

HOW NEWS MEDIA FRAME A CRISIS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NATION-WIDE AND LOCAL NEWS COVERAGE DEALING WITH THE PENN STATE SCANDAL

Jinbong Choi, Sungkonghoe University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to evaluate how news media covered the Penn State scandal through contents analysis of news coverage of the crisis. To conduct this research, four newspapers were selected: The New York Times and The Washington Post as nation-wide newspapers, and Centre Daily Times and Daily Collegian as local newspapers. Overall, 368 news articles were gathered during an approximately one-month time period (November 5, 2011 to December 5, 2011). According to the findings of this study, the coverage of the Penn State scandal was heaviest during the first two weeks of the selected time period and all frames were used most heavily during the beginning of the crisis. Regarding the frames used, all newspapers utilized the attribution of responsibility frame, the human interest frame, and the morality frame predominantly. Additionally, local newspapers claimed Coach Sandusky to be the party most responsible for the scandal, while national newspapers found Penn State University responsible more frequently. All responsible parties overwhelmingly employed silence as a response to the crisis and rarely used the 'accept responsibility' response.

Keywords: Penn State Scandal, Crisis Communication, News Frame, Crisis Party, Crisis Response.

INTRODUCTION

On Saturday, November 5, 2011, a former defensive coordinator of the Penn State Nittany Lion football team was arrested and charged on 40 criminal counts of sexual abuse against young boys between the ages of 8 and 12 across a 15-year time period, on or near Penn State university property (Viera, 2011). The accused coach, Jerry Sandusky, was released on \$100,000 bail on the same day of his arraignment. The boys Sandusky was accused of abusing had all previously been a part of his Second Mile foundation, which he formed in 1977 as a means of assisting needy children from absent or dysfunctional families (Viera, 2011). After proceedings of the investigation, several high-level school officials were charged with perjury, suspended, and/or fired for allegedly covering up the sexual assaults or failing to notify authorities.

The series of developments that took place following this arrest was said to have tarnished the reputation of the previously esteemed Penn State University. Prior to this revelation, the image of Penn State was relatively unblemished. Through decades of academic emphasis, through both the school structure and by way of athletic virtue (led by former head coach Joe Paterno, who had been in the position for 46 years before being fired after the breaking of the sex scandal), the school's façade had come to be one of the most well known and well

respected, in terms of university integrity (Pennington, 2011). This scandal has been covered extensively in the media, from newspaper coverage to television programs. Because of this extensive coverage, it can be seen from a public relations standpoint that this incident has damaged the school's reputation to an indeterminable, yet vast, degree.

The Penn State image was previously one that had been carefully constructed in a positive light, led primarily by former head football coach Joe Paterno, in a manner that best represented the university and its values (Hartman, 2012; Shamokin, 2011; Viera, 2011). The university was one of the most respected, in regards to morality and ethics, in both academia and athletics (Hartman, 2012; Shamokin, 2011; Viera 2011). The initial image damage resulted from the backlash of the news media coverage of the sexual abuse scandal concerning former coach Jerry Sandusky. The continuing reputational damage stemmed from the actions of Penn State after the scandal broke, and the publicizing of those actions by news media. In these actions, the university actively attempted to protect its image before protecting the victims of the sexual abuse (Simoneaux, 2011; Bontemps, 2011; Jenkins, 2011). News media outlets criticized the approach taken, and this further tarnished the university's reputation.

Thus, the primary purpose of this study is to analyze how this damage occurred; specifically, how the news media covered the Penn State crisis. This study focuses on how nation-wide newspapers and local newspapers covered the scandal. By doing so, this study may have several contributions in the field of public relations because the findings from this study aim to benefit public relations practitioners and executives by providing them with tips and advice regarding how to best handle similar crises, should they find their companies, organizations, or universities in a comparable situation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hardin et al. (2007) analyzed the framing methods used by regional and national newspapers between 2002 and 2005 when covering the Title IX law, which guarantees young women access to scholastic sporting opportunities. Title IX was seen as controversial in the sense that requirements of the law would divert money away from "revenue" sports (such as football) as a means to support newly enacted women's athletics. Content analysis of the articles collected and examined during this time frame found that although most stories avoided negative framing devices, stories about the Title IX Commission during 2002 and 2003 more often used negative framing that could perpetuate misunderstanding about the law. Additionally, it was found that the paper size, placement of stories, and reporter gender were significant contributing factors that affected the way stories framed and sourced Title IX coverage.

A study conducted by Bishop (2001) examined the controversy that takes place during the juncture of the construction of a new professional sports stadium. Particularly examined in this research is the key role that print journalists play in these cities where controversy occurs. In this study, the researcher identifies four stages of social drama, as covered by news media: breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration. Breach is identified as what comes of decisions made by team owners and government officials who don't want to see the team franchise move elsewhere; crisis is identified as the result of negative reactions toward plans for the construction of a new stadium. Redressive action sees team/governmental officials and new alliances (built on cooperation between former opponents) attempting, and often failing, to utilize public means to resolve the crisis. The finding of this study suggests that journalists are ultimately the agents of reintegration: these individuals transition from criticizing the decision to

erect new stadiums, to endorsing the projects. What this means is that journalists hold power in terms of swaying public decision in regards to this subject matter.

Gill (2011) analyzed the Rutgers Women's basketball and Don Imus controversy that occurred in 2007, which raised issues of both a racial and sexist nature after radio show host Imus made derogatory remarks about the predominantly African American athletic team. This study analyzed print newspapers, Internet articles, and news magazines, due to the observation that these media can help structure social relations and serve as a foundation of societal ideology. It was found within the collected articles that white privilege, new racism, sexism, and their intersection were the main elements covered in the news media collected.

Research conducted by Walsh & McAllister-Spooner (2011) analyzed the image repair strategies utilized by Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, his sponsors, and the connected organizations after an image of the swimmer allegedly smoking from a marijuana pipe was publicized. As a means of evaluating Phelps' repair campaign, media coverage of the controversy was reviewed and analyzed. It was found that the main areas of focus used by news media concerning this crisis focused on two main topics: 1) poor judgment due to the athlete's young age; and 2) the matter being seen as a trivial mistake, often when compared to athletes taking performance-enhancing drugs. Overall, it was found that media coverage allowed the athlete lenience in his transgressions. Consequently, the repair campaign was seen as a success (Brown, 2012).

Winters (2015) scrutinized athlete Adrian Peterson's attempt to repair his image regarding child abuse allegations after he whipped his son with a switch. To analyze the incident, Winters conducted qualitative content analysis through the media after Peterson was on the receiving end of an immense backlash for his wrongdoing, especially with regard the police reports and media statements that he made during the time span of the incident. As a result, regarding the police reports, he found that Peterson utilized two main image repair strategies: evasion of responsibility and the reduction of offensiveness. He claimed that he did nothing wrong but had good intentions in disciplining his son the way he was raised. However, he employed mortification, reducing offensiveness, evasion of responsibility, and corrective action in the media statements. He did not testify whether the way he disciplined his child was inappropriate until he met a psychologist and after that he recognized that he needed to take corrective action in order to develop or correct the way he disciplines his child.

A study conducted by Len-Ríos (2010) evaluated the image repair strategies employed by Duke University when members of the school's lacrosse team came under fire after being accused of sexual assault at an off-campus party. Len-Ríos (2010) analyzed local newspaper stories on the case according to the crisis stages, which were identified as follows: early (the breaking of the story, the suspension of the lacrosse season); middle (the indictment of the accused players, the resuming of the lacrosse team schedule); and late (the releasing of Duke communications, the conducting of a prime time interview with Duke's president and the unraveling of the prosecutor's case). There were 3 identified main categories for coding: story prominence, which identified a story's importance pertaining to whether it was a front page story or inside page story); theme of story, which was categorized into 8 distinct themes: ethical issues, legal issues, political/administrative issues related to the district attorney, broad societal issues, public reaction, Duke University climate, sports or other; and the portrayal of actors, in which the news stories were coded for whether the actors were portrayed positively, negatively, neutral, or not applicable. It was found that the majority of stories were centered on the theme of legality and the resultant legal issues. Other themes, in order of prevalence, were the political and

district attorney issues, Duke's campus climate, public reaction, ethical issues, broad societal issues, sports, and other. 84.5% of stories about the political and district attorney issues were written in the late stage of the crisis, while 87.8% of the stories about the broad societal issues were addressed at the early and middle stages of the crisis.

Fortunato (2008) also scrutinized the Duke University lacrosse team's sexual assault incident. In particular, he focused on the actions and communication strategies from the university in its attempt to frame the story and restore its fame through the website the university established to handle the incident. Duke University issued press releases, conducted press conferences, and established a website to communicate its perspective on the situation and provide all necessary information to the audience. Additionally, the university admitted that many students were likely involved in the inappropriate incident and, therefore, stopped the season despite them conversely claiming that they were innocent. In particular, the president, Brodhead utilized a letter to the entire Duke community to announce how the university was dealing with the crisis by establishing five specific committees. In addition, the university identified key stakeholder groups such as alumni, current students, their parents, and the general audience and issued separate letters to all of them. Overall, Duke accepted responsibility for the incident and expressed a will to condemn and rectify such behavior.

A study that examined the International Monetary Fund (IMF) intervention in South Korea looked closely at Korean nationalism and how select sports celebrities came to be seen and utilized as iconic figures (Cho, 2008). The two athletes in particular, a baseball player and a golfer, transitionally evolved through media perspective and representation. This study identified 3 ways in which the athletes were covered: 1) the coverage focused on a self-governing individual; 2) that individual being invested with the image of economic success in global competition; and 3) that individual being invested with the image of responsibility for both the family and nation-state at large. This study suggests that the sports celebrities were presented as models for a new type of citizenship; in other words, these individuals were given a status as "*national individuals*" (Cho, 2008).

Research conducted by Mayfield (2002) analyzed the method of information dissemination of the sports information departments at universities, particularly, football organizations. Results from this study suggest that these university departments, *not* public relations professionals, are the primary source of information when it comes to proving information to and keeping up with the demand from newspapers, television, and Internet media outlets. It is suggested that the way for this role to change is for a crisis to develop at a university where a solution is for the sports information contact to assume a managerial role and practice two-way symmetrical communication.

Mason (2002) conducted a study that examined a controversial time period in hockey, in which an unconventional, electric hockey puck was introduced to the sport as a means of drawing new audiences and making the sport more viewer-friendly. The puck was widely vilified by established hockey fans and, ultimately, was short-lived. This study analyzed the reaction the introduction of the puck generated by examining popular media coverage from the time period. The coverage of the puck was overwhelmingly negative, and focused on two main subjects: vilification of the puck and the Fox network, which was responsible for the initiation of the puck; and NHL leaders, who "*allowed*" Fox to change the sport. The coverage of this issue caused the puck to be withdrawn from play, which again illustrates the power of journalism upon controversial subject matters.

Wahlberg (2004) covered the controversial use of Native American identities for athletic team purposes. The controversy peaked in 2001 when it was publicized that a wealthy donor at the University of North Dakota threatened to vanquish a gift of a \$100 million hockey arena if the university abandoned its Fighting Sioux identity. Results from this study suggest that controversies such as this are best analyzed through the news coverage of the respective issue within Steven Fink's four-stage pattern framework of crisis stage analysis: prodromal (forewarning), acute (crisis-triggering event occurs), chronic (organization responds to crisis), and crisis resolution (clear signal of crisis ending).

Research conducted by Bruce & Tini (2008) examined the notion that the relationship between sports and media coverage is unique, in the sense that the majority of messages conveyed in the world of sports is through media coverage, rather than advertising and sales campaigns. This study analyzes how this relationship can take a turn for the worst when high profile scandals occur, and particularly looks into the Australasian men's rugby league salary cap scandal. This scandal was further examined through the collection and analysis of news coverage of the crisis; specifically, how the media reported the events and whether the organization experienced success in controlling the framing of the stories. It was found that the organization demonstrated its lack of public relations knowledge due to its sole reliance upon one media format to disseminate its own information (an Internet website). The news media focused extensively on the organizational management team, explicitly blamed the management team, and demonstrated a strongly critical slant against the organization. These media perspectives reflected those of the public.

Based on the literature regarding sports crisis communication, the following research questions have been developed.

1. RQ1: How many news articles regarding the Penn State scandal were reported per week?
2. RQ2: How many news frames regarding the Penn State scandal were reported per week?
3. RQ3: What types of news frames were used to describe the Penn State scandal?
4. RQ4: Who do the newspapers attribute responsibility for the Penn State scandal to?
5. RQ5: What types of responses were used to portray the Penn State scandal?

METHODOLOGY

Because this study aims to analyze how the news media covered the Penn State scandal, content analysis of news sources was necessary. For the purpose of this study, four newspapers were analyzed: two national newspaper publications, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*; one local newspaper, *The Centre Daily Times*, from University Park, PA, in which Penn State is established; and the Penn State student newspaper, *The Daily Collegian*. Because coverage of this scandal began on November 6, an initial one-month time frame was selected for content analysis. That time frame was from November 5, 2011 to December 5, 2011.

In order to comprehensively assimilate articles from both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, the academic search engine LexisNexis was used. The phrase "*Penn State football scandal*" was entered into the search engine on two separate occasions, for each newspaper, respectively. The results yielded 90 articles from *The New York Times*, and 45 articles from *The Washington Post*, giving a total of 135 articles. After each article was initially previewed, it was determined that one *New York Times* article was a duplicate of an original article, recalculating that total to 89 articles. It was also determined that 3 articles from *The Washington Post* were duplicates, and that 2 of the articles merely mentioned the exact phrase that was searched, but were focused on completely different subject matter. This recalculated the

number of *The Washington Post* articles to a total of 40.

In order to collect articles from the local and campus papers, each respective publication's website was utilized. Again, the phrase "*Penn State football scandal*" was used. These terms were entered into each site's search engine. A total of 83 articles were collected from *The Daily Collegian* (student newspaper), while 156 articles were collected from *The Centre Daily Times* (local newspaper). The grand total of articles collected from all four newspapers was 368 articles.

For this study, the method of analyzing the collected news articles was adapted from An & Gower's (2009) study, which analyzed how news media frame crises. The main frames identified in this study are as follows: 1) human interest frame, which appeals to the emotional aspect of events, issues, and problems; 2) conflict frame, which is utilized to illuminate conflict and disagreement among individuals, groups, or organizations; 3) morality frame, which focuses on the context of morals surrounding the events, problems, or issues at hand; 4) economic frame, which reports the economic effects that an event, problem, or issue can have upon an individual, groups, organizations, or countries; and 5) attribution of responsibility frame, which is utilized when a cause or solution of an issue is attributed to an individual or group. The attribution of responsibility frame is further dissected with the level of responsibility sub-frame, which identifies individual and organizational levels of responsibility. For the purpose of this study, levels of responsibility will be identified in conjunction with the five frames previously identified (An & Gower, 2009).

After adapting the five main frames to be identified, the collected news articles from *The New York Times* were carefully read one by one, in chronological order, in search of prominent news frames being used in each article. *The Washington Post* articles were then examined in the same manner. For the purpose of this study, all identifiable frames within each news article were recorded, in order of prominence within the article. The secondary element that was examined within each news article was the level of responsibility attributed. This was determined by evaluating which Penn State representative was mentioned the most within the article, and the context of which the representative was mentioned in relation to the tone of the article. Sublevels (or other attributed parties) of responsibility were also indicated. Finally, the types of responses from the parties identified by level of responsibility were established. This was determined by examining how the attributed party responded to the accusations or statements being made within the content of the article. The following three types of responses were used for classification purposes in this study: silent, in which the attributed party remains silent or offers no form of response whatsoever within the content of the article; denial, in which the attributed party actively denies the content within the article of which they are being held responsible; and accept responsibility, in which the attributed party acknowledges and accepts responsibility for the content being assigned to them within the news article

RESULTS

The Weekly Quantity of News Articles (RQ1)

Research question one asked how many news articles regarding the Penn State scandal were covered per week. In order to analyze this, the study classified the five weeks based on the date, November 6, 2011, when the coverage of this scandal began.

Table 1 indicates the weekly quantity of news articles about the Penn State scandal published by each analyzed newspaper. It can be inferred from the information in this table that

coverage of the Penn State scandal was heaviest during the first two weeks of the selected time frame. This can be attributed to the constant updating of information about the scandal at the outbreak. It can also be seen that the last week of the time frame produced the least amount of news articles concerning the scandal. This was likely due to the slowing of available information to be publicized.

| Week of article | National newspapers* | | Local newspapers** | | Total |
|-----------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| | Washington Post | New York Times | Daily Collegian (Student newspaper) | Centre Daily Times (Local newspaper) | |
| 11/5-11/11 | 16(40%) | 28(31.5%) | 33(39.8%) | 39(25%) | 116 |
| 11/12-11/18 | 13(32.5%) | 33(37.1%) | 30(36.1%) | 51(32.6%) | 127 |
| 11/19-11/25 | 6(15%) | 17(19.1%) | 3(3.6%) | 31(19.9%) | 57 |
| 11/26-12/2 | 4(10%) | 6(6.7%) | 10(12%) | 23(14.7%) | 43 |
| 12/3-12/9 | 1(2.5%) | 5(5.6%) | 7(8.5%) | 12(7.8%) | 25 |
| Total | 40(100%) | 89(100%) | 83(100%) | 156(100%) | 368 |

Note: *p=0.742, X=1.967 **p=0.000, X=26.651

Overall, the coverage varied from newspaper to newspaper. In terms of national papers, while the Washington Post steadily decreased in its number of weekly quantity of articles, the New York Times increased from week 1 to week 2 (31.5%-37.1%), then decreased for the remainder of the time frame. Locally, the Daily Collegian decreased minimally from week 1 to week 2 (39.8% - 36.1%), then decreased drastically in the middle of the time frame (3.6%), then increased (12%), then decreased (8.5%). On the other hand, the Centre Daily Times' weekly quantity of articles increased from week 1 to week 2 (25% - 32.6%), then steadily decreased for the remainder of the time frame. These differences could potentially be attributed to the varying amount of information that was made available to each publication.

Additionally, it can be observed that the New York Times and the Centre Daily Times publications were able to publish more articles about the scandal than the Washington Post and the Daily Collegian, respectively. This is likely due to the size of the newspapers. Because the New York Times and the Centre Daily Times both have more space to cover news issues, more articles could be published. It can also be seen that the local papers published more articles about the scandal than the national papers. This can be attributed to the proximity element of the news, which influences local papers to produce more stories about the issue, due to the closeness of the public to this particular incident.

The Weekly Quantity of News Frame (RQ2)

Research question two asked how many news frames regarding the Penn State scandal were covered per week. Table 2 indicates the weekly quantity of news frames in all of the analyzed articles on the Penn State scandal. In this table, the number of frames used by newspapers totaled more than the articles published. This is because some of the articles were identified as containing more than one significant frame during content analysis.

It can be inferred from the information in this table that all frames were used most heavily during the beginning of the selected time frame, due to the publication of more articles during that time. Overall, the attribution of responsibility frame (263) was used the most by local and national newspapers. This is very likely due to the nature of the scandal, which caused many of the public to question who was responsible for the incidents. Additionally, the human-interest

frame (251) and morality frame (209) were also used in abundance. This is likely due to journalists' attempts to capture people's attention regarding the incident through emotional coverage. The conflict frame (113) was also used somewhat frequently by journalists, for the purpose of highlighting occurrences of conflict between individuals or parties within the news story. Finally, the economy frame (53) was the least used frame in the analyzed news stories. This is most likely due to the fact that the scandal and its results had little effect on the economy.

| Week of article | News Frames | | | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| | Human Interest frame | Conflict frame | Morality frame | Economic frame | Attribution of responsibility frame |
| 11/5-11/11 | 83(33%) | 33(29.2%) | 77(36.8%) | 11(20.8%) | 92(35%) |
| 11/12-11/18 | 97(38.6%) | 40(35.4%) | 71(34%) | 19(35.8%) | 83(31.6%) |
| 11/19-11/25 | 30(12%) | 12(10.6%) | 28(13.4%) | 10(18.9%) | 36(13.7%) |
| 11/26-12/2 | 25(10%) | 19(16.8%) | 24(11.5%) | 10(18.9%) | 33(12.5%) |
| 12/3-12/9 | 16(6.4%) | 9(8%) | 9(4.3%) | 3(5.6%) | 19(7.2%) |
| Total | 251(100%) | 113(100%) | 209(100%) | 53(100%) | 263(100%) |

News Frames (RQ3)

Research question three centered on the types of news frames utilized by the newspapers to portray the Penn State crisis. Table 3 indicates the news frames found in the analyzed articles of the Penn State scandal, by newspapers. Similar to Table 2, in this table, the number of frames used by newspapers totaled more than the articles published. Again, this is because some of the articles were identified as containing more than one significant frame during content analysis.

| News frames | National newspapers | | Local newspapers | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|------------------|--------------------|
| | Washington Post | New York Times | Daily Collegian | Centre Daily Times |
| Human interest frame | 24(32.4%) | 49(32.9%) | 74(31%) | 108(24.4%) |
| Conflict frame | 0(0%) | 0(0%) | 37(15.5%) | 78(17.6%) |
| Morality frame | 27(36.5%) | 43(28.9%) | 47(19.7%) | 96(21.7%) |
| Economic frame | 1(1.4%) | 7(4.7%) | 18(7.5%) | 29(6.5%) |
| Attribution of responsibility frame | 22(29.7%) | 50(33.5%) | 63(26.3%) | 132(29.8%) |
| Total | 74(100%) | 149(100%) | 239(100%) | 443(100%) |

It can be observed that the number of news frames used by each newspaper corresponds to the amount of articles published. For example, because the Centre Daily Times published the most articles during this time frame (156 articles compared to 89 by the New York Times, 83 by the Daily Collegian, and 40 by the Washington Post), it also used the most frames out of all of the newspapers analyzed.

It can be inferred from the information in this table that the frames most used by each newspaper varied. However, all newspapers used the attribution of responsibility frame, morality frame, and human interest frame the most. This can be attributed to the sensitive nature of the subject. Because this incident was a scandal involving the sexual abuse of children, it had an

emotional and moral impact on many people and there was a subsequent demand to know who was.

At the local level, the Daily Collegian utilized the human-interest frame (31%) most frequently, followed by the attribution of responsibility frame (26.3%). On the other hand, the Centre Daily Times used the attribution of responsibility frame (29.8%) the most, followed by the human-interest frame (24.4%). It is likely that the student paper used the attribution of responsibility frame less than the local paper due to the level of sensitivity attached to the subject. Because the student paper is directly connected to the school, the student journalists could have potentially felt more pressure to not attribute responsibility to certain figures. Overall, both local newspapers relied heavily on these two particular frames. Additionally, both the Centre Daily Times (21.7%) and the Daily Collegian (19.7%) used the morality frame and the conflict frame (17.6% and 15.5%, respectively) somewhat frequently. This is likely due to the questioning of morals among the individuals involved in the scandal, as well as the conflict between parties about who was ultimately responsible for the scandal.

At the national level, the New York Times used the attribution of responsibility frame (33.5%) the most, followed closely by the human-interest frame (32.9%) and the morality frame (28.9%). On the other hand, the Washington Post utilized the morality frame (36.5%) the most, followed by the human-interest frame (32.4%) and the attribution of responsibility frame (29.7%). It is likely that the New York Times used the attribution of responsibility frame more than the Washington Post because of its reputation as a reputable and prestigious publication. Because of this recognition, many people would expect the New York Times to have information about who is responsible for the scandal. The Washington Post's heavy use of the morality frame can be attributed to the publication's history of seeking the moral truth in important and breaking news stories. Neither the New York Times nor the Washington Post were found to use the conflict frame. The frame least used by all newspapers was the economy frame, due to this particular incident having little to do with the economy.

Responsible Parties for the Scandal (RQ 4)

Research question 4 asked who the newspapers assigned responsibility to for the Penn State scandal. Table 4 indicates the parties found to be responsible for the scandal, according to each newspaper. In this table, the number of parties found to be responsible by the newspapers again totaled more than the articles published. This is because some of the articles were identified as indicating more than one responsible party during content analysis.

| Parties claimed responsible in news article | National newspapers | | Local newspapers | | Total |
|---|---------------------|----------------|------------------|--------------------|-------|
| | Washington Post | New York Times | Daily Collegian | Centre Daily Times | |
| Coach Sandusky | 12(16%) | 24(17.3%) | 62(42.5%) | 131(34.1%) | 229 |
| Coach Paterno | 25(33.3%) | 38(27.3%) | 26(17.8%) | 78(20.3%) | 167 |
| Coach McQueary | 6(8%) | 3(2.2%) | 5(3.4%) | 17(4.4%) | 31 |
| Penn State University | 23(30.7%) | 59(42.4%) | 21(14.4%) | 48(12.5%) | 151 |
| PSU President Spanier | 3(4%) | 8(5.8%) | 15(10.3%) | 54(14%) | 80 |
| PSU officials Curley or Schultz | 6(8%) | 6(4.3%) | 16(11%) | 48(12.5%) | 76 |
| Police investigators of 1998 case | 0(0%) | 1(0.7%) | 1(0.6%) | 8(2.2%) | 10 |
| Total | 75(100%) | 139(100%) | 146(100%) | 384(100%) | 744 |

It can be inferred from the information in this table that the party most responsible for the scandal was Coach Sandusky, according to the analyzed newspapers. While this is the case, it can also be inferred from the table that the local papers found Coach Sandusky (Daily Collegian: 42.5%; Centre Daily Times: 34.1%) to be responsible more frequently than the national papers (New York Times: 17.3%; Washington Post: 16%). This difference in responsibility attribution is likely due to the proximity element of the news. Because the local papers are closer to the scandal, they are more likely to attribute responsibility directly to the source of the incident, rather than other figures that had less to do with the scandal.

On the other hand, the national papers found Penn State University (New York Times: 42.4%; Washington Post: 30.7%) responsible more frequently than the local papers (Daily Collegian: 14.4%; Centre Daily Times: 12.5%). This is likely due to the local papers' reluctance to bring responsibility to the school itself, and consequently tarnish the school's reputation.

Additionally, the national newspapers found Coach Paterno (New York Times: 27.3%; Washington Post: 33.3%) to be responsible more frequently than the local papers (Daily Collegian: 17.8%; Centre Daily Times: 20.3%). Because the local papers had such a high regard for Coach Paterno, these publications were less likely to hold him responsible. Penn State President Spanier and Penn State officials Curley and/or Schultz were also labeled responsible somewhat frequently by the newspapers. This can be attributed to the level of responsibility that is assumed to be had by these individuals as university representatives.

Last, Coach McQueary and the police investigators of the 1998 case were found to be least responsible for the scandal by all analyzed papers. This is likely due to the minimum amount of involvement that both parties had to do with the crisis.

Types of Responses for the Scandal (RQ5)

Research question five asked what types of responses to the crisis were reported by the newspapers. Table 5 indicates the types of responses given by the parties claimed as responsible for the scandal.

| Response for the crisis | National newspapers* | | Local newspapers** | | Total |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| | Washington Post | New York Times | Daily Collegian (Student newspaper) | Centre Daily Times (Local newspaper) | |
| Silent | 34(85%) | 77(86.5%) | 80(96.4%) | 141(90.4%) | 332 |
| Denial | 4(10%) | 9(10.1%) | 2(2.4%) | 12(7.7%) | 27 |
| Accept responsibility | 2(5%) | 3(3.4%) | 1(1.2%) | 3(1.9%) | 9 |
| Total | 40(100%) | 89(100%) | 83(100%) | 156(100%) | 368 |

Note: *p=0.906, X=0.197 **p=0.299, X=3.672

Using the information given in Table 5, it can be inferred that all parties overwhelmingly used silence as a response to the crisis, at both the local (Daily Collegian: 96.4%; Centre Daily Times: 90.4%) and national (New York Times: 86.5%; Washington Post: 85%) level. This can be attributed to the fact that all parties were reluctant to accept responsibility for a scandal as sensitive and damaging as this particular one. As a result, these individuals/entities remained silent.

The next most common form of response used by parties said to be responsible was the denial response, though it was used minimally at both the local (Daily Collegian: 2.4%; Centre

Daily Times: 7.7%) and national (New York Times: 10.1%; Washington Post: 10%) level. This is likely due to the parties' needs to publicly reject the responsibility that is being placed on them for this scandal and proclaim their innocence. Because of the damaging elements of this crisis, it is more likely that those choosing to respond to the scandal would deny any responsibility.

Finally, the response of accepting responsibility was the least used overall, at both the local (Daily Collegian: 1.2%; Centre Daily Times: 1.9%) and national (New York Times: 3.4%; Washington Post: 5%) level. This can be attributed to the fact that all involved parties were reluctant to accept responsibility for a scandal as negative as this. When responsibility was accepted, it was on a very minimal level, as evidenced by the information in the table.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research is to analyze how newspapers covered the Penn State scandal and to provide pertinent advice on how public relations professionals can best cope with similar crises in the future based on the findings of this study.

News coverage of the scandal was found to be most frequently reported 1-2 weeks after the incident occurred. It showed that the coverage was heaviest in the initial time frame of a crisis because the media often takes great interest in scandals or crises (Barnett, 1990; Rowe, 1999), and people tend to seek information about the crisis and evaluate the cause of the incident and the accountability of the organization for the crisis through the news coverage portrayed about the crisis (An & Gower, 2009). Additionally, the way in which the news media covers a certain crisis can influence the public's perception and impression of the organization (Coombs, 2006). It means that public relations practitioners can influence the larger general audience by providing information to the press about how promptly and honestly they are dealing with the crisis at the initial stage.

Meanwhile, the quantity of news coverage was shown to be different according to the newspapers; this can be attributed to different levels of newsworthiness perceived by local and national newspapers. In other words, local newspapers can report much more regarding the case due to the high impact and proximity to the public in certain areas. Furthermore, university departments are the major source of information for certain information (Mayfield, 2002). It indicates that not only public relations staff, but also members of university departments, can play crucial roles in crisis situations.

All frames were also heaviest in the initial phase of the crisis. Overall, the attribution of responsibility frame was utilized the most while the human interest frame and morality frame were also used frequently. This is similar to the findings of Leo-Rios's (2010) analysis of the Duke University's sexual assault scandal. In his research, the news media also emphasized the attribution of responsibility frame the most by focusing on the legal issues. This occurred because people tend to seek the causes and involved parties when facing crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2004), and the news media tend to assign the responsibility for the crisis to individuals or organizations. Also, the news frame of the crisis depends on the type of crisis; in particular, the human interest frame is mainly utilized in victim cluster news (An & Gower, 2009). Similarly, it also found that the human interest frame was used frequently in this research because there were young victims due to the nature of the sexual abuse.

Regarding the news frames, it was found that the attribution of responsibility, human interest and morality frames were utilized predominantly by the newspapers. According to An & Gower (2009), the news media are much likely to concentrate on the attribution of responsibility for crises when there is strong controllability and intentionality of actors. They also insisted that

the matter of crisis responsibility may depend on how the media portray a crisis. For example, the attribution of responsibility, human interest, and morality frames are related to the individual level of responsibility, whereas the economic frame is involved at the organizational level of responsibility. Therefore, with crises involving individuals, they tend to primarily describe morality issues or personal stories and emotional information which stimulate the senses. With regard to the Penn State scandal, the level of individual responsibility frame was also highlighted.

On the other hand, the result of Gill (2011) was opposite although it was a crisis caused by personal mistakes. Regarding the Don Imus controversy, the news media framed the societal ideologies – such as white privilege, new racism, and sexism – rather than an individual level of responsibility. Bishop (2001) and Mason (2002) also insisted that the news coverage can influence public opinion. News coverage has the power to change the public's decision about the construction of a stadium (Bishop, 2001) or withdraw an electronic hockey puck from the field of sport (Mason, 2002). Those results indicated that news frames have the power not only to help identify and resolve the issues but also contribute to create public opinion (Knight, 1999). It shows that public relations specialists should design press releases in order to diminish an organization's image degradation by framing its messages and using appropriate terminology and vocabulary.

Regarding the responsible parties for the scandal, Coach Sandusky was marked as the responsible party predominantly by the local newspapers, while the national newspapers frequently attributed the responsibility for the scandal to the university. The local newspapers judged that Sandusky was greatly responsible for the crime, whereas the national newspapers found that the university failed not only to adequately supervise the coach but also to sufficiently protect children from the sexual abuse. According to An & Gower (2009), if a representative of an organization committed any wrongful acts, the news media emphasized the individual level of responsibility, while if the actor is an employee, the news media assigned the organization the accountability of the crisis. However, the result of this study differed according to the size of the newspapers. It means that the size of the newspapers is a substantial contributing element that affects the way stories are framed and sourced in news coverage (Hardin et al., 2007).

Meanwhile, Penn State University tried to conceal the situation by not notifying authorities in spite of knowing about the scandal through its own investigation. Also, the university defended its officials and its reputation rather than taking substantial actions to protect the child victims. The way Penn State University managed the crisis was not a success when compared to the Duke officials' treatment. The president of Duke University immediately held a press conference and actively responded by opening the online community when the rape scandal of the lacrosse team occurred (Fortunato, 2008; Jin et al., 2010). Additionally, he conducted different message strategies to each section of the public, students, their parents, and alumni, in order to prevent damage of their belonging and identity as a member of the university. For those efforts, Fortunato (2008) evaluated that Duke attempted to frame positive stories. Consequently, those results have shown that public relation professionals should try to portray the positive aspects of an organization's crisis responses in the media coverage.

With regard to crisis responses, all responsible parties related to the scandal excessively remain. They have pleaded innocence or used the denial response heavily, and the acceptance of responsibility response was rarely utilized. The results of this study appeared in Gill (2011) and Winters's (2015). Don Imus, who made insulting remarks about the Rutgers University basketball team players, claiming that "*nappy-headed ho's*" was used in the black community first when he received immense backlash for his offensive remarks (Gill, 2011). Peterson also

failed to restore his image by predominantly using an evasion of responsibility response for the abuse to his son even though he utilized the modification response together, which was the most effective as an images repair strategies (Borden, 2012). As a result, he has lost six sponsors and was suspended without pay for the remainder of the season (Winters, 2015).

On the other hand, Phelps succeeded in his image restoration for the marijuana controversy by sincerely acknowledging and apologizing for his mistakes (Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). The apology strategy is a very common and effective method of defending athletes (Kruse, 1981). His prompt and appropriate apology was well received by his sponsors and organizations, even by the media. They expressed a desire to continue sponsoring him, and the media also reported that his mistake was trivial when compared to cases in which performance-enhancing drugs are used. Of course, this result was also because he is an icon and is both a regional and national sports hero. Walsh & McAllistr-Spooner (2011) argued that Phelps' sponsors seem to benefit more by standing by him. Similar to this, Cho (2008) found that national athletes who have become globally competitive in sports become a new type of model to represent the nation, such as in periods of economic difficulty in South Korea. In short, the generosity of the sports hero can contribute positively to the management of companies and organizations and even development the identity of countries. Overall, these studies showed that initial and rapid responses to crises and the attitude to athletes can affect news frames.

Public relations practitioners usually play an important role in establishing and improving favorable relationships with key stakeholders and the general public. However, when encountering a crisis, their roles are very limited because they do not know everything about the crisis. In this regard, the roles of public relations staff are like a double-edged sword. Based on the findings of this research, we suggest practical implications for public relations professionals and executives to minimize the damage from similar crises.

Above all, public relations practitioners should know that the initial response plays a crucial role in a crisis situation. In other words, the risk may spread or be reduced depending on the initial crisis response. According to this research, the news coverage related to the scandal was reported most frequently in the first 1-2 weeks after the incident occurred, and the news frame was also used frequently in the initial phases. Those results showed the importance of the initial response. In other words, the news frame can be determined by the initial statement, and it can influence audiences' perception of crises and impression of the responsible party. Thus, when encountering similar crises, one should never attempt to avoid the crisis or reduce it. Rather, organizations must show that they are willing to pay attention to the crisis and resolve it by making a strong commitment that corresponds to the fact in a timely and efficient manner.

Furthermore, the individuals or organizations should quickly accept responsibility for their part in a scandal, if they are indeed involved. This should be done in order to indicate that the responsible individuals/parties are aware of their wrongdoing and have genuine intentions to apologize for and explain their actions. However, the finding of this study showed that the silent response was the most used, and the accept responsibility response is hardly seen. The attribution of responsibility frame is the most used frame in crises studies. It means that acknowledging responsibility for a crisis is very important. In particular, issuing a sincere apology is an effective way to minimize business losses and the defamation of individuals and organizations in the long-term. Thus, practitioners should encourage the responsible parties to apologize for their role in a scandal in a timely manner, if they are found to be responsible.

Public relations specialists should also maintain a flexible relationship with other departments. According to the results of this study, local papers tend to cover scandals on a

larger scale, when compared to national papers. It indicates that local newspapers can deal with diverse topics because of the physical proximity, and consequently, sources of information can be varied. In other words, particular publications can be scrutinized more in-depth. Unfortunately, the role of public relations practitioners is very limited during severe or urgent crisis situations because other departments tend to be major sources of information for the press (Mayfield, 2002). It is not easy, however, for all employees in every department of the institution to have expertise in PR. If specific information were provided without verification, the crisis may be considerably negatively affected. Therefore, public relation practitioners should provide truthful and correct information to the media by cooperating with other departments.

Regarding the news frame, emotionally targeted frames are used most in scandals similar to this, and those frames are likely to focus on personal stories. Of course it is important to offer explanations for situations where the public will be invested in the moral elements of a news story, such as on this occasion. On the contrary, there are potential possibilities of the offenders' or victims' rights being infringed upon. For example, when the personal information of a sexual molestation victim is made known to the public, it may cause secondary damage such as psychological trauma and defamation. Therefore, care should be taken when dealing with personal information, in particular, in cases of sexual abuse casualties.

The crisis responses should be fulfilled at the organizational level even if the incident is caused by one individual. An institution consists of not only an organization itself but also its diverse members on a larger scale. It means that the Penn State scandal was simply not just a problem for the individuals involved in but for the overall organization. This is because just like the honor of an individual can enhance the reputation of the institution, personal mistakes can ultimately disgrace the entire organization. It can be seen that the university and its figures were found to be responsible for this incident, even though they were not directly involved. Consequently, practitioners in a similar situation in the future should encourage organization representatives to be truthful and respond to scandals quickly in order to avoid image damage during an extended time period, as was the case with this situation.

Moreover, in the process of managing a crisis, the victims should be protected first in any crisis situations. Unfortunately, the Penn State officials were first accused of concealing Sandusky's serious crimes. There were rarely any attempts made to try to cope with the scandal correctly although the university authorities had received previous complaints about Sandusky. To make matter worse, the state police instructed a mother of a child victim not to speak with a journalist to cover up the sexual abuse. In doing so, Penn State University enabled Sandusky to keep molesting children for so long. As a result, the university missed numerous opportunities to prevent other child abuse, and children were ultimately not protected from further harm. The number of victims increased, and they struggled with the sexual abuse for a long time. It is very important to protect socially vulnerable groups against sexual abuse, in particular, in cases like those caused by an abuse of power such as in Sandusky's scandal. Taking care of the weak is the more appropriate way to minimize the damage from a crisis as well as to preserve its positive reputation and finances rather than bolstering the officials.

CONCLUSION

Recently the concept of image repair for sports organizations and athletes is becoming more important as popularity as well as media coverage of troubled athletes increases. Negative media coverage can affect the management of the organization as well as significantly damage its reputation and popularity. It can be seen that sports organizations should understand how to

improve and defend their favorable prestige. In this respect, this study provides valuable messages for public relations specialists to cope with similar crises in the future. It may apply to not only athletes but also CEOs, public officials, actors, and others who face the tarnishing of their image.

The practical implication of this research is that organization representatives to be truthful and respond to a crisis as quickly as possible in order to avoid image damage when they are facing a crisis. Another practical implication of this study is issuing a sincere apology is an effective way to minimize the reputational damage of organizations and the defamation of individuals and organizations in the long-term.

However, it still possesses a few limitations. This study evaluated how the news media framed the Penn State scandal, who was responsible for the crisis and how they responded to it. For these reasons, it is difficult to ascertain precisely how people felt and what their reaction to the scandal was. Hence, further research is needed to ascertain the public perception of the crisis communication conducted by the organization. In doing so, we can understand how the news media frame a crisis and also how the audience recognize the crisis as a whole. Also, as this study analyzed news coverage during only a one-month time span after the initial breaking of the news, it was seen to be difficult to evaluate the changes of the crisis management in general. Thus, future research is needed to measure the whole time span of a crisis. In doing so, we can figure out how individuals or organizations manage crises and learn lessons through the process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by the Sungkonghoe University Research Grant of 2019.

REFERENCES

- An, S., & Gower, K. (2009). How do the news media frame crises? A content analysis of crisis news coverage. *Public Relations Review*, 35, 107-112.
- Barnett, S. (1990). *Games and sets: The changing face of sport on television*. London: BFI Publishing.
- Bishop, R. (2001). If you build it, we won't leave: Turner's social drama in newspaper coverage of stadium construction controversies. *Journalism Studies*, 2, 373-392.
- Bontemps, T. (2011). A State of disaster Paterno under scrutiny in wake of scandal. *New York Post*.
- Borden, S.L. (2012). Press apologies: A new paradigm for the new transparency? *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 27(1), 15-30.
- Brown, K.A. (2012). *Off the field- an empirical examination of the impact of athlete transgressions and response strategy on the image repair and crisis communication process*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Alabama.
- Bruce, T., & Tini, T. (2008). Unique crisis response strategies in sports public relations: Rugby league and the case for diversion. *Public Relations Review*, 34, 108-115.
- Cho, Y. (2008). The national crisis and de/reconstructing nationalism in South Korea during the IMF intervention. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 9(1), 82-96.
- Coombs, W.T., & Holladay, S.J. (2004). Reasoned action in crisis communication: An attribution theory-based approach to crisis management. In D. P. Millar & R. L. Heath (Eds.), *Responding to crisis communication approach to crisis communication* (pp. 95-115). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fortunato, J.A. (2008). Restoring a reputation: The Duke University lacrosse scandal. *Public Relations Review*, 34, 116-123.
- Gill, E. (2011). The Rutgers women's basketball & Don Imus controversy (RUIMUS): White privilege, new racism, and the implications for college sport management. *Journal of Sport Management*, 25, 118-130.
- Hardin, M., Simpson, S., Whiteside, E., & Garris, K. (2007). The gender war in U.S. sport: Winners and losers in news coverage of Title IX. *Mass Communication & Society*, 10(2), 211-233.
- Hartman, S. (2012). Paterno was legend as coach and person. *Star Tribune*.

- Jenkins, H.W. (2011). No Business for Old Men. *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, p. 13.
- Jin, Y., Park, S., & Len-Rios, M.E. (2010). Strategic communication of hope and anger: A case of Duke University's conflict management with multiple publics. *Public Relations Review*, 36, 63-65.
- Knight, M.G. (1999). Getting past the impasse: Framing as a tool for public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 17, 27-36.
- Len-Ríos, M. (2010). Image repair strategies, local news portrayals and crisis stage: A case study of Duke University's lacrosse team crisis. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 4, 267-287.
- Mason, D. (2002). Get the Puck Outta here: Media transnationalism and Canadian identity. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 26(2), 140-167.
- Mayfield, J.T. (2002). *Public relations and college football: A survey of sports information directors*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. (AAT 1410864).
- Pennington, B. (2011). Penn state scandal shakes the happy valley family to roots. *The New York Times*.
- Rowe, D. (1999). *Sport, culture and the media: The unruly trinity*. Buckingham, PA: Open University Press.
- Shamokin, P. (2011). Only Fats Will Replace Hysteria in PSU Scandal. *The News – Item*.
- Simoneaux, L. (2011). *Good people stand up when they see wrong*. The Herald.
- Viera, M. (2011). A Sex Abuse Scandal Rattles Penn State's Football Program. *The New York Times*.
- Wahlberg, D. (2004). Ending the debate: Crisis communication analysis of one university's American Indian athletic identity. *Public Relations Review*, 30, 197-203.
- Walsh, J., & McAllister-Spooner, S. (2011). Analysis of the image repair discourse in the Michael Phelps controversy. *Public Relations Review*, 37, 157-162.
- Winters, R. (2015). Image repair and crisis response of professional athlete Adrian Peterson. *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, 6(2), 16-23.