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Intention to comply with crisis messages communicated via social media

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A B S T R A C T

The rapid growth of social media challenges crisis communicators to disseminate safety messages to affected audiences quickly and in a manner that promotes maximum compliance. A nationally representative consumer panel responded to food recall messages that varied in source (organizational or user-generated) and reliability (confirmed versus unconfirmed). Results indicated that intent to comply with a food recall message was stronger in response to organizational messages than to user-generated messages, but did not vary according to message reliability. Strong age cohort effects were seen in the responses to message source, with younger participants making less distinction than older cohorts between organizational and user-generated sources. Implications of the results for public relations and crisis communications theory and practice, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research were discussed.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary public relations practice, and crisis communications in particular, is being challenged by the emergence of social media. Although many of the best practices used in traditional media are likely to remain effective in the domain of social media, some may require adaptation.

The existing literature in public relations has concentrated on the role of official spokesperson in communicating messages to various audiences (Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Kelleher, 2008; Wright & Hinson, 2009). This dominant model features the dissemination of information from one to many, with reciprocal opportunities for the many to interact with the one. Emerging technologies add the potential of a many-to-many channel of communication to the traditional one-to-many channel (Shklovski, Palen, & Sutton, 2008).

The urgency of providing reliable information to the many is especially acute during a crisis. The viral spread of information on social media could be viewed as an advantage to crisis professionals who must reach the public as quickly as possible. On the other hand, authoritative voices might have difficulty being heard against the noise of the many-to-many communication model made possible by social media. Crisis professionals need a solid, empirical foundation to maximize the advantages of social media while mitigating its disadvantages.

The research presented here explored two aspects of a food crisis message that are likely to impact listener compliance with a recall message. First, intent to comply to a message originating with an organizational source was compared to intent to comply with a message originating in a user-generated source. Second, intention to comply was assessed in

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response to messages containing confirmed or unconfirmed information. This study makes a number of contributions to the public relations and crisis communications literature by systematically varying these message attributes using a national, representative consumer panel.

1.1. Social media and crisis communication

Effective theories exist for guiding the responses of organizations responsible for a crisis, such as the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT; Coombs, 2004, 2007) and a modification of the SCCT that incorporates social media, the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC; Jin & Liu, 2010; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011). However, the primary focus of most crisis models appears to be reputation management, as opposed to predicting audience compliance with crisis safety messages.

Appropriate segmentation of the audience is essential to reaching all persons potentially impacted by a crisis (Heath, Lee, & Ni, 2009). One of the critical variables segmenting the audience in regards to messages communicated via social media is age. However, the relationship between age and social media use is in a constant state of flux, and requires regularly updated information.

One of the contributions of the current study is the use of a representative national consumer panel as opposed to the more typical undergraduate convenience sample. This provides the ability to observe critical age-related differences in responses to messages conveyed via social media.

1.2. Food crisis messages, message source, and message reliability

Food borne diseases have increased in the United States over the last several years. An estimated 76 million cases of food borne disease occur each year, and about 5000 of these cases result in death (CDC, 2005). However, ". . .the systematic study of effective [food] recall communications is in its infancy" (Hallman & Cuite, 2010, p. 24).

The advent of social media provides both opportunities and challenges for the effective dissemination of food safety messages. Little is currently known about the factors contributing to the credibility of user-generated content or its power to influence relative to content originating from organizations (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). One of the goals of this study was to make a direct comparison between the effects of organizational and user-generated sources on a person's intent to comply with a food recall message.

Journalists and public relations professionals crafting crisis messages have systems and criteria for fact-checking that are not shared across the online community. Because the likelihood that uncertain information would be relayed is higher in user-generated sources than through organizational sources, an understanding of the potential impact of unconfirmed information would be helpful in constructing a crisis communication plan. This study specifically tests the impact of confirmed and unconfirmed information on the intent to comply with a food recall message.

2. Method

The procedure for the current study consisted of four steps: scenario construction based on focus group data, scenario realism checks, piloting the research instrument, and administration of the final instrument to a nationally representative consumer panel. All procedures received prior approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the authors' university.

2.1. Instrument development and testing

Four scenarios (Organizational—Confirmed, Organizational—Unconfirmed, User-generated—Confirmed, and User-generated—Unconfirmed) were constructed on the basis of data from three focus groups. Eight men and 16 women ranging in age from 18 to 81 years with a mean of 43 years participated in the focus groups. Based on discussion with these focus group participants, an example of an "organizational" source was operationalized as a credible organization, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). An example of a "user-generated" source was operationalized as a link to an individual, non-expert user's blog shared on Facebook, accompanied by likes and comments. "Confirmed" information was operationalized as containing a specific list of products being recalled, while "unconfirmed" information was operationalized as a message noting that a contamination was "likely" and "an investigation is underway."

Realism checks for the four scenarios were conducted with a convenience sample of 26 undergraduates enrolled in a large, public university. Participants responded to two seven-point Likert scales (1 being "Strongly Disagree" and 7 being "Strongly Agree") modeled after scenario realism checks used by Dabholkar (1994). The first scale stated "The situation described was realistic," and the second scale stated "I had no difficulty imagining myself in the situation." The mean realism score was 5.02 and the mean imagine score was 5.01. These scores were viewed as acceptable for proceeding with the experiment (Dabholkar, 1994). Further discussion with the realism check participants confirmed that the operationalization of the major constructs of each scenario was effective and that the constructs were distinct from one another.

A questionnaire was developed that assessed demographic information, self-reported use of social media, and three 7-point Likert items designed to measure intent to comply with a food recall message. The latter items were constructed following the protocol for measuring intention to comply with a persuasive health message set out by Francis et al. (2004).