

2017

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ABSTRACT

Exemplification is a term referencing the use of emotional and arousing messages or images to elicit responses based on impression formation. A variety of research has demonstrated that exemplification has an impact on perceptions of events, individuals, and organizations. Less is known, however, about how exemplification processes manifest in user comments after news stories. The current study examines this question in terms of an emergent aspect of computer-mediated communication: the ability of users to comment on news stories. Specifically, this study investigates how exemplified accounts in user comments to a news story may influence audience perceptions. Respondents reported their perceptions of threat severity, susceptibility, behavioral intentions, and perceptions of organizational reputation after viewing different manipulations of a news story. The findings are consistent with Exemplification Theory and indicate that user-generated comments can influence exemplification effects. Results are discussed in terms of implications for public relations and crisis communication.

KEYWORDS

Crisis communication; exemplification; public relations; user-generated content

Simply put, social media gives everyone a voice. Social media provides individuals with a platform and potential audience for promoting ideas or lodging complaints. This is simultaneously advantageous and disadvantageous. Rather than only debating the merits, ethics, or societal implications of social media, crisis and public relations (PR) practitioners may find it immediately useful to also focus their attention on how to use social media as a tool for effective communication throughout the crisis lifecycle. The public uses various heuristics and considers information from multiple sources when making judgments concerning events, and therefore it is essential for crisis and PR practitioners to consider all potential channels of crisis communication. The current study examines one aspect of social media, specifically Web 2.0, and the ability of user-generated content after news stories to drive impressions. The study investigates how exemplified accounts in user comments to a news story may influence the perceptions and behavioral intentions of an audience. An experimental procedure exposed participants to the combination of a news story with base-rate information concerning food preparation at a restaurant, an exemplified video portrayal, and exemplified user comments concerning the incident. The findings are largely supportive of exemplification theory and illustrate that exemplars embedded in user comments after a news story have the ability to change perceptions and behaviors even in the presence of base-rate information.

A review of exemplification theory and the extant literature relating to user-generated comments and organizational reputation is offered, followed by the explanation of the

experimental procedure and a summary of results. Finally, the conclusions are discussed in terms of their implications for crisis and public relations practitioners.

Exemplification theory

Exemplification theory (Zillmann, 1999, 2002) suggests that mediated information is neither consumed nor recalled equally. Pallid information is not as readily retrieved as more emotionally engaging, vivid, and concrete media exemplars (Zillmann, 1999). Perhaps because of their appeal and impact on recall, news reports often include exemplars (Tukachinsky, Mastro, & King, 2011), and news organizations are the primary source of exemplars in contemporary society (Zillmann, 1999).

Exemplification theory is grounded in the idea that while exemplars describe singular events, they simultaneously associate that event within a larger category of occurrences. As noted by Zillmann (2002), “[e]xemplars describe events. Not all events are exemplars, however [*sic*]. In order to function as exemplars, events must share attributes with others to a degree that makes them classifiable as members of the same population of events” (p. 22–23). Therefore, because an exemplar can function as a representation of a larger group, it can influence subsequent perceptions, judgments, and impressions of that group (Zillmann 1999, 2002).

An exemplar is one example of a larger population of occurrences (Zillmann, 1999). The exemplified portrayal may be misrepresented by the dramatic nature of exemplars typically portrayed in the media or through personal communication channels. These dramatic representations can overshadow memories of more reliable rates of change and incidence proportions (Zillmann, 2002), that is, more quantitative and pale base-rate information, even when the exemplars are inconsistent with the base-rate information (Westerman, Spence, & Lachlan, 2009). Media processes are particularly susceptible to these generalized representations, in part because of the short format of broadcast stories, and in part because of the need to entertain the viewer. Zillmann (2002) further argues that media reports are often structured as narratives and may exaggerate events that are not representative exemplars because of their entertainment value.

One strategy that may guard against potentially misleading nonrepresentative events is to provide more quantitative information along with an exemplar (Zillmann, 1999). However, base-rate information is often unknown (Zillmann, 2002) and is only occasionally reported when it is known (Zillmann, 1999). Even if base-rate information is provided in the form of statistics and other more abstract information, it may still be disregarded in favor of the more easily recalled vivid details (Zillmann, 1999). This is the case because exemplars are often nonemblematic in their extremity compared to normal cases (Zillmann, 1999). These antinormative examples, ranging from somewhat representative to fully misrepresentative, provide more entertainment value and are more often selected by news broadcasters (Zillmann, 2002). Furthermore, advertisers typically use their best stories in the form of exemplars to sell products and services. Zillmann (1999) suggests that even though the aim is often representativeness, the fact that exemplars are somewhat nonrepresentative cannot be fully avoided.

When exemplification occurs, there is an essentially unconscious “leap from detecting an abstraction to applying it to other situations and contexts...[that] is part and parcel of exemplification” (Zillmann, 1999, p. 73). Irrelevant information is ignored because of an inborn survival response that drives individuals to discard inconsequential information (Zillmann, 2002). Uneven influence can therefore be exerted by exemplars and can have an impact on affect contemplation and evaluation (Zillmann, 2002).

Pictures and stories have similar exemplification effects, but these effects are canceled when pictures and stories are inconsistent (Tukachinsky et al., 2011; Westerman, Spence, & Lin, 2015). Without image balance in issues, perception will be in favor of supplied photographs (Zillmann, Gibson, & Sargent, 1999). However, pictures, videos, and news stories are not the exclusive domains in which exemplars can appear. Vivid stories can be told in conversations, can be

written in books and magazines, or can appear on social media. One area where exemplars have not been studied but may have the ability to influence perceptions is through user-generated content on social media, specifically user comments on a news story.

Online comments and organizational reputation

News sites on the World Wide Web often allow readers to post comments. User-generated content of this form is one of the primary characteristics of Web 2.0, the second stage of development for the World Wide Web (Westerman, Spence, and Van Der Heide, 2012). Participatory technologies allow users to post information, comment on content, and engage in asynchronous and sometimes anonymous conversations with other users. As noted by Walther, DeAndrea, Kim, and Anthony (2010), oftentimes, the act of users “commenting takes the form of reactive exchanges, i.e., viewers post comments in response to a central message or media clip, and they may occasionally respond to another commenter, but rarely if ever do they append subsequent comments-on-comments that would develop a dialogue of mutually contingent responses among them” (p. 470). Users therefore can create conversations around a story (Glaser, 2008; Houston, Hansen, & Nisbett, 2011) or co-opt a story for propaganda, spam, or a number of other purposes.

Walther et al. (2010) examined the participatory process in anti-marijuana public service announcement videos on YouTube and associated participatory comments from viewers. Their study of anti-marijuana public service announcements (PSAs) and online user comments, both negative and positive, showed some impact on both the evaluation of the PSA and less directly on attitudes to marijuana. Results show that supportive or derisive comments affected PSA evaluations but not marijuana attitudes, whereas the interaction effect of identification and comment valence affected both PSA evaluations and marijuana attitudes. Their results indicate that participatory comments shaped perceptions and influenced the effectiveness of the PSA, and may undermine the PSA message. Interaction between comments and social identification of the audience to the posters of comments helps explain the impact on attitudes toward marijuana. Their results show the potential of user comments to be attentionally favored and persuasive.

The capacity for users to comment on Web content will likely continue to increase. Even though user comments have been shown to influence specific behaviors, the significance of user comments in the Web 2.0 environment requires further investigating, specifically in the area of exemplification effects. Although user comments have been shown to impact impressions of PSA evaluations (Walther et al., 2010), media bias (Houston et al., 2011), motivation to read (Springer, Engelman, & Pfaffinger, 2015), hotel room sales (Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009), and purchase decisions (Flanagin, Metzger, Pure, & Markov, 2011), there are still many areas of research left unaddressed. For example, the ways in which exemplars interact with newer and more interactive technologies, including those that allow users to generate content, is less clear. If user comments embedded with exemplars have the ability to change attitudes and behaviors in the same way news stories or videos can, the results are meaningful for crisis practitioners and PR professionals. Within this gap in the research, the following research question is offered:

RQ₁: To what extent do the exemplars present in user comments after a news story produce effects consistent with exemplification theory?

Previous exemplification research has looked at issues of susceptibility and severity of threats (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Spence et al., 2015, 2016; Westerman et al., 2009, Westerman, Spence, and Lachlan, 2012; Zillmann, Gibson, Sundar, & Perkins, 1996). Exemplification effects have been studied in numerous contexts and modalities. One specific context that has been given a great deal of focus is stories about health, safety, and risk. Aust and Zillmann (1996) found that highly emotional reports created perceptions of greater severity. As argued by Zillmann (2006), when the public is confronted with a risk, they often take steps to guard themselves from exposure to the consequences of that risk. In addition, the presence of a single exemplar is enough to motivate an

individual to take protective actions against that risk. Therefore, examining these issues in exemplified user comments both extends previous research in exemplification theory and further tests the theory. With this understanding, the following research question is offered:

RQ₂: To what extent do exemplars used in user comments following a news story influence perceptions of (a) severity of a risk, (b) susceptibility to a risk, and (c) behavioral intentions?

Previous research has demonstrated that news stories containing exemplars can influence the perceptions of an organization's reputation (Spence et al., 2016). An organization's social legitimacy or responsibility is derived from how consumers and other stakeholders see the organization as managing risks in terms of the stakeholders' best interest (Palenchar, Hocke, & Heath, 2011). Exemplification theory provides a means to understand how individuals simplify and interpret complex risk conditions (Westerman et al., 2009; Westerman et al., 2015).

A crisis can be created and intensified through the presentation of exemplars, and such crises are particularly problematic when considered in the context of legitimacy gaps (Spence et al., 2016). Organizations 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). Thus, a crisis occurs when organizations fall short of these standards and expectations.

Research has shown that third parties can occasionally emerge as the primary communicator during crises (Millner, Veil, & Sellnow, 2011; Spence et al., 2016). These outside parties can serve as proxies for organizations that lack the resources, capacity, or credibility to communicate consistently in all phases of the crisis. Third-party organizations with high levels of credibility can then extend that credibility to the organizations they endorse (McCleneghan, 2007). However, in the same manner that third parties emerge as helpful primary communicators, it may be possible that third parties could emerge as harmful communicators. Acting as the primary mechanism of exemplar creation or distribution, specifically through commenting on a story that appears on a news site, may cause reputational damage. Thus, a seemingly unbiased and neutral news story may neither promote nor diminish the reputation of an organization.

The question remains, however, what happens when exemplified content is posted in the comments section of a seemingly unbiased news story? Consistent with exemplification theory, exemplified comments left by users may have the ability to be more easily retrieved, even when base-rate information is offered in the news story. In order to examine this phenomenon, the following research question is offered:

RQ₃: To what extent do exemplars posted in user comments following a news story influence perceptions of an organization's reputation?

Procedure

Participants were recruited from introductory communication and business communication courses (housed in separate colleges) at a large research university and were offered nominal extra credit for participation. Participants were provided instructions to navigate to a Web site where they were asked to provide consent and then participate in the study. After providing consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. The experimental procedure was constructed to allow the participants to either watch a news video associated with a cbsnews.com Web page or to read the news story without the video within a Web browser (along with other manipulations explained in more detail later), much as they would if they were navigating to the pages on their own. The procedure also replicated the exact appearance of the cbsnews.com Web page. Participants were made to believe they were viewing/reading an actual (unaltered) news story. The only changes to the makeup of the cbsnews.com Web site involved the experimental manipulations. The continue button that was part of the survey software was not available for participants to navigate beyond the

experimental stimulus until 30 seconds after the cbsnews.com page appeared or until one second before the end of the video. This reduced the opportunity for participants to avoid reading or watching the stimulus materials.

Stimulus materials

The news story was chosen because it involves a common practice most Americans engage in (eating at a restaurant) and allowed the experimental testing of circumstances involving an actual case. In the semester previous to administering the study, a manipulation check was conducted to determine if the images, quotes, and content were exemplars and to determine if the news story was well known. None of the participants in the manipulation check had seen the story or the video, and the story was over a year old at that time. Within the story there were no references to the year of the incident, but references to “November” and “last July” were used in the video condition. For this reason, the dates on the cbsnews.com Web page were changed to December of the previous year. Thus, the experimental conditions were set up to create the impression that it was a recent event.

In the first condition, the participants viewed the cbsnews.com Web page, which had a version of the story with only base-rate information. This story only explained that the witnesses captured a video of a restaurant worker tenderizing meat on a sidewalk, the fact that a health department inspector investigated the incident, and that the restaurant previously had a good health inspection score. The second condition had participants view the base-rate article and a video of the story. The video was from a local CBS affiliate (KCBW in San Francisco) and contained several exemplars. The images were graphic, showing a restaurant employee slamming a large side of beef on the sidewalk multiple times. It also contained interviews with local residents viewing the video that included comments concerning how “horrible” the event was. Residents spoke about how the sidewalks “had never been cleaned” and how they would “not eat there at all.” It also showed images of cigarette butts and other hazards on the sidewalk. Additionally, there was exemplified commentary by the news reporter and studio anchor. The next condition contained the base-rate story with the addition of user comments after the story. The user comments were created to contain exemplars that were graphic and emotional, similar to the video. Examples include “those sidewalks have never been cleaned” and “that is one of the reasons why we prefer to cook at home.” The final condition required participants to watch the local-affiliate video and to read the base-rate story with the user comments.

The experimental procedures also provide a realistic manipulation concerning how stories can be picked up and presented by different media outlets. A story can be reported without video footage, presenting only base-rate information. If video footage is available, it can be presented as a link or embedded. Further, many news sites allow users to comment on stories.

Measures

After viewing one of the conditions, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire evaluating their responses on a Web-based survey. A series of questions were used to examine perceptions of severity, susceptibility, behavioral intentions, organizational reputation as well as a series of scales used for another study. To access respondents’ perceptions of severity, a 7-point Likert-type question asked “How big of a health issue is poorly prepared restaurant food 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 eating meat as outlined in the story?” and had a response scale ranging from 1 (not much of a problem) to 7 (very problematic). In order to examine the estimation that respondents experience similar food preparations in the future (susceptibility), two 7-point Likert-type questions were used. The questions asked respondents “How likely are you to eat food that has been mishandled

in a restaurant?” and “How likely is it that you would unknowingly eat meat prepared in this way?” 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).

To both test exemplification theory and to determine the ability of exemplars placed in the comments section of a news story to create similar responses to previous research, 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 restaurant is basically honest” and “I do not trust the restaurant to tell the truth about this incident” are typical of the scale. Alpha reliabilities for the Organizational Reputational Scale were .87.

To access respondents’ behavioral intentions, five Likert-type questions using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 “not likely at all” to 7 “very likely” were used to measure respondents’ behavioral intentions. Questions included “How likely are you to check the health inspection score at a restaurant before eating?” or “How likely are you to read online reviews of restaurants such as YELP?” or “avoid eating at restaurants?” Coefficient alpha for this scale was found to be .69.

Demographics were measured using several questions about various characteristics of the respondent. Participants were asked to self-report their age as a continuous variable. They were also asked to self-report their sex. Participants were asked to report their race by choosing from the following list: “African American,” “Caucasian,” “Latino/Hispanic,” “Asian American,” “Native American,” and “Other.”

A total of 245 completed surveys were used in the analysis. There were 117 participants who indicated they were female and 122 indicating they were male, with 6 not providing an answer to the question. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (74.6%), along with 25 (10.2%) self-identifying as African American, 23 participants (9.4%) self-identifying as Asian, 11 (4.5%) indicating Latino/Hispanic, and 3 (1.2%) selecting the “other” category. The mean age of the sample was 21.0 ($SD = 4.7$).

Results

In order to explore differences across conditions, a series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) examined variability in the dependent variables across participants who had received only the cbsnews.com article, the cbsnews.com article with user comments, the cbsnews.com article with a local-affiliate video, or the cbsnews.com story with user comments and the local-affiliate video. These analyses were conducted separately for severity, susceptibility, behavioral intentions, and organizational reputation. Given that there was likely shared exemplification information in the conditions that featured both the article and the video, the analyses are not fully crossed but are instead limited to comparisons of individual cell means.

In terms of perceptions of severity of long-term health outcomes of eating food handled as represented in the story, a significant model emerged, $F(3, 241) = 3.572$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$. The pattern of means indicates that perceptions of severity were strongest when respondents viewed the cbsnews.com article with user comments and the local affiliate video ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.65$), followed the cbsnews.com article and local affiliate video ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.37$), the cbsnews.com article and with user comments ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.52$), and the lowest perceptions of severity were in the condition where respondents only viewed the cbsnews.com article ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.77$). Tukey post hoc tests revealed significant differences between the means for the cbsnews.com article with user comments and local-affiliate video and the cbsnews.com article conditions, $p < .05$.

A similar question examining perceptions of severity asked respondents how big of a health issue poorly prepared restaurant food was. Results indicated no differences between conditions, $F(3, 241) = 1.168$, $p = .322$. However, the pattern of means followed the same distribution as the above referenced severity question.

Concerning susceptibility, a question asked respondents how likely it is that they would eat food that had been mishandled at a restaurant. Results indicated no differences across the conditions, $F(3, 240) = 0.535, p = .659$.

A similar question examining perceptions of susceptibility asked respondents how likely it is that they would unknowingly eat meat prepared in this way. Results indicated no differences between conditions, $F(3, 241) = 2.096, p = .101$.

When examining participant behavioral intentions, a significant model was detected, $F(3, 241) = 4.397, p < .005, \eta^2 = .05$. In terms of the pattern of means, the intentions to change behavior were strongest when respondents viewed the cbsnews.com article with user comments and the local-affiliate video ($M = 4.02, SD = 1.03$), followed the cbsnews.com article with user comments ($M = 3.96, SD = 0.97$), the cbsnews.com article and local-affiliate video ($M = 3.82, SD = 1.18$), and respondents reported the least intention to change behavior when seeing only the cbsnews.com article ($M = 3.38, SD = 1.09$). Tukey post hoc tests revealed significant differences between the cbsnews.com article condition, the cbsnews.com article and user comments, and cbsnews.com article, local-affiliate video, and user comments, $p < .05$.

A similar pattern of means was detected for organizational reputation, $F(3, 238) = 4.831, p < .01, \eta^2 = .06$. For the organizational reputation scale, the organization was rated least favorably when respondents viewed the cbsnews.com article with user comments and the local-affiliate video ($M = 2.27, SD = 0.59$), then the condition where participants viewed the cbsnews.com article and user comments, ($M = 2.39, SD = 0.69$), followed the cbsnews.com article and local-affiliate video ($M = 2.62, SD = 0.64$), and participants indicated the highest level of reputation when seeing only the cbsnews.com article ($M = 2.66, SD = 0.73$). Tukey post hoc tests revealed significant differences between the means for the cbsnews.com article with user comments and the local-affiliate video, the cbsnews.com article and local-affiliate video, and the cbsnews.com article, $p < .05$.

Discussion

The detected differences in intentions, perceptions of severity, and organizational reputation are consistent with exemplification theory and also highlight the importance of user-generated content following a news story. Research Question 1 asked the extent to which exemplars present in user comments after a news story produce effects consistent with exemplification theory. The condition with the cbsnews.com article and user comments was similar to that of the condition with the article and local-affiliate video highlighting the ability of exemplars in user comments to drive perceptions and intentions to change behavior.

Research Question 2 addressed the extent to which exemplars in user comments following a news story could influence perceptions of severity, susceptibility, and intentions to change behavior. Perceptions of severity were highest when respondents viewed the cbsnews.com article with user comments and the local-affiliate video and perceptions of severity were lowest in the condition where respondents only viewed the cbsnews.com article. The condition with the cbsnews.com article and user comments was similar to that of the condition with the cbsnews.com article and local-affiliate video. These findings support what is known about how exemplars can drive people's judgments and estimations of organizations. Perception were weakest where participants only viewed base-rate information; however, the presence of a video and/or user-generated comments containing exemplars pushed perceptions. Similar results were found for intentions to change behavior where intentions were lowest in the cbsnews.com (base rate) condition.

For perceptions of susceptibility to the risk, there were no differences found between the groups. This is a finding that is consistent with previous research (Spence et al., 2015) and may be explained through the experimental procedure itself. If individuals indicate that they are likely to change their behaviors after exposure to the exemplified portrayals, then it is reasonable to believe that they do not see themselves as susceptible to the problem. Stated in other words, if a person believes they will take actions to avoid a risk, they should see themselves as less susceptible to that risk. Because this finding has been replicated, future research should look at levels of response efficacy associated with

behavioral intentions to provide further support for this argument. It would be worth examining whether risk avoidance, coupled with response efficacy, drives a predictable reduction in perceived susceptibility.

The third research question addressed the issue of the extent to which exemplars in user comments could influence perceptions of organizational reputation. Perceptions of the reputation of the organization (in this case a San Francisco Restaurant) also followed the distribution of exemplars. Participants in the cbsnews.com condition (base rate) had the most positive perception of reputation, with the lowest perceptions of reputation emerging in the condition with the cbsnews.com article with user comments and the video. The condition with the cbsnews.com article and user comments caused respondents to perceive the organization less favorably than the condition with the local-affiliate video. These findings again support exemplification theory. Vivid, concrete, and emotional portrayals even when only present in user comments impact the perceptions and actions of the public. Organizational reputation is diminished when exemplars align negatively with the organization's products, services, or interaction with other stakeholders.

Practical implications

The findings from this study both extend theory and provide data-based support for recommendations to organizations and public relations practitioners. First, the findings show that organizations and PR practitioners must not only monitor news stories but should also monitor user comments on those stories. In most of the conditions of the study, the exemplified user comments had equal or greater ability as the video to drive people's perceptions of the organization, issue severity, and intentions to change behavior. Often, when monitoring the media for potential issues, the focus is on traditional news stories (in print, online, or video). A factual story with no exemplars may be a nuisance to an organization, but it is unlikely to have a significant impact on the public. The current results indicate that the presence of user comments on a story can have a strong influence on people's perceptions of the story in much the same way and strength that a vivid video can influence public perception. Therefore, monitoring user comments should be part of a best practice in public relations and crisis communication. Monitoring user comments can be seen as an opportunity to engage in dialogue with the public, and, more importantly, it can be viewed as another channel through which to engage the public.

Previous research has indicated that engaging the public in dialogue responding to exemplified criticism is effective. For example, third-party endorsements provided by an industry association countering exemplified news coverage and consumer alarm were seen to reduce perceptions of severity and improve the afflicted organization's reputation (Spence et al., 2016). Similarly, organizations have a better opportunity to refute exemplified perceptions if they respond through the same media through which the criticism was communicated. This was highlighted when Domino's Pizza experienced criticism surrounding a hoax video posted on YouTube appearing to show food being contaminated in a Domino's restaurant before being served. The Domino's organization saw little positive reaction from consumers when responding through traditional public relations communication channels. When Domino's posted its own video on YouTube directly refuting the claim made in the hoax video and actively engaged in Twitter dialogue with messages of clarification and refutation, the company saw a favorable response from consumers and earned praise from media sources covering the story (Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012). PR practitioners should address criticism through dialogue using whatever channels of communication are being used by the publics during the crisis (Lachlan & Spence, 2014).

Most importantly, simply documenting stories from traditional forms of news coverage as well as blogs and other forms of new media is not sufficient for an effective PR response. Viewing and responding to the actual comments made by readers in response to news stories and other forms of exemplified coverage may be essential (Lin, Spence, & Lachlan, 2016). When exemplars are present, these comments carry considerable influence and must be acknowledged. Any assumption that the

influence of exemplification is limited to highly visual formats is incorrect and misleading. PR practitioners would be wise to make certain that comments posted on relevant Web sites are a consistent component of their environmental scanning and issues management.

Public relations should not be considered as something “only big company’s worry about.” The restaurant in this study was not part of a large franchise and had a geographically limited public. If the restaurant loses reputation with that public, there is no other group of customers to attract. Thus, small organizations need to see PR as part of their responsibilities. Small organization can also look at this geographically limited public as an opportunity. Communicating through an issue similar to the one outlined in the experiment may provide opportunities for renewal, strengthening existing ties or making new relationships (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007). This may be easier for a smaller, geographically limited organization. Channels for viewing coverage and comments related to the crisis may be more focused, allowing local organizations to react quickly. Existing networks with customers, normally used for advertising via social media, may also allow for a more tailored response by local organizations to stories with exemplified content. Previous research has shown that tailoring messages to specific geographical audiences in response to crises can enhance their positive impact (Sellnow, Sellnow, Lane, & Littlefield, 2012). Moreover, establishing and maintaining such local networks prior to a crisis event also serves as a best practice for precrisis planning (Seeger, 2006).

Limitation and future directions

The mean age of the sample highlights that predominantly college students participated in the experiment and research indicates several potential limitations related to the use of college or convenience samples (Sears, 1986). However, the issue involved, specifically restaurant food handling, is something that is likely to affect people regardless of age.

It also would have been advantageous to create a condition with the presence of user-generated comments that contained no exemplars. The simple presence of comments from others may serve as a heuristic indicating that the subject discussed (the handling of food) potentially was a threat, because people were making it a topic of discussion. In future research, it would be useful to add a condition with the presence of inconsequential comments to determine if this is a possibility.

This and other similar research is adding to the knowledge that exemplars do not have to be embedded within news stories or other longer accounts to produce effects consistent with what would be predicted by exemplification theory. Social media is becoming a source where people directly obtain their news (Lachlan, Spence, Lin, & Del Greco, 2014; Pew Research, 2016). People make decisions about what to read, source credibility, and other issues based off cues from various factors (Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen, & Alter, 2005; Lin, Spence, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2016; Yang, 2016). Therefore, user-generated comments and the presence of exemplified comments are possibly more influential on judgments and estimations than what is demonstrated by the results of this study. Particularly given the ability of bandwagon effects and the absence of gatekeepers. User-generated comments have the ability to contain any information desired by the person posting with only other users available to filter or comment on the content (Spence, Lachlan, Westerman, & Spates, 2013). Future research may, therefore, examine how the effect of a headline and comments only impact the judgments of readers, specifically in relation to exemplification.

An area not examined in this study is how the act of responding to user-generated comments impacts exemplification effects. Previous research has outlined that message ordering and third-party responses have the ability to reduce exemplification effects, but the next step in this line of research is to determine the effectiveness of organizations engaging in conversations on the comments section of news stories.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to test the boundaries of exemplification theory and to expand understanding of how user comments on news stories contribute to the construction of an issues crisis. This examination was then used to support a discussion of how public relations professionals should devote more attention and energy to the role that user comments can play in the development of public perceptions. Results of the experiment supported the propositions of exemplification theory; severity, behavioral intentions, and organizational reputation all followed the distribution of exemplars. It is clear that the use of exemplars in user comments on news stories may have a significant influence on public perceptions surrounding a story. The findings underscore how important it is to monitor user comments in news stories. Monitoring user comments should be seen as a standard practice for organizations.

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