

MESSAGES, MAGIC AND MISALIGNMENT

Interpreting Disney's Leadership Communication Through the Archetypes of *Wicked*

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study examines how stakeholders interpreted Disney's leadership communication during its 2022 response to Florida's Parental Rights in Education legislation. Using leadership theory, values alignment research, and narrative metaphors from *Wicked: Part One*, the study analyzes film scenes, public social media discourse, and survey responses. Findings aim to identify how communication style influences trust, authenticity, and perceived values alignment. The project offers practical strategies for leaders navigating sensitive social and political communication.

Research Problem

Disney's brand identity, which emphasizes inclusion, shaped stakeholder expectations for how the company would communicate during the 2022 Florida legislation controversy. When leadership's initial response appeared misaligned with these values, stakeholders questioned the clarity, consistency, and intent behind Disney's communication. This highlights a broader challenge of maintaining trust and values alignment during politically charged events. Examining stakeholder interpretations of Disney's response through authoritarian, symbolic, and transformational leadership frameworks can help identify which strategies are perceived as most effective.

Research Questions

- How do stakeholders describe Disney's leadership communication during the 2022 Florida controversy?
- What patterns emerge across narrative analysis, social media discourse, and survey responses?
- Which leadership communication strategies are perceived as most effective for building trust and values alignment?

Case Context Timeline

Florida HB 1557 introduced

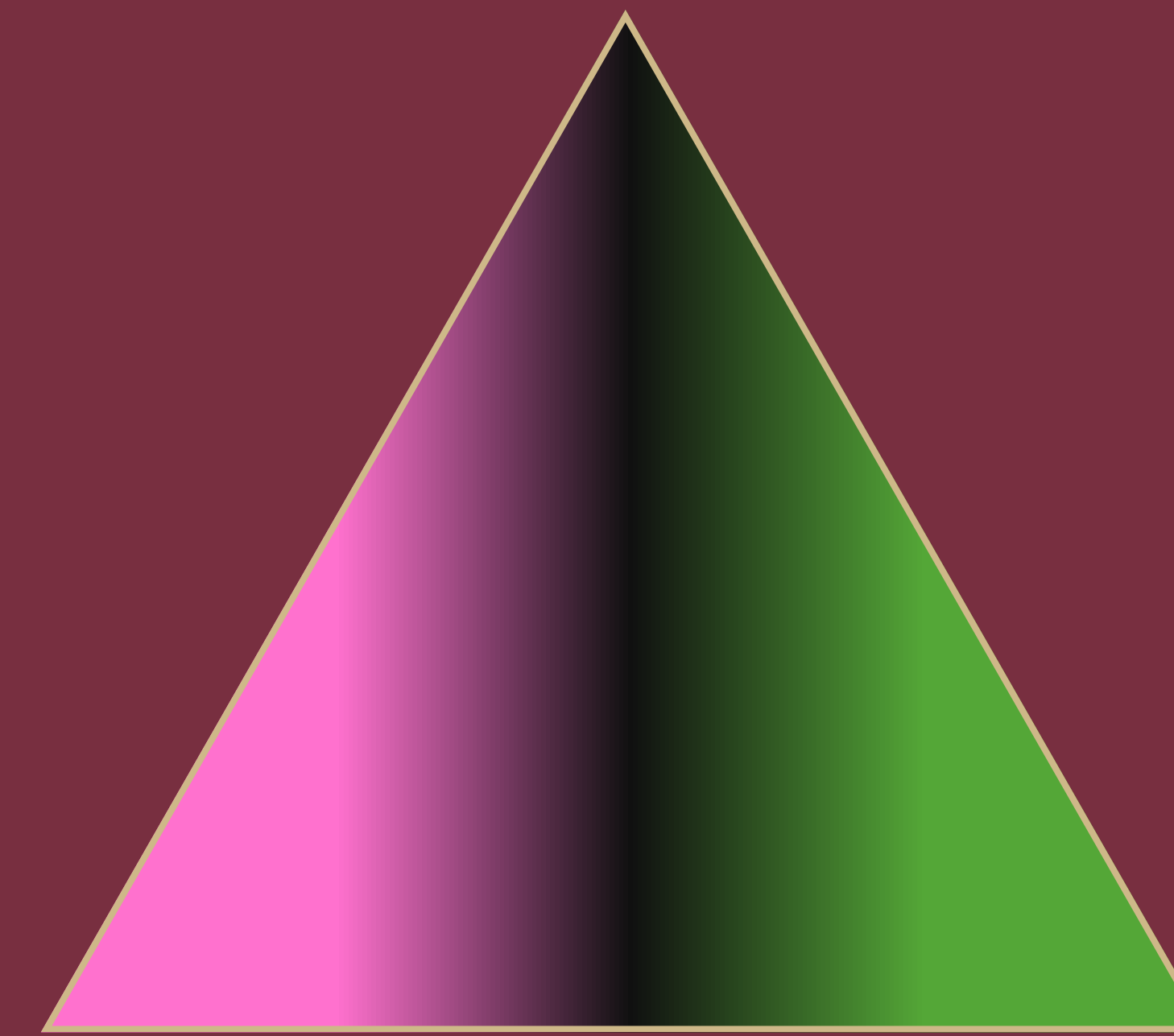
Public criticism and employee walkouts emerge

Disney leadership initially responds cautiously

Leadership Framework

Leadership Styles as Interpretive Lenses for Stakeholder Perception

Wizard = Authoritarian Leadership
Controlled Messaging & Risk Avoidance



Glinda = Symbolic Leadership
Image Focused & Audience Oriented

Elphaba = Transformational Leadership
Value Driven & Authentic

Methodology

Exploratory Mixed-Methods Study (Qualitative Dominant)

This study uses a mixed-methods design combining narrative scene analysis, social media discourse coding, and a pilot perception survey to examine stakeholder interpretations of Disney's leadership communication. Qualitative insights from these data sources are combined to identify patterns in how different leadership styles are perceived. Together, these approaches provide a multidimensional view of stakeholder expectations and values alignment.

Data Sources:

- Narrative scene analysis (*Wicked: Part One*)
- Social media discourse coding (N = 21 posts)
 - Platforms Analyzed: Instagram (11), Twitter/X (5), LinkedIn (3), Facebook (2)
- Pilot audience perception survey

Social Media Coding

- Coding Categories
 - Tone (supportive, critical, neutral)
 - Values alignment perception
 - Trust perception
- Ethical Note
 - Posts were paraphrased to protect user anonymity

Expected Findings

Key Patterns Across Data Sources:

Stakeholders respond more positively to leadership communication that is:

Clear and Timely | Explicitly Values-Based | Emotionally Authentic

Transformational leadership styles appear most strongly with:

Higher Trust | Stronger Perceptions of Values Alignment

Leadership Implications

For organizations navigating political controversy:

- Silence may damage trust
- Symbolic messaging alone may appear performative
- Values-driven communication strengthens credibility

Conclusion

As an initial investigation, this study highlights the ways stakeholders make sense of leadership communication during politically sensitive moments. The responses analyzed here suggest that stakeholders pay close attention to consistency, tone, and perceived authenticity when evaluating an organization's public stance. While the results are not definitive, they surface questions worth exploring about how leaders can navigate controversy without compromising trust or organizational values. These findings highlight the growing importance of values-driven leadership communication in maintaining trust within increasingly polarized environments.

References

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