‘How could anyone have predicted that #AskJameis would go horribly wrong?’ public relations, social media, and hashtag hijacking

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how a Twitter public relations campaign was hijacked by audiences through an investigation of the #AskJameis campaign employed by Florida State University (FSU). A thematic analysis of 1214 tweets revealed that the hashtag was hijacked through audience members mocking and criticizing both FSU and Jameis Winston. The results suggest that PR professionals must account for the anticipated “pulse” of the audience before launching campaigns on social media. Underestimating the capabilities of the active social media audience can further exacerbate crisis situations, suggesting that at times, not using social media is a more effective public relations practice. © 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The advent of social media has opened up additional avenues for organizations to engage in two-way dialogue with a variety of stakeholders (Chewning, 2015; Men & Tsai, 2014). As organizations cultivate dialogue with stakeholders via social media, this interaction can mitigate damage during crisis and encourage stakeholders to prolong relationships (Men & Tsai, 2014). Whereas these outcomes are certainly positive, organizations also have less control over public relations campaigns and narratives that are conducted on social media (Ott & Theunissen, 2015; Wan, Kah, Ong, & Pang, 2015). Thus, even well-intentioned public relations efforts disseminated on social media can quickly stray from the intended goal as multiple voices contribute to and shift narratives in unfavorable directions for the organization (Chewning, 2015; DiStaso, Vafeiadis, & Amaral, 2015; Theunissen, 2014).

The capability for audiences to engage in these behaviors suggests that public relations professionals need to be attuned to the “pulse” of the social media audience, to avoid elevating current crises or creating one. That is, public relations professionals should consider how the larger social media audience is likely to react to the campaign, how audiences have reacted to similar initiatives by other organizations, and what historical and relational factors could prompt audience members to take the campaign in undesirable directions. Theunissen (2014) challenged scholars to attend to the implications arising from the co-creational corporate identity that occurs through digital dialogue. This research begins to take up that call by focusing on
how an invitation of dialogue via Twitter quickly created a crisis for Florida State University (FSU). Specifically, on August 10, 2014, the official FSU football Twitter account sent the following message, “#Nosels Fans: Do you have a question for our starting QB Jameis Winston? Tweet us using #AskJameis” (2014). Although making athletes accessible to fans via Twitter and dialoguing with audiences are both generally seen as a viable public relations strategies for sport organizations (Sanderson, 2011), the circumstances and controversy surrounding Winston’s legal issues made the success of the campaign dubious from the onset. Specifically, in December 2012, Winston was accused of raping a female FSU student (Vaughan, 2014a), although Winston was not charged due to lack of evidence (Schlabach, 2013). In addition to this rape allegation, Winston also had experienced two other legal issues. First, in July 2013, Winston was accused of drinking soda from a water cup at a campus-area Burger King (thus, consuming the soda without paying for it), followed by a Tallahassee Publix grocery store accusing Winston of stealing crab legs in August 2014. Winston indicated that he “forgot” to pay for the crab legs and was given a citation and ordered to perform community service although he was temporarily suspended from the Florida State baseball team (Vaughan, 2014a). Against this backdrop, it is not altogether surprising that the #AskJameis campaign quickly spiraled out of control and escalated into a crisis.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Social media and sport

In the contemporary sport landscape, essentially every professional sport organization operates at least one social media account, as do most amateur organizations, particularly in the realm of North American intercollegiate athletics. Prominent athletes such as Lance Armstrong, Curt Schilling, and Shaquille O’Neal were early adopters of social media technologies (Sanderson, 2011) which has contributed to fans flocking to social media platforms to obtain messages directly from athletes. As the number of athletes adopting social media has increased, fans are subjected to more diversity with athletes’ personalities, which have produced public relations incidents for sport organizations. For example, in May 2011, after the death of Osama bin Laden was publicly announced, National Football League (NFL) player Rashard Mendenhall of the Pittsburgh Steelers sent out several tweets questioning the public celebration over the death, while also insinuating that the U.S. government was involved in carrying out the September 11, 2011, terrorist attacks against the United States (Pompei, 2011).

While athletes create public relations issues for sport organizations based on the content of their messages, other organizational personnel also can trigger public relations incidents via social media. For instance, in March 2015, University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Associate Athletic Director Jeff Darby apologized after he sent tweets from the official men’s basketball Twitter account criticizing one of the UTEP players (2015). In another example, in November 2014, ESPN personality Bill Simmons lambasted fellow ESPN employees Mike Greenberg and Mike Golic via Twitter, after they made critical comments about him on their radio show. These incidents arguably had harmful intention behind them, yet in some cases, and just as with other entities, sport organizations may experience public relations issues on social media through well-intended actions. For instance, in May 2014, the Baltimore Ravens live-tweeted the press conference of its then-player Ray Rice, who had been the subject of public scorn following a domestic violence incident. Plausibly in an effort to provide transparency, the Ravens tweeted out some of Rice’s comments, which included unfortunate remarks about “getting knocked down and getting back up.” Not surprisingly, the Ravens came under heavy criticism for live-tweeting the press conference (Van Biber, 2014). Although the capability to engage fans via social media is generally heralded as a positive outcome (Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2015), the ability for audiences to intervene and disrupt narratives can yield undesirable outcomes for organizations. It is imperative, therefore, that public relations personnel consider how proposed campaigns enacted via social media are likely to be interpreted by audience members, particularly when social issues are involved. Indeed, via social media, audiences can quickly “turn the tables” and perpetuate undesirable views of the organization.

2.2. Public relations, social media, and participatory culture

Through social media, public relations has shifted from one-way information dissemination to encompass two-way interaction that includes a variety of stakeholder voices (Chewning, 2015; van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes, & Vliegenthart, 2014). Organizations no longer have sole control over messages and are subjected to a multiplicity of voices, and some voices may appear to be associated with the organization but in fact, are designed to mock it (Wan et al., 2015). Whereas organizational social media use is championed and can result in perceptions that the organization is more authentic (Park & Cameron, 2014), it also is accompanied with risk, as some messages can create or enflame crises (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). These negative outcomes may be attributable to the growing number of stakeholder voices who can participate in public relations narratives. Accordingly, public relations and other organization personnel must evaluate perceived audience reaction on social media and incorporate those insights when evaluating the efficacy of social media campaigns.

For example, Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin (2011) examined British Petroleum’s (BP) image-repair on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The authors discovered that BP predominantly used a corrective action image-repair strategy, which was deemed to be unsuccessful. Specifically, they observed that audience reactions on social media expressed negative emotions towards BP and its strategy failed to alleviate the negative public sentiment about the company. Ott and Theunissen (2015) posited that it was crucial for organizations to utilize social media to demonstrate that the organization is listening to publics. Moreover, failure to listen can result in reactive strategies that also prove ineff-
fectual. Veil, Reno, Freihaut, & Oldham (2015) examined the case of online activists hijacking the Kraft Foods Facebook page and noted how the activists were able to exert pressure on Kraft Foods to change product ingredients. They argued that organizational personnel needed to be more proactive in anticipating crises, as underestimating the ability of an online collective can result in greater harm and risk than pre-emptively addressing issues. The authors also suggested that organizational personnel needed to check audience pulses (e.g., considering how similar campaigns have fared in the past, considering public attitudes/goodwill towards organization) and evaluate messaging based on these assessments. As audience members can quickly become active participants in PR narratives, it is important to examine how social media campaigns can quickly deteriorate and enhance the organizational crises that they were designed to buffer.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection

Data consisted of tweets that contained the #AskJameis hashtag. The Radian6 software program was used to retrieve tweets. Radian6 is a social media tracking software program that allows users to search publicly available social media posts within specific time parameters for user-defined search terms. We used only the date of the #AskJameis campaign, August 10, 2014, as once news of the hashtag circulated and Florida State began getting criticized, the campaign was pulled (2014). We utilized the “Topic Trend” search feature, which provides a line graph illustrating the levels of posting activity around a search term. We observed that the largest escalation of activity on August 10, 2014, was from 10:00 am to 11:00 am Eastern Standard Time, as the number of tweets spiked from 422 to 4232. Thus, we pulled all tweets added during this time period (n = 3810). We then elected to re-move “as is” re-tweets from the data. The interpretive design of our study, and the ambiguity surrounding the intent of “as is” re-tweets (e.g., endorsement? denoting interesting content?) underpinned this decision (Freelon, 2014). Re-tweets that included unique commentary remained in the sample. There were a total of 2413 “as is” re-tweets, leaving a sample of 1397 tweets.

3.2. Data analysis

To investigate how audience members hijacked the #AskJameis hashtag, a thematic analysis of the tweets was conducted using constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each tweet served as the unit of analysis. First, three authors independently immersed themselves in the data through an initial active reading of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) observed that this process can be driven by either data or theory, and we took a data-driven approach, creating categories as data analysis unfolded rather than a priori (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). Next, using a procedure employed by Sanderson and Truax (2014), each of the three researchers independently coded 25% of the postings (n = 350) developing themes by micro-analyzing and classifying themes into emergent categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) based on how audience members were hijacking the #AskJameis hashtag.

Tweets that appeared to involve more than one theme were placed into the category that was thought to exemplify the most dominant theme in the tweet. Development, clarification, and refinement of themes continued until new observations did not add substantively to existing themes. This allowed the researchers to independently gain insight into the usefulness of the developed thematic categories (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006). The three coders then met and reviewed the themes and any differences were discussed until reaching consensus on the appropriate thematic category for the tweet. After reaching agreement on the themes, the three researchers used these themes as a template to code the remaining tweets, which were divided equally and analyzed. After completing this analysis, the three researchers again met and reviewed themes, agreeing that the remaining tweets could be categorized into one of the previously developed themes. Additionally, it also was discovered that 193 tweets were not relevant to the study (e.g., spam messages, posting comments to other Twitter users not related to a comment about the #AskJameis campaign). Accordingly, these were removed, leaving a final sample of 1214 tweets. Through the data-analytic process described above, five categories emerged that captured how participants hijacked the #AskJameis hashtag: (a) criticizing FSU; (b) referencing Winston’s legal incidents; (c) general sarcasm; (d) insinuating Winston received preferential treatment; and (e) mocking Winston’s intellect. It should be noted that although rare in frequency (n = 33) there were participants who offered genuine questions. Given their small overall proportion in the data, we do not discuss these respondents as a specific category (Table 1).

4. Results and interpretation

Tweets are reported verbatim from the data. Therefore, spelling and grammatical errors were left as originally posted by Twitter users.

4.1. Criticizing FSU

The most prevalent way that users shifted the direction of the #AskJameis hashtag was by criticizing Florida State University. For some, this involved expressing shock and contempt that FSU would make Winston available for this type of public relations campaign. Examples of commentary here included, “#AskJameis just a terrible ill conceived idea and a giant mess
Table 1
Participant themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th># Of incidents</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criticizing Florida State University</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>“Want to know how not to run communication or social media correctly? Go see #AskJameis. Bad bad move FSU”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referencing Winston’s legal incidents</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>“Jameis don’t you hate it when girls get all crabby after you rape them? #AskJameis”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General sarcasm</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>“How many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop? #AskJameis”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insinuating Winston received</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>“How much do the local cops cost there? #AskJameis #FSU”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferential treatment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mocking Winston’s intellect</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>“What has bred more progress for human—cultivation of crops or development of defined national/state identities? #AskJameis”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

for @FSU_Football;“ and “Yes Florida State. Having your criminal quarterback answer questions by creating the #AskJameis hashtag was SUCH a good idea. “rolls eyes.” Some individuals elevated the criticism by alerting sport media members in their tweets, encouraging them to witness the campaign’s tailspin. For instance, “@slmandel @FSU_Football Hahaha what a dumb move. #AskJameis;“ “@bomani_jones did you see the questions asked from fsu on #AskJameis;“ and “@ESPN_Colin tell me you have see @FSU_Football latest brilliant move!! #AskJameis #socialmedia.” Still other Twitter respondents noted that the campaign would serve as a public relations lesson. For example, “All PR people let this #AskJameis be an example of how not to use social media!!!!” “Guessing whoever at Florida State thought #AskJameis was a good idea might be having a little sit-down in the coming days;“ and “Today just provides 1 more Ex why brand’s need to create strategy before executing on Social. Take a look at the #AskJameis. Case & point.” While these critiques conveyed skepticism about the decision to make Winston available for the campaign, others correlated this decision with a lack of understanding about the public climate surrounding Winston amidst his legal incidents. For instance, “Clearly Florida State is out of touch with common sense thinking #askjameis was a good idea. Are you stupid?” and “TONE-DEAF! MT @FSU_Football #Noles Fans: do you have a question for our starting QB Jameis Winston? Tweet us using #AskJameis.”

4.2. Referencing Winston’s legal incidents

For some participants, the #AskJameis hashtag served as a way to invoke questions about Winston’s perceived tendency to engage in criminal activity, which to some degree may have been influenced by previous incidents of criminal activity within the FSU football program (Rossman, 2014). For instance, “@FSU_Football just curious which crime you are looking to commit to complete your hat trick. I am on the edge of my seat. #AskJameis;“ and “@FSU_Football #AskJameis @jaboowins [Winston’s personal Twitter handle] Next time you commit a crime are you going to felony or sticking with misdemeanor?” For others, they used football verbage to contextualize Winston’s behavior. Examples here included, “Jameis did you get a bigger rush from the win against Auburn or the win in the judicial system? @FSU_Football #AskJameis;“ “What is harder, winning on the field or in the courtroom? #AskJameis;“ and “Your football success has allowed you to escape punishment for rape and theft. What crime will you try and get away with next?”

Although some individuals focused on Winston’s overall legal incidents, others made specific mention of the rape allegations. For instance, “@FSU_Football How many other girls has Jameis raped? #AskJameis;“ “@FSU_Football when a girl says no, does she really mean yes? #AskJameis;“ and “Do you prefer raping women in the comfort of your own bathroom, or will a public bathroom do in a pinch? #AskJameis;“ Others focused their efforts on Winston’s theft of crab legs by asking questions such as, “When you stole the crab legs, was there a special?” and “How do u prefer your Crab Legs paid for or Stolen off the dock.” Other played off the sexual connotation of “crabs” by posing inquiries such as, “#AskJameis Can you recommend a good medicine to get rid of crabs?” and “#AskJameis I do not understand why you had to steal from Publix—I thought it was easy to get crabs in Tallahassee.” Finally, some participants merged both the rape and shoplifting allegations, “Which did you find harder to open, the legs of the crabs or the non-consenting women? #AskJameis;“ and “Did you get a bigger rush from stealing crab legs or stealing a woman’s bodily autonomy? #AskJameis.”

4.3. General sarcasm

Some people conveyed light-hearted humor through the questions that they posed to Winston such as, “Where do babies come from? #AskJameis;“ “#AskJameis What happens when the fridge closes? Does the light go off? How can you be so sure?” and “#AskJameis Do you agree that atomic-powered cars would provide a solution to the world’s energy problems?” Other examples included, “Did you know 70% of your immune system is in your gut? Have you tried ProBiotics? #AskJameis;“ “The chicken or the egg? #AskJameis;“ “How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? #AskJameis;“ and “How do I remove a stain from a microfiber couch?” Still others posed complex scientific or historical questions, such as, “#AskJameis Explain the commercial, political, and religious structures and goals that underwrote European colonial ventures in the New World;“ “Was the Marshall Plan after WW II a response to the failures of the Treaty of Versailles post WWI? Answer in 2 tweets, please #AskJameis;“ “Can we quantitatively understand quark and gluon confinement in quantum chromodynamics and the existence of a mass gap #AskJameis;?“ and “How do you think the Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act of 1930 impacted the sales of goods and services in the US? #AskJameis;“
4.4. Insinuating Winston received preferential treatment

Both the Tallahassee Department and FSU as an institution came under scrutiny and were heavily criticized by some media and women’s rights advocates for the manner in which Winston’s rape allegation was investigated (Vaughan, 2014b). Thus, it was not surprising that some participants used the hashtag to re-ignite these criticisms. Some individuals conveyed these views through sarcastic questions such as, “#AskJameis What is more of a mockery to you, ACC Defenses, or the United States Legal System; “ #AskJameis Is your lawyer reading these questions to you & letting you know which you can answer or does he only do that for criminal cases?” and “Do you have to be drafted by a Florida football team to keep your immunity or is it nationwide?” Others criticized the Tallahassee Police Department, it had intentionally skirted its duties, “Maybe the Tallahassee police can hop on #AskJameis and finally question him,” “Hey @TallahasseePD!!! Here is your chance!!! #AskJameis;” and “If the cops had used this hashtag, would you have finally answered their questions? #AskJameis.” Others directed specific critiques at Winston, “@FSU_Football are you on a first name basis with the Tallahassee cops? #AskJameis;” “#AskJameis, How glad are you that you play in Tallahassee where the PD protects the football players #whataigosaroundcomesarounds;” and “Have the police contacted you using this hashtag to interview you since they obviously did not do it before? #AskJameis.”

4.5. Mocking Winston’s intellect

Some individuals seized the opportunity to use the hashtag to belittle Winston for what they considered to be his intellectual limitations. For example, “#AskJameis have you finished coloring and did you stay in the lines on all the pages for your summer classes at FSU?” “#AskJameis You finish Cat in the Hat yet?” and “@FSU_Football do you know what a compound sentence is? #AskJameis.” Some people ridiculed Winston for his enunciation (in particular his penchant for saying the word “strong” as “scrong”; “@FSU_Football if you are scrong, does that make me scrong too? #AskJameis;” and “#AskJameis How scrong are you in the weight room?” Participants also integrated Winston’s legal incidents into their ridicule, “#AskJameis would you like the complementary package of hooked on phonics with your next batch of Crab Legs and roofies?” and “The industrial revolution changed the face of the American novel forever. Discuss, citing non-consensual examples #AskJameis.”

5. Discussion

This research explored how a public relations campaign enacted on social media can spiral out of control as audiences intervene in public relations narratives and shift them in undesirable directions. Beyond the emergent themes, this research has several implications that are now discussed. First, although it appears that FSU was tailoring the campaign to its “fans,” Twitter’s open-access essentially guarantees that those outside the target market can participate, and in this case, seize control of the campaign. There were some genuine questions that were asked of Winston, yet, overall, these questions comprised just 2.6% of the tweets in the sample. Social media and public relations is a strategic process that involves many organizational personnel who need clearly-defined roles (Neill & Moody, 2015). While it is unclear how many individuals in the Florida State athletic department, football program, and University marketing and communications offices were involved in the planning and execution of this campaign, the reaction suggests that perhaps there was not a coordinated organizational effort to consider the efficacy of making Winston publicly available. Ott and Theunissen (2015) noted that when a crisis occurs, brands may incur risk by engaging stakeholders via social media. Thus, when organizations, particularly those that employ high-profile individuals such as sport organizations are weighing public relations initiatives on social media, the proverbial statement “discretion is the better part of valor” may be a more appropriate strategy.

This leads to a second implication for the study—that organizations need to be mindful of the “pulse” of social media on social issues. In other words, while it may be “textbook” to make an athlete or high-profile employee available to the public via social media, careful consideration of the active audience is warranted. For example, public relations professionals must consider the results of previous campaigns initiated by other organizations, along with prevailing public attitudes about the organization and/or the organizational member who is going to be part of the campaign. This includes how social issues may be related to the campaign and to what degree audience members might attribute the campaign to reflect the organization’s insensitivity to social issues. Certainly, there will always be some negative voices on social media; nevertheless, it behooves public relations professionals to ensure that the campaign does not aggravate and create more negativity. As this case evidences, not only can the audience hijack the campaign, but in doing so, the media can be alerted, which can result in negative press and an inflammation of the crisis and reinforce negative perceptions of the organization (Ott & Theunissen, 2015; Wan et al., 2015). Veil et al. (2015) noted that organizations needed to be assertive in scanning their environments and be proactive in addressing issues before they prompt a crisis. This case suggests that when an organization is in the midst of handling a crisis it is imperative to anticipate how the active audience may react before making a high-profile organizational member available to the public. This ties into a third implication from the current study: the need for public relations personnel to distinguish between “textbook” recommendations and applied practices. In other words, while using social media for public relations can engender positive outcomes (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Park & Cameron, 2014), there are occasions when not using social media may be equally beneficial. As social media provides a polyvocality of voices (Chewning, 2015; van de Meer et al., 2014), it may be prudent for organizations to expect that there is a considerable
probability that public relations practices via social media will morph into narratives that frame the organization unfavorably (Ott & Theunissen, 2015; Theunissen, 2014).

Whereas organizations cannot micro-manage this outcome entirely, there are certain campaigns where narrative disruption is more/less likely to occur. In this case, given Winston’s history of legal issues, coupled with the open-access and real-time structure of Twitter, making him available to answer questions was a doomed public relations campaign from the start.

6. Limitations and directions for future research

This research was limited in that it only explored one case. Although we believe that the insights gained from this case are important, it would be beneficial to examine multiple cases when visible employees are made available via social media as a crisis response strategy. Second, while the crisis was enflamed by the Twitter commentary, the outcomes of this campaign quickly spread through sport media, and it may have been helpful to examine the full scope of the crisis by looking at how the campaign was framed in the media to get a sense of the totality of the collateral damage. In terms of future research, there are several exciting directions that scholars can traverse. First, to what extent do public relations professionals consider the participatory culture of social media when deciding on public relations strategies? As this case illustrates, there may be times when participation can be quite detrimental to the organization and understanding the degree to which public relations professionals are conscious of this cultural element on social media may help better understand discrepancies between research and practice. Second, as Brown and Billings (2013) observed, fans can enact crisis communication on behalf of a sport organization, and while we did not observe any Florida State fans attacking those who were mocking or criticizing Winston and the university, it would be interesting to examine fan-enacted crisis communication in response to other people hijacking a brand’s public relations efforts on social media. Such work could help shed light on the co-creative process of social media public relations and illustrate what narrative voices get highlighted and which get subjugated.

7. Conclusion

The participatory nature of social media meshes organizational public relations practices with a diversity of voices that can take public relations efforts in unwelcome directions. Accordingly, organizational personnel operating at the intersection of social media and public relations must be attuned to the “pulse” of the social media audience and carefully contemplate how specific public relations strategies will be interpreted and acted upon.

References


