Full Length Research Paper

The effect of system generated cues on users' perceptions of organizational trustworthiness, competence and goodwill

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This study examines how inherent social media system cues may affect perceptions of an organization's credibility during crisis. Due to their bi-directional nature, social media platforms generate system cues, such as user comments on Facebook and number of followers on Twitter. Thus, even if organizational messages are informative and articulate, they may be scrutinized or perceived as less credible due to system generated cues. This research details a five condition experiment that empirically examines trustworthiness, competence and goodwill of a university institutional webpage, Facebook account (with user comments and without user comments) and Twitter account (with followers and without followers). Findings suggest that system generated cues influence users' perceptions of an organization's credibility.

Key words: Crisis messages, social media, credibility, PR tactics.

INTRODUCTION

Social media pervades all aspects of everyday life, including times of crisis. In fact, many authors (Augustine et al., 2014; Spence et al., 2014) have suggested that social media has transformed organizational crises due to its immediacy, narrative-nature, and ability to reach numerous stakeholders across multiple platforms. Social media users are showing a decline in receiving and retaining information from traditional news sources because they have become their own gatekeepers (Haas and Wearden, 2003).

Research (Bennett et al., 2008) also suggests that digital natives—those who have grown up with technology—may view social media as more trustworthy than traditional communication tactics during times of organizational crisis (Omilion-Hodges et al., 2012). Considering that traditional age college students are digital natives and avid social media users (Lenhart et al., 2010), some (Snoijer et al., 2014) have suggested that researchers begin to explore how this population reacts to social media tactics, especially during crises.

Theoretical rationale

As Snoeijers et al. (2014) acknowledge, universities are morally obliged to protect students from harm which

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includes execution of effective communication during crisis. While there may be many scenarios that may require universities to efficaciously disseminate information, few are as grave as an active shooter on campus. Moreover, since there is an unfortunate trend of shootings on college-campuses despite increased security measures (Associated Press, 2014), understanding how digital natives respond to these particular crisis messages is paramount.

Scholars have begun to examine how universities communicate with students in times of crisis. For example, Snoeijers et al. (2014) investigated students' response to a hypothetical food contamination scenario, whereas Clarke and Chees (2006) explored students' reactions to bioterrorist threats. Varma (2011) also explored a university-based crisis, but from a slightly different standpoint, by investigating students' reactions to the firing of the head basketball coach. These studies have helped to pave the theoretical road for the current study.

While extant research has started to explore the intersection of university-student crisis communication and social media, gaps still persist. One notable dearth is in understanding how inherent system cues of Facebook and Twitter—the two most commonly used social media platforms—influence users. This is of particular importance because seminal research conducted by Westerman et al. (2012) found notable differences in perceptions of credibility based on the number of friends a mock Twitter user had. Thus, not only is it important to understand which social media channel (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) is preferred in times of crisis, but consideration of the effects of system-generated cues is also necessary.

Due to their interactive nature, social media sites offer various mechanisms to encourage bi-directional connections among users. Facebook, for example, allows a member to create and maintain a page where he or she may represent themselves through control of text and images. However, the user's "friends" may connect with them by posting comments or images under the Comments section of the Facebook page generating information overloads or system-cues. Twitter, another popular social media site, also generates system-cues in the form of followers. That is, when deciding who to follow on Twitter, one may assess credibility or even likability through the number of followers a particular user has. Thus, while messages may be identical, a social media user may not "like," "friend," or "follow" an organization because of the system-generated cues of Facebook or Twitter.

This study extends the communication field in several important ways. First, this scholarship adds to the burgeoning body of research that explicitly examines the communication relationship between a university and its student body. Second, this work offers universities pivotal information regarding student reactions to a variety of commonly-used communication channels to increase their ability to effectively communicate during crises. Third, this research furthers earlier research that has examined system-generated cues in social media by exploring both Twitter and Facebook. This is accomplished through an empirical study (N=296) that assesses college students' assessments of trustworthiness, competence, and goodwill of a fictional university's crisis communication messages on their homepage, their Twitter account, and their Facebook page. Study stimuli are discussed in greater detail in the Methods section.

METHODS

A five condition experiment was conducted to explore how organizational channels, and specifically social media generated cues influence college students' perceptions of trustworthiness, competence, and goodwill of their university after reading messages regarding a hypothetical active shooter on campus. Participants (N = 296) were randomly assigned to one of five conditions: university homepage, university Facebook page with "friend" comments, university Facebook page without "friend" comments, university Twitter page with followers, and a university Twitter page without followers. An experimental methodology is a preferred method for exploring students' reaction to crisis scenarios (Snoeijers et al., 2014; Spence et al., 2014).

Procedures and participants

296 undergraduate students from a large Midwestern university earned a nominal amount of extra credit toward an introductory communication course to participate in the study. Of the 296 participants, 67% were females (N = 199) and 33% (N = 94) were males. Average age of participants was 22 (SD = 3.87) with 70% (N = 209) of participants identifying themselves as Caucasian, 19% (N = 56) as African American, 4% (N = 12) as Latino/Hispanic, and approximately 5% (N=14) as multi-racial. 5 participants did not disclose ethnicity. In regard to academic standing, 69% of participants were upperclassman (N = 99 seniors, N = 106 juniors) with 18% (N = 53) sophomores and 13% (N = 38) freshman participation.

Study stimuli

Participants were randomly assigned to view one of five university-sponsored communication channels: university homepage, university Facebook with user comments, university Facebook without user comments, university Twitter page with followers, and university Twitter page without followers. The homepage was used as a control condition, because typically homepages are static (e.g., non-interactive) in nature and therefore lack system-generated credibility cues. The two social media under study (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) each had two-unique conditions. In the first condition, the mock social media page utilized the system-generated cues by populating fictional comments on the university's Facebook page and by demonstrating followers on the university's Twitter page. In the second condition, the Facebook page had the same message, but did not have any messages from other users. In the Twitter condition, the tweets remained the same, but the university had zero followers. See Figure 1 for sample Facebook page with comments.

In line with previous research, the authors hypothesized the

| facebook | Wall | Photos | Flair | Boxes | Central College | Logout |

Central College Campus Alert: Between 8:00 am and 8:25 am this morning Central College emergency dispatch received a 911 call about a shooting at the classrooms in Jasper Hall. Officers confirm a shooting involving the death of ten women and three men. The victims were traditional college-aged students, ranging from 18-22, mostly women. Four other students and one faculty member incurred injuries, but are expected to make a full recovery. All affected parties were taken to Beneton Hospital. The gunman killed himself with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. The investigation continues. Central College classes are suspended until Monday. Watch ccollegue.edu for more info.

CENTRALCOLLEGE

| Wall | Info | Photos | Boxes |

Write something…

Share

View photos of Central College (5)

Send Central a message

Poke message

Information

Networks
Great Waters, MT.
Birthday:
May 01, 1917
Political:
Democrat
Religion:
Catholic
Hometown:
Great Waters, MT.

Friends

Lester   Frank   Marilyn

Bobby   Jackie   Robert

Lucy Applewood sorry to hear about the shooting on campus. thoughts and prayers to the families. but people it's not the guns that shoot and kill others, it's the bad guys who can get a gun off the streets.

Eddie Tomasco Amazing how uncivilized things continue to be in a civilized world. To the victims and their families...heartfelt prayers and thoughts.

Pretty Ladie in Pink I just got the news this morning. My prayers for the family of the victims.

James Turner THOUGHTS & PRAYERS 2 ALL

Angela Walker Edgefield We still are the best college and always will be. Pray for the families

Tomas LaGuardia A sad day for C College let us Pray for all

Figure 1. Sample Facebook page with user comments.

following:

H1: Social media conditions with user comments and friends will be perceived as more trustworthy and credibility, and demonstrate increased goodwill than social media conditions with less favorable system-generated cues.

Instrumentation

After viewing the stimuli, participants were asked to assess the credibility of the communication tactics utilized by the fictional university. McCroskey and Teven's (1999) measure of source credibility was utilized in the current study as it continues to demonstrate utility in crisis communication research (Edwards et al., 2014; Lachlan et al., 2014). This measure of credibility is consi-dered in three dimensions: trustworthiness, competence, and goodwill. Each dimension consists of six unique semantic differential items that are assessed on a 7-point scale. The competence dimension of the scale indicated good reliability α = .86. Alphas .60 are considered acceptable, whereas those that are .70 and higher are considered good (Cronbach, 1951). After one item (Concerned with me—Unconcerned with me) from the goodwill dimension was removed, the scale demonstrated good reliability (α =.80). After discarding one item (Honesty—Dishonesty) from the trustworthiness

dimension it also indicated good reliability (α =.86). The two items were discarded due to a lack of internal consistency with other subscale items.

RESULTS

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to examine differences between the five conditions. In each dimension of credibility (e.g., competence, goodwill and trustworthiness) the Facebook with comments condition was assessed most favorably (Table 1). While this condition consistently garnered the highest perceptions of overall credibility, it was only statistically significantly different in the goodwill dimension, $F(4, 291) = 2.58$, $p = .03$.

Post-hoc analysis indicated that the Facebook with comments condition ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.18$) differed significantly from the university homepage ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.15$), $p = .04$, and from the Facebook with no comments ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.08$) condition, $p = .05$. Though it did not differ significantly, it is important to note

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for conditions in dimensions of credibility.

Condition	Goodwill	Trustworthiness	Competence
Homepage	4.47 (1.16)	4.68 (1.26)	4.60 (1.18)
Facebook with Comments	5.08 (1.18)*	5.10 (1.26)	4.86 (1.08)
Facebook without Comments	4.50 (1.09)	4.79 (1.10)	4.54 (1.01)
Twitter with Followers	4.72 (1.13)	4.73 (1.11)	4.50 (.97)
Twitter without Followers	4.55 (1.13)	4.61 (1.25)	4.41 (1.10)

*significant at $p < .05$ level.

that the homepage and Twitter without followers conditions had consistently lower means than the other conditions.

DISCUSSION

This study provides practitioners with data suggesting some commonly utilized tactics are perceived as more credible and trustworthy than others. In times of crisis, practitioners utilize pre-existing channels they believe to be effective in reaching stakeholders—thus if a practitioner believes a homepage or a Facebook page is most effective in communicating with college students—it is likely he or she will devote his or her energy to delivering messages through these channels. While research indicates that this is an effective way to reach stakeholders, particularly digital natives, it is important to remember that system-generated cues can affect an organization's credibility.

Put simply, if a message lacks user comments or followers it can be enough to diminish the perceived goodwill of an organization. To that end, it is recommended that organizations have a strategic plan in place when they begin use of new social networking sites. This will enable organizations to efficiently bolster their networks so that when they use such channels to disseminate information in times of crisis, the organization and its messages are more likely to be seen as credible. Moreover, these results are of particular importance since social media is quickly gaining traction in terms of becoming the preferred and often first source of news consumers seek in times of crisis (Augustine et al., 2014). Likewise, this research bolsters the growing area of studies that specifically examine university-student communication in times of crisis.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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