
Public Relations Theory & Practice: Analysis Of College Admissions Bribery Scandal

This essay will discuss the 2019 College Admissions Bribery Scandal, also known as Operation Varsity Blues, in relation to two public relations theories: the framing theory used by media and public relations practitioners and the rhetoric theory to persuade the public. Within the essay, there will be assertions to where framing is used by public relations advisors to repair students' reputations damaged by their involvement in the scandal. Further, the essay will draw on the utilisation of rhetoric theory used by colleges involved in the scandal to persuade stakeholders and publics within their statements.

The 2019 College Admission Bribery Scandal is the largest-ever college admissions scandal, believed to have begun in 2011 involving eight elite colleges including Stanford University and Yale University (Atkinson & Sukin 2019). Made public in March 2019, US Federal Prosecutors charged 50 parents, but approximated 750 families involved in cheating on standardised tests and bribing college coaches to accept students (Fieldstadt 2019). Those facing charges include parents, athletic coaches, exam proctors, SAT/ACT administrators, college administrators, and William Singer CEO college prep company, The Key. Singer assisted the wealthiest parents get their kids into elite colleges and was paid “ \$25 million to bribe coaches and university administrators”, the Department of Justice said (Durkin 2019). Singer's misconduct included bribing exam administrators to allow someone else to take the exam in the students place or bribing proctors to fix the students' wrong answers. Singer also had children fake learning disabilities so that they would be able to take the tests at facilities where staff had been bribed (Levenson 2019). Additionally, Singer bribed college coaches saying students should be accepted because they were a recruit for the sports team, but Singer and the coaches knew that the student was not a competitive player and that their athletic profile was fake. During a hearing, Singer pleaded guilty to charges, 'I created a side door that would guarantee families would get in,' (Durkin 2019).

Framing theory relates to the ability to derive specific outcomes through the manipulation of messages through the selection of language, facts, visuals or themes (Van Der Meer, Verhoeven & Beentjes et al. 2014). In the media, framing attempts to shape the perspective through which people interpret information, which in-turn influences the attitudes and behaviours that people form in response to the coverage of certain issues (Johnston & Sheehan 2014). Framing involves placing neutral information into a certain field of meaning. The senders of the information, often publicists or journalists, decide how they want audiences to perceive the message and then constructs communication to focus on a specific angle (Calabrese 2016). The purpose is to encourage audiences to perceive information in a certain way as it allows message constructors to control how the issue is perceived and understood by audiences.

Framing is used in various aspects of public relations; what we consider 'reality' depends on the frames employed by the media (Johnston & Sheehan 2014). For example, a brand may decide to place a product in two frames: a positive frame; the product has been proven effective in 90% cases, or a negative frame; the product has failed on 1 out of every 10 cases. Given the power of the media in setting the public agenda, how topics are framed impacts how we know what we know about the world (Edwards 2009). Framing can be observed in the scandal in

practices from news media to public relations officers hired to assist with student reputations. Media outlets framed the scandal differently, impacting how readers understood the topic and influenced their attitudes towards it based on what they consumed. Media outlets with a sympathetic framing approach to the scandal included Washington Post's "Their parents dragged them into the college bribery scandal. Can a PR expert pull these kids out?" or Bloomberg's "Don't Punish the Students for the Parents' Sins" (Veith 2019). Whereas media websites such as CNN's "Cheat.Bribe.Lie" or Huffington Post's "Elite College Admissions Scandal Shows Irony Of Affirmative Action Complaints" display negative frames that led to the re-birth of the injustices of white privilege (Levenson 2019).

Media depictions of the scandal led to the recognition of the widening corruption of elite college admissions through the steady application of wealth combined with fraud. Juda Engelmayer president of HeraldPR told The Washington Post that whether or not students were complicit of the bribery, "their lives are headline-inducing messes... some kids are guilty only by association and should not pay for the sins of the parents," (Roberts 2019). Retained by two families, including an Ivy League senior with great grades whom no one wants to hire. "He's been rejected at job after job," Engelmayer says, "because when you do a Google search on him, the first thing that comes up ... is his dad paid off somebody at the school," (Roberts 2019). Using framing fundamentals to distance students from the criminal activities of the parents, Engelmayer's solution is online reputation management and search engine optimisation. Engelmayer frames the student, so if someone searches them they will first discover their achievements, hobbies and charitable work prior to discovering association with the scandal. The online framing begins with removing the students name from the parents Wikipedia pages or any media mentions, then 'tidying' the student's social media as "deleting everything online looks suspicious", said Engelmayer (Roberts 2019). Engelmayer finds positive details in the students' lives that can be emphasised and creates new websites. This way the first entries that appear during an online search are sites full of photos and well-written material with the idea of pushing the scandal further down in the online search. Most average prospective employers do not look past the first two pages, but if the student "want(s) to work on Wall Street ...they need to create a compelling online case for themselves...the places they're looking at are doing fine-tooth-comb searches," Engelmayer said (Roberts 2019). After the first few search pages there is a better sense of the student's identity, not what the parent did. The process of search optimisation demonstrates that framing is not only about how the media presents news, but how framing is a reconstruction from various angles of a small section of reality (Van Der Meer, Verhoeven & Beentjes et al. 2014).

The rhetoric theory focuses on the role that information plays in shaping knowledge, opinions and motivating actions. Heath describes rhetoric as "the ability to create opinions that influence how people...think about their society and organisations..." (2009). Closely associated with rhetoric, persuasion aims to create, modify or reinforce people's beliefs, attitudes or behaviours (Johnston & Sheehan 2014). As proposed by Aristotle, there are three ways that persuasion occurs in audiences: ethos, pathos and logos (Johnston & Sheehan 2014). Ethos appeals to ethics, relating to the character and credibility of the persuader. Pathos appeals to emotion, which is essential if the persuader intends for their message to produce action. Finally, logos appeals to reason- to be effective in persuasion, messages require logical reasoning to support arguments.

The use of the rhetoric theory to persuade audiences is fundamental to the practice of public relations.

Rhetoric theory can help public relations account for the symbolic aspects of communication, which are the heart of public relations activity (Edwards 2009). Examples of the use of rhetoric to persuade the public include Government Health Campaigns, in which the campaign sends a message to audiences persuading them to change their behaviour (like receiving a vaccination) using tactics such as emotive language (pathos), doctors (ethos) and facts (logos). Months after the discovery of Operation Varsity Blues, colleges are still under extreme scrutiny from those who work in media, parents and current students. In the wake of the scandal, involved colleges released statements acknowledging the accusations across various platforms such as social media, television and in media statements as “organisations must therefore release timely and effective responses to criticisms if they wish to maintain a positive reputation and prevent further damage to their image”, (Lai 2012 p.11).

Operation Varsity Blues has caused the public to question the fairness and validity of the admissions process and specifically about whether the SAT is as secure as it should be. According to The New York Times, Georgetown University, the University of San Diego, the University of Southern California, Stanford University, the University of Texas at Austin, Yale University, Wake Forest University and the University of California, Los Angeles were convicted. With the goal of repairing a damaged reputation, “organisations must issue public acknowledgements that are capable of persuading stakeholders (and publics) to reinstate their trust in them,” (Lai 2012). The rhetoric theory became a key aspect for the colleges’ public statements that reacted to the news and addressed the scandal. Although each college released public statements the following day, the University of Southern California and Georgetown University are the main focus of how the colleges’ used principles of the rhetoric theory to persuade and shape the way the public felt about the scandal (Appendix 1 & 2).

The University of Southern California (USC) released their statement via social media and USC News website. To be effective in persuading readers, the statement’s caption includes that it was written by USC President Wanda M. Austin (Appendix 1). This appeals to ethos, as the USC President is a highly credible and trustworthy source to gather information from due to his status as President and involvement with the college. Pathos is utilised within the statement to create emotional responses through the use of emotive language such as “criminal”, “believes” and “alleged”. As well as these emotive, loaded uses of language, the use of “we” is a strong appeal to pathos. Personal pronouns like “we” are used to make readers feel like part of a group or inspired to take collective action. This can be empowering for the reader, as they are not left as a bystander with no stake in the issue, and are therefore encouraged to take action. Compared to statements by Georgetown University or Wake Forest University, USC does not effectively appeal to logos, as there is no attempt made to appeal to reason through the use of facts, statistics or evidence. For example, Wake Forest University appealed to logos through the use of evidence that it had “retained outside legal counsel to further investigate the charges against head volleyball coach Bill Ferguson while he is placed on administrative leave.” Through the careful construction of the statement, USC used elements of rhetoric to create emotional appeal, while appearing credible in relation to their involvement.

Georgetown University released a letter via social media that was much more in-depth and transparent than other colleges’ (Appendix 2). The statement was written by Vice President and General Counsel Lisa Brown and Vice President and Senior Advisor to the President Erik Smulson. Similarly, the letter appeals to ethos as the statement-makers are highly credible and trustworthy due to their status within the university. It’s also interesting to note that this is the only statement made concurrently and that this could potentially elevate ethos due to the

inclusion of two sources. Although the letter uses personal pronouns such as “we”, it’s the statements like “we were deeply troubled to learn”, “criminal acts against the University” or “Mr. Ernst’s alleged actions are shocking”, “highly antithetical to our values” are emotive. The use of language helps depict Georgetown as a victim of misconduct, which connects to the public’s beliefs that they are victims of the widening corruption of elite college admissions. It is also important to note that the statement was formatted as a letter, which is more inclusive and personal, which makes readers feel as if they are being personally addressed. This interconnects with how the appeal to logos is with strength. By opening with “Earlier today, we were deeply troubled to learn that former Tennis Coach, Gordon Ernst..”, evidence is provided about who is directly involved. By providing evidence and timelines about Ernst’s involvement, the statement appeals to logos by using facts and evidence to appeal to reason of Georgetown involvement. Georgetown’s letter is effective in persuading audiences of their victim status as it effectively frames Georgetown as a victim of staff misconduct through the use of the rhetoric elements.

Operation Varsity Blues laid bare the elaborate lengths that some wealthy parents will go to get their children into America’s most elite universities, the media played a role in how colleges, students and parents responded to the public scrutiny. The use of framing was carried out by the media and practitioners to shape the way the public viewed Operation Varsity Blues. This shows that the use of framing has allowed, to a certain extent, the lives of students to be reconstructed, but the lives of the parents’ to be defined by the bribery in which they partook in. Through the use of rhetoric theory to persuade the public, the elements of ethos, pathos and logos were crucial in the public statements made by colleges’ to ensure that stakeholders and public reinstated trust in them. Although colleges have ensured that their application programs have been improved since, as the media states; the scandal highlights the widening privilege of wealthy families.