

Managing Brand Crises in the Age of Cyber Violence: Ethical Strategies and Consumer Moral Cognition

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Abstract:

In the digital age dominated by social media, disputes over user value have become the core trigger point of brand crises. When brand behavior touches upon morally sensitive issues and triggers a brand crisis, users' discussions are very likely to escalate into cyber violence. This kind of behavior not only spreads geometrically through the amplification effect of social communication but also poses multiple threats to the brand: damage to reputation assets (such as the collapse of trust), direct financial losses (such as a sharp drop in sales), and weakening of long-term competitiveness (such as the loss of users). In the face of such crises, the choice of a brand's response strategy will directly affect consumers' feelings towards the brand as well as their future purchase decisions and loyalty. This article systematically analyzes the mechanism by which different strategies affect consumers' moral cognition, reveals the intrinsic reasons for their influence on purchasing behavior, and thereby provides theoretical and practical strategies for brands to build ethically oriented crisis response models.

Keywords: social media, brand crises, cyber violence, response strategy, moral cognition

Introduction

Since the internet and social media have been so developed, the brand crisis has become a crucial challenge for current companies. As investigated, nearly 75 percent of brands admitted at least one brand-fire exposure in a year and approximately 54% of them reported more than one crisis [1]. Such crises can harm a brand's equity through a weakening of brand confidence and a reduced likelihood of brand consideration and choice. [2] (Effectiveness of cor-

porate responses to brand crises: The role of crisis type and response strategies) Therefore, company should not only realize the threat and consequence of brand crisis, but also realize how to deal with different circumstances when they come. In studies by Park (2017) and Liu et al. (2016, 2018), scholars proved that crisis response strategies might rescue brands from their reputation decline. [3] By forming the response actions in a timely manner, brands can reshape both cognitive and affective reactions of stakeholders and reduce negative effects from crisis.

[4]. Currently, three kinds of main strategy are widely used for businesses-apology, silence, and legal action-An apology means an active act of taking responsibility by declaring admission of mistakes, expressing remorse and committing to rectification. Silence indicates a passive stance of not making an official response during the critical period of public opinion outbreak (usually referring to the golden 72-hour period). Legal action refers to the act of safeguarding rights by using means such as lawyer's letters and litigation to counter cyber violence. Apart from businesses' strategy, customers' reaction is more crucial, because it indicates whether businesses' action is appropriate. Customers' reaction could be generalized as attribution theory- in psychology, it explores how individuals explain the causes of events or behaviors, both their own and those of others. This research will aim to discuss the effectiveness of distinct strategies in crisis events, base on attribution theory.

2. different strategies and their pros and cons

2.1 apology strategy

The apology strategy is a core method for brand to take responsibility initiatively which concedes mistakes and make promise to make up for their behavior. A well-timed apology is one of the most commonly used tools in crisis communication, and it has been widely studied for its effectiveness in restoring brand image.[5] An effective apology must simultaneously incorporate three core elements: a clear admission of fault, an indication of the actual impact on a specific group, and a verifiable commitment to compensation. The sincerity of the apology and the brand's commitment to preventing future occurrences is critical in determining whether consumers will forgive the brand and continue to support it.[6]

Apology strategies, when properly executed, can signal to consumers that the brand acknowledges its mistakes and is taking concrete steps to rectify them. This, in turn, leads to an enhanced perception of the brand's integrity and a pathway toward rebuilding brand loyalty. [7] However, not all of apology would be effective. For example, generic or insincere apologies may backfire, leading to increased consumer skepticism and further erosion of trust. [8] In addition, other factors such as severity of the events and brand's previous reputation shouldn't be neglected. If enterprises insult or discriminate against other groups or countries, or repeatedly make mistakes on the same issue, it will become more difficult for them to offer a satisfactory apology in order to gain customers' forgiveness and loyalty. Follow the background of globalization, more and more international companies are cooperating mu-

tually. Thus, Cross-cultural communication barriers and religiosity have become factors that brands should have extra consideration. Cross-cultural communication barrier is one of the key factors affecting the effect of brand apology, which is mainly reflected in the communication challenges under different cultural dimensions. The contrast of high and low context culture provides a profound perspective for this purpose. [9] In places like the US and Germany, people tend to say exactly what they mean – information gets shared through clear, direct talking. But over in Asian countries such as China or Japan, meaning often hides between the lines. There, folks rely more on unspoken signals and shared cultural understanding to get their message across. Thus, the high-context market centers on maintaining face and repairing relationships, avoiding direct attribution expressions. In low-context markets, technical solutions are given priority, emphasizing precise responsibility division and verifiable solutions. An apology that ignores cultural context risks falling flat. Smart brands tune their message to their audience's background to make sure it's both understood and felt.

2.2 silence strategy

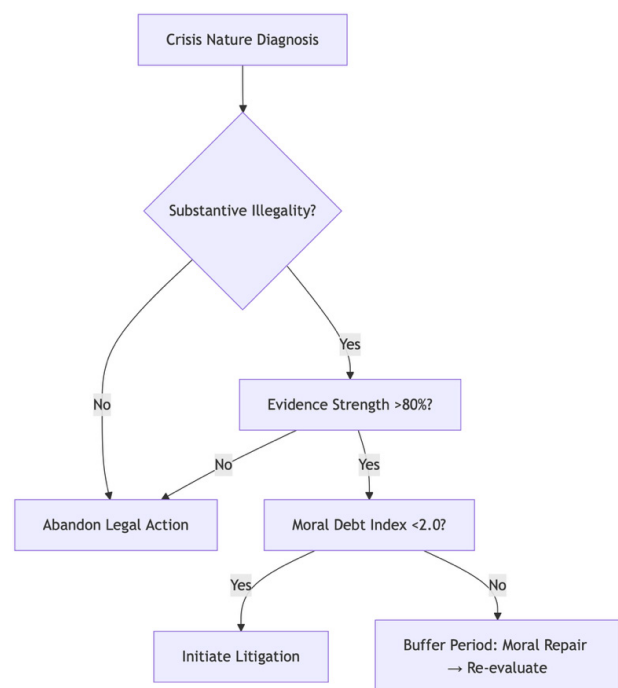
Silence– defined as “a lack of communication from an organization or its failure to provide clear and adequate responses to questions or concerns raised” [10]. – silence could be defined as intentionally or unintentionally and it's not a single behavior that exists in three differentiated types. The implementation of the silence strategy is not a single behavior but exists in three differentiated types, each of which has a different impact on consumers' moral perception. The first type is strategic silence, which means that enterprises deliberately reduce the heat of events by not responding. This is a method of trading time for space. For instance, a certain technology company chose to remain silent in the early stage of a product safety dispute and only responded after the third-party test report was released.[11] The second type is institutional silence, which stems from the sluggish response caused by the rigid communication mechanism within an organization. A typical case is that a multinational food group, during a quality crisis, experienced a 48-hour response vacuum due to unclear rights and responsibilities between the headquarters and regional branches, which eventually led to a large-scale consumer boycott[12]. The third type is adversarial silence, where enterprises express their protest against the irrationality of cyber violence by not responding. For instance, when a certain luxury brand chose to remain silent in the face of malicious photo editing attacks on social media, it instead gained the support of rational consumer groups[13].strategic silence not only as the absence of speech but also as statements providing little to no information. Strategic silence should then be operationally defined as a deliberate lack of organization-

al communication, and if there is any, the information is intentionally scant and ambiguous. [14] strategic silence may be practiced when organizations are proscribed by legal and regulatory requirements, or to signal patience, composure or to avoid sidetracking an issue while it is being worked on. [15] Keeping silence has been acceptable in many places which is helpful for companies avoiding consistent criticism and preventing potential investigation to find out more problems. Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016) found that silence, as opposed to stealing thunder, may be more appropriate when an organization fears a response may jeopardize their stakeholder relationships and implicate legal liability. [16] However, silence strategy has its potential drawbacks. In journalistic discourse). Silence often insinuates culpability and guilt by default". [17] and in organizations, silence from management might be interpreted as "negligence, indifference, an index of a weak position, or a validation of rumors". [18] When organizations choose silence in crises, they create a dangerous information vacuum that enables critics to frame the narrative and invites perceptions of negligence or guilt. This absence of response is strategically risky: it escalates stakeholder frustration, validates rumors, and damages trust irreparably. According to what has been mentioned above, it's clear to see that silence strategy is a double-edged sword and how to use is extremely important. the silence strategy has differentiated effects at different stages of a crisis. During the incubation period, silence may prevent the crisis from escalating. During the outbreak period, silence will accelerate the escalation of the crisis. During the duration, planned silence (such as in coordination with judicial procedures) may help quell the crisis. Business should make flexible decision base on their crisis process and conduct communication with public in an appropriate time. Silence strategy is essentially a sophisticated management game. Enterprises have to recognize that in the internet age, not responding itself constitutes a powerful response. However, in the most of times, this response will be interpreted in the most unfavorable direction. Therefore, only be deeply understanding the multi-dimensional mechanism behind base on their own conditions can make the best communication decisions in a crisis.

2.3 legal action

Legal action strategy refers to the institutionalized response of a brand to cyber violence through judicial or quasi-judicial means, such as lawyer's letters, civil litigation, and criminal reports. This approach fundamentally shifts attribution responsibility from corporate self-defense to institutional fact-finding and reconstructs the crisis narrative by leveraging the symbolic authority of the legal system [19]. Its core functions are reflected in three aspects: Suspension of Liability: When there is fac-

tual ambiguity, initiating legal proceedings to transfer the burden of proof to judicial institutions temporarily freezes the attribution of public guilt - effectively converting "corporate scandals" into "pending cases" [20] Deterrence engineering: Criminal reports and stop-order letters have produced measurable declines in rumor dissemination. Empirical data show that within 72 hours of litigation announcements, malicious posts decreased by $\geq 67\%$ [21]. Credit arbitrage: When the distrust of stakeholders exceeds 40%, regular apologies and statements can no longer win people's trust. At this point, court judgments or regulatory reports can serve as exogenous trust signals and can transcend polarized online discourses [22]. However, key limitations still exist: In regions where public trust in the judiciary is less than 30% (for example, in developing economies), legal action may backfire [23]. Furthermore, the average litigation period of 11 months for civil cases conflicts with the 48-hour crisis communication window, posing a risk of "delayed performance of reputation"[24]. Ultimately, quasi-judicial actions (e.g., threatening letters from lawyers) amplified the backlash when targeting vulnerable groups - 72% of consumers regarded this as "corporate bullying" [25]. Therefore, the effectiveness of this strategy still depends on the credibility of the institution and the reliability of the evidence. As legal weapons without forensic grade evidence become suicide drugs for reputation, emphasizing the necessity of incorporating national governance capacity into the crisis management framework



3. Industries analysis

3.1 . Introduction

Due to the differences in product characteristics, ways of contact with consumers and regulatory environments among various industries, the types of crises they face, and the public's tolerance are also quite distinct. Therefore, the response strategies must be highly industry specific. Afterwards, the article will select several representative but differentiated industries for analysis to see what different approaches they will adopt to respond and resolve their brand crises and consumer complaints.

3.2 . The automotive industry

In the digital age, the products of the automotive industry have outdo their attribute as mere means of transportation and have been deeply integrated into users' digital lives and value systems, making them particularly vulnerable when facing value disputes. The core of such disputes often revolves around data privacy, environmental ethics and supply chain morality, directly impacting consumers' trust in brand safety and moral recognition. For instance, when Tesla was exposed that its on-board sensors might have collected information about the surrounding environment without explicit authorization, public doubts quickly escalated from a technical level to a moral trial of data and privacy infringement.[26] In this context, if a brand takes legal action and responds forcefully to the media or users who raise doubts through litigation, it will be regarded by the public as an attempt to use its technological and legal advantages to suppress reasonable doubts from the outside world, thereby provoking stronger moral anger and leading to a double collapse of the brand's reputation and purchase intention. Conversely, a proactive apology strategy - including senior management acknowledging inadequate design considerations, promptly releasing privacy protection enhancement plans, and introducing third-party auditing institutions - can steer public perception towards recognition of the company's image as a responsible technological innovator, effectively restoring moral perception and stabilizing market confidence.

Another typical case is the issue of labor rights in the supply chain. If it is confirmed that the overseas suppliers of a car manufacturer like Toyota have violated the rights and interests of workers, the brand's silence will be directly interpreted as a betrayal of its commitment to sustainable development and a disregard for basic human rights.[27] At this point, only a prompt and sincere apology, supplemented by substantive actions such as terminating cooperation with problem suppliers, compensating the affected groups, and making the entire rectification process completely transparent, can regain consumers' moral under-

standing and restore the ethical legitimacy of the brand. Therefore, for the automotive industry, the core of its crisis response lies in building a closed loop of "recognition - compensation - evolution". Silence is only strategic and reasonable during an extremely short period of internal technical diagnosis, while legal action is highly risky and only applicable to malicious commercial defamation with conclusive evidence. Moreover, adequate communication must be carried out in advance to avoid being construed as an intolerant attitude of a tech giant

3.3 . Food Industry

The food industry is closely linked to consumers' daily lives, cultural traditions and emotional affiliations, which makes its brand crises highly sensitive. In this field, "silence" is often not a passive move but a core strategy of remaining still to prevent the situation from escalating. Value disputes usually stem from the subversion of tradition, health concerns and questions about fairness. A typical situation is that when McDonald's attempted to introduce a culturally specific item like the McCurry in India, it was criticized by consumers in the original cultural circle as disrespectful to cultural heritage.[28] In the early stage of such a highly culturally sensitive crisis, an immediate apology might be interpreted as an admission of fault, which could instead confirm the accusations and spark broader controversy. At this point, strategic silence is of vital importance - brands need to suspend all marketing activities, use this period of silence to conduct in-depth internal evaluations and cultural tracing, and at the same time quietly engage in closed-door communication with industry experts, cultural representatives, etc. This model of being quiet on the outside and dynamic on the inside can be understood by the public as a prudence and respect for cultural traditions rather than arrogance or neglect, thereby creating space and laying a factual foundation for possible necessary clarifications or low-key adjustments in the future.

Similarly, when it comes to health disputes, if a product like Coca-Cola's high-sugar beverages is initially questioned but lacks scientific consensus or authoritative evidence, a hasty apology may cause unnecessary panic.[29] The strict compliance of the law provides a legal basis for the strategy of silence. The silence of a brand should be accompanied by behind-the-scenes actions, such as proactively sending products to third-party authoritative institutions for testing or preparing communication materials based on scientific facts. Once the test results confirm the product's safety, the objective facts accumulated during the silent period will become the most powerful response weapon, guiding the public's perception from emotional questioning to rational cognition, thereby consolidating the brand's image as a scientific, rigorous and responsible one. On the contrary, if one gets embroiled in a public

opinion maelstrom to defend themselves from the very beginning, it will instead intensify the loss of trust. In fairness questions (such as pricing strategies), silence can also be used to calmly assess the true representativeness of market feedback and reserve flexibility for subsequent data-driven explanations or local adjustments. In conclusion, for the food industry, silence has transformed from a passive response to a proactive strategy centered on risk assessment and fact-checking. Its successful implementation depends on substantive follow-up actions, while apologies are only applicable in extreme cases where the facts are conclusive and responsibilities are clear.

3.4 luxury good industry

The essence of the luxury goods industry does not lie in the functions of its products, but in the meticulously constructed value dreams, identity symbols and cultural authority. Therefore, the crisis it is facing is essentially the shattering of the brand myth, and the response strategy must maintain its scarcity, exclusivity and cultural consistency to the extreme. The most common value disputes revolve around cultural respect and moral purity. Take a well-known case as an example. An advertisement released by Dolce & Gabbana triggered a global public opinion storm because it was accused of containing racial or cultural discriminatory elements.[30] At this point, any form of silence or attempt to defend one's position through legal action (such as accusing critics of misinterpreting artistic expressions) will be understood by the global market, especially the offended cultural groups, as an arrogant attitude based on a sense of cultural superiority, leading to a sharp depreciation of their brand assets. The only feasible path is for the top management of the brand to come forward and offer a profound and unreserved apology, immediately remove all controversial content, and prove their respect through humility and actions.

Another typical controversy is related to the spokesperson. When a brand ambassador like Johnny Depp for Dior is embroiled in a serious personal moral scandal, the public will closely watch whether the brand will cut ties with them to defend its own values.[31] Silence can be regarded as an ambiguity and compromise of values, and threatening legal action against claimants is an even more counterproductive resort. Agile crisis management - that is, promptly issuing a statement expressing regret over the incident and announcing the termination of cooperation - can clearly convey the brand's unquestionable moral bottom line and consolidate consumer recognition. In addition, the elite customer group, which is increasingly concerned about sustainable development, is also highly vigilant against the exaggerated environmental commitments of luxury brands. If a brand like Gucci is questioned for its false environmental commitments and attempts to suppress the reports of environmental organizations through

legal means, it will confirm the false accusations and lead to the loss of core customers.[32] The real solution is to apologize and provide verifiable third-party certification, invest in a genuine and environmentally friendly supply chain, and match the ethical consumption expectations of its customer base. From this, it can be seen that the response strategy of the luxury goods industry must be extremely refined: the apology should reflect modesty beneath nobility; Silence can only be used for an extremely short period of strategic evaluation. Legal action, however, is extremely risky. It should be absolutely avoided in disputes over values unless it is used to defend clear legal facts such as the theft of intellectual property rights.

3.5 Technology and Internet Industry

As the builders and rule-makers of the digital ecosystem, the business models of technology and Internet companies are highly dependent on the protection and authorization of the legal framework, which makes "legal action" the core and preferred strategy for them to deal with specific types of crises and defend their own rights and interests. The core of these disputes often revolves around algorithmic ethics, data power and platform responsibility. For instance, when Amazon's artificial intelligence recruitment system is accused of bias by unconfirmed reports, an immediate public apology or an overly long period of silence may be regarded as tacit approval by the market and could lead to irreparable damage to its reputation and shareholder lawsuits. [33] In this context, when enterprises take decisive legal action - such as sending a lawyer's letter or filing a defamation lawsuit against the agency that published the false report - it is not only an active defense of their business reputation, but also a strong signal to users, investors and regulatory authorities that they have a high level of confidence in the compliance of their technology. This response, armed with the law, can quickly bring disputes back from the moral trial ground to the evidence-based legal process, effectively curb the spread of rumors, and buy time for internal technical audits.

In the field of data security, legal action is also a key tool for defining the boundaries of responsibility. When a data breach occurs at companies like Facebook, while the company initiates an emergency response, it immediately hires top-notch cybersecurity and legal evidence collection teams to get involved. This behavior itself is a powerful form of communication. [34] By holding malicious attackers accountable through legal means or filing lawsuits against third-party cloud service providers that fail to fulfill their contractual obligations, the focus of public anger can be shifted from the platforms themselves to the real responsible parties. This move not only demonstrates the company's determination to safeguard the interests of its users, but also practically clarifies its own scope of responsibility, avoiding unnecessary moral accusations. In

terms of platform content governance, when confronted with obvious false information or malicious commercial defamation, legal action rather than public debate is the most efficient response. The platform, in accordance with the user agreement and relevant laws, resolutely takes measures such as banning and filing lawsuits against accounts or content that violate regulations. This can most clearly demonstrate the seriousness and enforceability of its platform rules, shaping its identity as fair, neutral and powerful, rather than getting embroiled in endless public opinion battles. In conclusion, for the technology and Internet industries, legal actions have transcended mere defensive measures and evolved into an active risk management and precise public relations tool, whose applicability is based on strict legal compliance. Apologies, on the other hand, are mainly used in scenarios of clear technical errors or security vulnerabilities, while silence is only applicable to extremely short-term internal fact-finding stages.

Conclusion

In the digital age, where social media amplifies public discourse and moral sensitivities, brand crises have evolved from mere operational challenges to profound tests of a brand's ethical standing and relational integrity. This paper has systematically examined how different response strategies—apology, silence, and legal action—shape consumers' moral cognition and, consequently, their trust, loyalty, and purchasing behavior. Through a structured analysis grounded in attribution theory and illustrated with cross-industry cases, several key insights emerge.

First, the effectiveness of any crisis response is deeply mediated by its alignment with consumers' moral expectations. An apology, when sincere, culturally attuned, and accompanied by tangible corrective measures, serves as the most potent tool for rebuilding trust across most industries. It acknowledges fault, demonstrates empathy, and commits to change, thereby positively influencing internal attributions of responsibility. However, its success hinges on contextual factors such as cultural dimensions, crisis severity, and prior brand reputation.

Second, silence is a high-risk strategy that demands nuanced application. While it may be strategically useful in the very short term—for instance, during internal assessment or when legal and regulatory constraints apply—prolonged or poorly timed silence often exacerbates crises. It creates an informational vacuum that fuels speculation, reinforces negative perceptions, and can be interpreted as indifference or guilt. Its utility varies significantly across crisis stages and industries, being particularly damaging in sectors like food and luxury goods, where emotional and cultural connections are paramount.

Third, legal action, while effective in countering mali-

cious falsehoods and providing institutional validation, carries substantial reputational risks. It can be perceived as aggressive or evasive, especially when public trust in judicial systems is low or when deployed against vulnerable stakeholders. To avoid backlash, this strategy must be reserved for scenarios with robust evidence and clear legal grounding and should be communicated within a framework of fairness and transparency rather than intimidation. Importantly, the choice and implementation of these strategies must be industry specific. The automotive, food, luxury, and technology sectors each face distinct types of value-based crises—whether over data ethics, cultural respect, moral purity, or algorithmic fairness. Effective response requires a tailored approach that considers sectoral vulnerabilities, stakeholder expectations, and the symbolic role brands play in consumers' lives.

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