

NOT YOUR AVERAGE JOE: HOW SPOTIFY EXPERIENCED THE EXTRAORDINARY JOE



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Your update on the most recent public relations issue



Spotify • 20,221,231 likes • 11 chapters, 10 mins read

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Prologue

Connecting to the Server

The advent of digital technologies allowed platform companies to connect service providers with customers anytime, from anywhere. On the other hand, the interconnected world also means that false information can spread out of control rapidly, possibly causing a detrimental impact on the well-being of the platform community as a whole, and the platform company may have to deal with its consequences. A major dilemma is that some publics expects platform companies to embrace freedom of speech, effectively hindering platform companies from filtering misinformation. The impact will be amplified exponentially if the content creator is an influencer with a colossal follower base. This poses a significant challenge for platform companies, particularly with handling its Public Relations affairs involving a prominent Key Opinion Leader (KOL).

Case Overview

A Quick Glance

The American comedian, presenter, and Ultimate Fighting Championship expert commentator Joe Rogan is the host of the podcast The Joe Rogan Experience on Spotify, with millions of views per episode listening to his dialogues with guests (Rogan, n.d.). In an episode of The Joe Rogan Experience released on December 31, 2021, Dr. Robert Malone, a researcher who contributed to early studies on the mRNA technology used in the most effective COVID-19 vaccines, made several incorrect claims, including the claim that the effectiveness of vaccines is caused by "mass formation psychosis." that is a situation where people are in a mob mentality without being aware that they are hallucinating (Lee, 2022; Yang, 2022). However, this is not the first controversy involving Dr. Malone (Parsons, 2021). In fact, he was previously suspended from Twitter for distributing false information about COVID-19 (Parsons, 2021). Shortly after the release of the controversial podcast on Spotify, more than 270 doctors sent an open letter to Spotify over the episode, mentioning Joe Rogan's podcast as a "menace to public health" (Yang, 2022). Famous musician Neil Young initiated the movement by threatening to remove his music from Spotify if the platform refused to delete Joe Rogan's podcasts (Greene, 2022). Many other celebrities also supported his movement. Subsequently, India Arie, an American singer, posted clips of Joe Rogan using the N-word on The Joe Rogan Experience to support his leave from Spotify (Kaufman, 2022a). Regarding the chain of events,

Spotify released a content advisory to all podcast episodes that included discussions of COVID-19 and removed some misleading podcasts (Spotify, 2022a). Moreover, in a leaked internal message, Spotify CEO Daniel Ek stated their commitment to supporting content creators coming from historically marginalized communities (Nover, 2022). In a later move, as Spotify insisted on being an open platform, it started to focus on safety-related efforts by launching the Safety Advisory Council (Spotify, 2022b) and deploying advanced technologies such as Machine Learning to assist in identifying potentially harmful content (Spotify, 2022c).

Company Profile

About Spotify

Innovative

Sincere

Spotify, co-founded in 2008 by Martin Lorentzon and the current CEO Daniel Ek, is a digital music, podcast, and video service platform that provides access to

Mission To unlock the potential of human creativity—by giving a million creative artists the opportunity to live off their art and billions of fans the opportunity to enjoy and be inspired by it Values

Figure 1: Spotify's Mission Statement and Core Values (Spotify, n.d.-a; Spotify, n.d.-b)

Passionate

millions of songs and other content from creators all over the world (Spotify, n.d.-a).

By the end of Q3 2022, with 456 million monthly active users, including 195 million premium subscribers, across over 180 markets, Spotify is the world's most popular audio streaming subscription service (Spotify, n.d.-a).

Collaborative

Playful

DANIEL EK
CEO and Co-founder



The Joe Rogan Experience

Not Your Average Joe

Joe Rogan has established himself as a leading figure in the podcast industry. Spotify is said to have signed a \$200 million exclusive rights deal with Joe Rogan in 2020, which is double the previously reported number of \$100 million, and The Joe Rogan Experience has become the most popular podcast program on the platform (Rosman et al., 2022).



Figure 2: The Podcast Charts on Spotify (2022/11/29). Source: Spotify

The Joe Rogan Experience, which debuted in 2009, has included a range of eminent guests throughout the years, including physicists, musicians, thinkers, historians, and more (Mark, n.d.). According to JRE Library (2022), a total of 2,106 episodes have been recorded in the 12.5-year existence of the podcast. He has recently been putting out three to four episodes each week, reaching at least 10 million people per show (Brangham et al., 2022). Moreover, according to Chartable, the podcast is ranked in first place among the Top Podcasts in the United States of America and got 4.6 stars from 269,316 ratings (The Joe Rogan Experience Podcast - Listen, Reviews, Charts, n.d.).

Despite its fame, the show is not without controversy. In fact, prior to the Dr. Malone episode, Joe Rogan had actually been rebuked multiple times by the White House for providing COVID-19 misinformation. In April 2021, the recommendation against vaccination broadcasted during his podcast session was condemned by top government officials (Forgey, 2021). White House communications director Kate Bedingfield stated, "I'm not sure that taking scientific and medical advice from Joe Rogan is perhaps the most productive way for people to get their information." (Forgey, 2021). Subsequently, Chief Medical Advisor to the President of the United States Anthony Fauci criticized Joe's antivax podcast by stating, "Because it is likely

that you — even if you have no symptoms — that you may inadvertently and innocently then infect someone else, who might infect someone who really could have a problem with a severe outcome. So if you want to only worry about yourself and not society, then that's OK" (Forgey, 2021).

CRISIS EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT

2021/12/31

Episode containing COVID misinformation released

2022/01/12

270 US health experts petitioned Spotify

2022/01/30

Spotify published COVID-19 content policy

2022/01/24

Neil Young threatened to remove his music from Spotify

2022/01/31

Joe Rogan posted his apology video and admitted that his podcasts contain misinformation

2022/01/31

India Arie resurfaced clips of Joe Rogan saying the N-word

2022/02/06

Spotify CEO sent out the internal letter, which got leaked to public

2022/02/05

Joe Rogan posted a video apologizing for having said the N-word

2022/04/22

Joe Rogan said in a podcast that he obtained 2 million subscribers during the crisis

2022/06/13

Spotify launched the Safety Advisory Council

Key Publics' Responses

The Voice

Several groups of people started responding to the case as soon as it emerged. This includes the reaction from other celebrities, users, the government, and competitors.

Celebrities

A few days after the open letter was sent to Spotify, several other famous singers threatened to remove their own music from the streaming platform. The Canadian-American singer-songwriter Neil Young started the Spotify boycott among artists. In a post that has been removed from his website, as cited by Rolling Stone, Young stated on January 24, "I am doing this because Spotify is spreading fake information about vaccines — potentially causing death to those who believe the disinformation being spread by them." (Greene, 2022). He also wanted to let Spotify know that he wants all his music off the platform if Spotify does not remove Joe Rogan's content (Greene, 2022). "They can have Rogan or Young. Not both" (Greene, 2022).

As a response, Spotify followed Young's request by removing his catalog from the platform and said it hopes "to welcome him back soon." Young, who has been an advocate for COVID-19 safety and prevention, had about 6 million monthly listeners on Spotify (Kelly, 2022). In short, Spotify listened to the request and chose its exclusive contractor Joe Rogan over Neil Young, who demanded Spotify take action against Joe Rogan.

Shortly after Neil Young took his stance, on January 28, a friend of Neil, another Canadian-American singer-songwriter, ten-times Grammy Awards recipient Joni Mitchell also followed suit by publishing the following announcement "I've decided to remove all my music from Spotify ... I stand in solidarity with Neil Young and the global scientific and medical communities on this issue. —Joni Mitchell" (Mitchell, 2022).

Another friend of Neil, the guitarist Nils Lofgren also followed suit on January 30 through a statement shared with the Neil Young Archives, as cited by Billboard (Kaufman, 2022b). He took 27 years of his music off the platform and has also requested the labels that own his earlier music to have those removed as well (Kaufman, 2022b). In his closing remarks, Lofgren encouraged "all musicians, artists and

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music lovers everywhere, to stand with us all, and cut ties with Spotify" (Kaufman, 2022b).

The boycott movement is then joined by the Grammy-winning singer India Arie. However, she did not only condemn Spotify for not removing Joe Rogan's podcast containing COVID-19 misinformation (Kaufman, 2022a). The black singer

called out the fact that the Joe Rogan show is also problematic for his language around race (Kaufman, 2022a). She uploaded clips of Joe Rogan saying the N-word in his podcasts to her Instagram page (Kaufman, 2022a). Moreover, she also mentioned the unfairness of Spotify paying 100 million dollars to Joe Rogan while paying other musicians little as her main reason for leaving the platform (Kaufman, 2022a).

The boycott movement is echoed by many other musicians, including Graham Nash, Failure, David Crosby, and Stephen Stills (Lynch, 2022).

Spotify Users

After the petition got viral and musicians started to take their music offline from Spotify, hashtags like #CancelSpotify, #DeleteSpotify, and #ByeSpotify (or #ByeByeSpotify) went trending on Twitter. Moreover, the niece of Donald Trump, Mary L Trump, tweeted that Joe Rogan's show should be removed from Spotify not only because of the COVID-19 misinformation it is spreading but also for being racist. Her tweet was among the top tweets in this crisis, obtaining 1.36 million



Spotify should get rid of Joe Rogan's show not just because he spreads COVID disinformation but because he is a racist.

It's yet another reason for us to #DeleteSpotify.

Check out my new podcast--available everywhere you listen--except Spotify 59



Figure 3: Mary Trump's Tweet. Source: Twitter

Spotify's Monthly Active Users

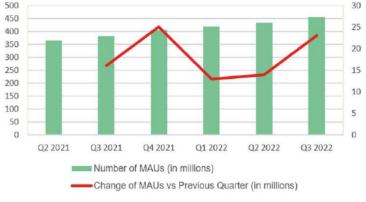


Figure 4: Spotify's Monthly Active Users. Source: Spotify's Quarterly Results

reaches and more than 7,000 engagements (Meltwater, 2022). This heightened the intensity of the boycott. Shortly after the hashtags went viral, the number of visits to Spotify's cancelation page exploded. According to SimilarWeb data shared with Insider, Spotify's subscription cancellation page had around 26,000 visits on January 25. On January 27, visitors shot up to 45,000 and reached 56,000 on January 29, marking a 115% increase in traffic (Vlamis, 2022). Furthermore, according to Spotify's Quarterly Results, the number of monthly active users grew by only 13 million in Q1 2022, which is a significant drop from the growth trend it always had in the previous quarters (Spotify, n.d.-c).

However, the catastrophe did not seem to occur to Joe Rogan, who was the originator of the backlash. In fact, Joe Rogan benefited from his increased popularity thanks to this crisis. He claimed he had a subscriber boost because of the uproar. "It's interesting, but my subscriptions went up massively. That's what's crazy," Rogan said on an episode earlier this month. "During the height of it all, I gained two million subscribers" (Rogan, 2022).

The above data suggests that the crisis contributed negatively to Spotify's performance, while Joe Rogan actually benefited from the increased popularity. To sum up, from the perspective of Spotify users, although the crisis started as Joe Rogan's personal misdeeds, the publics seem to blame Spotify for this issue for its ambiguous stance towards the case, as evidenced by the boycott movement and the decreasing growth of the number of users.

Government

On February 1, after Spotify released the COVID-19 disclaimer page, White House press secretary Jen Psaki called on music and podcast streaming giant Spotify to do "more" in the fight against COVID-19 misinformation in her routine press conference. "Ultimately, our view is that it's a good step, it's a positive step, but there's more that can be done," said the press secretary (Bowden, 2022). She expects platforms, not only Spotify but also others where Americans obtain their news, to have active participation in prohibiting COVID-19 misinformation from happening (Bowden, 2022).

Competitors

As Neil Young's music has been removed from Spotify as the result of the boycott, Spotify's major competitor Apple Music took advantage of the crisis by performing a maneuver by tweeting that they are the home of Neil Young's entire music catalog. This tweet has gained significant traction with over 7,000 retweets and 37,000 likes, possibly exposed to 9.97 million users (Meltwater, 2022). Moreover, it has also accumulated 27,900 mentions and 220 million impressions from January 26 to February 5 (Meltwater, 2022).

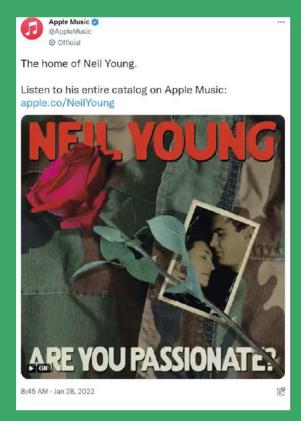


Figure 5: Apple Music's Maneuver. Source: Twitter

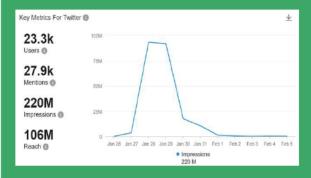


Figure 6: Twitter Metrics for Apple Music's Tweet. Source: Meltwater



Figure 7: Open Letter from Rumble. Source: Twitter

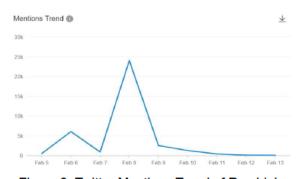


Figure 8: Twitter Mentions Trend of Rumble's Offer. Source: Meltwater

Moreover, on February 7, after Spotify removed 70 of The Joe Rogan Experience episodes, a video streaming platform popular among conservative people, Rumble, offered \$100 million for Joe Rogan to bring all of his old and new shows without any censorship to

their platform (Rauwerda, 2022). The popularity stunt made by Rumble achieved great results. According to Meltwater (2022), tweets including both "Rumble" and "Joe Rogan" spiked with about 24,000 mentions in a day at its peak. In such wise, Rumble took advantage of the situation to launch an attack on Spotify's image by implying that Spotify is no more a platform for open conversation since it's now conducting censorship.

Spotify's Responses

The Echo

Shortly after Neil Young's statement, Spotify stated that "We want all the world's music and audio content to be available to Spotify users. With that comes great responsibility in balancing both safety for listeners and freedom for creators," a Spotify spokesperson told The Washington Post in a statement. "We have detailed content policies in place" and "We regret Neil's decision to remove his music from Spotify, but hope to welcome him back soon" and removed Neil's content (Andrews, 2022). At this point of time, Spotify insisted on keeping Joe Rogan's podcasts in the name of freedom (Andrews, 2022).

Spotify's stance has not been changed until January 30, when Spotify finally acknowledged the feedback from its stakeholders, particularly the medical and scientific communities, and updated its platform content policy (Spotify, 2022a). By taking this action, despite not catering to the request of the public to remove the content, Spotify showed its empathy by listening to stakeholders' opinions. The next day, Joe Rogan officially posted his 10-minute apology video regarding the misinformation. After the White House statement on February 4, Spotify removed 70 episodes of The Joe Rogan Experience (Shoaib, 2022). On February 5, Joe Rogan posted another apology video for the racial slurs he used previously (The Associated Press, 2022). Spotify CEO Daniel Ek confirmed on February 6 that Joe Rogan chose to have some episodes of the show removed (Celebrity Land, 2022).

In a leaked internal letter, Spotify CEO Daniel Ek addressed the case to the employees by apologizing for the trouble "There are no words I can say to adequately convey how deeply sorry I am for the way The Joe Rogan Experience controversy continues to impact each of you." He made clear that Joe Rogan's racist remarks do not represent the values of the company (Nover, 2022). Moreover, he emphasized that Spotify is not the publisher of The Joe Rogan Experience podcast (Nover, 2022). He understood that the public perception might imply otherwise, particularly due to Spotify's exclusive license (Nover, 2022). Believing that the company should be an open platform, he asserted that all types of creators, including those from underrepresented communities and diverse backgrounds, should be elevated (Nover, 2022). Thus, he committed to invest an amount of 100 million dollars incrementally for the licensing, development, and marketing of music (artists and songwriters) and audio content from historically marginalized groups (Nover, 2022).

After this internal message spread to the general public, Spotify's spokesperson confirmed that the leaked message was real (Nover, 2022). However, since the public reactions to the crisis has declined by the time Spotify CEO sent the letter, as demonstrated by an analysis performed on Meltwater (2022), there was no significant follow-up reaction from the publics pertaining to this leaked message.

Financial Impacts

The Costs

Spotify Technology S.A. (SPOT)

NYSE - NYSE Delayed Price. Currency in USD



Figure 9: Two-Month Chart of Spotify's Stock Price. Source: Yahoo Finance

Since the year 2022 started, Spotify's stock lost almost 25% of its value until the end of January. The stock price started decreasing particularly after January 10, when about 300 of US doctors showed Spotify their concern about the COVID-19 related-content on The Joe Rogan Experience. Moreover, Neil Young led several artists in a boycott movement by requesting Spotify to delete his songs on the platform. Fearing future loss in their investment, investors became concerned on whether Spotify would run into trouble, particularly if other artists followed them (Q.Ai - Powering Personal Wealth Movement, 2022). On January 31, Joe Rogan posted a 10-minute video on Instagram, issuing an apology to Spotify and pledging more balance on his show in the middle of the backlash against COVID-19 misinformation on the platform. After that, the market responded, and Spotify's stock price jumped 12% (Mukherjee et al., 2022). On February 2, after Spotify CEO Daniel Ek addressed the release of the company's fourth-quarter earnings, which showed mediocre financial results and reflected a period that did not include the controversial case, Spotify's stock went down again (Aswad, 2022). During that time, even though Spotify CEO Daniel Ek sent a message to its employees with his apology for the Joe Rogan case and announced to invest \$100 million in marginalized communities, Spotify's stock did not have a noticeable change. In such wise, this sequence of events impacted Spotify's stock price along with Spotify's fourth-quarter financial report.

Reputational Impacts

The Extraordinary Experience

Twitter

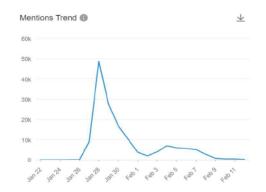


Figure 10: Twitter Mentions Trend of the Spotify Boycott Hashtags.
Source: Meltwater



Figure 11: Twitter Top Keywords of the Spotify Boycott Hashtags. Source: Meltwater

The boycott movement, as identified by hashtags #DeleteSpotify, #CancelSpotify, #ByeSpotify, and #Bye-ByeSpotify, gained significant traction with up to 50,000 mentions in a day at its peak, with most of them coming from the North America region and containing the keywords shown in Figure 11, generating an adverse impact to Spotify's public reputation.



News

Moreover, in terms of news coverage, the search with combined keywords "Spotify" and "Joe Rogan" resulted in a small bump in Mid-January, when the doctors petitioned Spotify. It took a while until the popularity of this topic reached its peak, particularly after Neil Young's statement. The mentions trend peaked several times as the case progressed throughout its life cycle. The topics commonly associated with the search are displayed in the form of a word cloud in Figure 13.

Bloomberg Forbes

The Washington Post

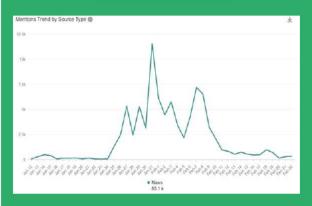


Figure 12: News Mentions Trend for the Spotify

– Joe Rogan Crisis. Source: Meltwater

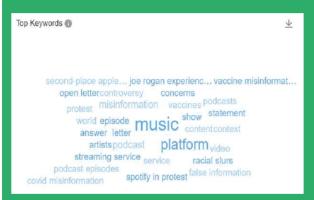


Figure 13: News Top Keywords of the Spotify Boycott Hashtags. Source: Meltwater

Key Takeaways

Add to Your Playlist

To digital platform companies, engaging with its major KOLs is as important as ever. Special attention should be paid to managing and communicating matters related to them. This case is a wake-up call to raise awareness for platform enterprises to treat their major contractors as internal "assets" in terms of public relations, for the public perception will associate both the platform and contractor together, regardless of their actual relationship. In this example, Spotify initially insisted that it is a platform company embracing the freedom of speech, thus not being responsible for the deeds of its content creators. However, as the case proceeded, Spotify silently removed some misleading content and put forward new content policies. Although the case initially began as Joe Rogan's personal issue with his own deeds, the publics were not satisfied with the actions Spotify took as a platform company, as evidenced by the financial and reputational impacts it faced. With the features of this case, companies that have contracted with famous people as their exclusive partners will have an opportunity to contemplate what they should focus on to prevent such a crisis from emerging.

Aftermath and Pending Issues

Play Next

Insisting on the position as a platform company with no responsibility to its content creators (Spotify, 2022a), Spotify has instead decided to move forward by empowering safety-related initiatives and being more transparent to the public about them (Spotify, 2022b), which is in line with Page Principle 1: Tell the Truth. In a continuous effort to listen to its stakeholders (Page Principle 3), several months after the crisis, on June 13, Spotify continued to strengthen its safety efforts by launching the Safety Advisory Council (Spotify, 2022b). Composed of leading global safety experts, Spotify expects the Council to help Spotify "evolve its policies and products in a safe way while making sure Spotify respects creator expression" in a high-level context without interfering with decisions regarding any specific content or creator (Spotify, 2022b). Moreover, to put its words into action (Page Principle 2), in October, Spotify announced the acquisition of Kinzen, a long-time partner of Spotify that focuses on applying advanced technologies, such as Machine Learning, to filter harmful content from online communities (Spotify, 2022c). These efforts show that although The Joe Rogan Experience crisis has faded away, Spotify is aware that similar cases might occur again, and Spotify is thoughtfully paving its way to the future (Page Principle 4).

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