

Emotions, Rumors, and Trust: A Study of Brand Crisis Responses Online

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Abstract. In an era of social media penetration, brand crises are no longer limited to information clarification; they often stem from the spread of emotions and the weakening of trust. This paper, focusing on the incident of Costa Coffee, explores how brands can guide emotions and rebuild trust through response strategies during crises driven by online rumors. Combining a literature review with case analysis, the study constructs a three-stage theoretical model: “emotional contagion—brand response—trust repair.” The study found that delayed responses or a lack of emotional resonance deepen public distrust. At the same time, proactive apologies or emotional resonance responses are more conducive to crisis containment and image restoration. This study emphasizes the need to consider both platform differences and emotional rhythms in brand crisis response, broadening the application of emotional contagion theory in brand communication and providing theoretical support and practical guidance for companies to build dynamic, cross-platform response mechanisms.

Keywords: Crisis communication; cross-platform media communication; emotional contagion; trust repair; brand management.

1. Introduction

In this swiftly transforming age of social networks, the craft of brand building encounters not only unique chances but also serious threats—one of the key is the susceptibility to rumor disaster. Unlike in the era of traditional mass media, where information channels were comparatively slower, one of the main features of social media is that any single person with a notion can amplify their experience to international narratives. This transformation has escalated risks for brands, the reason being that rumors can go viral on social networks within a short stint, which is usually accompanied with consumers' skepticism and emotional outburst, creating indefensible situation for a brand, and devaluing public trust toward a brand. Thus, a customer previously noticed a foreign object in a Costa coffee and posted it, which quickly became viral on the internet. Subsequently, but still the Company stated it was only a misunderstanding. This incident caused a crisis of mistrust. Likewise, Apple was thought to be guilty of purposefully slowing down the operation of older iPhones in order to trigger user conversations about new purchases. This, together with accusations on social networks such as Instagram and Twitter, caused a storm.

As per the emotional contagion hypothesis, the mentioned incidents are likely to be the result of the rapid spread of personal emotions through the virtual channels of social media. Existing researches have proven the effectiveness of emotional spread, in terms of accelerating rumors' diffusion, yet they ignore the precise role of corporate responses in the interactions between these contagions and the rebuilding of trust. For that matter, not a lot of studies have been completed comparing the self-governing processes in TikTok, Weibo, or Twitter, even though the emotional responses on these platforms may vary greatly in terms of the time, intensity, and framing. These are precisely the missing parts that require more thorough investigation, which in a comprehensive way will combine the influence of emotional contagion, corporate response strategies, and the process of regaining or rebuilding customers' trust.

Thereby, the current study will examine how brands' various response strategies, which include public apologies, corpus clarifications, or strategic silence, influence consumers' perceptions in the rumors existed in social media platforms. Emphasis is put on the tempo of the reaction, channel of communication, emotion involved, transparency of content, and platform selection. Identifying these potential influencing factors will further our objective by determining the real success of these strategies in building trust among the consumers.

2. Literature Review

In today's social media environment, emotional transmission in traditional interpersonal contexts is unidirectional. However, social platforms are more receptive to users' emotions and expressions, which contribute to rapid emotional surges and intensify people's perceptions of events. Nevertheless, existing studies tend to focus solely on the mechanisms of emotional dissemination, without establishing a clear connection between emotional dynamics and trust repair following brand-related rumors. To address this gap, this paper proposes a chain model in which emotion influences trust recovery through perceived credibility.

As Bail notes, social media functions like a "prism" that refracts users' social perceptions, further amplifying the intensity of emotions and identity-based biases [1]. The study could also be extended to reveal that, in the early stages of information diffusion, social platforms tend to spread rumors more rapidly than traditional media. Moreover, discussions regarding cross-platform dissemination paths and their moderating effects on response effectiveness remain underdeveloped. To address these shortages, this paper will explore how different platforms influence the effectiveness of the same response strategy through comparative analysis. When rumors are inaccurate or poorly handled, they can cause irreversible damage to a brand's credibility. Audiences often perceive the brand's delayed awareness and ambiguous statements as attempts to evade responsibility, which further fuels the spread of negative emotions. However, the existing literature does not elaborate on the role of factors such as timeliness and transparency in trust recovery. Therefore, this study will refine these elements and quantify trust accordingly.

In the contemporary media landscape characterized by fragmentation, individuals are primarily concentrated across different streaming services and "micro-communities" within social platforms, which has disrupted the unidirectional communication path between brands and consumers [2]. As a result, when brands apply the same crisis response strategy across multiple platforms, it often proves ineffective and may even intensify public distrust and further misunderstanding toward the brand.

3. Costa Incident: Communication Pathways and Emotional Evolution

3.1. Incident Overview

The incident kicked off when a consumer declared finding a strange object in a cup of coffee bought in a Costa store, together with a photograph of his or her claim, which was brought up on Weibo. The post quickly became one of the trending topics, catching over 50,000 reposts in a 24-hour frame, and the platform's main page grows to cover it. Critical to the point, social media carried out the amplifying function in this process, while individual experts' input and one person's doubt widened into public attention. The initial reaction focused less on facts and more on curiosity, as well as on negativity and doubt. Costing queries on control quality and food safety regulation were the discussion points. Given Costa's indecision and inactivity at the start, the lingering uncertainty among the following shoppers gradually shifted into building anxiety, hence setting the spiral of emotions in motion. This phase shows that when the brand is unable to supply effective explanation at the very start of the rumor, then it is most likely to lose the essential chance to mold people's opinion.

3.2. Communication Pathways and Media Characteristics

As the incident kept on stabbing on other social websites like Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, public opinion built up from initial indecisiveness to anger and finally to open resistance in the long run. Owing to food bloggers and key opinion leaders' reposts and commentary, the collective contagion effect of their expression was self-perpetuating, filling in the comment section with groups of online sleuths condemning the food chain with lines like "never drink Costa ever again" and "food safety can't be ignored." Through this process, the mechanism of emotional transmission was evident, whereby individual negative feelings spread easily through imitation and interaction in online networks, which later turned into a collective doubt of the brand. What has been the finding previously indicates that anger, as opposed to the positive ones, is more transferable, and the spread of it across social boundaries is more likely to happen [3]. In this dynamic, the case of Costa is the most evident: the narrative features of different platforms not only had a role of polarization of emotions but also intensified the differentiated diffusion of this power—Douyin heightened the visual impact of it through short videos, and Xiaohongshu was more vocal in raising analytical discussions that reinforced "distrust discourses." Consequently, these two aspects further complicated the increasing complexity of the crisis.

3.3. Emotional Progression and Specific Analysis

It was only some 36 hours later from the date when the incident occurred that Costa managed to issue their first response, the core of which was based on rational clarification. Here Costa highlighted that it was a "consumer misunderstanding," though this speech was totally green in providing any empathy. It undoubtedly came to look as more or less "insincere" and "arrogant" among the public, as it was slow and calm. What this means is that a well-designed formal apology is not sufficient to rectify adverse perceptions if the apology is received by the consumers after the emotional peak and backlash have generated. It is crucial to note that effective crisis communication is not just built on the provision of factual information, but also on the precise timing of the response and the emotional aspects of the given message. Claeys and Cauberghe pointedly build up the fact that the necessity of integrating response content with response timing; it will not help on the overall effectiveness of the message when transparent information is provided in one time [4]. The case of Costa bears testimony to the fact that announcing communication and over-excessive rational explanation didn't match the public feeling as well and branded "double failure." The brand, moreover, was challenged by its doubly troubled ad campaigns that did not align with all platforms and thus resulted in scattered communication.

4. In-Depth Analysis of the Media and Emotional Logic Behind Costa's Failed Response Strategy

4.1. Media Perspective: Why the Response Strategy Failed

In the process of crisis communication, stealing thunder is considered a highly effective strategy. When the involved party voluntarily discloses information, the media tend to reduce the negative framing of the issue [5]. Unfortunately, Costa did not proactively adopt this effective approach. Instead, it delayed its response, allowing the media and users to quickly dominate the public discourse. As the literature indicates, when individuals encounter a brand-related crisis, emotions often play a crucial cognitive role. This can lead to strong resistance and intense reactions, as well as significant changes in how the event and the brand are perceived. Therefore, if a brand ignores public emotions, it is likely to be viewed as shirking responsibility, which results in a loss of narrative control during the crisis [6]. In addition, Costa defined the incident as a "customer misunderstanding," an attitude that appeared dismissive and disrespectful to consumers, failing to address their emotional needs or convey any empathy. Meanwhile, many online users were already emotionally agitated, and the incident had escalated into a public opinion storm. Costa's actions disregarded consumers' concerns

about food safety; the company did not release an official clarification, nor did it proactively reach out to media outlets or hold a press conference. These failures led to a missed opportunity to stabilize the situation at a critical moment.

Overall, Costa failed to construct a positive public narrative in time and did not respond in accordance with media logic. As a result, the brand's image suffered significant damage, laying the groundwork for potential emotional contagion in future crises.

4.2. Emotional Contagion Perspective: Breakdown of the Response Logic

In terms of the rapid spread of negative emotions, compared to traditional media, social media tends to present information in a more fragmented way, making media users more susceptible to emotional fragments. At the same time, today's social media platforms often accelerate the pace at which public negative sentiment erupts. In the case of the Costa incident, the public's initial concern was not about the factual accuracy of the event, but rather the brand's sense of responsibility and appropriate attitude. However, Costa's response was delayed, and they failed to curb the surge and diffusion of emotions. During this process, the brand did not shift its focus from "factual explanation" to "emotional appeasement," nor did it propose any remedial actions or express an apology to the public. On another level, negative emotions are not isolated; they are contagious and interlinked. As seen in the Costa case, if the initial dissatisfaction is not addressed effectively, it gradually accumulates into a serious public opinion crisis. Emotionally, this reflects a shift from individual feelings to collective emotional resonance.

In summary, emotion itself has become an essential part of brand crisis resolution. The most critical factor triggering this crisis was Costa's indifference and evasion of responsibility regarding the foreign-object incident. This failure to establish an effective communication and guidance mechanism at the proper stage escalated a micro-level event into a full-blown trust crisis, ultimately leading to the collapse of brand credibility.

4.3. Cognitive Fission through Cross-platform Dissemination

In today's digital environment, different social media platforms have distinct content preferences and algorithmic mechanisms, which lead to varied modes of event presentation. For example, in the case of Costa's foreign-object incident, Weibo, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu (RED) each generated different narrative structures. Weibo, as the originating platform of the event, emphasized timeliness and mainly focused on exposing and questioning the brand's responsibility. TikTok spread the incident through short videos with strong visual-emotional impact, highlighting details of the foreign object that triggered users' anger and discomfort. Meanwhile, on Xiaohongshu, users engaged in in-depth discussions surrounding "trust issues," extending the conversation into brand management and service quality. However, due to the differences in communication styles across these platforms, Costa failed to adopt a unified and systematic response logic and strategy. It remained silent on Weibo, lacked visual reconciliation on TikTok, and failed to address user sentiments on Xiaohongshu. As a result, the crisis-related information structure became fragmented across platforms.

As Christin points out, the internal design and evaluative logic of platforms constitute key foundations for the perceived legitimacy and visibility of information [7]. These mechanisms significantly influence what is considered valuable expression online. Therefore, under such differentiated platform conditions, Costa's adoption of a uniform response strategy did not meet the emotional needs of users across platforms, ultimately leading to fractured trust and a system-wide reputational crisis.

5. Theoretical Refinement

In the context of social media, the brand crisis issues have evolved from being no longer a matter of public opinion management under one-way communication to more complex challenges of collective emotion management and trust relationship repair. Based on this background, this paper

constructs a three-stage logical path model of “emotional communication-brand response-trust repair”, aiming to reveal how brands should precisely match response strategies in the public opinion environment of social platforms and gradually achieve an effective transition from public opinion crises to trust reconstruction.

Taking the Costa incident as an example, the model’s theoretical applicability and practical explanatory power have been initially validated. In the initial stages of a crisis, brands often face more than just the issue of information authenticity, but rather the rapid accumulation and fission of public sentiment. In the Costa incident, a simple user Weibo post sparked widespread panic and anger, primarily due to the emotional trigger of “food safety.” This sentiment, through the reposting and commenting mechanisms of social platforms and the extensive secondary dissemination by KOLs and food-related accounts, quickly established a highly consistent collective consensus that the brand was untrustworthy. This emotional fission process is not only a reaction to the facts but also a resonance of emotional expression styles. Lee and Theokary pointed out that on social platforms, emotional appeal and language style are far more powerful drivers of user engagement and dissemination than the content itself[8]. Super influencers build influence through this mechanism. This finding confirms the key logic of the “emotional contagion chain” in the first stage of this research model. It suggests that brands that fail to identify and intervene in the rhythm of emotional spread will lose their voice in the early stages of a crisis.

Entering the second stage, the brand’s response strategy becomes a key variable influencing the direction of sentiment. The timing, tone, platform, and transparency of the response all contribute to consumer perception and emotional response. In the Costa case, the brand’s first statement came 36 hours after the incident was exposed. Its response, delivered in a rational and clarifying tone, emphasized “user misunderstandings,” but failed to offer an apology or empathy, lacking emotional soothing or an acknowledgement of responsibility. This response failed to address negative emotions effectively and instead fueled users’ secondary interpretations of the brand as “arrogant and evasive,” further escalating emotions. Although subsequent statements and apologies were issued, the loss of the window for emotional guidance made the damage to trust difficult to repair effectively. The key to this stage lies not in whether a response is issued but in whether it truly aligns with public sentiment.

The third stage is the emotional trajectory and trust restoration process following the public outburst. Trust restoration is not the natural outcome of a one-way brand statement but a multi-stage process involving emotional relief, behavioral follow-up, and relationship rebuilding. The failure to restore trust in the Costa incident reflects a common misconception among many brands in their crisis responses: focusing solely on clarification and neglecting emotional expression; ignoring the response window, resulting in delayed and ineffective remedial measures; and responding at a pace that falls outside the user’s attention cycle. Without effective compensation mechanisms and long-term dialogue arrangements during this phase, it will be challenging to achieve a positive shift in user perception and reverse the brand’s unfavorable positioning in public opinion. Furthermore, research has found that different consumers exhibit distinct adaptation paths to crises[9]. This means that brands that ignore the heterogeneity of user emotional states during their response processes are likely to miss opportunities to reconnect with potential trustworthy individuals.

To enhance the efficiency of brand response and the accuracy of strategies, this paper further proposes the type classification of response strategies and their adaptation mechanisms based on the model. Brand response strategies will be divided into four key strategies. Firstly, Proactive Apology Strategy. Corporations publicly acknowledge issues or responsibilities at the beginning of the incident, actively express apologies, and demonstrate ‘signals of sincerity’, such as compensation. The strategy suitable to apply to a crisis involves the core interests of users (such as personal safety, food hygiene, personal privacy leakage, etc.), and the facts of the event that the company has negligent problems with the goods and services. Secondly, Emotional Resonance Strategy. Corporations should use warm language to resonate with users’ emotions, show understanding and empathy, avoid confrontation or forced clarification, and emphasize brand value consistency. This strategy applies to a crisis that may not necessarily directly relate to consumer rights. However, public emotions are stirred up (such as

cultural sensitivity, misinterpretation of values, allegations of group discrimination, etc.), and users are desperate to feel ‘understood’ and ‘respected’. Then, the Rational Clarification Strategy. Enterprises should provide specific, detailed, and logically explicit explanatory materials, using data, processes, screenshots, and other evidence to show the truth of the event and eliminate misunderstandings. This strategy applies to crisis events that are categorized as misinformation or misinterpretation with low public attention and predominantly rational users as the audience. Lastly, the Silence and observation strategy. The brand should not actively respond at this time, but closely monitor the event's direction, collect relevant data, and be prepared to respond quickly when necessary. This strategy applies to crisis events that are still in the early stages, have limited impact, or have not yet formed a public opinion hot spot.

At the operational level, these strategies demonstrate multi-dimensional control over response time, platform attributes, tone and style, and information transparency. The selection of different strategy types needs to be matched with the trend of public sentiment, the platform's communication mechanism, and the brand's reputation management capabilities to achieve dynamic adjustment. The proposal of this classification framework echoes the “brand response continuum model (typologies continuum)” proposed by Do and Nham[10]. This model emphasizes that response strategies should be flexibly adjusted between “denial” and “full responsibility”, and combined with “auxiliary strategies” such as apology, compensation, and empathy to enhance the effect of trust repair. The four types of strategies proposed in this article can be mapped to different intervals in this continuum, which not only reflects the hierarchical differences in responsibility attitudes but also emphasizes the simultaneous coordination of emotional regulation and cognitive guidance, providing an operational framework for brands to respond to multi-platform crises. In contrast, if brands can dynamically match response strategies, such as using emotionally resonant video responses on the Douyin platform, simultaneously launching clarifying data graphics on Weibo, and coordinating KOL content on Xiaohongshu to convey “empathy”, they are more likely to achieve consistent response effects across platforms and avoid emotional dislocation and structural trust collapse.

This study theoretically expands on three aspects of brand crisis communication research. First, it introduces the theory of emotional contagion into the context of brand social communication, revealing how public sentiment can be rapidly aggregated and amplified through platform mechanisms, transforming into collective cognitive biases. Second, it proposes a “dynamic response matching theory,” emphasizing that brands should select strategies based on the three-dimensional coordinates of “emotion type × communication platform × public opinion stage,” rather than adhering to traditional static classification systems. Third, the three-stage model constructed in this paper effectively integrates the logical pathways between crisis causes, emotional evolution, response structure, and trust outcomes, providing a replicable and empirically robust structural framework for future crisis management and brand public relations research. In short, brands seeking to navigate public opinion crises cannot rely solely on “issuing statements” or “deleting trending searches.” Instead, they must understand the underlying logic of emotional communication, establish a scientific mechanism for emotion recognition, and develop a dynamic strategy selection system. Only when brands truly understand, respond to, and guide emotions can they achieve a reversal of trust and rebuild long-term relationships.

6. Conclusion

This study constructed a three-stage model: “emotional communication—brand response—trust restoration.” Using the Costa foreign object incident as a case study, it validated the dynamic mechanisms of brand crisis response in the context of social media. The study found that the spread of consumer emotion accelerates public opinion evolution. At the same time, the timing, tone, and platform adaptability of brand response strategies determine the likelihood of emotional shifts and trust restoration. This suggests that effective responses require not only information transparency but

also precise targeting of user emotional structures, thereby achieving a transition from crisis control to relationship repair.

Furthermore, the study confirms the critical role of response strategies in emotional guidance and trust rebuilding, emphasizing the need for brands to develop emotionally resilient response mechanisms based on the principle of “emotional recognition as a starting point, response rhythm as a key component, and cross-platform consistency as a guarantee.” Response strategies are no longer simply one-way information outputs; they are instead emotional regulation behaviors with feedback-based perception.

This study expands the application of emotional communication theory to brand crisis management, proposing an analytical framework of “dynamic strategy matching,” providing more systematic and adaptable theoretical support for crisis management. Furthermore, the three-stage model can provide guidance for companies building digital sentiment monitoring systems and cross-platform response mechanisms.

Although this article establishes a preliminary theoretical framework and case studies, it lacks cross-industry comparisons and quantitative empirical support. Future research could incorporate user behavior data and natural language processing techniques to model and validate the causal pathways between sentiment evolution and strategic responses. Furthermore, attention should be paid to the mechanisms by which platform algorithms amplify sentiment transmission, further exploring how brands can achieve effective responses and restore trust within platform constraints.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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