

Final Spotify Case Study

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Introduction

Near the end of January of 2022, Spotify, one of the largest music streaming services, came under fire for the enabling of misinformation surrounding the spread of COVID-19 through podcast creators. After hearing podcaster Joe Rogan, host of “The Joe Rogan Experience,” make various statements about the COVID-19 virus and vaccine, [promoting information contradictory to scientific fact from the Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#), there was a public negative response. Following the efforts of medical experts and scientists who sent a letter to the company in December of 2021, music artists Neil Young and Joni Mitchell pulled their music from Spotify. The letter, signed by over 200 experts, highlighted Rogan’s misleading and false claims from his December 31st episode, expressing that besides the obvious medical concern, Rogan’s claims are [“a sociological issue of devastating proportions and Spotify is responsible for allowing this activity to thrive on its platform.”](#) Spotify executives have since replied with multiple statements, claiming that their intentions are to allow for content creator freedom however in a safe demeanor. Spotify will implement a content advisory on any podcast that mentions COVID-19.

This case is relevant to the understanding of how Public Relations and Strategic Communication can serve a company as they try to balance their social responsibility and business interests. More specifically, this case seeks to examine how the Spotify COVID-19 misinformation controversy has challenged the company with how to communicate in accordance with their values and ethical responsibilities, and how it has informed their PR response. Focusing on ethics of care, this case will aim to inform readers about the responsibility Spotify has with their listeners, employees, and content creators. The perspectives from each stakeholder group will add insight as to how Spotify fulfills these individual relationships and what they seek out as a greater priority, [considering the fact that Joe Rogan is one of the most profitable personalities on the platform.](#)

Background

In the current digital age, many people have numerous sources for content they prefer. Spotify is a preferred source, not only as a platform providing music but podcasts as well. Podcasts are a growing content medium on the platform. In addition, podcasting is an increasingly popular format to receive information amongst Americans. The [Pew Research Center](#) reports, “About a quarter of U.S. adults (23%) say they get news at least sometimes from podcasts, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in July 2021”. The content medium is even higher amongst younger audiences who rely on podcasts as news sources,

[One-in-three adults ages 18 to 29 say they at least sometimes get news from podcasts, compared with 12% of adults 65 and older.](#)

However, amidst the pandemic, audiences are more wary of the information they consume and what they consider reputable news sources. [Because it is difficult for users to spot misinformation themselves, they expect companies to be more active in addressing misinformation.](#) This issue is heightened in context of health including COVID-19 because it may result in potential harm to viewers, listeners, or readers.

With many stakeholders in mind, and given the circumstance of the pandemic, organizations must respond to crisis in an attentive and responsive manner. Ethical approaches are preferred rather than solely relying on logical approach. Professionals refer to ethical approaches during crisis communication, an under-researched yet fundamental ethical approach is ethics of care.

As listeners have become more aware of the responses they receive (or don't) from their favored companies, such companies have learned that they need to be more responsive. In the case of Spotify, an analysis guided by ethics of care can provide an outlook and or position that considers the ultimate good of the organization and its publics, and what enables such relationships, rather than simple resolutions. This case will review Spotify's company background, promotional content, and creator support alongside up-to-date media surrounding the controversy to analyze the company's response and what it can teach us.

Background on the Organization

According to [Spotify's Newsroom](#), the company's mission is to “unlock the potential of human creativity – by giving a million creative artists the opportunity to live off their art and billions of fans to enjoy and be inspired by it.” The issue surrounding the case study exemplifies how one of their most profitable personalities has tested their own mission statement and values.

In their [mission statement](#), Spotify states they value the free flow of creativity, for those who create and those who absorb. The stakeholders that Spotify considers as most important include both creators and listeners. Spotify was challenged to communicate their values with their key stakeholders in mind. What effect would their PR response have on their relationships with future content creators? What would have allotted from the situation if they had prioritized listeners?

The company has shown respect to their stakeholders and had launched various informational campaigns in an effort to raise awareness of the pandemic. This included a [donated ad inventory to various organizations for vaccine awareness, funds to the World Health Organization and COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access](#)

[\(COVAX\) to increase vaccine equity and supported the Go Give One fundraising campaign.](#) In addition, Spotify supported the creative community with a music relief project.

In this case study, Spotify did employ the logical, rational approach of banning a creator because that decision would have contradicted the brand's mission statement. The communication approach that Spotify executed involved ethics of care. In this PR strategic approach, Spotify examined its relationships with individual publics, the overall harm that would have ensued, and made a communication response. In doing so, Spotify was able to commit to its most profitable personality while mitigating its relationships with key stakeholders.

Situation

This case study examines Spotify's challenges revolving around the spread of COVID-19 misinformation and how their PR response evaluates their core values and profitability. With further analysis, we aim to understand Spotify's response through the perspective of ethics of care.

Spotify is a global music streaming service available in 184 countries and territories with [406 million](#) users and 180 million subscribers. Spotify has more than 3.6 million podcast titles, the most popular being The Joe Rogan Experience, [charting](#) at number one. Spotify's [mission](#) is "To unlock the potential of human creativity—by giving a million creative artists the opportunity to live off their art and billions of fans the opportunity to enjoy and be inspired by it." Their communities include artists, podcasters, advertisers, developers, vendors, design, engineering, and songwriters. Spotify has been a [public](#) company since April of 2018.

Spotify is a company that caters to the public, so they have a responsibility to their listeners, employees, and content creators. This situation brought those relationships to the forefront and caused Spotify to have to reexamine how they balance these relationships and cater to all their needs at the same time while staying true to their company values and bottom line. The situation required a response because Spotify needed to manage their reputation and mitigate their losses. Artists began to pull their catalogues from Spotify which would have cost them money if they did not respond to mitigate the losses. Additionally, listeners were also beginning to pull away from the company and Spotify had to show their listeners that they were being taken seriously while allowing for creative freedom to their creators.

The stakeholders that Spotify considers as most important include [both](#) creators and listeners. In any public relations challenge, Spotify would have to respond with both their values and key stakeholders in mind. They would need to consider what effect their PR response would have on their

relationships with future content creators? What would have allotted from the situation if they had prioritized listeners? As *Maerowitz*, associate [editor of PR News](#) explained, it is very important to find a middle ground for both key stakeholders. “Cannon argues that “in a free society, opposition is simply a part of culture...Swinging one direction over the other...could backfire if the pendulum swings too far.” Cannon says Spotify should listen to subscribers and partners but work hard to find a middle ground that can make both sides happy.

Compared to a decade ago, consumers are increasingly taking note of what [brands stand for and what they do not](#). Millennial and Gen Z audiences engage with brands that fulfill their core values and mission statement. Such audiences expect more from brands. They no longer just divulge in what the brand is selling/promoting, but they ensure that the brand they are engaging with [brands whose values align with their own](#).

This case study examines Spotify’s challenges revolving around the spread of COVID-19 misinformation and how their PR response evaluates their core values and profitability. With further analysis, we aim to understand Spotify’s response through the perspective of ethics of care.

Spotify executives released multiple statements, explaining that their intentions are to allow for content creator freedom and how they support their creators while also stating that they hear their listeners and will take action to ensure that creators are not causing harm to the public. Spotify has promised to implement a content advisory on any podcast that mentions COVID-19. Spotify was trying to mitigate the backlash and loss of both listeners and creators. Their goal was to find a balanced solution to appease listeners' safety concerns over COVID-19 misinformation while also avoiding alienating creators who would feel their first amendment rights were being infringed upon. The publics that were most important for Spotify were creators and listeners as active and aware publics.

Literature Review

This case study explores Spotify’s response to being called out for allowing COVID-19 misinformation on their creator’s platforms.

Our literature review will consist of brief background on how organizations have employed crisis communication into their work dilemmas with internal and external publics. Then, we provide information on the ethics of care perspective in terms of how companies respond responsibly in these

cases. Lastly, we will analyze the theory in comparison to other under-researched ethical approaches often employed in crisis communication.

Crisis Communication

Ma and Zhan (2016) examined how attributed responsibility affects a corporation's reputation and how their response strategies affected their reputation. Organizational reputation is defined as the “public perception of an organization” (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, pg. 1). According to Coombs (2014, pg. 2) crisis is defined as “a significant threat to operations or reputations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly.” Crises have been known to have a severe effect on corporate reputation and without the proper response to these crises, their reputation will most likely suffer. Having a damaged reputation influences public interactions to skew negatively. According to Walsh, Mitchell & et. al (2009) these negative consumer interactions can include “decreasing consumer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth behaviors.” (p.#). This study found that attributed responsibility had the most negative effect on corporate reputation and that while response strategies had a positive effect it was a weak association to the organization's reputation. Similarly, Ma and Zhan concluded that organizations need to communicate with their publics to address their issues by doing things such as announcing how they will be changing their behavior and expressing how that protect their public or will prevent similar events from happening in the future (Coombs, 2007, pg. 15). This assures the organizations publics that they have the ability to mitigate the negative impact of the crisis and keep the public informed of their processes. This has implications for Spotify's COVID-19 response because the attributed responsibility for managing their creator's ability to spread misinformation was high.

Similarly in Mariconda & Lurati (2014), they examine how the publics' knowledge of an organization is related to its reputation via media visibility, public prominence, and familiarity. According to the study, it is suggested that prominence and/or media visibility could potentially amplify the effects of a negative event; however, previous existing awareness of an organization has the potential to instead mitigate such negative effects. This has implications for how in times of crisis new facts will guide a public's response and perception of a company's reputation. If a company has never faced a crisis like this before, a familiar public may be inclined to be more forgiving versus an unfamiliar public who may hold the media's account to a higher regard as a trusted source.

Ethics of Care and Responsibility

As defined by Madden and al. (2021) adopt Gilligan's (1982) feministic approach to defining ethics of care is a "relational obligation and concern" (p.25) to cultural and collective issues. Meaning, rather than an organization responding to a crisis scenario with pure logic in a strategic and linear manner, the response given emphasizes the importance of care to vulnerable people or publics; those affected by the conflict, problem, or controversy directly affiliated with the organization. Tao and Kim (2017) explained that ethics of care approach "represents an organization's efforts to fulfill publics' emotional and interpersonal needs during a crisis by tailoring organizational decisions, action, and communication based upon the needs and feelings of publics; this approach entails the organization's demonstration of care, compassion, and sensitivities in its crisis responses" (p. 693).

Nicholson and Kurucz (2017) discuss the crucial aspects of leaders engaging with stakeholders and employees to reason with and discover the best possible outcome with ultimate care for others. In this, Nicholson and Kurucz aimed to find the relationship between leadership and followers moving towards sustainability. Focusing on responsibility in leadership in addition to relation-focused views, the two find that relationships in work are more effective (Nicholson and Kurucz, 2017). Ethics of care is then categorized into a framework of relational leadership for sustainability, where 'who we are' centers on the ideas of primacy of the relationship, complexity in context, mutual well-being focus, and engaging whole person. Taking each factor into consideration, the two claim to "support the development of individual well-being and organizational and societal flourishing" (Nicholson and Kurucz, 2017 p. 25). Ethics of care views responsibility in a way that prioritizes human relationships over rushed tactics to solve conflict. This concerns the relational dynamics of internal and external publics like higherups and their employees, stakeholders, customers, and consumers. Leaders of organizations play a crucial role in making decisions guided by ethics of care, as their initiatives to maintain human complexities go beyond other positions.

In the context of COVID-19, Branicki (2020) discusses ethics of care as a means to provide care for a crisis that affects all people. Studying crisis management, Branicki incorporates Gilligan's feministic approach of ethics of care while exploring heightened relational needs that result from a public health crisis causing a loss of resources. While working and living environments have changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Branicki (2020) aims to understand a sense of 'caring about, taking care, caregiving, and care receiving' in context of the pandemic and its unforeseen social changes. As relationships are bound to happen in any environment, those that are amid difficult change because of COVID-19 require even more responsibility and focus to seek alternative ends and follow alternative processes (Branicki, 2020).

Ethics of Justice and Care

Ethics of Justice is conceptualized as an "organization's efforts to ensure equitable and fair treatment of all parties involved in a crisis (i.e., including the organization's stakeholders and the organization per se) by making impartial, verifiable, and reliable decisions according to rigid universal rules and principles that do not vary by the particularities of crisis context" (Tao & Kim, 2017 p. 692-693).

Tao and Kim (2017) highlight how the two ethical approaches; ethics of justice and ethics of care are not oppositional to each other but complement one another and are interrelated. During times of crisis, organizations balance public relations and legal perspective but often lack ethical responses. Under public scrutiny, organizations are often left no choice but to "unveil the most fundamental elements of its ethical frameworks" (Tao & Kim, 2017 p. 692). Organizations utilize the ethics of justice approach in their efforts to ensure all parties involved in the crisis hold fair and equitable treatment. This ethical approach is similar to ethics of care as it requires organizations to act as an unbiased, objective agent that relies on rationality and logic. However, in stark difference in ethics of justice, organizations must detach themselves from certain aspects (such as emotions) to retain objectivity when decision making. In contrast, ethics of care remains sensitive and responsive to the feelings and needs of the public. Rather than organizations detaching themselves from the crisis, organizations must remain involved and be attentive to their publics. Although both ethical approaches employ open and transparent communication one through the essence of publics needs and care and the other through fair and equal treatment, the study concluded that organizations are twice as likely to employ the ethics of justice approach than ethics of care. Overall, utilizing an ethical approach that guides organizations decisions is fundamental, so their response does not violate stakeholders' expectations. In result, it may challenge the organization's legitimacy and its relationships with stakeholders.

Similar to Tao and Kim's (2017) findings, Roberts (2012) analyzed the role of the "ethics of justice" approach and its effectiveness as a public relations strategy. The author does validate the ethical theory as a strategy helps public relations practitioners determine their publics and the impact the response will have on them. Roberts (2012) notes that "most practitioners who seek to be ethical will stop short of making a decision that best serves distributive justice and choose enlightened self-interest or a similar approach." (p. 174). Furthermore, ethics of justice theory does not consider the values of care, emotion, and relationships, concepts that public relations practitioners appreciate in a symmetrical approach to communication. As reiterated by Roberts' (2012) study, the most effective

ethical approach that should be utilized by organizations during a crisis is ethics of care. Although both ethical approaches employ transparent communication and highly consider their stakeholders, the “ethics of care” approach is most applicable to Spotify’s communication strategy during the crisis. From this perspective, we will pursue the following research questions:

RQ1: How has the Spotify COVID-19 misinformation controversy challenged the company with how to communicate their values while balancing profitability?

RQ2: How, if at all, can ethics of care shape the responses and solutions given by Spotify?

Methods

We used a case study approach to explore the use of ethics of care in Spotify’s crisis response. Relevant pieces of literature to answer our research questions because the Spotify case offers what Gilligan describes as “ethics of care,” which is appropriate for research designed to confirm, challenge, or extend the theory within the public relations sector.

To collect data from multiple sources, we collected and analyzed organizational responses from Spotify dating back to January 2022. Furthermore, analyzed media coverage regarding the Spotify and Joe Rogan controversy. Although there have been numerous media articles about the case, we will focus on the first two weeks of the situation simply to analyze the initial response from the media landscape. This time frame also encompasses the key dates of the organizational response from Spotify and various music artists.

Findings

Joe Rogan’s podcast, *The Joe Rogan Experience*, is reported to broadcast COVID-19 misinformation to listeners around the globe. Media Matters monitored [350 hours of the podcast in 2021 alone](#) and relayed a timeline of moments in his episodes where he was found to make false claims regarding COVID-19 information. Due to the podcast's popularity and an [estimated 11 million listeners per episode](#), there was an increase in concern of COVID-19 misinformation amongst various groups.

In January of 2022, a total of 270 scientists, medical professionals, and many others signed a petition to raise awareness of the COVID-19 misinformation on Rogan’s show. To combat this initial crisis, Spotify executives “made assurance internally that the company was taking the issue seriously and that it was continuing to review Mr. Rogan's shows to make sure they were complying with Spotify’s rules, said a person involved in [discussions](#)”.

The issue was heightened on January 24 when Mr. Young posted a [since-deleted open letter](#) demanding his music be removed from the platform over COVID-19 misinformation. In this open letter Neil Young wrote, “I am doing this because Spotify is spreading fake information about vaccines – potentially causing death to those who believe the disinformation being spread by them”. Young continued to state, “They can have Rogan or Young, not both.” Within days Neil Young was accompanied off the platform by Joni Mitchell. In addition, Harry and Meghan Markle the Duke and Duchess of Sussex also [voiced their concerns of the misinformation](#) as they have their own deal with Spotify as well.

On January 30, 2022, Spotify released a [press release](#) regarding the platform's rules and their approach to addressing misinformation regarding COVID-19. In this statement, Spotify reiterates that in their core, the platform values the expression and creativity in individuals.

Furthermore, the platform acknowledged they had not been transparent in their policies that guide content. Such ambiguity in the companies' policies left space for both creators and listeners to question what is acceptable or not when it is applied to serious issues such as COVID-19. Within the release, Spotify stated that because the platform understands their responsibility and obligation as a resource that accesses widely accepted information, they took multiple steps to address the issue. First, Spotify published their long-standing platform rules. They published the policies on the company's newsrooms on their [website](#). By doing so, users can view how Spotify assesses all content on the platform. Secondly, [Spotify added a content advisory to podcast episodes that mention COVID-19](#). The advisory directs listeners to a COVID-19 hub where viewers can access “data-driven facts, up-to-date information as shared by scientists, physicians, academics and public health authorities around the world, as well as links to trusted sources”.

The third and final step the press release mentioned included the platform's initiatives to begin testing methods to highlight the policies to creators and publishers, so they have a clear understanding on what is acceptable and the responsibility they have as creators. As noted in the background, Spotify has taken initiatives to raise awareness about the pandemic. Spotify implemented this in their messaging to showcase how serious the company approaches situations involving the COVID-19 pandemic. Spotify closes the press release by stating they will continue to “partner with experts and invest heavily in functionality and product capabilities for the benefit of creators and listeners.” Throughout the news release, the CEO Daniel Ek mentions creative freedom as a priority.

Following the press release, Rogan responded on social media with an [Instagram video](#), the popular podcast host said that he views this as a time to present more experts — and do a little more research about his guests and what they were saying. In the video Rogan states, “Maybe try harder to get people

with differing opinions on right afterwards — I do think that's important," Rogan said. "And do my best to make sure I've researched these topics, the controversial ones in particular, and have all the pertinent facts at hand before I discuss them."

Analysis

As we have observed in the findings, the Spotify controversy surrounding Joe Rogan and COVID-19 misinformation, Spotify was challenged in their response., Spotify first emphasized that their platform values the creative expression of their creators and ceases to limit their individual rights as personas with creative platforms. In this case, Spotify's response relates to Tao & Kim's (2017) definition in ethics of justice as opposed to ethics of care, where Spotify as an organization unveiled their most fundamental elements of their ethical framework. They also prioritized creativity, as mentioned in their mission statement, "to unlock the potential of human creativity" (Spotify Newsroom, 2022).

The strategic messaging within the news release echoes the company's values but also acknowledges the public's need to address the COVID-19 misinformation. By doing so, the platform utilized the "ethics of care" theory. Spotify explicitly stated they have an obligation to many publics including creators and listeners.

Spotify's initial response disregarded a collective crisis that affects far more groups of people as opposed to one: the creators on the platform. As defined by Madden et. Al (2021), an ethics of care approach requires an organization to emphasize the importance of caring for vulnerable groups of people and publics. Seeing that Spotify has since taken multiple steps to improve their original response by providing accessible forms of data and fact, as well as placing content advisory on any podcast that mentions the COVID-19 virus and vaccine, we've observed that the organization is in fact taking steps in the right direction while using ethics of care...in the sense of caring about the health and wellbeing of each public they're involved with i.e., creators, listeners, employees, and other various stakeholders.

When dealing with crisis communication, specifically when an organization like Spotify has an immense public prominence and reputation to uphold (Mariconda & Lurati, 2014) as the streaming platform has over 400 million users (Spotify, 2022), it is of utmost importance that the organization responds in a way that efficiently communicates their concern and willingness to correct the issue in order to negate the increase of further complications (Ma & Zhan, 2016). Spotify has demonstrated exactly this by their adaptive conduct, admitting that because of the COVID-19 misinformation outrage, they will partner up with experts and continuously provide accurate information. In this, Spotify has discovered and implemented the best outcome with care for others (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2017). Upholding two of the main principles driven from ethics of care, maintaining caring relationships and caring for the self and

others, Spotify has found a way to balance their profitability and core values by protecting their relationship with their most popular and profitable podcast persona Joe Rogan, as well as their listeners, by providing accurate and consistent information regarding COVID-19.

Responsibility surrounding COVID-19 has proven to be more difficult as the implications of it, i.e., sickness, loss, seclusion, working from home, and shifted schedules have completely flipped the sense of normality in everyday life. In her work, Branicki (2020) applied ethics of care to conclude ultimate care for others should be placed at the forefront of all organizations. This is ultimately up to the organizational leaders (Madden and Alt, 2021). In the case of Spotify and CEO Daniel Elk, it was up to his leadership, in addition to his higher-ups, to sustain their promises to provide comfort and care to their publics amid such an endangering crisis that has affected all types of people and their relationships.

Conclusion

In this case study, Spotify did not employ the logical, rational approach of banning a creator because that decision would have contradicted the brand's mission statement. The communication approach that Spotify executed involved Ethics of Care. In this PR/strategic approach, Spotify examined its relationships with individual publics, the overall harm that would have ensued, and made a communication response with these factors in mind. Additionally, the Spotify leadership team's involvement was crucial to executing Ethics of Care effectively as the PR/strategic approach requires that communication maintain human complexities that go beyond other positions. In doing so, Spotify was able to commit to its most profitable personality while mitigating damage to its relationships with key stakeholders.

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Exhibits/Appendices

Spotify Mission:

Our mission is to unlock the potential of human creativity—by giving a million creative artists the opportunity to live off their art and billions of fans the opportunity to enjoy and be inspired by it.

NPR article discussing Neil Young and Joni Mitchell:
<https://www.npr.org/2022/01/30/1076849204/spotify-covid-advisory-joe-rogan-neil-young>

Rogan's Instagram Response: https://www.instagram.com/p/CZYQ_nDJi6G/



The image shows a screenshot of an Instagram post. On the left is a video player showing a close-up of a bald man's face, wearing a grey hoodie, with a blue sky and trees in the background. The video player has a play button, a progress bar at 0:00, and a total duration of 9:43. On the right is the post's content. At the top is the user's profile: a circular profile picture, the name 'joerogan' with a verified badge, and a 'Follow' button. Below this is the main caption: 'My thoughts on the latest controversy with @spotify'. An edit note follows: 'Edit: I just realized "chuckie's in love" is Ricky Lee Jones not Joni Mitchell. Doh!'. Below the caption are three comments. The first is from 'valentinethomas' with a verified badge, stating 'I was shadow banned on IG for 3 days after our podcast together last week AND WE DIDNT EVEN CHAT ABOUT COVID!'. The second is from 'esaagar' with a verified badge, saying 'I and millions of others are with you Joe'. The third is from 'thechristinap' with a verified badge, consisting of a row of ten yellow heart emojis. Below the comments are icons for likes, comments, shares, and a bookmark. A section titled 'Liked by peytonlanning_ and others' is visible, with the date 'JANUARY 30'. At the bottom right is a 'Post' button. At the bottom left is a comment input field with a smiley face icon and the text 'Add a comment...'. The video player at the bottom has a play button, a progress bar at 0:00, and a total duration of 9:43.

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joerogan My thoughts on the latest controversy with @spotify

Edit: I just realized "chuckie's in love" is Ricky Lee Jones not Joni Mitchell. Doh!

Edited - 6w

valentinethomas I was shadow banned on IG for 3 days after our podcast together last week AND WE DIDNT EVEN CHAT ABOUT COVID!

6w 1,696 likes Reply

View replies (51)

esaagar I and millions of others are with you Joe

6w 3,304 likes Reply

View replies (36)

thechristinap 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

6w 1,052 likes Reply

Liked by peytonlanning_ and others

JANUARY 30

Add a comment... Post