



Who says what during crises? A study about the interplay between gender similarity with the spokesperson and crisis response strategy



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relative importance of verbal and visual cues in organizational crisis communication, focusing on the importance of gender similarity between an organizational spokesperson and stakeholders and the moderating role of the crisis response strategy used. The findings indicate that gender similarity is beneficial for organizational reputation because it enhances stakeholders' empathy toward the spokesperson. However, this effect is only found when the spokesperson uses an appropriate crisis response strategy based on the guidelines of situational crisis communication theory. More specifically, when a spokesperson offers a rebuild strategy in the context of a preventable crisis, gender similarity results in more empathy toward the spokesperson and, subsequently, in improved organizational reputation. However, the effect of gender similarity on organizational reputation through empathy toward the spokesperson was not found when a deny strategy was used.

1. Introduction

Organizations have come to increasingly recognize the importance of organizational reputation as a means of achieving business goals and remaining competitive (Wang, Yu, & Chiang, 2016). Accordingly, from a management perspective, organizational reputation has been considered a significant source of competitive advantage as well as a resource that creates value and delivers consistent and superior market performance (Deephouse, 2000). A good reputation also leads to other benefits such as loyal customers, motivated employees, and being more attractive to potential financial investors (Dowling, 2002). During crises, however, organizational reputation is often under intense scrutiny (Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014). Therefore, organizations are inclined to protect and strengthen their reputation when a crisis hits (Coombes, 2007).

Thus far, crisis communication research has stressed the importance of verbal cues in the crisis communication message (i.e., the content and framing), also referred to as the organizational crisis response strategy (e.g., apology, denial), in order to restore the organization's reputation during and after a crisis (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). However, people form their opinions about others not only on the basis of what they say (i.e., verbal content, such as crisis response strategies); nonverbal visual aspects are also important (Sporer & Schwandt, 2006). One visual aspect of relevance for crisis

communication may be the gender of the spokesperson.

Researchers in social psychology (e.g., Aguinis & Henle, 2001; Aguinis, Simonsen, & Pierce, 1998) have illustrated the importance of nonverbal visual cues in the formation of perceptions of the communicator and his or her message. However, these insights might also be useful in a crisis context. Stakeholders seem to be very sensitive to visual cues, especially when the situation is uncertain, as is the case during a crisis (Coleman & Wu, 2006). In addition, especially in the contemporary social media environment, videos and photos are often used to communicate crisis responses (e.g., the statement by Volkswagen's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Martin Winterkorn in a video uploaded to the brand's Facebook page during Dieselgate). Thus, in crisis communication research, it is important to take not only verbal cues into account but also visual cues (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010).

Nonverbal visual cues, such as spokespersons' gestures, eye contact, ethnic similarity, and facial features, have only recently gained research attention (Arpan, 2002; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014b; Gorn, Jiang, & Johar, 2008). For example, Arpan (2002) found that ethnic similarity with a spokesperson is positively associated with the spokesperson's credibility ratings. Furthermore, Gorn et al. (2008) showed that natural associations between having a baby face and being honest underlie inferences about perceived honesty and persuasion. Claeys and Cauberghe (2014b) found that eye contact while speaking, expressive body movements, and a relaxed facial expression increase

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stakeholders' perceptions that the spokesperson is competent. These findings show that a spokesperson's nonverbal visual cues can play an important role in the context of organizational communication, and more specifically crisis communication, by influencing the perceptions of spokespersons and organizations.

Nevertheless, researchers have neglected to test the impact of an obvious and easily accessible visual cue that can be immediately observed about the spokesperson (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990): gender similarity between the sender and the receiver of a crisis message. Research in other contexts has demonstrated the beneficial impact of gender similarity. For example, Smith (1998) found that gender similarity between a buyer and a seller in the sales context resulted in greater relational investment.

Moreover, in addition to the lack of research on gender similarity to the spokesperson in a crisis context, there is a dearth of investigations regarding the interaction between nonverbal visual and verbal cues in crisis communication. This is surprising because in communication, these aspects are mostly combined. Thus, it is important to study these aspects, not separately, but as an integrated whole (Jones & LeBaron, 2002). Although researchers have investigated which verbal response strategies are beneficial for use in certain crisis contexts (e.g., Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014a), they have not yet examined what happens when a response strategy is communicated by a spokesperson to whom stakeholders may relate based on nonverbal cues such as gender.

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to investigate the impact of gender similarity between the crisis spokesperson and stakeholders on organizational reputation in a crisis context. More specifically, we unravel the underlying process that initiates the impact by examining the mediating role of empathy toward the spokesperson. Based on insights of interpersonal forgiveness, we argue that in interpersonal relationships, people are likely to ask for forgiveness for their wrongdoings in order to minimize the victim's motivation to retaliate against the transgressor (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). These insights are also valuable in a crisis context because organizations in crisis aim to minimize negative perceptions among stakeholders in order to protect organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007). In the current paper, we propose the empathy model of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997) as an interesting model to explain the initiation of empathy in a crisis context. According to this model, people forgive others to the extent that they experience empathy for them. Because many issues are not one-sided, empathy allows victims to understand the crisis from the other's perspective, which creates a greater understanding for the organization's behavior (Wade & Worthington, 2005). Furthermore, empathy results in a connection between the victim and the perpetrator, which can attenuate negative feelings resulting from the crisis (Riek & Mania, 2012). Thus, empathy forms a crucial facilitative condition for overcoming stakeholders' destructive responses. Empathy is therefore a crucial precursor of forgiveness (Riek & Mania, 2012).

According to McCullough et al. (1997), relational closeness is a precursor of the initiation of empathy. Therefore, the current study investigates whether gender similarity between stakeholders and the spokesperson initiates relational closeness and, thus, enhances empathy toward the spokesperson. In addition, according to Seeger's (2006) best practices in crisis communication, demonstrating empathic concern is important in crisis situations. However, the author stated that crisis communication spokespersons might be reluctant to frame their statements with empathic concern because of the fear of signaling a lack of professionalism (Seeger, 2006). Therefore, the present study sought to investigate whether gender similarity functions to induce empathy toward the spokesperson and, thus, whether it has a beneficial effect on organizational reputation.

In particular, we argue that gender similarity will only affect organizational reputation when apologies are offered (i.e., rebuild strategy). According to the empathy model of forgiveness, a crucial precursor of empathy is offering apologies (McCullough et al., 1997).

Therefore, we examine the moderating influence of a verbal cue, the crisis response strategy (i.e., rebuild or deny), on the impact of gender similarity on empathy toward the spokesperson. According to situational crisis communication theory (SCCT; Coombs, 2007), organizations in crisis have to offer an apology when a crisis occurs for which the organization is held responsible. We argue that the beneficial impact of gender similarity on empathy toward the spokesperson depends on whether apologies are offered in the crisis response strategy. Before discussing the results of the empirical study, we explain the theoretical framework and develop the hypothesis. We conclude with a discussion of the results and practical implications of the study.

1.1. Similarity attraction based on gender similarity

Similarity is “the extent to which members of a(n) (incidental) relationship are similar in characteristics” (Smith, 1998, p. 6). This nonverbal visual aspect can be based on external observable characteristics (Lichtenthal & Tellefsen, 2001). Studies on the impact of observable bases of similarity examine visual aspects such as ethnic background, gender, and age (e.g., Arpan, 2002; Dwyer, Richard, & Shepherd, 1998; Goldberg, 2003). The common aspect of these characteristics is that they can be observed with a quick visual inspection during a short interaction with the person (Crosby et al., 1990). According to Perloff (1993), similarity is a relevant nonverbal cue of the spokesperson.

People feel attracted to others who look similar to themselves because this similarity reinforces their self-esteem and helps them maintain a stable sense of congruence in their self-identity (Byrne, 1971; Tajfel, 1972). This assumption is based on social identity theory, which has been used in several contexts to show how similarity to others becomes a meaningful construct, for example, to identify with organizations (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). The basic assumption of this theory is that individuals demonstrate a tendency to classify themselves in several social categories in order to maintain a positive self-identity. Several studies have shown that when someone includes himself or herself in a certain category, this individual evaluates similar in-group members positively (for a review, see Tajfel, 1982).

Demographic characteristics, such as gender, form a category that an individual might consider relevant in determining his or her self-identity. Various researchers have argued that these surface-level traits form useful cues for categorizing oneself and others as these traits are visible and easily available. This is particularly so when information about the deep-level traits (e.g., attitudes, perceptions, and values) of others is unknown (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Kulik & Ambrose, 1992; Pelled, 1997). Thus, when stakeholders are not familiar with the organizational spokesperson, his or her demographic features, such as gender similarity, will likely play an important role in the formation of individuals' perceptions of the spokesperson and the organization in crisis. A condition of this effect is that stakeholders are able to see the spokesperson (e.g., in the news or an online video). By positively evaluating people who are demographically similar, a person is able to maintain his or her own positive self-identity (Goldberg, 2003).

Tajfel (1982) argues that this process underlies the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), which suggests that the more people perceive another person as similar to themselves, the greater the likelihood that the other person will be liked. According to this paradigm, individuals who share demographic dimensions have more common life experiences and beliefs. Thus, these individuals find social interactions with each other to be less stressful and more positively reinforcing (Vecchio & Bullis, 2001). The paradigm posits that the generation of affect that results from demographic similarity in a relationship results from a sense of comfort and supportive behavior toward each other (Tsui, Xin, & Egan, 1995).

Arpan (2002) was one of the first researchers to investigate similarity between stakeholders and a crisis spokesperson. Her study

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