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How a paracrisis situation is instigated by an online firestorm and visual mockery: Testing a paracrisis development model



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ABSTRACT

On the framework of cognitive appraisal theory, the current research proposes a paracrisis development model that illustrates how the cognitive appraisal of social norms and visual mockery in the social media evokes negative affect and subsequent coping behaviors in terms of boycotts. To test the model, an online experiment was conducted simulating a real-world paracrisis situation in which a user's Facebook commentary regarding a company's billboard ad sparked a social media outcry. Results of the study showed that both social proof and visual mockery played a role in the negative climate of opinion and perception of a crisis. Social proof and visual mockery also aroused negative affect. Notably, visual mockery affected negative affect of self rather than others, while social proof had a greater impact on negative affect of others than self. The elicited negative affect not only increased boycott intentions but it also mediated the effect of visual mockery on boycott intentions. In conclusion, the paracrisis development model showed empirical evidence for the role of social media triggered events in forming a crisis perception and potentially leading to boycotts in the interplay of social proof and visual mockery.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, organizations have learned of several high-profile cases in which the sudden discharge of a visible number of online complaints, or an online firestorm (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2013), engendered a controversy and even prompted calls for a boycott of the organization. Coombs and Holladay (2012) called this phenomenon a paracrisis, which is defined as “a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior” (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 409). The potential harm from such a paracrisis situation should not be underestimated since the situation can affect the organization's stakeholder relations and potentially its reputation.

The current research aims to provide theoretical background for the phenomena in which triggered events on social media stirred an online controversy and sparked an outcry among visibly vociferous social media users. In pursuing the research goal, it examines the specific conditions that aggravate a paracrisis situation and the consequences of the conditions. Two major conditions that can form a paracrisis are the perception of a bandwagon, “the tendency

of social constituents to emulate the consensus among a critical mass of peers as their focal choice” (Fu & Sim, 2011, p. 2383), and the existence of visual mockery of the situation. The visual mockery refers to an absurd misrepresentation or imitation of a particular visual image to make it appear stupid or impudently unsuitable (Billig, 2005).

The consequences of such conditions can include escalated perceptions of a crisis and calls for a boycott. On the basis of cognitive appraisal theory, this study is the first empirical investigation to explain the underlying mechanism that influences social media users' perceptions of a crisis and their behavioral intentions in the observation of others' reactions to an organization's commercial message. To test the theoretical model of a paracrisis development (see Fig. 1), an online experiment was conducted simulating a real-world paracrisis situation in which a user's Facebook commentary regarding a company's billboard ad sparked a social media outcry (Fitzsimmons, 2013). The proposed model in Fig. 1 explains how individuals assess the negative climate of opinion on social media and develop the perception of a crisis based on a heuristic cue of social norms and visual mockery, which can result in emotional responses to the situation followed by their coping behavior to manage the emotions arousal.

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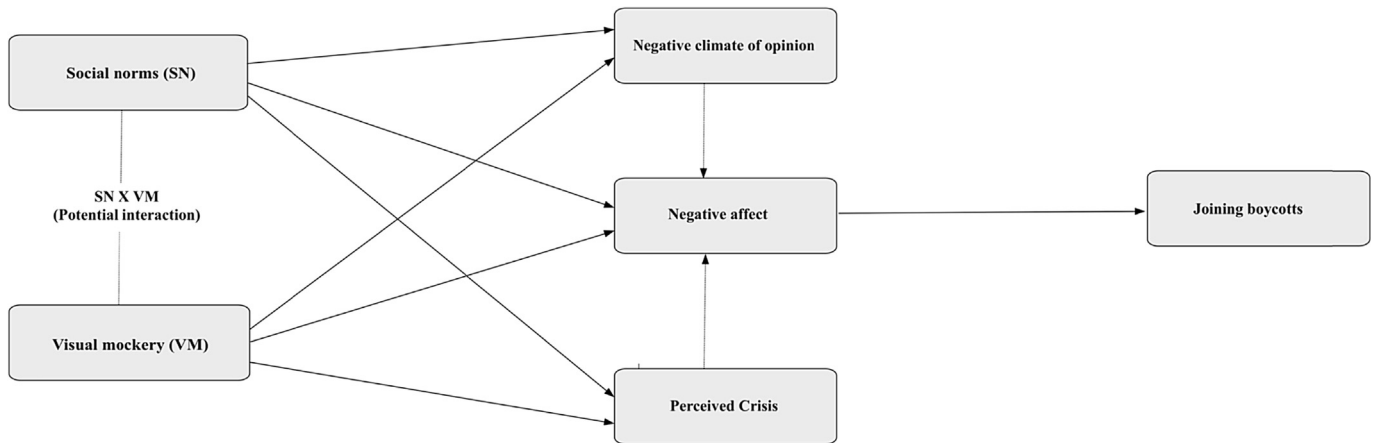


Fig. 1. A paracrisis development model: A groundswell of online opposition and the instigation of a paracrisis situation.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social proof principle and negative climate of opinion on social media

The principle of social proof explains the phenomenon in which individuals look for others' way of doing when they determine an appropriate behavior in a given situation (Cialdini, 2009; Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999). This principle casts a new light on online social influence research that examines an important question regarding “how do we know who to believe in an environment where *anyone* can say *anything* about *anything* to *everyone*?” (Van Der Heide & Lim, 2015, p. 2). The principle of social proof has explained that individuals in social media are greatly affected by perceived social norms, the manifest representation of the salient attitudes and behaviors among many other friends online. Thus, users of social media are particularly active in seeking the climate of opinion, referred to as “a quasi-statistical sense” (Noelle-Neumann, 1977, p. 145), in decision making, which makes those users susceptible to online social influence (Hsueh, Yogeewaran, & Malinen, 2015; Lee & Jang, 2010). Consequently, individuals tend to follow what they perceive as majority actions on the assumption that actions taken by many others are based on substantial, more accurate, and valid information, thus having a superior judgmental merit (Zerback, Koch, & Krämer, 2015).

In the social media environment, users' perceptions of the climate of opinion can be easily affected by several consensus heuristics such as trend words, popular hashtags, the number of retweets, the number of favorites and so on. A body of research (Kim & Sundar, 2014; Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010; Xu, 2013) demonstrated that the perceived majority and bandwagon perception could work as a consensus heuristic and affects individuals' credibility judgment. As a result, individuals may perceive reality erroneously based on bandwagon perceptions formed by salient cues.

Social media has greatly influenced the way individuals observe others' opinions and feelings about a certain issue by continuously improving such consensus heuristics (e.g., addition of dislikes button on Facebook). In particular, when individuals on social media are exposed to a new piece of an emotionally contentious argument for which they do not have sufficient background information, they are prone to be more affected by such a contentious opinion if it comes from a perceived majority at the time of information processing.

This phenomenon of making a potentially erroneous perception

can often occur when individuals are selectively exposed to the expressions of like-minded people and use their opinions as a guiding reference in estimating the general public opinion (Marks & Miller, 1987). A recent study (Messing & Westwood, 2012) suggests that social media users can be affected by perceived opinions from like-minded people and such tendencies may be stronger when they perceive more social endorsements as a form of more comments and favorites.

Being cognizant of the role of consensus heuristics in forming the majority opinion on social media, a tech-savvy minority often attempts to influence the climate of opinion by the collective use of consensus heuristic cues of social media platforms. As a result, the perceived majority on social media can be distorted if a numerical minority engages in the amplification of the voice of the minority group (Liao, Fu, & Strohmaier, 2016; McCauley, 2015).

The erroneous perception of the majority opinion as a function of the overestimation of minority opinion shows the contrary nature of social media in forming the climate of opinion. Previous research has demonstrated such erroneous perceptions of a certain climate of opinion on social media due to the overestimation of minority opinion. Dvir-Gvirzman (2015) demonstrated that the size of a minority opinion is often overestimated by members of a public. This results in the phenomenon in which the “inflated minority” opinion carries more weight in the political process. When an individual pays exclusive attention to a single position, what they have perceived may have their augmented perceived consensus for the single position (Marks & Miller, 1987), similar to the Motrin Mom's case in which Johnson & Johnson had to pull down its ad campaign amid flood of outcry and call for a boycott from a vocal minority of Twitter users (Learnmonth & Parekh, 2008).

On the basis of social proof theory, this study posits the following hypothesis.

H1a. There will be a main effect of social proof on the estimates of unfavorable climate of opinion about the ad, controlling for their pre-attitude toward the ad, such that participants in the high social proof condition will have greater estimates of unfavorable social media opinion about the ad than those in the low condition.

2.2. The role of visual mockery on social media in forming negative climate of opinion

Researchers have addressed that the visual mockery or parody as a form of user-generated content can have a significant effect on the awareness and perceptions of a situation (Seltzer, Jean, Kramer-

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