

Public Abstract

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Title: PROACTIVE SELF-DISCLOSURE OF THREATS: THE EFFECTS OF VOLUNTARY DISCLOSURE OF CORPORATE ISSUES ON PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSPARENCY, CREDIBILITY, AND PERCEIVED SEVERITY OF ISSUES

Guided by the public relations literature of stealing thunder and organizational transparency, the present study builds on the theoretical argument that a corporation's proactive, self-disclosure claims of its issue via Facebook (i.e., "we believe it is important to disclose the following information to achieve public awareness of a potential health risk") influences publics' transparency perceptions on the corporation, which may lead changes in public perceptions of the company's credibility and the perceived severity of a given issue. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the impact of different disclosure claims posed by a company on public's perceived transparency of stimuli companies; perceived credibility toward each company involved in a given issue, and perceived severity of the issue.

The study used a 3 (information disclosure: voluntary vs. responsive vs. obligatory disclosure) x 2 (referral source: presence vs. absence) mixed-subject design experiment with 142 adult participants (mean age = 35.4). Information disclosure was the within-subjects factor, whereas presence or absence of the referral source encountering the disclosure statement was the between-subject factor.

Results showed a main effect of the three types of self-disclosure on the participants' perceptions toward companies and issues. That is, regardless of one's prior involvement of the stimuli company, "voluntary" disclosure of a corporate issue led participants to rate the company as more transparent and more credible than either the "responsive" disclosure messages or the "obligatory" disclosure. However, the responsive and the obligatory disclosure did not lead participants to perceive differences on the dependent variables. Notwithstanding, the voluntary, self-disclosure condition, when compared to the obligatory condition, was more effective in reducing participants' perceived severity of the particular issue.

The results theoretically extend the "stealing-thunder" literature (i.e., using a news article as the platform carrying the strategy), in a way that even when the voluntary disclosure of a corporate issue is posed and delivered by a company itself, such disclosure statement affects the audience perceptions regarding severity of the issue. In the same vein, public might view a company's disclosure as either volunteered or forced to respond, given that the responsive and the mandatory disclosure of information were essentially the same in responses. The findings also provide practical implications for organizations' issues management such that an organization may strategically use the voluntary information disclosure with their social media platforms, if the strategy can enhance greater transparency and credibility perceptions toward the organization using that strategy and further, mitigate the severity perceptions toward the threats, as the data suggests.