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Does stealing thunder always work? A content analysis of crisis communication practice under different cultural settings

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ABSTRACT

A content analysis of six paired stealing thunder and thunder cases in Western and non-Western cultures offers insight into effective crisis communication strategies in different cultural settings. Specifically, this study examined the differences between stealing thunder cases and thunder cases in terms of crisis communication strategies, message frames and public emotions. Results from each set of paired crisis cases indicate that the stealing thunder strategy may not always work in the same way nor have the same power in different cultural environments.

1. Introduction

A crisis is by definition unpredictable, but not unexpected. Crisis communication practitioners seek how to strategically prevent a crisis; however, if one occurs, the focus becomes how to reduce crisis damage. According to Western scholars, an organization in crisis should tell the truth and tell it quickly (e.g., Augustine, 1995; Barton, 1993; Dougherty, 1992). Coombs (1999) suggested that organizations could gain support and forgiveness from stockholders by self-reporting the potential risks before the crisis was revealed by news media. Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2005) also supported the perspective that self-disclosing a crisis can be effective in minimizing crisis damage in Western culture. However, in Asian culture the so-called gold rule during a crisis is "more deeply held than the value of telling the absolute truth in every situation" (Yu & Wen, 2003, p. 62). In most instances, a silent and reserved gesture is often considered a wise option in Asian culture (Bond, 1991).

Crisis communication scholars have conceptualized stealing thunder by applying it to different simulative settings (e.g., Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Claeys & Cauerghe, 2012). Based on two stealing thunder crises from the United States, for example, Wigley (2011) found that stealing thunder was associated with more positively framed stories than thunder cases. However, little research has been devoted to the effects of stealing thunder on the actual crises in different cultural settings. Based on actual crisis events, the current study compared communication strategies, frames of crisis communication, and the public's emotions between stealing thunder and thunder crises in different cultural settings. Hofstede's (2016) six-dimensions of culture were used as the theoretical framework to explain the role of culture in selecting crisis communication strategies, framing news stories, and generating public reactions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Stealing thunder strategy

Organizations use the stealing thunder strategy to report their own "bad news" and communicate with media and the public in a preemptive fashion during a crisis (Wigley, 2011). Easley, Bearden, and Feel (1995) reveal self-disclosure of negative information creates perceptions of higher credibility for an organization. Additionally, by proactively addressing the negative information, organizations reduce potential risks of a third party breaking the news. This allows organizations to set the tone of news coverage and frame the information in a positive way. Thus, news reporters are less likely to publish follow-up stories compared to organizations who withheld information.

Crisis communication scholars define stealing thunder as a "proactive self-disclosure strategy" which refers to "an admission of a weakness (usually a mistake or failure) before that weakness is announced by another party, such as an interest group or the media" (Arpan & Pompper, 2003, p. 294). Previous studies have mainly focused on the strategy's persuasive effects on the general public (e.g., Claeys, Cauberghe, & Leysen, 2013), and relationship construction between PR practitioners and journalists (e.g., Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Wigley, 2011). Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2005) found organizations in the stealing thunder condition had higher organizational credibility, and generated consumer purchase intention compared to organizations in the thunder condition. Similarly, Claeys et al. (2013) revealed ex-antecrisis timing strategy (stealing thunder) had a better effect on restoring an organization's reputation during a crisis than ex-postcrisis timing strategy (thunder).

Stealing thunder within a crisis context has been linked to greater levels of perceived credibility of an organization, interests of reporting crisis, and the perceptions of crisis severity. Consumers' negative perceptions of an organization can be lessened by self-disclosing negative or damaging information in an advertisement (Easley et al., 1995). Self-disclosure via a press conference has also been found to increase organizational credibility and reduce crisis severity (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

Additionally, PR professionals who use the stealing thunder strategy are more likely to have positively framed and fewer follow-up stories (Wigley, 2011). According to Arpan and Pompper (2003), journalists are more likely to view PR practitioners who stole thunder as more credible communicators. However, the public may see the confession as merely a public relations stunt, with the organization having no other choice than to disclose the information. It is a "trick" or a weakened story to divert the public into thinking the crisis is minor, while the issue is critical (Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993). Based on six actual crisis cases in Western and non-Western cultures, the current study aims at observing how each culture used or did not use the stealing thunder strategy during a crisis situation.

2.2. The role of culture in crisis communication

For understanding cultural orientations, Hall (1976) introduced the concept of high/low context cultures which are identifiable based on message dissemination. In a high context culture, such as Asian culture, members build close intimate relationships with one another. Some key characteristics of this culture are the existence of social hierarchies, use of simple meanings to disseminate information, and individual self-control. On the contrary, members in a low context culture, such as Western societies, are characterized by individualization, perceptions of alienation, and short-term relationships. Low context cultures also rely less on traditions and use explicit communication to convey meaning.

Hofstede (2009) further examined a six-dimension model to identify the cultural distinctions, namely masculinity-femininity (MAS), individualism-collectivism (IDV), long term orientation (LTO), power distance index (PDI), uncertainty avoidance index (UAI), and indulgence-restraint (IND). Specifically, masculinity versus femininity emphasizes gender roles, while individualism-collectivism focuses on individuals' contribution to groups in society. He maintains, "a collectivist society is characterized by strong groups, extended family members which continue to support each other while an individualist society is characterized by loose ties where members of the society are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family members."

Long-term orientation was classified as a new dimension to reflect Asian perspectives. While short-term orientation consists of respect for tradition, protecting one's face, and fulfilling social obligations, long-term orientation is characterized by thrift and perseverance (Hofstede, 2009). In addition, the power distance index measures the degree to which less powerful members of society accept the unequal distribution of power. The uncertainty avoidance index indicates how comfortable members of a culture feel in unstructured situations and their tolerance for inequality (Frith & Mueller, 2003). Finally, indulgence-restraint examines how much people obey the societal standards.

2.3. Crisis response strategies

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) maintains that communication shapes people's perceptions of a crisis (Coombs, 1999). Organizations restore their image by implementing several response strategies, including denial posture, diminishment posture, rebuilding posture, and bolstering posture. Derived from apologia (a rhetoric of self-defense), the image restoration theory holds that an "organization's credibility depends on its image to a very large extent" (Coombs & Holladay, 2009).

Developed by Benoit (1995), the theory of image restoration discourse examines crisis management approach and response strategies from an organization's point of view. Since a crisis could potentially threaten an organization's image, practitioners need to "address issues of responsibility" and "reduce the act's perceived offensiveness" (Benoit and Czerwinski, 1997). The theory is divided into five typologies, including denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the act, corrective action, and