

Social Media as a Loudspeaker for Nike: Can Image Repair Communication on Facebook Impact Emotion and Responsibility Attribution?

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ABSTRACT

There is limited understanding of how publics attribute responsibility for public relations crises through social media. Public involvement in social media has emerged as an area of interest in conflict management because involvement impacts negative emotion and attribution of responsibility to an organization. The researchers measured involvement, as related to emotional reaction and responsibility attribution, using a content analysis of Facebook consumer comments ($N=236$) made after *Nike Running* issued an apology and statement of corrective action about the technical problems with the Nike Plus Sports Kit. The frameworks of Contingency Theory of Accommodation and the Situational Crisis Communication Theory illuminated the findings. The results revealed that effortful involvement in commenting was positively associated with crisis responsibility attribution. However, involvement was not associated with emotional venting. This suggests that corrective action may quell emotional reaction, but responsibility attribution may be of concern when using social media as a two-way communication tool.

Keywords: Social media, involvement, emotional venting, crisis responsibility attribution, publics, crisis communication, conflict management

Ever since Nike introduced the Nike Plus iPod Sport Kit, Nike Plus began as a sensor that fit into special Nike Plus shoes and a connector that fit into an iPod Nano. The system tracked mileage and calories burned and included workout playlists and encouragements pre-recorded from professional athletes and coaches. The connector also was capable of uploading runs on the Nike Plus website. Nike Plus continued to evolve since its inception by integrating Facebook and implementing other social network platforms on the Nike Plus website where runners can become friends, look at each other's runs, and even challenge each other. Today, Nike Plus has more than 11 million users (Laird, 2013). However, a review of discussions on the Nike Running Facebook page revealed a theme of disgruntled users with the Nike Plus website and Facebook page. Users continually had problems with loading runs and logging in. Nike issued an apology through email and on the Nike Running Facebook page, eliciting over 50 emotionally charged comments from users responding to the letter. A month later,

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Nike Running issued an updated apology statement that employed a corrective action technique, triggering over 230 comments.¹

Even though an increasing number of scholars establish that social media have become integral to media relations and communication for organizations (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Park & Lee, 2013; Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010), when it comes to emotional venting and expressions of crisis responsibility attribution in social media, scholars criticize that there is room for further development (Choi & Lin, 2009b; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Specifically, seeking an understanding of how publics perceive or attribute crisis responsibility through social media has captured relatively low attention (Lee, Park, Lee, & Cameron, 2010; Shin, Cheng, Jin, & Cameron, 2005).

Public involvement is also of interest in conflict management given that involvement influences negative emotion and triggers crisis responsibility attribution in certain instances (Choi & Lin, 2009b; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Hallahan, 2000; Heath, 1997). As a way to examine the role of involvement, as related to emotion and responsibility attribution, the current study content analyzed consumer comments in the Nike Facebook page made after Nike Running issued a corrective action statement about the technical issues surrounding their products.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Organizational Use

The customer dissatisfaction with the performance of Nike Plus products was voiced on Nike Running's Facebook page for months before Nike decided to respond with corrective action communication. While Liu et al. (2011) propose that publics believe traditional media are more reliable during a crisis, they also found that publics still use Facebook for emotional needs and to "share or obtain insider information" (p. 150). Moreover, publics passively receive crisis information from Facebook and email (the only two tactics used by Nike to communicate with publics about Nike Plus) (Liu et al., 2011).

In order to effectively manage organizational conflict, scholars recommend viewing it as a life cycle that requires practitioners to change their stance and strategy. In the contingency theory of accommodation perspective, Cameron et al. (2008) explicates the conflict management as a life cycle with four discrete phases: proactive, strategic, reactive, and recovery phases. Proactive and strategic phases are more concerned with conflict prevention and concern. Reactive and recovery phases involve response to a crisis or conflict and rebuilding approaches. This study is most concerned with the reactive phase. This occurs when the issue or conflict at hand comes to a critical point

¹ The statement reads: "Nike+ is experiencing technical difficulties, and some Nike+ users may be unable to upload their workouts. Please know we're working to resolve this as quickly as possible. We recommend waiting to upload until the sync experience has been stabilized. We'll provide updates as more information becomes available."

and poses significant impact so that public relations practitioners must choose a response strategy (Cameron et al., 2008).

Image Restoration Strategy

Relationships with media are key to crisis management. However, it is possible for organizations to control information release by using repair strategies via social media, instead of traditional media.

Scholars have suggested conflict resolution techniques for public relations professionals to reach a solution properly (Benoit & Pang, 2007). In doing so, Benoit (1997) suggested five image repair strategies with subcategories: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of an event, corrective action, and mortification. To be specific, denial is a communication strategy in which the organization claims that it did not perform the situation. Evasion of responsibility includes arguing that the act was provoked or defeasible. Reducing offensiveness of an event includes bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, or compensating the victim. Corrective action is defined as a strategy in which a company promises to correct the problem. Lastly, mortification is when an organization seeks to restore an image by asking for forgiveness (Benoit, 1997).

A prevalent repair strategy is when a company promises to correct the problem and to prevent future problems through corrective action, (Benoit, Pang, 2007). The corrective action strategy is the most widely used (Caldiero, Taylor, & Ungureanu, 2013). Coombs (1998) argued that the corrective action strategy is appropriate when strong personal control is involved, such as accidents and acts for which the communicative entity can be blamed. They also argued that the most prevalent image repair strategy through print news is corrective action.

While corrective action has been found to be an effective strategy in traditional media, its impact in social media is less understood (Haigh & Brubaker, 2009). Right after the Nike crisis happened, Nike first provided corrective action as a repair strategy via its Facebook page but did not provide any statements through traditional media. This statement was a form of corrective action where Nike Running promised to fix the problems (i.e. "we're working to resolve this as quickly as possible"). Nike's corrective action statements triggered many responses from consumers about the shortcomings of the Nike Plus system. As Benoit (1997) pointed out, it is really important to acknowledge components of image restoration discourse for a firm that admits responsibility and a commitment to correct the problem. Therefore, the current study focuses on examining the effects of using a corrective action statement in a social media platform.

Involvement

Beyond source, considering public involvement has emerged as an area of interest in conflict management because individuals use different cognitive processes depending on the extent of their personal interests (Heath & Douglas, 1990). Since views toward an issue affect how information is processed, involvement influences anger and higher crisis responsibility attribution in certain instances (Hallahan, 2000; Heath, 1997).

Highly involved publics strive to conduct themselves in a manner consistent with the beliefs and principles they hold (Heath & Douglas, 1991). Thus, they agree with an organization's position if it affirms an idea to which they are predisposed to and are willing to receive messages despite such reinforcement. Therefore, involvement should play an important role as a variable to consider in organization crisis frameworks (Choi & Lin, 2008). In response to this point, the current paper tries to examine the role of public involvement in crisis response strategies.

There have been many definitions of involvement in scholarly literature. For example, the concept of felt involvement has emerged as a key definition of involvement in consumer behavior and communication research (Celsi & Olson, 1988; Choi & Lin, 2008). High involvement consumers might scrutinize and argue more about crisis information; that is, consumer involvement may alter the effects of crisis response. Felt involvement is a person's perception of personal relevance in regards to an issue, event, or object (Celsi & Olson, 1988). McDonald and Hartel (2000) have suggested that involvement levels among publics influence anger and attribution because publics first appraise personal relevance before emotionally reacting and attributing blame.

Attributing of Responsibility

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) guides research on social mediated responses, but more in terms of an organization's tactics and responses (instead of consumer activity). The SCCT is beneficial in predicting proper ways for an organization to respond and communicate during a crisis situation to protect reputation (Coombs, 2007). The theory stems from Weiner's (1986) research on attribution theory. According to Weiner's research, individuals seek causes for an event. From Weiner's attribution work, Coombs (2007) posits that stakeholders make attributions about crisis causes and conclusions about crisis responsibility from this process. If responsibility is attributed to the organization, negativity towards that organization will often appear.

When the organization's reactive phase strategy is decided upon, organizations can choose response options: deny, diminish, rebuild or reinforce (Coombs, 2012). In this study, Nike Running's rebuilding response was examined in the analysis of the corrective action strategy:

H1: Involvement will be associated with higher levels of responsibility attribution towards an organizational statement released on the company Facebook page.

Emotions

Recent research found that social media creates a sense of community (Macias, Hilyard & Freimuth, 2009) and an outlet for individuals to share and express emotions. Moreover, Jin and Liu (2010) found that individuals will turn to social media when they seek emotional support. Coombs and Holladay (2005) also found that emotion should be a part of post-crisis communication for organizations. When publics perceive that organizations have a high responsibility for the crisis, they are more likely to have strong negative emotional responses (McDonald, Sparks, & Glendon, 2010).

Anger, a clearly negative emotional response, often leads to decreases in purchase intent and increases in negative word-of-mouth (WOM) communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Jorgensen, 1996). McDonald et al. (2010) found that high responsibility and involvement of an organization during a crisis will lead to strong negative emotions (mainly anger), with responsibility more so influential of negative emotions than involvement. McDonald et al. also found that anger leads to negative WOM and can influence customer loyalty and complaining. Thus, anger can lead to major negative consequences because emotion and mood can be easily and widely spread on social networking sites. If messages or trends of anger spread on social networking sites, the targeted issue or organization could suffer great consequences, such as negative organization reputation (Choi & Lin, 2009a).

As previously supported, social media are often a likely form of communication for emotional support and venting (i.e. Jin & Liu, 2010; Macias, Hilyard, & Freimuth, 2009). The Nike case may have involved higher anger since Nike's reputation is fixed as a well-known American brand. This unique situation was accounted for in data analysis of responses to the Nike corrective action statement.

Based upon the literature, the following was hypothesized:

H2: Involvement will be associated with anger responses toward the organizational statement released on Nike Running's Facebook page.

METHOD

To examine the themes of emotion and involvement in the responses to the Nike Running corrective action statement posted on Facebook, a quantitative content analysis of comments left in response to the statement was executed. Each consumer comment in response to the Nov. 4 corrective action statement was coded for involvement, corporate responsibility attribution, and emotion, given the hypotheses.

Data Collection

Two hundred and thirty six (N = 236) comments in regard to the November 4, 2011 corrective action statement were downloaded from the Nike Plus Facebook fan page and analyzed. All comments were used in the analysis with a focus on the reactive phase, from November 4, 2011 to November 12, 2011.

CODING VARIABLES

Involvement

Involvement was coded for by looking for patterns of central (more elaboration) or peripheral processing of the responses toward Nike communication (Celsi & Olson, 1988; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). If responses were more focused on the content of the apology and the arguments, they were coded as high involvement (an affirmative to "Does the commenter focus on content of corrective

action statement or argument [not ranting, but rational questions or statement regarding technical issues]?”)

The coders also measured how much effort the person used by counting the number of words the individual used to respond to the corrective action statement. This measure was recoded into low, medium, and high levels of involvement as such: “How many words does the commenter use (highlight and look at words)?” This was recoded into the following: 1-10 words as 1 (low), 11-35 words as 2 (medium), and 35+ words as 3 (high) (this was based on the distribution of counts; most comments had few words).

Corporate responsibility attribution

This refers to claims in comments that the organization (Nike) is responsible for the event or crisis at hand (Choi & Lin, 2008). Corporate responsibility attribution was coded by counting mentions of Nike.

Emotional venting

This was the positive and negative emotion in responses, given Jin (2009) and McDonald et al. (2010). Comments were coded as either positive or negative in regard to the incident.

Intercoder Reliability

In order to ensure that results of the content analysis were reliable between coders, the codebook was pre-tested for intercoder reliability. Two coders were trained on a sample of $n = 51$ comments, which represented 22% of comments coded in the complete analysis. The average Kappa reliability coefficient was $\kappa = .80$ (from the $n = 51$ sample). After both coders were finished with analysis, a reliability analysis was conducted again. The average overall reliability coefficient (Cohen's Kappa of $N = 236$ comments) was $\kappa = .87$. Half of each coder's data was used for analysis.

RESULTS

To compare observed and expected frequencies for independent and dependent variables and to look for association, researchers used crosstabs and chi-square analysis through use of the SPSS statistical software.

On average, commenters wrote $n = 21.21$ words, with a range of 162. Six word responses occurred most. This suggests that most commenters had low to moderate involvement. Descriptive data for other involvement data showed similar results. For processing based involvement, most responses were coded as low involvement, in the negative to question 1 in the codebook (at $n = 153$ in the negative and $n = 83$ in the affirmative).

Most comments did not contain a mention of Nike at $n = 155$ in the negative (versus $n = 81$ in the affirmative) for question 3 in the codebook, suggesting low overall attribution. Emotion varied from other variables in that 91.1% of comments were negative.

H1 hypothesized that involvement would be associated with responsibility attribution towards Nike in a chi-square analysis.

H1 was supported. Chi-square tests were run for two types of involvement and attribution. For central processing related involvement (involvement related to content related contents), there was no significance ($p = .20$) with $X^2(1) = 1.66$. For effortful involvement, the test showed significance ($p < .01$) with $X^2(2) = 23.85$. Both tests had 0 cells with expected counts of less than 5.

Confirming the significance of the second test, a correlation was also run for effortful involvement and attribution (returning the word count values to effortful involvement—1-163 words). Significance of $p < .01$ was found at the .01 level with a Pearson $r = .35$.

H2 hypothesized that involvement would be associated with negative (or angry) responses as shown in a chi-square analysis.

However, H2 was not supported. Chi-square tests with two types of involvement and emotion showed that the test of involvement related to a focus on corrective action content² showed no significance ($p = .21$) with $X^2(1) = 1.57$. The chi-square test run for effortful involvement³ also showed no significance ($p = .67$) with $X^2(2) = .79$.

While the Involvement 1 x Emotion test had 0 cells with expected counts of less than 5, the Involvement 2 x Emotion test had 1 cell with an expected count of less than 5 (16.7%). This percentage only accounted for 1 out of a total 6 cells for the two variables of interest for this chi-square.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

Theoretically, this study contributes to Contingency Theory and SCCT frameworks and may indicate that involvement is an important variable to consider in future studies. The study may help public relations practitioners understand how apology and corrective action image repair strategies triggers emotional venting responses and expressions of corporate responsibility attribution. Results could also lead to further empirical research testing the relationship between involvement and emotional response, for example, as the results suggested that involvement may not be related to emotion in the social media setting.

The results of the tests for H1 suggest that effortful involvement is associated with responsibility attribution; involvement as a processing phenomenon perhaps has a weaker association with attribution (as no significance was shown between processing involvement and responsibility attribution). This shows that involvement, as a central processing occurrence, may be associated to *emotional response*, while involvement as

² “Does the commenter focus on content of corrective action statement or argument (not ranting, but rational questions or statement regarding technical issues)?”

³ “How many words does the commenter use (highlight and look at words)?”

an effortful action may be strongly associated to responsibility attribution. This finding is consistent with McDonald and Hartel (2000), Hallahan (2000), and Heath (1997) in that the study established a connection between involvement and responsibility attribution. However, the study furthers the research by demonstrating the relationship in the social media context. This is important because social media has become fundamental to media relations and communication for organizations (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Park & Lee, 2013; Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010).

The results of tests for H2 suggest that involvement as a central (with greater elaboration) processing phenomenon (versus peripheral processing—less elaboration) in commenting may be more strongly related to emotion than effort put in to commenting (again, given Celsi & Olson, 1988; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). However, since H2 was not supported by significant results, future research in other case studies or experimental studies will further illuminate the relationship between involvement and emotion.

These findings could lead public relations researchers in the future to analyze responses to social mediated apologies, corrective action statements, and other organizational efforts to manage and resolve conflict (i.e. proactive, strategic, reactive, and recovery phases) (Cameron et al., 2008). Additionally, since emotion was not related to involvement, responsibility attribution may be more concerning than emotional outbreak in the crisis lifecycle. This is especially true in applying corrective action strategy. Corrective action may be a good tactic for managing emotional response, even among highly involved publics. This strategy may be less effective for reducing blame on the organization, however, since effortful involvement was related to crisis responsibility attribution. Since the effect of corrective action in social media is less understood, the relationships between these variables deserve further scrutiny and testing in the social networking context (Haigh & Brubaker, 2009).

Given these findings, this study was meant to be an exploratory study of responses to apology and corrective action statements released through a social media format. Since it was a content analysis of responses, a future experimental study or survey may validate the findings of this study. It did not measure dimensional emotional or cognitive states of emotional venting or involvement. It did not analyze the dimensions of corporate attribution responsibility either. Through future study, researchers and practitioners can further their understanding of these variables in the social media context, such as active and passive emotional response in different stages of a crisis.

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