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What makes crisis response strategies work? The impact of crisis involvement and message framing[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the moderating impact of crisis involvement and message framing on the effect of crisis response strategies on post-crisis attitude toward an organization. In the experiment, 274 respondents participate in a 2 (crisis response strategy: match vs. mismatch) × 2 (crisis involvement: low vs. high) × 2 (message framing: emotional vs. rational) between-subjects factorial design. The results show that in the case of high crisis involvement or in the case of rational framing of crisis communication, crisis response strategies that match the crisis type increase the post-crisis attitude toward the organization. In the case of low crisis involvement or in the case of emotional framing of crisis communication, the impact of a matched or mismatched crisis response strategy on the post-crisis attitude toward the organization does not differ. In addition, the study suggests that crisis involvement has a moderating impact on the efficacy of message framing in terms of post-crisis attitude toward the organization, which depends on whether the crisis response strategy matches the crisis type or not.

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1. Introduction

Organizations in crisis face severe reputational damage (Coombs, 2007). As a response to these crises, organizations best communicate in the most appropriate way to minimize the damage and to restore their organizational reputation (Coombs, 2004). Early research in crisis communication focuses on case studies in order to develop typologies of the crisis response strategies practitioners use (e.g., Benoit, 1995). More recently however, scholars focus on experimental research in order to study under which conditions these crisis response strategies are most effective in restoring an organizational reputation (Coombs, 2007). Previous experimental research on crisis communication focuses on the impact of situational variables, such as the type of crisis and the severity of the crisis, on the effectiveness of crisis response strategies (e.g., denial and apology) in restoring an organizational reputation (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 1996). As a result of this research the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) now distinguishes three clusters of crisis types differing in the amount of crisis responsibility that stakeholders attribute to the organization, and three clusters of crisis response strategies differing in the amount of responsibility that the organization takes for the crisis by means of crisis communication (Coombs, 2007). In sum, the SCCT provides guidelines for matching crisis response strategies to crisis types by taking the level of organizational crisis responsibility into account, in order to restore the crisis damage.

However, previous studies contradict each other concerning the efficacy of these SCCT guidelines for restoring organizational reputations in crisis. While some studies find that a matched crisis response strategy results in a better post-crisis reputation than a mismatched crisis response strategy (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 1996), others do not (e.g., Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010). This study adds value by investigating two factors that may moderate the efficacy of matching crisis response strategies to crisis types in restoring organizational reputations.

The first moderator under investigation is the consumers' crisis involvement. Recent studies in crisis communication stress the importance of involvement during crises (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Choi & Lin, 2009a; Coombs & Holladay, 2005). The results of a case study in the context of crisis communication suggest that individuals with high crisis involvement scrutinize crisis information more in depth than those who are low in involvement (Choi & Lin,

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2009a). This finding is in line with consumer research literature according to which individuals' involvement with products/issues influences the depth in which they process information (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). As a consequence, the importance of the content of messages differs for consumers' with low versus high involvement. The current study experimentally investigates this proposition for crisis communication, in order to show that organizations should take consumers' involvement with a certain crisis into account when determining their crisis communication strategy (Coombs & Holladay, 2005).

The second moderator under investigation is the message framing. Marketing research shows that the presentation of information (i.e., emotional versus rational framing) influences individuals' willingness to thoroughly evaluate the content of advertising messages (McKay-Nesbitt, Manchanda, Smith, & Huhmann, 2011). This study investigates if the framing of crisis communication has an impact on the way consumers evaluate the organizational communication and, more specifically, if framing has an impact on the importance of using a crisis response strategy that matches the crisis type. Prior studies in a marketing and advertising context focus extensively on the persuasive impact of emotions in communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Geuens, De Pelsmacker, & Faseur, 2011). The field of crisis communication however, focuses on the emotions consumers feel during crises (Choi & Lin, 2009b; Jin, 2009; Jin & Hong, 2010), but not on the possible effects of emotional framing of the message. The current study demonstrates the importance of message framing as a crisis communication strategy in addition to the content (Coombs, 2007) and the potential moderating impact of message framing on the effectiveness of the guidelines of the SCCT for applying crisis response strategies.

This study contributes to the research field of crisis communication in four ways. First, the study fulfills the need for more experimental research on crisis communication (Coombs, 2007; Rowland & Jerome, 2004). Second, the findings establish under which conditions taking the SCCT guidelines into account is crucial or less crucial for communication managers. Hereby, this study also adds to the current academic knowledge about the SCCT, which is one of the most important theories in crisis communication (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009). Third, experimentally testing the impact of crisis involvement in consumers' organizational evaluations allows the formulation of clear guidelines to crisis communication managers. When organizations are able to establish if a crisis evokes a high or low level of involvement with certain stakeholder groups, they can use the results of this study to tailor their crisis communication. Finally, this study establishes the impact of emotional versus rational message framing in crisis communication. Investigating the impact of message framing is beneficial to the research field because the findings change the focus from consumers' felt emotions during crises to the strategic use of emotions by organizations in crisis communication. In addition, the study shows the relative importance of content versus framing in crisis communication.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses development

2.1. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Coombs's (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) aims to provide crisis managers with guidelines to match crisis response strategies to different crisis types. According to the SCCT, the amount of responsibility individuals attribute to the organization in crisis determines the reputational threat a crisis causes (Coombs, 2004, 2007). The SCCT includes three clusters of crisis types based on individuals' attributions of responsibility to the organization in crisis (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The victim cluster entails crises with weak attributions of organizational responsibility (e.g., product tampering). The accidental cluster involves crises with a certain, but low level of responsibility attribution to the organization (e.g., technical-error product harm). The preventable cluster incorporates crises with high perceptions of crisis responsibility (e.g., organizational misdeed with injuries). According to the SCCT, the more responsibility that consumers accredit to the organization with respect to the crisis, the more the organizational reputation suffers (Coombs, 1998).

The SCCT matches these crisis types, differing in organizational responsibility, with three clusters of crisis response strategies, differing in the amount of responsibility that the organization takes for the crisis by means of communication (Coombs, 2007). When using deny strategies, the organization rejects all responsibility for the crisis. Diminish strategies minimize the organizational responsibility or the crisis damage. With rebuild strategies organizations admit full responsibility. Crisis managers should select crisis response strategies that match the amount of potential reputational damage that a certain crisis inflicts (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). As such, the SCCT advises organizations to use deny strategies in the case of a victim crisis, diminish strategies in the case of an accidental crisis and rebuild strategies in the case of a preventable crisis (Coombs, 2007).

2.2. The moderating impact of crisis involvement on the effect of crisis response strategies on post-crisis attitude toward the organization

Past experimental research on the role of consumer involvement during crises focuses on the importance of involvement with the organization in crisis or with the organization's products, and shows that high involvement with an organization or with the organization's products leads to lower levels of perceived severity of the crisis (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). More recently, crisis communication researchers additionally stress the importance of consumers' involvement with the crisis (Choi & Lin, 2009a; Coombs & Holladay, 2005). These authors introduce crisis involvement as a potential moderating variable of the effectiveness of the guidelines of the SCCT for matching crisis response strategies to crisis types in minimizing crisis damage. Choi and Lin (2009a) investigate how consumers with high crisis involvement (i.e., parents) report about the 2007 Mattel product recalls on online platforms compared to how newspapers report about the crisis in their articles. Hereby, the study compares several dimensions of organizational reputation and attributions of responsibility manifested by both parents and newspapers. The results show that both parties differ strongly in their perceptions about the crisis. A difference which the authors explain by the fact that consumers with high crisis involvement process crisis messages more actively. Choi and Lin's (2009a) study does not however, compare the crisis evaluation of consumers with high involvement to consumers with low involvement. The assumptions they make about the impact of crisis involvement on the degree to which consumers process crisis information stems from consumer behavior research.

Different features of communication are more or less effective in influencing consumers' attitudes depending on their level of involvement (Petty et al., 1983). Individuals with high involvement devote a higher amount of attention to the content of a message than individuals with low involvement (MacInnis, Rao, & Weiss, 2002). Issue involvement increases a person's motivation to engage in a thorough consideration of issue-relevant information that an organization presents, in order to form an attitude about a product (Petty et al., 1983).

The results of these previous studies in the marketing domain allow making predictions of the effect of involvement on the effectiveness of the guidelines of the SCCT to match crisis response strategies to crisis types. This study predicts that the content of a crisis response and more specifically the match between the crisis response and the crisis type have a positive impact on a consumer's attitude toward the organization for individuals with high involvement, but not for individuals with low involvement. Based on Petty et al. (1983) this study expects that if organizations offer consumers with

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