

AstroWorld Crisis Case Study

An out-of-world catastrophe occurred on November 5, 2021. AstroWorld, a concert hosted by Travis Scott resulted in crowd surges, three hundred lawsuits, and deaths (NBCNews, 2021). Despite efforts to minimize the impacts of the travesty, Travis Scott's inadequate response to the detrimental effects of the crisis led to his cancellation as an artist. To handle such crises effectively, organizations should follow the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by Timothy Coombs which determines a correct crisis response based on a three-step process. Through the analysis of SCCT, Travis Scott's ineffective crisis management occurred from his misjudgment of the type of crisis situation, ignorance of the consequences of the event, and constant denial of his involvement and responsibility.

Travis Scott is a hip-hop artist, entrepreneur, and Grammy-nominated musician. Scott's brand is not limited to music but includes fashion, food, and video games. Travis Scott performed at numerous events before the crisis and had previous controversies and arrests regarding crowd safety at his concerts. In 2015, Scott encouraged the crowd to jump over the event's stage safety barriers, incited fans to attack a man, and was sued by a fan who fell from a balcony due to a crowd surge (Mayk, 2022, p.2). In 2019, three concert audience members were taken to the hospital from a crowd stampede (Mayk, 2022, p.2). Travis Scott's major stakeholders, likewise other musicians, are his fans as they impact music sales and support in the media.

On November 5th, 2021, Travis Scott performed and hosted Astroworld in Houston, Texas. According to ABC News, over 50,000 concert goers attended the event and within 30 minutes of the performance, the police were contacted to give medical attention to the crowd (2021). Many fans were suffocating from crowd surges and trampled as other fans pushed

towards the stage. Concertgoers began to panic, faint, and pass out and the police declared Astroworld a mass casualty event within half of the show. Despite chants from the crowd to stop the show, Scott performed for 40 more minutes and there were no efforts to stop the show from the producers. During the concert, Scott paused his performance three times to ask for help for those in the crowd. Nonetheless, Scott continued to finish his song set and then attended an after-party. At the end of the night, ten fans passed away and over three hundred people were injured (ABC, 2021). Due to Scott's ignorance of the show's situational environment- there were high-level consequences from this travesty resulting in deaths, and mental and physical trauma of audience members.

Scott and his team had two major responses to the crisis. Firstly, Scott posted a video response to his Instagram a day after the crisis. In the video, Scott shared how he was "devastated by what took place last night" and his prayers for the families of the lost victims. This video received backlash and commentary from the media and news outlets deeming his "apology" insincere and deflecting responsibility. About a month later in December, his team officially released a second statement describing Scott's next steps regarding Astroworld. According to the statement, Travis Scott partnered up with a mental health app, Better Help, to offer a free one-month trial for all the victims of the festival. Additionally, he will pay the costs for the victims' funerals (Mayk, 2021).

Travis Scott and his company failed to successfully handle the crisis due to three major setbacks in the SCCT process. Firstly, Scott's Instagram video was negatively perceived by fans, media, and news sites because viewers found the video insincere, forced, and inconsiderate. In the video, Scott denied responsibility and briefly shared his distress about the incident. The formal statement by his company also faced dissatisfaction from his stakeholders. Many

stakeholders called his collaboration with Better Help a business opportunity to gain incentives rather than aiding the victims. Additionally, in response to his proposed compensations, family members of the victims declined his offer to pay for funerals- calling the offer “demeaning and inappropriate given the magnitude of the tragedy that unfolded,” (Flores, 2021). Travis Scott and his company should have provided a genuine apology that contained accountability for continuing the show despite the crowds’ apparent concerns, inability to provide emergency procedures, and the impact of the lost lives during the concert.

Situational Crisis Communications Theory created by Timothy Coombs (2022) focuses on protecting the reputation of an organization by altering stakeholders’ perceptions through communicative processes (p.193). Every crisis will differ in intensity and determine how much responsibility the affected stakeholders expect the organization to take. Negative perceptions toward the organization can decrease the organization's image, support, and amounts of purchases. There are three steps in SCC; first, the crisis manager must determine if the situation is Victim, Accidental, or Intentional. A Victim crisis implies that the organization is also a victim of the situation. Accidental crises are events that are unintentional or uncontrollable by the organization. Lastly, Intentional crises are when organizations purposely enact or neglect purposeful crisis actions. After evaluating the crisis, the manager must determine if there are other modifiers. Modifiers contain the Crisis History of how the organization dealt with previous crises and the Crisis Severity of the impact of the crisis on stakeholders. Lastly, after accumulating all factors- the crisis manager must evaluate the best crisis response. The three response strategies are Denial, Diminish, and Rebuild. Denial shifts the blame and persuades stakeholders that the organization is not responsible for the issue. In Diminish, organizations claim responsibility for the crisis but use past works and justification to reduce any perceptions

of malicious intent. Lastly, Rebuilding prioritizes victims' concerns, apologizes, and has corrective actions to compensate the victims. However, Coombs (2022) proposes that any crisis response, "should first address the physical safety and psychological well-being of the victims" that were affected by the issue (p. 194). Organizations should prioritize the victim's needs and well-being before any other process.

According to the SCCT theory, Scott did not choose the best crisis responses when evaluating Astroworld. In Scott's initial response, he denied the responsibilities of Astroworld and claimed he was a victim as well. It was only after the backlash that his company declared that Scott would give compensation to the victims. In addition, he did not consider his reputation for enabling crowd violence and previous crowd injuries. For these reasons, Travis' apology seemed ignorant to fans because he dismissed accountability and repeated the same behaviors from his past controversies. As Coombs (2022) describes, an apology should contain "Affective empathy" or an "emotional response to a victim's situation," (p.194). However, Travis objectively talked about the deaths, and denied his impact on the crisis, choosing an incorrect "Denial" response.

The Astroworld crisis was not effectively dealt with because SCCT strategies were conducted incorrectly to alleviate the crisis. The best response strategy for Scott would have been an automatic "Rebuilding" response. The detrimental impact of Astroworld is an extreme crisis that requires an empathetic response that reflects on the events and lives lost. Travis' apology video and statements resulted in repercussions and only negatively affected his brand image. If Travis wanted to deny their influence on the situation, the next best response would be a "Diminish" apology. However, realistically, the Diminish strategy would not have worked efficiently as Scott has a bad reputation regarding crowd safety at his concerts. The ineffective

crisis response stemmed from Scott's apology that lacked empathy and accountability- which caused stakeholders to distrust Scott. All later actions regarding compensation and efforts to fix the solution were disregarded by stakeholders as Scott's image was too negatively perceived to alter or improve his public image.

Effective public relations and crisis management require a deliberately executed communication plan that matches the severity of the crisis. Each step must be intentional, genuine, and considerate of the damage of the crisis. Unlike the strategies used for Astroworld, the crisis manager must consider the Organizer's influence in the crisis, previous history, and what response is necessary according to the intensity of the event. Public relations teams must be thorough with their strategies and tactics to mitigate negative perceptions of the Organization. An effective public relations result requires well-organized statements that include SCCT qualities to preserve the reputation of the organization or artist. By implementing Situational Crisis Communication Theory strategies, an Artist organization can effectively manage crises they may face within their career.

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