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The 2013 Boston marathon bombing: Publics' emotions, coping, and organizational engagement

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ABSTRACT

Guided by the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model and coping literature, this study qualitatively examined online publics' crisis emotions, especially positive ones, coping methods, and a focal organization's (Boston Athletic Association, or BAA) engagement as discursively enacted on the Boston Marathon Facebook (BMF) page during one month following the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. Results from qualitative content analysis showed that positive public emotions did exist, and stemmed from online publics' identity, coping, and BAA's engagement. Publics engaged in cognitive, emotional, action-based, and discursive coping; they formed a rhetorical digital community where a renewal discourse fostered positive public emotions, aided coping, and guided BAA's engagement. By detailing the connections among publics' positive emotions, coping, BAA's engagement, and community discourse, this study offers suggestions to (1) refine and expand the ICM model, and (2) develop a community-based, organization-decentered renewal discourse, which reflects the social media landscape.

1. Introduction

In the *Handbook of Crisis Communication*, Jin and Pang (2010) viewed emotions as the next frontier of crisis communication scholarship. They urged organizations to understand publics' emotions and coping amid crises, so as to appeal to their minds and hearts and to facilitate publics' coping. Jin and colleagues (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2007; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2007; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2007) drew on psychology, and developed the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model, which integrated publics' crisis emotions, coping strategies, crisis types, and organizational engagement. ICM offered crisis managers a preliminary roadmap to diagnose publics' emotions and coping needs based on crisis types, so as to develop emotion-oriented crisis responses. ICM (Jin & Pang, 2010) initiated a promising emotion-based crisis communication research agenda, which prioritized public healing over organizational image.

Despite its heuristic value, ICM posed limitations (Jin et al., 2012). Missing from the model were positive public emotions, nuanced publics' coping methods, and specific organizational engagement strategies. Jin et al. (2012) called for diverse methodological approaches to refine ICM and to test it against real crises, so as to enhance its theoretical and practical value. This study answered the call. It qualitatively examined the Boston Marathon Facebook (BMF) page following the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, to uncover publics' positive emotions, coping strategies, and Boston Marathon Association's (BAA) engagement and coping facilitation.

Briefly, in April 15th, 2013, two explosions occurred about 12 s and 190 m apart at 2:49 pm EDT near the marathon's finish line, leaving three people killed and 264 injured. On April 18th, two suspects were identified (Tamerlan Tsarnaev and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev). While fleeing, they killed an MIT policeman, carjacked an SUV, and had a gunfight with the police. During the gunfight, another policeman was severely injured and one suspect, Tamerlan Tsarnaev was killed. On April 19th, a manhunt for the second suspect, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, caused a city lockdown. Around 6:00 pm, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was found hiding in a boat in a resident's backyard. He was shot in

the boat, arrested, and taken to the hospital. Eventually, he alleged guilty and was sentenced to death in May, 2015.

Immediately after the bombing, BAA, local police, volunteers, and local government took charge of rescue and rebuilding. BAA, organizer of the annual Boston Marathon, was the focal organization embroiled in the attack. It took the initiative to support its publics, including runners, fans, local citizens, and the media. It used its Facebook page (BMF) to communicate decisions and convey care and concerns, receiving lots of public comments. In late April, BAA started to send out medals to all registered runners, and in mid-May, BAA invited runners who passed the halfway checkpoint but not the finish line back to the 2014 race. BMF members also posted comments on the page to commemorate the victims, support BAA, or mobilize other fans/runners. Since BAA was not the culprit of the crisis but proactively engaged in crisis rebuilding and coping facilitation, it showed an ethics of care (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Gilligan, 1982) and received predominantly positive feedback on its BMF page.

The 2013 Boston Marathon bombing was emotionally charged and garnered wide public attention. Publics' emotions and coping strategies manifested discursively on the BMF page. Results of this qualitative study indicated that positive public emotions coexisted with negative ones; they stemmed from publics' identity, coping, and BAA's engagement. Publics engaged in cognitive, emotional, and action-based coping; they formed a rhetorical digital community where renewal discourse aided in coping and guided BAA's engagement. By detailing the connections among public emotions, coping, discourse, and organizational engagement, this study offers suggestions to expand the ICM model, especially from a discursive perspective in the digital age.

2. Literature review

2.1. The Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model

Public emotions in crisis were studied as both antecedents and outcomes. Scholars found negative emotions influenced publics' decision-making, judgment, attitudes, behaviors, and subsequent acceptance of organizations' crisis response and perceptions of reputation (Choi & Lin, 2009; Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Kim & Cameron, 2011; Turner, 2007). These studies were mostly concerned with how publics' emotions may hinder organizations' postcrisis reputation. The Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model, on the other hand, was proposed so that organizations can better facilitate public coping (Jin et al., 2007, 2012).

ICM is based on the premise that crises are perceptual (Coombs, 2007), and that emotions serve as "one of the anchors of the publics' interpretation of the unfolding and evolving events" (Jin et al., 2012, p. 268). It operates on two continua, with X-axis indicating publics' coping strategies and Y-axis indicating levels of organizational engagement. Different types of crises, and publics' crisis emotions are then mapped into each of the four quadrants.

On the X-axis of ICM, publics' coping falls on a continuum from cognitive to conative coping (Jin et al., 2012). *Cognitive coping* is primarily perceptual, used by publics to make meaning of the crisis and the organizational-public relationship. *Conative or problem-focused coping* is action-oriented, used by publics to address the troubled situation or change the organizational-public relationship (Jin, 2010; Jin et al., 2012). On the Y-axis, *organizational engagement* is operationalized as a combination of organizations' goal relevance to the crisis (Lazarus, 1991) and their perceived crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007). Organizations may engage highly with intense energy and sustained resources, or moderately or lowly by diffusing responsibility or claiming helplessness. *Types of crisis* are categorized based on three criteria: internal-external, personal-public, and unnatural-natural, with terrorism plotted in Quadrant 3. ICM is focused on *negative public emotions*, including fear, anxiety, anger, and sadness, with two levels of manifestation: primary emotions are the immediate emotions publics experience following a crisis, and secondary emotions are contingent upon organizations' responses and publics' coping preferences (Jin et al., 2007, 2008, 2012).

Based on ICM, Jin et al. (2007) recommended crisis practitioners to respond to publics' emotional upheaval in a crisis, and to facilitate public coping based on crisis types and publics' coping preferences. After empirical testing using real crisis media stories, Jin et al. (2012) found mixed negative emotions in each quadrant, and insufficient organizational engagement. Primary publics were found to mostly engage in conative coping. Jin et al. (2012) attributed these findings to methodological limitations: since they examined media stories that tended to be action-focused, organizations' perspectives may be misrepresented and publics' cognitive coping may be overlooked. Furthermore, though ICM arguably offers an integrated picture of public emotions, coping, organizational engagement, and crisis types, absent are publics' positive emotions, nuanced coping strategies, and specific organizational engagement strategies.

2.2. Positive public emotions in crisis communication

Crisis communication literature is preoccupied with publics' negative emotions, because they were found to threaten institutional trust (Griffin, Neuwirth, Dunwoody, & Giese, 2004), reputation (Choi & Lin, 2009), and to increase attribution of responsibility (Choi & Lin, 2009). But positive emotions such as love, gratitude, relief, and interest, were found to co-exist and even trump negative ones among individuals in difficult situations (Choi & Lin, 2009; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). Yet, they have received limited attention in crisis communication scholarship.

Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) indicated that positive emotions could enhance coping and reduce psychological arousal by broadening attention and building cognitive flexibilities. Kim and Niederdeppe (2013) found college students experience more positive than negative emotions during the H1N1 flu epidemic; positive emotions increased students' trust in the health center and their information seeking. These findings implied connections between positive emotions and coping. However, Fredrickson et al. (2003) commented, "seeking these alluring payoffs begs the question of how to cultivate positive emotions in crises" (p. 374). They called for more studies to explore the emergence of positive emotions amid crises. Since research on positive emotions in crisis communication is limited, and no known studies have explored the emergence of publics' positive emotions in crises, this study aimed to fill this gap by asking:

RQ1: How and why, if at all, did publics' positive emotions emerge after the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing?