

# Northwestern Lacks Direction: A Mishandling of Hazing Allegations

James Morton, Utah State University

Chris Hanna, Georgia Southern University

Northwestern University was forced to respond to hazing allegations within their football program when an anonymous complaint was filed following the 2022 football season. Its response to the allegations had several iterations due in part to a lack of using the correct combination of communication strategies. Northwestern released an initial response to the allegations that included a two-week, unpaid suspension of their head football coach. They then had to react to a media report that outlined the specific acts of hazing (Markus et al., 2023). The reaction included the firing of the formerly suspended head football coach (Schill, 2023). Northwestern then fired their head baseball coach for bullying and creating a toxic environment (Bullington, 2023), extending the communication crisis. The period of crisis was further extended with the filing of multiple lawsuits by former players against Northwestern and various people either employed or formerly employed by Northwestern (Hill & Bonesteel, 2023). Two more incidents represented the end of the crisis. The first was Northwestern players and coaches wearing shirts supporting the former head coach at an early season practice (Peter, 2023) and the second was the filing of a lawsuit by the former head football coach (Schad, 2023).

There are five strategies people utilize when employing image repair theory during crisis communication including (a) denial, (b) evasion of responsibility, (c) reducing offensiveness of the event, (d) corrective action, and (e) mortification (Benoit, 1997). This study examines the strategies Northwestern utilized in their communication during the crisis. A longitudinal approach was taken to assess how Northwestern handled the communication crisis over five months. Additionally, media and plaintiff responses to Northwestern's communication strategies were investigated. This study is complete and found that Northwestern employed all five of the major image repair strategies outlined by Benoit but relied most heavily on reducing offensiveness. Additionally, Northwestern's lack of use of the mortification strategy in combination with the corrective action strategy led to a poor response from the media and multiple lawsuits being filed against them.