

# Framing technique can be used as a public relations strategy in cases of sexual assault

August 27 2008

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In Spring 2006, when three White Duke University lacrosse players were charged with raping a Black female student from nearby North Carolina Central University, Duke University officials framed the crisis in terms of institutional reputation rather than the rape issue at hand.

In a new study published in the journal *Communication, Culture & Critique*, Barbara Barnett of Kansas University reports on her qualitative textual analysis of public relations materials published by Duke from March 24, 2006 through June 18, 2007.

Allowing for the examination of emphasis and meaning, Barnett's analysis revealed that the University carefully crafted its response to allegations of rape, presenting itself as a voice of reason in an emotionally charged atmosphere, and as a victim of a rogue prosecutor, whose case relied on rumor rather than solid evidence. In a case that involved allegations of rape, there was surprisingly little discussion on the issue of rape itself.

Duke University proved adept at speaking about its own image and integrity, but failed to address the larger issues in the case, including sexual objectification of women, the risks of sexual violence on college campuses, and the perceptions of privilege in U.S. college athletics.

"In the end, the charges against the Duke athletes turned out not to be true, but for nearly nine months, Duke lived with allegations that three student athletes might have raped a student at a nearby university. Duke

focused on its own reputation but missed an opportunity to talk about the larger issue of rape" Barnett notes. "Sexual violence is a serious matter, and organizations that find themselves confronting such charges, even charges they suspect may not be true, need to speak clearly and strongly to the issue of rape itself."

Source: Wiley

Citation: Framing technique can be used as a public relations strategy in cases of sexual assault (2008, August 27) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-08-technique-strategy-cases-sexual-assault.html>

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