

Word-of-Mouth Motives: Why Brand Users and Non-Brand Users Talk about a Brand
Transgression

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate (a) brand consumers' and non-brand users' motives word-of-mouth behaviors and (b) the joint effects of situational perceptual variables and word-of-mouth motives on brand and non-brand users' information forwarding. To do so, two surveys among Singaporeans using a fictional workplace gender discrimination crisis context were conducted, one for brand users (N=461) and another for non-brand users (N=277). Scales were developed based on Berger's (2014) conceptualization of word-of-mouth motives, and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with principal component analysis (PCA) were conducted to validate the scales. Findings from hierarchical multiple regression analysis indicated that non-brand users' information forwarding behavior is driven by two impression management motives (entertainment and identity signaling) and altruism. Meanwhile, brand users' information forwarding behavior is driven by impression management (entertainment) motive, altruism, and vengeance. Additionally, the referent criteria was a significant predictor of non-brand users' and brand users' information forwarding (149 words).

Keywords: altruism, impression management, information forwarding, non-brand users, situational theory of problem solving, venting, vengeance, word of mouth motives

Word-of-Mouth Motives:

Why Brand Users and Non-Brand Users Talk about a Brand Transgression

People often share their thoughts and opinions with their social networks. They talk about many topics and issues, including product-related information, shopping experiences, or political issues. With the technological advances we see today, particularly related to social media, the content of people's posts on social media has the potential to spread through their social networks, and impact others' perceptions of those topics and issues. When such content is related to a brand or a company, it has the potential to impact other people's impressions about brands (Berger, 2014). Specifically, negative word of mouth often starts as a form of consumers' complaining behavior about a certain product or service (Hirschman, 1970; Singh, 1988), reflecting consumers' dissatisfaction with a company's products or services. Such negative word of mouth, therefore, is often related to 'directly affected' consumers.

However, as digital media technologies continue to expand, companies and brands need to be cognizant not only of customer complaints as a form of negative word of mouth, but also word of mouth by those who are not directly affected by the brand or its actions. Individuals with no behavioral relationship with a brand may also want to talk about the company not based on their direct experiences, but instead based on hearsay or their observations of brand behaviors from media or other sources (Grunig & Hung, 2002; Yang & Cha, 2015). Such behaviors may severely impact corporate/brand reputations (Yang & Cha, 2015). Furthermore, when facing challenges and other forms of crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), organizations may suffer from online petitions and allegations that are driven by netizens, many of whom may be not direct customers.

As an alternative view to situational theorists' (e.g., Kim & Grunig, 2011), Hallahan (2000) argued for scholars to pay more attention to publics whose level of knowledge and

involvement is low. Yet, few studies have attempted to explain why publics with low involvement in an organization, such non-brand users, may become active communicators against the organization in times of a crisis. This present study is an attempt to fill this gap. Specifically, unanswered in extant research is why non-related and/or less involved individuals engage in negative communication behaviors against an organization in a crisis despite their low level of involvement. To answer this question, we examine individuals' motives for engaging in negative communication behaviors, with the following research questions guiding our inquiry:

RQ1: What word-of-mouth motives are most salient in non-brand users' information forwarding behavior intention?

RQ1-2: How do non-brand users' motives differ from brand users'?

To answer these research questions we investigate how two segments of the general population for a brand, i.e., brand users and non-brand users, perceive and react to an organizational crisis, focusing on their motives for engaging in word-of-mouth behaviors. By integrating two theoretical approaches, Kim and Grunig's (2011) situational theory of problem solving and Berger' (2014) conceptualization of word of mouth and interpersonal communication motives, we examine how different types of word of mouth motives can explain both non-brand users' and brand users' information forwarding behavior about an organizational crisis. In addition, word of mouth motives may serve as reasons behind publics' communication behaviors, beyond Kim and Grunig's (2011) situational perceptual and cognitive factors. The next section provides a review of the theoretical framework upon which this study is built.

Literature review

Understanding Publics in the Context of Organizational Crisis

As a critical function of an organization, crisis management aims to prevent or mitigate threats to the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Among the several key contributors to the body of knowledge on crisis communication, Benoit's (1995; 1997; 2000; 2004) image-repair strategies and Coombs' situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2006; 2007) are seminal works for communication and public relations scholars. These seminal works mainly focus on organizations' crisis response strategies to mitigate the reputational threat of a crisis (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Zhang & Benoit, 2004). Accordingly, much crisis communication scholarship has been devoted to understanding the best image repair strategies to influence publics' opinions about the organization, especially during crisis (Wan & Pfau, 2004). As several scholars have pointed out, however, publics' communicative responses to organizational crises are still underexplored in the area of crisis communication and management strategies (e.g., Krishna & Vibber, 2017).

It is, therefore, important for an organization to have a good understanding of its publics and potential consequences of crises on organizational effectiveness and organization-public relationships. Organizational crises in particular often elicit negative responses from diverse segments of publics. An area still unexplored in our scholarship is non-brand users' communicative reactions to an organizational crisis. Trump (2014) found that when a brand transgression occurs, people will evaluate the brand negatively and engage in punitive action, regardless of the relevance of the brand action to themselves. A question that remains unanswered is what motivates those with no relevance to the brand action, i.e., non-brand users in our study, to communicate about the brand. Are brand users and non-brand users driven by the same motives in engaging in communicative behaviors? To better understand users' and non-users' communicative reactions to a crisis, we propose an integration of Kim and Grunig's (2011) situational theory of problem solving (hereinafter STOPS) and Berger's (2014) conceptualization of word of mouth motives. While we believe

that STOPS has merit in explaining publics' communication behaviors in both active and passive forms, its premise does not explain people's hidden personal motives behind their active communication behaviors.

The STOPS is a communication theory that explains publics' communication behaviors (Kim & Krishna, 2014), encompassing three types of communicative actions, information selection, information acquisition, and information transmission (Kim, Grunig & Ni, 2009). Each of these three communicative actions area conceptualized to have an active and a passive dimension. Together, the six communicative behaviors constitute communicative action in problem solving, the dependent variable of the STOPS. Publics' activeness in engaging in communication behaviors is driven by their situational perceptions, namely, problem recognition, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition, which affect their situational motivation in problem solving.

Individuals' communicative actions, according to the STOPS model, are predicted by their situational motivation in problem solving and the referent criteria. Situational motivation in problem solving is defined as the "a state of situation-specific cognitive and epistemic readiness to make problem-solving efforts—that is, to decrease the perceived discrepancy between the expected and experiential states" (Kim & Grunig, 2011, p. 132). Situational motivation in problem solving sums up the effect of the three perceptual variables (problem, constraint, and involvement recognition) and may be utilized as a proxy for the three perceptual variables (Krishna, 2017a). The referent criteria refers to "knowledge or subjective judgmental system that influences the way in which one approaches problem solving" (Kim & Grunig, 2011, p. 131). Recalling available, applicable, and relevant experiences and knowledges helps publics' communicative actions in problem solving. Those recyclable knowledge or experiences work as "decisional guidelines" or "decision rules" for problem solving behavior (Kim & Grunig, 2011, p. 131).

Given the purpose of this research, to understand individuals' word of mouth behaviors and the motives behind such behaviors, Kim, Grunig and Ni's (2009) variable information forwarding formed the focus of this study. Information forwarding is the proactive dimension of information transmission, one of the three categories of communicative action in problem solving. Active information givers forward information voluntarily and intentionally to others without being solicited for such information (Kim & Grunig, 2011). It is a form of "planned, self-propelled information giving to others" (p. 127). Kim and Grunig (2011) suggested that the purpose of information forwarding evolves from problem giving to problem and solution forwarding.

Kim and Grunig (2011) argued that involvement recognition is not necessarily an actual connection or involvement to the problematic situation. Therefore, publics' involvement recognition about a problematic situation may have nothing to do with their actual lives. Instead, involvement recognition refers to publics' *perceived connection* to the issue. Therefore, even those not directly affected by the issue or the crisis may be motivated to engage in problem solving behavior as long as their perception of their involvement in the issue is high. Similarly, problem recognition and constraint recognition are conceptualized as individuals' (publics') subjective perceptions, and therefore may predict *both* brand users and non-brand users' information forwarding behavior. Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are posited:

H1: Brand users' (a) and non-brand users' (b) problem recognition is associated with their information forwarding.

H2: Brand users' (a) and non-brand users' (b) involvement recognition is associated with their information forwarding.

H3: Brand users' (a) and non-brand users' (b) constraint recognition is negatively associated with their information forwarding

Although scholars have argued for more attention to be paid to individuals with differentiated levels of knowledge about a given issue (e.g., Hallahan, 2000; Krishna, 2017b), social and digital technologies allow individuals to have access to vast quantities of information. In the context of organizational crises, people learn about the crises very quickly due to the power of social media. Additionally, increased exposure to different kinds of organizational crises over time via traditional and social media may afford individuals opportunities build a knowledge base related to organizational crises. It would logically follow, therefore, that when faced with information related to a new crisis, such individuals will activate their pre-existing knowledge (Higgins, 1996) and apply it to a new crisis, and proactively forward information about the crisis to their social networks. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

H4: Brand users' (a) and non-brand users' (b) referent criteria is associated with their information forwarding

Although the STOPS model helps explicate the situational perceptions which encourage users and non-users to communicate about an issue, individuals' motives behind engaging in information forwarding remain underexplored. Understanding individuals' motives behind engaging in negative communication behaviors about an organization in crisis may help organizations frame more effective responses that may mitigate the negative word-of-mouth behaviors. However, to do so, it would be important for organizations to also understand how non-brand users' behaviors and motives differ from users'. By integrating issue-specific variables (situational perceptual and cognitive variables) and individuals' personal factors (i.e. their word of mouth motives), we believe that we can complement previous research explaining publics' communication behaviors. In following subsection, we explore the literature on word-of-mouth motives.

Motives of Negative Word-of-Mouth Behaviors

Word of mouth is an important aspect of consumer behavior research (Park & Kim, 2009; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004), and yet little research addresses what drives people's word-of-mouth behavior. In discussing why people talk and what people talk about in his research review piece, Berger (2014) suggested that word of mouth has several functions, such as impression management, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding, and persuading others. More importantly, Berger (2014) suggested that these motives are self-serving rather than other-serving. Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster (1998) also proposed eight types of consumer word of mouth. Those eight are altruism (for positive word of mouth), product involvement, self-enhancement, altruism (for negative word of mouth), helping the company, anxiety reduction, vengeance and advice seeking.

Considering the context of organizational crisis, we paid special attention to categories of motives identified in extant research, namely impression management (identity signalling), impression management (entertainment), emotional regulation (venting) and emotional regulation (vengeance), and altruism (negative word of mouth). First, Berger (2014) suggested that word of mouth facilitates impression management through self-enhancement. People would like to be perceived positively and as a result, tend to share certain things that they believe would garner positive impressions among their social networks. Their information gift giving in the form of opinion or advice is driven by people's status seeking (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007). For example, opinion leaders often talk more and share more (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1995) as they are interested in displaying their knowledge and expertise to others, and reinforcing their identities as experts to others (Berger, 2014). Applying this logic to an organizational crisis, we contend that publics may want to talk about the crisis to make themselves appear smart and knowledgeable about the crisis.

Berger (2014) also posited that people want to talk about entertaining things as part of their impression management efforts, as sharing information in an entertaining way makes the information sharer sound interesting or funny. Interesting products (Berger & Schwartz, 2011, as cited in Berger, 2014), controversial topics (Chen & Berger, 2013), surprising things (Berger & Milkman, 2012), and extreme issues are more likely to be shared by people.

Individuals also use word of mouth to regulate their emotions (Berger, 2014). They manage their emotions to vent (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998 as cited in Berger, 2014) or to take vengeance (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009, as cited in Berger, 2014). Expressing negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or frustration provides catharsis and helps individuals feel better after talking with others (Berger, 2014). When consumers are outraged by a brand transgression, they may also want to harm the company by actively avoiding the company's brand (Lindenmeier, Schleer, & Pricl, 2012), or by spreading negative messages that discredit the company (Romani, Grappi, & Bagozzi, 2013).

Finally, an other-serving (vs. self-serving) motive that has been discussed in the literature is altruism. Altruism as a motive has received support from previous literature for decades (e.g., Bach & Kim, 2012; Dichter, 1966; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Sundaram et al., 1998). Although Berger (2014) argued that sharing useful information may be considered self-enhancing rather than altruistic, previous research has suggested that people want to help others make good decisions (Sundaram et al., 1998). Sundaram et al. (1998) suggested that there are two types of altruism, one is for positive word of mouth and the other is for negative word of mouth.

Berger's (2014) and Sundaram et al.'s (1998) notion of word-of-mouth motives is also relevant to individuals' negative word-of-mouth behavior in a crisis situation. The phenomenon itself (i.e., negative word-of-mouth behavior about an organization during a

crisis) may seem homogeneous. However, the motives behind such behaviors may be heterogeneous depending on the type of consumers and/or type of consumer-brand relationship. To explain, brand users' negative word-of-mouth behaviors may be driven by their need to extract vengeance, and/or to vent (motive for emotion regulation) as they are directly affected by the crisis. Furthermore, brand users who have had negative experiences with a certain brand before are willing to provide advice to discourage others from using the brand (Bach & Kim, 2012).

However, non-brand users' motives for engaging in negative word-of-mouth behaviors may be different, as their level of involvement with the brand and with the crisis situation is likely to be minimal. Yet, non-brand users may be willing to spread negative information about the firm in a crisis due to their own motives, such as impression management. By sharing controversial, yet entertaining information with others, such individuals may aim at shaping the impressions others have of them. When it comes to organizational crisis, people might want to engage in word of mouth about the crisis as it might be controversial or surprising. Consider the online fury experienced by United Airlines after their recent debacle where a passenger was violently reaccommodated. Self-enhancement is known as a fundamental human motivation (Fiske, 2001). Beyond making themselves look good, people also may like to communicate their identities, such as marketing mavens or industry experts, by sharing their knowledge or expertise. Therefore, drawing upon Berger's (2014) theoretical framework, we posit the following hypotheses:

H5. Non-brand users' negative word-of-mouth behaviors against an organization will be driven by their motives of altruism (H5a) identity signaling (H5b) and entertainment (H5c) for impression management.

H6. Brand users' negative word of mouth against an organization will be driven by their motives of vengeance (H6a) and venting (H6b) for emotion regulation, and by a motive of altruism (H6c).

Method

Data Collection

In order to test the proposed hypotheses, survey data were collected using an online research panel through Qualtrics. Two separate surveys were conducted, one for brand users and the other for non-brand users, in December 2016 among Singaporeans. Besides the question about brand use, all other survey items were identical. Respondents who participated in one survey could not enter the other survey.

A total of 461 brand users responded to the survey, of which 93 were between the ages 20 to 29, 109 participants were between 30 to 39 years old, 115 were between 40 and 49 years old, 103 individuals were between 50 and 59 years old, and 41 participants were over 60 years of age. Of the participants, 228 self-reported being male and 233 said they identified as female, reflecting the population distribution of Singapore (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2015).

As for non-brand users, a total of 277 participants responded to the survey. Ninety-two were between ages 20 to 29, 92 participants were between 30 to 39 years old, 53 were between 40 and 49 years old, 32 were between 50 and 59 years old, and 8 were over 60 years old. Of the sample, 141 reported being male and 136 identified as female.

Survey Procedures

For the non-brand users' survey for non-brand users, participants were asked to select one of four brands that they do not use at all or rarely use. The four brands were Apple, Adidas, Dell, and Nestle. If they reported "I use all" their survey participation was terminated.

For the brand users' survey, each respondent was asked to choose one of the four brands that they often use. If they reported "I don't use any", they were redirected to the survey exit.

The four brands, Apple, Adidas, Dell, and Nestle were chosen after careful consideration of their ranking across various reputational indices. In order to minimize the effect of any confounding factors, high ranking brands across various reputational indices, including Business Insider and Forbes, were selected.

Once participants had selected a brand that they either do not use (for non-brand users) or often use (for brand users), they were asked to respond to a series of questions related to their demographics and their attitudes toward the selected after. Once these measures had been completed, participants were exposed to the following vignette:

After shopping, you enter a coffee shop. While reading a newspaper over coffee, you come across a news article stating that several global companies have been accused of gender discrimination at top management level. These companies face the potential of being sued for discriminating against women in employing and promoting them to the corporations' top management. Reporters also uncovered significant salary/wage gaps between the women and the men in the companies, with men being paid a lot more than the women. In the news article, Amnesty International argued that these companies have intentionally discriminated against women to save costs and maximize profits. One of the companies implicated in this article is [Adidas, Nestle, Dell, Apple].

The respondents were allowed 25 seconds to complete reading this vignette, which was followed by more questions related to their information behaviors, situational perceptions, and motives. Prior to survey completion, participants were asked to confirm that they understood that the contents of the vignette were entirely fictional.

Measures

The design of the survey and operationalization of various constructs were made based on extant literature. All items were measured using a Likert-type scale, running from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

Word-of-mouth motives. As there are no validated measures for word-of-mouth motives, we developed measures by referring to Berger's (2014) work on conceptualization of word of mouth motives. Statements were created based on Berger's (2014) categories of word of mouth motives, such as impression management (identity signaling) and emotion regulation (venting), including "I would be motivated to share my opinions about this crisis to sound more intelligent", "I would be motivated to share my opinions about this issue to sound like an expert on this crisis" (See Table 1 for details).

[Insert Table 1]

Problem recognition. Based on Kim and Grunig's (2011) situational theory of problem solving, the following statements were asked: "this crisis is a serious social problem," "the company should deal with this crisis more seriously" and "there should be serious efforts to address this crisis."

Involvement recognition. To measure involvement recognition, we also revised Kim and Grunig's (2011) items for the purpose of this study. The following items were used: "this crisis is significantly related to me," "this issue potentially affects my family members/friends," and "I am connected with this problem and its consequences."

Constraint recognition. We adopted and revised Gregoire, Laufer, and Tripp's (2010) items to measure constrain recognition. Kim and Grunig (2011) use the reversed items of constraint recognition. As perceived consumer power is an opposite concept to constraint recognition in the context of consumer publics' behavior, we found Gregoire, Laufer, and Tripp's (2010) items as suitable to measure constraint recognition related to corporations. The following items were used: "I feel I have leverage over the brand," "I feel I have the

ability to influence the decisions and/or behaviors of the brand,” and “I am confident that I am able to get my way with the brand.”

Referent criteria. To measure referent criteria, the following statements were used: “I know how to proceed about addressing this crisis,” “I strongly support a certain way of resolving this crisis,” “past experience provides me with guidelines for solving this crisis.”

Information forwarding. To measure information forwarding behavior intention about a crisis, we adopted and revised Kim and Grunig’s (2011) statements as follows: “I am likely to spend time discussing this issue with someone I do not know well,” “I am likely to discuss this crisis with my family and/or friends,” and “I am likely to have conversations about this crisis with others.”

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 23. First, Cronbach’s alpha for all observed variables were calculated to ensure reliability of the measurement items. All variables were found to have a Cronbach’s alpha of $>.70$, with the lowest being $.76$ and the highest being $.96$ (see Table 1 for Cronbach’s alpha values). To test the validity of the constructs of word-of-mouth motives, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal component analysis (PCA) and Oblimin rotation were performed. Following this analysis, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted.

Results

Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analyses were conducted to validate the measurement items of word of mouth motives. Sixteen items related to word-of-mouth motives were subjected to EFA using PCA with Oblimin rotation method. Analyses of the non-brand users’ survey showed that the Kaiser-Meyser-Okin value was $.788$ for the PCA of word-of-mouth motives. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) reached statistical significance ($\chi^2(105) =$

2678.737, $p < .001$), supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix. PCA of word of mouth motives revealed the presence of five components with eigenvalue exceeding 1, explaining 80.73 of the variance. As shown in Table 2, standard factor loadings range from .76 to .94. Regarding validity, 80.73 % of the total variance suggests that this scale has sound explanatory power in explicating word-of-mouth motives (Table 2).

[Insert Table 2]

The survey for brand users also yielded similar results. The Kaiser-Meysler-Oklin value was .910 for the PCA of word-of-mouth motives. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) reached statistical significance ($\chi^2(120) = 6818.729, p < .001$). PCA of word of mouth motives also revealed the presence of five components with eigenvalue exceeding 1, explaining 84.80 of the variance. As shown in Table 3, standard factor loadings range from .72 to .96. High values for total variance, i.e., 82.11% of the total variance, show that this scale has high level of validity (Table 3).

[Insert Table 3]

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis

To answer the research questions, we conducted hierarchical multiple regression analysis for the non-brand users' and brand users' surveys respectively. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to examine the relationships among the four independent variables from Kim and Grunig's (2011) situational theory of problem solving (problem recognition, involvement recognition, constraint recognition, and referent criterion), five different types of word of motives, and information forwarding behavior. We controlled for brand attitude and brand choice.

For non-brand users, situational perceptual frames accounted for 14.8% ($p < .001$) of incremental variance for information forwarding. These increments led to 15.1% of total variance for information forwarding. In individual contribution, involvement recognition (B

= .177, SE = .053, $p < .05$) (H2) and referent criteria ($B = .257$, SE = .064, $p < .001$) (H4) were significant predictors of information forwarding. H2 and H4 were supported while H1 and H3 were not supported. As a next step, five different types of word of mouth motives were entered into the equation. In this analysis, altruism ($B = .237$, SE = .063, $p < .001$; H5a), impression management motive (identity signalling) ($B = .144$, SE = .051, $p < .05$; H5b), and impression management motive (entertainment) ($B = .246$, SE = .051, $p < .001$; H5c) were significant. H5a, b and c were therefore supported. This model accounted for 29.8% of the total variance (Table 4).

[Insert Table 4]

The data for brand users also exhibited similar patterns. On entering situational perceptual frames at Step 2 of the model predicting information forwarding, the R square change was .284 ($p < .001$). Both involvement recognition ($B = .379$, SE = .046, $p < .05$) (H2) and referent criterion ($B = .210$, SE = .055, $p < .001$) (H4) were significant predictors of information forwarding. Similar to non-brand users, H2 and H4 were supported for brand users while H1 and H3 were not. At Step 3, five word of mouth motives were entered. These five types of word-of-mouth motives added 21.3% additional variance to the total variance. In this analysis, emotion regulation (vengeance) motive ($B = .166$, SE = .036, $p < .001$) (H6a), impression management (entertainment) motive ($B = .283$, SE = .046, $p < .001$), and altruism motives ($B = .127$, SE = .046, $p < .05$) (H6c) were significant. Hence, H6a and H6c were supported (Table 5). H6b was not supported while impression management (entertainment) was an unexpected finding. This model accounted for 50.7% of total variance.

[Insert Table 5]

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to investigate (a) brand consumers' and non-brand users' motives for discussing organizational crises and (b) the joint effects of situational

perceptual variables and word of mouth motives on brand and non-brand users' information forwarding behavior. Surveys conducted with brand users and non-users revealed interesting patterns of cognitions and behaviors. First, for both users and non-users, involvement recognition and referent criteria were the only situation-specific perceptual variables that were significantly associated with information forwarding about the crisis. Second, while non-users tended to engage in word-of-mouth behaviors to signal their identities, for entertainment, and for altruism, brand users did so to extract vengeance from the brand, for entertainment, and from an altruistic motive. The implications of this work are detailed next.

Explicating Motives of Low Involvement Publics

This research represents one of the first attempts to explore differences between non-brand users and brand users' situational perceptions and motives for engaging in communication behaviors about a brand in crisis. Although there is an impressive body of knowledge that has investigated issue-specific publics related to crises (e.g., Lee, 2004; Liu, Austin & Jin, 2011), few studies have parsed out how such publics' motives impact their communication behaviors. Furthermore, few studies have attempted to differentiate between and compare the traits of consumer and non-consumer publics. In doing so, this study presents a theoretically grounded explanation of why less involved individuals may be motivated to engage in information forwarding about a crisis. Our findings indicate that non-brand users, i.e., individuals with low levels of involvement with a transgression-related crisis, are likely to talk about a crisis to others in order to garner favorable and positive impressions about themselves. By talking about a brand transgression (gender discrimination crisis in this study), non-brand users seem to want to enhance their image and to signal their identities as being smart and intelligent.

Meanwhile brand users were found to have a different motive – emotion regulation via vengeance. As consumers of a brand, brand users are may perceive more closeness to the

brand transgression than are non-users, may be motivated to take punitive action against the brand. Examining how consumers' expectations of the brand in terms of corporate behavior may impact these motives to engage in word-of-mouth behavior may be a worthy area of future research. Interestingly, both non-brand users and brand users' information forwarding was found to be driven by altruism and a desire for impression management (entertainment).

Unpacking the Impact of Situational Variables

Besides word of mouth motives, the impact of situational variables on information forwarding was also examined. Involvement recognition and the referent criteria were the only situational variables that were found to be significant in predicting information forwarding. The fact that neither problem recognition nor constraint recognition were significant predictors of information forwarding represents an interesting finding for public relations theory-building. In light of the various studies that have shown the all the situational variables have an impact on all six communicative actions conceptualized in the STOPS (e.g., Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim, Ni, Kim & Kim, 2012; Krishna, 2017a), this finding is indicative of a need to further examine the communication behaviors individually to understand the differentiated impact of the various situational variables on the communicative actions independently.

Another interesting finding is the role of the referent criteria in explaining publics' communicative action about an organizational crisis. Along with involvement recognition, the referent criteria was a significant factor. The dynamics between referent criteria and word of mouth motives make sense: When individuals have recyclable knowledge from a similar, previously known crisis, they may utilize such knowledge as a frame to make sense of the crisis situation and be more motivated to enhance their self-image and perhaps help others by forwarding this information among their social networks. According to Kim and Grunig (2011), referent criteria can be considered "wishful thinking or willful thinking toward an end

state in problem solving” (p. 131). In the context of organizational crisis, people might have strong wishful thinking about the crisis dissolution which affects their behaviors.

Integrating the Situational Theory of Problem Solving and Word of Mouth Motives

This study contributes to the body of knowledge related to crisis communication and management shifting scholars’ attention from an organization-centric approach to a public-centric approach. More importantly, this study provided insights regarding consumers’ motives for engaging in negative word of mouth behaviors in conjunction with their situational perceptions. Our findings revealed the importance of prior knowledge and involvement recognition as well as altruistic, impression management and emotion-related motives in predicting the likelihood of information forwarding behaviors. Future research should examine the interactions between situational perceptions and motives in predicting publics’ communicative action to add to our understanding of the dynamics between situational and cross-situational factors.

This study has a few limitations. First, the sample size for each dataset was different, and we therefore make no comparative claims. Second, the scales for word of mouth motives were not exhaustive. Future scholarship may work toward improving and developing more comprehensive scales. Third, the proposed theoretical model should be tested in different crisis contexts to validate the findings of this study. Additionally, the operationalization of information behaviors as conceptualized in the STOPS is without valence. Scholars may want to develop scales to measure likelihood of negative information forwarding to get more nuanced results. And finally, there is some level of unexplained variance that the models did not account. Future scholarship may work toward unearthing other variables that explain publics’ information forwarding behavior. Despite these limitations, the findings reported in this study present key points of interest for public relations scholars and practitioners.

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Tables

Table 1. *Measurement Items of Word-of-Motives*

| Item / Reliability | Content | Non-users (N=277) | | Brand users (N=461) | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-------|------------------------|-------|
| | | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| Self enhancing (Identity signaling) (Non user: $\alpha=.894$) (Brand user: $\alpha=.917$) | I would be motivated to share my opinions about this issue to sound more intelligent. | 2.90 | 1.045 | 3.19 | .928 |
| | I would be motivated to share my opinions about this issue to sound like an expert on this issue. | 2.73 | 1.095 | 3.02 | .918 |
| | I would be motivated to talk about this crisis as it will make me sound smart | 3.05 | 1.057 | 3.19 | .915 |
| Self enhancing (Entertainment) (Non user: $\alpha=.764$) (Brand user: $\alpha=.882$) | I would be motivated to talk about this issue with others for entertaining conversation | 3.13 | 1.033 | 3.14 | .967 |
| | I would be motivated to talk about this issue with others because it is surprising | 3.31 | .928 | 3.21 | .930 |
| | I would be motivated to talk about this issue with others because it is interesting | 3.37 | .971 | 3.25 | .900 |
| | I would be motivated to talk about this issue with others because it is controversial | 3.58 | .862 | 3.38 | .880 |
| Emotion regulation (Venting) (Non user: $\alpha=.886$) (Brand user: $\alpha=.914$) | I would be motivated to express anger about this crisis to feel better | 3.02 | 1.048 | 3.11 | .970 |
| | I would be motivated to express anger about this crisis to feel relieved | 2.86 | 1.014 | 2.00 | .976 |
| | I would be motivated to vent to my anger | 2.86 | 1.073 | 2.96 | .957 |
| Emotion regulation (Vengeance) (Non user: $\alpha=.941$) (Brand user: $\alpha=.955$) | I would be motivated to say negative things about this company to punish it | 2.72 | 1.046 | 2.76 | 1.018 |
| | I would be motivated to say negative things about this company to take revenge against it | 2.50 | .977 | 2.58 | .963 |
| | I would be motivated to say negative things about this company to give it a hard time | 2.58 | 1.066 | 2.70 | 1.012 |
| Altruism (Non user: $\alpha=.842$) (Brand user: $\alpha=.924$) | I would be motivated to share information about this crisis with others to help them | 3.63 | .831 | 3.39 | .869 |
| | I would be motivated to share information about this crisis with others to help them make better decisions about this brand in the future | 3.71 | .787 | 3.35 | .908 |
| | I would be motivated to share information about this crisis with others to help them avoid a negative experience with the brand in the future | 3.62 | .824 | 3.38 | .930 |

Table 2. *Exploratory Factor Analysis for Measurement Items of Word-of-Mouth Motives (Non-brand users)*

| Item | Pattern coefficients | | | | | Structure coefficients | | | | | Commonalities |
|-----------------|----------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|
| | Component | Component | Component | Component | Component | Component | Component | Component | Component | Component | |
| Venting 1 | .929 | | | | | .936 | -.322 | .326 | | | .880 |
| Venting 2 | .902 | | | | | .913 | | .310 | | | .843 |
| Venting 3 | .787 | | | | | .848 | -.416 | | | | .752 |
| Vengeance 3 | | -.936 | | | | .329 | -.950 | | | | .905 |
| Vengeance 1 | | -.926 | | | | .311 | -.939 | | | | .887 |
| Vengeance 2 | | -.918 | | | | .362 | -.938 | | | | .891 |
| Altruism 3 | | | .893 | | | | | .903 | | | .831 |
| Altruism 2 | | | .859 | | | | | .873 | | | .773 |
| Altruism 1 | | | .794 | | | | | .825 | | | .710 |
| Entertainment 3 | | | | .865 | | | | | .870 | | .761 |
| Entertainment 1 | | | | .837 | | | | | .826 | | .721 |
| Entertainment 2 | | | | .755 | | | | .347 | .787 | | .654 |
| Identity 2 | | | | | .922 | .411 | | | | .938 | .841 |
| Identity 1 | | | | | .918 | .360 | | | | .914 | .885 |
| Identity 3 | | | | | .851 | .359 | | | | .868 | .778 |

Note. Extraction method was Principal Component Analysis with Oblimin rotation.

Table 3. *Exploratory Factor Analysis for Measurement Items of Word-of-Mouth Motives (Brand users)*

| Item | Pattern coefficients | | | | | Structure coefficients | | | | | Commonalities |
|-----------------|----------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| | Component | Component | Component | Component | Component | Component | Component | Component | Component | Component | |
| Identity 1 | .963 | | | | | .942 | .333 | .421 | -.447 | -.579 | .889 |
| Identity 2 | .920 | | | | | .936 | .381 | .470 | -.464 | -.598 | .878 |
| Identity 3 | .772 | | | | | .893 | .355 | .464 | -.575 | -.639 | .825 |
| Vengeance 3 | | .959 | | | | .353 | .965 | .452 | -.360 | -.525 | .933 |
| Vengeance 1 | | .917 | | | | .359 | .955 | .462 | -.359 | -.562 | .916 |
| Vengeance 2 | | .916 | | | | .17 | .946 | .464 | -.381 | -.541 | .901 |
| Entertainment 3 | | | .905 | | | .415 | .415 | .900 | -.461 | -.465 | .811 |
| Entertainment 4 | | | .837 | | | .412 | .366 | .886 | -.542 | -.538 | .807 |
| Entertainment 2 | | | .735 | | | .491 | .412 | .844 | -.563 | -.515 | .741 |
| Entertainment 1 | | | .715 | | | .467 | .540 | .799 | -.342 | -.526 | .702 |
| Altruism 2 | | | | -.935 | | .487 | .368 | .504 | -.954 | -.513 | .911 |
| Altruism 3 | | | | -.891 | | .491 | .386 | .511 | -.934 | -.535 | .878 |
| Altruism 1 | | | | -.758 | | .562 | .384 | .552 | -.885 | -.566 | .811 |
| Venting 2 | | | | | -.917 | .606 | .510 | .495 | -.483 | -.933 | .872 |
| Venting 1 | | | | | -.913 | .595 | .480 | .548 | -.488 | -.928 | .866 |
| Venting 3 | | | | | -.867 | .569 | .543 | .479 | .479 | -.906 | .828 |

Note. Extraction method was Principal Component Analysis with Oblimin rotation.

Table 4. *Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Information Forwarding (Non-brand users)*

| Information Forwarding | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|------|----------------|-------|
| Predictor | β | SE | ΔR^2 | VIF |
| Step 1 | | | .003 | |
| Braid choice | -.040 | .048 | | 1.000 |
| Brand attitude | .033 | .050 | | 1.000 |
| Step 2 | | | .148*** | |
| Braid choice | .033 | .044 | | 1.005 |
| Brand attitude | -.031 | .047 | | 1.034 |
| Problem recognition | .085 | .072 | | 1.225 |
| Involvement recognition | .177** | .053 | | 1.342 |
| Constraint recognition (R) | -.015 | .060 | | 1.463 |
| Referent criterion | .257*** | .064 | | 1.318 |
| Step 3 | | | .147*** | |
| Braid choice | -.025 | .041 | | 1.043 |
| Brand attitude | .037 | .045 | | 1.102 |
| Problem recognition | -.040 | .073 | | 1.494 |
| Involvement recognition | .157 | .051 | | 1.441 |

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| | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|-------|
| Constraint recognition (R) | -.089 | .057 | 1.556 |
| Referent criterion | .146 | .065 | 1.595 |
| Identity signaling | .144 | .051 | 1.745 |
| Venting | .042 | .050 | 1.594 |
| Vengeance | -.075 | .043 | 1.283 |
| Entertainment | .246*** | .051 | 1.237 |
| Altruism | .237*** | .063 | 1.443 |
| Total R ² | | .298*** | |
| <i>n</i> | | 277 | |

Note. *p< .05, ** p< .01, *** p<.001

(R) = reversed variable

Table 5. *Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Information Forwarding (Brand users)*

| Information Forwarding | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|------|----------------|-------|
| Predictor | β | SE | ΔR^2 | VIF |
| Step 1 | | | .010 | |
| Braid choice | .084 | .031 | | 1.005 |
| Brand attitude | -.046 | .049 | | 1.005 |
| Step 2 | | | .284*** | |
| Braid choice | .080 | .026 | | 1.026 |
| Brand attitude | -.002 | .042 | | 1.061 |
| Problem recognition | -.052 | .052 | | 1.444 |
| Involvement recognition | .379*** | .046 | | 1.533 |
| Constraint recognition (R) | .052 | .061 | | 1.864 |
| Referent criterion | .210*** | .055 | | 1.734 |
| Step 3 | | | .213*** | |
| Braid choice | .070 | .022 | | 1.038 |
| Brand attitude | .004 | .036 | | 1.071 |
| Problem recognition | -.019 | .045 | | 1.481 |
| Involvement recognition | .157** | .043 | | 1.884 |

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| | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-------|
| Constraint recognition (R) | -.039 | .052 | 1.948 |
| Referent criterion | .070 | .051 | 2.100 |
| Identity signaling | .089 | .048 | 2.455 |
| Venting | .060 | .046 | 2.549 |
| Vengeance | .166*** | .036 | 1.722 |
| Entertainment | .283*** | .046 | 2.011 |
| Altruism | .127* | .046 | 2.272 |
| Total R ² | | .50.7*** | |
| <i>n</i> | | 461 | |

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

(R) = reversed variable