

Leveraging Parasocial Relationships for Crisis Management: Tim Ballard's Use of Social Media

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Abstract

This study examines the role of parasocial relationships—one-sided bonds between media figures and audiences—in crisis management, using Tim Ballard of Operation Underground Railroad as a case study. Amid allegations of misconduct, Ballard's use of Instagram was analyzed through parasocial interaction theory. A rhetorical analysis of comments on his posts revealed that most were supportive or defensive, highlighting the strength of parasocial bonds in maintaining public image. The findings emphasize the power of narrative control and emotional appeal in crisis situations and underscore the importance of critical media literacy in understanding media influence.

Keywords: *parasocial relationships, crisis management, Tim Ballard, social media, public perception, narrative persuasion, media literacy.*

Tim Ballard, former CEO and founder of Operation Underground Railroad (O.U.R.), an organization dedicated to rescuing children from sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, has recently faced allegations of sexual misconduct and misuse of organizational funds (Operation Underground Railroad, n.d.; Winn, 2023). Despite these allegations, Ballard remains a significant figure in conservative circles, especially following the release of the film "Sound of Freedom," which is based on his experiences (Helmore, 2023). This study examines how Ballard's use of parasocial interactions, particularly through Instagram, has influenced public perception and maintained his image amidst controversy.

Utilizing parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), this study conducts a qualitative rhetorical analysis of Ballard's Instagram posts and the public's responses to them. The research explores the dynamics of these one-sided relationships and how Ballard's strategic use of social media impacts his credibility and the public's trust. By analyzing comments and themes, the study aims to understand the manipulation of parasocial relationships for personal advantage and the broader implications for public figures leveraging such interactions during crises (Ballard, 2023; Horton & Wohl, 1956). This research contributes to the discourse on media, celebrity behavior, and consumer trust, highlighting the ethical considerations of

such mediated relationships.

Literature Review

Tim Ballard, founder of O.U.R., became a prominent figure in the fight against child trafficking, with his work dramatized in the film "Sound of Freedom" (Helmore, 2023; Jessen, 2024). However, serious allegations have tarnished his reputation, raising ethical concerns. This study will analyze Ballard's use of social media to maintain his public image, focusing on how his Instagram activity influences his credibility and the public's trust (Jessen, 2024). Through a qualitative rhetorical analysis of his posts and public comments, the study seeks to understand the manipulation of parasocial relationships during personal and professional scandals, contributing to the discourse on media, celebrity behavior, and consumer trust.

Tim Ballard

Tim Ballard, the founder of Operation Underground Railroad (O.U.R.), gained prominence as a leading figure in the global fight against child trafficking. His organization, dedicated to rescuing children from sex trafficking, received widespread acclaim for its daring operations and high-profile successes. The film "Sound of Freedom," which dramatized Ballard's efforts, further elevated his status as a hero in the anti-trafficking movement, captivating audiences and raising significant funds and awareness for the cause (Helmore, 2023).

O.U.R.'s operations often involved undercover missions where Ballard and his team posed as potential clients to rescue victims and apprehend traffickers. These dramatic rescue operations, combined with effective storytelling and media coverage, helped build Ballard's reputation as a fearless crusader for justice (Jessen, 2024). The film "Sound of Freedom" grossed over \$100 million at the box office, portraying Ballard's work in a heroic light (Helmore, 2023).

Ballard's reputation took a significant hit with a series of allegations and lawsuits. In October 2023, a lawsuit in Utah accused Ballard of sexually assaulting several women under the guise of conducting rescue operations, using a tactic known as the "couples ruse" to coerce women into sexual acts (Branigin & Scribner, 2023). The plaintiffs alleged that Ballard exploited his authority and the mission's context for personal gratification. Claims were also made that O.U.R. and its board members were aware of Ballard's misconduct but failed to act, raising questions about the organization's ethical standards and internal controls (Helmore, 2023).

In response, Ballard vehemently denied any wrongdoing, asserting that the "couples ruse" was a legitimate tactic for safety and effectiveness. He claimed the evidence against him was improperly obtained, framing the allegations as part of a smear campaign (Beal-Cvetko, 2023). O.U.R. also denied the allegations, stating that their operations were conducted ethically and that the lawsuits did not reflect their standard practices. Despite these denials, the public scandal has severely damaged Ballard's reputation and O.U.R.'s credibility, highlighting the need for rigorous oversight and accountability within non-profit organizations (Branigin & Scribner, 2023).

Parasocial Interaction Theory

Parasocial interaction theory refers to the reaction of a media user to another individual (usually with some degree of fame) in media where the media user views the celebrity as a close friend (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial theory was developed to attempt to explain the imaginary relationships between individuals and those who are distant (such as celebrities on social media) from the audience, and do not reciprocate communication (Stever, 2017). There is no real interaction happening between individuals, rather the communication is one-sided, is not reciprocated, and the relationship is essentially imagined by the other person (Horton & Wohl, 1956). While the social interactions are similar to in-person interactions, the response of a social partner is little to none in parasocial interactions (Stever, 2017). These interactions develop into a parasocial relationship as the person engaging in the parasocial interaction feels as if there is a reciprocated relationship with gradual relationship growth and thus builds rapport with the other person (Whang & Im, 2020). Such relationships are initiated or strengthened when the celebrity seemingly communicates in familiar ways with media users through the computer (Dibble et al., 2015), which is most often done through various social media today. In discussing similarities between parasocial interaction and social interaction, researcher David C. Giles (2002) stated:

"It seems likely that, once we have made a person judgment about a media figure, or attributed person characteristics to that figure (e.g., an anthropomorphized cartoon animal), then we will subsequently respond to that figure "as if" it occupies our physical space, thereby becoming incorporated into our social network. If this is the case, then we might expect to identify similar psychological processes underpinning the course of parasocial relationships to those found in face-to-face relationships." (pp. 283-284)

Parasocial interactions begin when a public figure acknowledges the presence of the audience in their interaction, incorporates a more natural, conversational style such as in informal in-person gatherings, and physically and verbally acknowledges their audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Strauss, 1958). According to Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011), users' parasocial interaction experience is "characterized by a felt reciprocity with a TV performer that comprises a sense of mutual awareness, attention, and adjustment" (p. 1107). Also apparent is that cues given by a media figure such as eye-gazing or body language interactions can increase the parasocial experiences wherein the user infers and uses intuition to take part in the parasocial interaction experience (Cummins & Cui, 2014; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Parasocial relationships can be used for the benefit of the individual celebrity or for companies or organizations who use the celebrity in their marketing.

Parasocial relationships are characterized by the concern, time, and energy audiences dedicate toward media figures, which develops into an intimate awareness of the public figure (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Tukachinsky & Eyal, 2018). "...[R]esearchers have observed that people are more likely to socially disclose personal information, display interpersonal empathy, and show decreases in social rejection-related cognitive impairments after being primed with their favorite media figure" (Knowles, 2007, as cited in Riles & Adams, 2020, pp. 792-793). Strong interest in media figures--whether spurned by adoration or dislike--could be a large part of parasocial relationships due to long-lasting interest being a necessary factor in the experience for continued investment needed to achieve such relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956, as cited in Riles & Adams, 2020). By establishing credibility with viewers, celebrities can achieve success in securing endorsement contracts which in turn help companies sell products because of the famous person's recommendation/approval of the product (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016).

Theorizing on parasocial interaction, a celebrity's persuasive message can increase business through parasocial narratives which decreases the likelihood of the audience finding counterarguments (Clementson & Beatty, 2023). "Several studies have revealed that strong consumer-brand relationships can mitigate the detrimental impacts of negative information or transgressions (Kim et al., 2014; Sinha & Lu, 2015, as cited in Aw & Labrecque, 2022, p. 390). When celebrities or the organizations endorsed by celebrities make missteps, parasocial relationships can be used to influence users' perceptions. Brands can use persuasive communication to minimize negative impacts by

somewhat controlling the reactions of consumers or fans (Aw & Labrecque, 2022). Just as people tend to be protective and defend loved ones in their lives, the same can be true in computer mediated relationships. "...[P]eople often find themselves caring about mediated figures (e.g., celebrities, athletes, fictional characters, etc.), and even developing long-term socioemotional bonds with them, as if the mediated other were an acquaintance, a friend, or a loved one" (Pimienta, 2023, p. 4). With the strong bond of parasocial relationships, media users may be willing to overlook controversies their celebrities are involved in.

Because of parasocial relationships, celebrities are seen as credible to media users, and thus can enhance sales when the celebrity endorses a product (Burnasheva & Suh, 2020). Social media influencers can have a similar impact. While not traditional celebrities, influencers' parasocial relationships and interactions with their followers are paramount in order to create reputational capital and endorsement effectiveness, which is less vital for traditional celebrities (Hess et al., 2022). Additionally, a perceived weak parasocial relationship or interaction has less impact on the success of an endorsement of a celebrity than it does for social media influencers (Hess et al., 2022). Celebrities can be used in brand repair when their fan-established credibility is used in persuasive ways within parasocial interactions to mitigate negative consequences, or conversely, brands or organizations may sever ties with a celebrity to save their reputation when the individual acts negatively.

The credibility of a celebrity often increases the more parasocial interactions occur (Madison et al., 2019) whether through television programming or social media. While celebrity endorsers gain credibility through achievements and can create more positive impacts with their reputational capital while endorsing brands, the same may not be said with social media influencers (Hess et al., 2022). Studies have examined the credibility of a source when determining the celebrity's impact on how effective their persuasive messages are (Manchanda et al., 2021). Whether a celebrity has established high levels of credibility or not can have a huge effect on public perceptions. When a media figure misbehaves, this can damage parasocial relationships (Tukachinsky, 2019). In fact, Tukachinsky (2019) stated that college students found that social or moral misbehavior of their beloved media figures would damage how they felt about that person, and such relationship damage would be even greater than if such misbehavior occurred in real life friendships. This suggests that the persuasiveness or credibility of the celebrity

would be damaged, leading to negative attitudes about the celebrity and/or any brands they endorsed (Tukachinsky, 2019). Actions or behaviors of celebrities or social media influencers can damage parasocial interactions and relationships and have a potential impact on any organizations or companies they work with.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilizing parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) to explore the dynamics of relationships that audiences form with media figures. Focusing on Tim Ballard amidst allegations of misconduct and misuse of funds from Operation Underground Railroad, the research analyzed his Instagram activity. The data collection involved selecting relevant Instagram posts addressing the allegations, extracting the first 25 comments from each, and categorizing them based on their nature—supportive, defensive, showing signs of betrayal, or directly addressing the allegations.

The sample included comments from eight of Ballard's posts made after the allegations surfaced, amounting to 200 comments in total. These comments were placed in a spreadsheet for coding, with each category assigned a specific color. This process allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the comments to understand how Ballard's parasocial relationships were impacted by the allegations and his subsequent Instagram statements. The rhetorical analysis aimed to identify common themes and patterns, providing insights into the public's perception and trust in Ballard.

The study considered assumptions, limitations, and delimitations to ensure rigorous analysis. While the sample size provided a representative trend, analyzing all comments or comparing pre- and post-allegation comments could yield more comprehensive insights. The study did not include replies to comments, which might show public discourse among audience members. Despite these limitations, the sample was adequate to explain the parasocial interactions and relationships Ballard has cultivated.

Ethical assurances were maintained as the Instagram posts and comments are public. User anonymity was preserved by not including specific usernames. Potential researcher biases were acknowledged but deemed not particularly relevant to the study's problem or purpose. The analysis revealed that despite serious allegations, Ballard's followers remained largely supportive or defensive, highlighting the resilience of parasocial relationships and their impact on public perception.

Results

This study aimed to examine the impact of Tim Ballard's Instagram dialogue on his parasocial relationships following allegations of misconduct. The qualitative analysis focused on understanding how Ballard's interactions and rhetoric influenced his followers' perceptions and trust. Data was collected from the first 25 comments on eight of Ballard's Instagram posts, categorized into supportive, defensive, directly addressing allegations, and attacks. The analysis revealed that most comments were supportive or defensive, indicating that Ballard's followers largely resonated with his narrative and persuasive tactics, which included emotional and religious appeals. This suggests that Ballard effectively leveraged his parasocial relationships to mitigate the negative effects of the allegations and maintain public support. The findings align with existing research on parasocial relationships and crisis management, highlighting the power of narrative persuasion in shaping public perception and the resilience of parasocial bonds even amid controversy.

Ballard's Instagram Posts

This study comprises comments left on eight of Tim Ballard's Instagram posts. To understand the context wherein the comments were made, it is important to know the messages in Ballard's posts. After the allegations were first made against him, Ballard posted on his public Instagram account on September 20, 2023 with a caption thanking his followers for being supportive during this difficult time (Ballard, 2023a). In the video post, Ballard begins by talking about Abraham Lincoln and the difficulty he was having during the Emancipation Proclamation stating that he was being lied about and all the pressure on Lincoln. Ballard compares himself to Lincoln due to the "...false allegation from sources that we have not been able to determine yet..." (Ballard, 2023a). He further goes on to proclaim his allegiance to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, talks about his efforts to rescue children and fight child trafficking, and that there are evil pedophiles/traffickers who have allies in the government, media, corporations, and public institutions who will lie about him and destroy his good name (Ballard, 2023a). He again doubles down purporting his commitment to his religion and claims the timing of the allegations is directly tied to his interest in running for the US Senate (Ballard, 2023a). This persuasive commentary on social media is used to defend himself publicly and lean on ideals that will gain sympathy from supporters by using rhetoric that manipulates followers.

September 24, 2023, Ballard again went to social media to disclose his tactic, the "couple's ruse,"

which is at the center of several allegations (Ballard, 2023b). The couples ruse involves Ballard and a female operative working to convince traffickers they are a couple-- husband and wife or boyfriend and girlfriend. Ballard then states that he wants to give these women time to tell their own story and tells viewers to listen to their testimonies over the next several days and tells listeners to "...thank God for them for rescuing these children" (Ballard, 2023b). By revealing the couples ruse tactic, it creates a sense of transparency and a defense against the allegations of how it could be plausible the actions did occur, but under well-intentioned reasons: to save children from sex trafficking.

Ballard's next post included in the study was purported as a message from him and his wife, Katherine (Ballard, 2023c). In his video, he stated his wife wanted him to make the message because that they are under attack and the work they are doing to rescue abused children is under attack by false accusations because this is what happens when "...you're fighting against evil..." (Ballard, 2023c). Ballard tells the audience that he is faithful to his wife and to his God, but that everyone can think what they want, but that is the truth. He then pivots the conversation to focus on doing good through doing service for others stating that when you are in the service of others you are in the service of God (Ballard, 2023c). Ballard's video claims the attacks are happening due to evil trying to thwart the good he is doing and then redirects the conversation to encourage everyone to go out and perform acts of service.

The actual video shared in his September 27, 2023 post does not directly address the accusations as it was filmed prior to the allegations coming to light. His speech is about child sex trafficking and child exploitation material and how they are working to stop that and protect children (Ballard, 2023d). However, the caption included with his post states, "Just a few days after I delivered this speech, a flood of false allegations made their way to the front pages of many news outlets across the country" (Ballard, 2023d). While the two messages are incongruent, because Ballard posted them in conjunction with each other, it would seem he is telling his audience about how he is out working to save children while false allegations are being levied against him.

Ballard's next post (February 23, 2024) is a picture of his family instead of a video (Ballard, 2024a). The caption included with the image is thanking his followers for their support and kind words and messages (Ballard, 2024a). In context, though the allegations are not discussed, this message is showing his large family of 11 along with his gratitude and thanks for the love shown

to them, which could be considered a persuasive message as Ballard had been asking for financial help to support his family. Giving thanks while showing his family could convince others to give financially to support him and his family.

Ballard's next two posts include clips from episodes of a docuseries being produced on his behalf, "UNFOUNDED - The TRUTH and the BALLARD Case" (Ballard, 2024b; Ballard, 2024c). The highlighted film encourages the audience to donate to the Ballard Family Legal Defense Fund (New docuseries about Tim, 2024). In the February 27, 2024 post, Ballard again thanked his supporters for the kind words and prayers and encouraged them to watch episode one of the docuseries (Ballard, 2024b). The preview of the docuseries addresses the allegations and denies them by supplying reasons why it could not have happened--one woman he had never met and had never been in the same room with him and two others were being inappropriate and were promptly dismissed (Ballard, 2024b). Ballard states that he cannot allow these accusers to attack his cause and hurt his family (Ballard, 2024b).

The next post with a preview of episode one occurred on March 3, 2024. First, in the caption of the post, Ballard expressed being humbled by the producers of the videos and again thanked supporters and encouraged watching the docuseries (Ballard, 2024c). This clip, however, focuses more on Ballard's wife, Katherine, who suggests that the women came forward because Ballard is a public figure (Ballard, 2024c). She then contends that the hardest part for her is that the accusers sued her project under O.U.R. and that it has affected adoption of children and prospective families, but that there is no money there, so it just stopped the project entirely (Ballard, 2024c). Her persuasive commentary includes asking how the children hurt the accusers and how sad the ending of the program is to her (Ballard, 2024c). Both of these posts use persuasive commentary to outright deny the allegations and bolster the good he has done, alluding to how he is a victim of evil attacks against him. Besides the docuseries introduced in these posts, the clips shared are rhetoric aimed at praising Ballard and defaming the accusers.

The final post included in the qualitative content analysis is from June 28, 2024. This post is specific to the allegations given Ballard's caption, "An update regarding the recent allegations #unfounded" (Ballard, 2024d). In his video address, Ballard calls the allegations a "media circus" which has been an attack on him and his work (Ballard, 2024d). Before stating that there have been two times when things went to court which were dismissed by the

judge, he said "it's affecting children" (Ballard, 2024d). He continues to deny the allegations and then claims the accusers are stealing money from child rescue operations and his livelihood and that the audience's support is needed (Ballard, 2024d). Ballard brings up accolades he received in Mexico due to his effort, followed by mentioning again the lies and the media circus in a ploy to take money from his foundation and family. He once more asks for the audience's support for the kids and to "please, please, please" donate to the Ballard Family Legal Fund to keep his family afloat so they can continue to "save God's children" (Ballard, 2024d). The rhetoric in this post comprises outright calling the accusations lies purported by the media circus, discounting the validity of the claims since some have already been dismissed by a judge, and claiming the accusers are stealing money from the foundations and the children as well as his family's well-being.

Analysis

The analysis of Tim Ballard's Instagram posts and the subsequent audience comments was conducted to understand the impact of parasocial relationships on public perception amid allegations of misconduct. Comments were categorized into four distinct groups: supportive, defensive, directly addressing the allegations, and attacks. This section delves into the nature of these comments, providing examples from Ballard's posts and examining how his rhetoric and persuasive tactics influenced follower responses. By analyzing these interactions, the study aims to shed light on the role of parasocial relationships in shaping public opinion and maintaining support for public figures during crises.

Supportive

When a public figure is accused of misconduct, audience members impacted by parasocial relationships often feel compelled to offer words of support to the celebrity. As a public figure, Ballard is often lauded as a hero whom people look up to and respect. This is evident in the comments on his Instagram posts. One commenter stated on Ballard's (2023a) September 20, 2023 post:

"Thank you for being faithful!!!! Thank you, thank you, thank you!! Please stay strong and continue to fight the good fight. I'm with you, brother, fighting along side you. Please don't be discouraged! GOD IS WITH US! We love you! You are a good man" (Ballard, 2023a).

This comment came shortly after the allegations and Ballard's first post acknowledging there was something amiss. The words show support, even

to the extent of the commenter saying they are fighting alongside Ballard, along with God being with them. The statement further states that Ballard is a good man and thanks him for being faithful. This is a clear example of a supportive statement.

Another statement from a follower that was supportive in nature is in response to the September 27, 2023 post: "I'm with you Tim!!! I don't not believe any of these allegations! Continue doing good. We need you to" (Ballard, 2023d). Demonstrating unwavering support for Ballard, this commenter denounces the allegations and tells Ballard that he is needed and to keep doing good. From the final post in this study, another Ballard supporter stated, "Why do you think the devil is trying so hard to get you out? Keep going, No one can do what you do. There will always be a target on your back when you are fighting against evil" (Ballard, 2024d). Again, this comment is supportive and alludes to the reason the allegations are occurring is because the devil is trying to stop the good Ballard is doing.

Ballard has curated his parasocial relationships and his status as a public figure to elicit public support despite such egregious allegations against him. This is evident in the comments made on his posts on Instagram, the majority of which are in the supportive category as analyzed in this study. The statements are not only offering verbal support for Ballard, but also claiming support by standing alongside him and that a higher power is on his side as well to fight against evil.

Defensive

Another type of comment seen on Ballard's post which is similar to supportive, is defensive. These comments occur when the commentary goes beyond supportive and the audience member comes to the defense of the accused. The first example for a defensive comment is from September 26, 2023 (Ballard, 2023c):

"Mind blowing to me what people believe. All you are doing is trying to bring awareness to trafficking children and saving them and the trolls just keep coming out because the world here has it way too easy!!!! Everyone is like read the facts.. but yet they are buying into all the media crap.. typical now a days. So sorry you and your family are going through this."

The comment is defensive in nature as it claims all Ballard is trying to do is save children and that he is being "trolled" by the accusers and media. Another claim being made is that people are not reading the facts evident by them believing the allegations against Ballard. This

statement is more than just supportive because it was working to defend Ballard against the allegations and provide reasons why there are allegations that do not include fault.

The next example stems from Ballard's February 27, 2024 post. In particular, this defensive post displays attacking the accusers, as a defensive tactic in Ballard's behalf (Ballard, 2024b):

"You are amazing and anyone that is accusing you and suing you should be completely ashamed of themselves. Isn't it interesting how as soon as your movie came out and it was a huge success all of a sudden these people start suing you? It's obvious they just want money. And they should be completely ashamed of themselves for doing such a horrible act. Furthermore, to take away from the extraordinary work you have done, and for all the children you have saved is completely evil. These people that are suing you are evil."

The claims in this comment are that the lawsuits began after his movie came out and was successful, further stating that the accusers should be ashamed of themselves and those who are suing are evil. It also points toward the accusations lessening the work Ballard has done in saving children.

A third example of defensiveness is in a comment in the most recent post in this study. "People just want to hate you especially if you're a conservative or Christian" (Ballard, 2024d). This form of defense is dismissing the allegations because they are simply a result of Ballard's political and/or religious affiliations rather than an actual wrongdoing. It alludes to the accusations not being possible, but are merely alleged by people who may not be Christian or conservative.

Parasocial relationships can be influenced to the point that fans on the internet may not only support a public figure who has been accused of misdeeds, but may also even come to their defense due to a disbelief that their idol could have committed such an offense. The examples presented here show a distinct defensive tactic in support of Ballard, dismissing the possibility that he did anything untoward and is just trying to save children.

Directly Addressing the Allegations

On the opposite side from more supportive or defensive comments which boost the accused's image, is directly addressing the allegations. This occurs when commenters seemingly refute the persuasive commentary and reiterate the alleged misdeeds by the celebrity. Often, these comments seem more in opposition to the public

figure.

"Why did you step down from OUR if these allegations are false? Why are we just now hearing about the details of how it works with female operatives? Why quit if that's all it was?" (Ballard, 2023b). The first example of directly addressing allegations brings up the allegations and challenges Ballard stating that if the allegations are false, then why did he step down as CEO and not explain the couples ruse previously. Analyzing the comment, it seems that the commenter more or less believes the victims over Ballard, disregarding Ballard's persuasive tactic in denying allegations against him.

The next example is from Ballard's February 27, 2024 post (Ballard, 2024b):

"Sorry but this just sounds like an excuse. Anyone who tries to blame victims as opposed to just stating their innocence is typically a red flag. Additionally, the sad truth is that a person can be capable of all of the above. Why not just let justice play out if they're indeed innocent? Making a propaganda video just doesn't sit right with me."

The commenter in this case calls out Ballard's statement as making an excuse/propaganda video, further denouncing victim blaming. The follower does acknowledge that a public figure can do good while also committing misdeeds and suggests seeing how justice naturally occurs. The comment directly addresses the allegations and gives persuasive reasoning about Ballard's tactics.

A third example of directly addressing allegations is from the last post from Ballard's Instagram (2024d) included in this study:

"You still have several pending criminal investigations going on and 5 women suing for sexual abuse. This particular case that was dropped was for the young woman who was injured during training. Don't be fooled by this guys."

Responding to Ballard's post about certain cases being dropped, this commenter states that there are additional cases still being investigated from several other accusers of sexual abuse. The commenter implores others to not be duped by Ballard's rhetoric.

Despite any previous or current parasocial relationship formed with Ballard, these commenters who directly address the allegations are not dissuaded from believing the accusations against Ballard simply because of his defenses he gave denying the allegations. If anything,

they may have feelings of betrayal due to once idolizing the public persona.

Attacks

Similar in opposition like directly addressing allegations, attacks are comments that seemingly lash out at the accused public figure and directly attack the character or statements made. These attacks are contrary to the celebrities' carefully curated public persona and seek to damage their credibility.

After disclosing the O.U.R. enlisted tactic of the couples ruse, one commenter on Ballard's post (Ballard, 2023b) stated:

"Ooof...so the women who were employed with OUR and excited to help save children were evil when they were uncomfortable giving Tim blow jobs he claimed would help efforts? No legit official will say that's necessary but guess who did and enjoyed it? Tim. Men with good intentions can fall. Don't at me...I know a victim and nothing you can say will make me not believe this credible person."

Attacking Ballard and his couples ruse tactic in defense of the victims, this individual came in with a strong statement against Ballard noting that well-intentioned men can also do wrong. This is a clear example of attack.

The next example comes from Ballard's post wherein he shared a message from himself and his wife, Katherine (Ballard, 2023c). "Soooo why were you excommunicated then? There are very specific and limited reasons why the church excommunicates members... Also, howwww can you lie so brazenly?! It's sociopathic, Tim" (Ballard, 2023c) is another example of an attack. The commenter specifically references Ballard's proclaimed religion and the reports that he had been excommunicated from his faith, and then directly calls him a liar and a sociopath. This is an attack as it makes specific comments pertaining to Ballard's character.

A third example in this study of attack is from the June 28, 2024 post where Ballard is stating some of the lawsuits had been dropped by the judge. The commenter states (Ballard, 2024d):

"Conman, these women are attacking his character not his bank account or some child rescue operation. Tim is a Salesman and hype man. For years I've wanted to believe he had pure motives. I don't believe it now. Have heard and read too much."

The comment is an attack on Ballard's character evidenced by calling him a conman, a salesman, and a hype man. It further goes on to say they

once believed he had pure motives, but no longer believes that to be true after learning more about him.

Research Question 1: How are Tim Ballard's parasocial relationships/interactions impacted by his rhetoric/persuasive tactics?

The findings indicate that Tim Ballard's parasocial relationships and interactions are significantly influenced by his persuasive tactics and rhetoric on social media. The analysis categorized the responses into four groups: supportive, defensive, directly addressing allegations, and attacks. Out of 200 comments, 85 were supportive, expressing admiration and encouragement for Ballard, suggesting that his followers largely resonate with his messaging. Additionally, 52 comments were defensive, where followers not only supported Ballard but also actively defended him against the allegations, often by dismissing the accusations or attacking the accusers. This defense suggests a deeper level of engagement and belief in Ballard's narrative among his followers. The research aligns with existing studies on parasocial relationships, which often describe these connections as one-sided, where followers feel a strong bond with public figures despite little to no real interaction. The findings are consistent with the theoretical framework suggesting that public figures can leverage their parasocial relationships to influence public perception, even in the face of negative allegations.

Research Question 2: How does Ballard rely on these parasocial relationships/interactions to further his own cause and deny the allegations against him?

The findings suggest that Ballard effectively relies on his parasocial relationships to deny allegations and further his cause. With 137 out of 200 comments being supportive or defensive, it is evident that a significant portion of his audience not only believes in his innocence but also actively participates in promoting his narrative. Ballard's posts, which often include emotional appeals and religious undertones, resonate with his followers, leading them to rally around him in times of crisis. The theoretical framework suggests that public figures can use their influence to sway public opinion, especially when they maintain a consistent narrative. Ballard's narrative, which emphasizes his moral integrity, religious commitment, and the perceived injustice of the accusations, is reinforced by his followers' comments. This indicates a reciprocal relationship where Ballard's persuasive tactics bolster his followers' loyalty, and their support, in turn, reinforces his public stance. The findings are consistent with theories on narrative persuasion, where individuals are more likely to be persuaded by narratives that align with their pre-existing

beliefs and values.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand how parasocial relationships with public figures influence public perception, particularly during allegations of misconduct. By analyzing Tim Ballard's Instagram posts and the audience's comments, the research provides deeper insights into how parasocial interactions can be leveraged to maintain public support amid controversy. The analysis categorized the comments into four groups: supportive, defensive, directly addressing the allegations, and attacks. The majority of comments were either supportive of Ballard or defensive, indicating a strong parasocial bond that influences public perception.

The results revealed that out of 200 comments, 85 were supportive, 52 were defensive, 25 directly addressed the allegations, and 22 were attacks on Ballard. This distribution shows that most comments were positive, reflecting a benefit from the parasocial relationship between Ballard and his audience. The commentary mirrored much of Ballard's persuasive messages, suggesting that his parasocial interactions have been largely successful in maintaining support among his followers, even amid serious allegations. These findings align with existing theories on parasocial relationships, which describe these connections as one-sided but emotionally significant for followers.

The study's findings highlight that Tim Ballard's rhetoric and persuasive tactics significantly shape his parasocial relationships with followers on social media. The analysis showed that most comments were supportive or defensive, indicating that his followers are deeply influenced by his narrative and are inclined to support him despite allegations. This strong parasocial bond, where followers feel a profound, one-sided connection with Ballard, is consistent with existing theories on parasocial relationships. These theories suggest that public figures can leverage these relationships to maintain public support, even in times of crisis.

Several factors might have influenced the interpretation of these results. For instance, the nature of social media platforms, which often amplify supportive voices due to algorithmic biases, may skew the perceived level of support. Additionally, the phenomenon of selective exposure, where individuals engage primarily with content aligning with their pre-existing beliefs, might reinforce supportive and defensive comments. Ballard's use of emotional and moral appeals in his posts likely further solidified the supportive stance among his followers.

The study demonstrates that Ballard effectively utilizes his parasocial relationships to deny allegations and promote his cause. The predominance of supportive and defensive comments indicates that his followers are not only inclined to believe his narrative but are also willing to actively defend him. This suggests that Ballard's followers are deeply invested in his public persona and are likely influenced by his consistent narrative of moral integrity and religious commitment. This observation supports the theoretical framework that posits public figures can leverage their influence to shape public perception, particularly in crisis situations.

The findings align with existing theories on narrative persuasion and crisis management. The strong presence of supportive and defensive responses from followers indicates that Ballard's consistent narrative has been effective in maintaining his public image despite the allegations. However, the presence of a minority of comments that directly addressed the allegations or attacked Ballard suggests that not all followers were persuaded by his narrative. This divergence may be attributed to varying personal values, levels of investment in the parasocial relationship, or exposure to counter-narratives.

This study examined the nuanced dynamics of parasocial relationships, particularly how they affect public perception when a public figure is embroiled in controversy. The focus was on Tim Ballard, a prominent figure known for his anti-trafficking work, who faced allegations of misconduct. By analyzing the nature of comments on Ballard's Instagram posts following the allegations, the research sought to understand the role of his social media rhetoric in influencing his followers' reactions. The problem addressed was the apparent contradiction between Ballard's public persona as a moral leader and the private allegations against him. This study is crucial as it highlights the complexities of public perception management in the digital age, where social media plays a pivotal role in shaping narratives.

The findings revealed a significant predominance of supportive and defensive comments, suggesting that Ballard's followers were highly influenced by his narrative and rhetorical strategies. This underscores the concept that parasocial relationships, where audiences develop a one-sided bond with public figures, can significantly impact how individuals interpret and react to news and allegations. The study demonstrated that even in the face of serious accusations, these relationships can lead followers to dismiss or downplay negative information, prioritizing their pre-

existing beliefs and emotional connections over contradictory evidence. This aligns with the theoretical framework and previous research in media psychology, which posits that parasocial relationships can create a strong bias in favor of the public figure.

Conclusion

This study highlights the powerful role of parasocial relationships in shaping public perception, especially during crises involving public figures. By analyzing comments on Tim Ballard's Instagram posts following allegations of misconduct, the research demonstrated how Ballard's followers were influenced by his narrative and rhetorical strategies. Despite serious accusations, a significant portion of the comments were supportive or defensive, illustrating how parasocial relationships can lead followers to dismiss negative information and prioritize their emotional connections. This finding underscores the complexity of public perception management in the digital age, where social media significantly influences narratives.

The implications of these findings are substantial for both media professionals and the public. For media professionals, the study emphasizes the importance of ethical reporting and critical engagement with public figures' narratives, particularly in the context of serious allegations. For the public, the research highlights the necessity of critical media literacy to recognize potential biases in their perceptions, especially when they feel a strong connection to a public figure. Understanding the dynamics of parasocial relationships and narrative persuasion can inform more effective communication strategies, particularly in areas like public health, where trusted figures play a crucial role in disseminating information.

In conclusion, this research provides a foundational understanding of how public figures can use social media to manage crises and influence public opinion through parasocial relationships. The study calls for further research into the dynamics of these relationships and their impact on public discourse. Additionally, it stresses the need for enhanced media literacy to help the public navigate the complexities of information in the digital age. As public figures increasingly rely on social media to shape their public image, understanding the influence of parasocial relationships becomes ever more critical. This study sets the stage for future investigations into the intersection of media, public perception, and crisis management.

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