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Nonverbal cues of deception in audiovisual crisis communication

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ABSTRACT

Crisis communication research has mainly focused on verbal response strategies, such as apologies and denial. However, organizations and individuals in crisis often respond in an audiovisual manner (e.g., press conferences, corporate videos). Audiovisual messages convey not only verbal but also nonverbal cues (e.g., gaze aversion, speech errors). These nonverbal cues can affect the public's perception of deception, and thus, the perception of the speaker's credibility. Through a content analysis of 160 audiovisual crisis responses, this study examines which nonverbal cues of deception are communicated by organizations and individuals in crisis and how situational factors (e.g., crisis type) affect the occurrence of these nonverbal cues. The findings show that several nonverbal cues of deception occur in audiovisual crisis communication and that their occurrence depends on the crisis type, the source, and the crisis communication format.

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, interest in crisis communication within the domain of public relations research has increased. The focus of this research has been on the content of crisis communication, and more specifically on the impact of verbal response strategies (e.g., apologies, denial) on organizational reputation (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010; Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2011). The first studies on crisis communication conducted a large number of case studies to explore which crisis communication strategies individuals and organizations in crisis apply (e.g., Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1997a). Later on, situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) was developed, to examine how situational factors (e.g., crisis responsibility) influence the effectiveness of specific crisis response strategies (e.g., Coombs, 2007).

However, crisis communication often occurs through audiovisual media (Coombs & Holladay, 2009). Individuals (i.e., celebrities and politicians) and organizations in crisis have always responded not only through written media such as press releases and print media but also via audiovisual media such as press conferences and television interviews. Today, interactive media are often preferred sources of information, and the rise of social media has even further increased the importance of audiovisual responses for crisis communication (Coombs, 2015). Through those audiovisual messages, crisis communicators convey not only verbal cues, such as word choice or crisis response strategies, but also visual (e.g., eye contact, hand gestures) and vocal (e.g., voice pitch, speech hesitations) nonverbal cues.

Research in related fields, such as social psychology and political communication, has shown that nonverbal cues can influence the perception of the message and the speaker, both positively and negatively (e.g., Koppensteiner, Stephan, & Jäschke, 2015; Sporer & Schwandt, 2006). Many cues can, for instance, affect the degree to which a communicator appears deceptive, which influences his or her credibility (e.g., Bogaard, Meijer, Vrij, & Merckelbach, 2016; Reinhard & Sporer, 2008). Despite the relevance of such effects in the context of crisis communication, nonverbal cues are relatively unexplored in this domain. Therefore, this study

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aims to explore to what degree the most relevant nonverbal cues of deception occur in individuals' and organizations' audiovisual crisis responses and under which circumstances, by analyzing the audiovisual crisis communication of 160 crisis communication cases.

2. Nonverbal crisis communication

Research in fields such as social psychology and interpersonal communication has shown that people base their opinions of others not only on the content of their message but also on their nonverbal cues (e.g., Sporer & Schwandt, 2006). Nonverbal communication consists of visual cues (e.g., hand movements, gaze aversion) and vocal cues (e.g., voice pitch, speech errors). Crisis communication scholars have recognized that this insight could be important in crisis communication (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Coombs, 2015). However, research on visual and vocal cues in crisis communication is very limited.

First, research on visual cues is limited to the impact of ethnicity, facial features, visual expressions of power, and facial emotional expressions (Arpan, 2002; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Gorn, Jiang, & Johar, 2008; Hong & Len-Riós, 2015; Ten Brinke & Adams, 2015). Findings from this research indicate that stakeholders perceive spokespersons as more credible if the spokesperson has an ethnic background that is similar to the group he or she identifies with (Arpan, 2002). However, a spokesperson's race is a cue that plays a role only when no other information must be processed cognitively (e.g., crisis history; Hong & Len-Riós, 2015). Another study has shown that the face of the spokesperson matters as well. The extent to which a spokesperson has a "baby face" (i.e., large eyes, a small nose, a high forehead, a small chin) affects credibility perceptions (Gorn et al., 2008). Moreover, the degree to which a spokesperson visually expresses power (i.e., eye contact while speaking, expressive body movements, and a relaxed facial expression) plays an important role. During a crisis, spokespersons displaying powerful visual cues are perceived as more competent than spokespersons who use powerless cues. In the aftermath of the crisis, however, powerless nonverbal cues increase the perception of the spokesperson's sincerity (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). Finally, facial emotional expressions also have an impact (Ten Brinke & Adams, 2015). Facial expressions of sadness during corporate apologies have a positive effect, while nonverbal expressions of happiness (e.g., smiling) reduce the effectiveness of corporate apologies.

Second, research on vocal cues (e.g., voice pitch, speech rate, speech errors) in crisis communication is even more limited. One study has addressed this matter, by examining the impact of a spokesperson's voice pitch in crisis communication. The study showed that a spokesperson's voice pitch affects his or her perceived competence. More specifically, a spokesperson speaking with a low voice pitch is perceived as more competent than a spokesperson with a high voice pitch (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014).

Related research domains, such as social psychology, have shown that several other visual and vocal cues have an impact on different aspects of the perception of a speaker, such as attraction, affection, emotion, dominance, and deception (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). On the one hand, nonverbal cues could have a positive impact on the perception of the speaker and could thus be used as a strategic tool, for example to show control over the crisis (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). On the other hand, nonverbal cues could also have a negative impact (e.g., Reinhard & Sporer, 2008). In this context, especially perceptions of deception seem to be important for crisis communication, because they might lower the perceived credibility of a speaker (Reinhard & Sporer, 2008). Existing crisis communication research has shown the importance of credibility in crisis communication (Van Zoonen & Van der Meer, 2015).

Several nonverbal cues can lead to the perception that a speaker is either credible or deceptive. For example, gaze aversion, a high number of movements (e.g., trunk movements, position shifts, hand gestures), a high number of speech disturbances (i.e., speech errors and speech hesitations), a high number of pauses, and a higher voice pitch during speech all increase the perception of deception (Bogaard et al., 2016; Henningsen, Valde, & Davies, 2005; Reinhard & Sporer, 2008; Strömwall & Granhag, 2003; Vrij & Semin, 1996). Because these cues make a speaker appear deceptive, they significantly decrease the communicator's credibility (Reinhard & Sporer, 2008). Moreover, they seem to do so across different cultures, because studies in various Western countries have led to similar findings concerning perceived indicators of deception (Vrij & Semin, 1996). However, it is important to note that according to research these cues of deception are hardly correlated with actual deception, because there are almost no typical characteristics which distinguish liars from truth-tellers (e.g., Reinhard & Sporer, 2008). Nonverbal cues of deception thus affect the perception of a speaker's credibility regardless of whether the speaker is actually trying to deceive the listeners or not.

Because credibility is crucial in crisis communication (e.g., Van Zoonen & Van der Meer, 2015), avoiding nonverbal cues of deception could be important for a spokesperson in times of crisis. Therefore, this study examines the occurrence of the most relevant nonverbal cues of deception in audiovisual crisis communication. This leads to the first research question:

RQ1. To what degree do crisis communicators express nonverbal cues of deception in audiovisual crisis communication?

3. The impact of situational factors on nonverbal cues of deception

Research on verbal crisis communication recommends practitioners adapt their crisis response strategies to the situation (e.g., crisis type, crisis history; e.g., Coombs, 2004, 2007). Nonverbal cues, however, are more difficult to actively control (Ekman & Friesen, 1969), which makes them more likely to be affected by a number of situational factors.

3.1. Crisis type

The first situational factor that could influence the occurrence of nonverbal cues in crisis communication is the crisis type. According to SCCT, crises with high attributions of responsibility (i.e., preventable crises) are associated with greater reputation damage than crises with low attributions of responsibility (i.e., victim crises; Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010). This could lead

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