Responding to Negative Social Media Content: an Organizational Identification Perspective

Emergent Research Forum Paper

Quynh N. Nguyen
University of North Texas
Quynh.Nguyen@unt.edu

Anna Sidorova
University of North Texas
Anna.Sidorova@unt.edu

Abstract

Social media has transformed communication between organizations and their stakeholders. As organizations are trying to manage their identity and reputation without having full control over organization-related on-line content, the role of individual stakeholders in responding to online criticism about the organization becomes more important. Building on the organizational identification literature, this study examines the role of organizational identification in motivating stakeholder responses to organization-directed criticism on social media. The proposed research model hypothesizes a positive relationship between organizational identification and organizational members' propensity to respond to negative organization-related content in an adversarial manner. Organizational identity orientation is proposed to moderate such relationship. It is proposed that the model will be tested using survey data.

Keywords

Social media, organizational identification, identity orientation, social identity theory.

Introduction

The emergence of Web 2.0 and social media platforms in the 2000s revolutionized communication between organizations and their employees, customers, investors and other internal and external stakeholders (Aral et al. 2013). By enabling organizational stakeholders to generate organization-related content and to communicate such content to others, social media has increased the importance of interpersonal interactions across stakeholder groups (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). The growing reliance of individuals on social media for information consumption has prompted organizations to invest heavily in social media marketing in the hopes of driving user engagement and raising awareness for their company (Gensler et al. 2013). Although marketing and WOM literature offers insights into the nature of social-media interactions among broader groups of organizational stakeholders, the applicability of such research to broader contexts has its limitations. For example, it is not clear to what extent motivations for consumer WOM behavior, including concern for other consumers, social and economic incentives (Lee et al. 2012), hold for other stakeholders groups, such as employees, investors or even suppliers. Although the effect product or service reviews on buying intentions has been extensively examined (Cheung and Thadani 2012), less is known about second-order interactions, i.e. stakeholders' responses to content or comments by other stakeholders (Aral et al. 2013).

One important under-researched topic is the role of organizational identification in stakeholder on-line interactions. Although the role of organizational identification has been acknowledged as an important factor in the attitudes and behavior of organizational members (Ashforth and Mael 1989, Korschun 2015), its influence on social-media interactions among organizational stakeholders has not been explicitly examined. Boundary spanning research and social identity theory offer a novel and promising perspective for understanding social media interactions among organizational stakeholders. Indeed, social media represents a complex boundary-spanning environment, where the boundaries between personal and professional identities are blurred (Ollier-Malaterre and Berg 2013), potentially resulting in the obfuscation of the distinction between internal and external organizational stakeholders. Building on the theoretical model of organizational identification and employee relationships with external stakeholders.
Propensity to Respond to Negative Social Media Content

(Korschun 2015), this research seeks to examine the role of organizational identification in explaining stakeholders’ responses to negative organization-related content in social media. By negative organization-related social media content, we refer to substantiated or unsubstantiated online criticism of the organization, its products, actions, values, etc. Specifically, this study aims to address the following research questions:

What is the relationship between individuals' organizational identification, their propensity to respond to negative organization-related content on social media and the nature of the response?

How does organizational identity orientation moderate the relationship between individuals' organizational identification, their propensity to respond to negative organization-related content on social media and the nature of the response?

The study contributes to social media research in two ways. First, the study proposes a dependent variable, propensity to respond to negative social media content, and theorizes its relationship with individual’s organizational identification, as well as organizational identity orientation. Second, the study contextualizes organizational identity framework (Korschun 2015) to the context of social media, and the main contribution of the study is expected to arise from the empirical testing of the model.

In the remainder of the paper, we review relevant literature on organizational identification and stakeholder relationships, develop a research model and propose a set of testable hypotheses. The methodology for testing the model is outlined, and potential implications are discussed.

Literature review

Organizational Identification and Relationships among Stakeholders

Social Identity Theory predicts individual behavior based on the individual’s perceived membership in social groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986). According to the theory, individuals do not have one “personal self”, but rather several selves that correspond to their group memberships. Identification with a social group reflects the degree to which one uses a group to define oneself, and incorporates the group into the self-concept (Korschun 2015). Individuals with strong group identification view themselves not only as a unique person but also as an exemplar of a social category (Turner 1988). Group membership creates in-group self-categorization and leads to in-group favoritism. When identifying themselves as group members, individuals seeks to gain positive self-esteem by differentiating between in-group and out-group members based on some valued dimension.

Organizational identification represents a specific case of social identification and involves an integration of one’s sense of self with one’s sense of the organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989). A member’s cognitive connection with his organization is derived from his perceptions of organizational identity, i.e. the member’s beliefs of what is distinctive, central, and enduring about the organization, and construed external image, i.e. what the member believes outsiders think about the organization (Dutton et al. 1994). Organizational members whose own social identities are connected to the identity of their organizations care about how their organizations are described and perceived by other people. In the presence of perceived threats to organizational image or identity, such members would experience cognitive stress and are likely to respond by trying to positively influence their own and others’ perceptions about the organization. Members may also support their positive self-perceptions by affirming alternate dimensions of their organization’s identity (Elsbach and Kramer 1996). Organizational identification is proposed to influence the exchange behaviors between internal and external organizational stakeholders (Korschun 2015). Specifically, stronger organizational identification by employees is associated with more adversarial exchange behaviors between employees and organizational stakeholders perceived as outsiders, with such association being stronger if an employee perceives the organization to be individualistic (as opposed to collectivistic) in its orientation.

Social Media and Organizational Stakeholder’s Interactions

Social media is broadly defined as mobile or web-based communication tools that allow individuals and organizations to interact with each other to create, share or consume information. Social media use, generally categorized into information sharing and information consumption, has been fueled by fun-
related and content-specific motivations (Luchman et al. 2014). Users encountering information related to themselves on social media exhibit a variety of emotional and behavioral responses. For example, social media users facing embarrassing contents about themselves experience heightened sense of privacy invasion, but may, under certain circumstances, also experience increased relationship bonding (Choi et al. 2015). Witnessing others being criticized on the internet is strongly related to one’s likelihood to criticize others (Dsilva et al. 1998).

From the organizational perspective, social media serves as an enabler of interpersonal communication among organizational stakeholders. Social media enables individual stakeholders to talk directly to one another, increasing the importance of interpersonal stakeholder communications and placing it outside of firms’ direct control. Organizations are advised to carefully manage their identity, presence and reputation on social media (Kietzmann et al. 2011). This increasingly challenging task involves responding to online criticism in a way that leads to more positive product, brand, and organizational perceptions and has a positive impact on organizational reputation (Xia 2013). In the absence of organizational control over social media communication among its stakeholders, it is increasingly important to understand the factors that influence whether and how organizational members respond to negative organization-related content on social media. In the next section, we draw on the organizational identification and stakeholder relationship literature to shed light on this important issue.

**Theoretical Model and Hypotheses**

Individuals use social media as an alternative platform for identity management and self-enhancement (Ollier-malaterre and Berg 2013). Therefore, social media users are expected to attempt to mitigate the effect of negative or embarrassing social media content on their image by responding to such content. Organizational identification is defined here as the degree to which the individual uses the organization to define oneself. Individual’s organizational identification influences the degree to which he/she perceives negative information about that organization as damaging to his or her image. In the case of strong organizational identification, individuals will perceive negative organization-related content as a reflection on themselves, and consequently as a threat to their own image. They will then try to mitigate the threat to the organization’s reputation and, by extension, their own self-image by responding to the negative content. We, therefore, hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 1:** Individuals with high organizational identification are more likely to respond to negative organization-related content on social media.

As organizational identification increases, individuals become increasingly aware of their membership in the organization and are more likely to view others as “insiders” or “outsiders”. Because individuals with strong organizational identification are more prone to “us against them” mentality, they are likely to perceive anybody criticizing the organization as an outsider. This is expected to lead individuals with strong organizational identification to engage in adversarial behavioral exchanges with the criticism contributors (Korschun 2015). In the context of social media, such behavioral exchanges are expected to take the form of responses to the negative content. Hence, we hypothesize the following

**Hypothesis 2:** People with high organizational identification are more likely to respond to negative organization-related content on social media in adversarial rather than cooperative manner compared to people with low organizational identification.

Organizational identity orientation reflects the “nature of assumed relations between [the] organization and its stakeholders” (Brickson, 2005: 577). Research distinguishes among three types of organizational identity orientation: individualistic, relational, and collectivistic. In organizations with individualistic identity orientation, the focus is on traits that distinguish the organization from other entities ("We are the No.1 Law School in the U.S."), and the members are primarily concerned with the organization’s own welfare. In relational identity orientation case, members view the organization as an inter-entity partner and the importance of nurturing relationships with particular stakeholders is emphasized. Thus, the members are especially concerned with “enhancing the welfare of particular others” (Brickson, 2005: 580). For example, an organization may emphasize the relationships with its customers or suppliers. In collectivistic identity orientation case, members view the organization as a part of a large collective, and are concerned with the welfare of a larger community (Brickson 2005). Organizational identity orientation is expected to influence how members respond to criticism by others. Individuals who
perceive their organization as collectivistic are likely to view members of a larger community as insiders, and thus are likely to perceive criticism as constructive feedback rather than a threat to self-image. Such perceptions are expected to lessen the effect of organizational identification on individuals’ propensity to respond to the negative content. On the contrary, members of organizations with individualistic identity orientation are likely to perceive criticism on social media as a threat to the organizations’ distinct status, and, by extension, their own self-image. This is likely to prompt members with high organizational identification to respond to the criticism. In organizations with relational orientation, the perception of on-line criticism will depend on source of criticism. The criticism is likely to be perceived as constructive if coming from a relational partner, and as threatening if coming from another external entity. Member responses to such criticism are expected to vary accordingly. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between organizational identification and propensity to respond to negative organizational-related content on social media is moderated by people’ perceptions of the orientation of the organizational identity.

Similarly, individuals who perceive their organization to be more collectivistic will be less likely to engage in distinguishing between organizational insiders and outsiders, and thus in “us against them” thinking. This is expected to weaken the association between organizational identification and the adversarial nature of their response to negative social media content. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between organizational identification and the nature of the response to negative organization-related content on social media is moderated by people’ perceptions of the orientation of the organizational identity.

The model summarizing the research hypotheses is presented in Figure 1.

Methodology

To test the proposed research model, data will be collected using an on-line survey of students from a large public university. The students will be asked about their identification with the university, their perceptions of the university’s identity orientation, and their propensity to respond to negative content related to the university on social media. Organizational identification will be measured using a 5-point Likert scale by Miller et al. (2000) adopted for the university context. Identity orientation will be measured using a scale adapted from (Brickson 2005). The propensity to respond to negative organization-related content on social media and the nature of the response will be measured on 5-point Likert scale using items developed by the authors for the purpose of this study based on theoretical definitions of the constructs. The survey will also capture control variables such as demographic characteristics, the frequency of social media use, and whether or not an individual is connected with the University on social media. In addition, individual personality traits will be measured using the big five inventory (BFI) to control for their effect on individuals behavior on social media (Correa et al. 2010). Data will be analyzed using structured equations modeling, partial least squares (PLS) approach.

Conclusion

This research extends the application of organizational identification theory to social media interactions among organizational stakeholders. The proposed model aims to enhance our understanding about the
association between organizational identification and propensity to respond to negative organization-related content on social media. The study contributes to current research by explicating the role of organizational identification as a motivating factor for social media activity. If supported, the proposed relationships will have important implications for research and practice.

References