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What's Gender Got To Do With It? How Client Gender Influences Public Relations Practices and Crisis Management Strategies

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**What's Gender Got To Do With It? How Client Gender Influences Public
Relations Practices and Crisis Management Strategies**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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Honors Capstone Project In: Public Relations

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Abstract

Media leads gender stereotyping. Consumers of media internalize messages of gender put forth by the media, thus shaping their attitudes and expectations of gender. This paper focuses on gender and how it influences public relations (PR) practices and crisis management strategies, specifically in entertainment PR. This is a subject that has yet to be explored. Utilizing primary, secondary and quantitative research methods, I hope to answer my research question: how does client gender influence PR strategy? To test my research question, I designed an online survey composed of four common PR crises seen in the entertainment industry among celebrities. The four main areas of focus for these crisis scenarios were DUI's, infidelity, domestic violence and leaked nude pictures.

The problem is that in society, there are pre-existing notions of gender set in place. Men and women are given "scripts" of how they should act based off of characteristics that are deemed appropriate each sex. An example of this would be how men are expected to be tough, in charge and not show emotion, where as women are expected to be emotional and dependent on their partner in a relationship. This becomes the norm and the media continues to reinforce these ideas about gender. Using expert testimony, I argue that these gender stereotypes impacts how PR practitioners strategize because they must keep in mind these societal views of gender when making decisions. To prove this, I created a survey to distribute to PR practitioners testing how gender influences their decision-making.

In public relations, PR practitioners essentially manage the relationship between perception and reality. They help manage the reputation of an individual, organization or company (Martin, 2005). Public relations and media have a symbiotic relationship (Corporatewatch.org). This means that they have a mutually beneficial relationship where the PR industry depends on the media as its central vehicle for much of its messages. The media in turn, has become more dependent on PR practitioners to supply them with content (e.g. news articles for print and online media channels). In conclusion, given how the media perpetuates gender stereotypes, consumers of media internalize these messages and PR practitioners work with the media, I want to know how PR practitioners will deal with entertainment clients in times of a crisis and how gender influences PR practitioners decision making.

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Executive Summary

Description of Study

This research project is a systematic investigation that focuses on the effects of gender on decision making among public relations professionals. This is all designed to bring new information to the public relations field and contribute to general knowledge. This research will build on already existing knowledge about gender issues and public relations, but provide a different perspective on crisis management as it relates to gender, thus contributing to general knowledge. By conducting primary research through surveys, I hope to discover new information regarding client gender and how it influences PR strategy in entertainment PR—a topic that has yet to be explored.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this research is to explore how client gender influences PR strategy. Celebrities are very unpredictable—there's no telling what they will do. What makes celebrities different from non-celebrities is that they are constantly under public scrutiny. Celebrities are aware of their popularity and reliant on their reputation. This is because they essentially *are* their own brands. Some find themselves in crisis situations and in dire need of a PR practitioner or team to come in and resolve the situation. “A reputation of real value takes a long time to grow—like a tree. And like a tree it takes only a minute to cut it down” (Reputation Management, 2011). That is why having a PR practitioner is so vital for celebrities. They need a PR practitioner to be there to keep the “tree from

falling,” and if it falls, to be there to catch it so that the damage isn’t too bad. In other words, it is essential for celebrities to have a PR practitioner to manage their reputation and protect their brand, for both their professional and personal lives.

PR practitioners essentially manage the relationship between perception and reality. Crisis communications is a sub-specialty of PR and can be best defined as a PR tool designed to help defend or protect an individual, company or organization that faces a public challenge to its image, brand or reputation (Martin, 2005). I will conduct interviews with PR practitioners in the entertainment industry to get their expert opinions on how and to what extent gender influences the way they do their job and approach a crisis situation. I will then be able to get a professional perspective and a better idea of how to answer my research question.

Significance of Study

“Media is deeply implicated in the process of defining and framing gender in society” (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007, p. 21) and is also one of the main facilitators of gender stereotyping. Media consumers analyze and process messages, retain them, and form certain attitudes about what is and is not appropriate for men and women. Consumers use media on a daily basis to keep informed on current events, to purchase things, to socialize or simply for entertainment. While doing so, certain messages creep unnoticed into the consumer’s consciousness. “Research indicates that we are raised into our gender roles through a process called gender-typing—as children, we absorb behaviors

and ideologies assumed appropriate by our culture for each biological sex” (Espinosa, 2010). The media continually reinforces viewers’ attitudes about gender, which in turn impact the behaviors consumers consider socially appropriate for men and women. Given this, I believe societal views about gender impact the way PR practitioners handle his or her men and women clients. This is because PR practitioners are taught to anticipate reactions from consumers and the general public. This is particularly important when dealing with a client of celebrity status because they are constantly in the public eye. As a soon-to-be graduating senior who will enter the entertainment PR industry, I wanted to better understand how PR practitioners strategize, especially during times of crisis and how they are influenced by client gender when making decisions. This is important for the field of PR and its present and future practitioners to understand because it impacts how they do their job and how they represent their clients.

When researching the tactics and strategies a PR practitioner uses in times of crisis there was ample material. However, there is no research to date that addresses how client gender influences PR strategy and the way they make decisions—the gap in the field. This made me want to conduct further research to fill this gap. To do so, I conducted primary research utilizing surveys. I will begin my research by analyzing practitioners who represent celebrities because their clients are constantly in the public eye so much that even a small reputation crisis can end a career.

Literature Review

Public Relations

Rex Harlow wrote one of the most widely used definitions of public relations in 1997. Harlow (1997) defines public relations as “a distinctive management function, which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organization and its publics.” Image and reputation is vital to any business, company or individual(s) in the public eye. This is why many seek out the expertise of PR practitioners to assist with managing image and reputation. The field of PR has a wide array of specializations, which any practitioner can enter. A few of these specializations include health, investor relations, sports, travel and tourism, political, government, arts and entertainment, education, nonprofit, and many more.

For the purposes of my research, I am specifically interested in entertainment PR. Entertainment PR deals with individual(s) who possess some kind of talent such as dancing, singing, acting or other talents. These individuals typically seek out PR practitioners for guidance concerning how to brand themselves, how to get their name out there and often time how to get out of bad, public PR crisis that could potentially damage his or her career. PR practitioners can choose to work independently in entertainment PR or with a PR firm or talent agency.

A PR practitioner who works independently with celebrity clients are often referred to as celebrity publicists. These individuals must actively seek out

their own clients. For a new PR practitioner just entering entertainment PR they are more likely to begin managing the reputation of a new/undiscovered talent. The PR practitioner is in charge of getting their client's name and face out to the public any way they can. Most common practices include booking events such as performances, interviews and television appearances. If a client is already well known or famous, then the practitioner must manage what information about their client goes public and what stays private. A practitioner who works for a firm or talent agency does not have to actively seek out clients. Clients looking for PR representation or help go to the PR firm or talent agency themselves. A practitioner who works for a firm has the same responsibilities of a practitioner who works independently.

Gender

Gender is a term that is often confused or used interchangeably with the term sex. Gender is a social and cultural term that refers to the “meanings, values and characteristics that people ascribe to different sexes” (Blackstone, 2003, p. 335). Sex on the other hand, is a biological term that is “determined by the X and Y chromosomes” (Espinosa, 2010) an individual possesses. An individual who possesses two X chromosomes is considered female and an individual who possesses 1 X and 1 Y chromosome is considered male. We begin developing our gender identity between the ages of two and three (Espinosa, 2010). “While some choose to believe they have chosen their behaviors based on individual characteristics, Taylor argues that behavior is socialized rather than by natural

occurrence” (Taylor, 2003). This means that we aren’t naturally drawn to characteristics and behaviors deemed appropriate for men and women by society. We are taught and raised into our gender roles and taught to recognize the male and female role expectations to fit in with society. We begin learning about what characteristics and behaviors are deemed appropriate for each sex from our parents, friends, peers, teachers and the media—one of the strongest influencers.

Gender and Media

“Gender roles are prevalent in media, often portraying women as nurturing, gentle, cooperative, concerned with appearance, and sensitive to others; while men are viewed as logical, competitive, independent, assertive, financial providers, skill in business and dominant over women” (Foss, 1989; Wood & Reich, 2006). In addition, women are also seen as sex objects, have high emphasis placed on their appearance, are of lower status when it comes to occupational positions and are often represented more negatively in the media than men are.

Men on the other hand, are often portrayed as successful, having high position jobs, being the breadwinners of the family, strong, and feel the need to suppress their sensitive/compassionate side. These are just some of the common stereotypical characteristics and behaviors that have been consistently put into consumer’s minds about female and male gender roles in society. “Tragos believes that with any change in gender perceptions (for example: women being powerful and men being sensitive) the media backlashes with gender specific television channels such as WEtv (Women’s Entertainment Television) and Spike

(a network for men); thus creating further resistance to changing stereotypes” (Tragos, 2009).

Crisis Management

A crisis is defined as “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, individual or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name—it can simply interrupt an organization or even threaten the existence of it” (Martin, 2005). For this reason alone, it is vital for a business, organization, and/or individual to have a crisis plan prepared and ready to go in case of an unexpected or “expected” crisis or scandal.

There are five stages of a crisis that a PR practitioner or team follows, which are: detection, prevention/preparation, containment, recovery, and learning (Martin, 2005). These stages help the PR practitioner/team form tactics and strategies that assist with alleviating the situation. If the strategic plan is done well, the business or individual will have a speedy recovery (1-3 months) or end up with a better reputation/image than they had before the crisis. I used the book *Crisis management: The effective use of image restoration strategies when an organization/individual is faced with a crisis* as a beginning benchmark in analyzing how PR practitioners handle clients of both sexes.

Methodology

The research features a quantitative method. I created a brief, ten-minute online questionnaire using Qualtrics, a survey development and data management website and distributed it to thirty PR practitioners in the entertainment industry. The participants for my survey were PR practitioners of all demographics (i.e. age, race, sex) who have 1+ years of experience in entertainment public relations and crisis management. I recruited them through the PR department in Newhouse. The questionnaire included basic demographic questions, as well as questions about their work experience (past and present).

Research Design: I created a survey with a list of questions and crisis scenarios to test my research question: How does client gender influence PR strategy? The crisis scenarios were broken down into four common crises seen throughout the entertainment industry, being: DUI's, infidelity, domestic violence and leaked nude pictures. The scenarios were completely randomized, which meant that each practitioner who took the survey would receive the crisis scenarios in a random order and the pronouns used in each scenario would vary. For each of the four scenarios I kept the exact same scenario, but changed the name and pronoun. As you can see in the DUI scenario in the appendix (figure 1), I only changed the name and pronoun, this way I could better gauge if gender did influence the practitioner's decision making throughout the survey. I also made it a point to use non-ethnic common names such as John, Britney, Brad, Jennifer, James to avoid thoughts of race. This is because once race enters the equation it begins to skew the results, which I wanted to avoid.

Variables: There were three key variables for my survey: independent variable, dependent variable and moderator. The independent variable of my study was gender because it was the variable that I had control over and was the variable that controlled the survey. The dependent variable was the intensity of the crisis because each scenario varied in intensity. This would then effect the role gender played in the decision making process for PR practitioners. The last variable was the moderator variable, which was expertise. This survey was sent out to a variety of practitioners who varied in age so expertise would vary as well, thus influencing how the practitioner's answered/approached each question.

The purpose of this research is to assess the participant's thoughts and expertise in crisis management and entertainment public relations. Participants were redirected to the survey, hosted on Qualtrics, a survey development and data management website. Upon arriving at the site, participants were asked to read the information sheet, respond to general demographic questions (e.g., age, sex, race) and information about his/her professional experiences (e.g., length of time in field, size of firm).

After completing this information, participants were asked to read four different crisis scenarios, presented one at a time, followed by questions that addressed the intensity of the crisis, the likelihood that the participant will use specific strategies, and the likelihood that the client's reputation will recover from the crisis. The strategies varied for each crisis scenario. Participants responded according to a 6-point Likert scale where 1 indicated "Very Unlikely" and 6 indicated "Very Likely." The survey was approximately 10-15 minutes long. All

participants responded to all four scenarios, but the presentation and the name of the client were randomized, resulting in a within-and between-subjects design with eight possible conditions.

Hypothesis: I predicted that women in the scenarios I created would have higher crisis rankings in 3 out of the 4 crisis scenarios (DUI, Infidelity and leaked nude pictures). I predicted that PR practitioners would recommend certain strategies for women celebrities than they would for men celebrities. I based my hypothesis off of my knowledge about gender issues and public relations as well as the research I conducted.

Results & Conclusion

From the thirty surveys I sent out to PR practitioners I received a little less than half. This was due to delayed IRB approval, which gave me less time to recruit participants. From those who did fill out the survey about 70% of participants were female with the remainder being male practitioners. Most of the participants had experience in the 1-3 year range, with a few being in the 5+ years range. It was difficult to reach any major conclusions due to the small pool of participants; however, I did see a few patterns in the data. For example, in the DUI scenario for “Jennifer” there were more votes for her to issue a public apology and enter rehab than there was for “Johnny.” I saw similar instances in the leaked nude pictures scenario, where the intensity of the crisis was rated lower for “Adam” and higher for “Ashley.” From these few observations, I can see that gender does have some kind of influence on PR practitioner’s decision-making. I

plan to continue my research after graduation and receive a larger pool of participants to better gauge just how much gender really does influence PR practices and crisis management strategies.

Appendix

Scenario #1: DUI

Jennifer is a 24-year-old musician who was just arrested for a DUI. Police pulled her car over at 230 in the morning after running a red light. Police say Jennifer verbally harassed them and was charged with resisting arrest; she blew a .15 on the Breathalyzer. TMZ published her mug shot the next day and the story was covered on various entertainment shows (e.g., Entertainment Tonight).

Johnny is a 24-year-old musician who was just arrested for a DUI. Police pulled his car over at 230 in the morning after running a red light. Police say Johnny verbally harassed them and was charged with resisting arrest; he blew a .15 on the breathalyzer. TMZ published his mug shot the next day and the story was covered on various entertainment shows (e.g., Entertainment Tonight).

- Strategies to deal with crisis:
 - Issue a public apology
 - Hold press conference and take questions
 - Enter rehab
 - Community service
 - Decline comment because it is a legal matter
 - Find witnesses to refute charges
 - Do nothing. Just let it play out.
 - Other: _____

Scenario #2: Domestic Violence

Husband-and-wife singing duo Brad and Britney Taylor got into a vicious spat before a concert in Chicago. Britney allegedly started the fight by slapping the back of his head, according to Brad's memoir. When the two emerged from a limousine, they each were severely bloodied and bruised with Brad's eyes almost sealed shut and Britney's nose bloodied. Brad described it as the one time he fought back against his wife.

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- Strategies to deal with crisis:
 - Issue a public apology
 - Schedule appearances on top talk shows to discuss the matter
 - Hold press conference to explain situation and take questions

- Enter client into therapy
- Decline comment because it is a legal matter
- Decline comment because it is a personal matter
- Do nothing. Just let it play out.
- Other: _____

Scenario #3: Nude pictures leaked

Adam, the 18-year-old pop heartthrob has reportedly become the latest celebrity to fall victim to apparent leaked nude photos scandal. Highly personal and private photographs from his mobile phone were posted on several celebrity gossip websites yesterday.

Ashley, the 18-year-old pop star has reportedly become the latest celebrity to fall victim to apparent leaked nude photos scandal. Highly personal and private photographs from her mobile phone were posted on several celebrity gossip websites yesterday.

- Strategies to deal with crisis:
 - Issue a public apology
 - Hold press conference announcing lawsuit against leaker and take questions
 - Hold press conference. React light-heartedly to photos, but make critical statements about leakers and privacy, and take questions
 - Do nothing. Just let it play out.
 - Other: _____

Scenario #4: Infidelity

As revealed in exclusive photos obtained by Us Weekly, 26-year-old Christina Patterson was caught cheating on boyfriend Adam Johnson with her married "Final Days" director Chad Andrews.

As revealed in exclusive photos obtained by Us Weekly, 26-year-old Adam Johnson was caught cheating on girlfriend Christina Patterson with his married "Final Days" director Cassandra Andrews.

- Strategies to deal with crisis:
 - Issue a public apology
 - Issue statement explaining the situation
 - Hold press conference to explain the situation and take questions
 - Do nothing. Just let it play out.
 - Other: _____

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