



Confessions of an angry employee: The dark side of de-identified “confessions” on Facebook



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ABSTRACT

Employees' communication behaviors are an important area of research for public relations. In this study, employees' communication behaviors in a de-identified context have been studied from the perspective of online flaming by analyzing “confessions” posted on a Facebook confessions page. The theoretical perspectives of the uses and gratification theory and employee communication behavior in public relations literature were adopted in this study. Positive and negative “confessions” were analyzed to identify employees' motivations in posting them. While negative posts expressing anger and frustration at policies, personnel, and the management in general dominated the page, positive posts indicated expressions of pride, nostalgia, and gratitude for social support from co-workers. Petitions from employees to change behaviors and policies were also found, and were examined from the perspective of paracrisis.

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1. Introduction

A confessions page is a page on Facebook created for the members of a specific organization, where members have the option of “confessing” their secrets or any information that they would like to share with others affiliated to the organization (Bounds, 2013). What makes these pages interesting is that these posts are de-identified, as users write out their messages on a different portal, such as GoogleDocs, without including any identifiable information. These messages are then posted on to the confessions page by the administrator, who too is de-identified. The potential effect of such pages is compounded by the fact that the pages are open to all Facebook users. The trend of confessions pages on Facebook started with college students, and is now spreading to high school students (Bounds, 2013), who all use these pages to “confess” about a variety of issues, including their secret crushes, their past relationships, their schools, the work they need to put in at school, and even the food in their dining courts. These posts are often characterized by explicit content and language, profanity and hostile intentions. The next logical step may be for employees of an organization to start a confessions page.

The confessions page of an organization forms the subject of this study. The confessions page of a large multi-national organization was identified, and its contents analyzed to identify themes and motivations behind the confessions, especially when such “confessions” are hostile toward the organization. Using the uses and gratification theory (UGT) and concepts of employee communication behaviors, the nature of employees' negative communication behavior on a Facebook confessions page are explored and discussed. On a broader level, the idea of employees' posts on such pages is situated in the concept

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of paracrises (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). The overarching goal of this study is to examine how employees use confessions pages, and the implications of such pages for public relations practice.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Integration of uses and gratification theory and employee communication behavior*

Being an important part of an organization's day-to-day functioning, employees are privy to sensitive information about the organization, and are in direct contact with the organization's key stakeholders such as consumers, suppliers, etc. Employees have also been shown to be important sources for information for stakeholders. Center, Jackson, and Smith (2003) discussed how external publics view the messages received from employees to be more influential than PR messages and press releases. Given their strategic importance, it is unsurprising that much public relations research has been devoted to understanding the antecedents and consequences of employees' communication behaviors (e.g., Kim & Rhee, 2011).

Blumler and Katz's (1974) uses and gratification theory (UGT) may be particularly useful in explicating employees' (negative) communication behaviors, especially on social media. The theory explains why people use different forms of media by focusing on their needs and motivations such as tension release (Windahl, 1981). In this theory, audiences were conceptualized as exhibiting active information seeking behavior in the pursuit of gratifications. However, one major limitation of the UGT is that it has focused on the audiences' media consumption rather than their active communication behaviors. "Audience activeness" should be further researched in the context of employees' communication behaviors against their organization on social media. Alonzo and Aiken's (2004) work is one of the few studies to apply the UGT to predict and identify users' motivations in the process of hostile online communication behavior, or flaming, supporting prior research which suggests that an anonymous computer-mediated communication environment encourages disinhibitions, leading to loss of social cues which may result in deviant, anti-social behavior (e.g. Hiltz, Turoff, & Johnson, 1989).

In this study, an extension of the UGT is proposed by incorporating Kim and Rhee's (2011) concepts of employee communication behavior (ECB). Integrating the two perspectives allows for a better explanation of employees' communication behaviors about their organization on social media, as it helps explain their motivations for doing so. The relational quality between the organization and employee as perceived by the employee has been shown to be an antecedent of the direction of such communication – either negative or positive (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Of note, too, is the research on employees' deviant and anti-organizational behavior in the fields of management and applied psychology (e.g. Bolin & Heatherly, 2001; Dineen, Lewicki, & Tomlinson, 2006; Reisel, Probst, Chia, Maloles, & König, 2013). For example, Reisel et al. (2010) studied the relationship between job insecurity, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors, and found that employees satisfied in their job were less likely to experience negativity against the organization, burnout, and were less likely to engage in deviant behaviors in the workplace. This study forms an extension of this work on employees' deviance, by explicating the communicative aspects of employees' deviance, especially in an open access, online context such as social media.

It is important to identify the motives or needs of employees who engage in negative megaphoning about their organization. McQuail (1994) proposed that people have several motives that trigger actions, such as the need for information and advice, experiencing empathy with problems of other people, feeling connected with others, escaping from problems and worries and experiencing emotional release. People have needs that influence their communication behaviors (Rubin, 1992). Employees' negative communication behaviors have been shown to be the result of their negative experiences with their organization (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Hence, when employees post negative comments against their employers, we posit that they will exhibit their negative emotions to escape problems that they have encountered at work or to release their negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or dissatisfaction with the organization. On the flip-side, employees may also utilize this de-identified space to express their positive emotions about their employers. Employees' "confessions" constitute an emotion-based coping approach to vent their negative feelings about or express positivity toward their organization. The following research questions form the basis of this study:

RQ1: What motivations are salient in employees' positive "confessions" about the organization?

RQ2: What motivations are salient in employees' negative "confessions" about the organization?

Besides understanding the employees' motivations in engaging in communication behaviors on Facebook's confessions pages, it is also important to discuss the overarching impact of this phenomenon. To do so we draw upon the idea of a paracrisis, and seek to understand whether employees' negative communication behaviors on Facebook confessions pages may constitute a paracrisis. Coombs and Holladay (2012) proposed the idea of a paracrisis, or a threat to the organization charging it with unethical or irresponsible behavior. Specifically, a paracrisis is a special form of a crisis threat which does not necessarily involve legal violations, but irresponsible conduct which has been recognized by stakeholders as such and caused them to petition the organization. For there to be a paracrisis, Coombs and Holladay (2012) state that there must be a petition to the organization and such a petition must be visible by other stakeholders. Therefore, the final research question of this study is as follows:

RQ3: How do employees' posts on a confessions page constitute a paracrisis?

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