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IS APOLOGY THE BEST STRATEGY TO MITIGATE ONLINE FIRESTORMS IN SOCIAL MEDIA?

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – To provide a comparative overview with respect to the employment of two different crisis communication strategies, namely corrective action vs. apology, in the wake of an online firestorm and to avoid its further escalation.

Design/methodology/approach – A 2x3 factorial experimental design was implemented, comprising two levels of image repair strategies (corrective action; apology), and three levels of online firestorm triggers (unethical behaviour; core business problem; communication issue). A total of 564 valid responses were collected by means of an online questionnaire.

Findings - Corrective action, as image repair strategy, is more effective than an apology following core business and communication related incidents, whilst neither of the strategies differ in their effects following unethical behaviour incidents.

Furthermore, the effect of image repair strategy on perceptions, attitudes and behavioural intentions is moderated and mediated by users' attribution related to companies´ responsibility and brand attitude, respectively.

Last, the absence of an organizational response following an incident has a negative effect on users' brand attitude in an online setting.

Practical implications – Contribution towards the body of knowledge of crisis communication and crisis management fields in online settings.

Originality/value – This is the first paper that integrates a comparative overview of CCS' effectiveness into the management of online firestorms.

***Keywords*:** online firestorm; social media crisis; crisis communication

Track: Advertising and marketing communications 2

1) Introduction

Recently, a relatively new online phenomenon has drawn the attention from academia, known as "online firestorm" (Pfeffer et al., 2014). An online firestorm is generated by a single complaint which creates a way for many other complaints and comments to follow (Hogreve, Eller, & Firmhofer, 2013), with clusters of complains being quickly

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formed. Many examples illustrate that, amongst them is H&M´s ´coolest monkey in the jungle´ which is detailed in the following section.

Due to the recency of this topic and despite its relevance for reputation management, there is still a profound lack of understanding in respect to why, when and how such online attacks occur, under which circumstances they are amplified and, most importantly, how they are successfully restrained. Therefore, the current paper aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge of firestorms in social media, focusing on exploring the response strategies that companies may implement in the attempt to restrain the evolvement of this type of phenomena.

Drawing upon Benoit's (1995) Image Repair (IRT) and Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication (SCCT) theories, which are regarded as two of the most influential and thus widespread conceptualizations regarding crisis response strategies, the current study provides a goal-oriented framework of crisis communication strategies (CCS). More precisely, this paper aspires to clarify which strategy (corrective action vs. apology) is the most effective for an organization under attack to employ following an incident in order to avoid the further escalation of an online firestorm (e.g refrain intentions to forward the message to peers or comment on it). In this sense, this study focuses exclusively on the post-crisis communication stage, i.e., the follow-up communication as denominated by Coombs (2014). Moreover, the moderation of users' attribution of companies´ responsibility and the mediation of brand attitude are considered.

2) Literature review

2.1. Online firestorms (OF) – understanding the phenomena

Participants in online firestorms may assume three kinds of behaviours, namely: those who complain, reply and observe (Lee & Song 2010). Complainers are those who share their negative experiences with the company and others. Repliers give their opinions or provide sympathy to those that are complaining, whilst observers do not actively participate in the online firestorm but rather read the complaints and the replies while making judgements on the situation (Lee & Song 2010). From an organization's perspective, all three types of participants are important as they form ideas on how they value the brand and its reputation. However, most participants within an online firestorm are classified as repliers (Lee & Song 2010), who are the ones responsible for the content virality (Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013).

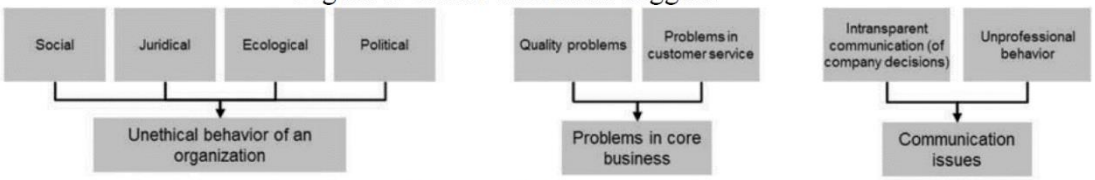
In recent years, different organizations have acknowledged several cases where they found themselves in the middle of situations in which the sudden discharge of a considerable number of online complaints, or an online firestorm (Pfeffer et al., 2014), sparked controversy and even prompted calls for a boycott of the organization.

Among the examples is the H&M "coolest monkey in the jungle" 2018 advert (perceived as an unethical behaviour). In the beginning of 2018, H&M Group, was compelled to apologise following the online backlash received for using an image of a black child on their website, as being part of a new campaign to model a sweatshirt with the slogan: "coolest monkey in the jungle". Shortly after, social media users started labelling the advert as "racist", "offensive", "unacceptable", "insensitive" and "outrageous". In a matter of hours, there were already many thousands of messages generated on social network sites, expressing disapproval towards the controversial

marketing campaign. Later, traditional media started covering this incident enhancing its reach and contributing to more indignation on social media. As a result, several celebrity endorsement contracts were immediately terminated, which resulted in loss of money and prestige for the brand, and many H&M stores were vandalized.

According to Rauschnabel, Kammerlander, & Ivens (2016), online firestorms may be triggered by three different types of incidents: unethical behaviour, core business problem and communication issue (figure 1). Perceived unethical behaviour of an organization refers to a perceived false behaviour of an organization regarding social, juridical, ecological and political issues. Business problems can be triggered by perceived quality problems in the core business of an organization, such as problems in products (faulty products), or problems related to customer service. In respect to perceived unfair or unprofessional communication behaviour, sometimes, from the internet users' point of view, organizations fail to communicate clearly and transparently their organizational decisions to stakeholders, which can trigger an OF.

Figure 1. Online firestorms triggers.



Source: Rauschnabel et al. (2016).

2.2. Hypotheses

In 1997, Benoit & Drew conducted a study on the appropriateness and effectiveness of several image

repair strategies and found how audiences perceived them. On the effectiveness spectrum, corrective action and apology/mortification were highest ranked (Benoit, 1995; Benoit & Drew, 1997). Corrective action involves the accused showing commitment to repair existing damages or to take steps to prevent recurrence of the offensive act (Benoit, 1997: 156), whilst with an apology, the accused admits their responsibility and asks for forgiveness (Brown, 2012: 19).

According to Coombs & Holladay (2008), apology is often overpromoted and incorrectly considered

the best alternative, in the current study the authors intend to explore this understanding and valuating it in the context of an online firestorm. The following hypotheses capture this effect:

H1a: Apology has a higher positive effect on users´ forwarding intentions than corrective action.

H1b: Apology has a higher positive effect on users´ negative WOM intentions than corrective action.

- The effect of attributed responsibility as a moderator:

Social media crises are mainly reputational concerns, in which the affected organizations experience large attributions of guilt (Coombs, 2007). The attribution of responsibility is important, as the perceived level of responsibility for the crisis attributed to the organization influences how the organization may react to crisis threats

(Jin et al., 2014).

Moreover, it is known that the threat posed by a crisis extends to behavioural intentions. Increased attributions of organizational responsibility for a crisis results in a greater likelihood of negative WOM about the organization and reduced purchase intention from the organization. Therefore, following a similar reasoning for the scope of this study, the second pair of hypotheses is proposed:

H2a: Attributed responsibility moderates the effect of image repair strategy on forwarding intentions.
H2b: Attributed responsibility moderates the effect of image repair strategy on negative WOM intentions.

- Brand attitude as a mediator:
Brand attitude is the general brand evaluation, based upon beliefs and affective reactions (Murphy and Zajonc, 1993; Walla et al., 2011). For organizations, the creation of a positive brand attitude is of utmost importance (Walla et al., 2011), since individuals' behaviours can be highly affected by their attitudes towards a product/brand (Friedkin, 2010).

In view of that, it is proposed that image repair strategy affects brand attitude and users intentions to behave accordingly, which in the context of OF implies their intentions to forward or engaging in negative WOM. Accordingly, the third pair of hypotheses is suggested:

H3a: Brand attitude mediates the effect of image repair strategy on forwarding intentions.
H3b: Brand attitude mediates the effect of image repair strategy on negative WOM intentions.

- Existence vs. absence of organizational response:
Some studies suggest that the absence of a response provided by an organization targeted by negative WOM engenders negative responses in consumers, whilst others refute these findings. Therefore, these divergent results show the need for further research, particularly within the scope of the present research. The fourth hypothesis is then suggested:

H4: The absence of an image repair strategy has a negative effect on brand attitude.

3) Methodology

A 2 x 3 factorial experimental design was implemented. It comprised two image repair strategies 5 (corrective action; apology), and three types of online firestorm triggers (unethical behaviour; core business problem; communication issue). Respondents were randomly allocated to one of the scenarios.
In each scenario, an interaction between an organization and its stakeholders was depicted, i.e., participants were presented with a Facebook post that represented a complaint posted by a dissatisfied Facebook user on the organization's page following an incident. The incidents were drawn upon similar real- life situations involving online firestorms in recent years. The posts were signalized with a high level of negativity and likes, so the firestorm was simulated. A fictitious brand was created. The scenarios were

pre- tested and adjusted.

For the final questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies to measure brand attitude (Spears & Singh, 2004), attribution of responsibility (Coombs, 2007), negative word of mouth intentions (Zeithaml et al., 1996), intentions to forward the content (Chiu et al.,2007). All measures were collected based upon 7- point Likert scales.

4) Results

In total, 564 valid responses (split according to figure 2) were obtained and analysed using IBM SPSS 25.0. Respondents were males (58.3%) and females (41.7%) regular users of Facebook in age groups between 18-24 (22%), 25-34 (22.2%) and 35-44 (24.6 %). Constructs were validated for reliability and unidimensionality.

Figure 2. Profile of groups

ONLINE FIRESTORM TRIGGER	Unethical behaviour		Core business problem		Communication issue	
IMAGE REPAIR STRATEGY	Corrective action	Apology	Corrective action	Apology	Corrective action	Apology
TOTAL SAMPLE (564)	**GROUP 1** (92)	**GROUP 2** (92)	**GROUP 3** (94)	**GROUP 4** (94)	**GROUP 5** (96)	**GROUP 6** (96)

Source: developed by the authors.

Hypotheses H1a and Hb were tested using ANOVA. In H1a, the analysis compared 3 paired scenarios: i) unethical behaviour in the context of corrective versus apology strategies (Group 1 and 2); ii) core business problem in the context of corrective and apology strategies (Group 3 and 4) and iii) communication issue in the context of correction and apology strategies (Group 5 and 6).

Regarding the first paired scenario, the differences between means comparing strategies using apology and corrective actions were not significant ($p = .617 > \alpha.05$). Differently, the second and third paired scenarios revealed significant differences ($p = .001 < \alpha.05$ and $p = .036 < \alpha.05$), with corrective strategies having a significantly better effects than apology. In view of these results, H1a is not accepted as the impact of apology on users´ intentions to forward the negative content is lower than the use of correction strategies in cases where a core business problem or a communication issue occurs, otherwise, it is not significant.

In H1b, the same three paired scenarios were analysed and results indicate that corrective strategies were significantly better in refraining users´ intentions to pass on the negative word of mouth than apology in 6 the case of a core business problem ($p = .001 < .05$). In other cases, it was not significant ($p = .253 > \alpha.05$ and $p = .052 > \alpha.05$). Therefore, H1b was not accepted.

For the second pair of hypotheses, a regression analysis using the bootstrapping technique (Efron, 1979) was conducted to further investigate moderation effects between the variables, drawing upon the moderation conceptualization posited by Baron & Kenny (1986). Hypothesis 2a is supported, as the moderation effect is confirmed, implying that the attributed responsibility moderates the effect of the image repair strategy employed by the organization under attack on Facebook users' forwarding intentions. The model obtained and under analysis was highly significant, as $p = .000, < \alpha (.05)$, presenting a high $R^2 = .7447$, implying that 74.47% of the

variation of forwarding intentions was explained by the image repair strategy, whereas 25.53% was left unexplained. Results indicated that image repair strategy was a highly significant predictor of forwarding intentions, as B = .286, SE = .080, p = .000 < α (.05), and that attributed responsibility was a highly significant predictor of forwarding intentions, as B = .920, SE = .023, p = .000 < α (.05). Most importantly, the interaction term (image repair strategy * attributed responsibility) was highly significant, as B = .242, SE = .047, p = .000 < α (.05).

Hypothesis 2b is supported, as the moderation effect is confirmed, implying that the attributed responsibility moderates the effect of the image repair strategy employed by the organization under attack on Facebook users' negative WOM intentions. The model under analysis was highly significant, as p = .000 < α (.05), presenting a high R^2 = .7335, implying that 73.35% of the variation of negative WOM intentions was explained by the image repair strategy, whereas 26.65% was left unexplained.

Results indicated that image repair strategy was not a significant predictor of negative WOM intentions, as B = .109, SE = .074, p = .140 > α (.05), and that attributed responsibility was a highly significant predictor of negative WOM intentions, as B = .833, SE = .021, p = .000 < α (.05). Most importantly, the interaction term (image repair strategy * attributed responsibility) was highly significant, as B = .320, SE = .043, p = .000 < α (.05).

At low levels of attributed responsibility, the effect of image repair strategy on negative WOM intentions, is highly significant, i.e., at low levels of attributed responsibility, there is a highly significant negative relationship between image repair strategy and negative WOM intentions, as B = -.461, SE = .107, p = .000 < α (.05). At medium levels of attributed responsibility, the effect of image repair strategy on negative WOM intentions is not significant, i.e., at medium levels of attributed responsibility, the positive relationship between image repair strategy and negative WOM intentions is not significant (no relationship), as B = .109, SE = .074, p = .140 > α (.05). At high levels of attributed responsibility, the effect of image repair strategy on negative WOM intentions is highly significant, i.e., at high levels of attributed responsibility, there is a highly positive relationship between image repair strategy and negative WOM intentions, as B = .622, SE = .100, p = .000 < α (.05).

For the third pair of hypotheses, a regression analysis using the bootstrapping technique (Efron, 1979) was conducted to further investigate mediation effects between the variables, drawing upon the mediation conceptualization posited by Baron & Kenny (1986). Hypothesis 3a is supported, as the mediation effect is confirmed, which implies that brand attitude mediates the effect of the image repair strategy employed by the organization under attack on Facebook users' forwarding intentions. The model under analysis was highly significant, as p = .002, < α (.05). Hypothesis 3b is supported, as the mediation effect is confirmed, implying that that brand attitude mediates the effect of the image repair strategy employed by the organization under attack on Facebook users' negative WOM intentions. The model under analysis was highly significant, as p = .002, < α (.05). The results indicated that image repair strategy was a highly significant predictor of brand attitude, as B = -.340, SE = .110, p = .002 < α (.05), and in turn brand attitude was a highly significant predictor of negative WOM intentions, as B = 1.091, SE = .029, p = .000 < α (.05). Moreover, the image repair strategy was

still a highly significant predictor of negative WOM intentions after controlling for the mediator, brand attitude, as B = .687, SE = .076, p = .000 < α (.05), implying the existence of partial mediation. Approximately 72% of the variance in negative WOM intentions was accounted for by the predictors (R^2 = .716). The results indicated that the indirect coefficient was significant, as B = -.371, SE = .121, 95% CI = -.6112, -.1227. The use of image repair strategy was associated with approximately .37 points lower negative WOM intentions scores as mediated by brand attitude.

To test the fourth hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted followed by a paired t-test and independent t-tests, drawing upon a pre and post test design. In this case, brand attitude was measured twice in each of the six groups available, i.e. for each online firestorm trigger with the respective image repair strategy, at two different points in time, before (pre-response brand attitude) and after (post-response brand attitude) the organization's response following the complaint posted on the brand's Facebook page by the dissatisfied Facebook user. The hypothesis 4 is supported, as the absence of an image repair strategy employed by the organization under attack, has a negative effect on Facebook users' brand attitude.

5) Conclusions

Results position corrective action as a more effective image repair strategy than apology for core business and communication-related incidents. No significant differences were found between the employment of neither of the strategies for unethical behaviour-related incidents.

Attributed responsibility is confirmed as a moderator of the effect of image repair strategy on forwarding and negative WOM intentions. Brand attitude is confirmed as a mediator of the effect of image repair strategy on forwarding and negative WOM intentions.

In terms of limitations, the study focused on Facebook, even though Twitter is regarded as a social networking site more prone to the occurrence of such phenomena, with fictitious scenarios being depicted (no crisis history and prior reputation taken into account).

Factors that may also impact how users perceive organizations and consequently their behavioural intentions, such as crisis response timing, crisis origin and media coverage were also not considered.8

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