

This is Going to Ruin the Tour:  
A Deep Dive Into the Dark Side of Pop Sensation Justin Timberlake

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COMM 353: Crisis Communication

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May 2, 2025

Many people know Justin Timberlake as a star of stage and screen, a member of the “NSYNC” band, and a very successful solo artist. However, not everybody knows about the wide variety of controversy and crisis that has surrounded his career. This paper will explore the crises Timberlake encountered throughout his career and they will be evaluated based on the lens of Crisis Communication best practices.

Timberlake’s career began in 1993 when he was 12, when he starred in the kids show *The All New Mickey Mouse Club* alongside other child actors like Britney Spears, Christina Aguleria, JC Chasez, and Ryan Gosling. After this show concluded, he and his co-star JC were approached by Chris Kirkpatrick to form a boy band. They also recruited two additional members; Lance Bass and Joey Fatone. This combination of boys created “NSYNC” in 1995. Their first hit song was released in 1997, entitled “I want you back”, then shortly after they signed a record deal with RCA. “NSYNC” rocked the music industry for 7 years, but the band went on an indefinite hiatus when Timberlake decided he wanted a solo career. Timberlake immediately began his solo career, releasing his first single “Like I Love You” then releasing the album “Justified” later that year. This album won Timberlake 2 Grammys in 2004. He continued to release more singles, albums, and Grammys throughout the years and became one of the most prominent male pop artists in America. He is still active today, and went on a well known tour last summer, “The Forget Tomorrow World Tour”. As for his time on the silver screen, Timberlake also has plentiful film credits, with the most notable including *Shrek the Third*, *The Social Network*, *Runner Runner*, and starring in all three movies of the *Trolls* franchise. Timberlake is married to Jessica Biel and they share two children, Silas and Phineas (Biography). As you can see, Timberlake has had a successful career with many highs. However, the many highs also bring many lows.

The first controversial incident/crisis that Timberlake encountered during his career was during his romantic relationship with Britney Spears. Timberlake and Spears dated from 1999 to 2002, after they met while working on *The All New Mickey Mouse Club* in 1993. They reunited in 1998 when Spears opened up for “NSYNC” on their tour. However, they did not make their relationship public until 2000 at the MTV Video Music Awards. For the most part, their relationship was positive with both Timberlake and Spears supporting each other's careers. However, the celebrity fairytale dream came crashing down when Spears revealed in March 2002 that she was no longer in a relationship. At the time, they claimed that their breakup was caused by conflicting work schedules, and not being able to see each other often. In traditional celebrity fashion, Timberlake released a song and music video that was allegedly about Spears, *Cry Me a River*. The music video featured a blonde who was similar to Spears, who was cheating on Timberlake, and the lyrics said “Told me you loved me, Why did you leave me all alone.” At the time, Timberlake denied that this song was about Spears, but he opened up about the meaning of the song in 2018, saying that he was angry, bitter, and he wrote the song in two hours and released it in hopes that people would be able to relate to it. In an interview in 2003, when asked about the breakup and if she betrayed the relationship, Spears said “I think everyone has a side of their story to make them feel a certain way, I’m not technically saying he’s wrong, but I’m not technically saying he’s right either. It was just a very weird time... I felt exploited and very weird.” (People). This statement made the public question Timberlake’s credibility as well as his true intentions behind writing the song.

The real crisis surrounding this relationship began in 2021 when the documentary *Framing Britney Spears* was released. This documentary was about the career of Britney Spears, and all the deep dark secrets the public did not know about. When speaking about the

relationship between Spears and Timberlake, the documentary discussed how the *Cry Me a River* music video was poorly choreographed to make Britney out to be something she was not, and how Timberlake made vulgar comments about his sex life with Spears during interviews.

Timberlake posted a public apology about this matter on Instagram, where he said “I am deeply sorry for the times in my life where my actions contributed to the problem, where I spoke out of turn or did not speak up for what was right. I understand that I fell short in these moments and in many others... I specifically want to apologize to Britney Spears and Janet Jackson both individually, because I care for and respect these women and I know I failed. I care deeply about the well being of the people I love and have loved.” (People). This was the first time that Timberlake sincerely apologized to this crisis, and spoke out in an apologetic way about his relationship with Spears. Some people that followed the crisis thought the apology was sincere, however it came too late, as it was said 19 years after the song and video were released.

Another highly public crisis surrounding this relationship happened 21 years after their relationship ended in 2023. This crisis arose after Spears released her memoir, *The Woman In Me*. In this book, Spears revealed that she got pregnant during her relationship with Timberlake, but had an abortion. When Spears spoke in her book about the abortion, she said “It was a surprise, but for me, it wasn’t a tragedy. I loved Justin so much. I always expected us to have a family together one day. This would just be much earlier than anticipated. But Justin wasn’t happy about the pregnancy. He said we weren’t ready to have a baby in our lives, that we were too young. If it had been left up to me alone, I never would have done it. And yet, Justin was so sure he didn’t want to be a father.” (People). Since they didn’t want the public to know about the abortion or pregnancy, Spears gave herself an at home abortion. She said it was excruciating and took hours, and she will never forget the pain and fear she felt that day. Timberlake was there

with her as she performed the procedure, and he played his guitar in the background as he thought his music would help. Timberlake was shocked when this information was released, as he thought the incident would only be between the two of them. Timberlake's spokesperson said that he was choosing to not comment on the matter, as whatever he says will likely be thrown right back at him and cause larger problems. The public largely criticized Timberlake for the scandal, and he did not respond to any of it (Right of Life). The actions Timberlake took during this situation as well as how he handled the aftermath changed the public's perception of him.

When examining the relationship and drama between Timberlake and Spears through the lenses of crisis communication, I decided to focus on how Timberlake responded to both crises. The first crisis in 2002 Timberlake issued an apology, but the public did not appreciate it as much due to how late it was. Timberlake waiting until 2002 to apologize for something he did in 2002 was damaging to his reputation, then and now, and it gave the public the idea that he isn't a fully honest person. The crisis response strategies Timberlake used during this situation included attacking the accuser, excusing, then apologizing. In 2002, Timberlake blamed all the problems on Spears and said that she deserved to be portrayed in the negative light that the *Cry Me a River* video showed her in. This is referred to as attacking the accuser because he was attacking everything Spears said or did instead of admitting that he may be a part of the scandal as well. In 2018, Timberlake opened up about why he wrote the song. This would be referred to as excusing because Timberlake was making up excuses for his actions, the excuse being his heartbreak. In 2021, Timberlake apologized for the whole situation and how he treated Spears in the aftermath of their breakup. This would be referred to as apologizing because he took accountability for his actions (Eseke A, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025).

The second crisis in 2023 Timberlake has chosen to not speak on. This is a poor crisis response because “no comment” is a damaging comment (Eseke A, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025). It would be better if Timberlake put out a statement about the situation to apologize to Spears and their fans. It would make people trust Timberlake again, and since there is no apology, people may be wary of Timberlake and not trust him.

Now to move into the next Justin Timberlake crisis, the Janet Jackson incident. In 2004, Timberlake and Jackson were both featured in the Super Bowl Halftime Show. During their performance, Timberlake ripped the top off of Jackson’s black bodice and, for just a second, revealed Jackson’s bare breast. Jackson’s spokesperson said that the incident was not intentional, as Timberlake was supposed to rip away the top layer of the shirt and just leave her red lace bra. However, the viewers of the performance as well as news reporters across the country thought that this was a lie, and that the incident was intentional (Parade). The public was mortified by this incident, and lost trust in Timberlake, Jackson, and both of their teams after this. The public thought it was disrespectful that Timberlake, Jackson and their teams thought ripping Jackson’s shirt off would make for a good show.

At first, Timberlake’s reaction to the situation wasn’t serious, which offended some people. In an interview, he said (to the public) “Hey man, we love giving you all something to talk about.” The public did not appreciate this statement, resulting in Timberlake’s tone regarding the situation shifting immediately. After that, Timberlake apologized, telling people that he did not intend to show Jackson’s breast on national television. He apologized at a 2004 Grammy’s event by saying “All I could say was ‘Oh my God, Oh my God. I looked at her. They brought a towel up on stage. They covered her up. I was completely embarrassed and just walked off the stage as quickly as I could. I’m frustrated at the whole situation. I’m frustrated that my character

is being questioned. And the fact of the matter is, you know, I've had a really good year, especially with my music." (Parade). Timberlake also apologized to Jackson, according to her, through a phone call. However, she never called him back or discussed the incident with Timberlake because she felt anger that she was getting more of the heat regarding the incident than Timberlake. Timberlake responded to her lack of a response in 2006 by saying "I probably got 10% of the blame, and that says something about society. I think that America is harsher on women... and I think that America is unfairly harsh on ethnic people." (Parade). He also made another statement in 2009, saying "I wish I had supported Janet more. I am not sorry I apologized, but I wish I had been there more for Janet." (Parade). He also apologized again in 2021, making an Instagram post apologizing for incidents occurring with Jackson and Spears (statement listed above).

When examining this situation through the lenses of crisis communication, I decided to focus on how Timberlake chose to respond to this crisis. Timberlake immediately responded to the crisis, which was valuable for his reputation management. He was also consistent in each of the statements he made, and he never changed his stories. This helped build the public's trust about Timberlake. He was open and transparent with the media, as he shared his honest thoughts about the situation and didn't hold anything back. His crisis response strategy was apologetic, as he was sincere about the whole situation and issued multiple apologies (Eseke A, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025). The way Timberlake handled this crisis was good, as he apologized for his actions, recognized his wrongdoings, and was open and transparent with the public about the incident.

The final crisis to be addressed is when Timberlake was arrested last summer. Timberlake was arrested on June 18, 2024 in Sag Harbor, New York for driving while intoxicated. The police

say that they watched him run a stop sign and swerve out of his lane, which caused them to think he was intoxicated. When they pulled him over, the police reported seeing bloodshot eyes and a strong alcohol odor on his breath. He refused the breathalyzer test and performed poorly on field sobriety tests. He was then held overnight and then released at 9:30 am the next morning. He got pulled over two months into his *Forget Tomorrow* world tour. When the cop pulled him over, he said “This is going to ruin the tour” then the cop replied with “what tour?” and Timberlake stated “the world tour (NPR Music News). This interaction went viral online, as people thought it was funny that the cop did not recognize Timberlake.

After going back and forth with the police and the court for months and refusing to plead guilty, Timberlake eventually did take a plea deal in September 2024. He pleaded guilty to driving while his ability was impaired, which is a lesser charge than driving while intoxicated. His plea deal included his license getting suspended for 90 days, a \$500 fine with a \$260 surcharge, as well as 25 hours of community service to a non-profit of his choice. He was also required to make a public service announcement regarding the matter. After the court hearing, Justin went outside to crowds of people waiting for him and he said the following; “I found myself in a position where I could have made a different decision. And so what I’d like to say to everyone watching and listening, even if you’ve had one drink, don’t get behind the wheel of a car. There’s so many alternatives. Call a friend. Take an uber. There’s many travel apps. Still, take a taxi. This is a mistake I’ve made, but I’m hoping that whoever is watching and listening right now can learn from this mistake. I know that I certainly have. And like I said, even one drink, don’t get behind the wheel of a car. We can all be more safe out there, and I’m going to do my part. I hope that everyone else does their part.” (CBS News). After this, Timberlake was praised for admitting he was guilty and admitting the mistake that he made by the public and law

enforcement officers. The public also felt his apology and statement were sincere, and law enforcement appreciated how he used his public platform as a way to spread awareness (CBS News). The way Timberlake handled this was beneficial to his reputation because he recognized how he may have hurt people and he stated what he can do to improve.

The form of crisis response that Timberlake used in this situation was openness and transparency. In his statement outside of the court, he admitted his mistakes and told others not to make the same mistake as him. The openness and transparency Timberlake showed in this situation was appealing to the public. Throughout the different stages of this crisis, he had multiple crisis response strategies; outright denial and apology. He denied the allegations for a while, as he refused to plead guilty to driving under the influence. After he did admit his mistakes, he released an apology to the public (Eseke A, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025). This resulted in the public putting more trust in Timberlake.

Overall, Timberlake has had mixed crisis responses. Some crises he handled well, others too late, and others not at all. This analysis is an example about how how a crisis is handled isn't always dependent on the person handling the crisis, but the manner of the crisis. In the future, as a fan of Timberlake, I hope that he stops getting entangled in so many controversial issues, and if he does, he handles them with openness and transparency.

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