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Using Twitter as a means of coping with emotions and uncontrollable crises

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ABSTRACT

Twitter is a popular social medium that has the capacity to provide real-time information to stakeholders and crisis managers during an organizational crisis. While several studies have described the multiple ways in which Twitter can be used by organizations to communicate with stakeholders, this study explores how stakeholder tweets can be analyzed by organizations to gauge the public's collective sentiment in order to construct messages that facilitate coping during a crisis. Using Jin, Pang, and Cameron's (2007, 2012) Integrated Crisis Mapping Model, this study analyzes 818 tweets obtained immediately after a repeat crisis. Each tweet was analyzed according to the elements of perceived controllability and predictability, as well as the emotions and coping strategies used on behalf of the organization's external stakeholders. The findings of this study suggest ways in which organizations can provide support and clarity while trying to prevent reputational damage during a highly emotional crisis.

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1. Introduction

Shots rang out on Virginia Tech's campus as a student from a neighboring university shot and killed a campus police officer before fleeing the scene (Rothaker, 2011). The entire campus was placed on lockdown as officers attempted to locate the assailant. This incident prompted memories of a similar tragedy that occurred only four years earlier when the university experienced one of the worst mass shootings in American history (Hauser & O'Conner, 2007). This most recent crisis required administrators to implement the university's crisis management plan to protect the campus; all while an outpour of tweets emerged that expressed various emotions regarding the university's ill-fated, yet all too familiar circumstances.

The scope of this study is to examine the social media chatter that occurs during an organizational crisis, specifically in terms of the negative emotions that are commonly expressed and communicated by an organization's stakeholders on Twitter. This emotion-filled dialogue deserves scholarly attention, as it is highly influential to the way the media and other external stakeholders view and discuss the crisis with others. Practitioners can utilize data obtained from such an analysis to help determine the appropriate organizational responses that facilitate coping among stakeholders, which according to Coombs (2007c), meets important ethical responsibilities that must be considered by the organization when responding to a crisis.

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Several scholars have identified the important role that emotions serve before, during and after an organizational crisis (Carlson & Dacey, 2013; Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011). One particular area of research, the integrated crisis mapping (ICM) model, has been developed to provide researchers and practitioners with a framework that can be used to identify the various emotions stakeholders experience during a crisis, as well as the coping strategies they use to deal with these emotions (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2007; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2012). While the ICM model has been tested and applied in various crisis-related settings, there is a gap in the literature on whether the model can be applied to examine the emotions displayed through social media during an organizational crisis.

Using Jin et al.'s (2007, 2012) ICM model as a framework, this study analyzed 818 tweets obtained during and immediately after an organizational crisis that occurred only four years after the same organization experienced a similar gun-related tragedy. The tweets that comprised this sample were coded according to the manner in which they expressed the perceived predictability and controllability of the crisis and the emotions and coping strategies used on behalf of the organization's external stakeholders. Findings from this study are used to suggest ways in which organizations can facilitate coping and provide support and clarity during a time when stakeholders are in a highly emotional state. The study also discusses the practical and moral implications involved with using the ICM model in the realm of social media.

2. Literature review

2.1. Crisis management

During the last decade, an increasing number of tragic incidents on university campuses have forced all universities to scrutinize their own levels of preparation for a potential crisis. An organizational crisis is an uncommon and random event that can damage an organization's reputation and threaten the safety of its employees and surrounding community (Coombs, 2007a; Mitroff & Anagnos, 2000; Pearson & Clair, 1998). Heath (2006) suggested that an organizational crisis is "a risk manifested," which implies that crises often stem from risks and issues that were ignored by the organization (p. 245). This definition implies that practitioners need to have proactive environmental assessment measures in place that can effectively identify potential risks before they become crises.

Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) claimed that crises prompt "high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization's high priority goals" (p. 233). Organizations can face multiple types of crises that include rumors, challenges or confrontations by disgruntled stakeholders, organizational misdeeds, either with or without injuries, as well as natural disasters, disease outbreaks, and intentional events like workplace violence (Coombs, 1999; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2010). For universities and organizations alike, ensuring organizational survival after a crisis requires actions and communication that meet the needs and expectations of their stakeholders.

Fearn-Banks (2010) labeled crisis management as "strategic planning to prevent and respond during a crisis or negative occurrence, a process that removes some of the risk and uncertainty and allows the organization to be in greater control of its destiny" (p. 480). According to Boin and Lagadec (2000), members of the public often perceive the success or failure of crisis management efforts according to their ability to reinvent or confirm existing values and beliefs. Thus, successful crisis management efforts restore normal order and meet the value-driven expectations of stakeholders – both of which are outcomes that can be achieved with substantive action and the effective use of traditional public relations tactics and social media.

2.2. Social media and crisis management

González-Herrero and Smith (2008) claimed that radical changes triggered by the emergence of online technologies have necessitated a novel approach to crisis management that addresses the new digital environment in which public relations and crisis communication is now practiced. This new model combines the stages of issues management, planning-prevention, crisis and post crisis phases to establish a vigilant and technologically-focused approach to monitoring the organization's external virtual and physical environments. Their approach also acknowledges the needs for crisis managers to design prompt responses that are tailored for multiple online platforms and evaluate the applicability of existing crisis management frameworks to the realm of online technologies and social media.

The modern landscape in which public relations is practiced is comprised of constituencies of avid social media users, most of whom have expectations for instantaneous crisis-related information (Stephens & Malone, 2009). Social media have also afforded these constituencies the power to challenge organizations in an unrestricted and highly visible manner (Argenti, 2006). Liu et al. (2011) argued that the individuals who use social media during a crisis can be categorized as *creators* of crisis communication content; *followers*, who obtain information from the creators and disseminate it to others; or *inactives*, who consume crisis information indirectly through word of mouth or traditional media outlets that obtained crisis-related information directly from creators.

According to Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar (2011), social media allows an organization's constituents "to become part of the actual crisis communication response," which consequently indicates the importance of actively monitoring and understanding public sentiment and concerns to stop invalid rumors, establish favorable relationships, and maintain the organization's credibility (p. 110). Similarly, Coombs and Holladay (2014) claimed that an organization's stakeholders often act as crisis managers and monitoring their concerns provides opportunities for practitioners to evaluate the effectiveness

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