Full Length Article

Examining the paracrisis online: The effects of message source, response strategies and social vigilantism on public responses

Soojin Roh

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, 215 University Place, Syracuse, NY 13244-2100, USA

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

A 2 × 2 experimental study (N = 168) examined the effects of the message source (CEO vs. individual real estate agent) and response strategies (deny vs. diminish strategies) on public perceptions of controversial online comments and emotional and behavioral responses. This study extends situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) by applying it to paracrisis situations as well as by testing a cognitive model in which breach of expectation by different actors leads to different degrees of judgment of responsibility and counterfactual thinking processes (i.e., the person could/would/should have done something else). A deny crisis response (e.g., scapegoating) was effective in reducing blame and negative affective responses and yielded less negative reputation assessment of the message source. The expectation breach led participants to engage in a counterfactual thinking process, which in turn evoked greater indignation and more negative reputation assessment. Indignation and negative reputation were both significant predictors of online word-of-mouth intention. Social vigilantism, individuals' tendency to propagate their opinions onto others, mediated the relationship between indignation and online discussion intention.

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1. Introduction

Organizational crisis is "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders . . . and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2014, p. 3). As noted in the definition, a crisis is a perception that results from the violation of expectation, and public perception of a crisis is an essential component of crisis management that will impact its outcomes (Penrose, 2000). Expectancy violation theory (Burgoon & Miller, 1985) suggests that individuals have sets of expectations about others' behaviors, and when the expectations are breached people experience an increase in arousal and changes in attitudes and behaviors (Burgoon, Dunbar, & Segrin, 2002; Burgoon & Hale, 1988).

Of particular concern in this study is the public perception of morally wrong or irresponsible behaviors manifested online, such as racial slurs or jokingly made socially inappropriate comments, and their consequences. For example, a vice president of a company received backlash and issued an apology after he posted online a celebratory picture of himself hours after laying off hundreds of employees (Dowdy, 2015). A PR executive representing various companies got fired amid harsh criticism over racist tweets (Dimitrova, Rahmanzadeh, & Lipman, 2013).

These unethical, controversial remarks posted online have been termed a challenge crisis (Lerbinger, 1997) or paracrisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), "a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior" (p. 409). Coombs and Holladay (2012) argued that though a paracrisis is not yet a full-blown crisis, it is a warning sign that could escalate to a crisis status once it gains enough attention from stakeholders. A unique aspect of challenge crises online is that they are inherently public in nature. Anyone with an online presence has access to all publicly available online content. It means that these events are under the constant scrutiny of the public, who in turn can monitor the way it is being handled in real time. The stakeholder perception of treatment or mistreatment of potential reputational threats could evoke emotional reactions to the organization, influence the organization's reputation, and subsequently affect the public's perception of the organization.

The increasing popularity and use of social media have raised concerns for increased public scrutiny and the heightened visibility of potential challenge crises. Such online blunders are common (Dowdy, 2015) and require effective management strategies for crisis prevention and mitigation given their crisis potential (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) offers various ways to respond in the face of crisis (Coombs, 2007), but whether SCCT's suggestions would still be effective in managing paracrises has yet to be explored (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

The current study examines how controversial online behaviors violate the public's expectations about persons and organizations, how this breach of expectations impacts the way the public understands the event, and individuals' emotional reactions and behaviors. In the framework of expectancy violation theory, fairness theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001), and SCCT, this study aims to determine the impact of message source and response strategies on expectation violation, emotional reactions, the way individuals make responsibility judgments and reputation assessments, and their intention to engage in corrective behaviors such as participating in online discussion on the matter.

1.1. Situational crisis communication theory

When faced with unexpected negative situations, individuals engage in an attribution process to find the causes of the event to determine who is responsible (Weiner, 1985). When blame is pointed at an organization, the perception of responsibility can impact the way stakeholders assess the organization. Attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) posits that when the cause of an event is deemed internal and preventable (i.e., the locus of control is internal), the organization is more likely to be considered responsible for the negative and unexpected event.

SCCT predicts that response strategy affects judgment of responsibility; the way the organization handles the situation, for instance, influences the public's causal attribution of responsibility. Each different response strategy yields different degrees of responsibility perception, reputation assessment, and emotion. For example, employing deny crisis response strategies such as scapegoating (i.e., blaming others outside the organization's control) may elicit less sense of responsibility than employing diminish strategies such as excusing (i.e., reducing responsibility by denying the intent to do harm).

In order to address the backlash sparked by controversial comments or behaviors, online figures often employ different response strategies resembling the crisis response strategies suggested in SCCT. For example, they may try to reduce their degree of perceived responsibility and avoid blame by presenting themselves as the victims of malevolence or unfortunate accidents, or they may call the posting a joke that was not meant to be serious. The degree to which the public blames an organization or a person for online blunders may in turn affect reputation judgment as well as emotional reactions, such as anger, as in a full-fledged crisis event. Negatively assessed reputation and emotional reactions associated with such reputational threats could eventually cause behavioral changes, such as spreading negative words online. Given that a paracrisis is a new, distinctive type of crisis threat that calls for more scholarly attention (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), this study attempted to test SCCT's applicability in a new context.

H1a. Participants exposed to Twitter messages using a deny response strategy (e.g., scapegoating) will report less judgment of responsibility than those exposed to Twitter messages using a diminish response strategy (e.g., excusing).

H1b. Participants exposed to Twitter messages using a diminish response strategy (e.g., excusing) will report more negative reputation assessment than those exposed to Twitter messages using a deny response strategy (e.g., scapegoating).

H1c. Participants exposed to Twitter messages using a diminish response strategy (e.g., excusing) will report more negative emotional responses than those exposed to Twitter messages using a deny response strategy (e.g., scapegoating).

1.2. CEO vs. non-corporate actor

Social psychology literature (Lee Hamilton & Sanders, 1999) argues that individuals take three factors into account when making normative judgments: intentionality, the obligations of the actor, and the consequences of the act. First, the more intentional were the actor's actions, the more blameworthy people find the actor to have been. This is consistent with crisis communication literature testing SCCT (Coombs, 2007) and attribution theory (Weiner, 1985). Second, a person with more power (i.e., in a higher position) is expected to have greater moral obligations than those with less power. Third, when the consequences of the act are deemed more severe, people are more likely to blame the actor. Corporate misdeeds can bring much greater damage than those of individual actors, considering the scope and reach of the potential harm that can be done. For example, the misdeeds of corporate actors in higher positions such as CEOs may affect more people than those