

WRIT 3010: Practical Studies in Damage Control, Final Exam

Take Home Exam (20%) – Find a recent (last 10 years) **Canadian PR crisis** case that has **not** been studied on the course. Apply the theories you've learned from the readings to that Canadian PR crisis case. Write an 6-8 page, ~2000 word paper that explains the case and then analyzes making direct reference to at least six good sources and to as many course terms as are applicable. No outside sources beyond the readings are needed, but engagement with the readings is vital. You may revisit the themes of your weekly reading assignments, but please compose all-original content for this paper. Reference your sources and cite in-text accordingly. Include a Works cited.

I recommend taking notes each week from the readings as you progress through the course – then when you write the paper you do not have to reread the articles to find secondary material. Include citations to course readings & a bibliography in MLA/ Chicago format. Your paper should be submitted no later than December 12 at 11:59PM on Moodle.

Drilling to the Root of the Problem: Dalhousie University's Facebook Crisis

Summary of the Crisis

On December 12, 2014, a female student enrolled in Dalhousie University's School of Dentistry presented staff members with 54 screenshots of a private Facebook group. The group, titled "Class DDS 2015 Gentlemen" ("Dalhousie University Probes Misogynistic Students"), consisted of male dentistry students. The screenshots contained sexual posts about their female classmates. One screenshot asked the group which female they would like to have "hate" sex with; another joked about chloroforming women (Tutton). Three days later, on December 15, an anonymous source sent these screenshots to a news site.

Already, the crisis involved two *intensifiers*.¹ First, the screenshots were a media exemplar, easily sharable amongst stakeholders and unrelated audiences. Second, the crisis involved innocents: the female students whom the Facebook group violated in their posts. These *intensifiers* exasperated the crisis and spurred public demands for retribution.

Eventually, Dalhousie revealed that the crisis had deeper roots, bringing to light a culture of misogyny, sexism, homophobia, and unprofessionalism within the dentistry program. Following news reports about the screenshots, Dalhousie University started a five-month mission to repair their image and address the toxic culture that birthed the crisis. The university issued several responses, but this paper will focus on the three most significant.

First Response

On December 17, 2014, two days after news sites exposed the screenshots, Dalhousie University President Richard Florizone made an announcement. The victims of the crisis preferred restorative justice over punitive punishment. Following this preference, the university

¹ *Intensifiers*: when a situation involves an *intensifier*, it make the crisis worse, and it increases the need for a response. There are ten *intensifiers* in total. See Appendix E for a full list of *intensifiers*.

was to educate the Facebook posters on the wrongdoing of their actions through a confidential restorative justice process. The process would “identify the ways” Dalhousie could “rebuild” trust “in the classroom” and “the public” (qtd. in Wong and Walsh). The fate of the perpetrators—and whether or not the university would expel them—was still under discussion.

The head of an institute acting as the spokesperson for a crisis is an indication of seriousness (Ratna Damayanti et al. 101). When President Florizone gave Dalhousie’s first response, it was a confirmation of the Facebook crisis’s severity: the university would not be minimizing the crisis. Their stance was appropriate considering the extent of public outrage.

Dalhousie demonstrated several of William Benoit’s Image Repair strategies² (Benoit 56) in their first response, namely: *transcendence*,³ *corrective action*,⁴ *mortification*,⁵ and *shifting the blame*.⁶ Through *transcendence*, the university transferred the focus from their sullied reputation onto the restorative justice process. This process also doubled as a form of *corrective action*. Dalhousie’s use of *mortification* was not for themselves but the sake of the boys, with Florizone sharing that “the regret” he heard “from some of the men involved” was genuine (qtd. in Wong and Walsh). But the response also *shifted the blame* onto the perpetrators. Florizone emphasized that their “degrading and misogynistic comments” were “entirely unacceptable” in the Dalhousie community (Florizone), clarifying that the boys had acted on their own volition.

² William Benoit’s Image Repair strategies: strategies used when responding to a crisis. They help to repair the sullied image of an individual or institution. Professor William Benoit created them.

³ *Transcendence*: emphasizing that there are more important values to focus on (Benoit 56).

⁴ *Corrective action*: a plan to solve or prevent the recurrence of the problem (Benoit 56).

⁵ *Mortification*: apologizing (Benoit 56).

⁶ *Shifting the blame*: claiming that another person or institution performed the act in question (Benoit 56).

As they began their response to the crisis, Dalhousie used *invariants*⁷ and *de-escalators*⁸ to appease their audience. By sympathizing with and commending the female victims, Florizone was showing concern for the individuals hurt, which is an *invariant*. However, the president commiserated with the Facebook posters as well, commenting on the genuineness of their regret (Wong and Walsh). Such consideration towards the offenders revealed another, more hidden approach to the crisis: quieting it down. Public charges and punitive punishment would only generate negative attention and further sully Dalhousie's image.

As this suggests, Florizone's promise of *corrective action*, in the form of the restorative justice process, was both an *invariant*, actively taking steps to prevent the harmful action from occurring again, and a *de-escalator*, reducing the severity of the crisis so that a less significant response is required. The university focused on one *de-escalator* in particular: victim forgiveness or understanding.

A good crisis response considers the "expanded viewpoint of how" a crisis might "affect" stakeholders (Ulmer 609); it contemplates the victim's point of view. Dalhousie centred their first response around their female students' opinions, demonstrating an understanding of their victims and satisfying Ulmer's prerequisite for good crisis response. Their consideration of the victims also generated positive press.

However, the restorative justice process had significant faults. It would take months to conclude, and the university was not transparent about the procedure while it was occurring. As Coombs notes, "Most stakeholders will learn about a crisis" from the media (Protecting

⁷ *Invariants*: strategies meant to appease audiences during a crisis. There are four *invariants* in total: demonstrating concern for the individual(s) hurt, bolstering individual or organizational values, making it clear that no harm was intended, and actively taking steps to prevent the harmful action from occurring again.

⁸ *De-escalators*: strategies meant to calm audiences. They make the original crisis seem less severe or prove to audiences that action is already being taken.

Organization Reputations 164). If an organization is not forthcoming with the necessary information, stakeholders and general audiences will start to speculate (Coombs, Protecting Organization Reputations 164). Dalhousie suffered this very fate.

In the weeks following the first response, there was a public outcry. Approximately 200 protestors marched the streets of Dalhousie University on December 19, 2014, demanding that the perpetrators be expelled. The Twitter hashtags “#dalhateswomen” and “Dalhousiehateswomen” trended soon after.



Figure 1: Example of a Tweet with the hashtag #dalhateswomen.

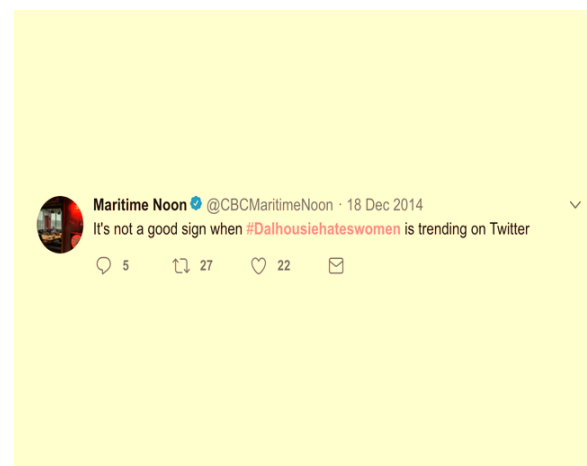


Figure 2: Example of a Tweet with the hashtag #Dalhousiehateswomen.

The public did not understand how the restorative justice process worked and had no proof that it was occurring. Dalhousie’s reluctance to share information on the process led the public to believe that they were not resolving the issue; consequently, they took matters into their own hands.

Second Response

On January 5, 2015, approximately one month after the first response, President Florizone announced that Dalhousie University was suspending the clinical privileges of thirteen students

responsible for the Facebook postings. Four days later, on January 9, the university prohibited these students from attending lectures with their classmates.

Until Dalhousie lifted the suspension, the thirteen students were ineligible for graduation. This was the university's intention, as "any individual recommended for graduation" had to "have complied with the professionalism requirements of" their "academic program" (qtd. in "Dalhousie Suspends 13 Dentistry Students"). In this case, "professionalism requirements" referred to the successful completion of the restorative justice process.

The primary Image Repair strategy included in the second response was *corrective action*: the suspension of the thirteen boys. The suspension was consistent with the university's restorative stance as its purpose was not to punish but to give Dalhousie enough time to educate the perpetrators.

The month between the first and second reply presented a new *intensifier*: the absence of messaging. Duke and Masland emphasize the importance of maintaining ongoing *corrective action* (32); this includes responding to inquiries, even in the absence of new information. Dalhousie did not maintain constant communication with their audiences, only releasing a statement when there was new information. Their silence aggravated the crisis. For instance, due to the lack of updates, a Dalhousie University alumna started a petition to expel the thirteen boys responsible for the Facebook posts, garnering 50,453 supporters. She was disappointed by the "closed, internal and confidential" restorative justice process and demanded more transparency (B, Meghan).

Third Response

On March 2, roughly two months after the second response, Dalhousie University lifted the Facebook posters' suspension, permitting them to attend classes with other students and

participate in clinical practice. A summative report about the restorative justice process followed on May 22, five months after its initiation. The report included contributions from the process supervisors, the Facebook posters, members of the Facebook group, the female victims, Dalhousie's Faculty of Dentistry, Dalhousie University, and the Nova Scotia Dental Association.

Most important in Dalhousie's Image Repair strategy were the four *invariants*. The Facebook posters exhibited the first *invariant* by expressing concern for the individuals hurt. The report used the second *invariant* to bolster the university's values, reminding readers that one of Dalhousie's "Strategic Directions" was to create "a diverse and inclusive environment" (qtd. in Tryon and Logan). In the report, the Facebook posters admitted to opposing the university's values and expectations. They were suggesting that Dalhousie, as an institution, had no intention to harm, which was the third *invariant*. As was the case in prior responses, the restorative justice process acted as the fourth *invariant*: actively taking steps to prevent the harmful action from occurring again.

Next, Benoit's Image Repair strategies illuminated the crisis communication tactics employed by this report. The first strategy used was *transcendence*. The female victims drew attention to a broader culture of misogyny within the dentistry program and society. They admitted to knowing of the Facebook group's existence before the crisis and ignoring it until it directly affected them. In this way, they claimed to have contributed "to the culture and climate that" allowed "Facebook groups like the one at issue to thrive and flourish" (qtd. in Tryon and Logan). The Facebook posters strengthened this *transcendence*. They referred to their actions as extensions of the culture of "prejudice and discrimination that" existed "inside and outside of dentistry" (qtd. in Tryon and Logan).

The report also employed the strategy of *mortification*. The Facebook posters claimed to

have realized the “hurt and harm” their “comments caused” for “classmates, faculty and staff” (qtd. in Tryon and Logan). They accepted responsibility for the crisis, apologizing for their actions and asking the victims and the public for forgiveness (qtd. in Tryon and Logan). Though they conveyed their “overwhelming regret,” they understood that “saying sorry” was “too easy” and vowed to prove their apologetic sentiments through future actions (qtd. in Tryon and Logan). Their promise was an attempt at atonement.

The document’s final strategy was *bolstering*.⁹ All participants in the report bolstered the restorative justice process. The Facebook posters credited the process for helping them “rebuild the relationships damaged and improve” themselves (qtd. in Tryon and Logan). The victims referred to the process as a “solution to a complicated problem,” claiming that it served just as much justice as punitive punishment (qtd. in Tryon and Logan). The participants were reinforcing the university’s crisis response strategy, defending Dalhousie from criticisms against the restorative justice process and demands for punitive punishment.

After this, the report concluded that the restorative justice process had successfully educated its participants on the overarching culture of misogyny, homophobia, racism, and sexism within the dentistry program. It offered suggestions on how to correct this problematic culture, which Dalhousie accepted (“External Dentistry Task Force”).

Still, while the report adequately described the restorative justice process and used complementary Image Repair strategies, its length was a deterrent. Stakeholders were involved enough in the situation to read through an eleven-page document, but general audiences—who had the potential to become Dalhousie students—could lack this patience. To reach a broader

⁹ *Bolstering*: stressing the good traits of an institution (Benoit 56).

audience, the university should have released a one-page press release containing the report's key findings.

Conclusion

The public blamed Dalhousie University for the Facebook crisis, depicting Dalhousie as a dangerous institution for female students. To repair their image, Dalhousie utilized Image Repair strategies.

However, the university's approach to Image Repair was unconventional, targeting the root of the crisis rather than the crisis itself. They implemented restorative measures and admitted to a culture of misogyny and problematic beliefs, amending the cause of the crisis alongside their image. By correcting the root of the crisis, Dalhousie could maintain its repaired image over a prolonged period.

In this way, the restorative justice process was also a preventative measure. It allowed Dalhousie to disassemble the toxic culture in their dentistry problem, preventing similar crises from occurring in the future. Coombs considers crisis prevention to be the "starting point of crisis management and crisis communication" (The Paracrisis 408). Dalhousie was smart, therefore, to implement preventative measures in their Image Repair strategy. They built the foundations for more successful crisis responses to come.

Outside of the faults outlined in this essay, Dalhousie responded well to a rather tense situation. It is difficult, however, to comment on the success of their Image Repair as Dalhousie University suffered two more unrelated crises¹⁰ in 2015 (Levine). These crises could have counteracted the positive effects of a satisfactory crisis response.

Despite the university's misfortune, the number of student applications in 2015 was the

¹⁰ A Dalhousie medical student told his psychiatrist that he planned to harm Dalhousie students and faculty, and a student about to start medical school at Dalhousie University murdered another student (Levine).

same as the year preceding the crisis (Levine). These numbers suggest that Dalhousie was triumphant in their crisis response, but it is also indicative of partisanship. Dalhousie's educational services and status as the number one Maritime university might have been impressive enough for potential students—Dalhousie's partisans—to overlook the crisis.

Works Cited

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[offensive-facebook-comments/](https://globalnews.ca/news/1732801/dalhousie-university-announces-response-to-offensive-facebook-comments/).

Appendix A: Figures



Figure 1: Example of a Tweet with the hashtag #dalhateswomen.



Figure 2: Example of a Tweet with the hashtag #Dalhousiehateswomen.

Appendix B: Background Information on Facebook Crisis

The Canadian Press. "A Timeline in the Scandal Involving the Dentistry School at Dalhousie

University." *CityNews Toronto*, CityNews, 30 June 2015,

<https://toronto.citynews.ca/2015/06/29/a-timeline-in-the-scandal-involving-the-dentistry-school-at-dalhousie-university/>.

Appendix C: Additional Information on First Response

Semansky, Matt, and Ryan McNutt. "What Is Restorative Justice?" *Dalhousie News*, Dalhousie University, 18 Dec. 2014, www.dal.ca/news/2014/12/18/what-is-restorative-justice-.html?utm_source=dalnewsWeekly.

Appendix D: Additional Information on Second Response

“Response to Dentistry Facebook Comments Continues.” *Dalhousie News*, Dalhousie University, 5 Jan. 2015, www.dal.ca/news/2015/01/05/response-to-dentistry-facebook-comments-continues.html.

Appendix E: WRIT 3010 Class Developed Intensifiers

Intensifier 1: Media exemplar (bits of media that are easily sharable amongst audiences)

Intensifier 2: No or inconsistent messaging

Intensifier 3: Hypocrisy or repeated behaviour

Intensifier 4: Caught lying (denial) or stonewalling (diminish)

Intensifier 5: Malice or anti-social act

Intensifier 6: Food, water, or drug safety

Intensifier 7: Found to be responsible

Intensifier 8: Children, the elderly, or other innocents

Intensifier 9: No empathy for victims/helpless

Intensifier 10: Death