Official and Viral Apologia: Participatory Culture and the Penn State Scandal

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OFFICIAL AND VIRAL APOLOGIA: PARTICIPATORY CULTURE AND THE PENN STATE SCANDAL

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication, Technology, & Society

by
Brandon Boatwright
May 2013

Accepted by:
Dr. Travers Scott, Committee Chair
Dr. Brenden Kendall
Dr. Joseph Mazer
ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the relationship between organizational apologia and the participatory cultures constructed around new media. Using The Pennsylvania State University sex abuse scandal as a case study, the current research highlights the significant role online communities play in the image repair process of an organization accused of wrongdoing. The current study is an attempt to bridge the gap between organizational apologia and participatory culture by offering a multimethodological approach to an analysis of the Penn State crisis. Five specific events in the crisis are examined across three levels. First, a rhetorical criticism of the Penn State response to the event offers insight into the role of organizational apologia. Second, textual analysis of Internet memes in response to the Penn State message sheds light on the impact the self-defense has on its intended audience. Finally, virtual ethnography provides significant perspective on the impact of participatory culture in a crisis scenario. In all, this analysis identifies key concerns around and related to organizational apologia, audience reception, and participatory culture in hypermediated contexts.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my family. I have been blessed beyond measure that your unwavering support and encouragement have sustained me from my very first day of school to the moment I completed this project. Each of you has been instrumental in my personal and academic development, and these brief comments cannot begin to suffice to describe how thankful I am for your guidance, compassion, and unconditional love.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge several people that have been immeasurably helpful throughout this entire process. First and foremost, I want to recognize the outstanding leadership and direction Dr. Travers Scott offered me in designing, developing, and doing this project. Without his tutelage, this project would have surely tanked. I also want to extend my gratitude to Dr. Joe Mazer and Dr. Brenden Kendall for their tireless support. I am sure that my many impromptu visits to your offices over the past two years have come at inopportune times for each of you, and yet you both were always willing to offer your advice and expertise in every capacity you could. For that matter, I want to express my sincerest appreciation to the entire Department of Communication Studies at Clemson University. For the past six years, it has been my home away from home, and the relationships and experiences I have built with each of you will endure.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my peers in the MACTS program. As part of the first cohort to complete a thesis within the program, I cannot begin to express how much our collaboration and friendship has meant to me over the past two years. From the beginning, when it seemed like our brains were fried after each class, to the end when each of us were looking back at those days as “the good ole times,” I could not have hand-picked a better group of friends to share this experience with. We are CTS!
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

In November 2011, reports surfaced that Jerry Sandusky, former defensive coordinator for the Penn State University football program, had been arrested on charges of alleged criminal sexual child abuse. This thesis examines the Penn State apologia in the wake of this crisis and, moreover, how these image repair strategies were received and spread across social media through participatory culture.

Sandusky’s indictment was the result of a two-year grand jury investigation into allegations made against him, claiming that he had inappropriate sexual contact with at least eight underage boys over a 15-year period. Prior to the allegations, Sandusky maintained a positive reputation at the university as a result of his 32 years of service to the football program in addition to his philanthropic work establishing an organization for at-risk youth called “The Second Mile.” The grand jury’s report stated that Mr. Sandusky singled out eight boys for sexual advances or sexual assaults between 1994 and 2009 (Viera, 2011). Sandusky’s trial began on June 11, 2012 at the Centre County Courthouse in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania. The jury found him guilty on 45 of the 48 counts on June 22, 2012. On October 9, 2012, Sandusky was sentenced to 30 to 60 years in prison.

As the scandal broke, details about other university officials’ involvement (or lack thereof) in the misconduct came to light as well. University President Graham Spanier resigned from his post amidst the allegations and the Penn State Board of Trustees fired former Head Football Coach Joseph V. Paterno for not sufficiently reporting the abuse to the proper officials. Paterno, who died two months later due to complications from lung
cancer, held that position at Penn State since 1966 where he had become an iconic figure within the university and community as well as the much broader college football landscape as the all-time winningest head coach in history. Athletics – football, in particular – at Penn State comprise a significant portion of the university’s culture and budget. According to the Department of Education data for 2010-2011, Penn State’s athletic department enjoyed a net income of $31,619,687.00 (Jessop, 2012).

Together, Paterno and Sandusky were credited with creating a football culture at Penn State that far exceeded its rivals in terms of success on and off the field. When the Penn State Board of Trustees announced Paterno’s termination, students rioted in the streets of State College by tearing down streetlights and overturning a television news van (Schweber, 2011). Still further, former Athletics Director Tim Curley and former Vice President Gary Shultz were both indicted on perjury charges after having allegedly lied during a grand jury investigation looking into the Sandusky case. Shultz and Curley have yet to stand trial.

The accusations and ensuing legal action sparked a media frenzy and resulted in significant damage to the image of Penn State University. The scope and scale of the scandal has had a dramatic impact on the university and its culture including a loss of sponsorships (Carpenter, 2011), a sharp decline in merchandise sales (Loviglio, 2011; Sauer, 2011), prospective students reevaluating their decision to attend the university (Athavaley, Bachman, Maher, & Miller, 2011), and graduating students facing increased scrutiny and pressure when entering the job market (Lauerman & Perlberg, 2011;
Sheinin, 2012). Moody’s Investor Services went so far as to consider downgrading Penn State’s Aa1 credit rating as a result of the scandal (Associated Press, 2011).

The Freeh Report (2012), an independent report by former Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Louis Freeh and his law firm, Freeh Sporkin & Sullivan, LLP, sanctioned by the university’s board of trustees, found that “the most saddening finding by the Special Investigative Counsel is the total and consistent disregard by the most senior leaders at Penn State for the safety and welfare of Sandusky’s child victims” (p. 14). Perhaps the most significant finding in the Freeh Report highlighted the fact that high-ranking university officials like Spanier and Paterno knew of Sandusky’s misconduct and failed to act accordingly to stop him.

More recently, following the release of the Freeh Report, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) imposed unprecedented sanctions against the Penn State football program and athletic department in light of the allegations made against Sandusky. As a result of the scandal, and the subsequent investigation into the university’s role in facilitating Sandusky’s actions culminated by the Freeh Report, the NCAA imposed a substantial punishment on Penn State’s football program including: (1) a $60 million fine, (2) the vacation of all 112 wins from 1998 to 2011, (3) a four-year post-season ban, (4) a four-year scholarship reduction, (5) granting current players the option to transfer to other schools freely, and (6) putting the athletic department on probation for five years (ESPN.com news services, 2012). The sanctions placed on Penn State were the most severe the NCAA has imposed since Southern Methodist University
received the “death penalty” – a one year ban on the school’s football program – for an extensive pay-for-play scheme in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, many media members commented that the Penn State sanctions would be equally damaging to the long-term success and integrity of the program. Following in the wake of lesser sanctions (by comparison) imposed by the NCAA at schools like the University of Miami and Ohio State University in the same year, the Penn State punishment sought “punitive and corrective” action. In light of that, Thamel (2012) wrote that the unique circumstances around Penn State contributed to the intensity and severity of the punishment: “It is hard to compare what happened at Penn State with typical cases involving rules violations in college sports. The Penn State case centered on a pedophile and a set of administrators accused of enabling him, a rare and complex confluence of evil intentions and top-level administrators willing to look the other way” (p. A1). These contextual factors served as justification for the extreme measures taken by the NCAA against the Nittany Lion football program.

Conversely, others saw the sanctions as too harsh; they wondered why the NCAA would come down so hard on the football players who had no involvement in the scandal and were being punished based on the wrongdoing of their leaders. Philadelphia Inquirer op-ed columnist Bob Ford (2012) echoed that sentiment by arguing that while the criminal activities that took place at Penn State were irreversibly detrimental to the program’s culture, the sanctions would do nothing to repair the lives of the victims and, consequently, should not impact the program’s ability to continue to compete.
Expunging the victories from Paterno’s record is fine. He shouldn’t be remembered now as the greatest anything. Handing down enormous fines and penalties, and making sure those go to the proper charities, is the right thing to do. Placing an “integrity monitor” within the athletic department, forcing the adoption of the reforms outlined by Freeh, overhauling the compliance office, and doing everything except have Aunt Bea sit in study hall with the players, that’s all fine. Killing the football team’s competitive chances for the next decade? That’s not fine. (Ford, 2012, paragraph 11)

Regardless of where one stood on the severity of the punishment imposed by the NCAA on the Penn State football program, these sanctions – coupled with the overall sentiment regarding the scandal – constituted a significant crisis for the university.

In order to salvage its reputation, university officials were compelled to respond in a manner that defended the organization from the allegations made against it throughout the investigation and trial. The actions of Sandusky and the inaction by prominent leaders within the organization to stop him resulted in a dramatic fall from grace for Penn State University from an athletic, academic, and cultural standpoint. As such, image maintenance gave way to image repair with Penn State seeking atonement for its inappropriate behavior.

Over the course of the scandal, the university released calculated statements in an effort to deploy its public relations strategically. As the forthcoming review literature will discuss, this is common practice with regard to any organization facing a crisis. The
Current study seeks to examine the breadth of strategic responses available to and the ones used by Penn State in an effort to repair the damage done by the scandal. What’s more, as the crisis unfolded, social media quickly became an open forum for discussing the events related to the scandal. To that end, various online groups emerged with the specific purpose of sharing information about or debating the crisis. These groups varied considerably in terms of composition, popularity, and levels of responses. Despite their disparity, each online community revolved around its capacity to create discussion around the crisis. This is precisely what the current study seeks to examine.

Research Overview

Given the rise in popularity of social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter, and other similar sites, it is next to impossible to limit a thorough examination of the Penn State scandal to traditional media venues alone. Of particular interest to the current study are the responses to Penn State’s apologia through social media. In other words, I am interested in looking at how people interpreted and responded to the university’s image repair strategies by generating and spreading their own content across the Internet. Brown and Billings (in press) justify the significance of this approach by recognizing that “while previous studies have analyzed several different crisis communication responses in sports, none have attempted to establish how fans are included in the strategy” (p. 3). This is surprising given the capacity for fans to “become surrogates for organizational crisis responses via social media” (p. 1). The current research is an attempt to bridge this gap.
More specifically, this project will address the utility of social networking sites with a critical eye toward the processes that enable users to create and spread messages relating to the crisis. Throughout the scandal, user-generated content (e.g. memes, mash-ups, parodies, etc.) has been passed along various social media outlets and other online mediums. This, I believe, potentially compounds the university’s public relations dilemma in that such an environment has the potential to water down any official response and perpetuate potentially negative messages. On the other hand, it may be possible for these outlets to become surrogates for Penn State by offering a unique form of image repair on their own. By examining the artifacts within the context of the community in which they were produced, I seek a better understanding of the role an online culture plays in the image repair process of an organization.

This study seeks primarily to analyze (1) Penn State’s strategic efforts at apologia, (2) an online community’s memes created in response to Penn State apologia strategies, and (3) the online community’s responses to those memes. An exhaustive explanation of the methodological approach to this research will be offered in the methods chapter. However, for all intents and purposes, it is important to begin with an overview addressing the structure of this research before going forward.

To begin, five important events in the chronology of the scandal were identified: (1) the scandal breaking into mainstream news outlets, (2) the firing of Paterno, (3) the trial of Sandusky, (4) the removal of the Paterno statue outside Beaver Stadium, and (5) the NCAA sanctions placed on the Penn State football program. Justification for why these events were chosen will be discussed further in the method chapter of this research.
Each of these events will be evaluated on the three levels mentioned above: (1) a rhetorical analysis of the official Penn State response to the event, (2) a textual analysis of the meme that corresponds to the event and Penn State response, and (3) a virtual ethnographic approach to the online community in which these memes were created and spread. Table 1 illustrates the overall methodological approach to this study.

To further clarify the objectives of the current study, and with respect to the above introduction to the topic, this research is guided by three research questions. First, what is the underlying function behind each image repair strategy and/or posture assumed by Penn State and what purpose does this serve? Second, what do the memes created in response to the Penn State apologia signify about how the image repair strategies were being received within the online community in which they were created? Finally, what effect(s) does the interaction between the official Penn State response and its corresponding meme have on the online community in which it was created?

Summary

While the situation at Penn State is an extreme example, it is nevertheless an example of a communicative phenomenon that pervades everyday life. That is, when confronted with accusations or convictions of wrongdoing, we seek to explain, justify, or deny any action others may deem inappropriate in order to salvage our own reputations. Additionally, the current study bridges the gap between traditional apologia research and contemporary scholarship on new media and participatory culture. Before beginning a discussion of the relevant theoretical foundations for such a claim, let me first clarify that this study is not intended to be a methodological defense for future rhetors similar to
Sandusky or Penn State. In other words, the purpose of my research on the subject is not to exonerate anyone from condemnation for their actions. Rather, given the popularity of the case, the gravity of the situational context, and the implications it entails, my goal in this study is to shed light on the discursive elements at work under the worst of circumstances.

In so doing, my hopes are that this project affords a clearer understanding of what individuals or organizations should do or learn from their own apologetic responses to threats made against them. Whereas some may view this approach as a sensationalistic endeavor replete with justifications or explanations for Sandusky and Penn State’s (in)actions, I would counter by arguing that this analysis provides valuable insight into not only how the accused responds to allegations but also offers the audience a clearer means with which to evaluate and respond to their defenses.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following review of literature centers around three heavily contested areas of study pertinent to this research: (1) apologia and image repair, (2) online and participatory cultures, and (3) cultural texts analyzed from traditions in rhetoric and cultural studies. Each of these concepts will be discussed sequentially as they relate to the current study.

Apologia and Image Repair

Over the past 20 years, an enormous amount of scholarly attention has been devoted to individual and organizational responses to threats against their reputations. One of the leading fields to study these phenomena has been that of rhetoric. There are many reasons for such a high level of consideration, not the least of which is the prevalence of apologetic discourse in everyday life. Benoit (1995) best justifies this position in writing:

Our face, image, or reputation is a valuable commodity. We not only desire a healthy image of ourselves, but we want others to think favorably of us as well. Hence, the communicative activity of excuse-making or image restoration deserves serious study not only because it pervades social life, but also because it serves an important function in our lives, by helping to restore our precious reputations. (p. vii)

The desire to maintain a positive image becomes even more important when confronted with allegations of misconduct or wrongdoing. Kenneth Burke (1968)
described responding to accusations against one’s worth as a human being as one of those
“situations typical and recurrent enough for men to feel the need of having a name for
them” (p. 3). Apologia, “the speech of self-defense,” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 273) is
the name scholars have most frequently used to describe this phenomenon. Ware and
Linkugel’s (1973) seminal article, “They spoke in defense of themselves: On the generic
criticism of apologia,” offered the first attempt to classify apologia as a rhetorical genre:
“We believe that apologetical discourses constitute a distinct form of public address, a
family of speeches with sufficient elements in common so as to warrant legitimately
generic status” (p. 273). Years later, Downey (1993) echoed that assertion by claiming
that “apologia resembles a catalog of options available to rhetors rather than a unified set
of elements which, through their recurrence together, warrant a generic label” (p. 43). To
be sure, much of the research surrounding apologia has revolved around discovering and
highlighting this constellation of similar components.

As a result, rhetorical scholars have developed a variety of different approaches
including apologia theory (Ware & Linkugel, 1973), kategoria-based apologia theory
(Ryan, 1982), and image repair theory (Benoit, 1995), among others. Each of these
approaches operates under the basic premise that, when accused of wrongdoing, an
individual or organizational entity will act to repair their image. However, given the
situational variance inherent among apologetic events, no two approaches have agreed on
any sort of unified method of analysis with which to examine them. This is especially
true within research on organizational apologia. Rowland and Jerome (2004) contend that
the lack of consistency in research regarding organizational apologia reflects two factors:
“the existence of two different and sometimes conflicting purposes in organizational apologia and the fact that there is much greater variation in the societal constraints facing the organizational apologist” (p. 194). Given that the current study will primarily focus on the organizational responses made by Penn State, this problem is especially significant and needs to be addressed. A potential resolution can be found by applying Downey’s (1993) focus on “functions and not just the forms of apologia” (p. 43). Downey argued that the functions of apologia have driven the concept’s evolution from Greek times to the present and, by extension, produced five distinct versions or “subgenres” of apologia. These subgenres include: (1) self-exoneration, (2) self-absolution, (3) self-sacrifice, (4) self-service, and (5) self-deception. Koestein and Rowland (2004) later added atonement as a sixth sub-genre of apologia. It is from this perspective that I intend to base the rhetorical analysis of the current research.

By focusing on the functions of apologia, as opposed to its various forms, one can more accurately condense the wide range of approaches researchers have applied to studying the phenomenon. Indeed, “delineating its functions in addition to its forms yields a more comprehensive understanding of the rule of rhetorical genres in human affairs” (Downey, 1993, p. 60). In the interest of brevity here, I will defer this discussion to the methods section, where it more adequately reflects the rhetorical traditions I employ. Instead, it is important to first provide an overview of the three most popular models of apologia and image repair discourses.

First, Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) theory of apologia identified four factors in rhetorical self-defense. The four factors included denial, bolstering, differentiation, and
transcendence. Denial, simply put, assumes that one may deny alleged facts, sentiments, objects, or relationships as they relate to the accusations against the rhetor. Bolstering implies that a speaker attempts to identify himself with something viewed favorably by the audience and is considered the obverse of denial. Differentiation is used to separate some fact, sentiment, object, or relationships from some larger context within which the audience currently views that attribute. Transcendence, the final of the four factors, is intended to psychologically move the audience away from the particulars of the charge at hand toward the direction of some more abstract view of the rhetor’s character. These factors then combine to establish four potential postures of self-defense: (1) absolutive, (2) vindicative, (3) explanative, and (4) justificative. The theory of apologia has been a very popular approach to examining image repair discourse and has served as the foundation for later theoretical developments.

Second, Ryan (1982) built from Ware and Linkugel’s apologia theory by adding the kategoria, or accusation, as an inseparable component to the apology. He proposed treating accusation and apology as a speech set so that the critic may better understand both speeches by evaluating them together. He wrote:

By identifying and assessing the issues in the accusation, the critic will gain insights into the accuser’s motivation to accuse, his selection of the issues, and the nature of the supporting materials for his accusation. As a response to the accusation, the apology should be discussed in terms of the apologist’s motivation to respond to the accusation, his selection of the issues – for they might differ from the accuser’s issues – and the nature of the supporting materials for the
apology…By checking each speech against the other, the critic is better able to distinguish the vital issues from the spurious ones, to evaluate the relative merits of both speaker’s arguments, and to make an assessment of the relative failure or success of both speakers in terms of the final outcome of the speech set. (p. 254)

In other words, Ryan’s kategoria-apologia approach expanded the genre of apologia by arguing that the critic cannot fully understand the accusation or apology without considering them both together. Downey (1993) complemented Ryan’s approach succinctly: “Stemming from the interplay between a rhetor’s purpose and an audience’s expectations within a certain context, the function of a genre constitutes its meaning, or the way it is used in any given time to satisfy collective needs” (p. 43). Though the term “audience” in Downey’s position does not specifically identify an accuser, it nevertheless implies that the rhetor’s purpose cannot be fully understood without addressing the situational context, which includes the accusation.

Third, Benoit’s (1995) image restoration theory\(^1\) (IRT) offers an integrated typology of image restoration strategies. The theory operates under two key assumptions: (1) that communication is best conceptualized as a goal-directed activity, and (2) maintaining a positive reputation is one of the central goals of communication. IRT incorporates both Ware and Linkugel’s theory of apologia and Ryan’s kategoria-apologia approach in that it considers both the strategies used to defend a rhetoric from attack while

\(^1\)Although the theory is most frequently referred to as image restoration theory, Benoit (2000) noted that he now tends to prefer image “repair” to image “restoration” because “restoration” implies that one’s image has been restored to its original state. While I agree with Benoit in this regard, I refer to the theory by its original name in order to remain consistent with the previous literature on the topic.
also highlighting the need to consider the nature of attacks or complaints that prompt a response (Benoit, 1997). Benoit identified five broad categories and 12 subcategories of image repair techniques. The five categories, accompanied by their corresponding subcategories, are: denial (simple denial, shifting the blame), evading responsibility (provocation, defeasibility, pleading accidental, good intentions), reducing offensiveness (bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking one’s accuser, compensation), corrective action, and mortification. While IRT offers the most comprehensive typology of image restoration strategies to date, it is by no means an exhaustive list of potential excuses, apologies, or accounts. Indeed, Benoit (1995) admits that “the complexity of human behavior, the pervasiveness of this activity, and the diversity of scholarly interests prevent me from making the claim that this theory is complete” (p. ix). Nevertheless, IRT has been widely adopted in the study of apologetic discourse.

Most notably with relation to the current study, Len-Ríos (2010) analyzed Duke University’s strategic use of communication to defend its image in the wake of a scandal involving its men’s lacrosse team. Three members of the team faced sexual assault charges after a hired dancer at a party accused them of raping her at that party. Len-Ríos employed IRT to analyze Duke’s strategic responses through 54 public statements, news releases, and documents. Results showed that Duke initially relied most on simple denial and mortification to defend its athletes, and engaged in bolstering, corrective action, separation, and attacking one’s accuser to defend the university’s reputation. Similarly, Barnett (2008) underscored the public relations challenge Duke faced with regard to its
academic and athletic integrity. Worthington (2005) further stresses the significance of university public relations in a case study of a private Catholic college in the western U.S. facing similar allegations of sexual abuse. Although her study does not specifically address image repair strategies, it is nonetheless an important comparison to the current study because of her analysis of the way the media framed the scandal. Kummerfeldt (1975) wrote of university public relations that:

In fact, “image” is a concept that has brought the term “credibility gap” into the nation’s lexicon. Two presidents have left office in the last decade, due in part to this failure of their “image” to match reality. The public no longer accepts statements by individuals or institutions at face value. Newspapers, radio, television, and magazines, acting as information gatherers on the public behalf, certainly don’t accept self-proclaimed “images.” (p. 6)

To be sure, in cases of apologia and image repair, audience reception plays a pivotal role in the way messages are received (McCleary, 1983). In order for an apologia to be necessary, it must be assumed that a salient audience (or audiences) must disapprove of the act performed by the individual or organization. What is most significant in this regard is the notion that “perceptions are more important than reality. The important point is not whether the business in fact is responsible for the offensive act, but whether the firm is thought to be responsible for it by the relevant audience” (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). As Kummerfeldt mentioned, the advent of new communication technologies and mediums complicates this process even more. Specifically, the next section will address key issues in new media that relate to audience composition in the
form of online communities, and how these audiences have begun to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate content at the expense of the Penn State apologia effort.

**Online and Participatory Cultures**

Unlike apologia and image repair theory, the concept of culture is much more resistant to definition. That is, cultural studies scholars have debated the merits of suitable explanations for culture for decades. One would assume that the varied components of these definitions reflect the varied composition of their subjects. The definition of culture is as much contested as the many examples of it that exist in reality. Nevertheless, it is important here to discuss and elaborate on the relevant definitions of culture as pertaining to the current research.

To begin, Raymond Williams (1958) once wrote that culture is ordinary.² Although a seemingly gross oversimplification of the concept, Williams’ use of the word “ordinary” is particularly challenging. If culture is ordinary, what makes it so? How does it achieve such a label? Williams offered an almost paradoxical explanation to these questions:

> Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings.

> Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience.

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² By “ordinary,” it is important to note that Williams is asserting that culture is not just the “high culture” of literary studies focusing on the canon. Instead, culture – to him – extends beyond these boundaries and well into the periphery.
contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. (p. 93)

This answer is inconsistent in that ordinary implies culture would be common to all, not constructed according to its own unique principles. To be ordinary, then, is to be relative. In other words, culture is largely dependent on the manifestation of ideas among a particular group of people. What may be true and ordinary for some may not be so for others. This makes any distinction between cultures remarkably difficult and, as a result, problematic.

To more thoroughly bridge the gap within the concept of cultural studies, I begin with Poster’s (2006) assertion that culture has become a problem for everyone, particularly within new media contexts: “What was once a safe ground of enquiry has shifted as if by some earthquake whose effects long went unmeasured on academic Richter scales. Culture is now an unstable terrain marked by the scars of two decades of discursive rumbles” (p. 134). The contestation over what culture is has led to further arguments over what culture can and cannot be; “culture has lost its boundary” (Poster, 2006, p. 134). Part of the reason for this is that the prevalence of the Internet and new media technologies have prompted researchers to reconsider culture as it pertains to online formations. “The difficulty is of course that the relationship between culture and technology is every bit as much a theoretical problem as it is a task of description, and technological practitioners are often unaware of the work performed by their own theoretical assumptions” (Slack & Wise, 2006, p. 141). As such, technology (specifically the Internet and new media) has potentially forced what we typically conceive of as
culture into an uncomfortable state of being. But, perhaps, an analysis of culture
necessitates a similar analysis of technology, given that technology will always be a part
of the context of everyday life. Thus, technology is ordinary and, by extension, an
element of culture.

The Internet and new media technologies create human communities that embody
the culture Williams explained at the beginning of this section. They are, to an extent,
societies with their own shapes, purposes, and meanings. They grow based on active
debates under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, thus writing
themselves into the land. The significant challenge rests in how the medium affects the
users it attracts and, by extension, the messages they create and share. It is precisely that
which the current study seeks to more thoroughly evaluate. In the wake of the Penn State
scandal, numerous online communities have spawned their own cultures that seemingly
either complement go against the messages that the university is trying to convey. In light
of these assertions, the remainder of this section will address (1) the form and function of
online communities and cultures and (2) the use of Internet memes as cultural artifacts.

Gradinaru (2011) makes an excellent observation when explaining that
researchers examining the concept of community in new media settings “are not dealing
with a classical notion, endowed with definite characteristics, but with a notion which
continuously requires its reinterpretation and revalorisation (sic)” (p. 143). This most
certainly embodies the recent debate surrounding online communities and cultures. The
focal point of which revolves around whether or not the technological divide potentially
undermines the validity of the community. Castells (2001), for one, argued that a
necessary step to understanding the new forms of social interaction in the age of the Internet is to redefine community by “de-emphasizing its cultural component, emphasizing its supportive role to individuals and families, and de-linking its social existence from a single kind of material support” (p. 127). Others argue that, in fact, digital communication and new media platforms enhance cultural participation (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Valtysson, 2010), and support the notion that “we are no longer interfacing to a computer but to culture encoded in digital form” (Manovich, 2001, p. 70). To be clear, for the purposes of this study, my perspective most prominently aligns with the latter.

The infrastructure allowing these new technologies to take shape has enhanced our ability to form communities. That is not to say that “new” media technologies have necessarily revolutionized the way we communicate, but rather have led us into yet another evolution as such. I agree with Jenkins (forthcoming) in that I do not presume “that new media platforms liberate people from old constraints but rather suggest the affordances of digital media provide a catalyst for reconceptualizing other aspects of culture…” (p. 10). In other words, it is now easier for individuals to express themselves online and find others that share similar perspectives on certain issues with the advent of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube than it was when communication was more one-directional.

This idea is best conceptualized through what Jenkins (2006a) calls participatory culture. He defines this phenomenon as “a culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (p. 331).
Jenkins argues that the top-down, bottom-up consumer-driven process of media convergence turns the power to create content over from corporate interests to grassroots consumers. This, then, changes the nature of the producer-consumer relationship and instead creates a hybrid entity known as the “prosumer.” Valtysson (2010) explained the concept neatly:

The interactive and participatory aspects of new media objects erode the distinction between artists and audience and offer a model which has been termed the rise of the prosumer, i.e. the consumer is simultaneously a producer.

Consumers have, of course, always been producers since they inevitably assign their own meaning to a work, but a digital culture greatly accelerates the actual material manifestation of interactive manipulation. (p. 205, emphasis in original)

This fusion of producer and consumer is a complement to Jenkins’ notion of participatory culture. It upends the traditional perception of audience members being inactive, passive recipients of mass-produced, one-size-fits-all communication. Rather, Jenkins (2006b) argues that participatory culture is taking shape at the intersection between three trends:

1. New tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, and recirculate media content;
2. A range of subcultures promote Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production, discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed those technologies; and
3. Economic trends favoring the horizontally integrated media conglomerates encourage the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship. (p. 135-136)

While there are many various ways users may engage in participatory culture, the next section will focus primarily on Internet memes as cultural artifacts being created, spread, manipulated, and reproduced.

The rise of digital technology and the Internet has fostered a new form of cultural media: the Internet meme (Chen, 2012). Originally coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) in his book, *The Selfish Gene*, the word “meme” describes the natural human spreading, replication, and modification of ideas and culture. The biological analogy to the gene comes into play based on the assumption that, like genes, memes are passed along from human to human through cultural evolution. He argues that “just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (p. 172). As such, a meme could be any cultural artifact including songs, jokes, articles of clothing, norms, traditions, etc., that are shared between people. Because these ideas all depend on the human mind to exist as well as to replicate (Danung & Holloway-Attaway, 2008), they embody the notion of participatory culture. Musello (1992) best articulates the movement of material culture such as memes:

> Things move. Through the course of their natural history they are fabricated, adapted, bought, sold, traded, stolen and given as gifts, perceived as relics,
“performed” as elements of ritual, manipulated in the negotiation of personal relationships, and presented in constantly evolving forms as symbols of locally and/or globally significant statuses. Objects “behave” (and “misbehave”) as instruments implicated in processes of interaction. They change as time or activity alters them, or as those using them come, by convention or inclination, to reinterpret and “see” them differently...In the process, the things with which we surround ourselves may, and commonly do, become inscribed with multiple valences of significance, with each level of meaning modifying the other. (p. 37)

Specifically, the Internet meme has attracted recent scholarly attention because of its importance as a cultural artifact in addition to its unprecedented ability to mutate and spread rapidly. Underwood and Wesler (2011) argue that as modes of social interaction shift towards online platforms and become more instantaneous, “the more our communities, our culture, our groups, and our identities are shaped by dynamics of computer mediated interaction” (p. 304). Thus, as online communities emerge, Internet memes serve as cultural artifacts that contribute to the creation of individual and collective group identities. The open dialogue of the Internet creates an ideal environment for large-scale meme creation, distribution, and circulation. Moreover, Internet memes are able to spread more rapidly than before. But the sheer volume of memes being spread online does not detract from their significance to the cultures they produce or reflect. Indeed, “memes are not treated here as isolated, discreet units, but as the building blocks of complex cultures, intertwining and interacting with each other” (Shifman, 2011, p.
Such is the case with the Facebook group *Penn State memes* as it relates to the current study and will be discussed further in the methods chapter of this project.

**Cultural Texts in Rhetoric and Cultural Studies**

The preceding discussions reflect two distinct traditions familiar to the field of communication studies: rhetorical analysis and cultural studies. The current research relies on both traditions to understand the phenomena under consideration. As the forthcoming methods chapter will discuss, the rhetorical tradition best suits an analysis of the Penn State apologia whereas a cultural studies perspective underpins the examination of online communities. Before expounding upon how each tradition will be operationalized in this research, it is important to first offer a conceptual link between the two. This effort proves to be a formidable challenge given that perhaps the most common link between the rhetorical and cultural studies traditions is their tendency to resist definition. Nevertheless, going forward it would be useful to identify the common ground upon which both rhetoric and culture stand in order to draw conclusions from both.

To begin, extant research suggests that *language* and *discourse* sit at the fulcrum connecting rhetorical analysis and cultural studies. Barker (2008) posits that language rests at the heart of cultural studies: “That is, language gives meaning to material objects and social practices that are brought into view by language and made intelligible to us in terms that language delimits” (p. 7). Ontologically, then, language defines what is and what is not. In a similar vein, Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, and Lair (2004) define rhetoric as “the humanistic tradition for the study of persuasion” (p. 79) identified primarily through discourse. In other words, humans make sense of the world by
identifying values within it and, as a result, all texts may then be interpreted for their
values. Sillars and Gronbeck (2001) clarify this connection by explaining that the
rhetorical tradition “has always been concerned with relationships between discourses
and their power to influence or control information, identity, beliefs, attitudes, values,
and behaviors” (p. 31) while the cultural tradition “is concerned with the production and
exchange of meanings – the ‘giving and taking’ of meaning – between members of a
society or group” (p. 31). Therefore, the language humans use is inherently value-laden
(rhetorical) and systematically shapes the way groups produce and exchange meaning
(cultural).

Moreover, this comparison becomes especially significant when positioned within
an organizational framework. “Rhetoric has its place here, however, and its heuristic
value is tied to its sensitivity to the uses and adaptations of language and other symbols,
particularly as they relate to various audiences” (Cheney & Lair, 2005, p. 56, emphasis
in original). Here, Weick’s (1979) concept of double-interact takes precedent as the
potentially instrumental link between rhetoric and cultural studies in this particular case.

The unit of analysis in organizing is contingent response patterns, patterns in
which an action by actor \( A \) evokes a specific response in actor \( B \) (so far this is an
interact), which is then responded to by actor \( A \) (this complete sequence is a
double interact). (p. 89).

These contingent response patterns must assume that (1) some form of rhetorical text has
been created through language and (2) that the text then prompts meaning making. This
process applies not only within organizations, but between and outside of them as well.
That is, accusations made against Penn State by various publics (i.e., cultures) for misconduct compel the university to respond (rhetorical apologia) which thereby elicits the subsequent readjustment by the accusers (memes and meaning making). To put it more plainly, Weick’s double-interact demonstrates similar characteristics to Newton’s third law of motion: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. For every discourse, there is oftentimes an equal and opposite discursive response as a result of language.

Of course, Weick’s double-interact and Newton’s third law of motion are fundamentally at odds with one another given that the former is grounded in the contingency of humanistic traditions while the latter derives validity through the scientific laws of physics. Nevertheless, this metaphor serves to forward the connection between rhetoric and cultural studies in that the focus on language, texts, and discourse exists at the heart of each; albeit with different outcomes. In other words, rhetorical analysis examines text and language and emphasizes the actions they inspire. Conversely, cultural studies situates text and language within larger assemblages of meaning (Hall, 1996). Sillars and Gronbeck (2001) tie this relationship together succinctly:

[Cultural studies], in the end, is connected in one direction with classical rhetorical criticism’s interest in the generally received opinions (doxa) that Aristotle understood were at the base of human decision making. But in the other direction it looks to ideological study, with values understood as tools of oppression, as constraints contingent upon thought and behavior – indeed, as
ideologies that can enslave one group of people to the will of more-powerful others. (p. 208)

**Summary**

In sum, it is important to stress that the three components of this literature are not separate parts of this project. To be sure, a systematic relationship exists among them. That is, organizational action (apologia) attempts to persuade people, but provokes an individual response through online and participatory culture. However, the meaning of that response and, in turn, the original action, is determined within a community through its interpretation of cultural texts. My approach to understanding this relationship is discussed in the following methodology chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

This chapter outlines the three-phase research design for the current study. Given that the focus of this research is directed towards analyzing both organizational image repair strategies as well as audience reception of those strategies, a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena can only be gained through extensive observation and critical evaluation. As such, the methodological approach to the current study is divided into three distinct phases each applied across five examples: (1) the rhetorical analysis of an official Penn State University apologetic response, (2) the textual analysis of a meme corresponding to the university response, and (3) a virtual ethnography of the specific online community that generated and circulated, and responded to the various memes.

Sample Selection

Before discussing each phase in detail, it is important to first outline the selection process of the responses, memes, and communities being examined. To be sure, the scandal at Penn State has dramatically expanded in scope and severity since it first became public in November 2011. This has made it difficult to limit the time frame for analysis with regard to this study. However, despite ongoing investigations and continued skepticism facing Penn State in the wake of the scandal, I have identified several significant events over the course of the nine months between the time news of the scandal was first broke and July 2012 when NCAA sanctions were handed down to the university’s football program. Each of these five events elicited an official university response. Each university response, then, elicited a subsequent response from various
online communities that have developed around their own collective interests regarding the scandal. The five events include: (1) the initial news of the scandal, (2) the Board of Trustee’s decision to fire former Head Coach Joe Paterno, (3) the Sandusky trial, (4) the removal of the Paterno statue outside of Beaver Stadium and (5) the NCAA sanctions imposed on the Penn State football program and athletic department. Each of these scenarios will be addressed individually by applying the three-phase design discussed above.

These events were chosen based on several criteria. First, each event must be significant to the scandal and, particularly, hold potential to damage the Penn State image. By itself, this criterion would most certainly produce a more comprehensive list of events than those listed above. Surely the Penn State scandal writ large cannot readily be reduced to five distinct events. However, in lieu of offering a direct measurement of the most significant events in terms of media exposure, feedback, and sentiment through any sort of analytic software or quantitative data analysis, this research is somewhat limited by the availability of memetic responses. For example, while the firing of Graham Spanier was a pivotal moment in time during the scandal, no meme responding to this action exists on the Penn State memes Facebook page and therefore was not chosen for consideration.

Therefore, the second criterion for selection of these events is that there be a corresponding meme acting as a response to the official Penn State message. This creates a dyadic relationship between the apologetic strategy and the memetic response. Each dyad, then, is examined as a pair.
Finally, each of these events was chosen based on its significance to the scandal and, particularly, its potential to damage the Penn State image. As previously mentioned, the scandal writ large encompasses a much broader chronology of events that contributed to its significance. The events selected for analysis, while not exhaustive, do provide a starting point from which to begin.

Each meme was selected for analysis according to similar criteria as discussed above regarding the chosen events. First, the meme had to correspond to an event that the university had officially responded to. Second, each meme had to have been selected from the Penn State memes Facebook page in order to provide consistency in the sample. Third, the meme needed to demonstrate the potential to damage or repair the image of the university in light of the event it represented.

The Penn State memes Facebook page was chosen because it constitutes an online community with a vested interest in the affairs of Penn State University. At the time of this research, the page has accumulated 27,163 “likes” and generated or hosted 678 memes related to Penn State. Of those 678 memes, 89 (13.13%) were directly related to the scandal in some way. A more thorough description of the Penn State memes page will be provided in the analysis chapter of the thesis, as ethnographic observation (discussed below) calls for thick description of the community being observed.

Analytics

Rhetorical analysis of Penn State responses. Given the centrality of public address and persuasion inherent within the concept and process of apologia, it is methodologically appropriate to approach instances of public self-defense through a
rhetorical lens. It is equally important to note, however, that no singular, universal analytic method with regard to rhetorical criticism exists. Although many precedents and frameworks have been set forth through nearly two millennia prior to approach rhetoric, rhetorical criticism today remains largely subjective. The challenge, then, rests in the critic’s ability and authority to critique. As Edwin Black (1965) famously noted: “Thus, the modern critic has assumed the burden of not only understanding and evaluating the products of human effort, but also of defining and delimiting the nature of his own criticism” (p. 2). The varying approaches to analyzing apologetic discourse coupled with the relatively unstructured methodological approach of rhetorical criticism presents a particularly interesting challenge.

Nevertheless, the rhetorical analysis of apologia and image repair is not an altogether amorphous undertaking. Lloyd Bitzer’s (1966) analysis of the “rhetorical situation” aids in this regard. Specifically, Bitzer offers a definition of the context in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse: “It is clear that situations are not always accompanied by discourse. Nor should we assume that a rhetorical address gives existence to the situation; on the contrary, it is the situation which calls the discourse into existence” (p. 2). This perspective on the rhetorical situation closely aligns with Ryan’s (1982) kategoria-apologia theory in which an accusation precedes apologia; a scenario in which the situation calls the discourse into being.

This study, in particular, will focus primarily on what Richard Crable (1990) calls the fourth great system: organizational rhetoric. From this perspective, “discourse is produced by organizations, not individuals” (p. 117). In other words, Crable perceives the
organization as a rhetorical being capable of gaining support through intermediaries or spokespersons that are themselves reflections of the organization. Such is the case with Penn State’s apologia. Looking at organizational responses from the university through a rhetorical perspective (specifically organizational) offers unique insight into how an organization addresses the rhetorical situation of kategoria-apologia. Using this method, I will draw heavily on prior research on both rhetorical theory and apologia/image repair theories to substantiate my claims. Specifically, rhetorical analysis will be employed when examining the five official university responses selected as discussed above.

**Textual analysis of memes.** The second phase of the research design will aid in the analysis of memes, mash-ups, and parodies that were created in reaction to official Penn State responses. In examining the five selected user-generated responses to the Penn State apologia, I will use textual analysis to uncover the underlying relationships between social events, social practices, and social structures (Fairclough, 2003) within online communities as they relate to the scandal. Conceiving memes, mash-ups, or parodies as texts, however, is a relatively new undertaking (Chen, 2012; Danung & Holloway-Attaway, 2008; Shifman, 2011; Underwood & Wesler, 2011). Chen (2012) argues that “the Internet meme as an online community’s cultural artifact actually helps to illuminate how they express values and share interests, which then leads to the fostering of critical judgment in the membership and even creation of political action” (p. 7). Thus, as texts, user-generated content holds tremendous potential rhetorical force.

To be sure, however, none of the “texts” in this case constitute any sort of harmonious whole. We must therefore consider them fragments of the cultures they
represent (McGee, 1990). The manner in which these particular texts are produced and spread through online communities problematizes the traditional notion of what a text is. Nevertheless, McGee (1990) aids in our understanding of this fragmentation process and how it relates to memes as texts: “The unity and structural integrity we used to put in our texts as they faithfully represented nature is now presumed to be in us ourselves” (p. 287, emphasis in original). I agree with this assertion and contend that the concepts of intertextuality and intertextual interanimation (Ott & Walter, 2000; Solomon, 1993) further justify this position. More specifically, Still and Worton (as cited in Solomon, 1993) contend that because works are only available through reading or hearing, what is produced by the recipient is “due to the cross-fertilization of the packaged textual material (say, a book) by all the texts which the reader brings to it” (p. 66). In other words, memes operate at a level that extends beyond the traditional “text” by relying on bits and pieces of preexisting texts that have been mashed up and (re)interpreted by their authors to take on an entirely new meaning. The intertextuality of memes therefore accounts for their ability to persevere in an ever-changing and dynamic online landscape. Nevertheless, “things tend to stick around if they are interactive or something people can copy and remix” (Ulaby, 2012, paragraph 19).

Because the texts under analysis in this study are so easily spread, I agree with Solomon (1993) in that we should further “explore the polysemic nature of works and how varied the supportable interpretations of works can be” (p. 64). More simply, individuals derive meaning from texts more so than an author prescribes it. Audiences, in instances such as these, “unconsciously create meaning by utilizing their vast knowledge
of cultural codes learned from other texts to read a particular text” (Ott & Walter, 2000, p. 429). Thus, based on what they know from official releases from Penn State, individuals within the online communities that produce these texts potentially interpret them apart from what the authors of the memes intended.

Since my selection of text for this research revolves around still image memes and thus requires an element of visual interpretation as well, it is important to indicate that I draw from visual cultural analysis with regard to the memes, too. As Hariman and Lucaites (2003) explain, visual practices in the public media play an important role in the collective representations that are the materials of public culture. “The daily stream of photojournalistic images, while merely supplemental to the task of reporting the news, defines the public through an act of common spectatorship” (p. 36). Such is the case with the Penn State memes. While memes may serve the supplemental task of reporting the scenario at Penn State, they are ultimately reflections of public sentiment created through participatory culture.

As such, I seek to offer my own interpretation of the texts based on similar justifications. To that end, I agree with Hardin et al. (2009) in that my purpose in doing so is neither to present my analysis as the most accurate “retelling” of the text nor to assume that my particular interpretation is the best way to read it. Instead, their citation of Dow (1996) proves beneficial in that, “criticism as an argumentative activity in which the goal is to persuade the audience that knowledge of a text will be enriched if they choose to see a text as [I do]” (p. 4).
Furthermore, textual analysis will closely relate to the final phase of this methodological approach. I offer Hine’s (2000) elaboration on an inclusive view of texts in ethnographic research as a preview of the next section:

Rather than being seen as more or less accurate portrayals of reality, texts should be seen as ethnographic material which tells us about the understanding which authors have of the reality they inhabit. Texts are an important part of life in many of the settings which ethnographers now address, and to ignore them would be a highly impartial account of cultural practices. (p. 51)

Each meme was first situated in response to a specific Penn State image repair strategy. For example, as indicated through the text in the “Condescending Wonka” (Knowyourmeme.com, 2012) meme below, this image was created in response to the university’s decision to remove the statue of Paterno from just outside the football stadium grounds in July 2012.

Once the relationship to the official Penn State response has been established, the next step of the textual analysis is to provide commentary on what the image means in terms of (1) content and composition, (2) aesthetics, (3) tone, and (4) underlying message of the meme as it relates to the organizational response. Again, the purpose behind examining these memes revolves around their capacity to generate collective meaning about (which may potentially undermine or substantiate) Penn State responses to allegations of wrongdoing among one specific online community. By isolating the individual memes and applying the procedure detailed above to each, my goal is to
Oh you want Paterno's statue torn down?

I'm sure that will significantly improve the lives of Sandusky's victims.

Figure 3.1. Condescending Wonka meme sample.
uncover and highlight recurrent patterns of discourse that are created in response to organizational apologia.

The third phase of analysis will involve virtual ethnography. According to Clifford Geertz (1973) the traditional concept of cultural analysis through ethnography is fairly straightforward: “There is a culture out there and your job is to come back and tell us what it is” by offering a “thick description” of it. As a methodology, traditional ethnography assumes that a researcher gains access to a particular culture and examines it through varying degrees of observation and participation in order to shed light on its communication, practices, beliefs, etc.

A recent shift in ethnographic research revolves around technological innovations like the Internet. Christine Hine (2004) champions the idea of ‘virtual ethnography’ by arguing that “as the Internet becomes more and more embedded into everyday life, social research will have to come to terms with it in order to achieve its goals of effectively researching and portraying everyday life.” In other words, conducting ethnographic research on the Internet should yield similar results with regard to social understanding of a culture as conducting ethnographic research in the traditional sense.

As one might expect, virtual ethnography has been a highly contested methodological approach. At the epicenter of this debate is the conception of “fieldwork” as it moves from the field in a traditional sense to the Internet. Wittel (2000) highlights four problems that arise from this shift. First, the validity of data on the Internet users is problematic in that the accuracy of information about age, gender, nationality, etc. cannot be adequately checked. Second, participant observation – the core of ethnographic
inquiry – is difficult to achieve if the researcher cannot observe ‘real people.’ Third, the issue of examining connections in a networked society is “an impoverished and one-dimensional way to represent and express social ties.” Fourth, the displacement between the ethnographer and a physical field results in a lack of a common physical context. Sade-Beck (2004) suggests that no clear link to the “real world” means that virtual ethnography “cannot be the sole source of data as it provides only a partial and limited picture” (p. 48) making it difficult to obtain a thick description of a culture. Furthermore, Wilson and Peterson (2002) argue that studying new media through ethnography is a fleeting endeavor:

> The disparate approaches to new media and Internet studies also reflect the ephemeral nature of the new media, the often elusive and ambiguous constructions of individual and collective identities mediated by these technologies, and the problem of gaining and ontological footing within rapidly obsolescing technologies. (p. 451)

Advocates of virtual ethnography have begun to address the many benefits to studying online communities. Beaulieu (2004) claims that “technological mediation serves as a protective barrier between the object and the researcher as subject” (p. 146). That is, the accessibility of the Internet offers researchers a unique benefit in that their presence does not disturb the natural order of things. This also means that the researcher does not have to expend precious time by relegating oneself to the field for any prolonged period. This ties in nicely with one of Hine’s (2000) principles of virtual ethnography in that “the shaping of interactions with informants by the technology is part of the
ethnography, as are the ethnographer’s interaction with technology” (p. 65). If we truly have adopted technology into our everyday lives, it is important that we not only account for the implications as such for the real world, but also strive to understand how the Internet becomes socially meaningful in and of itself. Moreover, proponents of virtual ethnography argue that the division between online and offline worlds undermines our potential to understand them both. For instance, Driscoll and Gregg (2010) posit that the reifying binary of the real/virtual distinction should be “rejected as unhelpful (not to mention passé)” (p. 17).

For the purposes of the current study, my aim was to immerse myself into an online community with an interest in the Penn State scandal. Specifically, the Facebook group with the title Penn State memes – the site where all of the texts subject to analysis were found – was my primary field of study. While the Penn State memes Facebook page is not solely dedicated to the scandal (rather, it is a site primarily consisting of what is presumably Penn State students commenting on various facets of university life), many of the memes created on this page during the time span I analyzed them had to do with scandal. This observation reflects the significance of the scandal to the Penn State culture. To be clear, my primary focus relied heavily on examining artifacts that had to do with the Penn State scandal and the various conversations around them.

Summary

This chapter has provided a general overview of the research design for the current study. In sum, three methods (rhetorical analysis, textual analysis, and virtual ethnography) were each applied across five events (the breaking of the scandal, Paterno’s
firing, the Sandusky verdict, the removal of the Paterno statue, and the imposition of NCAA sanctions) in an effort to more fully understand how participatory culture operates in response to organizational apologia. The following chapter will put this design into action through analysis of each event.
CHAPTER FOUR
ANALYSIS OF EVENTS

This chapter is divided into five events related to the Penn State sex scandal: (1) former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky’s arrest and the breaking of the news, (2) the firing of former head football coach Joe Paterno, (3) the verdict of the Sandusky trial, (4) the removal of the Paterno statue outside of Beaver Stadium, and (5) the imposition of NCAA sanctions on Penn State’s football program. Each of these events had a significant impact on the image of The Pennsylvania State University’s image.

In light of this, each event is then analyzed across three levels. First, a rhetorical analysis of the official Penn State response is conducted. The goal of this level of analysis is to examine and interpret the functions (Downey, 1993) of apologia. That is, instead of relying on simply the structural and stylistic components of each response to understand the rhetorical postures Penn State adopts, this study seeks to more thoroughly explain the functions of apologia which “constitutes its meaning...to satisfy collective needs” (Downey, 1993, p. 43).

Second, textual analysis is used to uncover the underlying message behind memes created in response to the official Penn State stance on each event. That is, each event presents an official response and an accompanying meme to the response. The purpose of the textual analysis is to address the meme in terms of its aesthetic structure, content, and tone. More specifically, textual analysis – in this context – functions as either surrogate apologia or kategoria (Ryan, 1982) in an apologia scenario.
Finally, I intend to shed light on the role of the only community and participatory culture in organizational apologia through virtual ethnography. Through this, my ultimate goal is to highlight emergent themes of ignorance and morality as they relate to the values and emotions of those within the online Penn State community.

**Event 1 – Sandusky arrested/Scandal Breaks**

Former Assistant Football Coach Jerry Sandusky was arrested on November 5, 2011 on charges of sexually abusing eight boys over a 15-year period. He was arraigned and released on a $100,000 bail after being charged with 40 counts. Former university officials Gary Schultz and Tim Curley were charged with perjury and failure to report what they knew of the allegations.

**Statement by The Pennsylvania State University Board of Trustees**

Three days later, the university’s Board of Trustees issued a statement condemning the allegations surrounding Sandusky and promised “swift, decisive action” to be taken against all those involved. But perhaps the most telling turn of phrase in the announcement comes from its very first sentence: “The Board of Trustees of The Pennsylvania State University is outraged by the horrifying details contained in the Grand Jury Report.” Of particular interest in this claim is the word *outraged* to describe the overarching sentiment the BOT ascribes to the situation. Of course, this seems a natural response given the severity of the context. However, giving such prominence to a feeling of *outrage* in the first sentence of the statement seems peculiar when considering the wide range of emotions a scenario such as this might arouse. Of all possible sensations, why was extreme anger the first to be reported?
Perhaps the most telling answer to that question comes from the winter of 2011, when former Head Football Coach Joe Paterno, Former University President Graham Spanier, Shultz, and Curley were summoned by the grand jury to testify in its investigation against Sandusky. Although their appearance was reported by The Patriot-News in a March 31 article indicating Sandusky was the subject of a grand jury investigation, no official report was ever made of their involvement to the BOT. Moreover, after a trustee who read the article inquired about the investigation, Spanier briefed the trustees but did not raise any issue of its potential impact on the university and the board took no action to investigate further until Sandusky’s arrest on November 5. The question then becomes to whom is the outrage directed? Sandusky for his actions? Paterno, Spanier, Shultz, and Curley for their deflection of the severity of the issue? Or the Board of Trustees itself for not pressing more fully to understand the gravity of the situation?

As the statement continues, it becomes more clear that the Board of Trustees makes a conscious decision to distance itself and the university from these allegations. The outrage, then, is not directed toward itself (or anyone associated with it, for that matter) but rather exclusively toward Sandusky. The BOT “cannot begin to express the combination of sorrow and anger that we feel about the allegations surrounding Jerry Sandusky. We hear those of you who feel betrayed and we want to assure all of you that the Board will take swift, decisive action.” In line with Benoit’s (1995) typology, the BOT here shifts the blame to Sandusky and promises corrective action. The statement goes on to elaborate on the Board’s plan to appoint a Special Committee to investigate
the circumstances that gave rise to the grand jury report and further pledges that Penn
State “has always strived for honesty, integrity and the highest moral standards in all of
its programs...[and] will not tolerate any violation of these principles.”

What is most unique about this statement is the fact that no actual apology is ever
made. Instead, the Board of Trustees merely acknowledges its anger toward the situation
and promises to hold those involved accountable for their actions. However, by not
holding itself accountable for any event leading up to Sandusky’s arrest, the BOT’s
rhetoric reflects what Downey (1993) calls “contradictory, self-serving motives [that]
masks moral responsibility, exploits audience ignorance and emotions while championing
the same values breached by the apologist” (p. 58) which by its own nature thereby
“undermines facts and accuracy and shuns the confrontation of issues” (p. 58). The net
effect then becomes the “rhetoric of manipulation” (p. 58) and is characteristic of
Downey’s claim that contemporary apologia functions as self-deception.

While, of course, defending one’s image by shifting the blame, promising
corrective action, and reifying the apologist’s good nature are by no means new strategies
to image repair, but these methods take on new meaning when the underlying motives
behind them become self-serving and manipulative.

**Memetic Response: “You must know so much about Penn State”**

As reporters and journalists converged on State College, they “kicked ongoing TV
coverage of the story in the mainstream media into high gear” (McCarthy, 2011,
paragraph 1). Starting on the Monday following the first reports of the story, all three
national network morning shows (NBC’s Today, CBS’ The Early Show, and ABC’s
“Good Morning America” and ESPN held continuous coverage of the scandal throughout the week. The scandal held prominent position in news broadcasts for weeks following its outset. This, coupled with the sheer magnitude of the story itself, prompted the Board of Trustees to make the announcement examined above. What’s more, the coverage of the story prompted millions of Americans to change their perceptions of the university and its football program. Thus, the media involvement at this stage of the scandal serves as the link between the Penn State response and the meme under examination here.

For instance, the media coverage of the event continued down to social media in the form of a meme. Specifically, this meme (Figure 2) is a variation of the “Condescending Wonka” meme that features a screen capture of actor Gene Wilder in the 1971 musical *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. The image of Wilder (Wonka) situates the character as the primary focal point of the meme. Wilder’s eyes, however, deflect attention away from the character to the figure of what appears to be the back of a child’s head in the right side of the image. Wilder seems to be making direct eye contact with the child while his head rests upon the knuckles of his cupped hand and his disposition holds a wry grin. The look evokes feelings of condescension and therefore, according to knowyourmeme.com, “as its name suggests, the captions [on the meme] can be characterized as patronizing and sarcastic.” This implication parallels Wonka’s character in the film; his dismissive personality was the inspiration for these memes. The captions on each Condescending Wonka meme are separated at the top and bottom of the image, leaving Wilder’s face between them to serve as a partition of sorts.
Figure 4.1 – “Condescending Wonka” TV meme.
The top caption of this particular meme reads: Oh, you own a TV? The bottom caption then contends: You must know so much about Penn State. Holding to the premise that these captions are intended to be read sarcastically, an initial reading of them invites one to question the direction of the sarcasm. In other words, to whom is Wonka condescending?

Drawing from the contextual factors discussed above, it is presumably safe to assume that the sarcasm is directed toward those that consumed the media reports of the scandal. More specifically, it is a defense mechanism employed to disenfranchise those who rely on media to formulate their opinions of Penn State without having any vested interest or prior knowledge of what the university and its culture stands for. The message evokes a subtle “in-group, out-group” motif that seemingly aligns with the official response by the Board of Trustees. Whereas the Board was much more elaborate and descriptive in its defense, the meme seems more emotionally charged.

In a sense, the text and accompanying image of the meme create a separation between those that know Penn State and those that do not. Going one step further, the condescension of the meme implies that those that know Penn State are better than those that do not. It calls into question the naivety of the subject of the sarcastic attack. For instance, in the image itself, Wilder is making direct eye contact with the child. From this, we can infer that Wonka represents the “Penn Staters” whereas the child embodies the faceless Penn State attacker.

What is especially significant in this meme is that the attack seems twofold. While the message itself targets those that consume mediated coverage of the story, it also
implicates the media for not being able to tell the whole story. In other words, again adhering to the sarcastic tone, the media is incapable of capturing what Penn State really is. Although careful not to reveal the true nature of Penn State, one might argue that meme echoes the Board of Trustee’s description of the real Penn State as being characterized by having “always strived for honesty, integrity, and the highest moral standards in all its programs.”

**Online Community: “It’s scary how stupid people are”**

In contrast to the sarcastic attack against media consumers and producers evident in the meme, contributors to the image’s message thread are more direct in their accusations. More specifically, a thematic of ignorance emerges through closer examination of the patterns of interaction here. This is done in two ways. First, those defending Penn State accuse those attacking it for blindly following along with media reports of the story. They vehemently contend that the university is much more than the actions of one man (Sandusky) and further argue that no one outside of Penn State can understand what happens at there. Second, those attacking Penn State posit that those defending it are blind to the “facts” of the story. Each of these positions will be examined sequentially.

To begin, supporting Penn State comes with a cost. In the wake of the scandal, those with a vested interest in the university (and those willing to defend it) were faced with the difficult task of overcoming an overwhelmingly negative public sentiment regarding its reputation writ large. Many believed that this was due in large part to the
media misrepresenting the story and the naivety of the public to believe it. One contributor commented:

> It’s not about football. I’m tired of the ignorance of individuals who think they know what’s going on because of what they saw on the news. The entire school’s reputation is now tarnished...I’m in Boston and I get people asking me, “how can you support that school...how can you wear that shirt??” It’s scary how stupid people are.

This post brings three important issues to light. First, it argues that the scandal transcends the football culture at Penn State. One of the more common accusations made against the university has revolved around the notion that the community and its officials were more interested in the football program and its success than the lives of the Sandusky victims. This is a common reaction by many Penn State supporters on the memes page; it becomes a burden on them to constantly combat this sentiment – so much so that the Penn State memes Facebook page cover photo was changed to an image of the revealing moment during the Penn State fundraiser known as “Thon” which raises money for children with cancer. The cover photo was posted on February 21, 2013 and resulted in a speedy accumulation of “likes.” More specifically, however, this particular post reframes that defensive mentality by forwarding – even justifying – the idea that the scandal is not about football, but something more profound.

Second, it overtly attacks the media and its consumers by using words like “ignorant” and “stupid” to describe them. This mirrors the overall sentiment toward the media on the Penn State memes page in general. Individuals consistently berate the media
for its involvement to the scandal to the extent that several memes were created in response to how poorly it was received within this particular community. This meme was chosen for analysis above the others, however, because of how heated the conversations became. No other meme related to the media sparked such immediate, intense debate. Within minutes of this meme being posted, the conversation began.

Third, it indicates that the scandal is not geographically constrained. Even in Boston people are attacking this particular poster for her support of the university. Another contributor presents similar experiences of ridicule and shame:

...And to all those who say we are hurt over football please wear a penn state shirt in public and actually feel and see the people stare at you. This is bigger than just football. My investment of THOUSANDS of dollars in my education has been tarnished.

Whereas the first post was more defensive, this one articulates a more neutral stance. While the statement implies that she has felt the persecution and consequent guilt associated with wearing Penn State apparel or otherwise supporting the school, it also suggests that as a result of negative press and public sentiment her education has been tarnished. Interestingly, it is not just the reputation of the school that has felt the sting of criticism; rather, those that have attended the university feel as though their personal educations have been directly affected by the circumstances. Their attachment to the university is so inextricably linked to the individual’s very being such to the extent that an attack against it may very well be considered an attack against the individual.
Conversely, those attacking Penn State consider those supporting it to be ignorant of the university’s failure to protect children from Sandusky. They pursue the position that supporters are blind to the truth because of their irrational support for the organization. The first comment in response to the meme is one that echoes the sarcastic nature of it:

*Oh, you go to Penn State? You must know everything that goes on there. Oh wait...*

Here, the comment counters the meme by suggesting that even if someone attends the university, they know little more than anyone else who owns a television and has followed the narrative. It breaks apart the argument that the media has misrepresented the story on the grounds that the university itself has distorted its involvement (or lack thereof) in the scandal. After having been rebuked for his comment, the contributor that posted this comment then began the following interaction:

**Contributor 1:** *Oh, so a bunch of children weren’t molested by a former PSU employee, and numerous high ranking figures at PSU didn’t know about it, and it didn’t take over 20 years for everyone to know about it?*

**Contributor 2:** *I didn’t....a case was brought back in ’98, e.g. not 20 years.*

**Contributor 3:** *He’s right, it was only FOURTEEN years of child rape cover-ups, therefor its ok.*

Rife with sarcasm, this exchange embodies the consensus among those attacking the Penn State supporters and simultaneously highlights their ignorance.
By analyzing the first event – the breaking of the news story – as I have done, three themes begin to emerge. First, the Penn State response seems to correspond to Downey’s (1993) notion that contemporary apologia functions as self-deception. This is done through the university’s reaffirmed commitment to high moral standards despite actually apologizing for their failures to adhere to them. Second, the memetic responses elicited from the official Penn State response fall into one of two camps: (1) surrogate apologists/defenders or (2) accusers. The meme acts as a reflection of the sentiment toward the original Penn State image repair strategy employed. As a surrogate, the meme can supplement the original defense or, as an accusation, can serve as the *categoria* (or attack) further compounding the university’s image dilemma. Finally, the online community serves as a breeding ground for both ignorance and larger discussions of morality around the event.

**Event 2 – Former Head Coach Joe Paterno Fired**

On the night of November 10, 2011, the Penn State Board of Trustees held a press conference at which they announced that former head football coach Joe Paterno and former university president Graham Spanier would be fired. Amid growing furor over how the university had handled the sex-abuse allegations, the BOT discussed their decision to fire Paterno and Spanier in front of a large contingent of journalists and public bystanders. Paterno, who had served as the Nittany Lions’ head coach for 46 years prior, was not present at the press conference, but rather was informed of his termination over the phone prior to the event.
Statement by the Pennsylvania State University Board of Trustees

Despite the BOT’s intentions to improve the university’s standing with the public in the wake of such a significant scandal by firing Paterno, a closer examination of the response again suggests that contemporary apologia functions as self-deception. This is primarily the result of three rhetorical strategies employed by the BOT during the press conference. First, the BOT reaffirms of the university’s morals and values without having actually admitted to a cultural failure of those morals and values. Second, the firing of Paterno stems from Burke’s (1973) explanation of scapegoating to purge the guilt that represents an undesirable state of affairs that ultimately serves to undermine the BOT’s credibility in firing him. Third, the BOT adopted Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) stance of transcendence by positioning the university’s long-term well being as the explanation for having acted quickly and decisively with regard to Paterno. Each of these rhetorical devices lend themselves to the function of self-deception, and will be addressed sequentially.

At the beginning of the press conference, Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees John Surma was introduced as the figurehead of the organization for the duration of the event. Surma began the press conference by indicating that the BOT had decided in a change of leadership to more adequately handle the escalating situation. He initially indicated that former president Spanier and the BOT had mutually decided that he no longer retain that position. Moreover, Surma then indicated, “Joe Paterno is no longer the head football coach, effective immediately.” This news was greeted with several angry outbursts from members of the audience.
Without breaking stride, however, Surma first went on to defend and reaffirm Penn State’s commitment to maintain “honesty, integrity, and the highest moral standards in all of our activities. We promise you that we are committed to restoring public trust to our university.” This statement, while ultimately intended toward the self-defense of the university, is nevertheless ineffectual. Even though this statement is clearly an attempt to realign the organization’s moral standing in a more favorable light, it does little to satisfy anything substantive. More accurately, this statement satisfies little other than what Downey (1993) would classify as “vague chronologies of events which added no new information, testimonials, and visible lack of argument, detail, or evidence” (p. 57).

Indeed, reiterating the assumption that Penn State holds itself to high moral standards only complicates the scenario given the severity to which it failed in upholding them.

Second, the BOT’s decision to fire Paterno calls into consideration Burke’s (1973) conception of the role guilt plays within the human drama. Burke explains that there are two fundamental processes people employ for expunging guilt: victimage (scapegoating or shifting the blame) and mortification (admission of wrong-doing and request for forgiveness). It is clear from this statement that the BOT adopted the process of victimage by using Paterno as its “vessel” (p. 39) for the transference of the burden of guilt. Benoit (1995) explains that “the recipient of this guilt is the victim of this process, and, if the process is successful, guilt is shifted from the rhetor to the victim and the rhetor’s reputation is cleansed” (p. 18). Within this context, then, Penn State fired Paterno in an attempt to transfer responsibility of guilt to him rather than sacrificing itself and accepting the wrongdoing that it was ultimately responsible for as an organization. By
singling out Paterno as perpetrator, the BOT deceives itself (and, consequently its audience) into believing the university writ large was somehow less responsible for the scandal than it was as an organization.

Third, the BOT adopts a rhetorical stance of transcendence (Ware & Linkugel, 1973) whereby it “joins some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship with some larger context within which the audience does not presently view that attribute” (p. 280). This strategy functions to “move the audience away from the particulars of the charge at hand to a more abstract, general view” (p. 280). This concept was actualized during the press conference when Surma discussed the BOT’s hopes for how this news would be perceived:

*I would hope that our students, we would hope that everyone who cares about Penn State - our 95000 students, our hundreds of thousands of alumni, the thousands of degrees which get awarded each year, our outreach for agriculture in every county of the commonwealth – I would hope that everyone would agree that what we’re doing is what we believe in our best judgment is in the best long-term interest of the university which is much larger than athletic programs.*

This statement invites the audience to reframe Paterno’s firing into a good thing for the university in the long-term. It places the tangible actions of the present into a more abstract consideration of a better future. By once again reaffirming the many positive attributes about Penn State, the BOT announcement redirects the focus of the scandal to other issues outside of the university.
Each of these rhetorical strategies embodies the “rhetoric of manipulation” (Downey, 1993, p. 58) which “reflects contradictory, self-serving motives” (p. 58) and masks moral responsibility. Under the given circumstances, despite their adherence to the structural components of the genre of apologia and image repair theory, these strategies rather undermine the university’s attempts to defend itself against accusations of misconduct. This is evident through the memetic response elicited from this announcement, which is addressed next.

“Gets Fired Over the Phone...Donates 100 Grand to the School a Month Later”

In the 46 years that Paterno served as head coach for the Penn State football program, he had become an iconic figure within the community. With his firing, however, he quickly became one of the more polarizing figures at the heart of the scandal. While the BOT voted unanimously to relieve Paterno of his duties, students rioted in the streets of State College in protest. This outpouring of emotion escalated just as quickly on social media as well. Further complicating the reaction to his firing, Paterno and his wife, Sue, donated $100,000 to the university mere weeks after his termination. From this, the meme responding to his firing was posted to the Penn State Memes Facebook page on February 10, 2012. Whereas the first meme analyzed acted as a surrogate apologist for the university, this meme (Figure 3) takes a more accusatory stance against the university for having fired Paterno.

The meme under consideration here is different from the others in this research in that it does not follow a commonly ascribed pattern. That is, unlike the “Condescending Wonka” meme discussed previously, the image used in this one is not recurrent in other
Figure 4.2 – Paterno meme.
contexts. Instead, the meme is simply an image of Paterno with captions above and below his face. This seems appropriate given the unique circumstances surrounding the event it addresses; a one-of-a-kind event elicits a one-of-a-kind meme. In the image, Paterno is wearing a shirt and tie covered by a jacket with the Penn State Nittany Lion logo embroidered on it. He is outside and coaching during a football game. His wire-rimmed glasses rest heavily on his nose. Above his head, a caption reads: “Gets fired over the phone.” Below his chin, it continues: “Donates 100 grand to the school a month later.” Again, unlike the first meme analyzed which acted as a surrogate apologist for Penn State, this meme invokes an ironic twist that portrays Paterno as the victim of the BOT’s decision to fire him in an attempt to cover up its own mishandling of the scandal.

The simple narrative employed by the meme is one that is intended to portray Paterno as having been wrongfully blamed for the scandal. It speaks to highlight the legend of Paterno, not the scapegoat. His legacy as a coach at the school is only strengthened among his supporters by his philanthropic efforts. The tone of the meme articulates an indictment against the university and BOT for having fired him without appropriate justification for doing so. As such, this meme acts rather as another accusation against Penn State following its initial response to the event. What’s more, this meme spread across Facebook quickly with 2,282 “likes” and 171 “shares.”

“I’m used to arguing with sheep”

Following news of Paterno’s firing, the entire page was abuzz with memes and posts that condemned the university for what was happening. Disbelief, shock, and horror

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3 The caption of the image on the Penn State memes Facebook reads, simply: “the legend.”
at this turn of events prompted many within the community to litter the site with profanity much the same way they took to the streets of State College. In a similar vein, many resorted to taking out their frustration in the form of memes by posting them to the main board of the page. The hours and days following Paterno’s firing resulted in seven memes that directly criticized the university for firing him.

As the meme with the most comments in this analysis (160 total), the conversation in this particular community revealed similar themes including (1) ignorance, (2) morality, and (3) being a “Penn Stater.” Each of these three themes will be addressed here sequentially.

First, the thematic of ignorance resurfaces here in much similar fashion as in the first event. Again, those defending Penn State accuse those attacking it for making accusations without adequate grounds to do so. What is unique about this conversation, however, is that instead of defending the university as a whole, most are engaged in defending Joe Paterno from those championing his termination. This is quite the opposite of what was revealed through the first event whereby most that spoke in defense of Penn State did so from a more collectivist perspective. Despite this transition, similar considerations of ignorance persist. Frequent counterattacks develop around the idea that those attacking Paterno simply do not “know the facts” and are ignorant for such blatant disregard for truth. For example:

*Hes just the only name you people know and you feel like arguing with people and getting attention. but its pretty ignorant. and you cant say hes immoral when he himself admits he should have done more...But I quit arguing with you retards for*
the night. you all made ur simple minds up months ago when your media outlet
told you what to think. i dont give a fuck. im used to arguing with sheep [sic]

This comment is a reaction to other posts accusing Paterno for having not done enough to
prevent the sexual abuse that took place. Here again, we see an argument develop around
the notion that the media has misled those attacking Paterno to believe that he was
somehow more involved in the scandal than he really was. For individuals defending him
– those that really know him – this becomes an offensive and unsubstantiated argument.
The “facts” accusers derive to malign Paterno are produced only out of knowledge of his
name and legacy without any logistical significance. The people who believe these facts
become sheep for having blindly followed the media.

Conversely, others in this space contend that Paterno was just as responsible for
others involved in the scandal. As such, he should be blamed for his (in)action and
received proper justice. Despite his previous philanthropic work (including the donation
the meme alludes to), Paterno made a mistake to which he must be held accountable:

he gave the money cause he felt guilty he did not do more he let a monster roam
the campus for 10 years after the fact. no amount of money can wipe that slate
clean he was part of the cover up with [Shultz] and curley if you think he was not
part of the conversations on how to handle this whole mess then your head needs
to come out of the sand

This battle was ongoing. One person would comment on the ignorance of another,
prompting the accused to defend their sensibility and then accuse its attacker in turn.

Another quote from a similar sentiment attacks the others supporting Paterno:
your sarcasm is what makes this a tiring argument, and its less than mature. Youll never learn something being this ignorant...This stupid picture shows up on my newsfeed and I couldnt hold back from commenting on the ridiculously ignorant comments

These ideas encapsulate the argument against Paterno and embody the overall mood of the community at this point in time. Even further, they serve to underscore the notion that anyone defending him remains ignorant to the truth. This contestation over “real truth” remains unsettling throughout the thread (and the page), and leads to a similar consideration of ethical decision-making.

Therefore, the second emergent theme from this conversation arises from considerations of morality. More specifically, Paterno’s morality becomes the center of debate. Again, camps are divided into those that support Paterno and those that do not. Those defending him propose counterattacks to those accusing him:

Either way. if you want to sit here and be critical and act morally superior to Joepa, than you just look like a douche. i mean come on your not better than him. ur just not...Being sanctimonious from a distance is a joke. you have no fuckin clue what you would do

These comments suggest two distinct possibilities. First, by not explicitly stating that Paterno may have experienced a lapse in morality, these remarks imply that it is ultimately understood that he cannot be considered ethically infallible under the circumstances. Instead, it becomes a point of concession among supporters that Paterno did, in fact, make a mistake. Second, by refocusing the argument into a hypothetical
situation, these posts suggest that no one can truly lay blame against Paterno because only he was privy to the context of the scandal. As such, the counterattack presupposes that no one else would handle the situation any better than Paterno.

Finally, the third theme that emerges from these observations is an embattled sense of identity among “Penn Staters.” The polarizing nature of Paterno’s firing has resulted in a significant conflict over what constitutes one’s level of affiliation with (or commitment to) the university. This is especially significant within the conversation around this meme and Paterno’s firing given the nature of the argument; either support Paterno or renounce him. Compounding the conflict is the relationship Paterno himself had built with the university. He was, for all intents and purposes, a part of Penn State. His departure (and, specifically, the circumstances surrounding it) upset the normative expectations of the culture and, consequently, the identities of those that comprised it. One commenter voiced her concern in this regard:

*I certainly hope the majority of these individuals aren’t Penn Staters and very few of you can claim State College as your lifelong home. If you had, you would know that this conversation is a disgrace to the Paternos and how Penn Staters truly carry themselves. You’re all just whining slimy little brats – a great man, who made a great mistake, is dead and gone – he has already answered for his part in this...And those of you that are furiously defending Joe Pa and Penn State just shut your traps. This is not how he or we should be handling the situation. This was the greatest sorrow and tragedy of his life, as it is for many of the 38,000 that call this place home when you all graduate after you’ve passed through here after*
4 years – or less if you’re coming from a branch campus. Just stop already, you aren’t doing Joe or Penn State any justice.

From this post, it is easy to mistake the emotion and attachment as merely school pride. A more thorough examination, however, reveals the heavily contested inner battle raging within an individual reconciling itself to the abrupt, dramatic identity shift these events have caused.

In as much as these memes and comments on the page are accusatory and contentious, it seems as though they offer the contributing individuals a sense of catharsis, closure, or justification for how they feel. As meme after meme of Paterno’s firing was posted to the main board, one could not help but get a sense of how angry these people were that their legendary icon had been terminated unjustly by the university he so valiantly served and, moreover, one began to get a sense for how justified they were in feeling this. For all intents and purposes, these individuals were indignant that Paterno had been labeled the “fall guy” and “scapegoat” here.

**Event 3 – Penn State Issues Message on Sandusky Trial Verdict**

On Friday, June 22, 2012, Penn State President Rodney Erickson issued a statement on the Jerry Sandusky trial verdict. Sandusky was found guilty of 45 of the 48 charges filed against him by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Erickson’s statement is a brief release that addresses the verdict and highlights the university’s dedication to combat child sexual abuse in the future. Moreover, it offers praises to the victims for having testified against Sandusky and outlines the university’s role in compensating the victims for claims related to the institution.
Message from President Rodney Erickson on Sandusky Trial Verdict

The Penn State statement on the Sandusky verdict adopts a stance that Benoit (1995) calls “reducing the offensiveness of the act” (p. 77) specifically through compensation for the victims of the misconduct. Benoit claims that reducing the offensiveness of an act requires that “a person accused of misbehavior may attempt to reduce the degree of ill feeling experienced by the audience” (p. 77). This approach has six variants: (1) bolstering, (2) minimization, (3) differentiation, (4) transcendence, (5) attacking one’s accuser, and (6) compensation. It is evident that the official Penn State release relies on compensation to reduce the offensiveness of the act in question. Under these circumstances, this stance readily invites consideration of Downey’s (1993) idea that contemporary apologia functions as self-deception.

Erickson’s statement following the Sandusky verdict offers a brief acknowledgement of the findings and praises the legal process for having spoken on the matter. The majority of the release, however, focuses primarily on the victims who came forward to tell their stories publicly and testified against Sandusky during the trial. Erickson is careful to point out that “No verdict can undo the pain and suffering caused by Mr. Sandusky, but we do hope this judgment helps the victims and their families along their path to healing” (paragraph 2). Moreover, the remainder of the statement continues to outline a stance of compensation for the victims. The third paragraph of the statement opens with the assertion that “My administration and the Board of Trustees maintain a steadfast commitment to pursuing the truth regarding Mr. Sandusky’s actions. While we
cannot change what happened, we can and do accept the responsibility to take action on the societal issue of child sexual abuse – both in our community and beyond.”

To that end, Erickson discusses the confidential counseling process already established for the victim’s of Sandusky’s conduct. What’s more, he outlines a plan for the university to take further action in compensating the victims privately, fairly, and expeditiously for claims relating to the university. It is important to note that this strategy does not deny that Penn State was responsible for the acts. Instead, this is an attempt to reduce the unfavorable feelings toward Penn State by increasing the audience’s esteem for the actor (Benoit, 1995). The key focus, then, appears to be squarely on the audience and not the victims. This functions as self-deception in that it (1) exploits audience ignorance and emotions by having it believe justice is prevailing and (2) takes on a view “intimating that time heals, distorts, forgives, and forgets” (Downey, 1993, p. 58).

Though not overtly self-deceptive, the style and structure behind this stance underscores the potential for it to be viewed as such.

“That’s Jerry Sandusky’s House. You Must Never Go There, Simba”

In light of the fact that Sandusky was both charged and convicted of child sexual abuse, his reputation among the Penn State community rapidly diminished. Many claimed that he alone should be held responsible for his actions, and that Penn State writ large had little to do with his misconduct. This is the context under which the meme for the Sandusky verdict event was created. As such, this meme takes the position of a surrogate apologist for Penn State in that it places blame on Sandusky and attempts to differentiate him from the university.
Figure 4 offers a visual representation of the meme. Its origins come from Disney’s 1994 film, *The Lion King*. In particular, it depicts a scene in the movie which Mufasa (the lead protagonist at this point in the movie) is surveying his kingdom with his son, Simba. As they are overlooking the vast area, Mufasa tells Simba that everything the sun touches is their kingdom. However, he cautions Simba to never go to the shadowy land to their right, which is to the south. As an often-replicated meme, content creators and authors will often rephrase this scene to depict areas that they view as favorable in direct comparison with areas they view as unfavorable. The meme is a three-panel sequence. The first panel shows Mufasa and Simba side by side while Mufasa explains to Simba the reach of their kingdom. The second panel focuses on Simba looking inquisitively at his father out of frame and asking about the shadowy place that appears over his left shoulder. The third and final frame of the sequence shows Mufasa sternly informing Simba as to what the area is and firmly warning him that he must never go there.

In this specific instance, the sequence focuses on “Happy Valley” as the kingdom and Jerry Sandusky’s house as the dark, shadowy place. In the first panel, Mufasa tells Simba: “Look Simba, everything the light touches is Happy Valley.” To which Simba replies: “Wow!” The second panel shows Simba then questioning: “But what about that shadowy place?” The third panel comes back to Mufasa telling Simba: “That’s Jerry Sandusky’s house. You must never go there, Simba.”

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4 “Happy Valley” is sometimes referred to as a colloquialism for the State College area. Commentators of athletic events at Penn State often give the location as “Happy Valley” as opposed to mentioning State College or the athletic facility.
Figure 4.3 – Lion King meme.

Look Simba, everything the light touches, is Happy Valley.

Wow!

But what about that shadowy place?

That’s Jerry Sandusky’s house. You must never go there, Simba.
The tone of this meme is quite obviously intended to be foreboding. Mufasa, as both the Lion King and father to Simba, offers his sage wisdom in order to protect his son from Sandusky. It is, for all intents and purposes, a slight against Sandusky with accompanying undertones of sarcasm and humor. What is ironic and noteworthy with regard to the content of this meme as it relates to the sequence of events that unfolded in the scandal, is the fact that few of the incidences reported ever actually occurred at Sandusky’s residence. Instead, many cases of Sandusky’s misconduct occurred on university property (e.g., locker rooms, showers, etc.). Thus, while the meme offers one narrative, it runs counter to the actual sequence of events as related to the scandal. This may suggest the author’s intention to further disassociate Penn State, State College, and “Happy Valley” from Sandusky by offering an augmented sense of safety and reality. The “light” in the meme symbolizes the greater good of State College and further separates it from the darkness of Sandusky and his actions.

“That’s so Wrong...FUNNY...But Wrong”

This meme was posted at a point in time when life on the Penn State memes Facebook page had returned to relative normalcy. By that I mean that students had returned to posting memes related to classes, public transit, professors, events, and other occurrences at the university. Moreover, this was the summer time. The mood was more relaxed and congenial. Significant time had elapsed since the breaking of the scandal and the firing and subsequent death of Joe Paterno. Of course, the Sandusky trial remained a topic of conversation throughout the page, but only one specific meme was created in reaction to it. The Lion King meme offered the first real chance for members of the
community to let their guard down. Granted, not everyone thought the meme to be in
good taste. However, it still generated over 4,000 likes and 746 shares.

More stringent observations of the thread for the *Lion King* meme revealed a
significant internal conflict among commenters between finding the meme to be
humorous or in poor taste. Interestingly enough, however, there was little debate between
whether one side was more favorable to be on over the other. When compared to similar
debates observed in other threads in this chapter, the one spawned from this meme
proved to be rather timid and reserved. Instead of an ongoing dialogue, this thread
prompted minimally contested posts that primarily served to simply indicate where one
stood with regard to how they perceived the meme.

This suggests that humor plays a role in individual and group identity
construction. For example, one commenter references his affiliation with the university
and, subsequently, justifies his stance on finding the meme humorous: “Ok...I can accept
this because we are all Penn State here...but still I hope that guy rots in hell! 😊” This
implies that being a part of Penn State makes it all right to laugh at the meme. Going one
step further, hating Sandusky makes it even more tolerable given one’s group affiliation.
Nevertheless, even those that claim to be unaffiliated with Penn State find the meme
humorous: “I dont even go to PSU and this is hilarious.”

Still, others are conflicted over whether or not they should find the meme funny.
In lieu of an exhaustive summary regarding the role of the morality in humor plays in
identity construction (as that is not the ultimate purpose of the current study), I do aim to
highlight its significance with regard to online ethnographic observation. These values,
feelings, and emotions – and the motivations behind them – are just as real and prevalent online as they are offline. In fact, Hine’s (2000) second principle of virtual ethnography acknowledges that:

    Cyberspace is not to be thought of as a space detached from any connections to ‘real life’ and face-to-face interaction. It has rich and complex connections with the contexts in which it is used. It also depends on technologies which are used and understood differently in different contexts, and which have to be acquired, learnt, interpreted and incorporated into context. These technologies show a high degree of interpretive flexibility. (p. 64)

As such, internally contested emotions are just as prevalent when confronting online ethnography as in traditional field research. Confused posts such as “Wow...is it horrible that I laughed at this?” underscores this principle. Seven people liked the comment, indicating either their similar struggle with the original commenter or offering support in light of his confused state.

**Event 4 – Penn State Removes Joe Paterno Statue Outside Beaver Stadium**

On Sunday, July 22, 2012, Penn State President Rodney Erickson issued a statement on the removal of the statue of Joe Paterno outside Beaver Stadium. In the statement, Erickson outlines the logic behind his decision to have the statue removed. He cites the release of the Freeh Report (the end result of the Board of Trustees’ Special Investigative Counsel on the scandal) as a moment providing himself and the Penn State community “a great deal to reflect upon and to consider, including Coach Paterno’s legacy.” Indeed, the Freeh Report (2012) found that:
The most saddening finding by the Special Investigative Counsel is the total and consistent disregard by the most senior leaders at Penn State for the safety and welfare of Sandusky’s child victims...Four of the most powerful people at The Pennsylvania State University – President Graham B. Spanier, Senior Vice President-Finance and Business Gary C. Schultz, Athletic Director Timothy M. Curley, and Head Football Coach Joseph V. Paterno – failed to protect against a child sexual predator harming children for over a decade. These men concealed Sandusky’s activities from the Board of Trustees, the University community, and authorities. They exhibited a striking lack of empathy for Sandusky’s victims by failing to inquire as to their safety and well-being. (p. 14)

In light of these findings, Erickson made the decision to have Paterno’s statue removed from the grounds near Beaver Stadium and store it in a secure location.

**Penn State President Issues Statement Related to Paterno Statue**

While the official Penn State responses to the scandal previously discussed have been shown to function as *self-deception*, the stylistic and substantive features of this statement from Erickson reflect the *self-service* function Downey (1993) argues is characteristic of contemporary apologia prior to 1960. Here, “for the first time, apologias were not strictly defensive reactions but strategically offensive actions” (p. 54). Instead of functioning to deceive himself and the Penn State community writ large, Erickson adopts a posture of *explanation* by linking the university’s actions to the power of cultural values. “This view intimates that audiences cannot condemn apologists if they identify with apologists’ motives” (Downey, 1993, p. 54). The effort here is the university’s first
attempt to identify with and reaffirm community ideals – not simply highlighting and attempting to glorify its own. This is apparent in three ways in Erickson’s statement.

First, Erickson tries to connect the university more fully to the community. In previous attempts and statements, the rhetors representing Penn State made it a point to highlight the university’s values *above* those of the community writ large. Here, Erickson attempts to bridge that gap by using the pronouns “us” and “we” to refer to the Penn State community as a whole instead of the university in isolation. This serves to reaffirm group identity and, consequently, enables the audience to more fully identify with the apologists’ motives. For example, the first sentence in the statement reads: “Since we learned of the Grand Jury presentment and the charges against Jerry Sandusky and University officials last November, members of the Penn State community and the public have been made much more acutely aware of the tragedy of child sexual abuse.” Through this, Erickson makes child sexual abuse a community issue – one through which they have painfully identified and endured together. Moreover, Erickson acknowledges the university’s shortcomings in management and underscores the idea that “we as a community have had to confront a failure of leadership at many levels” (emphasis added). By coupling the community and the university together, Erickson fosters within the audience a sense of group affiliation and cohesion previously absent in Penn State responses. Thus, the university’s problems are the community’s and vice versa; this creates a symbiotic relationship between the two that in that what impacts one directly impacts the other. Doing so makes his audience much more receptive to his (and the university’s) ideas and decisions because they directly impact the audience as well.
Second, Erickson’s statement makes an attempt to defuse the conflict around Paterno and his legacy. The underlying assumption of this posture implies that resolving the conflict within the Penn State community will result in a more united, congenial group mentality. He mentions that the statue itself has “become a lightening rod of controversy and national debate” and that, contrary to its original intention, “Coach Paterno’s statue has become a source of division and an obstacle to healing in our University and beyond.” As such, the only sensible thing left to do is remove the statue and, symbolically, the discord it created.

Third, the president makes a conscious effort to reframe the decision by placing the focus on the victims of the scandal and removing the spotlight from Paterno. Instead of previous attempts to acknowledge the victims in a manner that seemed less than genuine, this statement offers a very visible form of reparation aimed at helping to heal those affected. As such, Erickson decided “that it is in the best interest of our university and public safety to remove the statue and store it in a secure location. I believe that, were it to remain, the statue will be a recurring wound to the multitude of individuals across the nation and beyond who have been the victims of child abuse.” While he acknowledges that the decision will not be popular in some Penn State circles, the reified group mentality Erickson rejuvenated offers a course that both reconciles the community’s reservations about Paterno and underscores the need to address the victims’ struggle.
“I’m Sure that will Significantly Improve the Lives of Sandusky’s Victims”

As Erickson assumed in his statement, his decision to remove Paterno’s statue did not sit well with every circle within the Penn State community. This once again manifest on social media. Indeed, as has been the case with other memes, Paterno has been a divisive, polarizing figure. As such a revered icon for such a long time, his downfall was viewed by some as an unnecessary – even contrived – outcome from the university’s attempt to purge itself from guilt. Figure 5 clearly falls into this camp.

Specifically, this meme is another variation of the “Condescending Wonka” meme that features a screen capture of actor Gene Wilder in the 1971 musical Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory. The image of Wilder (Wonka) situates the character as the primary focal point of the meme. Wilder’s eyes, however, deflect attention away from the character to the figure of what appears to be the back of a child’s head in the right side of the image. Wilder seems to be making direct eye contact with the child while his head rests upon the knuckles of his cupped hand and his disposition holds a wry grin. The look evokes feelings of condescension and therefore, according to knowyourmeme.com, “as its name suggests, the captions [on the meme] can be characterized as patronizing and sarcastic.” The captions on each Condescending Wonka meme are separated at the top and bottom of the image, leaving Wilder’s face between them to serve as a partition of sorts.

The top caption of this particular meme reads: Oh you want Paterno’s statue torn down? The bottom caption then contends: I’m sure that will significantly improve the lives of Sandusky’s victims. Again, holding to the premise that these captions are intended
Oh you want Paterno's statue torn down?

I'm sure that will significantly improve the lives of Sandusky's victims.

Figure 4.4 – “Condescending Wonka” statue meme.
to be read with undertones of sarcasm and condescension, an argument can be made that this meme stands in direct opposition of Erickson’s decision to remove the statue. Instead, Wonka’s attitude toward the statue encapsulates that of Paterno supporters who believe that tearing down his statue would do little to relieve Sandusky’s victims of the strain his abuse caused them. More to the point, this meme rearticulates the belief that Paterno is not the primary villain in this narrative. As such, what would be the benefit of further belittling his good character by removing his statue? If Paterno is not the one at fault, it seems impossible to derive healing by removing his statue at all.

Clearly, then, this meme acts as an accusation against Penn State for once again placing the blame on Paterno when those that support him believe he should not be the scapegoat for the university.

“Turn it Around so it Looks the Other Way – Just like in Real Life”

The removal of Paterno’s statue reopened a deep wound. Following the release of the Freeh report and notification that the statue would be removed to a secure location, similar emotions related to Paterno’s firing came back fiercely. While there were numerous memes related to Freeh report compared to just one related to the removal of the statue, it seemed as though Paterno was once again the at the crux of the unfolding narrative on the Facebook page. News of the event disrupted the page from the other memes that had been pervading its board. Again, prior to the event, the mood had settled somewhat. The decision to remove the statue in light of the findings form the Freeh report disrupted that relative calm; calamity ensued instead. Nevertheless, it seemed as though members of the community had begun to acclimate to the new environment in
which Paterno was no longer a factor. It began to look like individuals were more disturbed by the fact that the scandal had resurfaced than they were angry about the removal of the statue.

Despite the negative tone of the meme, it seems as though Erickson’s renewed commitment to restoring the Penn State community has taken hold in this thread. Instead of a contentious back-and-forth between supporters and detractors of Paterno, there is a resounding agreement with the university’s decision to remove the statue. An argument could be made that this is due, in large part, to Erickson’s statement as an attempt to reconcile the civil war within the Penn State community. Furthermore, it indicates the community’s fatigue with arguing over the merits of Paterno’s continued iconic status. This, by extension, indicates that members of the community are beginning to reconcile their previous feelings and emotions as they related to Paterno and Penn State into a new, reinvigorated desire to move on from the scandal. This is evident, once again, through themes related to ignorance and morality.

Since the majority of responses in this thread are supportive of Erickson’s decision, the theme of ignorance is slightly altered within the context of this thread. Instead of both sides making accusations against the other on claims of being ignorant of the facts, those supporting the statue’s removal argue that the findings from the Freeh Report justify this action. Paterno, despite his philanthropic benevolence to the university and his success with the football program, failed miserably to provide for the safety of children from a child sexual predator. As such, his statue should be removed along with the negative connotation that Penn State is a community focused on athletics over basic
humanity. For example, one post from a self-proclaimed “townie” and Penn State undergraduate student reads:

*People who try to downplay the significance of JoePa’s role in the way the investigation was handled need to wake up and realize that college football isn’t important at all in the long run and trying to protect its reputation is what caused this mess in the first place. Had the incidents been reported to the proper authorities and prosecuted a decade ago, the rest of Penn State could have avoided the brunt of the criticism it is now receiving...People who live in other parts of the country think we’re all brainwashed fools to keep supporting JoePa, and they’re absolutely right.*

While we know little about this person’s previous thoughts and feelings toward Paterno prior to the scandal, it is clear that his emotions have indeed changed from where they once were. This, along with other posts, seems resigned to the fact that the culture at Penn State is and needs to be changing. No longer is it plausible to defend a man accused of harboring and facilitating a child molester in Sandusky. No longer should the community uphold its longstanding reverence for Paterno. No longer does Penn State revolve around Joe Paterno and his legacy, as painful as that may be. Anyone who believes otherwise is labeled and ridiculed for their ignorance. Put another way by a self-described Penn State alumni:

*Our alma mater has a SERIOUS PR problem right now, and removing the statue of a deified accomplice to a child molester would be a first step to rebuilding the PSU image.*
Another comment from a different alumnus reflects similar sentiments:

*Unless 99.99% (there'll always be a few crazies in all walks of life) of the community take a very strong stance against what happened and everyone involved (yes Joe falls in here) then the PSU community will continue to be viewed as a kind of twisted cult by the rest of the nation. The statue has to come down, not because its presence directly impacts the recover and future lives of the victims, but because it celebrates a tradition and culture that enabled a predator to prey on kids for over a decade.*

These comments are reflective of a sweeping cultural shift among the Penn State community. Each highlights a significant change in perceptions of what constitutes ignorance with regard to the scandal. As the community begins to adapt to its new standard, it marginalizes those that support Paterno – a complete turnaround from where the community stood just months prior.

In a similar vein, discussions of morality have shifted from whether or not one should be supporting Paterno’s integrity to a widely accepted premise that the community should focus on improving the lives of victims that suffered unfathomably at the hands of Sandusky and those that enabled him. One comment suggests that the focus should now rest on helping the families of the victims find relief by any means necessary – even if that means sacrificing the legend of Paterno:

*Punishment in the Paterno case, like the sentence in a murder case, is there to help families find some closure in the tragedy and establish a precedent that actions like this will not be tolerated.*
From this, and the overarching sentiment regarding Paterno’s morality, it seems obvious that members within this community – especially those that once supported him – feel betrayed by his actions. As such, they begin to develop a deeper sense of empathy with Sandusky’s victims. One of the more resonant comments to that end comes from a self-proclaimed former Paterno supporter who now staunchly agrees with Erickson’s decision to remove the statue (although not completely removed, rather resituated): “Turn it around so it looks the other way – just like in real life.”

**Event 5 – NCAA Imposes Sanctions on Penn State Football Program**

As a result of the scandal, the ensuing investigation, and the findings in the Freeh Report, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) imposed hefty sanctions on the Penn State University football program on July 23, 2012. These sanctions included (1) a $60 million fine, (2) the vacation of all 112 wins from 1998 to 2011, (3) a four-year post-season ban, (4) a four-year scholarship reduction, (5) granting current players the option to transfer to other schools freely, and (6) putting the athletic department on probation for five years (ESPN.com news services, 2012). Many sports writers and columnists lamented the implications these sanctions would have on the Penn State program. Yahoo! sports columnist Dan Wetzel (2012) went so far as to write that, “As penalties go for Penn State, death would’ve been preferable” (paragraph 1). Two days after the sanctions were announced, the Penn State Board of Trustees convened regarding

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5 Wetzel is referring to the NCAA’s notorious “death penalty” for athletic programs. This punishment, usually reserved for significant misconduct, results in the termination of the university’s athletic program.
the penalties and corrective actions announced by the NCAA. After the meeting they released a statement regarding the university’s position on the sanctions.

**Trustees Discuss NCAA Sanctions**

The final event for analysis provides an interesting context within which to critique the Penn State response. First and foremost, it is important to underscore the fact that, at this point in time, the university is no longer *accused* of misconduct, but stands guilty of the charges pressed against it (i.e., through the Sandusky verdict and the release of the Freeh Report). As such, collegiate athletics’ governing body is not *accusing* Penn State of wrongdoing; the NCAA is, instead, punishing the program for its failures to recognize and stop Sandusky. This sequence of events holds significance in a larger discussion around the nature of the rhetorical situation, but for all intents and purposes, here, it suffices to say that the Penn State response in this context might be considered retrospective. Moreover, this statement conforms to Downey’s (1993) assumption that contemporary apologia after 1960 functions as *self-deception*. This is achieved, once again, by attempting to reaffirm the university’s values and, specifically, those held from an athletic perspective. In light of this, two specific elements in this announcement warrant further consideration.

First, the announcement begins with the BOTs’ reluctant acceptance of the NCAA’s sanctions: “The Board finds the punitive sanctions difficult and the process with the NCAA unfortunate. But as we understand it, the alternatives were worse as confirmed by NCAA President Mark Emmert’s recent statement that Penn State was likely facing a multi-year death sentence.” Notice, here, that the BOT calls the process “difficult” and
“unfortunate,” but neglects to comment on whether or not the sanctions were deserved or appropriate. By focusing on the negative connotations of the process, it is within reason to assume that the BOT was displeased with the NCAA’s ruling. Nevertheless, it refrained from further commenting on the subject thereby negating any potential kickback should it voice anything other than acceptance and commitment to the sanctions.

Second, as such, the BOT confirms “its resolve to move forward together to recognize the historical excellence in Penn State’s academic and athletic programs. We anticipate and look forward to demonstrating our outstanding performance in complying with the sanctions.” Once again, the university makes an attempt, here, to bolster its image by relying on its past to do so. Benoit (1995) argues that the benefit of this strategy rests in its potential to “increase positive feeling toward the actor which may help offset the negative feelings toward the act, yielding a relative improvement in the actor’s reputation” (p. 77). Nevertheless, a vague reference to the university’s commitment to adhere to the NCAA sanctions does little to address the actual scandal and its role in it. Instead, as Downey (1993) argues, this type of discourse “reveals attempts to maintain viability of rhetors through asituational, offensively grounded avoidance” (p. 58). In other words, when Penn State officials come forward to reaffirm the university’s “good moral character,” “strong commitment,” and “historical excellence,” the absence of context from which to base these claims indicates that, in defending itself, the university skirts the major threats to its image by focusing on what it once believed itself to be.
“I’ma Let You Finish…But Joe Pa Still has the Most Wins of All Time”

Given that the NCAA sanctions placed on Penn State were intended to punish the entire football program for the actions of a handful of its leaders, many at Penn State and the surrounding community believed the sanctions to be inappropriate and unfair. Once again, this sentiment translated to social media quickly. Figure 6 depicts the meme in response to the NCAA sanctions.

This meme is consistent with the “Kanye Interrupts”

6 set of memes that relives an uncomfortable scene from the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards at the Radio City Music Hall in New York on September 13, 2009. When country singer Taylor Swift won the Best Female Video award for her song “You Belong with Me,” rapper Kanye West came up on stage and took the microphone away from Swift. At this point, he yelled out “Yo Taylor, I’m really happy for you, Imma let you finish. But Beyonce had one of the best videos of all time…one of the best videos of all time!” He then handed the microphone back to Swift, but MTV cut to a commercial break before she had an opportunity to finish her acceptance speech. The background image of the meme captures the moment that West begins to speak. West appears on the left side of the image and is facing to the left toward the audience. He is holding the microphone up to his mouth in his right hand and indiscriminately pointing toward the crowd with his left while he addresses the crowd. Meanwhile, Swift is positioned in the far right of the image grasping her award in her right hand while her left awkwardly reaches upward as if not knowing what to do with it. Her countenance is one of sheer confusion and disbelief as she looks on. This set of

6 Also known as “Imma let you finish” according to knowyourmeme.org
Yo NCAA, I'm really happy for you... I'ma let you finish...

But Joe Pa still has the most wins OF ALL TIME! OF ALL TIME!!!
memes’ purpose is to “interrupt” by way of espousing that one event is more significant than another. For example, the caption above this specific image reads: “Yo NCAA, I’m really happy for you...I’m a let you finish...” While the bottom caption continues: “But Joe Pa still has the most wins of ALL TIME. OF ALL TIME!!”

In this context, the meme encapsulates the overarching narrative accounting for the emotional impact the NCAA sanctions had on the Penn State community. Athletic programs at Penn State – and specifically football – hold tremendous importance to the university’s culture and history. Since one of the sanctions was the vacation of wins within the 13-year span between 1998 and 2011, this made a substantial impact on the football program’s cumulative record. Moreover, since Paterno had been head coach for those 13 years and 36 more prior to 1998, he was responsible for creating and sustaining the success at Penn State. As such, this meme functions as a surrogate apologist for Penn State. While clearly as disappointed by the NCAA’s actions as the BOT was, this meme goes where the BOT could not: it offers a critical perspective against the NCAA by reclaiming Paterno’s wins and mentioning that he still holds the most victories of all time.

“I’m Glad That’s What’s Most Important to You Guys...Such a Joke”

One of the recurring divisive subjects in the community has been Penn State’s commitment to its athletic heritage over its obligation to the children that were abused by Sandusky. It is important to mention here that the “Thon” cover photo mentioned in

7 After the NCAA sanctions were imposed, the result of the forfeiture of wins from 1998-2011 meant that Paterno would no longer be the winningest head football coach in college football – a title he had achieved with a win against Northwestern University the same year he was fired.
Event 1 remained the cover photo throughout the analysis. The photo shows students at the dance marathon holding signs which relay the amount of money raised for children’s cancer research and treatment. In blue numbers, the amount raised was $12,374,034.46. Underneath this number is another sign that reads: “For the kids.” This, perhaps, is a defensive statement directed to those that accused Penn State as a whole for neglecting to account for the human tragedy that occurred. What’s more, it may serve as a reminder to those that already do recognize and seek atonement for the wrongdoing. Nevertheless, the battle between sporting heritage and morality at Penn State continues to rage.

The historical significance of football wins and tradition to the Penn State community prior to the scandal was paramount. After the scandal, it has become harder to reconcile the football program with the university culture more cleanly. Despite this, there are those that staunchly support and advocate for the program (with or without Paterno) and its history regardless of what the NCAA takes away from it. Still, there are those that believe the football culture at Penn State needs to be changed as the rest of the culture did in the wake of the scandal. That is, the focus on football and athletics in general needs to be put in perspective. Once again similar lines are drawn between groups. Still further, similar themes begin to emerge around ignorance and morality.

One conversation begins with a post from a male named Joseph who hints at the ignorance of those who think the meme to which this thread responds is humorous:

Joseph: I’m glad that’s what’s most important to you guys...Such a joke.

Tony: Oh, stop being butthurt and learn to take a joke. Just because someone made a funny meme like this doesn’t mean all we care about is football. Contrary
to the media bullshit you probably swallow, us Penn Staters are actually
disgusted by the Jerry Sandusky scandal and feel for the victims...

Valerie: To Joseph, it’s not what’s most important. If memes depicted what was
most important to us then we’d be living in a pretty messed up society...

This interaction evokes three responses. First, ignorance is still a common theme in these
exchanges. Joseph claims that it is “a joke” that the only thing the people on the thread
care about is football which implies they are ignorant to the fact that the scandal took
place. Tony takes exception to this claim, indicating that football is not, in fact, the
priority and that “Penn Staters” do indeed feel for the victims of the scandal. Moreover,
Tony echoes the sentiment that the media has distorted reality and led people along
blindly with their coverage of the events.

Second, it highlights the morality of “Penn Staters” by arguing that they are
empathetic to the victims. Tony and Valerie defuse the accusations against the Penn State
community claiming that all they care about is football and athletics and that they profess
misplaced school pride in spite of human decency.

Third, Valerie argues that memes are not themselves representative of “what’s
most important.” She goes on to argue that memes cannot depict what is most significant
to life and society. Nevertheless, the values she and Tony forward in response to Joseph
would suggest that the memes serve as fodder through which to create, articulate, and
sustain meaning through the transmission of values in an online environment.
Summary

In this chapter, I have analyzed each of the five primary events of the Penn State/Jerry Sandusky sex abuse scandal under consideration. Each event was analyzed across three levels: (1) a rhetorical analysis of the Penn State response, (2) a textual analysis of the meme responding to the Penn State message, and (3) a virtual ethnography of the community these memes were created in. Each of these events shed light on the connections between the concept of, and theories related to, apologia/image repair, virtual communities, and cultural text. The following discussion chapter serves to highlight these connections and underscore their implications for scholars in the future.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The Penn State crisis provides a unique, albeit complex, context through which to examine the role of contemporary organizational apologia and participatory culture. This analysis contributes to the understanding of how organizations respond to significant crises and, moreover, how online publics subsequently respond to the organization’s various apologetic postures. To be sure, the current study extends traditional apologia theory by integrating it with new media theory and vice versa. More specifically, this research highlights the symbiotic relationship that exists between the two by bringing it to light through the Penn State sex abuse scandal.

In this chapter, key findings related to Penn State’s handling of the crisis, the public response, and community sentiment are discussed. Research questions that guided the overall study are again presented and addressed, with conclusions related to each of them drawn. Potential limitations to this research are discussed, along with suggestions for future research. Finally, broad implications for organizations are presented.

**Contemporary Organizational Apologia Functions as Self-Deception**

The first research question guiding this study asked, what is the underlying function behind each image repair strategy and/or posture assumed by Penn State and what purpose does this serve? The results suggest that the majority of official Penn State responses related to the crisis functioned as *self-deception*. Drawing heavily from Downey’s (1993) argument that “the function of a genre constitutes its meaning” (p. 43), I approached this analysis with a critical eye toward the ways in which various apologia
strategies were used at a given time “to satisfy collective needs” (p. 43). In other words, I sought a more thorough understanding of how apologias work at their most fundamental level.

In light of this, the structure and stylistic elements of the apologia or image repair strategy became less important. This is not to say, however, that this research would be complete without identifying the strategies and postures Penn State employed to repair its image. Quite the opposite is true. The ability to classify certain image repair strategies according to Benoit’s (1995) typology or Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) apologia postures/stances is certainly useful here, but simply understanding how to categorize these events does little to explain the motives behind them. Rather, by identifying and understanding the various postures and strategies used, one can obtain a clearer sense as to why each posture and strategy is chosen. What becomes most significant, then, is not the actual strategy alone, but the function to which each lends itself. Moreover, “Determining the function of a genre is an important critical endeavor, then, because it explains the fusion of forms that makes rhetorical genres recognizable [for one], and because it provides the basis for evaluating the genre’s efficacy as well as its endurance or evolution” (Downey, 1993, p. 43). To this point, responses from Penn State to the sex abuse scandal primarily reflected self-deception.

Tracing the evolution of the rhetorical genre of apologia, Downey (1993) posits that contemporary organizational apologia after 1960 functions as self-deception through:

Contradictory, self-serving motives, masks moral responsibility, exploits audience ignorance and emotions while championing the same values breached by the
apologist, undermines facts and accuracy and shuns confrontation of issues. The net effect [results in] a decisive rhetoric of manipulation. (p. 58)

This claim does not imply that the rhetor knowingly or consciously creates an overtly self-deceptive apologia. Indeed, that is not the rhetor’s true purpose. To be sure, the rhetor is actively engaged in an attempt to restore its image. However, the stylistic and structural formation of the apologia or image repair strategy implies that the message adopts the self-deceptive function subversively. To clarify, Penn State’s primary goal in responding to threats against its character as an organization was to repair its damaged image. However, the responses it offered – regardless of whether or not the chosen strategy appropriately suited the situation – undermined the university’s efforts by merely serving to deceive itself into believing it was somehow less responsible than it was for the misconduct.

For example, Penn State responses to events one, two, three, and five in the analysis reflected this tendency in three distinct ways. First, structurally, these messages were intended to repair the university’s image through the reaffirmation of its core values. Benoit (1995) and Ware and Linkugel (1973) categorize this strategy as transcendence, or “psychologically moving the audience away from the particulars of the charge at hand in a direction toward some more abstract, general view of [its] character” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 280). While at first glance, this may seem to be an effective strategy, the underlying fact of the matter is that Penn State violated the very values and moral code it claimed to preserve. As a result, this action is devoid of any substantive or
rhetorical force and is, instead, a self-deceptive response in that the university leads itself to believe in its core values despite having failed to uphold them.

Second, several responses rely on shifting the blame (Benoit, 1995) from the organization to others associated with the scandal. Burke (1970) described this process as the reduction guilt through victimage, or the symbolic “killing” of the scapegoat. This is, in essence, what happened at Penn State with both Sandusky and Paterno. The university pinned responsibility for the misconduct on each of the former football coaches while ultimately denying its own involvement (or lack thereof) in the scandal. This action was intended to distance the university from those responsible, and thereby exonerate it from blame. However, when looking at this process through the same critical lens, it becomes readily apparent that these strategies function as self-deception as well. Removing two fixtures of the university is a retrospective act and, consequently, ineffectual insofar as adequately resolving any wrongdoing. As such, the strategy employed in this case serves as a mechanism for self-deception by way seeking to reduce guilt but not reducing actual responsibility.

Third, Penn State adopts corrective action in an attempt to position itself more favorably with its audience. Specifically, it highlights the various forms of compensation the university will offer the victims of the crisis. Benoit (1995) contends that through compensation, the rhetor “offers to remunerate the victim to help offset the negative feeling arising from the wrongful act” (p. 78). While this seems, once again, like a palatable response to the situation, a deeper examination invites a consideration of manipulative rhetoric. That is, using compensation as a means for image restoration
seems primarily self-serving and exemplifies “misleading narrative and dishonest apology” (Downey, 1993, p. 57).

Interestingly, one posture Penn State adopted in its self-defense represented a slightly different function. The fourth event (the removal of Paterno’s statue outside of Beaver Stadium) prompted Penn State to adopt a posture of *explanation* by linking the university’s actions to the power of its shared cultural and communal values. “This view intimates that audiences cannot condemn apologists if they identify with the apologists motives” (Downey, 1993, p. 54). For all intents and purposes, this response is the first and only time Penn State attempts to make a direct link with its audience in order to establish unity. As such, this strategy functions as *self-service* in a manner that benefits both the rhetor and the audience.

The significance of these events is not that we can adequately categorize them according to their stylistic and structural characteristics. Indeed, the importance rather lays in our ability to look beyond surface-level interpretations of organizational apologia and become more adept at holding organizations and groups accountable for what they say and do in a crisis situation. It is not about making the right strategic choices to make an appropriate defense like a puzzle, but instead being able to recognize the underlying functions each strategy plays in the defense.

**Memes as Surrogate Kategoria/Apologia**

The second research question driving the current research asked, what do the memes created in response to the Penn State apologia signify about how the image repair strategies were being received within the online community in which they were created?
Crafting a thorough answer to this question prompted (1) a reconsideration of Ryan’s (1982) conceptualization of *kategoria* and *apologia* as a speech set and (2) an evaluation of the audience’s role in responding to organizational apologia in a highly mediated context. Together, these two elements coalesced around the basic premise that, in reacting to Penn State apologia, users create memes in order to serve as surrogate apologists or accusers.

To begin, we must take into account Ryan’s (1982) conceptualization of *kategoria* (attack) and *apologia* (defense) existing together as a speech set. Ryan argues that:

By checking each speech against the other, the critic is better able to distinguish the vital issues from the spurious ones, to evaluate the relative merits of both speaker’s arguments, and to make an assessment of the relative failure or success of both speakers in terms of the final outcome of the speech set. Hence the critic cannot have a complete understanding of accusation or apology without treating them both. (p. 254).

Of course, this is partially the task of the first research question discussed above. That is, in order to fully understand and possess the ability to critique an apology, one must account for the accusation it follows. However, what is unique about the Penn State situation that Ryan fails to account for is that the classification of a “speech set” consisting solely of accusation followed by defense is now largely incompatible with the open dialogue created by the Internet and social media, specifically. Rather, what emerges through these open spaces are *discourses* instead of individual speech sets.
With that in mind, it became apparent that the discussion around each of these events under analysis did not end simply with a singular accusation preceding a singular defense. Instead, participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006a; 2006b) extends the conversation. As these events begin to permeate social media through memes and other user-generated content, the concept of the “speech set” becomes overburdened by a steady dialogical overdose. What I mean here is that the defense of an organization no longer rests solely on the shoulders of the organization; consequently, the accusation against an organization no longer rests solely on the shoulders of the original accuser. Indeed, these roles have been adopted by regular people on social media.

This, then, implies that users are no longer passive consumers of mediated messages. Instead, as within popular culture, they now play an increasingly active role in the image restoration process within crisis scenarios.

Brown and Billings (in press) highlight the potential for fans of sports teams to act as crisis communicators on behalf of the organization. For instance, fans that are highly identified with a particular team will associate their own personal images with that team. As such, “this can lead to severe stress when a crisis strikes, as fans will want to aid by offering a remedy to the situation in some way” (p. 79). Moreover, those individuals that are highly identified with a specific organization and are willing to publicly defend it must be considered “real” fans. Such is the case with several of the memes created in response to the Penn State responses. For all intents and purposes, they are supplements to the official apology and thereby extend the speech set beyond its traditional rhetorical boundaries.
In contrast, this participatory culture also gives rise to more accusations against the university. For instance, the “Condescending Wonka” meme that sarcastically suggests that tearing down Paterno’s statue outside of Beaver Stadium will “significantly improve the lives of Sandusky’s victims” responds to the Penn State response with yet another accusation. The meme hints at subtle undertones of disdain for the president’s decision to remove the statue, and simultaneously accuses the university for using Paterno as a scapegoat for the scandal.

These exchanges suggest that social media and participatory culture have tremendous implications for rhetors in a crisis situation. As participation increases and content spreads across mediums and from offline to online contexts, the concept of the “speech set” – while still important when considering apologia scenarios in isolation – seems almost irrelevant here. One can no longer simply evaluate a singular set of accusation and defense, but must now take into consideration the discourses that form around these sets and the implications therein.

**Penn State Memes Facebook: Ignorance, Morality, and Identity**

The final research question guiding the present study asked, what effect(s) does the interaction between the official Penn State response and its corresponding meme have on the online community in which it was created? Drawing heavily from principles of virtual ethnography, extensive observations revealed three emergent themes from discussions centered around each event. First, and perhaps most prevalent, a theme of ignorance developed between Penn State supporters and detractors. A second theme developed around similar contestations of morality. Finally, and perhaps resulting from
the first two themes, a theme of contested identity emerged from these extensive dialogues. Each theme will be addressed presently.

**Ignorance.** One of the more prevalent themes that emerged from observations within the community was that of ignorance. This served as a divisive mechanism that was used to clearly distinguish who belonged in one of two groups: Penn State supporters and Penn State detractors. More specifically, it became readily apparent that at the center of this division was a debate over epistemological truth. That is, the views one person expressed on each event thread were grounded in either absolute truth, or, from the opposite perspective, unfounded speculation.

To elaborate, supporters of Penn State were skeptical toward others accusing the university (and/or Paterno) for having failed in its duty to stop Sandusky from committing the crimes that he did. This was due, in large part, to the fact that supporters believed these accusers were being fed information from the media that was misleading, corrupted, and wrong. While this points to a much larger distrust of the media covering the story, it nevertheless became a prominent fixture within each community space analyzed for this study.

By contrast, opponents of Penn State (or, at least, those that view the university in a negative light as a result the scandal) contend that those in support of the organization are blinded by school pride or affiliation. They argue that the situation is much more cut-and-dry when emotion is taken out of the equation. Rather, their position is one that they believe to be grounded firmly in logical appeals based on news reports and “facts” over emotion and attachment.
Morality. In a much similar fashion, a recurring theme of morality divides people into one of two camps. More specifically, much of this debate centered around Paterno’s involvement with the scandal and his morality as a person. This however, by extension, transcended Paterno to reflect the university and Penn State community writ large. Nevertheless, two groups emerged: one decidedly in favor of Penn State (and/or Paterno) and its handling of the situation, and one unambiguously opposed to it. Opposing ideas of morality created a remarkable chasm between these groups.

For example, many believed that Paterno had done everything in his power to bring Sandusky’s actions to the attention of his superiors so that they might stop him. Others criticized Paterno for not having done more than simply reporting the alleged crimes to his superiors. From this, a debate emerged in which participants berated each other over their own credibility to comment on the issue. It then became matter of their morality and not Penn State’s or Paterno’s.

Contested Identity. A theme of contested identity also emerged through observations of threads related to these events. Many individuals expressed confusion about their identity as it related to Penn State through their contributions to the threads analyzed here. More specifically, their comments brought to light an important internal conflict that permeated the discussion. At the heart of this conflict was the debate over what a “Penn Stater” should do or feel in this context. This created a very unsettling feeling among group members. This is, perhaps, the most significant theme that came to light as a result of this analysis because it underscores the impact a scandal has on those who have heavily invested themselves in the organization in crisis.
Previous research suggests that identity construction through computer-mediated communication around a brand or organization is contingent upon the level of affiliation one holds with the brand or organization. Schau and Muniz Jr. (2002), for example, argue that individuals highly identified with an organization will extend that dedication online and “vie for legitimacy and authority within these communities to gain both power within the community and to achieve validation of their individual identity” (p. 348). This premise is explained by and amplified within the context of college sports at Penn State. Wann and Branscombe (1993), for instance, found that individuals with high levels of sports team identification were “more involved and invested in the team, were more positive in their attributions concerning the team’s performance and predictions for the future, viewed other spectators as special, and felt it was more important for their friends to be fans of this team” (p. 10) than did persons who were moderate or low in identification with the team.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

As with all research of this nature, there are several limitations that need to be addressed. First and foremost, the Penn State scandal continues to unfold as this project was near completion. To be sure, the university and its officials will be working to repair its image for a long time yet to come. This would imply that there are several events and subsequent apologia that will occur over that span which warrant similar consideration and attention. In a similar vein, the events chosen for this analysis were limited by the availability of memes that corresponded to official Penn State responses. For instance, several significant events such as the firing of former university president Graham
Spanier were withheld from analysis because there was no accompanying user-generated content posted to the Penn State memes Facebook page. This is problematic in that the scandal itself cannot be reduced to a mere five events.

Nevertheless, more research in this subject area is sorely needed. This study invites scholars to reconsider traditional approaches to apologia and image repair theory. Instead of focusing primarily on the categorization and typologies of strategies, this project calls for a more rigorous examination of the functions and motives behind self-defense. It is no longer enough to simply identify strategies rhetors employ in their own defense. The need to understand the rhetor’s motive, function, and

Moreover, scholars must continue to investigate the impact of social media on apologia and image repair discourse, specifically among organizations. As evidenced through this analysis, crisis situations permeate social media quickly and spread with considerable vigor. This results in a substantial ripple effect of user-generated content commenting on the scandal that can potentially undermine or support the organization’s defense. Still further, it is evident that individuals highly associated with the organization take to social media in an attempt to defend it. This is likely due to the fact that their attachment extends well beyond mere affiliation and is heavily engrained in their personal lives.

**Implications**

The Penn State scandal provided a unique, albeit unfortunate, context through which to conduct this analysis. Certainly the events that led up to the crisis are grotesque and reprehensible by any standard. It is unfortunate that these proceedings provided such
excellent exemplars for this thesis to unfold. Nevertheless, the narrative the scandal has created remains a popular topic of conversation. This study attempted to evaluate this conversation across multiple levels; this is important because of the breadth and depth that characterized the scandal. To be sure, tackling the context of this scenario was a challenge in and of itself. But addressing that challenge head-on made the process all the more interesting and unique. Despite this hurdle, this thesis provides significant commentary on several important attributes related to organizational apologia and participatory culture through new media.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this research is that it extends traditional rhetorical theories of apologia and image repair by positioning them at the forefront of new media scholarship. For too long, rhetorical scholars have attempted to understand and critique speeches or other various texts in isolation. They have been mired in traditional methods and thought processes rendering them unable to more thoroughly account for, let alone explain, the interconnectedness of messages across mediums. The advent of the Internet – and the various cultures and communities it has spawned – implores the critic to expand its frame of reference. No longer is it enough to simply address a speech for its effectiveness, stylistic elements, etc. Public speeches and texts are increasingly becoming more public as they are passed along the Internet. There, they are extracted, manipulated, fragmented, mutilated, and discussed. The critic cannot stand idly by as this happens; instead, these exigencies should prompt the critic to evaluate on a much more comprehensive level. Failing to account for the responses to messages is a
failure to account for the viability of the message itself. After all, the critic – as a member of the audience – must realize that he or she, like the text, no longer exists in isolation.

Moreover, this research underscores the impact of new media and participatory culture on organizational discourse. Although this thesis only addresses one example of a specific discourse around a particular organization (Penn State’s apologia), it nevertheless invites the reader to consider the role online communities play in affecting the efficacy of its messages. This claim has tremendous implications for not only the way we study online cultures and communities, but also the way organizations interact with online cultures and communities. Even if an organization is not involved in conversation with its publics via social or new media, this does not imply that the conversation will not go on without them. This is especially prevalent in scenarios that directly affect the organization’s image, such as Penn State. By addressing the viral nature of online communities, researchers and organizations alike can more readily account for how messages will be received by its various publics online and offline.

It is important, once again, to highlight that this specific example is not applicable to every situation. The context surrounding the Penn State scandal is as complex as any; this makes it difficult to translate the findings here to similar situations in the future. However, to reiterate, that was not the goal of this research. Instead, this thesis finds its utility in beginning to expand traditional notions of rhetorical perspectives of apologia and image repair. It offers a new lens through which to apply antique concepts to modern problems.
Additionally, this research also connects to broader phenomena that should not go unmentioned. Beyond the strategies and functions of apologia discussed here, there are a score of bigger issues at play within this context. For example, very large organizations and social institutions are involved. To be sure, this brings to light issues around community, identity, sports, higher education, national and local affiliation, masculinity, sexuality, business, and childhood, among others. It would be impractical to tackle each of these issues in this study given the sheer magnitude of their scope. Nevertheless, it is important to underscore their potential for consideration in relation to the impact of image repair and apologetic rhetoric.
REFERENCES


