

Reputational Risk: Final Paper

As the 21st century has progressed and as we have started and journeyed and are now wrapping up our academic pursuits, one culturally peculiar phenomenon has arisen and been ingrained into today's modern vernacular. "Cancel Culture," as it has been deemed by media outlets, found a footing in the early 2010s and has since grown rapidly in the online space. The term is simple in nature—the act of boycotting and ostracizing those who behave in an ignorant or crude manner (the behavior of which usually comes to light as the result of indecent social media posts). Many in our generation see today's ubiquitous Cancel Culture as a culture of accountability: merely holding public figures accountable for offensive or unfavorable jokes and bringing to light incidents and patterns of behavior that would otherwise have been swept under the rug. To the naked eye, Cancel Culture is seen as mob justice, nothing more than misguided witch hunts meant to tear others down. To those who have taken Professor Golden's class, we see these 'cancellations' as a multitude of case studies detailing failures in reputational risk management. In an age where many corporations still cannot fully realize the impacts of reputational risk (or, like some, *refuse to*), a single public figure and a handful of public relations agents cannot possibly be expected to fight risk in a similar manner. Managing reputational risk is not a challenge relegated solely to big business—it is one we all have to manage in today's online age. After all, if you cannot manage even your own reputation, how others come to perceive you, how could you manage a business's reputation?

Take Ian's thoughts, for example, who is pursuing a career in marketing, of which public relations is a vital aspect. With PR & reputational risk, the name of the game is prevention; mitigation can only go so far. The best plan for a crisis is to not put yourself in the position to be in said crisis in the first place. Fitzsimmons and Atkins of *Rethinking Reputational Risk*

recognize this as well: “Humans have long been wise to identifying risks, assessing their likelihood and potential impact before accepting them or trying to avoid or mitigate them. The Egyptians developed fire brigades, Augustus added fire watchmen and the Phoenicians invented what we now call insurance,” (53). Sadly, this topic also relates to certain ideas discussed later in the textbook—that there exist certain fallacies we cling onto for the simple reason they lead to less mental stress for us. Fitzsimmons and Atkins describe this as one aspect of the reputational risk paradox, where there exists an unspoken idea in the executive level that risk “could not possibly happen to us: we are a well-run company so there is no point in wasting resources on a hypothetical risk,” (Fitzsimmons & Atkins, 246). This fallacy falls apart with some basic reasoning. Inside a well-run company exists imperfect humans, and although they may catch each other’s faults, we know, due to the imperfect nature of the parts that it is composed of, that this system cannot be 100% foolproof. When it comes to a single public figure or, more reasonably, them as well as a small team, there exists little-to-no safety net in today’s modernity. With the advent and popularization of social media spearheading the idea of publicizing any menial thought at-a-moment’s-notice, being a publicist today comes with challenges never before seen. Today, ruining your public image can be done in the span of minutes. After all, it would only take an offensive remark and a couple swipes/taps on your phone. Let the thought marinate on a public forum for any amount of time and there’s a nonzero chance a news site will pick up on it, get you fired, and tarnish your track record from there on out. There are many such cases. With social media’s wide-reaching net, more ‘everyday,’ normal people are being thrust into the spotlight at a regular pace. It seems there is a new fad every week, and behind each fad, there is a previously-mentioned imperfect person. As can be seen on the internet, the only thing people love more than building someone up is tearing someone down, and naturally public

perception can shift quite rapidly. These imperfect people do not have publicists because they have never needed them. More than likely, they have a history of off-color jokes because they have never contemplated that the dice roll-spotlight would be cast on them. Sites like Instagram, Tik Tok, and Twitter empower this pattern, and as these sites continue to only grow, it is our duty to understand this trend for not just our future careers, but our personal lives as well. The best solution is to not put ourselves in a position to be ‘canceled’ in the first place, lest we fight the losing battle of saving what’s left of our reputation.

In today’s interconnected world, the boundary between our personal and professional lives is becoming increasingly blurred, primarily due to the pervasive influence of social media. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter offer immense opportunities for self-expression, networking, and building connections. However, they also come with significant risks, as the permanence of online actions can ripple into unintended consequences. For Carolina, social media represents one of her personal “icebergs,” a hidden challenge that, if not navigated carefully, could have dire implications for her professional future. The lessons from *Our Iceberg is Melting* by John Kotter underscore the necessity of recognizing such risks and proactively managing them, emphasizing the importance of change management in mitigating potential damage.

Social media is a double-edged sword: while it allows individuals to curate their personal brand, it also amplifies missteps, leaving a permanent digital footprint. Early in our careers, it is crucial to cultivate a personal brand that is not only authentic but also near squeaky clean. Employers, colleagues, and industry peers often turn to social media to gauge the character and professionalism of potential hires or collaborators. A single careless comment, inappropriate photo, or controversial opinion can overshadow years of hard work and tarnish a reputation

forever. As Fitzsimmons and Atkins emphasize in *Rethinking Reputational Risk*, prevention is paramount. When it comes to social media, the best crisis management plan is to avoid the crisis entirely by being mindful of how we present ourselves online.

Our Iceberg is Melting provides a framework for addressing challenges like this through the principles of change management. The book outlines the importance of acknowledging threats, creating urgency, and rallying support to address them. Much like Kotter's penguins needed to adapt to their melting iceberg, we must adapt to the reality of living in a hyper-connected, scrutinized digital environment. Recognizing the iceberg of social media's influence on our professional lives requires vigilance and a willingness to evolve our habits. We must be proactive in setting boundaries between personal expression and professional decorum while remaining adaptable as the digital landscape continues to shift.

Change management is particularly relevant because social media evolves rapidly. Platforms introduce new features, trends emerge overnight, and public expectations shift. Staying ahead of these changes requires continuous self-assessment and adjustment. For instance, a post that might have been acceptable five years ago could be viewed as problematic today due to evolving societal norms. Kotter's emphasis on maintaining urgency and fostering a culture of continual improvement applies directly to how we manage our online presence. It is not enough to clean up our social media profiles once; we must routinely audit them to ensure they align with our professional goals and values.

Building a clean and professional personal brand early in one's career is not just about avoiding controversy – it's about establishing trust and credibility. A strong reputation opens doors to new opportunities and networks that might otherwise remain closed. Conversely, a damaged reputation can become a significant barrier, particularly in competitive industries.

Kotter's focus on creating a vision and communicating it effectively resonates here. Our personal brand is the vision we present to the world, and it should reflect the values and professionalism we wish to uphold in our careers. This requires intentionality, consistency, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Ultimately, social media is a powerful tool, but it is one that must be used with caution. By treating it as one of our personal icebergs, we can adopt a proactive approach to managing its risks. The lessons from *Our Iceberg is Melting* remind us that change is inevitable but with the right mindset and strategies, we can navigate these challenges successfully. Through careful curation of our personal brand, a commitment to professionalism, and an understanding of the potential consequences of our online actions, we can build a foundation of trust and credibility that will serve us well throughout our careers.

As the 21st century has unfolded and we have embarked on our academic journeys, one culturally peculiar phenomenon has rapidly become ingrained in modern society: "Cancel Culture." Emerging in the early 2010s, this phenomenon is closely tied to the rise of social media platforms that amplify individual voices and behaviors to a global audience. The term "Cancel Culture" refers to the act of boycotting or ostracizing individuals, especially public figures, who display ignorance, insensitivity, or crude behavior, often highlighted through offensive social media posts. While many view Cancel Culture as a way of holding people accountable for harmful actions, it also raises questions about the nature of reputational risk and crisis management, especially in today's highly connected and often volatile digital landscape. In our generation, Cancel Culture is often perceived as a tool for exposing problematic behavior and advocating for social justice. However, critics argue that it has evolved into a form of "mob justice," where individuals or public figures are unfairly vilified without proper context or

opportunity for redemption. For those studying reputational risk, such cases offer valuable lessons in managing public perception. As we move further into an era dominated by social media, managing our personal and professional reputations has become more crucial than ever.

At the heart of reputational risk management is prevention. Public relations professionals, such as Ian, who are considering careers in this field, understand that the best way to handle a crisis is to avoid it altogether. This principle is echoed in “Rethinking Reputational Risk” by Fitzsimmons and Atkins, who argue that humans have long sought to identify risks and mitigate them before they spiral out of control. From the ancient Egyptians who developed fire brigades to the Phoenicians who invented insurance, history shows that risk management is essential to long-term survival. Yet, the book also warns of a fallacy in reputational risk management—the belief that “it could not possibly happen to us.” This thinking is often prevalent in well-run organizations, where executives assume that their company’s reputation is bulletproof.

However, this belief is flawed. Inside any organization, there are imperfect human beings, and despite well-constructed reputational safeguards, errors will inevitably occur. When it comes to public figures, especially those without large PR teams or corporate backing, the ability to manage a reputation is even more challenging. In today’s world, a single offensive tweet, a misstep captured on video, or an ill-advised joke can instantly tarnish one’s image and career. The rapid dissemination of information on platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok means that reputational damage can happen in minutes, leaving little room for recovery. Take the case of comedian Kevin Hart, who stepped down as host of the 2019 Oscars after old homophobic tweets resurfaced. Hart had previously been regarded as a beloved comedian with a squeaky-clean public image, but within hours, his career trajectory was severely disrupted. Despite offering a public apology, Hart was unable to fully manage the backlash, demonstrating

the overwhelming power of Cancel Culture. This incident underscores the importance of managing reputational risk, not only for businesses but for individuals as well.

Social media has made it more difficult to distinguish between personal and professional lives. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, while offering immense opportunities for self-expression, also pose significant risks. A single careless post or comment can quickly spiral into a public relations disaster. This dynamic presents a unique challenge for individuals trying to navigate their personal and professional identities in an increasingly scrutinized digital space. For people, who are considering their future careers, social media represents a hidden "iceberg"—a risk that, if not carefully managed, can have severe consequences for their professional futures. Drawing upon the insights from “Our Iceberg is Melting” by John Kotter, it is evident that change management principles must be applied to personal brand building. Kotter’s model stresses the importance of recognizing threats, creating urgency, and rallying support to address potential problems before they escalate.

Similarly, individuals must recognize the risks posed by their online behavior and proactively adjust their actions to avoid damage to their personal and professional reputations. The rise of social media has made managing reputational risk akin to managing a rapidly changing environment. Just as Kotter’s penguins had to adapt to the melting iceberg, we must adapt to the ever-changing landscape of digital communication. Social media platforms evolve quickly, and what might have been acceptable behavior a few years ago may no longer be seen as appropriate today. For example, a post that was deemed funny or harmless in the past might now be interpreted as offensive due to shifts in societal norms. Recognizing this reality is crucial, especially when it comes to our digital footprints. Kotter’s emphasis on urgency and continual improvement is particularly relevant in this context. To protect our reputations, we must

continuously audit our social media profiles, ensuring they reflect the values we wish to convey professionally. This means regularly updating our online presence and being proactive in managing how we present ourselves to the world. Building a strong personal brand early in one's career is not just about avoiding controversy; it's about establishing trust and credibility. Employers and industry peers often turn to social media as a measure of an individual's professionalism. A strong online presence can open doors to new opportunities, while a tarnished reputation can close them. By following Kotter's principles of change management—creating a vision for how we wish to be perceived and communicating it effectively—we can better navigate the challenges posed by social media and build a reputation that aligns with our career goals.

In today's interconnected world, reputational risk is no longer a concern limited to corporations or public figures it's something everyone must manage, from students to professionals. The power of social media has made it possible for even the most seemingly insignificant actions to spiral into public relations crises. By understanding the principles of reputational risk management and embracing the lessons from change management, we can protect our personal and professional reputations from the ever-present threat of Cancel Culture. The key to avoiding reputational disaster lies in prevention: cultivating a clean, authentic personal brand and being vigilant about how we present ourselves online. As we continue to navigate the complexities of an increasingly digital world, it is essential to recognize the importance of our online behavior and manage it with the same foresight and caution that businesses apply to corporate reputations. Only then can we ensure that our careers and our personal integrity remain intact in the age of Cancel Culture.

Works Cited

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