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An exploration of the effects of victim visuals on perceptions and reactions to crisis events

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ABSTRACT

How news media and organizations use visual images in reports of crisis events remains relatively unexplored in spite of possible effects on perceptions of crisis responsibility and reputation. This study assessed the impact of visual condition (no visual, neutral visual, and victim visual) in two product harm crisis scenarios. Results revealed minimal effects for victim visuals. Implications for future research on visual elements and crisis communication are presented.

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1. Introduction

The social scientific approach to crisis communication utilizes experiments to test relationships between variables believed to be important to the crisis communication process. By concentrating on perceptions of the situation, the social scientific approach develops an audience-centered focus. The social scientific approach is dominated by Contingency Theory (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2007) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In SCCT, for instance, a critical component of the crisis situation is how people perceive crisis responsibility—the degree to which people feel the organization is responsible for the crisis (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 1996). We see a similar concern for audience perceptions in Contingency Theory research (Jin & Cameron, 2007). How people perceive crisis responsibility and other relevant crisis factors will limit which crisis response strategies can be used effectively. The social scientific crisis communication research is mapping the factors that shape audience perceptions. In turn, crisis managers can use this information to anticipate how stakeholders are likely to react and plan their crisis response accordingly.

Most stakeholders experience a crisis as a mediated event (Deephouse, 2000). A small percentage of people are actual victims of a crisis. Stakeholders learn about the crisis from stories appearing in the traditional and online media, including news stories and blogs. Crisis news stories often include visual elements such as a photograph or diagram. It is possible that these visual cues *could* have an important effect on people how perceive the crisis, thus affecting the crisis response efforts of the organization. Unfortunately, we know little about how visuals of a crisis affect perceptions of a crisis. Understanding how visuals influence crisis perceptions would enhance our understanding of the factors that shape crisis situations and have implications for crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2009).

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2. Crisis perceptions and crisis communication

A crisis can be defined as “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, 2007b, pp. 2–3). A key component of this definition is the perceptual nature of a crisis. We could argue that a crisis does not exist if stakeholders do not perceive it. This also means a crisis does exist if stakeholders believe there is one. As such the definition honors the co-creation aspect of public relations (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Meaning is socially constructed and that would hold true for crises as well.

Crisis communication includes efforts to manage stakeholder reactions to the crisis, organization in crisis, and crisis response (Coombs, 2007a, 2009). Crisis communication research has concentrated on reputation repair as the area of managing stakeholder reactions (Coombs, 2009). Common crisis responses used for reputation repair include: denial, claim no responsibility for the crisis; scapegoat, blame others for the crisis; excuse, minimize responsibility for the crisis by emphasize lack of control over events or lack of intention to do harm; justification, emphasize minimal damage from the crisis; compensation, provide money and/or gifts to victims; apology, publicly accept responsibility for the crisis and ask for forgiveness; reminder, tell people about past good works; ingratiation, thank stakeholders for helping; and victimage, explain that the organization is a victim of the crisis (Coombs, 2007b).

Managing stakeholder reactions refers to attempts at influencing, not controlling or manipulating the process. To be effective, stakeholder reaction management demands an understanding of those stakeholder reactions. It is naive for crisis managers to expect that they can create any reaction they desire to the crisis. Instead, the stakeholder reactions serve as a constraint within which crisis managers must operate. For instance, when stakeholders are likely to hold strong perceptions of organizational responsibility for the crisis, the use of a denial or justification crisis response is unlikely to be effective. Instead, crisis managers should be using compensation and/or apology (Coombs, 1995, 2007c).

By understanding how various elements in the crisis situation might affect people, we can anticipate how the audience (stakeholders) will react to a crisis. If we can anticipate audience perceptions, we can select a crisis response that should mesh most effectively with those perceptions. The better we understand the audience perception factors, the more effective crisis managers will be at anticipating stakeholder reactions and selecting a crisis response to “fit” with those reactions.

3. News story visuals as an audience perception factor

A relatively unexplored aspect of audience perceptions is the visuals used with news stories. Given that news stories are an important source of information for stakeholders (Deephouse, 2000), factors related to news stories should be investigated as potential audience perception factors. How do they influence perceptions of the crisis situation?

Research has demonstrated the ability of images in news stories to shape readers’ interpretations of the story (Gibson & Zillman, 2000; Zillman, Gibson, & Sargent, 1999). The most relevant finding for crisis communication is that photographs intensified risk perceptions. The study examined risk perceptions related to Appalachian tick disease. The experiment kept the story content constant but altered the images (tick, tick plus victim, and no image). When people viewed photographs that contained images related to the risk (the tick) or images of the risk and victim (tick and victim), they perceived the risk as significantly greater than when there was no image (Gibson & Zillman, 2000). In another study, an image of a victim from an amusement park ride created greater concern over ride safety and less confidence in ride safety than when there was no image or one of people enjoying the ride (Zillman et al., 1999). Again, the content of the stories remained constant as only the image changed.

By supplying certain types of information, organizational spokespersons may attempt to influence how journalists frame crisis reports in the media. However, spokespersons have little control over what visual images the media include when they have access to victims or crisis sites. In light of news values emphasizing the importance of dramatic visuals to intensify audience interest in news stories, media outlets are likely to prefer pictures of crises that depict human suffering. It is important to explore how these visuals shape audience perceptions.

The inclusion of images with victims has the potential to intensify attributions of crisis responsibility. The inclusion of the victims of crises could create a greater sense of danger that could lead to strong perceptions of organizational responsibility for the crisis.

RQ1: Will perceptions of crisis responsibility be stronger in a victim visual condition than in a neutral visual and no visual condition?

It is important to consider crisis responsibility because it impacts a number of other important outcome variables in the crisis situation. Crisis responsibility is one of the factors that affect key organizational outcomes such as perceptions of organizational reputation and intentions to engage in negative word-of-mouth communication (Coombs, 2007c; Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Affect is another concern related to crises. Researchers have been examining the emotions generated by crises and the effects of those emotions on stakeholder behavioral intentions (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Jin & Cameron, 2007; Jin & Pang, 2010; Jin et al., 2007; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2004, 2010). Anger, along with anxiety, has received the most attention in the crisis communication research (e.g., Jin, 2009; Jin & Pang, 2010). Because anger motivates people to engage in negative word-of-mouth so it is an important consequence of a crisis as well (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). It follows that

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