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Social media and corporate reputation during crises: the viability of video-sharing websites for providing counter-messages to traditional broadcast news

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ABSTRACT

Exemplification, or the use of highly emotional and arousing messages to elicit responses based on impression formation, has been shown to influence perceptions of events, individuals, and organizations. News coverage concerning the use of lean finely textured beef (LFTB) is one such example, and anecdotal evidence suggests that this coverage may have had a negative impact on public perception of the manufacturers producing LFTB. The current study examined the use of social media (specifically video-sharing sites) as a means of combating the negative effects of exemplars concerning LFTB. Respondents reported their perceptions of threat severity, susceptibility, behavioral intentions to avoid LFTB, and perceptions of organizational trust and reputation associated with the manufacturer. The findings are consistent with exemplification theory and indicate that message ordering can influence exemplification effects. Results are discussed in terms of implications for public relations and risk communication.

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Social media is playing an increasingly central role in crisis communication (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012). The urgency, complexity, volatility, and uncertainty associated with crises make information seeking a natural response. As social media use expands, so too does the likelihood that a rising number of consumers and other stakeholders 'will both produce and consume content from social and new media technologies during crises' (Lachlan, Spence, Lin, & Del Greco, 2014, p. 503). Information access through evolving communication technology creates new opportunities for organizations seeking to defend their reputations. Traditional forms of public relations practice such as news releases, press conferences, and issues advertising are undoubtedly still effective means of defending an organization's reputation (Spence, Lachlan, Omilion-Hodges, & Goddard, 2014). However, social media outlets give organizations a platform that may expedite their messaging and allow them to reach broader audiences during crises.

A long history of research indicates that swiftness is essential for organizations facing crises, particularly when an organization's reputation is threatened. Reynolds (2006) offers that a crisis response must be delivered 'speedily enough to satisfy a population savvy in gathering information but apt to respond emotionally in crisis decision making' (p. 251). Coombs (2009) argues more specifically that, for organizations, 'a crisis response should be fast, ideally within the first hour of a crisis' (p. 241). Beyond speed, social media give organizations flexibility in their audience analysis. For example, Veil, Sellnow, and Petrun (2012) describe how Domino's responded to a YouTube hoax, falsely claiming that food from one of its restaurants was intentionally contaminated, by creating its own YouTube video. The company's initial response using traditional forms of public relations failed to connect with the audience. Following the implementation of the social media campaign through YouTube, their countering message resonated with consumers.

Both speed and adaptation to audiences are particularly important in reputational crises that are emotionally evocative (Lachlan, Spence, Edwards, Reno, & Edwards, 2014; Spence, Lachlan, Lin, Sellnow-Richmond, & Sellnow, 2015; Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). Exemplification theory (Zillmann, 2006) characterizes this phenomenon by explaining that exemplars – simple, visually striking, and easily recalled words and images – are both emotionally arousing and persuasive. News media often include exemplars that are designed to grab and maintain the interest of the audience. Negative news coverage featuring exemplars may drive emotional reactions that spread quickly, threaten an organization's reputation, and demand an immediate response – whether or not the organization believes the accusations are warranted (Westerman, Spence, & Lachlan, 2009). The speed, accessibility, and ease of social media pose both challenges and opportunities for organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Freeberg, 2012). Exemplars can spread quickly on the Internet, magnifying the impact of a single news story. Social media present organizations with the opportunity to make a highly visible response to the crisis either proactively or reactively.

Despite the opportunities offered by social media, relatively little 'scientific research is available about the ideal techniques for retrieving information related to an impending threat via social media' (Lachlan, Spence, Lin, Najarian, & Del Greco, 2014, p. 522). Much of the canon of extant research is based on case studies and descriptive survey data. This study seeks to expand the understanding of social media and crisis communication through an experimental procedure examining the impact of a social media video clip during an organizational crisis. Specifically, it assesses the capacity for online video-sharing sites (such as YouTube.com) to serve as a medium for providing viewers with messages countering an exemplar found in traditional television news.

Exemplification theory and risk

Risk is an unavoidable and pervasive factor for any organization. In a broad sense, an organization's social legitimacy or responsibility is derived from the degree to which consumers and other stakeholders see the organization as managing risks in their best interest (Palenchar, Hocke, & Heath, 2011). Exemplification theory provides a lens for understanding how individuals simplify and interpret complex risk conditions (Westerman et al., 2009; Westerman, Spence, & Lin, 2015). In doing so, exemplification theory

'focuses on assessments of risks to safety and health, as well as on contingent apprehensions that motivate risk avoidance and related protective behavior' (Zillmann, 2006, p. S221). Such simplification is a natural process for coping with the large amount of risk-related information, much of it complex and contradictory. Exemplification theory provides a systematic explanation for how individuals forego detailed and systematic analytical processes in favor of mental shortcuts, subjective and biased in nature, when processing risk information (Busselle & Shrum, 2003; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

The vivid and emotionally arousing aspects of exemplars make them attractive for journalists who want to capture the attention and hold the interests of their audiences. The power of exemplars reaches far beyond increased viewership. Previous research has shown that exemplars in the news media influence public perception and opinion (Zillmann, Gibson, Sundar, & Perkins, 1996). In a series of experiments, Brosius and Bathelt (1994) found that, as the number of exemplars presented in a news story, either in print or radio broadcast form, increased, so too did the influence on public opinion.

One explanation for the influence of exemplars is based on the ease with which they are retrieved and the emotional impact they consistently generate. These simplistic and evocative assessments have been shown to cause audiences to overestimate risks (Westerman et al., 2009, 2015; Westerman, Spence, & Lachlan, 2012). Further research indicates that news stories containing exemplars magnify viewers' perceived risk of developing food poisoning from a restaurant (Aust & Zillmann, 1996). Similarly, those viewing a story with exemplars about amusement park accidents had higher perceptions of such risks than those who viewed a balanced or two-sided explanation of the issue (Zillmann, Gibson, & Sargent, 1999).

Considerable research suggests that exemplars are a powerful influence on recipients' risk perceptions and health-related attitudes (Hastall & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Lachlan, Westerman, & Spence, 2010; Westerman et al., 2009). Palenchar et al. (2011) assert that simplifying risk information (as in the case of exemplars) creates a tension related to corporate social responsibility. They ask, is 'the management function related to risk communication at its best – or at least at its most effective – when it simplifies and thus shields risk bearers from the uncertainties and complexities of risk and related policy decisions' (p. 192)? Alternately, they propose, 'Risk communication that operates within, and accepts, dissymmetry and dissensus might be more effective' (p. 193). In either case, Palenchar et al. (2011) establish that organizations are responsible for communicating risk information in a manner that contributes favorably to their stakeholders' 'longing and efforts for health and safety' (p. 189).

Exemplification and reputational threats

Given the documented influence of exemplification processes on risk perception, it follows logically that exemplification may be an important consideration when evaluating responses to crises. Circumstances move beyond issues to reach the crisis level when they present individuals with three characteristics: threat, surprise, and short response time (Hermann, 1963). Crises pose risks to safety or reputation, appear unexpectedly, and demand an immediate response. An organizational crisis is a 'specific, unexpected and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization's high priority

goals' (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 7). One such high priority goal is to maintain a favorable reputation through which an organization sustains its social legitimacy in the eyes of consumers and other stakeholders. Boyd (2009) explains that legitimacy is the 'foundation of all effective communication with publics – without it, any organizational messages or actions will be looked upon with skepticism. Consequently, establishing and maintaining legitimacy is a necessary component of any kind of public relations' (p. 157). Being 'perceived as useful (or competent) and responsible' is essential for organizations to establish or maintain legitimacy (Boyd, 2009, p. 157). Previous research has shown that negative publicity in the form of exemplars can create a sudden and widespread loss of an organization's credibility (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2014). As a result, exemplars associated with negative publicity can create or magnify a reputational crisis for organizations.

Organizational crises and reputation

Crises that are created or intensified through the presentation of exemplars are particularly problematic when considered in the context of legitimacy gaps. Organizations are normally seen as legitimate and enjoy favorable reputations when their actions 'reflect public values such as telling the truth, not following the flow of capital, and not damaging the environment' (Hearit, 2006, p. 13). Crises occur when organizations fall short of these standard expectations. Essentially, legitimacy gaps occur when an organization fails to meet the expectations of the public and other stakeholders for competence and responsibility. These gaps threaten an organization's reputation. As Heath (2013) explains, 'if their structures, policies, and behaviors fall short of serving the public interest they must be condemned to have a "bad" corporate reputation' (p. 390). Because the public grants legitimacy, and reputation is tied directly to legitimacy, Heath (2013) argues, 'reputation is not sender oriented or agentic alone, but a product of community dialog' (p. 402).

An organization's prior history also influences its social legitimacy and reputation during crises. If an organization enters a crisis with a highly favorable reputation, this initial favorability will work to the organization's advantage. Coombs and Holladay (2006) offer that such prior favorability serves as a form of 'reputation capital' that can be expended during the crisis to help bridge legitimacy gaps (p. 124). Conversely, if an organization enters a crisis situation having a prior history of legitimacy gaps and other disgraces, these prior failures make maintaining or rebuilding legitimacy and a favorable reputation much more difficult. Reputations may also be aided by third-party endorsements. Holladay (2013) posits that 'organizations often benefit from the endorsements of third parties who support the organization's facework' (p. 26).

Organizations may invite neutral third parties to assess a product or provide an assessment of actions leading up to a crisis. The value of these third parties is rooted in their objectivity and access to all essential information. For example, third-party communication was central to the Tennessee Valley Authority's crisis communication after a coal ash spill that devastated the Kingston, Tennessee community (Liska, Petrun, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2012). After the spill, the Tennessee Valley Authority commissioned an independent law firm to identify the flaws in policies and management preceding the spill. The third party identified a series of consistent failures that resulted in notable policy changes for the Tennessee Valley Authority.

In some cases, third parties emerge as the primary communicator during crises (Millner, Veil, & Sellnow, 2011). Third parties can serve as proxies for organizations that lack the resources, capacity or credibility to communicate consistently in all phases of the crisis. Government agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, United States Department of Agriculture, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency often emerge as central figures in organizational crises, offering clarification and recommendations for consumers (Millner et al., 2011). Third-party organizations with high levels of credibility can then extend that credibility to the organizations they endorse (McCleneghan, 2007, p. 33). During crises, a process of credibility by association can occur when independent, trustworthy organizations such as trade associations or government agencies speak in support of an organization that is engulfed in crisis. It may then follow that the logical placement for refutational messages, designed to counter the reputational damage inflicted by negative exemplars, may be shared through third-party endorsement.

Finally, another understudied area of research concerns the role of message primacy in counteracting negative attributions stemming from exemplars (Spence et al., 2015). Although not specifically examining exemplification, Arpan and Pompper (2003) found that ‘stealing thunder’ (the act of an organization breaking news about its own crisis) helped organizations achieve higher credibility ratings. Similarly, Spence et al. (2014) found that when receivers learned of a crisis from the organization (through a press release) before learning about the crisis through the media, organizations were able to obtain a stronger reputation than message receivers who learned first from the media. However, it is unknown if such findings would occur when a third party, acting as the primary voice of the organization in crisis, is first to deliver a message providing factual information.

Lean finely textured beef

The context for the current study is drawn from a case that clearly explicates the relationship between exemplification and reputation. Beef Products Incorporated (BPI) suffered tremendous financial losses when its product, lean finely textured beef (LFTB) was portrayed in an ABC television news broadcast as ‘pink slime’. Although the product, according to the Kansas Department of Agriculture (2012), had ‘at least a twenty year history of being used successfully and safely in beef products’, the segment relied on exemplars, including the name ‘pink slime’, which served to delegitimize the product among the viewing public.

The ABC news segment contained several exemplified features including the use of chemicals, such as ammonia, that are applied during the production of LFTB, quotations from scientists, and graphic images. This reference served as an exemplar as well, and while BPI responded to the ways in which the product is safe to consume, the public perception of LFTB remained negative. Agricultural policy analyst, Joel L. Green, documented the decline of LFTB in a Congressional Report on 6 April 2012, noting that a number of supermarket chains including Food Lion, Kroger, Safeway, and Supervalu responded to consumer requests that they cease to carry beef that included LFTB (Green, 2012). The USDA further announced that it would provide school districts participating in the National School Lunch Program with the option to decline purchasing ground beef

supplemented with LFTB. As a result of these policy changes, BPI was forced to close three of its four manufacturing plants, laying off more than 650 employees. The cost of lean ground beef subsequently increased, as did the public consumption of beef cuts with higher fat content. The USDA forecasted an increase in beef imported from countries such as Australia and New Zealand, increasing competition for the American beef industry.

On 26 March 2012, the American Meat Institute (AMI) released a five-minute video providing a third-party endorsement for LFTB. In a television news story format, a spokesperson for AMI explicitly opposed the use of the phrase 'pink slime' and refuted the claims made in the ABC news video. The video explained how the product is created, clarified that LFTB is composed entirely of lean beef, explained that ammonia is naturally present in many food products, and reaffirmed the quality, safety, and nutritional value of LFTB.

The BPI case is particularly fitting for the study of exemplification effects on organizational public relations crises. Labelling LFTB as 'pink slime' fits the characteristics of an exemplar, eliciting an emotional response from the public. BPI is an organization that has almost no direct contact with the public, thus categorizing it as a hidden organization (Scott, 2013). Unlike BPI, an organization with a more favorable reputation prior to the crisis may have a stronger post-crisis reputation. These issues, coupled with the vivid exemplars featured in the ABC story and renaming LFTB 'pink slime' likely influenced the public response to the report. Moreover, AMI's third-party endorsement provided a potential means for countering the pink slime exemplars and improving BPI's reputation.

As noted, previous research has demonstrated that the order in which a member of the public receives information can have an effect on organizational reputation (Spence et al., 2014) through the use of a press release and other variables (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Research has also shown the effectiveness of message ordering in reducing exemplification effects using print stimuli (Spence et al., 2015). However the use of video responses in social media has not been extensively examined. Therefore, to replicate and extend the findings of Spence et al. (2015), the following research questions are offered:

RQ1a: To what extent does the order of receiving video news reports influence exemplification effects on perceptions of organizational reputation?

RQ1b: To what extent does the order of receiving video news reports influence exemplification effects on perceptions of organizational trust?

Previous exemplification research has looked at issues of susceptibility and severity of threats (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Spence et al., 2015; Westerman et al., 2009, 2012, 2014; Zillmann et al., 1996). As argued by Zillmann (2006), when the public is confronted with a risk, they often take steps to guard themselves from exposure or the consequences of that risk. In addition, the presence of a single exemplar is enough to motivate an individual to take protective actions from that risk. Therefore, to replicate and extend previous research in exemplification theory, the following research questions are offered:

RQ2a: To what extent does the order of receiving video news reports influence exemplification effects on perceptions of severity and susceptibility to the risks of 'pink slime'?

RQ2b: To what extent does the order of receiving video news reports influence exemplification effects on perceptions of the long-term health risks of 'pink slime'?

RQ2c: To what extent does the order of receiving video news reports influence exemplification effects on behavioral intentions to avoid ‘pink slime?’

Procedure

Participants were recruited from introductory Communication and Business Communication classes (housed in separate colleges) at a large southern university, and offered extra credit for participation. They were instructed to navigate to a website to participate in the study. After providing consent, they were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. The experimental procedure was set up so the participants watched the videos in a web browser much as they would if they were navigating to the pages on their own. The procedure also replicated the look of a popular video-sharing site. These conditions were designed to experimentally replicate and extend the circumstances surrounding the ABC news report and its effects on perceptions of BPI. LFTB was chosen because it involves a product most Americans consume but know little about, and allowed the experimental testing of circumstances involving an actual case. In the first condition, the participants viewed the original Diane Sawyer ABC news feature from 2012 using the term ‘pink slime’ when discussing LFTB. This original news story contained several exemplars including the use of ammonia in its production, quotations from scientists stating that LFTB is less like meat and more like gelatin, emotional quotations from concerned customers and butchers, along with images of LFTB. After viewing the ABC news feature, participants viewed a video produced by AMI outlining the manufacturing process and the safety of LFTB. Condition two had participants first watch the AMI produced video followed by the ABC news feature. In condition three, participants only viewed the ABC news feature. The fourth condition exposed participants to only the AMI produced video.

Stimulus materials

The experimental procedures also provide a realistic manipulation concerning how some participants might receive information concerning a risk. When presented with a risk, people often engage in information seeking (Heath, Liao, & Douglas, 1995; Lachlan, Spence, & Seeger, 2009; Spence et al., 2006). This information seeking can be attributed to heightened levels of uncertainty about a risk and potential dangers associated with that risk. Therefore, in an instance such as learning about the additive LFTB, the public would not likely receive only one message. This is supported by the fact that ABC news received several inquiries after broadcasting the story, asking which grocery store chains use LFTB. Thus, after learning about the additive, members of the public sought out more information. The message ordering used in this study creates a more ecologically valid procedure, and more closely represents how individuals will receive or seek multiple messages from multiple sources, rather than receiving or seeking one message alone.

Measures

After viewing the videos in one of the conditions, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire evaluating their responses on a web-based survey. To access respondents’ perceptions of severity, a 7-point Likert-type question asked ‘How big of a health issue is

lean finely textured beef (pink slime) in your opinion?’ and had a response scale ranging from 1 (not a problem at all) to 7 (a huge problem). A similar question asked respondents ‘How severe are the potential long-term health outcomes associated with lean finely textured beef (pink slime)?’ and had a response scale ranging from 1 (not much of a problem) to 7 (very problematic). To examine the estimation that respondents would come in contact with LFTB in the future, a 7-point Likert-type question was used. The question asked respondents ‘How likely is it that the use of lean finely textured beef (pink slime) will continue to increase in the United States?’ The response scale ranged from 1 (not likely) to 7 (very likely). Similar measures were used in previous research (Spence et al., 2015; Westerman et al., 2009, 2015).

To examine the role of message order and exemplification effects on perceptions of BPI, two scales were used. The Organizational Reputational Scale by Coombs and Holladay (1996) was included. The scale has 10 items measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Questions such as ‘This organization is basically honest’ and ‘I do not trust the organization to tell the truth about this incident’ are typical of the scale. Alpha reliabilities for the Organizational Reputational Scale were .90.

Additionally, the RAND Public Health Disaster Trust Scale (Eisenman et al., 2012) was used. The scale has 4 items scored on a 4-point Likert-type scale with response ranges from ‘very confident’ to ‘not at all confident’. Questions included ‘How confident are you that the producers of lean finely textured beef (pink slime) provide honest information to the public?’ Coefficient alpha for this scale was found to be .78.

To access respondents’ behavioral intentions, five Likert-type questions were asked using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 ‘not likely at all’ to 7 ‘very likely’. Questions included ‘How likely are you to check the label on meat at the grocery store?’ or ‘How likely are you to purchase only organic or free range beef?’ Coefficient alpha for this scale was found to be .86.

A total of 254 participants completed the study. There were 112 participants who indicated they were female (44.1%) and 130 indicating they were male (44.1%) with 12 not providing an answer to the question. The sample was predominantly Caucasian with 192 (75.6%) indicating that was their race, along with 15 (5.9%) self-identifying as African-American, 39 participants (15.4%) self-identifying as Asian, 2 (.8%) indicating Latino, and 6 (2.4%) selecting the ‘other’ category. The mean age of the sample was 21.4 (SD = 7.2).

Results

In order to explore differences across conditions, a series of one-way ANOVA analyses examined variability in the dependent variables across participants who had received the ABC news feature only, the AMI produced video only, the ABC news feature followed by the AMI produced video, or the AMI produced video followed by the ABC news feature. These analyses were conducted separately for severity, susceptibility, behavioral intentions, organizational reputation, and the RAND trust scale.

In terms of perceptions of severity, a significant model emerged, $F(3, 253) = 7.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$. The pattern of means indicates that perceptions of severity were strongest in the ABC news feature only condition ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.71$), followed by the ABC

news then AMI produced video ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.70$), AMI produced video followed by ABC news feature ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.55$), and AMI produced video only condition ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.62$). Sheffe post hoc tests revealed significant differences between the means for the ABC news only and the AMI video only conditions, $p < .001$.

A similar question on the long-term health outcomes associated with LFTB indicated a similar significant model, $F(3, 252) = 3.53$, $p < .015$, $\eta^2 = .04$. The pattern of means indicates that perceptions of long-term health outcomes were most severe in the ABC news feature only condition ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.46$), followed by the ABC news then AMI produced video ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.71$), AMI produced video followed by ABC news feature ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.69$), and AMI produced video only condition ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.70$). Sheffe post hoc tests revealed significant differences between the means for the ABC news only and AMI video only conditions, $p < .024$.

Another question asked about the likelihood that the use of LFTB would continue to rise in the US. In terms of perceptions of increased use, a significant model emerged, $F(3, 253) = 5.10$, $p < .002$, $\eta^2 = .06$. The pattern of means indicates that perceptions of susceptibility were lowest in the ABC news feature only condition ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.44$), followed by the ABC news then AMI produced video ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.43$), AMI produced video followed by ABC news feature ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.36$), and AMI produced video only condition ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.05$). Sheffe post hoc tests revealed significant differences between the means for the ABC news only and AMI video only conditions $p < .004$, and AMI video only followed by the ABC news conditions, $p < .04$.

A similar pattern of means was detected for behavioral intentions, where a near significant model was detected, $F(3, 246) = 2.54$, $p < .057$, $\eta^2 = .03$. In terms of the pattern of means, behavioral intentions were strongest in the ABC news feature only condition ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.49$), followed by the ABC news then AMI produced video ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.70$), AMI produced video followed by ABC news feature ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.56$), and AMI produced video only condition ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.46$). Post hoc tests revealed significant differences between the means for the ABC news only and AMI video only conditions $p < .039$.

For trust in the organization, this pattern across conditions repeated itself again, $F(3, 253) = 6.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$. On this reverse scored scale, respondents reported having the least amount of trust in the organization in the ABC news feature only condition ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.49$), then by the ABC news feature followed by the AMI produced video ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 0.66$), AMI produced video followed by the ABC news condition ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 0.64$), and the AMI produced video only condition ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 0.62$). Once again, Sheffe post hoc tests revealed significant differences between the means for the ABC news only and AMI video only condition, $p < .001$.

A similar pattern of means was detected for organizational reputation, $F(3, 249) = 4.56$, $p < .004$, $\eta^2 = .06$. For organizational reputation, the organization was rated least favorably in the ABC news feature only condition ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 0.64$), then by the ABC news feature followed by the AMI produced video ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.91$), AMI produced video followed by the ABC news feature ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.82$), and AMI produced video only condition ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.64$). Post hoc tests revealed significant differences between the means for the ABC news only and AMI video only condition, $p < .005$.

Tables 1–6 report all means and standard deviations of each test.

Table 1. Perceptions of severity by condition (size of health issue)*.

ABC news only	ABC news followed by AMI produced video	AMI produced video followed by ABC news	AMI produced video only
$M = 4.66$ (SD = 1.71)	$M = 4.03$ (SD = 1.70)	$M = 3.85$ (SD = 1.55)	$M = 3.31$ (SD = 1.62)

* $p < .001$.**Table 2.** Perceptions of severity by condition (long-term health effects)**.

ABC news only	ABC news followed by AMI produced video	AMI produced video followed by ABC news	AMI produced video only
$M = 4.41$ (SD = 1.46)	$M = 3.82$ (SD = 1.71)	$M = 3.73$ (SD = 1.69)	$M = 3.52$ (SD = 1.70)

** $p < .05$.** Table 3.** Perceptions of susceptibility by condition (likelihood of contact)*.

ABC news only	ABC news followed by AMI produced video	AMI produced video followed by ABC news	AMI produced video only
$M = 4.39$ (SD = 1.44)	$M = 4.95$ (SD = 1.43)	$M = 5.06$ (SD = 1.36)	$M = 5.25$ (SD = 1.05)

* $p < .005$.**Table 4.** Intentions to change behavior by condition*.

ABC news only	ABC news followed by AMI produced video	AMI produced video followed by ABC news	AMI produced video only
$M = 4.33$ (SD = 1.49)	$M = 4.13$ (SD = 1.70)	$M = 3.97$ (SD = 1.56)	$M = 3.59$ (SD = 1.46)

* $p < .057$.**Table 5.** Levels of organizational trust by condition**, +.

ABC news only	ABC news followed by AMI produced video	AMI produced video followed by ABC news	AMI produced video only
$M = 2.78$ (SD = 0.49)	$M = 2.57$ (SD = 0.66)	$M = 2.51$ (SD = 0.64)	$M = 2.32$ (SD = 0.62)

** $p < .001$.

+Scale reverse coded, lower means indicate higher levels of trust.

Table 6. Levels of organizational reputation by condition***.

ABC news only	ABC news followed by AMI produced video	AMI produced video followed by ABC news	AMI produced video only
$M = 2.53$ (SD = 0.64)	$M = 2.83$ (SD = 0.91)	$M = 2.85$ (SD = 0.82)	$M = 3.02$ (SD = 0.64)

*** $p < .005$.

Discussion

The pattern of means across all dependent variables indicates that respondent perceptions and intentions follow the distribution of exemplars presented within the experimental conditions. In the ABC news only condition, in which respondents were only exposed

to exemplars, results suggest that respondents perceived the use of LFTB as a more severe health threat and one more likely to have negative long-term effects; they also reported stronger intentions to modify their behaviors than participants in the other conditions. Furthermore, respondents in the ABC news only condition indicated less trust in the producers of LFTB than did those in other conditions, and reported lower opinions of the reputation of the organization. The findings concerning the impact of exemplars on behavioral intentions, perceptions of issue severity, and organization trust are consistent with past research suggesting that exemplars may be powerful tools for inducing audience responses. The responses of participants mirror the distribution of exemplars by condition and refutational message.

Further, the perceptions of susceptibility (the notion that use of LFTB would continue to rise in the US) is consistent with the other findings and adds support to an exemplification process. Respondents in the ABC only condition indicated that the use of LFTB would not increase in the US. This makes intuitive sense; if the exemplars drove issue perception as expected, then respondents would believe that, if LFTB were harmful, its use would decrease. It may also be the case that the respondents in the exemplar only (ABC news only) condition believed that LFTB was so prevalent that it was unlikely to further increase, introducing a ceiling effect followed by means consistent with the distribution across viewing order in the other findings. In any case, consistent with exemplification theory, the exemplars in the current procedure appear to have been effective at evoking simple and emotional responses (Aust & Zillmann, 1996), and respondents from the sample reported lower perceptions of trust and reputation in the makers of LFTB and heightened perceptions of the severity and susceptibility when presented only with a news story containing exemplars.

In addition to offering further support for the impact of exemplification on risk messages, the current study adds more support to the broader notion of message order effects (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Spence et al., 2014, 2015). Exemplars can magnify risks perception (Westerman et al., 2009, 2015), and the public is often most reactive to risks that are least likely to hurt them (Sandman, 1999). In instances in which perceptions of the risks at hand are likely to be magnified by vivid, visually stimulating images, and emotionally arousing quotations, it may be the case that counteracting information designed to reassure the public can serve to swing public opinion toward a more reasonable assessment of the risk. However, the results also suggest that receiving information at any time will have some effect on perceptions of susceptibility, severity, reputation, trust, and behavioral intentions. In other words, messages based in factual arguments from a third party may be effective in countering overreactions to risk that are driven by exemplification, but receiving those messages first has the strongest impact.

Evidence of the attenuating impact of messages from both sources can be seen in the pattern of means for the dependent variables. For all outcomes except perceptions of susceptibility, the post hoc tests fail to find significant differences between those who saw the news feature followed by the AMI video, and vice versa. At the same time, the means indicate more positive perceptions of the organization than they do in the conditions in which participants only saw the ABC news story. While not as positive as the AMI video only condition, there is evidence that the presence of both messages attenuates negative responses in terms of organizational trust and organizational reputation.

It should be noted that the capacity for message ordering to reduce exemplification effects may be short lived. There is research evidence which suggests a connection

between exemplification processes and a sleeper effect (Gibson & Zillmann, 1994; Westerman et al., 2012). The sleeper effect is the result of exemplars being less easily forgotten and more easily retrieved, especially after the passing of time has allowed less extreme images to be forgotten (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). The impact of the ‘pink slime’ exemplar may have been attenuated by the immediate presence of base-rate, factual information. However, this attestation may be short lived because the more time that passes from the point of receiving exposure to the exemplar and factual information, the more likely it is that the exemplar will be the easiest information to retrieve, and that subsequent perceptions and intentions will mirror the distribution of exemplars in the videos. Future research should investigate message ordering effects, exemplification, and sleeper effects in combination.

Practical implications

This study first tested exemplification theory and then message order as a means of reducing exemplification effects. To an extent, the analysis also provides insight on how social media (specifically video-sharing sites such as YouTube.com) can be used to communicate with stakeholders. In the face of crises, organizations must provide accounts and explanations for the events in question to the affected public, and there are many venues from which to choose. However, for an organization such as BPI, these efforts may be cumbersome in the absence of a pre-existing relationship with the public in question. In the current study, a video produced by AMI was used on YouTube to provide information that countered previous attacks on BPI’s reputation. Largely unknown organizations such as BPI would do well to create and distribute their own material and use social media as a means of distribution, especially given the effectiveness of message primacy under such circumstances.

More specifically, the video distributed by AMI used a format similar to a television news story. Thus, the YouTube video provided a means of matching the format used by ABC News to establish ‘pink slime’ as a negative exemplar. A video-sharing website of this nature could be used to generate and distribute a counter message quickly prior to or in close proximity to a television news story attacking an organization’s reputation. Traditional public relations strategies such as news releases are still viable (see Spence et al., 2014); however, they take time and often depend on the media to distribute the messages. This reliance is particularly problematic when the source of the reputational crisis is a media-generated expose. Social media outlets such as video-sharing websites create a means for distributing counter messages expediently and with complete control of the message content. With an increasing number of people acquiring their television news online (Lachlan, Spence, Edwards, et al., 2014), video-sharing websites seem a viable option for organizations seeking to protect or repair their reputations during crises. Links to these sites can be referenced by the mainstream media, posted, reposted, tweeted and retweeted, allowing rapid dissemination across multiple platforms.

Whenever possible, being first to communicate news of the crisis or controversy with stakeholders and other relevant publics is best. Moreover, communicating early and often throughout a crisis is essential to maintaining or rebuilding a reputation. If, however, a story breaks before an organization can engage in crisis communication, hope is not lost. This study revealed that crisis communication after the attack message was still

much better than no response. Thus, organizations should strive to be first in sharing crisis information with their publics. When failing to do so, communicating as early as possible and consistently throughout the crisis is worthwhile.

Organizations should consider having a dedicated YouTube or other video-sharing site as part of their overall external communication strategy. For example, Ford, Chrysler, Mattel, Long John Silvers, Samuel Adams, and countless other organizations have built dedicated video-sharing channels. These are used to post commercials, instructions, fan and consumer videos, and could also be used as a place to post and distribute videos for information, crisis response or public relations. Having a video-sharing resource in place may be especially beneficial for a 'hidden organization' such as BPI, or for organizations such as AMI that represent them.

This study provides further support for the feasibility of third-party endorsements to bolster an organization's reputation during crises as evident by AMI's video produced for BPI. For such endorsements to be delivered in a timely manner, organizations must establish relationship networks well before a crisis occurs. Building communication networks as a pre-crisis planning process is a well-established best practice for crisis communication (Seeger, 2006). Such networking can create opportunities for third-party endorsements from industry groups, community leaders, or peer organizations. The value of such endorsements in crisis situations makes the time dedicated to pre-crisis network building a worthy investment.

Limitations

The mean age of the sample is indicative of the fact that predominantly college students participated in this study; there are several issues related to the use of college or convenience samples (Sears, 1986). Despite this limitation, it should be noted that the controversy surrounding BPI and ABC news labelling LFTB as 'pink slime' was over two years old at the time of data collection. Most of the participants in the sample were most likely not making decisions about their food consumption at that time, thus pre-existing dispositions concerning LFTB were unlikely or at worst, not particularly salient.

The responses of participants mirror the distribution of exemplars by condition and refutational message. In each condition, post hoc analyses suggest differences between the ABC news only condition and the AMI produced video condition. This can be due to a number of factors, such as, restriction in range of the scale, or the number of participants in the study. Regardless, the distribution did mirror the distribution of exemplars in each of the analyses; further research is needed to determine the strength and endurance of these findings.

As noted in the discussion, the results suggest that an informational news story can reduce exemplification effects. What is not known, however, is the extent to which these results will endure. One assumption of exemplification theory is the availability heuristic. Exemplars are less easily forgotten and more easily retrieved from memory to drive judgments. After a period of time, sleeper effects may take place, driving the retrieval of the 'pink slime' exemplar and others that may, in turn, drive judgments of the organization. This is of course an empirical question, and future research should continue to examine the plausibility of sleeper effects associated with exemplification effects and risk messages.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to further test exemplification theory and to expand the understanding of the utility of social media (specifically video-sharing sites) as a tool for managing crises and threats to organizational reputation. Results of the study supported the propositions of exemplification theory, as severity, susceptibility and behavioral intentions all followed the distribution of exemplars, and the data are consistent with the argument that getting a message out first is good for an organization. Regardless of the underlying psychological processes driving these assessments, the findings underscore how important it is for organizations to actively communicate with stakeholders and tell their story first, or as early as possible, and to communicate with relevant publics recurrently and consistently. Third parties are a potentially valuable resource in this ongoing communication process. A best practice for organizations is to communicate openly and regularly with involved publics, in order to ensure that their narrative is part of the public discourse.

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