



Full Length Article

Self-mocking crisis strategy on social media: Focusing on Alibaba chairman Jack Ma in China



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 March 2016

Received in revised form

23 September 2016

Accepted 13 October 2016

Available online 27 October 2016

Keywords:

Paracrisis

Social media

Crisis communication

Self-mocking

Humor

Parasocial relationship

ABSTRACT

Through qualitative and quantitative content analyses, this study examines China's largest e-commerce company, Alibaba, and its successful management of a paracrisis on social media. The study indicates that during the early paracrisis stage, Alibaba was successful at averting a social media reputation crisis by adopting the crisis response strategy of humorous self-mockery. The study also illustrates the importance of utilizing a CEO's personality and parasocial relationship in a crisis response, of choosing a communication style well suited to social media, and of analyzing existing public sentiment towards social media crisis communication.

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1. Introduction

"I am ordinary. I just look like ET" (Liu, 2014). "I flunked math. Got only 1 point in my first attempt at the National College Entrance Exam; got a 19 the second time, and got an 89 the third time. I never gave up." (Famous Quotes, 2014 "Famous Quotes", 2014)—Jack Ma, Founder and Chairman of Alibaba Group, China's largest e-commerce company.

TMall is an online retail site operating under the aegis of Alibaba Group—China's largest e-commerce company. In November 2013, after being accused of false advertising, TMall came under public scrutiny on Weibo, China's most popular social media site. Less than an hour after the accusation was made, TMall was the subject of more than 1500 negative comments posted to Weibo and of 10,000 reposts.¹ The company was suddenly embroiled in an online reputation paracrisis, as the online public ridiculed the company for using in their ads exaggerated and false data. The public demanded that the government should regulate companies' advertising. The paracrisis, however, was quickly resolved and in fact turned into a positive public relations opportunity for the company through effective social media crisis communication.

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¹ Authors counted the numbers of negative comments and reposts during the one hour period after the accusation.

What has become, for public relations professionals, an increasingly important but difficult task is the managing of reputation crises on social media (Aula, 2010; Ott & Theunissen, 2015). Paracrisis emerge more often on social media as threats and accusations against organizations are easily visible to the public (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b). Although a paracrisis is not considered a crisis that requires the full activation of a crisis management team, it may, if improperly handled, escalate into a crisis (Veil, Petrun, & Roberts, 2012). Negative public sentiments may go viral in seconds and are less likely to dissipate in the short term (Ott & Theunissen, 2015; Veil et al., 2012). Researchers have recommended some response options (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b) to resolve such reputation paracrisis on social media (Aula, 2010). Yet studies have shown that corporations tend to respond by relying more on traditional crisis communication strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; Ott & Theunissen, 2015). Relatively little research exists on how a corporation should respond to a paracrisis on social media to successfully avert a full-blown reputation crisis (Veil et al., 2012).

This study proposes that a potential response strategy in a paracrisis on social media may consist of self-mockery. It also highlights the importance of humorous responses and cultivating parasocial relationship in a social media paracrisis context. The study chose TMall's successful crisis communication case for the following reasons: (1) it demonstrates the importance of the infusion of corporate or CEO personality into communication with the public during a crisis; (2) it provides evidence of a self-mocking strategy's successful adoption in a paracrisis on social media; (3) it showcases a successful social media crisis communication style that not only mitigated the crisis but eventually turned a potential reputation crisis into a public relations opportunity.

2. Literature review

2.1. Chinese social media context

China's most popular social media site is Weibo, with 200 million daily active users (Fan, 2015). Corporations regard the site, which represents contemporary Chinese grass-roots culture, as a double-edged sword; it offers opportunities and raises challenges (Flemming, 2015). Corporate crises go viral overnight on Weibo's Twitter-like platform (Long, 2015). For corporations, therefore, understanding Weibo culture is crucial and may immensely improve their communication and crisis communication.

Weibo culture emerged as a result of Chinese journalists trying to discuss government-related issues without being censored. Other grass-roots social media users tend to use Weibo to raise awareness and to get a sense of where the public stands on social issues. It is one of the few places where the public gathers to support or oppose important social and political issues in China (Zhou, 2011). The majority of trendsetting and shared (i.e., retweeted) contents on Weibo consist of humorous content, jokes about current government affairs, and satire (60%); much less of it has to do with serious news and commentary (25%) (Yu, Asur, & Huberman, 2011; Zhou, 2011). As a result, language use and tone on Weibo are very informal (Zhang, Tao, & Kim, 2014) and in fact are characterized by satire and mockery (Yu et al., 2011; Zhou, 2011). Compared with Twitter, Weibo users tend to use more nonverbal communication cues such as figurative language, emoticons, pictures, and videos (Sterling, 2010; Yu et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2014). Figurative language, or the use of the indirect meanings of words and expressions to convey a deeper connotation (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013), is one of the major characteristics of Chinese Internet communication.

2.2. Crisis communication on social media

Traditional crisis communication, namely the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides general guidelines for applying specific communication strategies based on crisis situations and public perceptions (Coombs, 2015). Based on attribution theory, SCCT has shown that, by matching the appropriate crisis response strategies with specific situations, corporations could reduce public blame and restore corporate reputation (Coombs, 2015). In the majority of documented crisis cases, corporations tended to apply traditional crisis response strategies such as denial, justification, and apology on social media (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; Ott & Theunissen, 2015). Although traditional crisis communication strategies may also work in social media, the characteristics of social media bring challenges to traditional crisis communication. First, the interactive nature of the medium makes it impossible for corporations to use it just as a simple distribution channel of corporate crisis responses (Aula, 2010). While corporations aim to be open and transparent, the "truth" of the crisis is being told by multiple voices, both verified and unverified (Aula, 2010; Freberg, Palenchar, & Veil, 2013). When online publics use social media during a crisis, they are considered to be crisis communication creators (Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011). Public reactions to corporate response strategies on social media may pose further reputation risks for corporations (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b; Veil et al., 2012). Second, the transparency of social media calls for higher ethical standards (Aula, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2012a). Publics on social media are judging the crisis-affected corporations with higher standards. They expect immediate responses and accurate, up-to-date crisis information (Stephens & Malone, 2009).

In addition, the interactive and transparent nature of social media tends to increase the reputation threats brought by a crisis or a paracrisis as contents on social media are more easily visible to the public. A paracrisis is a publicly visible crisis threat that is commonly found in social media and poses a threat to corporate reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b). A paracrisis is similar to a crisis in that it requires organizational attention but different in that it does not disrupt the normal operation of a corporation. When a corporation is accused of unethical behaviors on social media, the negative

information about the corporation is on display for public scrutiny and discussion. Publics are potentially exposed to verified and unverified sources on social media. As a reputation is constructed by the public perception of a corporation, a paracrisis, if not handled properly, may cause severe reputation damage to the corporation and may turn into a full-blown crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b; Coombs, 2015).

In response to paracrisis, Coombs & Holladay (2012b) have recommended the potential use of reform, refuse, and refute response strategies. Similar to accommodative strategies recommended in traditional crisis responses (Coombs, 2015), reform is when corporations take corrective actions to meet public demands. When the reform strategy is applied, the corporation in crisis acknowledges a wrongdoing and considers public demands about changing corporate practice. The corporation can also use a refuse strategy by talking about its positive aspects while ignoring the accusation (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b). Similar to the combination of denial and bolstering strategies in traditional crisis responses, instead of directly responding to the crisis threat, the corporation ignores the threat and rather focuses on bolstering its reputation. Lastly, refute refers to the strategy when the corporation defends itself against the accusation. As refute challenges the public demands related to the accusation, it requires some degree of public support and positive public sentiment. When applying a refute strategy, it is thus important to create corporate defenses around its publics' core values and beliefs (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b).

2.3. The use of humor in persuasive communication

Humor has been studied in the contexts of advertising (Beard, 2008; Chattopadhyay & Basu, 1990), politics (Graber, 2008), and entertainment-based political media (Baumgartner, 2007; Nabi, Moyer-Gusé, & Byrne, 2007). Previous research on humor and persuasion has suggested that humor has a positive impact on communication source liking and message attention; and that its impact tends to be enhanced if people possessed positive prior attitude toward the communication source or the brand (Chattopadhyay & Basu, 1990; Nabi et al., 2007). A recent study investigating the impact of humor on counterargument engagement in the context of political social issue commentary has suggested that humorous messages induce less counterargument from the public when consumed in an entertainment context such as late-night talk show (Nabi et al., 2007). This indicates the use of humor in persuasive communication may reduce publics' motivation to counter-argue.

Previous crisis literature has also suggested that the use of humor may work in a paracrisis or non-severe crisis online (Veil et al., 2012; Wasserman, 2011). Paracrisis are by definition not severe, so formally addressing the crisis threat and blindly using traditional crisis response strategies may only serve to cause additional reputation damage (Veil et al., 2012). By analyzing ThinkGeek's mocking apology to National Pork Board (NPB)'s trademark infringement accusation, Veil et al. (2012) have suggested that humor may work as a potential strategy in a paracrisis to prevent negative information from further spreading. ThinkGeek's mocking apology to NPB was successful because the accused misconduct (i.e., using NPB's copyrighted slogan "the new white meat" for an imaginary product of unicorn meat) was originally meant to be an April Fools Day prank. The successful use of humor in a social media paracrisis can be found in other paracrisis cases such as RedCross's response to a rogue tweet by its social media specialist, "found two more 4 bottle packs of Dogfish Head's Midas Touch beer. . .when we drink we do it right #gettingslizzed" (Wasserman, 2011). In response to the rogue tweet "#gettingslizzed" on Dogfish Head beer, Red Cross acknowledged the mistake by posting a humorous tweet: "We've deleted the rogue tweet but rest assured the Red Cross is sober and we've confiscated the keys" (Wasserman, 2011). The humorous response successfully averted a crisis. The adoption of humor in crisis communication can be effective online, as it fits better with the informal communication styles of social media (Zhang et al., 2014). Therefore, the use of humor may potentially decrease the perceived severity of the crisis threat, reduce public motivations to counter-argue, and attract positive public sentiments (Nabi et al., 2007; Veil et al., 2012).

2.4. Communication source and parasocial interaction

Despite the traditional belief that publics perceive organizational sources as less credible than third-party testimonials (Callison, 2001), previous studies have reported that organizational sources are perceived as more credible and are more likely, during a crisis, to elicit positive public responses and compliance on social media (Liu et al., 2011; Park & Cameron, 2014). Particularly, scholars have called for the use of a conversational human voice in crisis communication (Park & Cameron, 2015; Veil et al., 2012). The use of a human voice such as first-person voice and narratives increases perceived interactivity and subsequently leads to higher reputation perception and positive behavioral intentions (Park & Cameron, 2015).

When organizational sources adopt a conversational human voice to communicate with the public in social media, people tend to develop a sense of intimacy and parasocial relationship with the communication sources. To imbue social media communication with corporate characters may also help increase parasocial interactions and nurture quality organization-public relationships (Men & Tsai, 2015). Parasocial interaction occurs when publics feel personally attached to and develop perceived personal relationships with public figures such as television characters (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). It does not require two-way communication or real interactions with public figures. Similarly, publics can develop parasocial relationships with corporations through social media when corporations utilize corporate characters and a human voice (Men & Tsai, 2015; Thorson & Rodgers, 2006). Especially when a CEO has a high profile and is actively visible to the public online, or when social media representatives of corporations adopt a conversational human voice to interact with the public on social media, publics tend to develop parasocial relationships with those personae.

Thus, the use of CEO voice (or social media representative's voice) in response to a paracrisis on social media (Martin & Bennett, 2008; Veil et al., 2012) can easily remind people of their sense of intimacy if they have already perceived a parasocial relationship with the CEO or representative. In addition, the CEO's personality can be used in social media to further elicit perceived parasocial interactions, increasing source liking and message acceptance in times of paracrisis. Furthermore, when publics have already developed parasocial relationships with such corporate characters, the use of humor adopted by the corporate characters in crisis responses may also add a sense of intimacy, and as a result, lead to easier forgiveness from the public.

2.5. The TMall case

TMall's online sales during China's "Cyber Monday"—aka, "Singles Day Sale" or "Double 11 Sale" (similar to America's "Black Friday")—surpassed a record 30 billion RMB (i.e., US\$4.5 billion) on November 11, 2013 (Yan, 2013). In a promotional post made the same day on its official Weibo page, the company claimed that it sold 2 million pairs of underpants within an hour. If this amount of underpants were laid out one after another, the company went on to claim, the row of underpants would be 3000 km in length. This additional detail quickly gave rise to a reputation paracrisis for the company. A local police department asserted on its official Weibo account (@Police Online) that TMall's claim was an exaggeration, pointing out that the data had to be false unless the company was selling its customers underpants more than a meter long (i.e., 1.5 m long). The accusation was directed at Jack Ma, CEO of TMall's parent company, the e-commerce company Alibaba Group. With a net worth of US \$21.4 billion, Jack Ma is an iconic figure in China. In 2014, Alibaba Group's public stock offering in New York set a record of \$21.8 billion ("Forbes The World's Most Powerful People #22 Jack Ma," 2016). Despite his success, Jack Ma is famous in China for his humble upbringing and running jokes about flunking math (Barboza, 2014).

Initial two crisis responses came from the vice president of Alibaba Group, Ran Tao within an hour after the accusation. Instead of resolving the incident, Ran Tao's posts only fueled the crisis, raising public doubts about TMall's sincerity. The tide of public opinion, however, began to turn with four response posts from TMall's official account with Jack Ma's personality and tone. By incorporating Jack Ma personality, self-mocking and humor into crisis responses, TMall transformed the paracrisis into a public relations opportunity.

Given the initial review of the case and relevant literature, this study intends to further explore the role of social media crisis communication strategies and communication source by focusing on the TMall (Jack Ma) case. To provide a more accurate understanding of the case, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: What crisis communication strategies were used by TMall on Weibo?

RQ2: Are there any differences in public sentiments (i.e., consumer attitudes, blame, and satisfaction) that are based on the communication sources of TMall's crisis responses (Ran Tao, the vice president of Alibaba Group vs. TMall's response in Jack Ma's persona and tone)?

RQ3: Are there any differences in public sentiments (i.e., consumer attitudes, blame, and satisfaction) based on TMall's crisis communication strategies?

3. Methods

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods to provide a detailed examination of the company's crisis responses and the public's reactions to them (Cutler, 2004). Qualitative analysis was applied to better identify and interpret the content, structure, figurative language, communication style, and emoticons that were used in the initial accusation post (i.e., the initial post by @Police Online) and the six corporate crisis response posts by TMall. In addition, quantitative content analysis was further employed to identify communication source and crisis response strategies being adopted by the corporation and to document online public reactions to the corporate responses.

In the quantitative content analysis, in addition to the initial accusation post (i.e., the initial post by @Police Online) and the six corporate crisis response posts, this study coded a total of 1050 public reaction comments. These public comments were chosen based on stratified random sampling to secure 150 public comments per each post. Since the number of public comments generated by each post varied,² the study chose a stratified random sampling method to better investigate the differences in public sentiments among TMall's response posts. Thus, using a random number generator, the study selected 150 comments per each post, consisting of a total of 1050 public comments.

On the coding sheet for the quantitative content analysis, coders documented TMall's six corporate crisis response posts. For TMall's corporate crisis response posts, the crisis communication source was coded as 1 = Ran Tao, the vice president of Alibaba Group and 2 = TMall's responses with Jack Ma (Chairman of Alibaba Group) as a communication source. TMall's response posts that "sounded" like the Jack Ma personality were considered to be from Jack Ma, as that was how the public perceived the response. And for the crisis communication strategies coding, the posts were first categorized into three levels: 1 = traditional crisis strategy (i.e., adjusting information, excuse, ingratiation and compensation, etc.; Coombs, 2015), 2 = self-

² TMall's six corporate crisis response posts generated a total number of 5229 public comments. The total numbers of public comments for the initial accusation post and TMall's six corporate response posts: accusation post: 24,937; TMall's response 1st: 173, 2nd: 185, 3rd: 993, 4th: 430, 5th: 220, 6th: 3228 comments.

mocking strategy and 3 = mocking the accuser strategy (these new strategies will be explained later in the result section) after an initial review of the case and qualitative analysis of the corporate posts.

When coding public comments posted under TMall's crisis response posts, coders first identified which crisis response post by TMall (from 1st to 6th post) each public comment was responding to. Then, whether the comment included blame to the company (blame presence: Yes = 1 and No = 0), contained satisfaction to the company's crisis response (satisfaction presence: Yes = 1 and No = 0), and showed positive, neutral or negative attitude toward the company (the degree of attitude: Negative = 1, Neutral = 2, and Positive = 3) were coded respectively. For the public comments posted in response to the initial accusation post (from @Police Online), however, coders only documented whether each public comment considered the incident as a serious crisis (Yes = 1 and No = 0) and questioned the company's false promotion data (Yes = 1, No = 0). This was to examine initial public sentiments about the incident. To test intercoder reliability for all coded items, about 11% of the total posts ($n = 115$) were double-coded by two independent coders. The intercoder reliability test using Krippendorff's alpha was satisfactory, ranging from 0.84 to 1.00 (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). Since intercoder reliability was deemed strong and satisfactory, the remainder of the sample was coded by one coder.

4. Results

RQ1 asked about the crisis communication strategies used by TMall. The first two initial responses from Ran Tao applied mostly traditional crisis communication strategies. More specifically, his initial crisis response adopted the combination of adjusting information, excuse, and corrective action strategies. Since he tried to establish personal connections with the accuser and expressed sympathy toward the public in his first response (e.g., "I am your fellow townsman [i.e., the same town as the accuser: Nan Jing] and Alibaba's employee. This Weibo post somehow concerns me too. In regard to the issue you raised, I was confused too"), it can be categorized as an adjusting information response (i.e., helps stakeholders psychologically cope with the crisis). Then he tried to explain that the mistake was due to measurement issues and correcting the mistake in the same response (e.g., "There might be some mistake in the measurement. It should be 2 million packages of underpants [not 2 million pairs of underpants]. One package may have several pairs of underpants") by adopting excuse and corrective action strategies. Twenty minutes later, Ran Tao added that the company would like to send the police department [the initial accuser] some complimentary underpants as a token of their appreciation. In this second response, Ran Tao used the combination of ingratiation and compensation as he attempted to please and praise the accuser and the public (e.g., "thank you for correcting mistakes in our language").

Following Ran Tao's response, TMall incorporated Jack Ma as a communication source in its responses and adopted a humorous tone: "[innocent emoticon] I got too excited . . . so pleaseeeeee do laugh at me! #Please forgive me math teacher! # [crying emoticon]." A sense of humor and self-mocking strategies were adopted. The self-mocking responses attributed the mistake to Jack Ma's inability to calculate the numbers correctly and his purportedly weak math skills. The second post with Jack Ma as a source adopted the same self-mocking strategy (e.g., "My poor math almost got me killed yesterday [. . . omitted].") This self-mocking post showed the public that he was redeeming himself by studying math and making correct measurement analogies (i.e., "so I was trying to make-up [the mistake] by going back to my elementary school math textbook last night . . . and now I see! If you pile up the 30 billion RMB sales TMall made on Double 11, it can be as high as four times the height of Mount Everest, and it can fill up 585 soccer fields . . . am I right? Waiting for talents and saviors online for answers!"). Both posts referenced the anecdotes and quotes Jack Ma made in public about his poor math. As these posts gained favorable public reactions, TMall even poked fun at the accusing party in its third response with Jack Ma personality: "@Police online dear police . . . this is an urgent case! [Worried emoticon]." TMall elicited responses from and mocked the initial accuser for being too serious and making a big fuss about the small mistake (i.e., calculation mistake). This post, by mocking the accuser, intended to take advantage of the positive public sentiments and further downplay the seriousness of the crisis.

The last post by TMall revealed a supposed conversation between Jack Ma and his social media manager. In the post, Jack Ma comes to ask about the crisis: "Damn it! You are such an amazing boy! Your '1.5 m' [Referring to the false advertisement] has beaten the billion response! [a reference to over a billion public responses] . . . You have been so bad at mathematics. How on earth did you calculate the length of the underpants that is the same as your height! Hahahahaha. . ." The social media manager responds, "Er . . . Boss, I heard you once got a score of 1 point in mathematics. Is that true?" Jack Ma: [changing the topic] "The weather is not so good today. . ." The manager asks again, "Boss, I also heard you were the only one who failed the police officer exam out of six applicants. Is that true?" Jack Ma responds "Um. . . [changing the topic again], when were you hired to our company, boy? [omission]." The conversation involved self-mocking of both the social media manager and Jack Ma. It mocked that Jack Ma flunked math and failed a police officer recruitment test and that the manager failed to calculate the length of total sales of underpants. The post not only further elaborated the self-mocking, but also showed the personal side of Jack Ma as well as his relationship with employees in a narrative form. At the end of the conversation, the two talked about the manager's inability to purchase an apartment and Jack Ma's promise to help decrease China's real estate prices. The posting of the dialogue between Jack Ma and the employee with a humorous tone seemed to successfully change the public sentiment against the false promotion.

Unlike the serious and formal tone of Ran Tao's responses, Jack Ma exploited the common Weibo language style—using a sense of humor, a satirical tone, emoticons, and figurative language. Figurative language was used to lighten the atmosphere and to downplay the seriousness of the previous responses. For example, instead of using the literal word for "excited," Jack

Table 1

Cross-Tabulation Results: Crisis Communication Source and Consumer Sentiments.

| Communication Source | Consumer Blame | | Consumer Satisfaction | | Consumer Attitudes | | | Total |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| | No | Yes | No | Yes | Negative | Neutral | Positive | |
| | Count (% within each source) | | | | | | | |
| Ran Tao | 226 (75.3%) | 74 (24.7%) | 267 (89%) | 33 (11%) | 184 (61.3%) | 82 (27.3%) | 34 (11.3%) | 300 (100%) |
| Jack Ma | 554 (92.3%) | 46 (7.7%) | 303 (50.5%) | 297 (49.5%) | 150 (25%) | 250 (41.7%) | 200 (33.3%) | 600 (100%) |
| Total | 780 (86.7%) | 120 (13.3%) | 570 (63.3%) | 330 (36.7%) | 334 (37.1%) | 332 (36.9%) | 234 (26%) | 900 (100%) |
| Chi-Square Test Results | χ^2 (df = 1) = 50.02*** | | χ^2 (df = 1) = 127.66*** | | χ^2 (df = 2) = 119.51*** | | | |

Note: * p (2-tailed) < 0.05; ** p (2-tailed) < 0.01; *** p (2-tailed) < 0.001.

Ma used the figurative word “鸡冻” (i.e., Frozen chicken jelly) since in Chinese it is pronounced the same (i.e., jidong) as “excited (激动).” In addition, the use of emoticons such as the innocent face, crying face and the worried face added richness and emotions to the content of the posts. The innocent and crying face emoticons in the self-mocking posts showed that Jack Ma feels embarrassed about the mistake and is begging for forgiveness. The worried face in the mocking the accuser post suggested urgency and added to the satire tone.

RQ2 asked if there were any differences in public sentiments by the communication sources of TMall's crisis responses. Initial public comments sampled in response to the initial accusation post indicated that the public did not consider the false data promotion as a serious crisis although questioning about the truth of the company's promotional data (e.g., only about 15% ($n = 23$) of the sampled initial public comments considered the incident as a serious one, while about 59% ($n = 88$) questioned the company's promotion data). However, the initial two responses with Ran Tao as a communication source further seemed to exacerbate the crisis and resulted in more negative public sentiments, attracting only 21 and 32 “likes” respectively from the public. The online public was not satisfied with Ran Tao's responses, as illustrated in the following comment: “Alibaba's vice president Ran Tao tries to bribe Nan Jing police [i.e., the initial accuser]. Do you [Ran Tao] want to shut them [the police] up?” TMall's later four responses with Jack Ma personality, however, drew much more public likings (attracted 430, 156, 122, and 1395 “likes” respectively) and sharings than Ran Tao. Especially TMall's last response with the supposed conversation of Jack Ma received most attentions from the public (1395 “likes,” 19,801 “shares,” and 3228 “comments”) among all six corporate responses. After the posts with Jack Ma as the source, the public started siding with TMall (e.g., a consumer commented: “Cat [TMall in Chinese literally means ‘sky cat’], don't bother to respond to those meaningless accusations! . . . who cares? . . .”).

Chi-Square tests of public comments to Ran Tao versus Jack Ma sources confirmed the above analysis. The results revealed significantly reduced attribution of blame to the company from 24.7% to 7.7% (χ^2 (df = 1) = 50.02, $p < 0.001$) and increased consumer satisfaction (from 11% to 49.5%, (χ^2 (df = 1) = 127.66, $p < 0.001$) when Jack Ma was adopted as a source, compared to Ran Tao. In addition, positive public attitudes shown among public comments increased from 11 to 33% when Jack Ma was used as a source ($n = 200$, 33%) compared to Ran Tao ($n = 34$, 11%), while negative public attitudes decreased from 62 to 25% for the Jack Ma source ($n = 150$, 25%) compared to Ran Tao ($n = 184$, 62%) (χ^2 (df = 1) = 2) = 119.51, $p < 0.001$; see Table 1 and Fig. 1).

RQ3 asked if there was any difference in public sentiments (i.e., consumer attitudes, blame, and satisfaction) based on the three crisis communication strategies (traditional, self-mocking, and mocking-the-accuser strategies). In general, when traditional crisis strategies were being used by the company, publics viewed it as insincere and making excuses. One observer responded, “What do you mean by ‘might be some mistake’? Please don't be so ambiguous.” Later self-mocking posts, however, quickly rectified the situation. The posts with a self-mocking strategy were not only entertaining but also reframed the situation as not serious, gaining positive ground for the company. As TMall mocked the accuser, the public started to ridicule the accuser as well and defending TMall: “It's just exaggeration. Doesn't matter if it's right or wrong.”

Chi-square tests showed similar results. Significant differences were found among the three strategies in terms of public blame (χ^2 (df = 1) = 55.58, $p < 0.001$), public satisfaction (χ^2 (df = 1) = 144.94, $p < 0.001$) and public attitudes (χ^2 (df = 4) = 167.26, $p < 0.001$). Additional Chi-square post-hoc tests were conducted to detect differences among the three strategies: Z scores and the corresponding p values were calculated. For blame, traditional strategies received more blame ($n = 74$, 24.7%, $z = 7.07$, $p < 0.001$) than self-mocking ($n = 43$, 9.6%, $z = -3.33$, $p < 0.001$) and mocking-the-accuser ($n = 3$, 2%, $z = -4.47$, $p < 0.001$). For satisfaction, publics showed more satisfaction with the self-mocking strategy ($n = 244$, 54.2%, $z = 10.93$, $p < 0.001$) than with the traditional strategies ($n = 33$, 11%, $z = -11.30$, $p < 0.001$). However, no significant differences were found between the mocking-the-accuser strategy ($n = 53$, 35.3%, $z = -0.37$, $p = 0.71$) and the traditional strategies ($n = 33$, 11%). For public attitudes, the self-mocking received more positive public attitudes ($n = 176$, 39.1%, $z = -7.09$, $p < 0.001$) than mocking-the-accuser ($n = 24$, 16%, $z = -3.06$, $p < 0.001$) and traditional strategies ($n = 34$, 11.3%, $z = 8.97$, $p < 0.001$; see Table 2 and Fig. 2).

5. Discussion

As a paracrisis may go viral on social media, the ensuing public reactions may exacerbate the crisis and evoke more reputation damage to the corporation (Aula, 2010; Freberg et al., 2013). Thus, it is important to nip the initial trigger event in

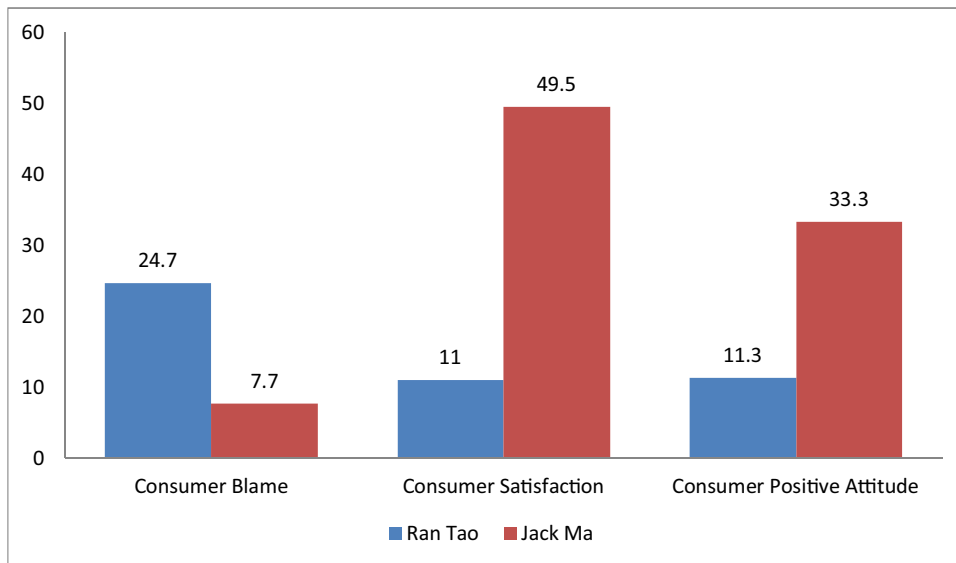


Fig. 1. Percentage of consumer blame, satisfaction and positive attitudes based on source.

Table 2

Cross-Tabulation Results: Crisis Communication Strategies and Consumer Sentiments.

| Crisis Communication Strategies Used | Consumer Blame | | Consumer Satisfaction | | Consumer Attitudes | | | Total |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| | No | Yes | No | Yes | Negative | Neutral | Positive | |
| | Count (% within each response post) | | | | | | | |
| Traditional Strategies | 226 (75.3%) | 74 (24.7%) | 267 (89%) | 33 (11%) | 184 (61.3%) | 82 (27.3%) | 34 (11.3%) | 300 (100%) |
| Self-mockery | 407 (90.4%) | 43 (9.6%) | 206 (45.8%) | 244 (54.2%) | 118 (26.2%) | 156 (34.7%) | 176 (39.1%) | 450 (100%) |
| Mocking the accuser | 147 (98%) | 3 (2%) | 97 (64.7%) | 53 (35.3%) | 32 (21.3%) | 94 (62.7%) | 24 (16%) | 150 (100%) |
| Total | 780 (86.7%) | 120 (13.3%) | 570 (63.3%) | 330 (36.7%) | 334 (37.1%) | 332 (36.9%) | 234 (26%) | 900 (100%) |
| Chi-Square Test Results | χ^2 (df=2)=55.58*** | | χ^2 (df=2)=144.94*** | | χ^2 (df=4)=167.26*** | | | |

Note: *p (2-tailed) < 0.05; **p (2-tailed) < 0.01; ***p (2-tailed) < 0.001.

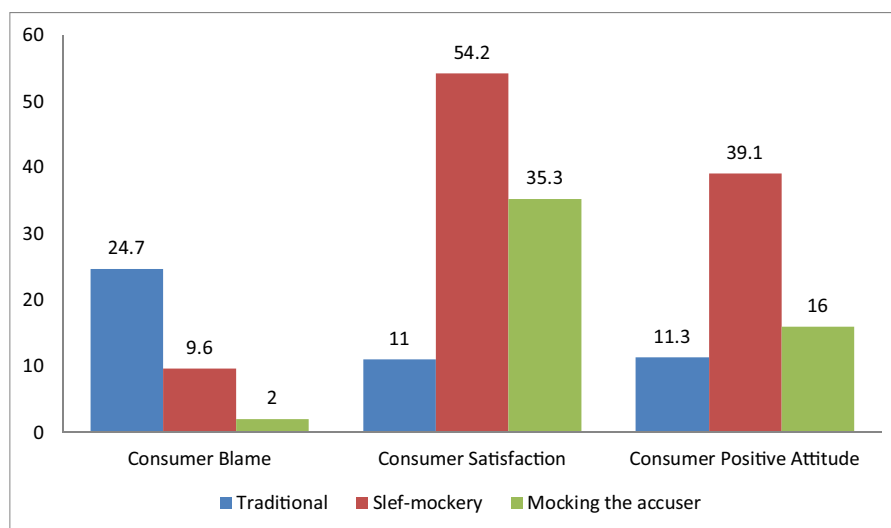


Fig. 2. Percentage of consumer blame, satisfaction and positive attitudes based on strategy.

the bud before it develops into a full-blown crisis. As demonstrated in our study, the adoption of traditional crisis response strategies for an online paracrisis, as deployed by Ran Tao in the TMall case, seems to intensify perceived crisis severity and engenders negative public reactions. This could be due either to the lower compatibility of traditional crisis responses with a social media paracrisis (Veil et al., 2012) or to Ran Tao's corporate character being weaker than Jack Ma's. The traditional crisis response strategy might not work in this case, as publics might be put off by what it perceives to be too heavy handed a response—ill-suited to a paracrisis in social media. However, our quantitative analyses cannot rule out the possibility of the effectiveness of the traditional crisis responses if used by Jack Ma instead of Ran Tao. That is, since Jack Ma is better known to the Chinese public for his success story and has a more favorable media profile than Ran Tao does (Barboza, 2014), the Chinese public might perceive a stronger parasocial relationship with Jack Ma. In turn, this perception could result in more positive reactions to the crisis responses from his persona. The Chinese public's perceived parasocial relationship with Jack Ma could be one of the contributors to the success of TMall's responses with the Jack Ma persona.

Besides the relatively weaker corporate character of Ran Tao, there are some differences among the strategies using the traditional crisis response, self-mockery, and mocking the accuser. The traditional crisis response strategies used by Ran Tao were, it must be noted, delivered in a conversational tone, showing the human side of him. We may conclude then, the use of first-person voice or a conversational tone (Men & Tsai, 2015; Park & Cameron, 2015) might not be enough to turn the tide of negative public sentiments on social media. What was missing in his traditional crisis responses, compared to the responses from Jack Ma persona, was the adoption of humor, emoticons, and figurative language. Considering the high-context communication nature of Chinese culture (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) and Weibo culture (Yu et al., 2011; Zhou, 2011), it is important to adopt more informal and personable communication styles on Weibo (Zhang et al., 2014). In particular, the use of nonverbal message cues such as emoticons and figurative language in self-mocking response strategies seems to provide additional emotional richness and a personal tone to Jack Ma's responses. Compared with Western social media, Chinese Internet language is characterized by the use of emoticons and figurative language (Sterling, 2010; Zhang et al., 2014). These nonverbal message cues not only convey additional connotations, but more importantly add fun and emotions to the communication content. The use of Internet slang with which the public is familiar tends to increase public liking and endorsement of the company (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013). Thus, the adoption of humor, emoticons, and figurative language in Jack Ma's responses may help better increase the sense of intimacy and perceived parasocial interactions with the corporate character among the public.

Moreover, even among Jack Ma's responses, a difference was identified. Although both self-mocking and mocking-the-accuser strategies were used by the Jack Ma persona and both adopted the use of humor, a conversational tone, and emoticons, a self-mocking strategy was found to be more efficient than a mocking-the-accuser strategy as far as yielding more positive public reactions. This might imply that the success of a self-mocking strategy in this case may not just originate from the adoption of humor or a social media communication style (e.g., emoticons, figurative language), but also from a good match between CEO personality and the strategy. The adopted self-mocking strategy better echoed Jack Ma's previous personal anecdotes than a mocking-the-accuser strategy could have. Jack Ma is famous for his anecdotes about his poor math and his success as an entrepreneur and businessman in China. As Jack Ma is known for his self-deprecation (Liu, 2014), the use of self-mockery in the crisis response posts quickly put the face of Jack Ma on the corporation, successfully diverting the topic by framing the data mistake as a personal failure. The message becomes more persuasive when it is attributed to someone well known for a sense of humor (Nabi et al., 2007). Thus, the better success of the self-mocking strategy in the TMall case could also be explained by a better match between Jack Ma's known personality and the self-mocking strategy.

The findings of this study also suggest that the use of humor can work better in dealing with a paracrisis on social media (Veil et al., 2012; Wasserman, 2011). Indeed, both self-mocking and mocking-the-accuser strategies that adopted humor yielded more positive reactions than did the traditional strategies without a sense of humor. The delivery aspects of communication such as a satirical tone and a sense of humor contribute to publics' acceptance of the crisis message in social media, reducing publics' motivation to counter-argue (Graber, 2008; Nabi et al., 2007). When a company mocks itself about a crisis, it seems to disarm, at least momentarily, those who possess negative sentiments against the company. This finding is in line with the previous humor and persuasion literature suggesting that humorous messages such as mocking could enhance communication source liking and reduce counterarguments (Baumgartner, 2007; Beard, 2008; Nabi et al., 2007). This further supports the previous research in that the impact of humor in persuasive communication can be intensified when the public holds positive prior attitude toward the communication source (e.g., Chattopadhyay & Basu, 1990), as illustrated in our study with Jack Ma's responses. As such, the use of humor in a self-mocking strategy seems to prevent negative public sentiments from going viral, averting a real crisis. People often say that attack is the best form of defense. Thus, in situations like a paracrisis, not severe but with potential to be, self-attacking with a sense of humor could be considered a form of self-defense. As a refute strategy indicates that the organization defends itself against an accusation in a paracrisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b), preemptive self-mockery could be one such specific form. In addition, publics may take the corporation's self-mocking as a sign of self-punishment based on the acknowledgment of its wrongdoing, leading them to discount the similar attacking messages in the future.

It is also important to note that detecting and analyzing public sentiments before responding to a paracrisis is crucial to successful crisis communication (Brummette & Sisco, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2014). In this case, for example, initial public sentiments suggested this was not a serious crisis. TMall's use of formal crisis response strategies, however, seemed to increase the perceived severity. Thus, when a paracrisis does not involve human casualty or moral issues, then companies may safely consider using informal, figurative, and satirical language for social media (Weibo in this case). Lastly, the self-mocking

strategy used in the TMall case seems to have succeeded because it was delivered as a form of a narrative, which can further elicit a parasocial relationship with the corporate character. The conversation with the social media manager showcased Jack Ma's relationship with his employees while mocking both Jack Ma and the employee. The public's overwhelmingly positive response to this post would suggest the public's appreciation of transparency and honesty on social media (Aula, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2012a). It also suggests that the public prefers a good narrative or story on social media rather than cold mechanical responses (Ott & Theunissen, 2015; Park & Cameron, 2015). The reaction also underscores the importance of responding based on existing public sentiments on social media (Brummette & Sisco, 2015; Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Detecting a shift in the overall public sentiments toward the corporation, TMall took the chance of demonstrating Alibaba's corporate citizenship by mentioning Jack Ma's promise to bring down real estate prices. As skyrocketing real estate prices are a big social issue in China (Rapoza, 2014), this brief mention not only showcased the corporation's financial ability, but also suggested that Alibaba is a socially responsible company that cares about the Chinese public.

6. Practical implications

In managing a paracrisis on social media, it is important, this study illustrates, to uphold several aspects of communication, such as a sense of humor, a communication style that befits Weibo culture (e.g., figurative language, a satirical tone, and emoticons), and parasocial relationship. TMall's successful paracrisis management might have succeeded because all these aspects were combined and aligned well. All these possibly important factors provide several meaningful insights and implications. First, the self-mocking strategy was effective probably because it brought in Jack Ma's personality. The good match between CEO personality and the adopted strategy could further enhance publics' perceived parasocial relationship. This suggests that when a corporation already has its CEO with a high profile, imbuing the corporation with the CEO's personality in its paracrisis communication and matching the CEO personality with an appropriate strategy would increase source liking and message acceptance.

Second, in social media paracrisis, corporations should be cautious about blindly using traditional crisis communication strategies, especially ones that forgo a sense of humor or a communication style that is better suited for social media culture. Without accompanying social media-suited communication styles, it may add perceived seriousness to paracrisis. Third, a sense of humor deployed in a self-mocking or mocking-the-accuser strategy might work and could be considered in a paracrisis on social media especially when public sentiments are not extremely negative and when the paracrisis does not involve human casualty, severe moral issues, and ethical issues. Thus, it is important to assess the characteristics of the paracrisis and detect existing public sentiments through scanning the social media environment. In addition, although a sense of humor seemed to work better when combined with the CEO personality and a self-mocking strategy in our case, it can also work both with and without utilizing a CEO personality or corporate character. If it is finely deployed in crisis responses with an appropriate communication style, it can also work in a paracrisis, as found in other paracrisis such as ThinkGeek's case against accusations of trademark infringement (Veil et al., 2012).

Third, this study implies that a sense of humor in a self-mocking strategy may work better if it accompanies an appropriate social media communication style and a narrative form. The adoption of informal, satirical, figurative language, emoticons, and a narrative form in corporate responses should be considered when communicating with the Chinese public, especially when dealing with a paracrisis. Lastly, a self-mocking strategy can be considered as a type of refute strategy to manage a paracrisis online. Through preemptive self-mocking against the paracrisis accusation or challenge, the organization can defend itself from similar accusations or challenges.

7. Conclusion

Through investigating TMall's social media paracrisis case, this study has emphasized the importance, in a crisis response, of actively utilizing CEO personality, parasocial relationships, a sense of humor, and a social media communication style. Future research should empirically examine how and when these aspects can work better in managing a paracrisis online to provide a better direction to practitioners and further enhance the theoretical understanding of social media crisis management. All in all, the study suggests that a self-mocking crisis response strategy can be adopted as a defense tool against the paracrisis accusation. And it can be effective when aligned well with a sense of humor and a particular social media culture, enhancing public resistance to negative online attacks.

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