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Getting emotional: An emotion-cognition dual-factor model of crisis communication

Yuanhang Lu^a, Yi-Hui Christine Huang^{b,*}^a School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon, Hong Kong^b School of Journalism and Communication, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

The effect of emotional experience on cognitive processes is an under-explored phenomenon in crisis communication research, despite indications of the increasing importance of emotion-based communication in the digital era. Emerging evidence indicates that the emotional experiences of publics play a critical role during organizational crises and determine the degree to which organizations are able to successfully devise communications that help them deal with such crises. Yet no comprehensive, theoretically sound model exists for analyzing how emotions influence the cognitive processing of crisis information. Our study proposes just such a model, capable of describing how cognition and emotion, separately or interactively, influence the publics' processing of crisis information and consequently their attitudes and behaviors. Our model describes how emotional variables determine whether the publics take a cognition-oriented approach or an emotion-oriented approach to information processing and subsequent formation of interpretations, evaluations, and judgments directed toward organizations. Moreover, our model explains how an emotion-to-cognition assessment of publics' attitudes is possible and makes a case for how it is critical for predicting and influencing the publics' behavior during organizational crises. The hope is that this model will aid practitioners and academics in understanding why the publics' emotions matter during crisis communication as well as how to craft more effective communication strategies as a result. Finally, several avenues for future research are suggested in order to test the validity of our conceptual model in different contexts.

1. Introduction

While previous studies of crisis communication have considered the role played by emotion (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2005, 2007; Jeong, 2010; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2007, 2012; Kim & Cameron, 2011; Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014), relatively little scholarship in this area has emphasized the effect of emotion on cognitive processes related to receiving and evaluating crisis information. Previous approaches are based on theories conceptually designed to capture “rational” powers of cognition, whether they explore the effect of crisis emotions on organizational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014) or on behavioral intentions (Botha, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Jin, Fraustino, & Liu, 2016). Crisis communication scholars tend to ignore the possibility that emotion plays as strong a role as rationality in cognition. Therefore few studies explore the influence of crisis emotions on the publics' perception and evaluation during organizational crises; even fewer consider the variables that determine whether the publics follow cognition-oriented or emotion-oriented patterns in order to process crisis information. The neglect of an emotion-to-cognition approach is partly due to theoretical presuppositions and partly due to the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: njuluyuanhang@gmail.com (Y. Lu), yhuang@cuhk.edu.hk (Y.-H.C. Huang).

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difficulty of observing, targeting, controlling, and measuring crisis emotions. Although [Kim and Cameron \(2011\)](#) emphasized the active role played by emotions in crisis communication, other features of emotional experience as it relates to crisis communication remain unexplored.

Crisis communication scholars and practitioners now face a rapidly changing digital environment, which increasingly foregrounds emotional forms of expression. This phenomenon should direct more scholarly attention to the role played by emotion in crisis communication. For instance, expressions of empathy or support may contribute to building and maintaining positive relationships on social network sites. Similarly, online criticism can help negative emotions spread whenever people review films or products online, share perceptions of organizational reputation, or interact by discussing current events. Further, empirical studies have indicated that emotions can trigger online viral sharing ([Botha, 2014](#); [Guadagno, Rempala, Murphy, & Okdie, 2013](#)). By further exploring the effects of emotional experiences on crisis outcomes, crisis communication research can help determine whether and precisely how the digital environment activates the publics' emotional involvement in the context of organizational crises.

As a response to both the theoretical gap in crisis communication research pertaining to emotion and the changes wrought by a digital media environment, this study conceptualizes an emotion-cognition dual-factor model of crisis information processing. This model (1) argues that the publics may follow both cognition-oriented and emotion-oriented patterns when coping with organizational crises, depending on certain emotional variables; and (2) articulates how crisis-induced negative emotions may influence the publics' crisis information processing. Given the dearth of research addressing these issues through an emotion-oriented perspective, our model's conceptualization draws from both crisis communication theories (e.g., Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Integrated Crisis Mapping model) and psychological theories (e.g., emotional contagion, cognitive appraisal theory, and appraisal-tendency theory).

2. Background

2.1. Situational crisis communication theory

[Coombs and Holladay \(2005\)](#) cited two rationales in support of integrating Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) with an account of emotional cognition. First, the theoretical basis of SCCT is [Weiner's \(1986, 1995\)](#) attribution theory, which states that emotions arise from interpretations of events. Crisis responsibility, the core concept of SCCT, determines the most effective post-crisis communication strategy for protecting an organization's reputation ([Coombs & Holladay, 2007](#)). The publics assess crisis responsibility based on their judgement of crisis type, crisis history, and prior organizational reputation. Moreover, SCCT consists of a clear cognition-to-emotion approach that can account for how the publics' perceptions of crisis responsibility shape crisis emotions. [Coombs and Holladay \(2005\)](#) found that attributions of crisis responsibility are positively or negatively related to different emotions (e.g., anger, schadenfreude, sympathy). Following this cognition-to-emotion approach, some researchers expanded the findings of SCCT through examinations of how different crisis response strategies and the attribution of crisis responsibility influence crisis emotions ([Choi & Lin, 2009](#); [Jeong, 2010](#); [Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013](#)).

Second, [Coombs and Holladay \(2005, 2007\)](#) recognized the importance of emotional effects on organizational reputation during crises. Emotions felt by the publics during organizational crises may influence their attitudes and behaviors toward the organization in crisis. [Coombs and Holladay \(2007\)](#) explored the impact of stakeholder emotions on behavioral intentions and proposed the idea of a negative communication dynamic based on feelings of anger and resentment. Following this emotion-effect approach, some researchers further examined the effects of emotions on organizational reputation and behavioral intentions ([Botha, 2014](#); [Jin et al., 2016](#)).

2.2. Integrated crisis mapping model

[Jin et al. \(2007, 2012\)](#) developed a new conceptual framework called the Integrated Crisis Mapping model (ICM). Based on [Lazarus' \(1991\)](#) cognitive appraisal theory, this model identified diverse emotions experienced by key stakeholders in crisis situations. Specifically, two continua – organizational engagement and publics' coping strategy – map four discrete crisis emotions (i.e., anger, fright, anxiety, and sadness). Organizational engagement measures the extent to which crisis-bearing organizations devote resources and energy to dealing with crises. The continuum ranges from low to high levels of expended resources and energy ([Jin et al., 2007](#)). Coping strategy measures the continuum that runs from the publics' choice of strictly problem-focused coping to strictly cognitive-focused coping during organizational crises ([Jin et al., 2007](#)). Therefore, the ICM concerns how the publics' emotional responses to different organizational crises are shaped by their appraisal of organizational engagement and choice of coping strategy. Following the cognition-to-emotion approach, some researchers further tested the validity and reliability of ICM (e.g., [Brummette & Sisco, 2015](#); [Guo, 2017](#); [Jin et al., 2016](#)).

2.3. Research gap: Interaction between cognition and emotion

Both the SCCT and ICM share a similar theoretical perspective, which results in the same theoretical limitations. [Kim and Cameron \(2011\)](#) pointed out that “the ICM and SCCT both emphasize the public's emotions are shaped by crisis type and crisis situations” (p. 829). Further, our study argues that the SCCT and ICM narrowly define the cognition-to-emotion approach, identifying it as focused solely on how the publics' crisis emotions are shaped by a cognitive process in which the publics rationally evaluate crisis type, crisis responsibility, organizational engagement, and coping resources.

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