I Know It's Not Your Fault! Effect of Social Exclusion on Attribution of Brand Crisis

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This research explores the effects of social exclusion on brand crisis attribution. Through four experiments we found that excluded participants made less internal attribution of the crisis to the brand when being asked to judge the responsibility of the brand. Moderating effects of trait perspective taking ability and number of attribution targets were also tested.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The negative experience of social exclusion can exert great impact on people’s cognition, emotion, and behavior, including consumer behavior. The current research focuses on a different marketing domain. We explore if social exclusion could influence people’s attribution of brand crisis. We propose that the experience of social exclusion would motivate people to take others’ perspectives and thus follow others’ attribution patterns.

People make attributions spontaneously, and their attributions are vulnerable to the “actor-observer asymmetry” bias. People would make external attribution for failures of the self and internal attribution for failures of others (Malle, 2006). The bias also applies to the brand crisis context. Consumers believe that crises are generally firm related and blame the firm for the crisis (Lei, Dawar, & Gürhan-Canli, 2012). But the firm may consider itself as more innocent and find other external factors to blame. It has been found that buyers and sellers would blame each other for the same crisis event (Folkes & Kotsos, 1986). The existing research suggests that the perspective in the crisis would determine the pattern of crisis attribution. So if consumers are motivated to take the crisis brand’ perspective, they may blame the brand less.

We propose that social exclusion can motivate consumers to take other’s perspective because perspective taking can be both reflective and functional for the excluded group. It can help the excluded understand the reason why they are excluded and help them regain social acceptance. Past researches have given support for the link between social exclusion and perspective taking. Excluded participants were more likely to consider others’ preferences when making decisions for groups (Mead et al., 2011) and take others’ spatial perspectives in relevant tasks (Knowles, 2014).

When facing a brand crisis and being asked to make attributions for the brand in crisis, excluded participants may automatically consider the perspective of the brand and make less internal attributions for the brand. Less internal attribution can further predict higher purchase intention of the brand. Social exclusion can provide the motivation for people to step into others’ shoes, but the predicted effect should require both the motivation and the ability to take others’ perspectives. So we render trait perspective taking ability as a moderator in the proposed effect and propose that the above effect would be stronger for people with higher trait perspective taking ability. Number of attribution targets can be a boundary condition because when multiple targets were provided for attribution, it would be hard for people to consider everyone’s perspective. So it is likely that they would adopt the perspective of the target they feel closest to due to the easiness and fluency attached with understanding close targets.

Four experiments were conducted to test all the hypotheses. We used recall tasks to manipulate social exclusion and provided participants with fictitious reading materials for crisis attribution. Study 1 revealed that excluded participants made attributions favoring the brand in both brand crisis and success scenarios. Study 2 found that the above effect worked for people with high trait perspective taking ability only. Study 3 demonstrated that the internal attribution made to the brand in crisis could predict future purchase intention. Study 4 asked participants to make attributions for multiple targets involved in the crisis event and found that excluded participants made favorable attributions for the consumers (the close target) rather than the crisis brand.

Through four experiments, we found that when being asked to judge the responsibility of the crisis brand, excluded participants would blame the brand less. And the effect was stronger for people with higher trait perspective taking ability. Number of attribution targets served as a boundary condition.

Theoretically, the research provides a complete picture for understanding the role of social exclusion in brand crisis attribution. By rendering a new mechanism of perspective taking and identifying a social antecedent of crisis attribution, the findings should contribute to the brand crisis literature. Also by exploring the effect of social exclusion in the brand crisis attribution domain, the paper facilitates understanding of the influence of social exclusion in marketing. Practically, the findings can bring insights to real world crisis management. Future studies can work on adopting different methods of exclusion manipulation, exploring the effect in other crisis contexts, and exploring more downstream effects of crisis attribution.

REFERENCES