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Organizational crisis communication on Facebook

A study of BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore British Petroleum's (BP) crisis response on Facebook and factors contributing to its stakeholders' perceptions of its crisis response strategies during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Design/methodology/approach – Applying crisis response strategies, this study content analyzed BP's crisis communication messages and Facebook users' comments on BP America's Facebook page.

Findings – The results revealed that information giving strategies dominated BP's crisis response, and Facebook users were more likely to comment favorably when BP used information giving strategies and accommodative strategies. Bolstering strategies and third-party endorsement did not achieve anticipated effectiveness.

Originality/value – The findings of this study will contribute to effective application of crisis response strategies.

Keywords Crisis management, Social media, Communication, Oil spill, Online user-generated content

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The popularity of social media has altered the crisis communication landscape. As a group of internet-based applications built on Web 2.0 that allows "the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), social media provides a platform for interactive communication between organizations and their stakeholders.

Social media enables an organization to deliver messages rapidly, directly communicate with its stakeholders, discover their concerns, detect misperceptions that need to be corrected, and potentially diminishing the negative effects if the organization employs appropriate crisis communication strategies. More importantly, social media enables an organization to assess whether stakeholders accept its crisis communication messages by analyzing stakeholders' responses, which reflect stakeholders' attitudes and feelings toward the organization's crisis management.

Previous research regarding social media-based crisis communication has focused primarily on natural disasters (e.g. Kim and Liu, 2012; Utz *et al.*, 2013). Limited efforts have been made to explore organizations' crisis communications via social media during preventable crises and stakeholders' real-time feedback (e.g. Coombs and Holladay, 2014; Romenti *et al.*, 2014). This study fills the gaps by analyzing British Petroleum's (BP)[1] crisis communication via Facebook and Facebook users' response to this communication during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010. The spill was considered the largest accidental spill in the history of the petroleum industry and the worst environmental disaster that the USA



has ever faced (BBC, 2010), and in which BP and its partners were blamed for making cost-cutting decisions that heightened the risk of a blowout (Rascoe, 2011).

The objective of the present study was to explore BP's crisis communication on Facebook and what made its stakeholders accept or reject its crisis communication messages. The findings of this study will contribute to effective application of crisis response strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1 Crisis communication strategies

Effective crisis communication is essential for repairing damaged reputation. Different stages of a crisis require of communication of different types of information to publics (Sturges, 1994). Sturges (1994) identified three categories of information: instructing information, adjusting information, and internalizing information (Coombs, 2012). Instructing information tells stakeholders how the crisis will or might affect them, and what to do to protect them physically and financially in the crisis (Coombs, 2012). Adjusting information helps reduce stakeholders' psychological stress by keeping them updated on crisis-related information, information about the actions that the organization is taking to prevent a similar crisis (corrective action) (Sellnow *et al.*, 1998), and expression of concerns for those affected (Kellerman, 2006). Coombs (2012) categorizes strategies providing instructing information and adjusting information as information giving strategies.

Internalizing information helps an organization manage its reputation. Coombs (2012) developed four clusters of reputation management strategies: the "denial cluster," which attempts to eliminate the crisis by denying its existence or the organization's responsibility for the crisis, and includes attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoating; the "diminishment cluster," which involves forms of excuse and justification to weaken the link between the crisis and the organization; the "rebuilding cluster" of compensation and apology, striving to restore organization legitimacy by seeking public approval and forgiveness; and the "bolstering cluster," including reminder, ingratiation, and victimage. Coombs (2012) categorized denial, diminishment, and rebuilding clusters as primary strategies, while the bolstering cluster represents supplemental strategies, which must be used in conjunction with one of the other three clusters. Coombs (1999) also added "endorsement of an outside expert" as an effective strategy for bolstering the credibility of an organization in crisis. Walton *et al.* (2012) refined the "justification" strategy by dividing it into "minimization" and "justification" strategies, with "minimization" meaning minimizing the perceived damage associated with a crisis, while "justification" referring to explaining reasons for an organization's response.

Coombs (2012) suggests that organizations should match appropriate crisis communication strategies to specific crisis situations, which include victim crises (e.g. natural disasters, and rumors), accidental crises (e.g. technical-error accidents), and preventable crises (e.g. human-error accidents), ranging from minimal to the strongest attribution of crisis responsibility. Stakeholders believe that a preventable crisis occurs because the organization intentionally places people at risk (Coombs, 2012). As the reputational damage of a crisis intensifies, publics' perceptions of the organization's crisis responsibility increase, therefore necessitating more accommodative strategies (Coombs, 1998). Based on the literature, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1. What was BP's dominant crisis communication strategy?

RQ2. How did BP's crisis communication strategies vary over time?

2.2 User-generated content (UGC) on social media in crisis communication

A major challenge of utilizing social media for crisis communication is the participation of stakeholders who create and exchange UGC. As Thomas Friedman said, "When everyone has

a blog, a MySpace page or Facebook entry, everyone is a publisher” (Hayes *et al.*, 2013, p. 94). Self-publishing and expressing of ideas is a key characteristic of Web 2.0, and ideas about an organization may come from any person and from any direction (Hayes *et al.*, 2013).

UGC on social media travels much faster and further than such content offline, generates greater credibility, and evokes greater interest in organization-related topics than the information that organizations create on their websites (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Jurvetson, 2000). UGC on social media may influence an organization directly by acting as an information source for investors, thus influencing their investment decisions (e.g. Clarke *et al.*, 2004). For example, UGC on social media can provide people’s personal experiences and feedback that may not be featured in an organization’s press releases or financial reports. Online UGC may also affect an organization indirectly by influencing intangible assets such as consumers’ attitudes toward the organization and organizational reputation, which in turn, influence an organization’s financial performance. In particular, negative UGC has a stronger impact on returns with a short “wear in” and long “wear out” (Tirunillai and Tellis, 2012).

Though UGC on social media can play a critical role in the impact of a crisis on an organization, probably due to the long-existing organization-centered research trend, which focuses on what the organization said, with the assumption that the messages would have the desired effects on stakeholders (Coombs and Holladay, 2012), stakeholder perspective, which examines how stakeholders perceive the organization’s crisis response, has not received much attention in crisis communication research. By analyzing the BP case, this study aimed to understand stakeholders’ reactions to organization’s crisis response.

The value in using information giving strategies is underexplored in previous studies. Instructing and adjusting information help people cope physically and psychologically with the crisis and are considered to be the foundation for any crisis response (Coombs, 2012). As the primary purpose of information giving strategies is to meet stakeholders’ information needs, rather than to repair organizational reputation, an organization using information giving strategies seems to care about its stakeholders and thus is more likely to receive favorable feedback from its stakeholders. Therefore, this study posits:

H1. People were more likely to comment favorably when BP used information giving strategies than when BP used reputation management strategies.

An organization’s responses substantially influence the consequences of a crisis. For example, Kerkhof *et al.* (2011) empirically compared the effects of different crisis responses (i.e. denial, apology, and no response) on social media after negative publicity about a company. The results suggested that compared to denial and no response, apology led to higher credibility and a more positive attitude toward the company’s response, though apology increased the perceived responsibility of the company for the crisis. Therefore, this study posits that:

H2. People were more likely to comment favorably when BP used accommodative strategies than when BP used defensive strategies.

Bolstering strategies are supplemental to other crisis response strategies, and are typically used to foster a positive connection between an organization and its stakeholders (Coombs, 2012). Therefore bolstering is considered effective for repairing an organization’s reputation. Studies suggested that bolstering was the most effective reputation repair strategy employed by the Air Force Academy to handle the sexual assault allegations in 2002 (Holtzhausen and Roberts, 2009), and bolstering was as effective as apology when a politician made a mistake (Sheldon and Sallot, 2009). Therefore, this study posits that:

H3. People were more likely to comment favorably when BP used bolstering in conjunction with denial, diminishment, or rebuilding strategies than when BP used denial, diminishment, or rebuilding strategies alone.

Previous studies suggested that third-party endorsement in crisis communication could add credibility to an organization's messages, ensure the organization's point of view is heard, and influence stakeholders' perception of the organization's reputation (Bunting and Lipski, 2000; Rhee and Valdez, 2009). In particular, Langford (2005) suggested that during an environmental crisis, it is important for an organization to work closely with third-party experts to facilitate publics' acceptance of corporate communication messages. Third-party endorsement is effective in defending an organization's reputation (Nelson, 1984) probably because of its high perceived credibility. Self-interest by the communicator has been found to play a key role in people's perception of source credibility, for example, if a communicator profits from persuading a message receiver, the receiver tends to judge the communicator as less trustworthy and thus has less favorable attitude toward the communicator (Kelman and Hovland, 1953). Compared to the organization experiencing a crisis, third parties look for public interest and appear more credible. An organization's past performance history also contributes to the credibility of its messages (Coombs, 1995). Given BP's past crisis history and the severity of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, people might perceive information from BP as an attempt to minimize financial loss, thus were more likely to accept information from third parties (e.g. government, journalists, scientists, Gulf businesses, Gulf residents, etc.). Thus, this study posits:

H4. People were more likely to comment favorably when BP used third-party endorsement than when BP used other strategies.

3. Method

This study content analyzed BP's crisis communication via Facebook during the oil spill and Facebook users' responses to BP's messages. The timeframe for data collection spanned from April 20, 2010, when the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded, releasing crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, to January 5, 2011, when the White House oil spill commission concluded that the spill resulted from a systematic management failure between BP, Transocean, and Halliburton (Goldenberg, 2011). Though BP completely killed the well in mid-September, 2010, given the severity of damage of the oil spill on the environment and economy in Gulf area, the results of investigation into cause of the spill play a crucial role in people's formation of BP's image, and their interpretation of BP's communication messages.

BP's messages ($n = 3,497$) and Facebook users' comments ($n = 180,605$) were retrieved from BP America's Facebook page. All messages were coded in terms of message and linked content (e.g. hyperlinks, online videos, etc.). Only comments directly responding to BP's messages ($n = 16,551$) were coded.

3.1 Measures

Researchers coded BP messages based on: general information of messages, BP's crisis communication strategies, level of accommodation of BP's crisis communication strategies, and degree of congruence between each comment and corresponding BP message.

General information of messages. Each message was coded based on posting date, volume of "likes," volume of comments, and message type (i.e. event post, note post, and wall post that has no special explanations).

BP's crisis communication strategies. The strategies were coded according to two categories: information giving strategies and reputation management strategies (Coombs, 1999, 2012; Walton *et al.*, 2012) (see Table I for definition of each strategy).

Level of accommodation of BP's crisis communication strategies. This variable was coded based on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from "1" representing "very defensive" to "6" representing "very accommodative." A defensive strategy is a strategy that attempts to defend and protect the organization's interests or reduce its responsibility for the crisis, while an accommodative strategy is a strategy that attempts to aid crisis victims and

<i>Information giving strategies</i>		
Instructing information	The organization tells its stakeholders what to do to protect themselves physically and financially in the crisis	
Adjusting information	The organization tells its stakeholders who, what, where, when about the crisis, informs them with the actions taken to resolve the crisis and to prevent the repeat of the crisis (corrective action), expresses concern for the victims, and addresses stakeholders' concerns (concern)	
<i>Reputation management strategies</i>		
Denial cluster (to prove the organization has no responsibility for the crisis)	Attacking	The organization confronts the person or group that claims that a crisis exists
	Denial	The organization states that no crisis exists
	Scapegoating	The organization blames some other person or group outside of the organization for the crisis
Diminishment cluster (to reduce the organization's crisis responsibility)	Excusing	The organization tries to minimize its responsibility for the crisis. The response can include denying any intention to do harm or claiming that the organization had no control of the events that led to the crisis
	Minimization	The organization tries to minimize the perceived damage associated with the crisis. The response can include stating that there were no serious damages or injuries
Rebuilding cluster (to improve the organization's reputation after it admits responsibility)	Compensation	The organization offers money or other gifts to the victims
	Apology	The organization publicly states that it takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks for forgiveness
Bolstering cluster (to add positive information about the organization and to build a positive connection between the organization and its publics)	Reminding	The organization reminds its publics of its good works
	Ingratiation	The organization praises publics
	Victimage	The organization explains how it too is a victim of the crisis
	Justification	The organization explains reasons for its response
	Endorsement of outside experts	The organization reports positive reviews from third parties

Table I.
Operational definitions of crisis communication strategies

stakeholders (Coombs, 2012). Coombs (1998) placed the seven most commonly used crisis communication strategies on a continuum from defensive to accommodative in the following order: attacking accuser, denial, excuse, justification, ingratiation, corrective actions, and apology. Based on the continuum, this study organizes the six response clusters (from "1" to "6") as follows: denial, diminishment, instructing information, adjusting information, bolstering, and rebuilding.

Degree of congruence between Facebook users' comments and BP's messages. This variable was coded based on a three-point scale ranging from "-1," which is incongruent, to "0," neutral, to "1," which represents congruency. In this study, a user comment that agrees with the corresponding BP's message is categorized as being congruent, while a user comment that disagrees with BP's statement in the message is coded as incongruent.

3.2 Inter-coder reliability

Four coders were trained. To test the inter-coder reliability, the researchers and one of the other two coders coded approximately 12 percent of BP's messages ($n = 433$), and the

researchers and another coder coded approximately 9 percent of Facebook users' comments ($n = 1,436$). The Krippendorff's (2004) α was calculated for variables involved judgment-coding inter-coding. The coefficients for crisis response strategies, level of accommodation of BP's messages, and degree of congruence between BP's messages and Facebook users' comments ranged from 0.76 to 0.88. All coefficients are within acceptable levels.

4. Results

4.1 BP's crisis communication on Facebook

Research questions examined BP's crisis communications via Facebook during the spill. Since joining Facebook in 2007, BP had only posted four messages on Facebook prior to the explosion. During the spill crisis, however, the volume of messages increased dramatically ($n_{\text{Apr}} = 2$, $n_{\text{May}} = 81$, $n_{\text{Jun}} = 303$, $n_{\text{Jul}} = 514$, $n_{\text{Aug}} = 571$). The volume steadily declined after the well was declared dead in September ($n_{\text{Sep}} = 538$, $n_{\text{Oct}} = 546$, $n_{\text{Nov}} = 453$, $n_{\text{Dec}} = 434$). From April 20, 2010 to January 5, 2011, BP posted 3,497 messages on the BP America Facebook page, with 92.4 percent providing hyperlinks to detailed information ($n = 3,232$), followed by wall posts ($n = 186$, 5.3 percent), notes ($n = 73$, 2.1 percent), and event notifications ($n = 6$, 0.2 percent).

RQ1: BP's dominant crisis communication strategy. BP primarily used information giving strategies ($n = 2,642$, 75.5 percent) and provided instructing information ($n = 360$, 10.3 percent) and adjusting information ($n = 2,396$, 68.5 percent) throughout its response. Adjusting information mostly focused on what happened ($n = 346$, 9.9 percent), BP's corrective actions ($n = 1,898$, 54.2 percent), and concerns ($n = 333$, 9.5 percent).

BP's reputation management strategies ($n = 1,139$, 32.5 percent) were dominated by bolstering strategies ($n = 852$, 24.4 percent), which included endorsement of outside groups ($n = 472$, 13.5 percent, e.g., government, news media, experts, Gulf businesses, chefs, tourists, residents, celebrities, claimants, etc.), reminder ($n = 387$, 11.7 percent), ingratiation ($n = 124$, 3.55 percent), and justification ($n = 39$, 1.12 percent). The less frequently used reputation management strategies were denial strategies ($n = 283$, 8.1 percent), which included denial ($n = 263$, 7.52 percent) and scapegoating ($n = 20$, 0.57 percent); rebuilding strategies ($n = 263$, 7.5 percent), including compensation ($n = 251$, 7.18 percent) and apology ($n = 23$, 0.66 percent); and diminishment strategies ($n = 115$, 3.3 percent), including minimization ($n = 104$, 2.97 percent) and excuse ($n = 13$, 0.37 percent). Approximately 8.1 percent of messages utilized both information giving strategies and reputation management strategies ($n = 284$).

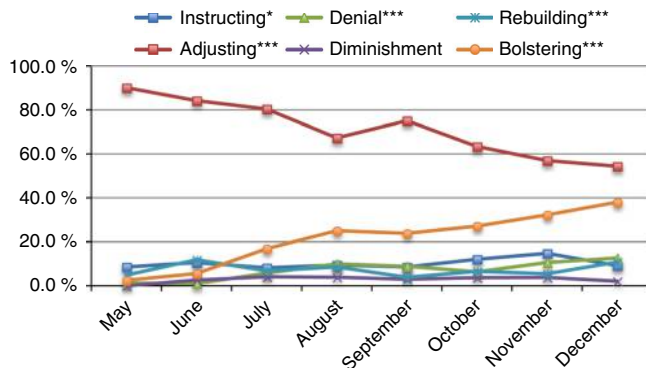
RQ2: change in BP's crisis communication strategies over time. Except for the percentage of adjusting information giving messages ($\chi^2 = 172.325$, $df = 7$, $p < 0.001$), which decreased over time, the percentage of instructing information giving messages ($\chi^2 = 17.346$, $df = 7$, $p = 0.015$), messages employing denial strategies ($\chi^2 = 50.789$, $df = 7$, $p < 0.001$), diminishment strategies, rebuilding strategies ($\chi^2 = 31.092$, $df = 7$, $p < 0.001$), and bolstering strategies ($\chi^2 = 156.175$, $df = 7$, $p < 0.001$) increased over the months (see Figure 1). BP's crisis response can be divided into three phases: spill containment, cleanup, and recovery.

Phase 1: April 2010 to July 2010: spill containment. During the first three months, BP has made significant efforts to stop the oil leaking. After trying a number of techniques, BP engineers successfully stopped the flow of oil on July 15.

To reduce people's anxiety, BP kept stakeholders updated on its efforts to contain the oil, and spill-related information such as environmental monitoring results and status of affected regions. BP demonstrated concern for affected families, fishermen, rig workers, and Gulf Coast business owners and also reassured publics concerned about the use of Corexit, a dispersant used to dissolve oil, and its health effects. BP also provided instructing information on filing claims, re-employment, and volunteering in affected regions.

To fix its reputation, BP primarily used rebuilding strategies by compensating affected individuals and business, and making apologies to the families of the workers who

Figure 1. Trend of crisis communication strategies used by BP America on its Facebook page during the oil spill crisis in 2010



Notes: Instructing information: $\chi^2=17.346$, $df=7$, $p=0.015$; adjusting information: $\chi^2=172.325$, $df=7$, $p<0.001$; denial cluster: $\chi^2=50.789$, $df=7$, $p<0.001$; rebuilding cluster: $\chi^2=31.092$, $df=7$, $p<0.001$; bolstering cluster: $\chi^2=156.175$, $df=7$, $p<0.001$. * $p<0.05$; *** $p<0.001$

lost lives in the explosion. BP attempted to bolster its stakeholders' perceptions by praising the hard work of its workers, volunteers, and all other groups involved in the response. Diminishment strategies and denial strategies were rarely used during this phase. BP used diminishment strategies (i.e. minimization and excuse) mostly to assure publics that the extent of the spill was not as bad as they assumed, and to explain weather delays and to respond to criticism about lies regarding the spill size. Denial was used to claim that Corexit does not pose environmental threat, responding to what was reported that the unprecedented use of Corexit in the Gulf has toxic effects on marine life and humans. Denial was also used to claim the reports regarding the environmental damage caused by the spill (e.g. the tall balls appeared on beached of Texas came from the spill) were inaccurate.

Phase 2: July 2010 to September 2010: cleanup. In this phase, instructing information was mainly about help centers and helplines offering information, support, and counseling for residents affected by the spill. Adjusting information focused on BP's cleanup efforts such as shoreline cleanup, Louisiana deep cleaning, rescuing and rehabilitation oiled wildlife, and funding research into the effects of the oil spill on the Gulf Coast.

Bolstering strategies were the most frequently used reputation management strategies throughout this period. BP used endorsement of outside experts to justify that the oil spill damage on natural resources was not as bad as expected, and the use of dispersants was effective and its negative effects on water quality was not near levels of concern (e.g. experts), and to confirm the cleanup progress made by BP (e.g. tourists, residents, media, and volunteers). Justification was used to justify BP's cleanup operations.

BP used denial and diminishment strategies more frequently than it did in Phase 1. BP used denial to claim that: BP has never used clean sand to cover or bury oil or oiled sand; BP has never prohibited response teams from speaking to the media; cleanup workers' illnesses were not oil-related; Florida beaches and the East Coast had not been affected by the oil spill; and there is no presence of harmful dispersants in Gulf seafood and there is no oil spill-related "dead zone." BP used diminishment to lessen perceptions of the toxicity level of Corexit, and to minimize long-term negative effects of the spill on affected regions (e.g. marshland in Louisiana).

Phase 3: September 2010 to January 2011: recovery. After completely killing the well on September 19, 2010, while continuing cleanup, BP's response focus shifted from the Gulf's environment restoration to the Gulf's economy restoration and investigation into the cause of the explosion.

BP kept stakeholders informed with its corrective actions such as: restoring the Gulf Coast economy by promoting tourism in Alabama, Louisiana, and Florida states; working with experts from the industry, government, and academia on restoration programs such as the Environmental Sampling and Monitoring Program; ensuring that such an accident never happens again; and reiterating the long-term commitment.

To promote safety of the Gulf seafood, BP used denial almost exclusively to claim that the Gulf seafood is not contaminated by oil and dispersants, and used endorsements from the government, experts, Gulf business owners, celebrities, and chefs etc. to add credibility to its messages. Additionally, there were some tips on fishing and seafood consumption, including a map of areas open to fishing, and recipes, etc. as well as notifications of interactive activities aimed at answering the publics' questions about the impact of the spill, seafood testing, and Gulf Coast restoration.

Facing the blame on the damage done to the Gulf area, BP frequently reminded its stakeholders of the progress it made in the restoration, including increasing areas reopened to fishing following comprehensive water quality tests conducted by NOAA and/or FDA, recovering tourism at the beaches of affected states, and increasing consumer confidence. BP also attempted to remedy the damage to its reputation by using scapegoating strategy to address the results of the investigation into the cause of Deepwater Horizon accident. In the internal investigation report published in September, BP claimed that a sequence of failures involving a number of different parties (i.e. BP engineers, contractor Halliburton and rig operator Transocean), rather than a single factor, lead to the explosion. In its cement testing report published in October 29, BP blamed Halliburton for recommending and supplying the unstable cement on the bottom of the Macondo well.

4.2 Facebook users' comments on BP's crisis communication messages

During the timeframe, BP received 57,344 likes and 180,744 comments. *H1* posited that people were more likely to comment favorably when BP used information giving strategies. A one-way ANOVA revealed a higher favorability level when BP used information giving strategies ($M=0.31$) than when BP used reputation management strategies ($M=0.16$) or both ($M=0.23$) ($F(2, 2,818) = 19.193, p < 0.001$). Therefore, *H1* was supported.

H2 posited people were more likely to comment favorably when BP used accommodative strategies. A simple linear regression revealed that the accommodation level of BP's message significantly and positively predicted the degree of congruence between comments and messages ($F(1, 2,811) = 25.705, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.009, b = 0.045$). Thus, *H2* was supported.

H3 posited that people were more likely to comment favorably when BP used bolstering strategies. No statically significant differences were found between degree of congruence when BP used only denial, diminishment, or rebuilding strategies and when BP used bolstering in conjunction with each of the other three clusters. Therefore, *H3* was not supported. It was found that people were more likely to comment favorably when BP used non-bolstering strategies ($M=0.30$) than when BP used bolstering strategies ($M=0.18, t(2,718) = 4.935, p < 0.001$).

H4 posited that people were more likely to comment favorably when BP used third-party endorsement. Results showed that Facebook users were more likely to comment negatively when BP's messages engaged third parties ($M=0.06$) than when third-party bolstering was not used ($M=0.28, t(2,819) = 5.834, p < 0.001$). Therefore, *H4* was not supported.

5. Discussion

5.1 *BP's crisis communication on Facebook*

This content analysis generated some intriguing findings. Information giving messages, in particular, adjusting information dominated BP's crisis responses. Coombs (2012) suggests that people are the first priority in a crisis, and organization should turn their attention to strategies to fix reputation only after providing instructing and adjusting information. BP's crisis responses confirmed the recommended strategies.

Results revealed that BP used denial and diminishment strategies more often as time went on. This shift may be due to changes in BP's perceived external threats. Threat is a factor that determines the degree to which an organization's stance either adheres to or diverges from accommodation (Cameron *et al.*, 2007). An organization is more likely to apply more accommodative strategies when there is a high level of perceived threat, such as external and long-term threats (Jin and Cameron, 2007). In the first months following the explosion, the overwhelming external threat that BP faced was overwhelming blame from the public. Rebuilding strategies therefore were frequently used in an attempt to combat negative coverage. When the well was successfully sealed and focus had shifted from spill containment to restoration of the Gulf coast, the external threat for BP shifted from the publics' blame for the spill to the publics' distrust in seafood safety and the government investigation into the cause of the disaster. In this situation, defensive strategies may more effectively prevent, if not fully repair, further damage to BP's reputation.

5.2 *User-generated comments on Facebook*

Results suggest that except for the use of information giving strategies and accommodative strategies, using bolstering strategies and third-party endorsement did not influence Facebook users' comments significantly.

Information giving strategies were found to be more effective than reputation management strategies in BP case. This might be due to the extensive damage the spill did to ecology, food safety, water quality, and several "at-risk" industries such as commercial fishing, tourism, and enterprises tied to natural resources (Proctor, 2010). People were eager to seek information to reduce uncertainty and anxiety. In this case, information giving strategies were more likely to be accepted by stakeholders, whereas, reputation management strategies were likely to be questioned due to BP's high crisis responsibility and a history of crisis.

Facebook users were found to be more likely to comment favorably when BP employed accommodative strategies. This finding is consistent with previous studies. For example, Claeys *et al.* (2010) demonstrated that rebuilding strategy yields the most positive reputational restoration during preventable crises. Similarly, Sisco's (2012) study of a nonprofit organization's use of Coombs' crisis response strategies revealed that participants demonstrated more favorable attitudes toward the organization when it used denial strategies in victim situations, diminishment and rebuilding strategies in accidental situations, and rebuilding strategies in preventable situations.

This study found that bolstering strategies were less effective than non-bolstering strategies. This finding supports the belief that bolstering would work best as a secondary strategy than as a primary strategy (Coombs, 2012). BP received less favorable comments when it used bolstering possibly because the effectiveness of bolstering depends on credibility of the organization, and the credibility is influenced by the organization's performance history. Publics are more willing to accept claims made by an organization with a positive performance history (Coombs, 1995). BP had poor crisis history before the Deepwater Horizon spill: explosion at its Texas City Refinery in 2005, leaks at its Prudhoe Bay Oil Field in Alaska in 2006, and pipeline leaks in Alaska in 2009 have undermined its credibility to stakeholders. As people tend to follow the lead of their affinity groups

(Hayes *et al.*, 2013), any distrust from stakeholders might be exemplified on Facebook, and thus affects the effectiveness of bolstering strategies such as reminder, ingratiation, etc.

This study revealed that people tended to comment negatively when BP employed endorsements from outside groups such as government, news media, and experts. Though news media and official sources are thought to have high reliability (Fico, 1984), messages from these sources seemed to be ineffective in BP's case. An explanation could be that users attributed third-party endorsements to extrinsic motivation such as monetary incentives, and thus did not perceive these endorsements to be credible. People usually explain events based on internal causes (i.e. characteristics of the individual or group) and external causes (i.e. factors related to environment) (Heider, 1958), often discounting intrinsic motivation in situations where extrinsic motivation can explain an event (Rifon *et al.*, 2004). For example, a product endorser may provide favorable comments about a product for either internal reasons (e.g. belief in the quality of the product) or external reasons (e.g. monetary incentives). If external reasons are found to account for the positive product comments, consumers will judge the product's worth as less than if the endorsement involves minimal or no monetary incentives (Folkes, 1988). Similarly, people may discount an organization's intrinsic motivations in its crisis communication when monetary interest is involved. Instead, they are more likely to resist defensive messages that protect organization's interests while accept accommodative messages that consider public interests, as what was found earlier that BP's accommodative messages were more effective.

5.3 Implications

Findings of this study confirm the critical role of information giving strategies, and support the claim that in a preventable crisis, more accommodative strategies such as rebuilding strategies are more likely to lead to positive attitudes and comments on organizational messages (Coombs, 2012). Therefore, an organization experiencing a preventable crisis may want to primarily adopt information giving strategies and accommodative strategies, while avoiding use of defensive strategies on Facebook. When an organization uses defensive strategies, even if authorities or experts have endorsed the organization's statements, users may still leave negative comments, and those comments may subsequently influence additional people's perceptions of the organization.

Organizations may want to proceed cautiously when employing third-party endorsement because these strategies may not be unconditionally effective in crisis situations. In BP's case, endorsements from the government, experts, etc. did not work effectively because publics might have been skeptical about the third parties' motives. Therefore, if an organization hopes to benefit from positive endorsements from third parties, these endorsements will likely be more effective if those parties appear to gain little or nothing by offering their endorsements.

6. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, this study only analyzed messages and comments on BP America's Facebook page. Future research could consider analyzing the information present on other BP-related Facebook pages (e.g. the Facebook page of BP's parent company), and BP's responses within a comment stream. Second, this study only analyzed Facebook users' responses to BP's messages. Future research could also analyze user-to-user conversation to gain a more complete picture of social media-based crisis communication. Third, this study analyzed BP's messages and Facebook users' comments in 2010, given that reputation recovery is a long-term process, future studies could explore BP's long-term crisis communication efforts. Finally, Facebook users are only a subset of BP's stakeholders. Research about other stakeholders needs to be conducted to get a representative sample for public perception of BP.

Despite limitations, the present study offers significant insights into selection of crisis response strategies by analyzing stakeholders' feedback on Facebook. Considering that negative buzz spreads quickly over social media (Ward and Ostrom, 2006) and the reputational threat caused by a preventable crisis, using appropriate strategies is critical to the success of crisis communication. Findings of the study suggest that in a preventable crisis, social media are best used to keep stakeholders informed about crisis situation and provide emotional support than being used to repair reputation. Reputation management strategies, especially bolstering, would work more effectively for organizations that have established credibility through pre-crisis performance.

Note

1. BP refers to BP America throughout the manuscript.

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