

# Examining Corporate Crisis Public Relations Practices in Sport Star Crisis Events from the Perspective of Positive Public Relations

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## Abstract

Positive psychology is an emerging current of thought in contemporary psychology. The extension of related viewpoints and concepts from positive psychology into public relations research can facilitate a "qualitative" leap for corporations in crisis handling, communication, image reshaping, and trust rebuilding in the field of crisis public relations. This paper adopts a positive public relations perspective to analyze the "Liu Xiang incidents in 2008 and 2012" as case studies, exploring corporate crisis public relations practices in sports star crisis events. This research bears significant practical implications for strengthening corporate public relations crisis management and future development.

## Keywords

Positive Public Relations; Sports Star Crisis; Crisis Public Relations Practices; Liu Xiang Incident.

## 1. Introduction

Positive psychology is a movement in psychology advocated and initiated by Martin E.P Seligman, the former president of the American Psychological Association, at the end of the 20th century[1]. As a novel research direction within modern psychology, positive psychology provides scholars with a way of shifting from "negative" to "positive" thinking. By extending the viewpoints and concepts from positive psychology into public relations research, particularly in the area of crisis public relations, it can enable public relations practitioners to make a "qualitative" leap in crisis handling, communication, image reshaping, and trust rebuilding.

### 1.1. Literature Review

Positive psychology focuses on everyday motivations and camaraderie. It calls on psychologists to regard human potential, motives, and abilities with a more open and appreciative perspective, conducting research on positive qualities, emphasizing human survival and development, and underscoring the value of individuals. Positive psychology is a science dedicated to the study of human developmental potential and virtues. The essence of positive psychology is reflected in correcting the previous imbalance in the development of psychology, emphasizing that the development of psychology relies not only on the prevention and treatment of human psychological disorders but also on the cultivation and construction of excellent human qualities[2]. These two aspects can complement each other and develop in a balanced manner[3].

The concept of Positive Public Relations can be traced back to the "Wuhan Consensus: 15 Basic Principles of Sunshine Public Relations" reached at the "6th International Academic Forum on PR and Advertising (PRAD)" in 2013. Chen Xianhong used the term "Sunshine Public Relations" to express the positive qualities of public relations theory and practice, aiming to construct an

idealistic cognitive framework for public relations, similar to the Excellence Theory, to achieve the goal of "de-stigmatizing public relations"[4]. In subsequent research, influenced by Chinese traditional culture and the academic trend of positive psychology, Chen Xianhong modified the concept of "Sunshine Public Relations" to "Positive Public Relations"[5].

Chen Xianhong believes that traditional public relations practices are mainly focused on risk management and crisis response, which are manifestations of negative public relations [6]. Drawing on the insights of positive psychology that shifts the focus from human disease and weaknesses to excellent human qualities and beautiful minds, public relations studies need to transition from focusing primarily on research into crisis events, media events, large-scale activities and other abnormal public relations studies, to also studying normal, proactive public relations such as daily relationship maintenance, organizational image shaping, and social capital enhancement.

## 1.2. Event Review

On August 28, 2004, Liu Xiang was the first to cross the finish line at the Athens Olympics with a time of 12.91 seconds, breaking the world record.

At 11:50 a.m. on August 18, 2008, Liu Xiang limped off the field without hurdling a single barrier as the first round of the 110-meter hurdles was about to begin at the Beijing Olympics, due to an injury.

At 5:45 p.m. on August 7, 2012, Liu Xiang fell and was injured in an unexpected accident during the first round of the men's 110m hurdles preliminaries in Group 6 at the London Olympics, causing him to withdraw from the race.

During the 2008 and 2012 incidents involving Liu Xiang, he endorsed 17 enterprises, including Nike, Coca-Cola, Amway Nutrilite, VISA, Yili, China Post EMS, Lenovo, Baisha, Aokang, Shanshan, Cadillac, Qianlima Automobile, Bank of Communications, Yuantai, Aokang, Cadillac, and Qingdao Beer. Nike's response stood as a representative case.

On August 18, 2008, Nike publicly affirmed Liu Xiang's outstanding athletic status and expressed their pride in their collaboration. They acknowledged Liu's injury and projected hope for his recovery. Concurrently, they established the "QQ Love Wall - Bless Liu Xiang," in collaboration with Tencent, which amassed close to 20,000 blessings and over 370,000 page views within a week.

On August 19, Beijing Times highlighted Nike's adjustment to Liu Xiang's advertisements in anticipation of his return. Major newspapers featured half-page to full-page Nike advertisements featuring Liu Xiang's withdrawal from the race. Nike's expenditure in this campaign was reported to exceed 1.5 million yuan.

On August 20, Nike denied the conspiracy theories about Liu Xiang's withdrawal in response to a web article, pledging to vindicate themselves through proper channels.

On August 8, 2012, Nike updated their official Weibo with motivational messages alongside a new poster titled "Live out your greatness." This update garnered significant engagement within three hours. The PR head of Nike also confirmed their ongoing partnership with Liu Xiang that year and refuted rumors of advertisers pressuring Liu Xiang to compete despite his injury.

## 2. Case Analysis

### 2.1. Applicability Conditions for Positive Public Relations

#### 2.1.1. Populist Ideology

Public opinion, as reflected in online polls such as the one on Phoenix Sports, skewed largely negative towards the Liu Xiang incident, with sentiments ranging from confusion to cynicism.

A multitude of critical posts emerged on major websites, accusing Liu of shirking competition, feigning pain, or losing face for the entire Chinese populace.

### **2.1.2. Official Ideology**

In contrast, official narratives painted Liu as a tragic hero and the embodiment of Olympic spirit. Mainstream media outlets, such as Xinhua and People's Daily, lauded Liu as a great warrior and expressed disdain for skeptics who accused Liu of putting on a performance. Notably, certain market-oriented media outlets expressed doubts about the handling of information surrounding the Liu Xiang incident.

### **2.1.3. Applicability of Positive Public Relations**

In situations where official and populist ideologies diverge, the utility of positive public relations becomes evident. The core of the controversy lies in conflicting values, with sufficient reasons found by proponents of both the "hero" and "performance" theories, leading to stubborn insistence on differing viewpoints. Positive public relations acknowledges this intersubjectivity, where each party in the dialogue possesses its unique stance, and seeks to understand others' perspectives[7]. It is suited for contexts aiming at fostering understanding rather than consensus. Importantly, positive public relations, with its focus on relationship-building rather than persuasion, fosters a subtler approach to resolving conflict.

## **2.2. Critical Points for Transition from Negative to Positive**

### **2.2.1. Insights from Positive Psychology**

Positive psychology embarks on uncovering positive meanings in issues from two directions: First, scrutinizing the issue from diverse angles to trace the root cause. Second, deriving positive experience from the issue's occurrence, progression, and outcome.

Essentially, positive psychology provides inspirations for positive public relations: Firstly, attempt to identify a root cause that is pardonable, remediable, and capable of yielding positive influence. Secondly, strive to discover a positive outcome that is convincing and embodied throughout the issue's course.

### **2.2.2. Thorough and Timely Presentation of Facts, Emphasizing Positive Experiences**

In the Liu Xiang incident, mainstream media, as the leading force in guiding public opinion, immediately introduced the causes, developments, and shared emotions of the event to the public through press conferences, special reports, personal interviews, and event commentary. For instance, at 12:25 p.m. on August 18, 2008, CCTV live-streamed the "Liu Xiang Withdrawal Press Conference," allowing key figures to clarify the true causes of the event. Bai Yansong's commentary "Please Read Liu Xiang's Departing Figure Well" expressed: "Four years ago, Liu Xiang stunned us with his frontal charge. Four years later, he touches us with his departing figure. That's enough; he has done all he could. Now it's up to us to interpret!"

Revealing the truth is the first step toward sincere, open, positive relations. Behind an organization's presentation of hard facts lies its genuine attitude, which, once recognized by the public, will elicit positive feedback. The overarching logic of communication between the organization and the public lies in emotional exchange, as public sentiment directly or indirectly influences the effectiveness of the organization's PR activities.

## **2.3. Five Positive Public Relations Strategies**

In the study "Speaking for the People: Research on the Government's Positive Public Relations Strategies in Responding to Epidemic Crisis" (Chen Xianhong, 2021), five positive public relations strategies were proposed: "listening, disciplining, informing, dialoguing, and participating". It's noteworthy that the emphasis of these positive PR strategies lies in the "Way" of public relations.

### 2.3.1. Listening

In negative public relations, listening is understood as environment scanning and monitoring, centered around the organization. In this context, "listening is not a metaphor for online participation, but speaking is the dominant metaphor," which deviates from the original intention of listening. Listening is about the ritualistic process, considered a prerequisite for achieving ideal crisis communication, ethical crisis narratives, and two-way dialogue. In the Liu Xiang incident, Nike captured the core issue needing immediate response, "Will they terminate the cooperation with Liu Xiang?", through listening to the public voice at the very beginning, thus preparing for the subsequent PR strategies.

### 2.3.2. Disciplining

Disciplining embodies the subtle characteristic of positive public relations. It shapes public identification and constructs value perception in the public opinion field through media symbol communication and public opinion guidance. The key to disciplining is the conveyance of emotions. Nike issued statements expressing their understanding, support, and continued cooperation with Liu Xiang in response to the incidents in 2008 and 2012. They demonstrated their attitudes and emotions to the public through actions like releasing statements, placing ads, denying rumors, renewing contracts, etc., covertly and professionally disciplining the public consciousness in the public opinion field.

### 2.3.3. Informing

Informing emphasizes factual information dissemination. Unidirectional information release and communication with the public are the first steps in crisis response. Since the public's media dependency intensifies during crises, Nike, as core stakeholder in the Liu Xiang incident, took the responsibility to explain "what happened," laying the groundwork for future PR strategies. The informing strategy suggests that proactive disclosure of ample information usually gives PR entities an advantage. Lenovo adopted a passive informing strategy during the 2008 Liu Xiang incident, leading to a PR failure due to inconsistent responses and contradictions in words and actions.

### 2.3.4. Dialoguing

Dialogue, building upon informing, is an approach that values sharing and mutual understanding [8]. In a crisis context, it constructs relationships through "meaning-making, understanding, and empathy/sympathy," emphasizing public interaction and co-creating reality in a partnership. The dialogue strategy of Nike in the 2008 and 2012 Liu Xiang incidents was not remarkable, for three reasons: (1) The attitudes and viewpoints within the public were entangled and conflicting. (2) It was challenging to establish a dialogue between massive corporations and the vast public. (3) Crisis PR practices from a negative PR perspective still primarily consider the PR entity.

### 2.3.5. Participating

One insight from positive public relations into crisis PR practices is the shift in personal pronouns. Instead of fighting alone with "I" as the subject, companies should use "we" as the subject, involving the public in collective interactions as much as possible. Participation strategy builds upon the dialogue strategy, aiming to establish true partnerships and provide stakeholders with concepts and frameworks for understanding and dealing with crisis events. Nike collaborated with Tencent to set up the "QQ Love Wall – Bless Liu Xiang" (Nike Brand Wall) during the 2008 Liu Xiang incident. The shift in pronouns to "we" is a crucial approach to co-creating meaning. Changing the public's passive acceptance to active participation through community involvement, social media engagement, employee involvement, and public participation promotes a two-way balanced relationship.

### 3. Conclusion

#### 3.1. The Shift in Crisis PR Perspective

The traditional crisis PR concept is "solving problems for the organization (or government, etc.)", while the crisis PR concept under the positive public relations perspective is "solving problems for everyone (including businesses, government, organizations, the public, media, and other stakeholders)". Positive public relations practice is an action philosophy with the mission of "speaking well + doing well + doing good things". In crisis PR, the organization-public relationship exists in a continuum from "negative" to "positive". Generally, after a crisis event occurs, the organization-public relationship is at the most negative end. If the PR strategy taken by the entity can return the organization-public relationship to normal, it achieves the "turn crisis into safety" in negative public relations. If the PR strategy taken can transform the organization-public relationship to a positive state based on normalization, it achieves "turn crisis into opportunity" in positive public relations. The change in crisis PR concept is essentially a rhetorical change. Crisis PR has become a good thing to create "positivity", not a bad thing to mend "negativity", shifting people's attention to the positive contributions and efforts of public relations.

#### 3.2. How to Stimulate the Positivity in Crisis PR

Under the concept of positive public relations, an important question to consider is: how to stimulate the positivity in crisis PR? Or from another perspective, how to stimulate the positivity in the people involved in crisis PR (including internal and external stakeholders)? Positive public relations pursue "harmony", including both internal harmony, i.e., the harmony of employees themselves, superiors and subordinates, among employees, and external harmony, i.e., among businesses, between businesses and communities, and between businesses and media. Specific measures can be started from "positive relationships". By establishing positive cognition and positive emotions of internal and external stakeholders towards the enterprise, handling the relationship between individuals and groups, personal values and social values, and the relationship between cooperation and competition, game and balance.

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