

Morgan Wallen: Racist or Regretful?

Introduction

Morgan Wallen, an American country singer, was accused of using a racial slur outside of his home in Tennessee. Wallen has become a hot topic of conversation after a video was posted of him using a racial slur against people of color, “The video was originally obtained by TMZ and showed Wallen and some friends returning home from a night out in Nashville” (Bain:2021). The video shows Wallen and his friends in the yard of his home yelling back and forth to each other, Wallen proceeds to shout at his friends calling them the N-word. After this incident became public, Wallen used the image repair strategies, corrective action and reducing offensiveness, to restore his public image. His corrective actions were introduced in his interview with Michael Strahan on *Good Morning America*, while also adding that he was going to check himself into a 30-day rehab in San Diego to figure out why he is acting immature and wrongful. His other strategy was reducing offensiveness, Wallen minimalized his incident by stating that, “he was ‘dumb’ and drunk when he used the N-word, insisting the hateful term was ‘playful’” (Daniels:2021). Another aspect in reducing offensiveness is how the celebrity used compensation to fix the incident. He calculated and donated some of his record sales to the Black Music Action Coalition (BMAC), “We tried to calculate what the number of how much [my sales] actually spiked from this incident, we got to a number somewhere around \$500,000, and we decided to donate that money to some organizations. BMAC was the first one” (Nolfi:2021). Fortunately, his actions of restoring his image worked successfully, “Despite the ‘Dangerous’ country singer’s untenable use of the N-word in February, Wallen, 28, had the biggest selling album of

2021” (Grace:2021). His record sales rocketed after the incident, which questions if the public was too forgiving of his actions.

Review Of Literature

Benoit created the Theory of Image Repair Discourse to simplify the broad category of crisis communication. He defines the theory as such, “Image repair discourse is a persuasive message or group of messages that respond(s) to attacks or suspicions that promote a negative attitude about the source of image repair” (Benoit:2015:10). He lists multiple ways in which complete this theory; however, Wallen focused on using reducing offensiveness and corrective action. Reducing offensiveness has six tactics: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation. Wallen focused on minimization by diminishing the negative harm done by the incident. In his interviews, he tries to convince the audience that what he said is not as bad as it first appears. He also used the tactic, compensation, by donating money to the victim which helps offset the negative feelings they might have. Another celebrity that used reducing offensiveness was David Letterman, after inappropriately joking about Sarah Palin’s daughter, “Humor offers a light-hearted approach that may not always fit with the severity of the offensiveness of the act or the sincerity of the image repair strategy” (Compton:2011:416). After watching Letterman’s apology video, he seems to have humor as an approach of minimalizing his actions towards Palin’s daughter. Another celebrity that used the same tactic was Kate Gosselin in her divorce with Jon Gosselin, “‘As always, my first priority remains our children,’ which alludes to the idea that she wants what is best for them and at that moment” (Moody:2011:407). She steers negative thoughts away from the divorce by providing sentimental statements towards her children. Duke University used corrective action after the

lacrosse team were accused of rape and sexual assault, “They formed ‘committees that were convened to investigate and address the university student-athlete culture’ (p. 121)” (Diulio and Arendt:2017:226). Wallen also uses corrective action, he promises to the audience that his wrongful act will never happen again and vows to make changes to prevent the recurrence of his act.

Analysis

Corrective Action

After the video of Wallen’s inappropriate behavior, him and his team started the image repair process with corrective action. Wallen declared that he was going to attend a rehabilitation center for 30 days in San Diego. By doing this, he was in hopes of learning on a deeper knowledge of what he did wrong and how he can do better, “Just trying to figure out: Why am I acting this way? Do I have an alcohol problem? Do I have a deeper issue?” (Giacomazzo:2021) Wallen said in his interview with Strahan. Only time will tell if Wallen found himself while in rehab. His explanation of why he is going to rehab is a great way to convince the audience that he is trying to get better. He tries to make the audience sympathize with him by adding the question, “do I have a drinking problem?” A celebrity’s best way to apologize to fans is by promising change in their behavior. Wallen understood that if he did not promise change, then he would lose his fans. He also started creating music with Black artists such as Lil Durk, “‘Morgan Wallen said the N word and is now making songs with Lil Durk. Anything is possible,’ commented another, noting Wallen’s recent collaboration with the Chicago rapper for song ‘Broadway Girls’” (Grace:2021). Creating new music with Black artists show his audience that he is not racist nor disapproves of Black artists.

Reducing Offensiveness

Wallen reduced the extremity of the situation by reducing offensiveness, saying the use of the word was not aimed to be derogatory at all, “[I] didn’t mean it in any derogatory manner at all,’ Wallen told Strahan, adding that he only used the word around a certain group of friends and didn’t realize the implications it could have” (Nolfi:2021). Strahan, in the interview, educated Wallen on the history of the word saying it “ties to slavery-era America, and stressed that many Black people often hear the word before they’re assaulted or even killed” (Nolfi:2021). Wallen, after learning the true negativity of the word, explained that he did not understand the true meaning and could not put himself in the shoes of the Black community. He admitted that saying the word playfully is still not acceptable. This method of image repair sometimes backfires on the individual because it can seem as if they are coming off naïve. Wallen, in this situation, apologizes for the use of the word. This may seem as if he is using mortification, but he is not asking for forgiveness; instead, he admits to what he said was wrong by pleading that it was not said with cruel intentions. His second tactic of reducing offensiveness is using compensation. As said before, he donated \$500,000 of his sales to Black organizations. In the eyes of the audience, this strategy can sometimes work because the individual being accused is giving something to make the problem better. However, sometimes people see this as a fixtured of money, and that wealthy people can make their problems disappear due to their income. For Wallen’s situation, compensation of his record sales was a great idea because this money was made from the skyrocketing sales created due to his negative publicity.

Evaluation

Wallen's image repair strategies, to me, could have been better. However, the public must have thought he had a great apology because his record sales increased after the incident occurred, "Wallen's sophomore album 'Dangerous: The Double Album' topped the Billboard 200 chart for five consecutive weeks upon release" (Daniels:2021). Clearly, he did an effective job of repairing his image and making sure his audience knew he was regretful of his actions. As for doing an ethical job, I believe he could have done better. Having a single interview with a Black spokesman and donating money to Black organizations is only scratching at the surface. If Wallen wanted to show he truly cared about the racism in America, he would have researched and spoke out against the unequal patterns in our country. The corrective action he used was only to focus on himself by going to a rehabilitation center. A more progressive corrective action would have been to speak out against racism, and this would have shown people that he truly learned from his wrongful actions. In the interview with Strahan, they talked about the racial division in country music, "Strahan also probed the star on the issue of racial division and inequality in country music, which Wallen admitted he didn't know much about" (Nolfi:2021). Wallen made no effort to say he wanted or was going to learn about the inequality in country music, if he would have done this, I believe he would have gained more respect from the public. Wallen was successful in his image repair strategies, but there could have been more done to gain the respect from different cultures in our country.

Conclusion

Morgan Wallen was accused of using a racial slur in the yard of his home after a night out, but his image repair strategies were good enough to keep him as one of the most popular country music singers. There are many implications for this research, being that most of the articles written on this situation were not scholarly or could have been biased. Another implication is the little research there was after the interview with Strahan. For example, the public is not sure if rehab truly changed Wallen's behavior, or if it was publicity stunt instead. Moreover, Wallen and his team did an exceptional job of keeping his image positive in the eyes of the public by reducing offensiveness to the situation and correcting the wrongful word choice.

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