication. This case study explores crisis communication through the lens of Image Repair Theory. A thorough review of relevant literature is necessary to understand how those academic theories can be applied practically in this case. This thesis will explore academic research within the field of image management and crisis communication, relating to Astroworld. It will also explore scholarly literature on celebrity endorsement to help contextualize the magnitude of Travis Scott's fall from grace.

Benoit's image repair theory

To begin, this research will examine IRT, as theorized by William Benoit, as it relates to crisis communication. IRT is an expansion, and in some ways a critique, of preexisting crisis communication strategies. The theory works under the assumption that crisis communication is a goal-oriented activity. That goal is to maintain a positive reputation when dealing with a crisis (Benoit, 2018). This is required when an attack is made on a group or an individual. While Travis Scott is technically an individual, as a celebrity he experiences the duality of being a single entity and an entire brand. An attack under IRT is made up of two components: a) the accused is held responsible for an action and b) the act is considered offensive (Benoit, 2018). Through the lens of IRT, crisis communication can fall under five typologies: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, and corrective action, and mortification (Benoit 2006). Under IRT, some of these strategies have sub-categories and some do not. These typologies are not mutually exclusive, meaning more than one strategy can be employed within a crisis communication scenario. Additionally, some communication strategies are more fitting for

certain situations and should be avoided in other scenarios. Essentially, the prescription fits the illness.

TABLE 1 *Typology of Image Repair Strategies*

Strategy	Definition	Example
Denial		
<i>Simple denial</i>	did not perform act; act is not harmful	Tylenol did not poison capsules
<i>Shift blame</i>	another committed the offense	madman poisoned capsules
Evade responsibility		
<i>Provocation</i>	offensive act just a response to an earlier offense	firm left state because of new taxes
<i>Defeasibility</i>	lack of information or ability	executive not informed of changed meeting time
<i>Accident</i>	mishap	tree fell on tracks, causing train wreck
<i>Good intentions</i>	meant well	company believed changes would help consumers
Reduce offensiveness		
<i>Bolstering</i>	stress defender's good traits or acts	Exxon claimed "swift and competent oil spill cleanup"
<i>Minimization</i>	offense less serious than it appears	few harmed by water pollution
<i>Differentiation</i>	act less offensive than other, similar acts	Sears repairs were preventative maintenance, not fraud
<i>Transcendence</i>	act justified by more important values	research uses animals to help create drugs for people
<i>Attack accuser</i>	reduce credibility of accuser; suggest victim deserved offense; shift audience attention from act	Pepsi owns restaurants and competes for your customers
Corrective action	fix problem or prevent recurrence	AT&T promises to spend billions to improve service
Mortification	apologize	AT&T apologized for service interruption

(Benoit, 2018, p.14.)

The above table illustrates the typology of image repair strategies. It shows the five main strategies with three having subcategories. Overall, there are 14 categories within the framework of IRT. Corrective action and mortification do not have subcategories. Each category and subcategory is clearly defined in the table and is accompanied by a real-life example of the crisis communication tactic in action. For example, provocation is a tactic used to evade responsibility. It is an “offensive act in response to an earlier offense” (Benoit, 2018, p.14.). An example of this is a firm leaving because of new state taxes (Benoit, 2018).

As the theorist of IRT, much of the academic research done in this field has been authored either in part or solely by Benoit. Case studies that have used IRT to examine crisis communication will inform our understanding of how Benoit’s theory can be applied in scholarly literature.

In the 2017 United Airlines case, a passenger was injured when forcefully removed from an oversold flight. The airline’s initial reaction of downplaying the injury and denying any wrongdoing caused public uproar online. Videos of this incident went viral causing major reputational damage (Benoit, 2018). In the discussion of this case, Benoit stressed the importance of mortification and corrective action when dealing with crisis scenarios involving injury or death. This is especially valid in the age of social media which has compressed the response time of communicators (Benoit, 2018).

In another case, Benoit critiqued statements made at a press conference President George W. Bush held as he tried to improve his approval rating after it fell from 71% to 49% as a result of the war in Iraq (Benoit, 2006, p.137.). Bush tried to maintain a “resolved and compassionate” public image amid the war. However, his denial of his mistake and refusal to apologize did little to mitigate the public’s dissatisfaction with the death of soldiers in Iraq (Benoit, 2006, p.137).

This case is relevant when examining the effects improper communication strategies can have on the public approval of public figures. This in turn can affect their capacity for reputational capital.

In collaboration with Chinese scholars Wei-Chun and Tzu-hsiang, Benoit (2009) discussed how Taiwanese media and the general public unapologetically support MLB star Wang Chien-ming. The case study discusses not only the power of celebrity within society (specifically a collectivistic one) but how IRT can be used by third parties to defend their favorite stars (Wei-Chun, Tzu-hsiang, Benoit, 2009). The article also discussed the group identity expressed by fans that may explain third-party image repair done by fans for celebrities (Wei-Chun, Tzu-hsiang, Benoit, 2009).

Celebrity endorsement

The above case studies have been examined to help introduce and explore the use of the theoretical framework for this case study. To understand more about the crisis communication scenario itself, it is important to examine cases in which the power of celebrity influence and reputation capital is explored as it relates to the case and career of Travis Scott.

Halonen-Knight and Hurmerinta (2010) have theorized brands and celebrities have become brands in their own right. Therefore, celebrity endorsements should be considered a “brand alliance where meanings and values can transfer” from one party to another (Hurmerinta 2010 p. 452). Symbiotically, partnerships between brands and celebrities tie their public image together, and when either party suffers from a tarnished image, the other party suffers. Brand managers may have chosen to distance themselves publicly from Scott to minimize the effects on their public image and by proxy, their reputational capital.

Foong & Yazdanifard (2014) demonstrate the power a celebrity and brand alliance can have on the overall incoming capital for both parties. When famous athletes win a championship or big game, the sales revenue of brands they partner with can see a \$70,000 weekly increase. Additionally, share prices increased “of at least 1% and market shares saw exponential increase.” Some brands within the study even saw a 20% sales increase (Foong & Yazdanifard, 2014, p.1.). Celebrities are opinion leaders among their respective fans. The article also points out other big names who have lost partnerships due to image crises. This includes Micheal Phelps and Kellogg's (marijuana), Chris Brown and Wrigley's (domestic abuse), and Kate Moss and Chanel (Cocaine) among others (Foong & Yazdanifard, 2014).

Zafar and Rafique (2012) argue celebrities can catalyze brand acceptance and add intrinsic value to a brand, greatly increasing consumer awareness of a brand. For a brand partnership to be most effective, the celebrity must be viewed as trustworthy, likable, and his or her image must organically align with the product or brand (Zafar & Rafique, 2012). However, negative information about a celebrity can have a major impact on the effectiveness of an advertisement. Negative attitudes toward a celebrity “might lead to negative attitudes toward the new venture and promotion” (Zafar & Rafique, 2012, p.55.) causing the brand to distance itself from a partnership to minimize the potential damage of image crisis fallout.

This chapter has sought to lay out the theoretical framework through which to examine Travis Scott's fall from grace. This was done by introducing the theoretical lens of image repair theory to analyze the effects of Astroworld on the rapper's career as well as subsequent case studies that explore the theory. In addition, supporting research discussing the relationship between celebrities and brands has been introduced. This research demonstrates the economic power of celebrity endorsement. It shows what is at stake to lose when a damaging blow is delt

to their reputation. This has been done to contextualize the power Scott possessed as the collab king, as well as the extent of the damage poor crisis communication, can have. This thesis is meant to examine how good crisis communication is integral to maintaining positive brand alliances and protecting reputational capital. In the next chapter, the methodological approach for determining the best crisis response to the Astroworld tragedy to minimize reputational damage will be discussed.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This case study examines the effectiveness of crisis communication by Scott and his team in the aftermath of the Astroworld Festival in 2021. IRT was used to determine the effectiveness of the communication in mitigating the negative reputation Scott accrued from being associated with the Astroworld tragedy. The previous chapters have introduced the events of the music festival, established the framework of IRT, and reviewed relevant literature to understand the reputational capital celebrities hold to stress the need for good crisis communication. This chapter will establish case study as the methodology of this research.

As defined by Glesne, a case study refers to the in-depth examination of a complex subject. It is the exploration of a “bounded integrated system” by gathering information to synthesize (Glesne, 2006, p 289-290). Creswell defines a case study as an inquiry designed especially for the in-depth analysis of a certain subject. This conclusion is reached by examining data, qualitative or quantitative, over a set period of time (Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D., 2018). This case study will be a qualitative, intrinsic exploration of the communications Scott and his team produced during his approximately eight-month hiatus. Specifically, it will examine the effectiveness of image repair strategies employed by his team between Astroworld and his first solo arena performance on Aug. 6, 2022. It will also include a prequel that demonstrates Scott's history of inciting rioting resulting in injury at his shows. This is important to note because it is part of the context the general public uses to interpret his response (based on past precedent).

Multiple sources will be used to study the effectiveness of the crisis communication done by Scott and his team. This exploration will include 21 social media posts, 3 videos, and 16

news articles. To determine the effectiveness of this communication, online fan responses and reactions containing opinions of the events of Astroworld with high amounts of likes, retweets, reposts, etc. will be examined. This high level of engagement reflects a general opinion among fans and the general public alike on the matter. Content simply making fun of such as memes of the tragedy will be excluded from the analysis if it offers no substance or value to the study.

RESEARCH TRUSTWORTHINESS

It is important to establish researcher trustworthiness. As a qualitative researcher, I served as the instrument for data collection in my research. Therefore, it is important to establish my credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure the integrity and validity of my research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish credibility, I engaged in peer debriefing with my thesis director in weekly meetings and frequent communications. My research was then sent out to a secondary reader and defended. To establish transferability, collected data from public facing sources of statistics including news articles and social media posts were discussed with detailed descriptions. To establish dependability I created a document trail and timeline of the events and communications produced by Scott and his team following the Astroworld tragedy. Finally, to establish confirmability, I engaged in reflexivity during analysis. Reflexive activity is a critical component of the qualitative research process because it allows the researcher to critically reflect on all variables at play (Glesne, 2006). Creating a timeline allowed me to examine the events and communications from beginning to end. This in-depth examination allows for a deeper analysis of the data as well as reveals potential limitations within the data.

Case study has been established as the methodology for studying the effects of the Astroworld tragedy on the career of Travis Scott. In the following chapter, the data will be used to study the effectiveness of the crisis communication done by Scott and his team after this mass

causality event. This is important within the field of communication to examine the responses of crisis communicators to determine their effectiveness and to help others become better communication practitioners in the process.

CHAPTER 4

DATA

This chapter will explore data needed to address the research question: How and to what extent did Travis Scott repair his public image following the 2021 Astroworld tragedy? The goal of this exploration is to determine the overall effectiveness of the crisis communication done by Scott and his team after the Astroworld tragedy. To determine the effectiveness of Scott's communication, this research examines Scott's prior experiences with out of control performances, communications put out by Scott and his team following the Astroworld festival, and the response of the general public to those messages. Tweets, Instagram posts, and YouTube videos included in this case study were statements of opinion on the controversy with large amounts of likes, comments, and retweets to help determine the effectiveness of Scott's communication. (Not an exact parameter, large in this context would mean a noticeably high level of engagement in ratio to other comments, likes, retweets, etc.) Content such as memes that did not add critique or comments were excluded. This timeline, excluding key moments of precedent extends from November 2021, when the tragedy occurred, to August 2022, Scott's first sold-out stadium show after the tragic loss.

This chapter will explore the following: important precedent before the events of the festival, a brief summary of the festival timeline, Scott's initial response, Scott's first interview, Scott's general hiatus, the announcement of project H.E.A.L., and Scott's slow comeback from private to major public performances. The data will be used to create a timeline of communication and responses examined through the lens of IRT. Key events like loss of brand deals or booking new shows are included to reflect Scott's career trajectory. This will allow for a

conclusion to be reached on if the communication strategies employed were effective through the lens of IRT.

Before the festival

Prior to the events of Nov. 5, 2021, Scott had a history of inciting riots and raging at his shows. This often landed him into legal trouble and injury as a result of the overcrowding and raging at his shows. This establishes past precedent of Scott encouraging violent behaviors at his festivals. It is important to note because many who critique his response to the Astroworld tragedy refer to these events as a touchpoint to determine the rapper's character.

In June 2015, Scott was arrested by Chicago police after his performance at Lollapalooza was cut short. The rapper was charged and later pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct charges (Niemeyer, 2021). According to the Chicago Police Department, Scott encouraged members of the audience to go past barricades, ignore security, and join him on stage (Kreps, 2015). This caused the concert to get out of control quickly.

In April 2017, a fan was left paralyzed after attending a Scott concert. At his Terminal 5 show in New York City, Scott encouraged fans to rush and jump from the balcony of the venue. This crowd surge caused Kyle Green to fall from the balcony. Green did not intentionally jump but was pushed by a crowd surge. After suffering the injury, Green was brought on stage by event personnel and presented with a ring by Scott as initial compensation. Green and his family later sued Scott for the incident (Saponara, 2017).

In May 2017, Scott was arrested in Arkansas for inciting a riot at his show in the Walmart AMP. Rodger's police department claims Scott encourages fans to rush the stage and bypass security protocols. As a result of this, many people in attendance were injured, including security

and police personnel (Jordan, 2017). Scott was booked in Benton country jail but only stayed in the facility for 12 minutes before making bail. On Feb. 6, 2018, Scott took a plea deal and was found guilty of misdemeanor disorderly conduct., paying a fine of \$7,465.31 as penance (Jordan, 2018).

In May 2021, tickets to the Astroworld music festival sold out before the setlist was even announced. In response to fans expressing disappointment in their inability to get tickets, Scott tweeted, “NAW AND WE STILL SNEAKING THE WILD ONES IN!!!!” (Scott, 2021).

This establishes the past precedent of Scott encouraging such behavior at his festivals. It is important to note because some who critique his response to the Astroworld tragedy refer to these events as a touchpoint to determine the rapper’s true character.

The day of the festival

Scott’s fans began to line up outside the venue to be let into the festival at 3:30 a.m. on Nov. 5, 2022. The gates of the venue were opened at 10 a.m. and crowds began to file in (Wood, 2021). However, thousands more who bought tickets entered the venue by rushing security checkpoints and breaking down barricades. By 4 p.m., 54 patients had been treated by medical personnel and authorities had made note of unsafe conditions of operation during the festival (ABC News, 2021). By 8:15 p.m., medical personnel was overwhelmed with helping to respond to the massive crowd's needs (Wood, 2021).

As Scott’s performance was set to begin, fans crowded around the stage, pressing in closer and closer as the starting time became imminent. Houston Fire chief Sam Pena told the press the crowd, “ began to compress towards the front of the stage,” as the starting time grew

closer. This can be seen visually in a recording of the Apple Live Stream of the event. There were approximately 50,000 people in the audience as Scott took to the stage (ABC News, 2021).

Scott began his show at approximately 9 p.m., as many concertgoers struggled to stay on their feet due to the tightness of the crowd. Video evidence shows that about 10 minutes into Scott's set, the crowd began to show signs of distress, which only worsened as the concert continued (ABC News, 2021). At 9:25 p.m., Scott stopped the show for the first time to draw attention to someone passed out in the crowd. The rapper said, "somebody passed out right there" to alert medical personnel (Woods, 2021). Scott continued with his set but stopped two more times to alert emergency responders that someone needed help in the crowd.

This included at 9:30 p.m. when an ambulance drove through the crowd (ABC News, 2021). Footage shows Scott stopping the concert and asking, "what is that?" as the ambulance drove through the crowd (Wood, 2021). The public could have seen this ambulance on Kylie Jenner's, the on-and-off girlfriend of Scott, Instagram story. The video was taken down after the reports of the evening began to come out.

At 9:38 p.m., the concert was declared a mass casualty event as a result of the crowd collapse. In crowd crush, a crowd of people is funneled into smaller and smaller areas. Compressed, the crowd has nowhere to go, so it collapses in on itself and goes from a vertical orientation to a horizontal orientation (Syed, 2022). This can cause people to be compressed so tightly together that they cannot breathe or be buried underneath each other, making it nearly impossible for people to get up, get out, or get help.

Common accounts of festival survivors show the chaos of the crowd crush. Fatima Munóz, a festival attendee, said a "domino effect" took place during the performance.

“I had fell right on the floor, and that's when everybody started tumbling down, and I tried so hard to get up. There was a legit dog pile on me. I was on the floor. Nobody helped. I tried screaming for my life. I tried screaming for help” (ABC News, 2021).

At 9:42 p.m., Scott stopped the show for another time to get help for a crowd member. This can be seen in footage from the Apple Livestream of the concert. Allegedly unaware of the declaration of a mass casualty event, Scott continued to perform. The show still continued till 10:12 p.m. (ABC News, 2021). Even after the performance ended, fans struggled to leave the venue to the tight crowds. The Houston fire chief said exists of the venue were not blocked but due to the tightness of the crowd, many people just could not get out. Medical personnel had to continue to respond to emergencies even after the music stopped (Wood, 2021).

The Houston police department later told the *Houston Chronicle* that Live Nation, the promoter of the music festival agreed to stop the show, but Scott finished his performance unaware of this agreement. Scott’s lawyers and communication professionals argue the rapper was unaware of what was going on in the crowd. According to news coverage, over 300 people were treated by medical on-site for injuries sustained during and 25 were transported to the hospital (ABC News, 2021). Eight people died on the scene and two people passed away in the hospital as a result of attending the concert. In total, 10 individuals died.

November 2021: Scott’s initial response

On Nov. 6, 2021, Scott tweeted out a statement regarding the events of the festival. The same post was uploaded to the rapper's Instagram story 24 hours following the event. Regarding the death and injuries that occurred at the music festival, Scott wrote:

I am absolutely devastated by what took place last night. My prayers go out to the families and all those impacted by what happened at the Astroworld Festival. Houston PD has my total support as they continue to look into the tragic loss of life. I am committed to working with the Houston community to heal and support the families in need. Thank you to Houston, Fire Department and NGR Park for their immediate response and support (Scott, 2021).

Fans and critics alike responded to Scott on Twitter.

@macaiyla tweeted in response, “This is the most basic half assed PR written shit I’ve ever seen.” The tweet received 55 comments, 1,076 retweets, and over 52,000 likes as of November 2022 (Macaiyla, 2021).

Eric Tamblyn @etamb tweeted, “My son was at the bottom of one of those human piles. He was crushed. While he survived, many around him did not. They were all screaming for help and to stop the show. You did not and you, the crew, venue and promoters will be held responsible.” This tweet received 421 comments, 1,764 retweets, and 48,000 likes as of November 2022 (Tamblyn, 2021).

On Nov. 7, 2021, Scott released an apology video on his Instagram story, done in black in white. The rapper laments about the tragic loss at the festival. He continues to ask for thoughts and prayers for the victims and their families saying:

I just want to send out prayers to the ones that was lost last night. We are actually working right now to identify the families so we can help assist them through this tough time. You know my fans, my fans like, my fans really mean the world to me. I always just really want to leave them with a positive experience. And any time I can make out

anything that's going on you know I stop the show and know help them get the help they need. I could just never imagine the severity of the situation (Scott, 2021).

Scott also asked his audience to send any information about the event to the Houston Police Department and other authorities noting:

We've been working closely with everyone to just try to get to the bottom of this. The city of Houston, HPD, Houston fire department, you know everyone that can help us figure this out. So if you have any information, you know, just please contact your local authorities. Um everyone just continue to keep your prayers (Scott, 2021).

Scott lamented his personal emotional experience in relation to the tragedy. He expressed devastation and disbelief as well as promising his audience updates on the situation saying:

I'm honestly just devastated. I could never imagine anything like this just happening. I'm going to do everything I can to keep you guys updated. Just keep you guys informed on what's going on. Love you all (Scott, 2021).

It is important to note that nowhere in the apology video (or any later content produced by Scott and his team) does he take partial or full responsibility for the tragic events of Nov. 5, 2021. This video was later taken down after it became a meme overnight. The video was reproduced and distributed satirically.

Viewers expressed online that they found Scott to be indifferent and tone-deaf to the tragedy (Flores, 2021). While these tweets didn't draw large engagement, they were propagated by the news and entertainment media as examples of common responses and reflect the general sentiment of the negative backlash Scott received.

One Twitter user wrote, "Travis Scott's apology videos on IG (Instagram) are so orchestrated, fake and way too overdramatic to be authentic no sensible person would fall for that (Scott, 2021)."

Another user wrote, "Travis Scott's Instagram apology is giving fake Youtuber apology vibes" (Scott, 2021).

Another user wrote, "I like Travis Scott music but that apology was so fake, nonchalant and scripted (Scott, 2021).

Another user tweeted, "Travis Scott's response is giving influencers fake apology video. A joke." In response to that, another user commented, "The emotion is so fake he's just trying to cover his ass (Scott, 2021)."

On Nov. 8, 2021. Scott announced his partnership with BetterHelp, an online mental health platform, to provide one month of free therapy to anyone who was affected by the events of the 2022 Astroworld Festival (Fischer, 2021). Scott initially received heavy backlash following the announcement. Typically, in partnerships with BetterHelp, celebrities and influencers receive compensation for the partnership. It was implied to many that Scott was trying to profit from the event. Scott later clarified that he would not receive any money from the partnership (Fischer, 2021).

In the same press release, Scott offered to pay for the funeral costs of the 10 individuals who died as a result of the mass casualty event. Many of the families declined this offer made by Scott. In a statement made by his lawyer, Daniel Petrocelli, who is also known for his role in the OJ Simpson case, Scott offered to pay for the costs of the funerals for the victims of the Astroworld festival. The statement read:

Travis is devastated by the tragedy that occurred at the Astroworld Festival and grieves for the families whose loved ones died or were injured. Travis is committed to doing his part to help the families who have suffered and begin the long process of healing in the Houston community. Toward that end, Travis would like to pay for the funeral expenses for Mr. Blount's son (Dillon, 2021).

The families of the victims quickly rebutted this message. In a statement made by the family of John Hilgert, the message was again described as tone-deaf:

I find offering to pay for funerals demeaning and inappropriate given the magnitude of the tragedy that unfolded. The Hilgerts are not about to allow someone else to pay for their son's funeral. It was one of the last things they could do for their son (Flores, 2021).

In a statement made by the attorney representing Axel Acosta, the family rejected also rejected the offer saying:

Travis Scott's offer to pay funeral expenses was nothing but a publicity stunt. Why else would he inform the press of such an offer? If he wanted to really do something to assuage the pain being felt by these families, he would shut the hell up and let them grieve (Flores, 2021).

Subsequently, commercial endorsements and partnerships with the rapper were canceled following the negative backlash. On Nov. 8, 2021, Scott was removed from the upcoming Dayz in Vegas music festival scheduled to occur on November 13. The festival put out a statement stating that the security and safety of the attendees and staff were central to the reason for his removal (Curto, 2022). On Nov. 15, 2021, Nike announced the postponing of a shoe collaboration with the artist. Scott and Nike were scheduled to drop the Air Max 1 x Cactus Jack

sneaker on Dec.16, 2021. However, Nike stated it will postpone the release, “out of respect for everyone impacted by the Astroworld festival (Curto, 2022).

In the coming days, the additional backlash to Scott’s communications emerged from the victims’ families. On Nov. 29, 2021, the family of the youngest victim of the Astrowold tragedy, Ezra Blount, told *Rolling Stone* they declined Scott’s attempt to pay for their son's funeral. In a statement made by their lawyer, the Blount family stated in response to Scott and his team:

Your client’s offer is declined. I have no doubt Mr. Scott feels remorse. His journey will be painful. He must face and hopefully see that he bears some of the responsibility for this tragedy. (Dillon, 2021).

Additionally, by Dec. 10, 2021, seven out of the 10 families who experienced the loss of a loved one as a result of the mass causality event rejected Scott’s offer to pay for funeral costs (Flores, 2021).

One Month After Scott’s First Interview

On Dec. 9, 2021, Scott gave his first interview following the Astroworld Festival. The interview was conducted by Charlemagne Tha God as part of his Exclusive Conversations series. Scott talked about the show, his love for his fans, and the lack of knowledge he possessed during the mass casualty event. Based on highly liked comments expressing opinions on the effectiveness of his communication, the interview was ineffective at improving Scott’s image.

User @ChefTamble commented, “This isn’t an interview, it's a prepared statement from his lawyers” This comment received 4,800 likes (Charlemagne Tha God , 2021).

User Jason Kray commented, “As a huge Travis fan that's been to his shows a few times it's really disappointing to hear him not talk about how his actions had an effect on what ended up happening here.” The comment received 1,800 likes (Charlemagne Tha God, 2021).

User @extrastrengthsassx commented: “When he talked about there being a lot of grieving and having wanted to be there to hold and have a conversation with the victims, I gasped at how insincere he was. Especially with how much those words clash with what he's actually been like.” This comment received 1.1k likes. (Charlemagne Tha God, 2021)

Patrick @pat_vicious commented: “Travis just dug himself into a deeper hole with this one. Not only were his answers so insincere and emotionless, but he beat around the bush and straight up lied on several occasions. The comment received 1,600 likes. (Charlemagne Tha God, 2021).

On Dec. 10, 2021, KESQ reported that Scott was removed from the headliner's list of Coachella 2022. This report was made based on a statement made by the Community Services Managers of Indio. When the new outlet reached out to Goldenvoice for comment, they did not receive a response (Chan, 2021). This is done after thousands signed a petition of change to have the artist removed as a result of the tragedy of the Astroworld Music Festival. As of November 2022, the petition has 71,882 digital signatures (Aswad & Murphy, 2021). It was also revealed in a *Variety* report that it was the intention of Scott and his team to have Coachella be his first live comeback performance after the tragedy (Aswad & Murphy, 2021).

On Dec. 11, 2021, Scott's seltzer line with Anheuser-Busch was discontinued. The Catci Seltzer was a collaboration with the brand and was available for nine months before its discontinuation. In a statement made by the company, the line was discontinued as a result of the

controversy surrounding the artist. In a statement, Anheuser-Busch believed, “brand fans would understand and respect this decision” (Curto, 2022).

On Dec. 28, 2021, Dior announced that it would delay its collaboration with Scott. The collaboration was meant to be part of its 2022 menswear summer collection. This decision was made mutually with the rapper. In a statement made by Dior, this postponement was done, “out of respect for everyone affected by the tragic events of Astroworld” (Curto, 2022).

Scott’s General Hiatus

Following ineffective communications put out by him and his team, Scott took a general hiatus from social media. News stories from this period mentioning the artist tend to focus on his personal and romantic life or on the course of legal action following the Astroworld festival. (I have chosen to mostly omit the legal and criminal proceedings from my data and analysis, focusing on the communication aspects of Scott and his team.) Scott during this period did not produce content, release, music, or give public performances.

February 2022: Scott Releases Music

On Feb. 23, 2022, Ye, the rapper American formally known as Kanye West, announced in an Instagram, post that Travis Scott would join him for his Coachella set. This sparked major backlash for both artists. Ye was later removed from the Coachella headliners list and did not perform at the festival (Curto, 2022). Additionally, on Feb. 23, 2022, Ye released his *Donda 2* album. One of the tracks on the album featured Scott on the track titled *Pablo* (Curto, 2022). This is one of the first musical releases from the artist after the Astroworld tragedy.

March 2022: Scott Announces Project H.E.A.L.

On March 8, 2022, Scott announced the H.E.A.L. project in posts on Instagram and Twitter. The H.E.A.L project is a \$5 million initiative designed to give back to the Houston community. The project includes mental health resources and scholarship funds meant for the people of Texas and beyond (Scott, 2021). In the caption for the H.E.A.L announcement, Scott wrote,

Over the past few months, I've been taking the time and space to grieve, reflect and do my part to heal my community. Most importantly, I want to use my resources and platform moving forward towards actionable change. This will be a lifelong journey for me and my family.

While it's easy for corporations and institutions to stay in the shadows, I feel as a leader in my community, I need to step up in times of need. My team and I created Project HEAL to take much needed action towards supporting real solutions that make all events the safest spaces they can possibly be. I will always honor the victims of the Astroworld tragedy who remain in my heart forever.

Giving back and creating opportunities for the youth is something I've always done and will continue to do as long as I have the chance. This program will be a catalyst to real change and I can't wait to introduce the rest of the technology and ideas we've been working on. See you all so soon" (Scott, 2022).

When looking at the fans' responses to the HEAL project, there was mixed commentary of positive and negative feedback. Here are some of the negative ones.

"Did you even write this... sounds like your team's work not yours." This comment drew 77 likes and 4 replies (Scott, 2022).

“An absolute bare minimum PR stunt so he can keep selling tickets and buying sports cars. This man’s ego ended 8 lives, and nothing he does will ever make that right.” This comment drew 137 likes and 15 replies (Scott, 2022).

“I can’t with this caption. I’ve never heard him speak a full sentence before. Let alone all this now.” This comment drew 50 likes and 2 replies (Scott, 2022).

“So it took you this long to apologize? A Truthful apology is spontaneous, doesn’t take months to say how you really feel. No matter what you do, those lives will always mark your path.” This comment drew 104 likes and 20 replies (Scott, 2022).

Here are some of the positive comments received in response to project heal.

“Love you even more for this I've been to one of your concerts with my daughter ~ we appreciate your hard work & dedication to your fans #TravisScott May God continue to bless you and your family.” This comment received 11 likes (Scott, 2022).

“...after meeting him last weekend. He’s a sweet guy with emotions. He’s been on interviews and has expressed sadness and even made this post. He wouldn’t be able to put on shows and bring in the people and all the money he does to the event venues if he did come off as fake. He’s just not.” This comment received 19 likes and 1 reply (Scott, 2022).

Overall, out of the hundreds of comments under this post, there are more positive comments than negative ones. However, the negative comments are typically longer in length and garner more likes and replies than their positive counterparts.

In conjunction with the project, Scott announced the launch of the TS Air Max 1 Wheat and a line of merch in collaboration with Nike. All the proceeds from the collab will be going toward the H.E.A.L project (Curto, 2022).

On March 26, 2022, Scott gave his first performance since Astroworld. Scott Dj'd and rapped along to a few songs at the event. The performance was given at a private pre-Oscars party attended by celebrities and Hollywood elites in Bel Air, California (Blair, 2022).

April 2022

On April 17, 2022, Scott attended a "Coachella" after-party and gave a brief performance to a private audience. It is important to remember that Scott was supposed to be the headliner for this music festival. The event was held in La Quinta, California, in association with the Revolve Festival (Corcoran, 2022). The Revolve Festival is not the same as Coachella. It is an invite-only event that happens the same weekend as the festival and is organized to capitalize on the festival's high traffic. The Revolve Festival is usually attended by influencers and celebrities alike when they are not at the concerts of the Coachella music festival.

On April 22, 2022, a song titled "Hold that Heat" was released by Southside and Future. It is the first track with a Scott feature that was widely available since the Astroworld tragedy (Curto, 2022). The album released by Ye, *Donda 2*, was only available on Ye's stem player. Therefore it was not widely available like this song. Scott also appears in the music video, rapping while holding an alligator on a leash. The music video for the song has 290,000 likes and 9,768 comments. YouTube removed the feature that allowed users to view the number of dislikes on a video, so that data is not applicable to the case study. The majority of the comments praise the song and acknowledge it as part of Scott's comeback (Southside, 2022).

One commenter wrote, "Travis and Future Cannot disappoint." This comment received 4,200 likes and 94 replies as of November 2022 (Southside, 2022).

Another commenter wrote, “Travis never disappoints, the best way to make a comeback is a beat with Future.” This comment received 2,300 likes and 49 replies as of November 2022 (Southside 2022).

One commenter made an interesting point stating, “They really gave Travis the entire song, I was scared it wud (would) just be the hook but DAMN.” This comment received 3,400 likes and 59 replies (Southside 2022).

Under the music video, there were little to no comments about Scott in regard to the Astroworld tragedy.

On April 27, 2022, Primavera Sound announced Scott as a headliner for the music festival in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This is the first festival performance Scott booked after the Astroworld tragedy. He was scheduled to perform (and took place) on November 12, 2022 (Curto, 2022).

May 2022: Scott’s Frist Public Performace & Nike Collab

On May 8, 2022, Scott gave his first public performance since the Astroworld tragedy to a sold-out crowd. The performance was not a solo show and occurred at E11evens Grand Prix in Miami, Florida. The rapper took to the stage around 3:30 a.m. and performed a 45-minute set (Bitsky, 2022). During his set, he encouraged audience members to take shots and was joined by fellow rapper Quavo.

On May 20, 2022, Scott announced the launch of his postponed Nike collaboration. The rapper collaboration shoe, the Air Trainer 1s, was only available for purchase by raffle. According to a TMZ report, the sign up for the raffle had more than a million entries within 30 minutes of the announcement. In an Instagram story, Scott said his emotions were running high

and thanked the fans for all the support and love he received in relation to the shoe collaboration launch. On Twitter, Scott tweeted out a promotional video for Cactus Corp for Nike. Based on the promotional content, this collab is assumed to be for-profit (Scott, 2022).

June 2022

On June 7, 2022, Scott was booked by Dayz N Vegas to be the headliner for their September music festival. This is an important landmark in his comeback as it would be the first American music festival Scott headlined since the Astroworld tragedy. Similar to Coachella, a petition was created on change.org to have the artist removed from the festival's lineup. However, the petition was unsuccessful in removing the artist from the lineup and he performed as scheduled. As of November 2022, the petition has received 2,674 digital signatures (Curto, 2022).

July 2022

On July 1, 2022, the Dayz in Vegas festival was canceled. Scott was scheduled to be a performer at the festival. The event was meant to be a landmark in his comeback as his first American festival performance since the Astroworld tragedy. The festival said that this cancellation was due to, "a combination of logistics, timing, and production issues" (Curto, 2022). The cancellation was not in relation to Scott or his team whatsoever.

On July 4, 2022, Scott opens for Meek Mill, a prominent rapper, at his Coney Art Walls performance in Coney Island, New York. Scott stopped the show when a fan climbed up on the stage truss during his performance. TMZ captured footage of the artist asking the fan to step down for his own safety by saying, "Just make sure you safe, my brother." Scott says a fan in a Spiderman costume climbed down and he continued the performance. During his stage set, he

also asked the audience to take, “ two steps back” from the barricade for their own safety (Curto, 2022).

On July 23, 2022, Scott joined Future, another American rapper, during his stage set at Rolling Loud Music Festival in Maimi, Florida. During the set, two performed their song “Hold that Heat ". In addition, Scott performed a few of his own songs while on stage with the artist (Curto, 2022).

August 2022

On Aug. 11, 2022, it was announced that Scott would take a performance residency at Zouk Nightclub in Las Vegas. Nevada. The residency titled “Road To Utopia” began on Sept. 17, 2022, with additional performances on Oct. 15, 2022. In a press release put out about the residency, it is described as a, “ a mind bending, first of its kind nightclub experience” (Curto, 2022).

On August 6, 2022, Scott gave his first solo arena performance since the Astroworld music festival as part of his comeback. The artist gave performed for two days at the O2 arena in London. The show was sold out with a crowd of over 20,000 fans in attendance (Gerber, 2022).

Conclusion

In this chapter the researcher explored data needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the communication put out by Scott and his team in response to the Astroworld tragedy. The majority of the duration of this timeline focuses on November 2021, when the tragic event occurred, through August 2022, when Scott gave a sold out arena performance. This timeline included the communications put out by Scott and his team as well as responses to those communications. In the next chapter, the information will be analyzed through the lens of IRT.

This analysis will determine to what extent, if at all, Scott repaired his image using strategies laid out in the IRT typology.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS

In the previous section, a timeline of the communications produced by Scott and his team was established. This included 23 curated examples of responses reflecting the general sentiment of Scott's image with the public. In this section, the effectiveness of those communications are determined based on the responses of the audience. To what extent, if at all, did Scott repair his reputation after Astroworld? This section will discuss the IRT strategies employed by the rapper, as well as some key features of nuance to the complexity of his situation.

As a communications professional, it is important to recognize the impossibility of handling this situation without some backlash. It was a mass causality event directly associated with the reputation of a public figure. There would have been backlash regardless, and it is safe to assume without some PR and crisis communications put out, the backlash may have been exponentially worse. Scott himself is a somewhat inarticulate person. His lack of eloquence is exhibited in his use of language. When comparing statements made by Scott and those put together by his team on behalf of the artist, there is a clear and present difference in the voice of the speaker. This difference in voice and tone is a key component to the critique Scott received stating over and over in my findings that these were disingenuous and don't sound like him. For communication to be effective, along with employing the right strategy, it needs to be authentic to the voice of the speaker.

Generally speaking, Scott's employment of crisis communication strategies, through the lens of IRT, was not effective in mitigating the fallout of the Astroworld tragedy. The incorrect strategies were employed in response to the event. Scott's repetitive denial of wrongdoing or knowledge of the events as they occurred only added fuel to the fiery backlash. Under IRT,

defeasibility is a subcategory of evading responsibility. It is when one attributes inaction to a lack of knowledge of the events that occurred in an attempt to avoid liability (Benoit, 2018, p.14.). Scott adamantly, repetitively denies knowledge of what was going on in the crowd. This IRT typology can be successful in certain crisis communication scenarios. However, in the face of injury and death, this denial of knowledge was not enough to evade responsibility in the mind of the audience and the public alike. In their mind, this was his music festival, his performance, and by proxy, the blood was on his hands.

This was evident in the comments in tweets the artist received. The general public was not happy with the lack of perceived empathy from the artist. When it comes to partnerships, brands form an alliance with an artist when they collab with them. Scott's communications failures transformed him into a social albatross. The distancing seen from Scott done by brands when canceling current or upcoming collabs is an attempt to mitigate the secondary backlash to protect their reputation as brands.

In Scott's situation, mortification and corrective action may have been the most effective typologies to use to minimize backlash. In the face of injury and death, it is arguably the best course of action to minimize reputational damage. However, his instance to downplay and deny fault in the situation may have caused the backlash to be worse than it would have been. It is understandable from a legal perspective to insist on ignorance when facing expensive legal action. This will prevent or minimize potential liability and subsequently protect from civil and criminal ramifications. However, this legal approach fails to mitigate the reputational damage that occurs. The court of public opinion, propagated by the narrative within media coverage, had already convicted Scott. This public conviction had a negative impact on the artist's public image and subsequently reduced his reputational capital.

A major shortcoming within his response is the lack of mortification, or an apology, for the events of the night. Expressing condolences to the families of the victims and other concertgoers is not a substitute for an actual apology. Scott could have apologized for the events of the festival without taking responsibility for all the events that occurred. His lack of knowledge and the ability to apologize for the festival's events are not mutually exclusive and can be done without being held liable for everything. A simple, *I am sorry I did not stop the show* or *I am mortified by the tragic loss that occurred during my performance* could have been a beneficial supplementation to the statements by Scott and his team. Throughout my research, not once come across Scott saying the actual words *I am sorry*.

From a legal perspective, it is understandable why Scott was advised to not take responsibility. However, one does not need to take responsibility for something to apologize to an audience. Expressing sorrow for a deeply tragic event is not an admission of guilt. Accountability and liability are not necessarily synonymous as long as the speaker employs careful language. While speculative, it is not a longshot to imagine Scott feels some remorse for the loss. His lack of expression of these feelings in a clear and concise manner to his audience breeds inauthentic communication. It weakens the plausible use of defeasibility to respond to the Astroworld tragedy.

What helped repair Scott's reputation was his general hiatus and later corrective action. Initial corrective action, offering to pay for the family's funeral costs, was not received well by the victims, and therefore, received backlash and negative press from a wider audience. The rejection of Scott's attempts to pay for the funerals, coupled with statements made by the families about these offers, only fueled the hellfire Scott was in for their death. The BetterHelp partnership was another example of corrective action not being well received by the victims of

the event. In theory, it is an excellent idea to offer mental health resources to those who have experienced a tragic event. However, the lack of clarification, and therefore wrongful assumption, that Scott would not make money off of the partnership (which celebrities and influencers typically do) made it appear that Scott was trying to profiteer off the corrective action employed.

Later corrective action was better received than initial correction action, which occurred directly after the festival. The H.E.A.L. project and donations of proceeds from Scott's first Nike shoe collab back after the tragedy received support from his target audience in both the comment sections on Twitter and Instagram, excluding the occasional internet troll. However, in comparison, these corrective actions did not receive as much media attention as the initial tragedy. On a positive note, the media coverage of the announcement was relatively neutral in language.

Overall, Scott's initial communication strategies were not effective through the lens of IRT. Yet, the artist was allowed to make a slow yet steady comeback. There are two main factors that could be contributing to this change in public opinion: time and a loyal fanbase. Normally a dominant figure with rap and celebrity culture, Scott took a few months away from the limelight after the Astroworld tragedy. The artist did not post on social media, release music or create new content save appearing briefly in other celebrities' (most notably his public girlfriend) content. This general hiatus allowed the target of public scrutiny to shift from Scott to other topics. The great American artist (and arguably inventor of modern pop culture) Andy Warhol once said, "in the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes" (Bravo, 2019). The same could be said for news media and cancel culture. In the digital age, the news is relevant for 15 minutes, then it's

discarded for the next great tragedy. This allows for individuals to evade cancel culture as long as they wait out the fallout of the controversy in the shadows.

Another aspect that allowed Scott to make a swift career recovery despite his failures in the eyes of IRT, was the loyalty of Scott's fanbase. Reputation management is a key component of IRT. As defined by Coombs, reputation is considered an intangible yet invaluable tool to attract customers, investors, and talent to a brand (Coombs, 2007). However, it can be argued that once someone reaches a certain level of fame, there are fans who may never leave them regardless of the controversy they face. A damaging blow to a public figure's reputation causes irrevocable damage to their reputational capital and power. Yet, once a celebrity is big enough, they can survive a controversy without being "canceled". These celebrities have a baseline level of reputational capital or influence regardless of what they do. In the introduction of this thesis, I spoke about some of Scott's brand deals before Astroworld, and while the tragic event did diminish some of the demand, fans were quick to defend the artist and demanded his return. Despite his communicative shortcomings, it is no surprise one of the biggest rappers in the game was able to make a comeback.

This section is to recognize some shortcomings and limitations of the research presented. This recognition is important when considering the validity of the analytical conclusion reached. This section will discuss the limitations of the research including the nature of the data, method of collection, time of collection, private vs public posts, deleted or archived posts, censored comment sections, and additional ongoing issues at play.

The fallout of the Astroworld tragedy is an ongoing issue for Scott and his team. As a result of the mass causality event, Scott faces legal action. It is anticipated this legal action will

garner sizable media attention and could cause more crisis communications concerns for Scott and his team to navigate. This communication will affect Scott's reputation. This is why a limited timeline analyzed was important to specify in this case study.

Additionally, many communications produced by Scott and his team were time sensitive in nature. Posts to Instagram stories are for 24 hours and be taken down at the creator's will. Additionally, comments and DMS received in response to stories are not public. Scott has not made public the communications he received from his audience when sliding up on Instagram stories. may affect data collection.

Content deleted from the online source (like an Instagram story or deleted post) may have had additional commentary from Scott's audience that would've furthered the analysis of the effectiveness of Scott's communication. Reposted content of deleted communications put out by Scott and his team did not contain what was in the comment section. Tweets critiquing the artist and the controversy may have been considered by the application itself, reported and deleted by the artist, or deleted by the user who created the commentary. Commentary may have been lost if it did not directly contain trackable references (like a hashtag or actually responding to a post) to the rapper or the tragic event.

Overall, this case study examined the effectiveness of Scott's reparative communications strategies in the midst of the fallout of the Astroworld tragedy. The research question asked: How and to what extent did Travis Scott repair his public image following the 2021 Astroworld tragedy? The effectiveness of the communication put out by Scott and his team was examined through the lens of IRT. A timeline of communications produced along with key events affecting public perception was produced. In this timeline, the responses by Scott's audience were

included to determine the effectiveness of the communication. This Timeline of Communication was then analyzed through the lens of IRT. Based on the analysis, Scott's initial crisis communication efforts were not successful through the lens of IRT. Instead, his ability to bounce back and have a public career came down to the time out of the public eye and a loyal fanbase eager to support his comeback.

It is important to examine failings in crisis communication to become better reputation management professionals. Events like this, seem rare, but it is possible that once in a career as a practitioner one will have to deal with this kind of fallout. This case study teaches the importance of using the correct image repair strategies when dealing with a crisis, and it shows how disastrous the fallout can be when not mitigated properly. Not every client one will have in their career will be as lucky as Scott. While not to the scale it once was, Scott did not have to rely on effective crisis communication to save his career. This is unlikely to work for the typical client with a smaller audience and less prestige. Therefore, it is important to examine the shortcomings of him and his team because not every client will have the same career cushion. Some people really are cancellable.

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