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*CUNY Bernard M Baruch College*

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Jeopardy! in Crisis: What is Corporate Culture Issues Affecting the Entertainment Industry?

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the  
Weissman School of Arts and Science  
Baruch College, The City University of New York  
In partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

In

**CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS**

By

Evan Nemeroff

May 23, 2022

Date

Under the guidance and approval of the committee,  
and approved by all its members, this project has been accepted in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in  
Corporate Communication.

This project also has been presented at colloquium to departmental  
colleagues and faculty.

**Approved:**

**Stuart Davis**

Professor Stuart Davis, Advisor Date: 05-22-22

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Professor Minna Logemann, Reader Date: 05-23-22

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# ***Jeopardy!* in Crisis: What is Corporate Culture Issues Affecting the Entertainment Industry?**

Evan Nemeroff

CUNY Bernard M Baruch College

## **Abstract**

Cultural issues like sexism, racism, and social movements have impacted the entertainment industry, specifically the game show sector. This research identified how these prevalent matters in our society have affected celebrities by looking into the type of people who lead game shows, revealing if certain demographics such as race and gender influenced whether particular individuals were chosen to host a program. Included within this research are studies that portray how the game show industry has been biased explicitly towards one gender for several decades. Further research looks into a scandal that Sony faced when it had to name a successor host for one of its top game shows. The research also addressed the proper ways a corporation should respond to a crisis in order to protect their brand image, and recognized the actions companies can perform to mitigate future problems from happening again.

## **Introduction:**

Corporate crises are often unavoidable. But with the proper plans in place, a company will be ready for any such scenario, and, in turn, minimize the damage if not avoid the issue entirely. One reason why a crisis might presently occur is because of cultural issues like genderism, sexism, and racism. All of these factors have impacted corporate reputation and brand image due to the increasing use of social media. More individuals now get an opportunity

to voice their opinion about an event happening in the news, which effects a corporation's brand image.

A crisis that recently took place which became a popular talking point in the media and among consumers was at Sony Television Studios and its popular game show, *Jeopardy!*. The purpose of this research is to diagnose the problem Sony faced determining its line of succession from Alex Trebek, to Mike Richards, and then naming both Mayim Bialik and Ken Jennings as temporary, full-time game show hosts for its 38th season. This research will investigate how Sony made their decision to initially hire Richards as the new *Jeopardy!* host, but then backtracked on this announcement when news was published highlighting offensive and sexist comments he made on a podcast several years ago.

The goal of this research paper is to look into how modern cultural movements and social media have swayed the reputation and image of a corporation. These movements and rise in technology use by individuals across the world have caused C-suite officials to be more prudent in responding to a crisis in an appropriate manner of time, and disseminating a statement that is sympathetic to its consumers in order to mitigate even greater criticism.

Another aspect of research within this thesis project will include reviewing consumer activism among television viewers. This part of the research includes two surveys that seek to find out from fans who they thought should have been the next host of *Jeopardy!*, and whether the general public thought Sony could have avoided its crisis.

## **Literature Review**

### **Part I: Scandal and Accountability of Famous People Related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)**

Cultural issues like sexism, genderism, and racism can affect any individual on a personal level and at their workplace. But it's even more concerning, and potentially troublesome, for famous people.

Social movements have become more popular over the last five years allowing individuals to express themselves more freely both online and in the mainstream media. This freedom of expression has led to the #MeToo movement, an effort to effect social change organized primarily through social media. Several high-profile actresses opened up about their experiences with sexual harassment in the film industry. The movement has provided solidarity for women from all backgrounds to share their personal stories.

The #MeToo movement was founded by American social activist Tarana Burke when she began using the phrase on the social networking platform Myspace to highlight sexual harassment activity, especially when it targeted women of color. Burke “argues that the Me Too movement works on empowerment through empathy by showing the world just how common sexual harassment is and by telling survivors that they aren't alone — and are supported (Understanding the Me Too Movement, n.d.).” Actress Alyssa Milano amplified Burke's message by turning it into a viral hashtag—#MeToo—on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. Milano did this when several women in Hollywood opened up about their own experiences involving sexual harassment from one of the most distinguished film producers in the business, Harvey Weinstein. Today, the movement is still a “source of solidarity” as tweets and Instagram posts continue to be common daily bearing the hashtag, illustrating how widespread sexual violence still is (Understanding the Me Too Movement, n.d.).

A subsequent result of the Me Too movement where a high number of consumers are using social media platforms to express themselves in an open environment has resulted in the

cancel culture movement. According to Mintz, cancel culture refers to the “withdrawing support for (canceling) public figures or companies after doing something offensive or deemed to be so by one group or another (Mintz, 2021).” This practice of canceling or mass shaming often occurs on Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook. When someone has been canceled, it means they cease to exist to that person. There is no communication with them or about them.

There is difference though between the terms cancel culture and boycotting. Cancel culture involves taking a public stance or protesting against a person or corporation that seeks to ruin them simply because their views do not align with yours. Meanwhile, the concept of boycotting is a personal choice in which individuals choose to support another business without trying to intentionally harm the company or organization that they believe has done something wrong.

### *Sexual Harassment on Game Shows*

Studies have shown that watching violence on television, film, or in video games, reinforces in individuals this type of action is tolerable in society (Jackson, 2019). A similar feeling can occur by watching game shows and seeing the “unwanted advances” women have to take from the hosts, which are usually male white figures. This conduct can potentially have an impact on them as adults in their personal lives and in the workplace. For example, sex jokes, comments about appearance, and unwanted touching like arousing hugs, are all actions that many people have probably experienced. However, they were highly likely to keep these manners and actions a secret because it was not customary to mention it to their friends, colleagues, bosses, or even a human resources department.

A particular division of the entertainment industry that has not adhered to current cultural issues are game shows. For decades, game shows have depicted scenes of women basically being used as pawns and being forced to accept unsolicited physical gestures of men in many episodes. Blatant displays of sexual harassment were common on 1970s game shows. Even if men were depicted to be comedians on an episode, the women were forced to deal with illicit behavior rather than the men having to change or stop their actions. During this time, culture reinforced sex harassment by normalizing the behavior as acceptable (Jackson, 2019). For women, there was an implied understanding that this behavior from men was to be expected.

One notable celebrity who was affectionate with women game show contestants was Richard Dawson. Appearing as a celebrity guest on *Match Game*, there was one episode where he “literally holds down a woman and kisses her non-stop” while Gene Rayburn, the host of the show, “eggs him on” (Jackson, 2019). At the time, this type of action was typical within the industry and contestants, nor viewers, even thought about questioning the behavior by either Dawson for performing the kisses or Rayburn for telling him to stop. Dawson would eventually become host of *Family Feud*, and would continue these antics on this show too, kissing every female contestant directly on the lips. When watching the show, it became evident that some women were uncomfortable by Dawson’s actions, but still let him proceed. One reason why this happened, especially during the 1970s, was because “as girls, we were taught to be polite. To tolerate behavior of adults, especially men. Be submissive. Acquiesce to the behavior. Above all else, be a good girl” (Jackson, 2019).

In the 21st century, there is a shift happening to normalize positive behavior. There are more images illustrating “girl power” as the new normal, from pictures of women protesting or speaking out through the #MeToo movement revealing unwanted touching by men. All of these

actions help illustrate that all people should be treated with respect and everybody should carry out behavior that is appropriate in any public setting, whether it's in a classroom, restaurant, at home, or even on television.

Genderism can be a sensitive issue within the game show industry. A study was performed analyzing 18 episodes of *Jeopardy!* looking at answers which could either be male or female. Some of the categories included in this study were "Poets," "Comic Strip Characters," and "U.S. Senators." Out of 1,080 clues asked on these episodes, a total of 251 fell into the category. When assessing this information in greater detail based on specific gender, only 52 were female. This ratio equates to 25 percent female to 75 percent male (Sosin, 2013). The analysis for this study only focused on gender and not race.

An example from this study was the category "Authors" appeared on two shows. This means there could be 10 answers, which ended up being the following: Washington Irving, Aldous Huxley, Marcel Proust, Tom Stoppard, Jack Finney, Walt Whitman, Arthur Clarke, Mo Willems, and the Brothers Grimm. Maya Angelou was the sole woman. Another instance highlighting the imbalance of gender issues on the show was within the category "Lines from Oscar Roles." The study revealed there were quotes from Gordon Gekko, Forrest Gump, Don Corleone, Jake LaMotta, and the stuttering King George VI. No answer was attributed to a woman. Historically speaking, it is not difficult to find at least one famous award-winning quote by a female character, such as Scarlett O'Hara's "As God is my witness, I'll never go hungry again," or Cher's memorable "Snap out of it!" as Loretta Castorini in "Moonstruck." In that same episode, guess how many women just happened to appear in a category called "Someone's in the Kitchen"? Four out of five. Uncle Ben was the fifth (Sosin, 2013).

Even the Final Jeopardy! clues were disproportionately favored towards men. On these 18 episodes, six of the programs could have had a male or female answer at the end of show. However, only two of those six were the name of a woman, which is 33 percent. These answers were Anna Karenina for “Classic Novels” and Eva Peron for “20th Century Names.” One answer that could have helped make this analysis become 50/50 was in the category “Artists.” But the right response ended up being Vincent van Gogh, and not a female artist.

Another game show that displayed sexism for several decades before the Me Too movement started was *The Price Is Right*. With the well-renowned Bob Barker as host, the show employed a number of models—all female—to introduce the prizes that were being given away. From 1972 to 2007, these models were referred to as “Barker’s Beauties.” It was not until 2012 for the first male model to appear on the show. He remained on the program for two years, and currently *The Price Is Right* features two male models (The Price is Right Models, n.d.).

#### *A Gendered History of Game Show Hosts*

When comparing game show hosts based on gender, men have firmly outnumbered women for several decades. Even though some women are currently game show hosts, the industry is still largely dominated by men.

Arlene Francis was the first woman to host a game show on television in 1949, according to the National Women’s History Museum. She hosted *Blind Date* for six years before making an appearance on live television from 1949-1952 when the show was aired by NBC and ABC. Francis was subsequently replaced in 1952 with a male host. However, Francis’ success in the role of “femcee” led to appearances on *What’s My Line*, which is perhaps what she is best known for (The First Ladies of Game Shows, 2013).

Another iconic woman to host a game show was Betty White. Starting in 1983, White led *Just Men!*, a show featuring only females as contestants competing against each other to win a car. The purpose of the show was for the contestants to guess how many of the seven male celebrity guests would answer “yes” or “no” to a question. If correct, the contestant would get a key possibly starting the engine of the car at stake. White became the first woman to win a Daytime Emmy for Outstanding Game Show Host (The First Ladies of Game Shows, 2013). Even though White claimed this award for her success, the show lasted only 65 episodes.

After White received an Emmy, it took another 22 years for a woman to win television’s top honor in that category again. In 2005, Meredith Vieira won the first of her two Emmy’s for Outstanding Game Show Host for leading *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. Vieira, who had the prestigious title from 2002-13, took this show from the Regis Philbin-hosted primetime version to a daily syndicated show. Vieira was also the co-executive producer of 365 episodes, another breakthrough for women in the game show field (The First Ladies of Game Shows, 2013).

### *Game-Changing Female Run-Shows*

Recent conversations about sexism, rape culture, and gender identity have strengthened due to the current political landscape, but they were set up by pop culture. Throughout the 21st century, the entertainment industry has seen an increasing number of television shows with female actresses as the lead characters. For example, in 2012, Kerry Washington made her debut in *Scandal* “covering up Washington D.C.’s bad behavior by day and sleeping with the President by night” (Dockterman, 2019). At first, critics were not satisfied with *Scandal* claiming it “conjures images of women eating cartons of low-fat ice cream in front of the TV,” but director Shonda Rhimes’ won over a large audience. After two seasons, ABC made *Scandal* the cornerstone of its Thursday-night block of dramas.

Just two weeks after *Scandal* premiered, a cable show created by a woman launched on HBO titled *Girls*. From 2013 to 2015, seven “game-changing female-run shows” premiered on streaming services, including *Orange Is the New Black*, *Broad City*, *Transparent*, *The Affair*, *Jane the Virgin*, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (Dockterman, 2019). Each of these shows changed the way audiences perceived women because they all possessed a specific voice about this gender.

## **Literature Review, Part 2: How Corporations Respond to Scandals**

Crisis management is defined as “a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damage inflicted by a crisis” (Claeys and Coombs, 2020). According to Dr. Timothy Coombs, a liberal arts professor whose primary research is in crisis communications, a crisis has four characteristics: it is perceptual, it is unpredictable, it can violate stakeholders’ expectations, and can lead to negative outcomes.

A crisis can impact organizational performance and cause negative consequences. When a crisis occurs, it not only “disrupts an organization’s immediate processes but it also has a long-term effect on organizational reputation and long-term performance (or even survival). Therefore, the right choice of communicative strategies and elements of communicative responses can help limit the reputational damage and other unfavorable outcomes” (Tkalac Vercic, et al., 2019).

According to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, organizational reputation is a “valued resource and should be protected during a crisis” (Coombs and Holladay, 2002). Research has shown that the best way to do that is by selecting a crisis response strategy best

suited to a particular crisis situation. The strategy should be appropriate for the situation and potential reputation harm.

Consequently, it is important for a corporation to prepare for a problematic event in order to respond appropriately and efficiently. There are methods companies can institute to help avoid a brand crisis. Based on literature in emergency preparedness, crisis management involves four interrelated factors: prevention, preparation, response and revision (Claeys and Coombs, 2020). These factors can be used in a three-stage approach to combat crisis management. First is the pre-crisis phase which includes prevention and preparation strategies. Next is the crisis phase which is when a corporation responds to the problem. Lastly is the post-crisis phase where a company learns from its scandal and makes revisions to avoid a similar incident from happening again.

Further research by Bernstein Crisis Management identified seven steps that should occur during the pre-crisis stage. These seven steps include: anticipating a crisis; identifying your crisis communications team; training spokespersons in order to communicate your company's mission to the media properly without misinterpretation; establishing notification and monitoring systems; identifying and knowing your stakeholders; and developing holding statements (Bernstein, 2015). In the pre-crisis stage, crisis communication typically revolves around monitoring disaster risks, making decisions about how to manage potential crises, and training people who will be involved in the crisis management process. Every business should have a crisis team and plan in place before the event strikes. This team should be comprised of people both internally and externally who can view the company from different perspectives.

Without having sufficient internal and external communications readily available can result in several business repercussions, including: operational response will break down; stakeholders will not know what is happening and will become angry; the organization will be perceived by consumers as inept; the time to put an end to the crisis will be extended; and the impact to the financial and reputational bottom line will be more severe (Bernstein, 2015).

After a corporate communication crisis occurs, there are three steps companies need to address: assess the crisis situation; finalize and adapt key messages; and post-crises analysis (Bernstein, 2015). During this period, the organization should release updates to its employees and external audiences on the recovery process, explain all corrective actions the company is offering, and investigate why the crisis even started. Through all of these post-crisis tactics, it is important to maintain a positive image for the company as a moral corporation.

When a corporate communication crisis occurs, the organization's public relations team typically is responsible for dealing with a crisis, or a company hires an external agency to manage the problem. One of the main job responsibilities for public relations professionals is to build and maintain a positive image for a company or organization. Specialists who work in public relations typically possess the necessary skills to protect and defend an individual, company, or organization that is facing a challenge to its overall public image.

Shift Communications compares crisis management to a fire because the crisis requires three things to burn: fuel, heat (energy), and oxygen or a catalyst like oxygen (speed). The fuel is something your company did or is responsible for that caused the crisis, which in this case is Sony hiring Richards as the new *Jeopardy!* host. The heat or energy is the public perception of an issue. The oxygen, or speed, is how your organization responded to the crisis. Shift says if

you “take away one of these elements,” the company’s crisis will dissipate, similar to a fire not spreading from one area to another, the problem will eventually “burn itself out” (Prater, n.d.).

Knowing what the problem is and acting upon this issue is the most critical step in maintaining a strong reputation with consumers. But nearly half of marketers, 45 percent, admitted they do not have a crisis communication plan in place (Gingerich, 2019). In its 2019 Crisis Impact Report titled, “How Customers React to a Brand Crisis,” Crisp Thinking Group surveyed 2,000 U.S. and U.K. consumers to understand the effect of a crisis on brand value and the importance of a strategic response to maintain customer loyalty. According to this Report, 53 percent of consumers expect brands to respond to a crisis within an hour, and 34 percent expect a response within thirty minutes. Furthermore, 90 percent said they are likely to shop with a brand that responds well to a crisis (Rand, 2019).

Today, many marketing executives are focused on utilizing social media channels to build brand reputation and its customer base. The Crisis Impact Report found that 47 percent of consumers across all age groups prefer to share news and receive a response about a corporation through social media (Rand, 2019). Marketing professionals know that failing to identify and manage customer concerns on social media immediately can negatively impact their business in the short term and future. When used properly, social media can be employed to flag and address any crisis situation quickly. Businesses can use social media to their advantage by immediately acknowledging a problem and letting consumers know how they are handling a crisis. Providing this information in real-time prevents inaccurate information from being disseminated virally to millions of people.

Today, consumers rely on social media websites to gather and spread information, from disseminating rumors or sharing news stories about brands that are often distorted. The Crisis Impact Report said that on Twitter, users are 70 percent more likely to retweet false news over the truth (Rand, 2019). This is why it is critical for a company to be proactive, especially on social media, and provide instant updates to their followers alerting them what is happening during a crisis to prevent the situation from intensifying.

When brands handle a crisis successfully, 39 percent of consumers said they will refer the company to friends and family, according to the Crisis Impact Report. Also, one in four consumers said they would follow the brand on social media and post something positive (Rand, 2019). However, a poor response can have damaging affects to brand value. The Crisis Impact Report found that 66 percent of consumers are unlikely to continue shopping with a brand that responds poorly to a crisis (Rand, 2019).

### **Research Questions:**

The basis of this research aims to identify how issues like gender, sexism, and racism affect the entertainment industry, specifically looking into the type of people who host game shows. This paper will analyze how a future game show host had his career altered due to the recent surge of social media activity, particularly because of popular cultural movements taking place like Me Too and cancel culture.

The specific example being used in this research diagnoses the corporate crisis Sony faced determining its line of succession from Alex Trebek to Mike Richards, and then naming Mayim Bialik and Ken Jennings as temporary replacement game show hosts after a report came out revealing offensive and sexist comments Richards made on a podcast. In this research, I will

assess whether the general public thought this crisis could have been avoided, and if Sony handled the problem—which was created internally by corporate executives—appropriately.

This study addresses these questions:

- 1. How do cultural elements like white male domination affect the entertainment industry?**
- 2. What impact did social media activism play in the case of *Jeopardy!* naming a new host?**
- 3. How did Sony address the crisis when news and social media posts began to emerge about Mike Richard's past history?**
- 4. How do consumers gauge or respond to Sony's corporate response to this crisis?**

### **Case Study, part 1: Analyzing the Mike Richards Scandal**

Crisis communication is defined as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation (Xu, p.3). Dealing with a crisis involves dialog between an organization and the public in three phases: before, during, and after the occurrence, which is typically a negative problem. Because of the increasing use of digital technology by consumers, organizations need effective strategies in place to respond when a corporate crisis or complaint occurs.

One corporation that recently battled a crisis resulting in substantial public reaction was Sony. After Alex Trebek, the legendary host of the classic game show *Jeopardy!* for 36 years passed away at the age of 80 in 2020 after battling pancreatic cancer, Sony had to conduct a search process to find a new permanent replacement. Most fans expected Sony to already know

internally who would take over the helm of the program when Trebek would no longer be able to be its leader, but this was not the case. The corporation instead decided to hold open tryouts for the hosting gig in the public eye, which was not a successful strategy. This plan ended up being a major debacle as the company's handling of this procedure was scrutinized, particularly when Sony announced who will be the next host.

### *The Iconic Career of Alex Trebek*

In 1984, a syndicated version of America's favorite quiz show debuted: *Jeopardy!*. Hosting this program was Alex Trebek, who eventually became one of television's most enduring and iconic figures engaging millions of viewers worldwide with his impeccable delivery of "answers and questions."

Every weeknight approximately around dinner time, families would have an opportunity to come together and put on their television and see the same person step onto the stage for *Jeopardy!*. For more than 8,000 episodes, Trebek would greet the contestants, begin the first round of clues (interrupted at the midway point to have a brief introductory conversation with each player), start the second round of trivia, and then recite the Final Jeopardy! question that always featured the same musical tune playing in the background since 1964 while the contestants wrote down their answers. According to Trebek, "I think what makes Jeopardy! special is that, among all the quiz and game shows out there, ours tends to reward and encourage learning" (About the Show, 2022).

In March 2019, Trebek announced that he had pancreatic cancer. He underwent treatment while continuing to host *Jeopardy!*. This act of courage inspired millions with his upbeat and candid messages about his health, which he often would share either off the air through

television interviews or sometimes even on stage prior to the program. Trebek also published a best-selling book in July 2020 titled “The Answer Is...: Reflections on My Life.”

In June 2021, Trebek was honored with a Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Game Show Host, his third consecutive and eighth overall. He also has a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. He has been honored with a Guinness World Records record for Most Game Show Episodes Hosted by the Same Presenter. In 2013, he was named a member of the *Broadcasting & Cable* Hall of Fame, and in 2018, he and *Jeopardy!* were inducted into the National Association of Broadcasters Broadcasting Hall of Fame. Trebek and *Jeopardy!* received a 2011 Peabody Award for “encouraging, celebrating and rewarding knowledge” (About the Show, 2022).

Before his death, which occurred on November 8, 2020, Trebek frequently recited that if he ever were to retire, the one piece of advice he would offer his successor would be “stay out of the way and let the contestants be the stars” (Chu, 2021). Unfortunately, Sony had other ideas when looking for the next host of this game show, and current cultural issues played a significant role impacting the decision-making process.

#### *The Beginning of Sony’s Corporate Scandal: Finding the Next Host*

Following the passing of Trebek, Sony began its search to find a replacement for the longtime *Jeopardy!* host. Rather than adhering to Trebek’s directive that the focus of the show should always be on the contestants, Sony went in another direction. The company signed a series of A-list celebrity guest stars to compete in a two-week trial run displaying their talents. Some of the guest hosts to see who fit best for the future heir to the *Jeopardy!* throne included LeVar Burton, Mayim Bialik, Savannah Guthrie, Robin Roberts, Katie Couric, Anderson

Cooper, George Stephanopoulos, and Aaron Rogers. Sony also allowed executive producer Mike Richards an opportunity to become a guest host, as well as Ken Jennings—considered to be the “Greatest of All Time” *Jeopardy!* champion as he won 74 games, the most in the game show’s history. Against Trebek’s wishes, the star of the program for viewers to watch now every day was to see which celebrity guest host can outperform the others instead of which contestant is more knowledgeable about general trivia.

Many of the guest hosts publicly said they would love the job, including Bialik, Stephanopoulos, and Rodgers. Burton, who was one of the fan favorites, wrote on the social media platform Twitter: “not gonna lie, I feel like I’ve been preparing my whole life to occupy the @Jeopardy host podium when Alex retires.”

#### *Sony’s Corporate Crisis: Naming the New Host*

Approximately nine months after the death of Trebek, Sony found a new permanent host. On August 11, 2021, executive producer Mike Richards was named for this position. Alongside Richards, *Jeopardy!* announced plans to air more primetime shows and spinoffs, such as the *Jeopardy! National College Championship*, in which Mayim Bialik will lead this programming.

After Sony made its anticipated announcement, sports and pop culture website *The Ringer* searched through episodes of *The Randumb Show*, a podcast Richards hosted from 2013-14, finding a number of “offensive and demeaning language” relating to women and nudity. Some of the disparaging comments Richards stated included saying that one-piece swimsuits make women look “frumpy and overweight” (McDowell, 2021). Throughout the course of the

podcast that he co-hosted with two women, Richards also expressed sentiments of anti-Semitism, as well as remarks about everyone from the unhoused to citizens of Haiti.

Once *The Ringer's* story was published, several of the major media outlets and entertainment magazine publications began covering this news. A joyous announcement naming Trebek's successor quickly turned into a public relations nightmare for Sony. In only a matter of days, there was no excitement about Richards becoming the next in line to become the famous quiz show's permanent host, but rather consumer criticism. Sony was dealing with a major corporate crisis that simply could have been avoided.

After *The Ringer* report was published, Richards immediately defended himself, commenting: "It is humbling to confront a terribly embarrassing moment of misjudgment, thoughtlessness, and insensitivity from nearly a decade ago. Looking back now, there is no excuse, of course, for the comments I made on this podcast and I am deeply sorry." Richards voluntarily stepped down as *Jeopardy!* host on August 20, but Sony did not terminate his position as executive producer. Instead, he retained that role following some "sensitivity training." This decision was not accepted well by the public, and due to continued consumer backlash about his derogatory language towards women, Sony eventually relented and told Richards that he would no longer serve as executive producer of *Jeopardy* or *Wheel of Fortune*. In a memo to *Jeopardy!* staff, Richards stated that the issues surrounding him made it "clear that moving forward as host would be too much of a distraction for our fans and not the right move for the show" (Turnquist, 2021).

*Background of Mike Richards*

Mike Richards was not as popular compared to the other guest show hosts Sony brought in for *Jeopardy!* auditions. However, Richards had long been a “television personality” hosting reality shows in his career including *High School Reunion* and *Beauty and the Geek*. Additionally, previous game show hosting stints included a revived *The Pyramid* in 2012. However, the majority of his workload consisted of producing quiz and game shows. Before joining as executive producer of *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune* in 2020, Richards played a key role behind the scenes of *The Price is Right*, the celebrity edition of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, and the revival of *Let’s Make a Deal*.

Richards is not new to allegations in the press. During his time serving as a producer on *The Price is Right*, he was embroiled in a 2011 sexual harassment lawsuit about discriminatory treatment of women filed by former models from the series. The lawsuits were filed against CBS and Freemantle Media, while Richards was not specifically named. Before Richards' casting for *Jeopardy!* was confirmed, he addressed these allegations and the “complicated employment issues” raised in the press during his time at *The Price Is Right* 10 years ago in a letter to staff. Richards said, “These were allegations made in employment disputes against the show. I want you all to know that the way in which my comments and actions have been characterized in these complaints does not reflect the reality of who I am or how we worked together on *The Price Is Right*” (Ushe, 2021).

After Richards quit as the new permanent *Jeopardy!* host, Sony subsequently appointed Bialik and Jennings as temporary guest hosts of the program splitting duties through the end of the 2021 season. Sony also decided to keep the duo for the same roles for its 38th season in 2022, temporarily putting off any speculation and drama about the job. However, both Bialik and

Jennings have also faced criticism for past remarks. For example, Bialik has received criticism over several issues including a “brain health supplement” she endorsed for a company that faced a lawsuit accusing it of false advertising, as well as writing in a 2012 book about making an “informed decision not to vaccinate our children” (Diaz, 2021). Meanwhile, Jennings had to apologize over insensitive tweets he made on Twitter about people who use wheelchairs. Luckily for Sony, neither Bialik’s nor Jennings issues created as much of a controversy on social media compared to Richards.

### *The Consumer Reaction to Sony’s Decision*

Social media provides all individuals accessibility to immediately share their opinion about any story. Sony’s decision regarding Richards’ new role at *Jeopardy!* became a viral topic that generated substantial conversations, with the news sparking mixed reactions from all people including fans and celebrities. Besides some consumers not liking the outcome announcing Richards as Trebek’s replacement, Sony also faced backlash on social media pertaining to how it handled the search process seeking the next permanent host.

Ravi Ahuja, chairman of global television studios and corporate development for Sony Pictures, defended the corporation’s decision to initially hire both Richards and Bialik. He said “a tremendous amount of work and deliberation has gone into it, perhaps more than has ever gone into the selection of hosts for a show — deservedly so because it’s *Jeopardy!* and we are following the comparable Alex Trebek. A senior group of Sony Pictures Television executives pored over footage from every episode, reviewed research from multiple panels and focus groups, and got valuable input from our key partners and *Jeopardy!* viewers” (Jackson, 2021).

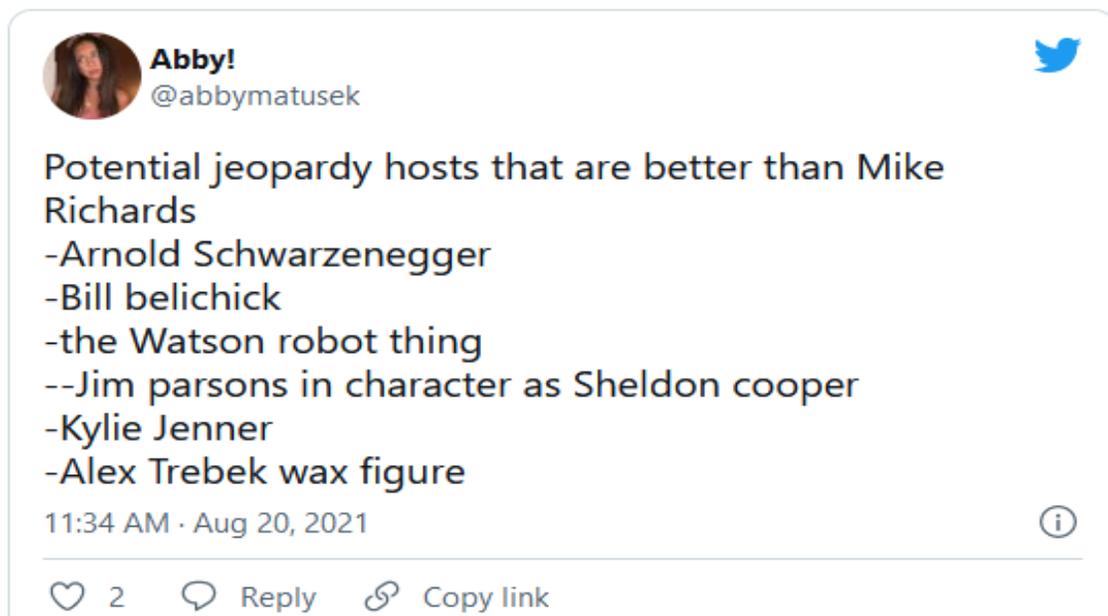
Ahuda mentioned that Sony intended to divide the hosting responsibilities, stating that it “became very clear that Mike and Mayim were the undeniable choices.”

Celebrities had differing opinions about Sony’s selection. In a remark supporting the company he works for, *Wheel of Fortune* host Pat Sajak “welcomed” Richards on Twitter. Yvette Nicole Brown, an actress from the show *Community*, expressed that she’s “very happy” for Bialik but added that “the way the search was handled did Levar Burton dirty” (Jackson, 2021). Aisha Tyler, well-known for being on *Friends*, *Talk Soup*, and an episode of *Celebrity Jeopardy!*, retweeted a link to *The Ringer* article with the following comment, “A: Will never watch @Jeopardy again. Q: Who is, everyone?” (Pedroia, 2021).

Fans of *Jeopardy!* wondered if the hiring process was “tainted by nepotism since Richards is already the executive producer on the show” (Pedroja, 2021). A Twitter user made a joke saying: “What you don’t know is that Jeopardy executive producer Mike Richards read his own resume, gave himself a callback and interviewed himself for the job.” A similar comment was also made: “It’s weird that Mike Richards, the head of Jeopardy host search, did not properly vet Mike Richards, the choice for Jeopardy host, in an exhaustive search lead by executive producer Mike Richards.” Another Twitter post pronounced: “Mike Richards single-handedly trashed the reputation of Jeopardy, a show that Alex Trebek had made television’s gold standard for decades. He should be fired immediately.”

The negative reactions from consumers continued to exacerbate on social media, which is not good news for any corporation dealing with a crisis. One fan reacted by saying, “It’s not that hard either give us what we want or give us what Alex Trebek wanted LaVar Burton or Laura Coates #Jeopardy maybe you should think about removing the man who put getting himself on

camera ahead of the right decision for the show.” Below is a screenshot from another consumer suggesting more suitable candidates for the position:



Conversely, there were consumers who were empathetic toward Sony’s decision. One supportive post of Mike Richards’ hiring said, “This is... really confusing. But hey, new primetime Jeopardy tournaments? Color me interested. Another person tweeted, “Jeopardy made the right decision. Mike Richard’s was the best.” A third Twitter user wrote: “He’s been a game show executive producer for over a decade and has actually hosted a game show before. He was by far the most qualified of the guest hosts. Do ten seconds of research.” Another tweet suggested that people are commenting pretending to be loyal *Jeopardy!* followers, saying “People who say they are done with Jeopardy probably hardly ever watched it. No serious Jeopardy fan is going to stop watching now. Boo freakin hoo” (Jackson, 2021).

Overall, many consumers were upset that Sony did not listen or provide them with an opportunity to share their thoughts on who should become the next *Jeopardy!* host. A fan wrote

on Twitter, “I actually wanted the loyal Jeopardy viewers to vote on their favorite guest host before corporate got involved. I’m not sure I can watch the new hosts.” But some fans expressed anger that Sony did not adhere to current cultural diversity, equity, and inclusion landscape throughout this process. Here are some examples of posts that were all liked by thousands of other social media users:



A screenshot of a tweet from Morgan Jerkins (@MorganJerkins) posted on August 20, 2021. The tweet contains a satirical commentary on the Jeopardy! host selection process. The text of the tweet is: "Alex Trebek: I want a Black woman to replace me. The public: We want a Black man. Execs: Let's get the white man who we clearly haven't done enough research on and has a history of being an ass." The tweet has received 30.6K likes and has 140 replies. The interface includes a profile picture, a verified badge, a retweet icon, and interaction buttons for likes, replies, and copying the link.

**Morgan Jerkins**   
@MorganJerkins 

Alex Trebek: I want a Black woman to replace me.  
The public: We want a Black man.  
Execs: Let's get the white man who we clearly  
haven't done enough research on and has a history  
of being an ass.

10:24 AM · Aug 20, 2021 

 [Read the full conversation on Twitter](#)

 30.6K  Reply  Copy link

[Read 140 replies](#)

 **Elie Mystal** ✓  
@ElieNYC

Shorter Mike Richards: While I regret that my past behavior is preventing me from using my whiteness to front Jeopardy! rest assured that I will continue working behind the scenes to limit opportunities for women and minorities.

11:29 AM · Aug 20, 2021

6.2K Reply Copy link

[Read 121 replies](#)

 **Matthew A. Cherry** ✓  
@MatthewACherry

Mike Richards thinking he can just slink back to his EP job after saying and doing what he did is peak white privilege.

11:04 AM · Aug 20, 2021

1.5K Reply Copy link

[Read 27 replies](#)

*Former Jeopardy! Contestants Voice Concerns*

Sony’s public relations crisis continued to become more difficult to handle as former *Jeopardy!* champions also began speaking publicly questioning the selection process and decision to hire Mike Richards. Several previous contestants used words like “dismaying,” “disheartening,” and “gobsmacked” to describe their feelings about the situation. The sentiment

from these prior champions was similar to fans and celebrities, explaining that they were not happy with how the corporation handled the situation.

The first contestant to appear on *Jeopardy!* following Trebek's cancer diagnosis was Anneke Garcia, who went on to become a four-time champion. Garcia mentioned that being on a game show like *Jeopardy!* provided her a "feeling of recognition" being described as a "non-model woman" on television (Bradley, 2021). When *The Ringer* story went viral, Garcia expressed that moment being a *Jeopardy!* champion was now a disappointment. According to Garcia, all the revelations linked to Richards is evidence that Sony's search for Trebek's replacement was never based on merit or integrity. "It was about a show business guy getting to do what he wants," Garcia explained (Bradley, 2021). She worries that Richards' misogynistic comments could have a "chilling effect" on potential *Jeopardy!* female contestants in the future.

Five-time champion Kristin Sausville simply said, "I think the main feeling of the community right now is: betrayed" (Bradley, 2021). Sausville echoed Garcia's thoughts, telling *The Daily Beast* that "*Jeopardy!* was a show that pretty much all of us had been wanting to be on for our entire lives. We trusted when we showed up on the set that we were going to be treated as equal and treated with respect, and we were." Sausville mentioned that her trivia friends are no longer interested in auditioning for *Jeopardy!*. Moving forward, she wonders "how women and Jewish people can feel safe on the set as contestants, as staff." In a written statement sent to *The Daily Beast*, Sausville said: "*J!* has always been known for its integrity, which is critical for a show about facts. It's sacrificing that integrity by keeping Mike Richards as EP, and runs a real risk of long-term damage to its reputation and perception. The show needs to suck up and do whatever they need to do in order to make Mike Richards not the EP anymore. I think it's

inappropriate for him to even be supervising women, and we know from his tenure as EP at *The Price Is Right* that other women who have worked for him agree.”

Arthur Chu, an 11-time champion, believes Sony “couldn’t intentionally sabotage the show worse than this.” He referenced Sony’s actions “like looking at yourself in the mirror and shooting yourself in the face” (Bradley, 2021). Chu is not optimistic about the future direction of the program, believing the Richards fiasco demonstrates Sony’s current view of *Jeopardy!*, which once maintained a sterling reputation for facts and knowledge. “I think the really worrying that about it is, what I sense from them is that they don’t have respect for that,” Chu said. “They kind of see *Jeopardy!* as a cash cow... When Alex died, they saw an opportunity to juice more ratings on top of that. And that’s a very tough thing to get over.”

Chu continued to vent his frustration by writing an op-ed in the *Washington Post* encouraging Sony Pictures Television to honor Trebek’s legacy by taking the focus away from the host and to where Trebek always felt it belonged: the contestants. Chu stated in this publication that he was stunned at how Sony was unaware of Richard’s podcast repeatedly making demeaning comments about women’s bodies and other bigoted remarks. James Holzhauer, who won more than \$2.4 million as a *Jeopardy!* 32-time champion, expressed his dissent to the Richard’s appointment in a tweet: “I was really looking forward to the season premier where after an exhaustive 61-clue search for the next *Jeopardy* champion, the show looks past the three obvious candidates and declares Mike Richards the winner.”

Looking ahead, *Jeopardy!* alumni articulated some names who should be the permanent host, which include Jennings and another former *Jeopardy!* champion Buzzy Cohen. Others that they all agreed would be better for the role than Richards were Burton and Laura Coates, a CNN

legal analyst who Trebek suggested could be his replacement. “I would like to see them pick a woman or a person of color to show that they are more interested in evolving,” Garcia said. “If you look at the TV that’s out there... You don’t have to just put ‘safe’ white men on TV anymore to keep your audience” (Bradley, 2021).

### *Responding to a Corporate Crisis*

What do consumers consider a crisis? Knowing this can help a corporation confront their crisis prevention strategy and develop effective messaging to address the situation. *Forbes* released its “13 Golden Rules of PR Crisis Management” companies should follow when responding to a crisis (Forbes Agency Council, 2017):

1. Take Responsibility
2. Be Proactive, Be Transparent, Be Accountable
3. Get Ahead of the Story
4. Be Ready for Social Media Backlash
5. Remember to be Human
6. First Apologize, Then Take Action
7. Monitor, Plan and Communicate
8. Seek First to Understand the Situation
9. Listen to Your Team First
10. Develop Strong Organizational Brand Culture
11. Turn Off the Fan
12. Avoid Knee-Jerk Reactions
13. Be Prepared

## *Evaluating Sony's PR Response to the Scandal*

A corporate crisis can create threats to public safety, financial and reputation loss, and is often accompanied by intense media scrutiny. Therefore, it is important for a company to prepare for a problematic event to take place so they can respond to an issue quickly. In terms of the crisis Sony faced naming Trebek's successor, this problem was mainly influenced by external audiences, specifically consumers using social media to voice their displeasure of an outcome they did not support. It was critical for Sony's public relations department to have prevention resources—such as prepared statements—in place defending its decision-making process. For any corporation, one of the most important aspects in crisis communication is being proactive in order to mitigate a problem. When doing a general evaluation of Sony's response against the “13 Golden Rules of PR Crisis Management,” the corporation was successful in some areas and failed in others. Steps in which Sony effectively contained the crisis included taking responsibility, being proactive, transparent, and accountable, and trying to get ahead of the story as much as possible. The corporation acknowledged immediately that it made a mistake not terminating Richards from the organization once *The Ringer* story was printed. Suzanne Prete, executive vice president, business and strategy for *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune* (which Richards was eventually also fired from), realized there was no way for Richards to have a presence in the either studio moving forward. “We had hoped that when Mike stepped down from the host position at *Jeopardy!* it would have minimized the disruption and internal difficulties we have all experienced these last few weeks,” Prete said. “That clearly has not happened” (Redmond, 2021).

## *Areas Sony Needs Improvement*

There were some steps within the “13 Golden Rules of PR Crisis Management” that Sony certainly needs improvement when dealing with future crises. The biggest failure Sony faced was not being ready for the social media backlash. During this problem, it appeared as if the corporation was not expecting as much criticism that they received. Even though a company, especially one as large as Sony, is not going to respond directly to any social media post, a corporation needs to communicate messages on its own channels explaining their position to consumers. Furthermore, the company did not disseminate any press releases after appointing Richards and Bialik as the next *Jeopardy!* hosts.

Another problem Sony faced was developing a strong organizational brand culture, as *Jeopardy!* was going through internal changes even before Trebek passed away. Harry Friedman left the show as the longtime *Jeopardy!* executive producer whom Richards stepped in to replace. Friedman holds the Guinness world record for most Emmy Award nominations for a game show producer, 48, and wins with 14 (Bradley, 2021). Another longtime producer, Maggie Speak retired in 2020. Glenn Kagan, a coordinator, claimed that “producers pushed him out of his longtime role that same year. He alleged “age discrimination in a lawsuit” in fall 2020 (Bradley, 2021). According to Chu, the organizational brand culture at *Jeopardy!* was not strong during this time period. “People don’t realize, the behind-the-scenes stuff is as important as the on-camera stuff. For decades, Speak has been something of a ‘mom’ to the *Jeopardy!* family; Kagan was ‘the dad.’ The dispute between Kagan and Sony was unduly contentious” (Bradley, 2021). Thirdly, Sony failed in the last “Golden Rule of PR Crisis Management” which is be prepared. Sony had more than a year to begin initiating some process to find Trebek’s successor. A corporation should not think its top program will continue to have success leaning on the celebrity leading the show to overcome a disease in which the odds are very slim to survive. This

is not a suitable business strategy and does not help the company prosper in the future. Over time, this rational will also impact the brand's value.

## **Case Study, Part 2: How the Scandal Matters to Consumers**

Companies don't control brand perception, consumers do. The good news is that corporations have more tools and resources than ever before to understand what their customers want, if they leverage opportunities to listen, stay agile and take customers' needs and wants into consideration first, and before their competitors do it. Consumers play an important role for corporations because they are the people who help propel a brand to succeed.

### *Sony's Hosting Scandal Impact on Audiences*

Television success relies upon how many viewers tune into a show. That is why it is critical for a program to hire stars who the audience will like. The same can be said for a game show, as the host needs to have a strong personality and establish an amicable relationship with the contestants.

This section of the research includes two separate surveys featuring consumer data. The first poll contains information from *Jeopardy!* viewers gauging their opinions about how each guest host performed and determining who they think is the appropriate host for *Jeopardy!*. A second poll was sent to a national audience, not necessarily fans of *Jeopardy!*, to find out whether they believe the game show industry has too many men hosting shows, and whether gender played a role in Sony naming its new *Jeopardy!* leader.

### *Insights From Fans Regarding Jeopardy! Guest Hosts*

In August 2021, media reports began circulating news that Sony was in “advanced negotiations” with *Jeopardy!* executive producer Mike Richards to replace the legendary Alex Trebek following his death from pancreatic cancer (Melore, 2021). Polls revealed that Americans were not supportive of this possible decision and wanted another individual to be Trebek’s successor. The correct answer to this question—which surveyed a sample of 1,003 Americans nationwide—was: “Who is Ken Jennings.”

But among the social media universe, a fan favorite leading into his guest tryout was LeVar Burton. The African American man was gaining popularity at a time when there was political drama happening throughout the country. The poll shows that 45 percent tuned into Burton’s first broadcast on July 26. Four out of five respondents described Burton’s first performance as either good or great, with less than two percent calling it bad or terrible (Melore, 2021). Moving ahead, another 28 percent tuned into future programs that Burton hosted. Despite the positive reviews on Burton’s performance, only one in 10 thought the “Reading Rainbow” and “Star Trek” star should be the permanent host of *Jeopardy!*. Instead, the record-setting champion Jennings got the most votes (23%), followed by Richards with 14%. Burton finished in third place among this poll at 10%, ahead of other guest hosts like Bialik (8%), Rodgers (5%), Couric (5%), Cooper (5%), Dr. Oz (4%), Roberts (3%) and Stephanopoulos (2%).

According to this *Jeopardy!* fan poll, Burton was popular among older respondents, as 86 percent of the panelists who thought the actor should replace Trebek were 45 or older. Another demographic supporting Burton’s appearance were men more so than women, with a favorable rating of 69 percent to 47 percent, respectively. But the biggest encouragement Burton received

went beyond polling numbers, as more than 260,000 fans signed an online petition urging Sony Pictures Entertainment to hire Burton as Trebek's successor.

### *Gender Issues in the Game Show Industry?*

For the second poll, a survey was disseminated nationwide to evaluate whether consumers think the game show industry is too gender-biased, specifically using the Sony scandal as its example. This survey was sent to a general audience across the United States to find out how people within the main targeted television viewing audience—ranging from 18-year-olds to adults 65 or older—feel about the game show industry. The survey was sent to a variety of people including graduate students, business professionals working in fields like banking, real estate, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and other sectors too, as well as retired individuals. Out of 151 respondents, 65 were male and 85 were female (one person preferred not to share their identity). In terms of age, 33 people were 18-34, 53 represented the 35-49 age gap, 39 surveyors were 50-64, and 26 were 65 years or older.

A common result that was distinguished among both sexes is the belief that the game show industry is dominated by male hosts. Among all the survey respondents, 54 men somewhat or strongly agreed with this statement, while 71 women thought this assertion was accurate. When Sony selected Bialik as a temporary full-time *Jeopardy!* host, women were more pleased with this decision than men. The poll found that 52 females either were somewhat or extremely satisfied with this announcement, compared to only 33 males. The majority of men surveyed, 29, were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with Bialik having some type of hosting responsibilities. Another noticeable finding in this survey was whether respondents thought gender played a role in Sony's selection as the next host. Out of 85 females who answered the survey, 69 reckon that

gender had a somewhat or extremely likely impact on the decision-making process, while only 42 males shared this feeling.

The results from both of these polls reveals consumers are not happy with how Sony controlled this decision-making process, and that the game show industry has a genderism problem.

*Conclusion: Where Does This Leave Us?*

As corporations face more scrutiny today because there is greater use of digital technology by consumers, this research shows why it is imperative for a company or organization to have an effective communication plan in place so their business can remain functional before, during, and after a crisis. Corporations have to be ahead of the problem and exhibit that they are in control of a situation, rather than be reactive to a crisis. It is important for an organization to be quick and accurate when responding to a crisis in order to prevent further damage and protect the business's reputation. As seen in the 2019 Crisis Impact Report, consumers are more receptive to continue completing business with a company that takes action against a corporate problem immediately, especially if there is a statement from a chief executive officer.

Communications professionals need to think long-term and prepare for all possibilities and potential brand ramifications. However, they must also monitor developments on a continual basis every day – in real time – and adjust accordingly. To maintain trust and protect corporate reputations, communicators need to shape strong strategies and craft eloquent messaging about

key issues. By doing this, brands will protect their overall image and maintain their loyal consumers, which is important for a business to be successful.

Despite the controversial and potential flaws of all the *Jeopardy!* hosts Sony battled throughout its process naming someone to supersede Alex Trebek, the show continues to be one of the most popular drawing a weekly audience of more than 20 million (Diaz, 2021). But high viewership does not mean a crisis will not occur again.

Since Sony has yet to name a permanent *Jeopardy!* host for next season or the long-term future, it is evident based on this research that the corporation institute the three-stage crisis management approach highlighted in this research to prevent another scandal.

Sony needs to learn from its Mike Richards crisis when naming the next host. The speculation is that either Bialik or Jennings will assume the mantle to lead *Jeopardy!*. When this announcement takes place, Sony needs to have a prepared statement explaining why this individual was chosen for the position. Additionally, the company has to complete proper internal due diligence on this person prior to making any announcement to avoid a similar fiasco comparable to the Richards case. For example, Sony needs to perform a full background check on the candidate they select for this prestigious role. This means reviewing their social media channels, researching any recent news articles about the person, and even speaking to the individual again prior to this news being released to the media. Following these steps can prevent any criticism that can hurt the company and its brand image.

For the second step of the three-stage approach, Sony has to prevent another scandal from happening again. The corporation should already be preparing plans for other game shows it

produces, such as *Wheel of Fortune* when Pat Sajak and Vanna White are no longer able to lead this program. *Wheel of Fortune* recently has faced criticism on social media because contestants did not properly solve answers correctly, either mispronouncing a word, or not reciting the full phrase in the proper amount of time. These issues are minor compared to *Jeopardy's!* crisis and ease very quickly in the busy news cycle we currently live in. But in the coming years when thinking about who might take over after its current hosts step down, Sony should consider consumer input because they play a critical role promoting a brand because of social media.

Sony should also already be thinking ahead and considering their options for both of the *Wheel of Fortune* positions. Will any of the guest hosts who auditioned for *Jeopardy!* be considered for either role? Will current cultural issues affect who takes over at *Wheel of Fortune!*? Will television viewers have any influence on the decision-making process? Based on the evidence provided in this paper, the answers to all these questions should be yes. Is that a bad thing? Probably not.

This research has shown that sexism and genderism in the game show industry continues to be a problem, but is gradually improving in the 21st century compared to previous decades. More women are beginning to host revival game shows, including Leslie Jones on *Supermarket Sweep*, Elizabeth Banks on *Press Your Luck*, Sara Haines leads *The Chase*, Jane Lynch emcees *The Weakest Link*, Jane Krakowski hosts *Name That Tune*. But among this group of women, only one is African American. This low number helps to signify that racism might be the next concern the entertainment industry needs to address in order to resolve the cultural issues within our society.

## **Appendix: Survey Questions**

1. What is your age?
2. I identify my gender as a:
3. Do you believe the game show industry is dominated by male hosts?
4. How often do you watch the game show Jeopardy!?
5. Did Sony's controversial decision to name its executive producer, Mike Richards, as the permanent host of Jeopardy! despite his past sexist remarks impact whether you will continue watching the game show?
6. To what degree were you satisfied with Sony's decision selecting Mayim Bialik as a temporary host of Jeopardy! following the Mike Richard's scandal?
7. How likely is it that gender played a role in Sony's selection as host?

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