THE EFFECTS OF RHETORICAL APPEALS AND MORAL JUDGEMENT ON INTENTION TO PARTICIPATE IN SOCIAL MEDIA FIRESTORMS

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THE EFFECTS OF RHETORICAL APPEALS AND MORAL JUDGEMENT ON INTENTION TO PARTICIPATE IN SOCIAL MEDIA FIRESTORMS

Research in Progress

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Abstract

Despite providing firms with tremendous business opportunities and benefits, social media exposes firms committing wrongdoings to threats of social media firestorms. Firefighting social media firestorms is one of the biggest challenges facing firms. Social media users gang up and leave messages to criticize and vent their anger on firms’ wrongdoings. These messages are highly persuasive, swaying other social media users into supporting the firestorms. Spreading like a wildfire, social media firestorms are difficult to control and the impacts on firms are far-reaching and deteriorating. To derive insights into tackling such issues, we draw on the rhetorical appeals in persuasion and the literature of moral psychology to develop a research model that explains the mechanism through which individuals participate in social media firestorms. We examine the effects of rhetorical appeals (i.e., ethos, pathos, and logos appeals) and moral judgement on one’s intention to participate in such firestorms. The research model will be tested with social media users using an online experiment. This study is expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge of social media firestorms and provide managerial implications for tackling such issues.

Keywords: Social media firestorm, Customer backlash, Persuasion, Rhetorical appeals, Moral judgement.

1 Introduction

Social media has been widely used by firms to build an online presence, boost brand awareness, promote products, and interact with customers. Despite bringing tremendous business opportunities and benefits, social media exposes firms committing wrongdoings to threats of social media firestorms. A social media firestorm refers to “a sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM [word-of-mouth] and complaint behaviour against a person, company, or group in social media networks (Pfeffer et al., 2014, p. 118)”. It has been one of the biggest challenges facing firms in the digital era. For instance, H&M, a multinational clothing-retail company, has been accused of a potentially racist advertising campaign across social media platforms (Barr, 2018). The incident drew notable attention from the media and the general public and eventually emerged as a social media firestorm. Thousands of social media users vented their anger on H&M, criticized it against the potentially disrespectful, offensive, and inappropriate advertising campaign, and called for a boycott. Given the detrimental impacts social media firestorms have on firms (Mochalova and Nanopoulos, 2014), an investigation into this emerging phenomenon is important and timely.
Social media plays a crucial role in fuelling the outbreak and widespread of firestorms (Pfeffer et al., 2014). During outbreaks of social media firestorms, messages scrutinizing and criticizing firms’ wrongdoings are created and shared across online social platforms (Ebner, 2014). These messages are persuasive because they can potentially trigger one’s moral system and modify one’s beliefs, values, and attitudes toward the incident and the firm (Ajzen, 1992). Social media firestorm messages are usually charged with emotional triggers, endorsed by popular celebrities, or conveyed in conjunction with supporting facts and statistics. They echo to social media users on the platform, widely known as the echo chamber and network clustering effects, creating an impression that everybody is talking about such wrongdoings and sharing similar opinions (Pfeffer et al., 2014). Exposures to these persuasive messages increase the tendency for social media users to participate in such firestorms. These rhetorical appeals embedded in social media firestorm messages are the heart of a firestorm if the sender wishes to take the recipients from where they are to where the s/he wants them to be (i.e., supporting the firestorm). Thus, it is of prime importance to understand how rhetorical appeals in social media firestorm messages influence one’s intention to participate in such firestorms.

A review of the existing firestorm literature suggests that the research into social media firestorm focused mainly on the detection of the incident. The insights into what drives people participate in these firestorms are fairly limited. Understanding the relative impact of rhetorical appeal and the underlying psychological mechanism that drives people into participating in social media firestorm helps firms to focus on the response strategy to thwart the spread of the firestorm. Prior research in moral psychology indicated that individuals concern how they and others treat people, and how they and others participate in groups (e.g., Haidt, 2007; Turiel, 1983). Specifically, their concerns go beyond personal harm and fairness to encompass potential or actual threats to the broader community and environment. Hence exposure to social media firestorm messages could be viewed as a moral encounter that drives individuals to make a moral judgement, such as assessing the firm’s wrongness.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to: (1) examine how rhetorical appeals of social media firestorm messages influence their persuasiveness, and (2) investigate the role of moral judgement in explaining users’ participation in social media firestorms. Drawing on the rhetorical appeals in persuasion (Aristotle and Freese, 1926) and the literature of moral psychology (Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 2013), this study proposes a research model explaining how rhetorical appeals (Aristotle and Freese, 1926) shape the persuasiveness of social media firestorm messages and influence an individual’s intention to participate in social media firestorms. The study also examines the mediating role of moral judgement in explaining the relationship between message persuasiveness and intention to participate. This study is expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge of social media firestorms and provide managerial implications for tackling such issues.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 defines social media firestorm and reviews the concerning literature. Section 3 presents the research model and hypotheses. Section 4 outlines the research method. Finally, Section 5 discusses the expected contributions to research and practice.

2 Literature review

2.1 Definition of social media firestorm

A social media firestorm refers to a situation where a person, group, or institution suddenly receives a large amount of negative attention on social media (Pfeffer et al., 2014). It arises spontaneously, is viral in nature, loads with a vast number of criticizing and aggressive comments (Johnen et al., 2017; Lamba et al., 2015). Social media firestorms arise often because firms are found committing wrongdoings such as making insensitive comments, offending minorities, or breaking cultural taboos. The violation of moral standards of a social entity ignites firestorms against firms (Johnen et al., 2017). Specifically, users publicize firms’ wrongdoings on social media platforms and leave negative and aggressive messages against them. Such messages are persuasive as they sway other social media users into supporting the firestorms (Ebner, 2014). The impacts of social media firestorms on firms are often...
negative and far-reaching as they destroy a firms’ reputation and image and draw unwanted attention from the media and the public in the blink of an eye (Mochalova and Nanopoulos, 2014).

2.2 Prior studies on social media firestorms

The research on social media firestorms is gaining momentum, characterized by a growing number of published scholarly articles over the past five years. Several patterns have emerged in the existing literature.

First, the majority of studies focused on detecting and predicting the emergence of social media firestorms (e.g., Drasch et al., 2015; Hauser et al., 2017; Mochalova and Nanopoulos, 2014). For instance, drawing on the idea of epidemiological surveillance systems, Drasch et al. (2015) developed an online firestorm detection algorithm and tested its reliability using real-world data from Coco-Cola. The algorithm was found to reliably detect a social media firestorm shortly after the existence of the first negative message. Besides, a significant number of studies extracted objective data from social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, in order to understand the impact of social media firestorms on the firm-customer relationship (e.g., Lamba et al., 2015; Rost et al., 2016; Salek, 2016). For instance, Lamba et al. (2015) extracted two hashtags on Twitter, #CancelColbert and #myNYPD, and examined the changes in consumers’ social interaction with the brand before and after the firestorm. Apart from the two research patterns stated above, some studies focused on examining the characteristics of incidents and how they affect individuals’ participation in social media firestorms (e.g., Johnen et al., 2017; Lim, 2017). For instance, Lim (2017) tested the effects of social norms and visual mockery on the perception of crisis and negative affect. Johnen et al. (2017) studied the impact of incidents’ moral arousal intensity on consumers’ willingness to participate in a firestorm and found that moral arousal increased the likelihood of writing an indignant comment.

Many social media users are swayed into participating in social media firestorms after they are exposed to persuasive firestorm messages on social media. However, as shown in the literature review above, existing research focused mostly on the detection and prediction of social media firestorms. The roles of rhetorical appeals and persuasion, which are crucial in the social media firestorm context, have not yet received commensurate scholarly attention. The psychological mechanism that explains individuals’ participation in social media firestorms remains also sparse. An investigation into the effects of rhetorical appeals and moral judgement on individuals’ intention to participate in social media firestorms is, therefore, timely and of prime importance.

3 Research model and hypotheses

Drawing on the rhetorical appeals in persuasion (Aristotle and Freese, 1926) and the literature of moral psychology (Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 2013), this study proposes a research model to examine the effects of persuasive social media firestorm messages and moral judgement on individuals’ intention to participate in social media firestorms. Figure 1 depicts the research model.

3.1 Rhetorical appeals and message persuasiveness

Message persuasiveness refers to the extent to which a message influences a recipient’s beliefs, values, and attitudes (Ajzen, 1992; Hornikx, 2008). Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher known as the father of western philosophy, named, in The Art of Rhetoric, three rhetorical appeals in persuasion, namely ethos appeal (i.e., appeal to character), pathos appeal (i.e., appeal to emotion), and logos appeal (i.e., appeal to logic). Specifically, ethos appeal refers to the mode where persuasion is made through the credibility, personal characters, ethical beliefs and values of the persuader; pathos appeal refers to the mode where persuasion is induced through invoking recipients’ emotions; and logos appeal refers to the mode when persuasion is made by reasoning.
Figure 1. Research model.

Ethos appeal convinces recipients via the authority or credibility of senders. For instance, compared with ordinary people, field experts (who has the expertise in the subject matter related to the wrongdoing), or celebrities (who are likable and worthy of respect) could demonstrate a higher level of ethos appeal in their messages. Recipients will perceive a higher level of persuasiveness out of their messages because these senders tend to be more competent, knowledgeable, and charismatic. Research in ethos appeal has demonstrated that trustworthy senders induce significant impacts on recipients’ attitude toward the position they advocate (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Teng et al., 2014). Specifically, messages shared by these senders tend to suppress counterargument and rejection that may arise in cognitive responses (Sternthal et al., 1978). Therefore, individuals could perceive a higher level of persuasiveness in social media firestorm messages generated by authoritative and credible senders. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

\[ H1: \text{Ethos appeal is positively related to message persuasiveness.} \]

Pathos appeal moves recipients through building a common bond or creating a shared identity between them and senders. Specifically, persuasion appealing to pathos has been found to elicit fewer critical thoughts and increase individuals’ tendency to believe in a message (Antonetti et al., 2018; Celik et al., 2016; Forgas, 2007). Celik et al. (2016) reported that respondents who were emotionally congruent with the hypothetical experimental condition perceived a higher level of persuasiveness in the message they read. Therefore, individuals could perceive a higher level of message persuasiveness when social media firestorm messages are able to invoke their emotions, such as anger, contempt, and disgust, against firms’ wrongdoings. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

\[ H2: \text{Pathos appeal is positively related to message persuasiveness.} \]

Finally, logos appeal influences recipients through providing grounds for reasoning. In particular, when claims in social media firestorm messages (i.e., accuses of firms’ wrongdoings) embrace data (i.e., grounds of a claim) and backings (i.e., reasons one should accept the data), they facilitate the cognitive process for evaluating a given situation (Lavine and Snyder, 1996; Toulmin, 2003). The importance of logos appeal in persuasion has been demonstrated in prior research in the online context. For instance, Kim and Benbasat (2006) found that trust-assuring arguments that included claim, data, and reasoning effectively increased individuals’ trusting beliefs in online shopping sites. Therefore, individuals could perceive a higher level of message persuasiveness when social media firestorm messages are logically derived and supported by statistics and/or established facts. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

\[ H3: \text{Logos appeal is positively related to message persuasiveness.} \]
3.2 Message persuasiveness and intention to participate in social media firestorms

Intention to participate in social media firestorms refers to the extent to which individuals intend to participate in punitive acts against firms’ wrongdoings. Classical models of attitude change suggest that persuasive messages can modify individuals’ attitudes and behaviors (Crano and Prislin, 2006). Therefore, the intensity of persuasion in social media messages influences how likely individuals will participate during social media firestorms. In particular, individuals who experienced a higher level of persuasion in the messages are likely to be swayed to join-in the firestorms. For instance, they may criticize firms on their official brand pages, spread negative comments, and call for a boycott. The effects of message persuasiveness on individuals’ attitudes, intentions and behaviors have been validated (Cho, 2010; Nunes et al., 2018; Pentina et al., 2018; Van Noort et al., 2012). For instance, Pentina et al. (2018) found that online review persuasiveness influenced one’s intention to visit and recommend a restaurant. Van Noort et al. (2012) found that message persuasiveness of viral marketing campaigns influenced one’s intention to forward the message. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

\[ H4: \text{Message persuasiveness is positively related to intention to participate in social media firestorms.} \]

3.3 The mediating role of moral judgement

Research in moral psychology suggests that although individuals are self-interested, they care about how they (and others) treat people, and how they (and others) participate in groups (Haidt, 2007). Therefore, exposure to messages related to firms’ wrongdoings, such as infringement of human rights, violation of community standards, or exploitation of the environment, is likely to trigger one’s moral reaction (Romani et al., 2013). Moral judgement, therefore, serves as a plausible psychological mechanism explaining the reason that people participate in social media firestorms. The moral psychology literature has identified several related yet distinct proxies for moral judgement, such as responsibility (Schlenker et al., 1994), blame (Guglielmo et al., 2009), and wrongness or permissibility (Knobe, 2010). In this study, perceived firm wrongness is used as the proxy of moral judgement and defined as the evaluation of the actions or characters of a firm that are made with respect to a set of virtues held to be obligatory by culture or subculture (Haidt, 2001).

Research in moral psychology has demonstrated that exposures to information regarding firms’ wrongdoings trigger individuals’ moral judgement and actions (Grappi et al., 2013; Guglielmo, 2015; Lindenmeier et al., 2012; Romani et al., 2013). In particular, through reasoning and reflection (Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 2013), individuals transform given information about people and actions to reach a judgement of a moral encounter (Haidt, 2001). Therefore, upon exposures to persuasive messages against firms’ wrongdoings, individuals are likely to engage in moral judgement to determine the degree of wrongness of firms’ actions. Subsequently, they will participate in social media firestorms, such as spreading negative word-of-mouth on social media or calling for a boycott, to restore fairness and justice against the wrongdoings. Johnen et al. (2017) suggested that individuals’ evaluation of moral wrongness of a firm predicted their intention to participate in a social media firestorm. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

\[ H5: \text{Perceived firm wrongness mediates the relationship between message persuasiveness and intention to participate in social media firestorms.} \]

4 Research Method

4.1 Research context

We will test our research model using two real-world social media firestorm incidents happened on Twitter – the ‘racist’ hoodie advertising campaign from H&M and the dragging off a passenger on an
overbooked flight from the United Airlines. These two cases are selected because they represent typical organizational wrongdoings that violate moral and social standards. Besides, Twitter is one of the leading social media where most of the social media firestorms incidents emerged. Together they represent ideal research contexts for testing the proposed research model and enhance the generalizability of the findings.

4.2 Research design

We will empirically test the proposed model using an online experiment. The experiment will adopt a 2 (Ethos appeal: Absent vs. Present) x 2 (Pathos appeal: Absent vs. Present) x 2 (Logos appeal: Absent vs. Present) factorial design. A fictitious social media platform simulating the interface of Twitter.com will be created and the appeals in the social media firestorm newsfeeds will be manipulated in accordance with the experimental conditions. At the beginning of the study, participants will be asked to perform specific tasks, such as browsing information, that are not directly related to the purpose of the study on the fictitious platform. After that, a manipulated incident (H&M or United Airlines), with accordance to the experimental conditions, will be shown to participants. After that, participants will be asked to fill out an online questionnaire containing the manipulation check questions, items related to the research model, and their demographic characteristics. Their interactions with the experimental interface will also be logged. Upon completing the study, they will be debriefed. The sampling criterion for participation is that respondents need to be active Twitter users with frequent visits to Twitter over the past four weeks. A market research firm will be employed for sending participation invitations to members of a nationwide panel of social media users. Participants will be rewarded with points that could be accumulated and exchanged for gifts. We aim at recruiting 400 respondents.

4.3 Measures

As discussed above, research on social media firestorm is still evolving, there is a lack of validated measures for the majority of focal constructs in our research model. Therefore, measures specific to the current context are developed following the instrument development approach suggested by Moore and Benbasat (1991). Table 1 shows examples of candidate items. All constructs will be assessed using perceptual scales with responses measured on a 7-point Likert scale, and multiple items will be used to ensure construct validity and reliability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Candidate item</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethos appeal</td>
<td>The newsfeeds’ creator has a virtuous character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathos appeal</td>
<td>The newsfeeds are emotionally intense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logos appeal</td>
<td>The newsfeeds offer the proof of plausible truth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message persuasiveness</td>
<td>The newsfeeds are compelling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived firm wrongness</td>
<td>After reading the newsfeeds, I feel that the firm has done something wrong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to participate</td>
<td>I intend to participate in the firestorm.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Measurement items

4.4 Data analysis

We will examine the effects of rhetorical appeals on message persuasiveness with ANOVA. We will then validate the remainder of the research model using structural equation modeling.
5 Expected Contributions

In this research-in-progress paper, we developed a research model explaining the effects of rhetorical appeals on intention to participate in social media firestorms through the moral judgement perspective. This study will provide important implications for research and practice. On the theoretical side, it will advance the information systems literature by addressing an underexplored research area, social media firestorms. The research model will provide a solid foundation for future studies aiming at studying the complexity and dynamics of persuasion in such contexts. On the practical side, this study will provide organizations with insights into prioritizing resources to tackle social media firestorms.

References


