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Does severity matter?: An investigation of crisis severity from defensive attribution theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

Although the concept of crisis severity has existed in the crisis communication literature for two decades, it has not been theoretically tested and explained. Based on Defensive Attribution Theory (DAT), this study intends to specify the relationship between crisis severity and crisis responsibility as well as organizational reputation within the SCCT model. Through a 2 (crisis severity) \times 3 (crisis type) between-subject factorial experiment ($n = 274$), the study revealed that higher crisis severity causes worse reputation regardless of crisis type. For accidental crisis, higher crisis severity leads to higher intentionality, one dimension of crisis responsibility. The findings indicate that crisis severity still has value in SCCT and deserves further investigation.

1. Introduction

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT hereafter) has become a dominant theory in crisis communication research. Since its introduction, researchers have focused on testing the SCCT model to find which crisis response strategies best protect an organization's reputation. Key variables and tenets have been widely tested such as crisis type (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2007), crisis responsibility (Brown & Ki, 2013), crisis history (Coombs, 2004), prior reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Kiambi & Shafer, 2016; Sohn & Lariscy, 2015; Turk, Jin, Stewart, Kim, & Hipple, 2012), and the relationship between crisis responsibility and post-crisis organizational reputation (Coombs, 1998, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Ma and Zhan (2016) evaluated existing studies about SCCT and solidified key variables and relationships such as the negative relationship between crisis responsibility and organizational reputation. However, one variable, crisis severity, which was initially explained in SCCT and repeatedly appeared in crisis communication literature generates inconsistent findings.

Although Coombs (1995) proposed that crisis severity is an important factor affecting crisis responsibility attribution and organizational reputation, most studies have only tested this variable as a supplementary component of a broader topic and have not theoretically explained why crisis severity influences or does not influence other variables (Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010; Hong & Len-Riós, 2015). In addition, studies of the relationship between crisis severity and crisis responsibility or reputation have generated inconsistent findings (i.e., Coombs, 1998; Laufer, Gillespie, McBride, & Gonzalez, 2005; Lee, 2004).

Defensive attribution theory (DAT) explains how the severity of an outcome influences the responsibility attribution process when something negative occurs (Walster, 1966). It argues that people generally attribute more responsibility to a perpetrator as the severity of the outcome increases. DAT is widely applied to criminal justice topics such as drunk driving and rape (Baldwin & Kleinke, 1994; Burt & DeMello, 2003; Giacomassi & Dull, 1986; Stewart, 2005; Taylor & Kleinke, 1992). Marketing scholars realized the

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importance of the theory and employed DAT to investigate how product failure severity influences consumers' evaluation of blame and brand image (Laufer & Gillespie, 2004; Laufer et al., 2005; Song, Sheinin, & Yoon, 2016). However, scholars have not tested its applicability to the crisis communication domain. Although marketing literature sheds light on its application to crisis research, it focuses more on crises related to products and services. Crisis communication research discusses multiple crisis types such as natural disaster and workplace violence, which are unnecessarily related to products and services. Therefore, more evidence would be necessary to apply findings from marketing to communication context.

This study aims to continue the discussion of crisis severity within the SCCT model. Based on DAT, this study attempts to investigate how crisis severity influences people's responsibility attribution and evaluation of reputation during a crisis. Specifically, the study endeavors to reveal if crisis severity has the same effect on different dimensions of crisis responsibility (intentionality, accountability, and locality) and organizational reputation across different crisis types.

2. Literature review

2.1. SCCT and attribution theory

SCCT has become a dominant and frequently examined framework in crisis communication research (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). As an audience-oriented theory which explains how people perceive a crisis and react to an organization's crisis responses (Coombs, 2010), SCCT posits that people want to know who the responsible party is during a crisis. The reputation of an organization decreases when the organization is believed to be more responsible (Coombs, 2007). Therefore, crisis responsibility becomes the core in the SCCT model. SCCT is deeply rooted in Attribution Theory, which primarily discusses how people make sense of an event, especially a negative event (Weiner, 1985).

The key component of Attribution Theory is whether the responsibility is internal or external because this will change how people see an event. Coombs (1995) borrowed the idea of responsibility from Attribution Theory to define crisis responsibility. It is operationalized as "the degree to which stakeholders blame the organization for the crisis event" (Coombs, 1998, p. 180). Coombs and Holladay (1996) further pointed out three causal dimensions of attribution that influence the level of crisis responsibility: stability, external control, and locus/personal control. Stability refers to how frequently an event happens. External control assesses if an event is caused by an internal factor or external factor. Locus/personal control reflects the intentionality of an act (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; McAuley, Duncan, & Russell, 1992; Russell, 1982).

The recent scale development study partially confirmed this categorization of crisis responsibility (Brown & Ki, 2013). Two of the dimensions in the new scale come from the original categorization: intentionality and locality. The concept of locality in the new scale is similar to external control, while intentionality in the new scale has the same meaning as locus/personal control. The new scale added another dimension of "accountability," which refers to the possibility that an organization could have avoided a crisis. The new scale identified three dimensions in crisis responsibility that are correlated with each other.

2.2. Defensive attribution theory (DAT)

DAT was first proposed by Walster (1966) to explain the attribution of responsibility during a negative event considering the severity of an incident. Walster (1966) argued that people have a tendency to look for a responsible party for an accident. If observers find that the victim of an accident is to blame, they tend to differentiate themselves from the victim to avoid their suffering. If observers find it is other people who caused the incident, defensive attribution mechanisms will be triggered and they will assure themselves by attributing responsibility to the perpetrator (Walster, 1966). Further, people assign more responsibility to the perpetrator when the severity of an accident increases because more severe events require more explanation. People perceive a severe accident to be more controllable if they assign more responsibility to the perpetrator (Walster, 1966).

Although Walster's first study supported this argument, his replication study failed to obtain similar results (Walster, 1967). Other researchers also reported inconsistent findings (i.e., Shaver, 1970; Shaw & McMartin, 1977). Shaver (1970) modified the theory by introducing two personal characteristics: situational relevance and personal relevance. Situational relevance refers to perceived similarity in the physical circumstances of the stimulus person and the observer. Personal relevance means perceived correspondence of personal characteristics. Shaver (1970) argued that defensive attribution is not triggered unless observers feel the situation is highly relevant or they are similar to the victim or the perpetrator. People tend to attribute more responsibility to a perpetrator if they believe the same situation could occur to them in the future or if they are similar to the victims of the incident as the outcome becomes more severe. By contrast, people express the opposite tendency if they are more similar to the perpetrator or believe the event is irrelevant to themselves (Shaver, 1970).

Based on the idea of situational and personal similarity, Shaw and McMartin (1977) further explicated the relationship among situational relevance, personal relevance, and accident severity. They argued that situational relevance is the cornerstone of the defensive attribution mechanism. People only form the self-protective attribution of responsibility when they feel the crisis situation is relevant to them. Once the premise is structured, personal relevance will determine two types of attribution: harm avoidance (low personal relevance to the perpetrator) and blame avoidance (high personal relevance to the perpetrator). In harm avoidance, the relationship between severity and responsibility is positive because observers hope to avoid similar harm. In blame avoidance, the relationship between severity and responsibility is negative because observers hope to avoid being blamed when a similar incident happens (Shaw & McMartin, 1977). Two meta-analyses confirmed the significant yet weak correlation between severity of the incident and responsibility attribution (Burger, 1981; Robbennolt, 2000). DAT is a theory to explain how observers attribute

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