When Words Hurt - Emotional Contagion in a Company's Facebook Apology

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The research investigates the contagion of negative emotions in corporate apologies in Facebook using an online experiment and an eye tracking study. The results reveal that while apologies reduce consumers’ sadness triggered by a crisis, emotional contagion attenuates this mitigating effect and negatively influences consumers’ willingness to forgive the company.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Corporate crises constitute a severe threat to a company’s reputation and performance by causing negative customer emotions and reactions (Coombs 2007; McDonald, Sparks, and Glendon 2010). Hence, a major goal of corporate crisis communication is to protect an organization’s reputation and avert financial damage (Utz, Schultz, and Glocia 2013). Corporate apologies have been identified as an effective strategy to mitigate the negative consequences of a crisis (Coombs and Holladay 2008; Robbenholz 2009). Interestingly, the expression of negative emotions like sadness appears to be an injunctive norm for apologies (Cialdini 2003). However, it is unclear how consumers process and react to such negative emotions. The socio-psychological process of emotional contagion (EC) supposes that individuals can “catch” the emotions of others (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1994). Based on the notions of the feelings-as-information theory (Schwarz 1990), consumers might rely on transferred negative emotions as information causing them to make valence-congruent evaluations. To date, there is a deficiency in literature on the possible consequences of EC, particularly with regard to negative emotions. The present study addresses this research gap by investigating EC in corporate apologies in a social media context. In doing so, we additionally consider the role of potential influencing factors (i.e., the authenticity of displayed emotions and susceptibility to EC). To this end, we conduct an online experiment and an eye tracking experiment.

Experiment one examines the effects of (authentic) negative emotions expressed in corporate apologies on consumers’ sadness and willingness to forgive. Overall, 194 participants (59% female, M_{age} = 27.1) were randomly assigned to a 2 (extent of negative emotion: low, high) × 2 (extent of authenticity: low, high) between-subjects design. We manipulated the extent of negative emotion by the number of affective cues such as the word “saddened” (one vs. seven negative affective cues) and the authenticity of negative emotions by the use of emoticons (none vs. two emoticons). Participants first viewed a newspaper report on a fictive corporate crisis that was identified via a pretest. Consumers’ sadness was measured at three points in time: T0 (before corporate crisis), T1 (after corporate crisis), and T2 (after corporate apology). Additionally, participants were asked to indicate their willingness to forgive the company and answered manipulation checks. Overall, consumers’ sadness increased after reading about the crisis (T1). The analysis revealed a significant change in participants’ sadness from T1 to T2. The extent of emotion, authenticity, and susceptibility show significant effects on the change in sadness from T1 to T2. The results of a mediation analysis further indicate that the effect of the extent of expressed negative emotions on customers’ willingness to forgive is fully mediated by customer sadness after reading the apology (T2). The extent of negative emotions in the apology positively affected participants’ sadness, which in turn, negatively influenced their willingness to forgive the company. In contrast to susceptibility, authenticity did not significantly moderate the contagion of negative emotions.

Experiment two uses physiological measures (i.e., pupillometry) to investigate negative EC in a company’s Facebook apology. Pupil size is endogenously affected by emotion and cognition (e.g., Bradley et al. 2008, Fox 2015). Specifically, the pupil diameter is assumed to vary depending on the extent of (negative) emotions (i.e., the number of affective cues). Cognitive processing was manipulated by syntactic complexity which causes the disruption of smooth processing (Gordon, Hendrick and Johnson 2001; Davison et al. 1980) and higher processing costs (Gibson 1998). Overall, 30 participants (70% male, M_{age} = 22.4) were randomly assigned to a 3 (extent of negative emotion: low, medium, high) × 2 (syntactic complexity: low, high) experimental within-subjects design. Participants first saw a newspaper cover illustrating the crisis for nine seconds followed by a fixation cross. They were then presented with the corresponding Facebook apology which varied in the extent of negative emotions and syntactic complexity. The timeline analysis of the pupil size data indicates a similar pattern for most apologies. There is an initial increase in pupil size, followed by a pupil constriction, followed by a steep pupil dilation. The final dilation initiates later for apologies with a higher complexity and higher extent of emotions. This is in line with participants’ dwell time, the time participants’ eyes spend on the Facebook apology, which increased with complexity and partly with emotion. The final pupil dilation seems to be in accordance with a proposed delayed pupillary response to emotions. For further analyses, we considered three points in time: 1) data in second two as here the initial peak occurred, 2) data in second 13 as here the final dilation for low complexity apologies and the lowest point for high complexity apologies occurred, 3) data in second 20 as here the final peak had already been reached in all groups. At second two, there was a significant interaction effect for emotion and complexity on pupil size change. Similarly, at second 13, the analysis revealed a significant interaction of emotion and complexity. At second 20, pupil changes did not significantly differ across the apologies.

The present research shows that negative emotions expressed in corporate apologies in a social media setting can be contagious. While apologies largely reduce sadness triggered by the crisis, this reduction varies depending on the extent of negative emotions communicated and consumers’ susceptibility to EC. Interestingly, the extent of negative emotion on consumers’ willingness to forgive is fully mediated by participants’ sadness. Authenticity did not significantly moderate the contagion process. Using physiological measures of emotions, the second experiment provides an innovative approach to investigate EC and validate the findings of experiment one. This research illustrates that affective cues suffice for companies to transfer emotions to consumers online and to thereby influence consumers’ willingness to forgive. While a corporate apology can mitigate the negative emotions of consumers in a social media environment, managers must pay attention to the extent of negative emotions communicated in a corporate apology since the contagion of negative emotions can attenuate consumers’ willingness to forgive the company.

REFERENCES


