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Challenges to the Applicability of Crisis Communication Management in the Social Media Era in China: A Theoretical Perspective Informed by SCCT

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Abstract: Social media has profoundly reshaped stakeholder relationships and information flows in crisis communication. As a result, the classic Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) now faces new explanatory challenges. Numerous studies have identified that SCCT has clear limitations in crisis typology, the locus of attribution, emotional dynamics, and technological variables. However, these limitations do not diminish the enduring theoretical relevance and validity of SCCT's central claims. By integrating the mediating perspective of the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model (SMCC), the moral-anger–driven emotional pathway, and the dual regulatory influences of Chinese sociocultural norms and platform-level governance, this paper advances theoretically grounded extensions to SCCT and offers context-sensitive crisis response recommendations for corporations operating in China.

Keywords: Situational Crisis Communication Theory; Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model; Social media; Corporate crisis management; Responsibility attribution

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1. Introduction

The global business environment is going through profound transformations. Faster technological updates, more aware public opinion, and the spread of social media have combined to form a complex risk network full of uncertainties. Digital opportunities bring benefits, but they also come with risks. For organizations, crises today are more frequent, spread faster, and do more harm than before. That is why crisis management has become a strategic priority for any organization's long-term strategy. A mishandled crisis can destroy a company's hard-won reputation and public trust, leading to a series of negative effects, such as customer churn, share price fluctuations, and supply-chain disruptions.

The China Internet Network Information Center put out its 57th Statistical Report about how the internet has grown in China, and it indicates that China already has 1.125 billion people using the internet, with the share of the population that has access going above 80% [1]. At the same time, more people using social media has completely changed how information gets shared around. Characterized by information spreading much faster, the people who used to control what gets out do not have that power anymore, and people's emotional reactions get stronger and spread more easily.

This kind of change makes effective crisis management much harder. For example, the time between a crisis breaking out and it getting widespread public attention is now much shorter. It can be seen that negative stories spread super fast, and an organization's reputation can get ruined much quicker than before. A well-known example of this is the 2025 Xibei prepared-food incident. It started when just one influencer posted an online complaint, but quickly grew into a big wave of public criticism [2]. Such incidents show that crisis communication today involves many voices taking part, emotional public debate, and information being spread out a lot by algorithms. All these changes put a lot of pressure on the way traditional corporate crisis response systems work. Such structural changes strain the operational logic of traditional corporate crisis response frameworks. This is also a challenge for traditional crisis communication theories to explain things and how useful they are for giving advice in real-world situations.

The situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) proposed by Coombs in the 1990s is one of the most widely cited theoretical frameworks in the field of crisis communication [3–6]. However, this theory was developed in the early era of traditional media. As social media became more common, the basis of this theory has been weakened, and it may no longer fully cover today's situations. In current crisis communication, social media greatly changes who spreads information, who receives it, and how information is created. Therefore, many researchers have tried to build new ways to look at crisis communication online. One key addition is the "Social Media Mediated Crisis Communication Model" (SMCC). This model highlights the part played by opinion leaders, multi-step information spreading, and the public's own active role in reshaping crisis communication [7].

Focusing on the applicability challenges of SCCT in the social media context, in comparison with SMCC, this paper reveals the structural differences between the two in terms of the communication subjects, information flow, and media roles, and then explores how to expand SCCT to guide enterprises in China to practice crisis communication in the digital age.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework of SCCT and its limitations

The theoretical foundation of SCCT stems from the attribution theory, which states that when people encounter negative events, they naturally tend to seek causes [8]. The judgment of causality directly affects their emotional responses and behavioral choices. SCCT holds that the core task of crisis communication is to match appropriate response strategies based on the specific crisis situation. More specifically, when people attribute the crisis to the company's fault or improper behavior, they often experience anger and may respond by avoiding purchasing its products or making negative comments. On the contrary, if they believe that the company is not at fault or has not caused harm, their emotions will shift to sympathy and support [8].

As early as 2002, Coombs and Holladay already noted that the attribution of public responsibility depends on two dimensions: the type of crisis and the history of the crisis [9]. The type of crisis is the core

criterion for determining responsibility, reflecting the inherent nature of the crisis event. The crisis history includes previous events and the current reputation of the organization [5]. Based on this, SCCT divides the attribution of crisis responsibility by stakeholders into three major categories: victims, accidents, and preventable crises. Victims' crises (such as product tampering, workplace violence, natural disasters, etc.) result in the lowest attribution of responsibility because the organization itself is also a victim of the crisis. Accidental crises (including industrial accidents caused by technical failures or equipment malfunctions) have a moderate attribution of responsibility because the crisis stems from uncontrollable or accidental factors. Preventable crises (covering human errors, management negligence, and deliberate actions that harm stakeholders knowingly) have an extremely high attribution of responsibility because the crisis stems from the organization's own controllable decisions [9].

For the above three types of crises, SCCT proposed three coping strategies. The first one is the denial strategy, which is applicable to the victim group; that is, the organization maintains its reputation by refusing to take responsibility or shifting the responsibility to others. For accidental crisis types, the weakening strategy allows the organization to reduce its accountability and the damage caused by the crisis by proposing excuses and pointing to external causes. When facing preventable crisis types, the organization adopts the reconstruction strategy by making a formal apology and providing active compensation to restore public trust [10]. By analyzing the type of crisis and assessing the degree of responsibility borne by the organization, crisis managers can determine the extent of the reputation threat, making crisis management both in line with moral standards and minimizing responsibility attribution, and maximizing the protection of the organization's reputation [8].

However, SCCT also has limitations. In the actual operational environment, it fails to fully consider the dynamic evolution characteristics of crises [4, 11]. For example, the "Haidilao Hot Pot" food hygiene safety incident in China rapidly escalated from a single store's kitchen hygiene problem to widespread doubts about the entire brand's food safety system, as well as the retracing of past public relations commitments. The attribution of public responsibility shifted from individual store negligence to systemic management failure of the brand. In fact, crises often develop over time, and the organization's reputation also fluctuates accordingly. At the same time, with the emergence of new evidence or the dissemination of new narratives, stakeholders' understanding of the causes of the crisis may also change [12]. Especially in the era of social media, the development speed of crises is much faster than before, and enterprise response strategies must be highly flexible and quickly adapt, rather than rigidly following static theoretical models.

2.2. Construction of SMCC theoretical framework and local factor impacts

In traditional models, communication has been largely one-way. However, current digital media tools and applications have enabled two-way interaction and content sharing between organizations and their publics [13]. Clearly, the information environment for crisis communication has changed significantly. Social media has broken the previous one-way flow. It lets people talk directly and share information in many directions. Crisis communication is no longer just a one-way stream led by elites, but a connected process with many different stakeholders involved.

SCCT provides a systematic framework for crisis communication, but its theoretical foundation is primarily rooted in the mass media era, with media not regarded as a core theoretical element [14]. Austin's SMCC model was among the earliest theoretical frameworks to describe relationships among organizations,

online and offline publics, social media, traditional media, and word-of-mouth communication. The model identifies three types of information-processing publics—social media creators, followers, and inactive users—and clarifies the pathways through which crisis information flows among these actors [7, 14]. Influential social media creators affect the viewpoints on certain issues, changing the way their followers perceive crises and their feelings, thereby meeting the followers' needs for information and emotional support [7]. These three groups play distinct roles at different stages of a crisis, collectively forming the main participants in social media-based crisis communication. The SMCC model also establishes five core dimensions of information flow that shape organizational crisis response: crisis origin (internal or external), crisis type (victimization, accident, or preventable), organizational voice, information format (traditional media, social media, or offline word-of-mouth), and information strategy [14]. A key idea of this framework is that crisis messages should be delivered through channels that match their source. For example, when internal crises are spread via third-party platforms, they may trigger public anger, dismissal, and dislike, leading to greater criticism against the organization. Conversely, if a crisis is perceived as caused by external factors, organizations can post updates on their official accounts to shift or ease responsibility—and these kinds of messages usually get more positive reactions from the public. When organizations share these kinds of excuse or responsibility-shifting content, their own owned channels work much better than third-party platforms [14]. In practice, many scholars recommend integrating social media into corporate crisis management strategies, so that organizations can listen to the public, interact with them, and fight against fake rumors. Yet they simultaneously caution that social media is not a panacea [14–15].

It should be noted that the effectiveness of the SMCC model is significantly influenced by sociocultural contexts. Huang et al. (2015) found that culture and politics uniquely shape crisis communication in Greater China. In societies emphasizing collectivism, nationalism, rationalism, and the "middle way," organizations tend to avoid confrontation and public apologies, preferring passive, face-saving, and ambiguous communication styles [16]. Li et al. (2026) further demonstrated that existing academic research on Chinese SMCC covers government communication, public participation, and political-cultural constraints. However, the theoretical foundations across these research themes remain uneven. Therefore, when applying the SMCC model to the Chinese context, researchers must fully consider the moderating effects of local factors such as politics, culture, and media systems [17].

3. Current dynamics in crisis communication

In China, platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin (TikTok) have reached hundreds of millions of users, enabling crisis information to be disseminated in real time throughout the entire online space [18]. This greatly changes how information moves and how meaning is built together between organizations, the public, and the government [17].

To start with, the most basic change in how fast information spreads is that it has gone from "timely" to "real-time." Back when traditional media was dominant, how long organizations took to respond was normally counted in hours. But these days, the second a crisis breaks out, news about it can zoom all across the country in just minutes. This compresses decision-making time to just a few tens of minutes. The need to respond right away makes time the most precious thing one can have. Even a tiny hold-up can be seen as trying to avoid the problem or just not caring, which makes the crisis get worse a lot easier than before. Next, how far news can spread now has grown way faster than it ever used to, going from a one-directional line

to out-of-control viral spread. Any piece of information about a crisis can blow up exponentially by passing through big key spots on social networks. In the blink of an eye, it can turn into an event that everybody online across the whole country is talking about. This way of spreading stuff like a virus cuts down a lot on how much power organizations have to keep their side of the crisis story in control.

Furthermore, the role of the public can shift from passive audience to active co-constructors. Thanks to social media, the public is no longer a passive audience but an active participant and has gained "gatekeeping" power. They can share their ideas, attribute responsibility, and let out their feelings online. The shared feelings that come from many people talking together, plus what the public cares about, often play a decisive role in what direction a crisis goes. The ability to decide what people talk about and how the story of the crisis is told is not just in the hands of one organization anymore. It's become an area open to argument where lots of different people can fight to have more influence.

Coombs and Tachkova (2018) proposed the term "Scansis" to capture the integration of crises and scandals. The core of this concept lies in the fact that the public's anger stems from the impression that the organization's behavior contains deliberate, unfair, and greedy motives [19]. When this anger gets to social media, it grows very quickly from user comments, streamers, and short video clips. Studies have shown that moral outrage weakens the benefits brought by standard crisis response measures (such as apologies or compensation), whether in terms of reputation or consumer purchase intentions. Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate moral outrage as the third evaluation dimension of crisis assessment into the SCCT framework, thereby redefining it [20].

It should be noted that algorithm-based information dissemination is sometimes overlooked. As a hidden structural force, algorithms are changing the environment of crisis information. Different platforms use different algorithmic logics, and these affect how crisis stories get spread, plus which of those stories get more attention from people. By filtering information to create bubbles and echo chambers, algorithms make cognitive biases stronger in certain groups, and that then changes how the public blames people or groups for the crisis.

4. SCCT's adaptability challenges and new developments

In the social media environment, the types of crises are no longer defined only by organizations; instead, they become the outcome of real-time discussions among multiple stakeholders. Through fragmented user-generated content (UGC), the public can unearth past misconduct by the organization and make emotional attributions, redefining the crisis within hours as "accidental," "preventable," or even "deliberate." For instance, some foreign brands such as IKEA strictly followed SCCT's standardized strategy in issuing statements, yet due to the lack of empathetic expression, they instead triggered new accusations from netizens of being "arrogant," resulting in a situation where theoretical strategies fully complied with guidelines but communication outcomes completely deviated from expectations. Therefore, the static classification system of SCCT is unable to support flexible and real-time crisis response. In the social media environment, this power has shifted from the organization to the public. People no longer rely on the organization's statements but instead base their decisions on scattered information, the interpretations of opinion leaders, and collective emotional responses. In consequence, the strategic choices of organizations are no longer proactive decisions based on internal evaluations but rather passive responses to public pressure. Moreover, the "scanning effect"

of comprehensive information is increasingly prominent, indicating that emotions such as moral indignation often precede cognitive attributions and thus become the main driving force for public behavior. When the public experiences a strong emotional response, even the strategies recommended by SCCT that match the crisis type may lose their effectiveness significantly due to moral indignation.

It is equally important that SCCT views the media as a neutral channel for transmitting crisis information. Although the SMCC model takes into account multiple communication factors, neither of the two theories addresses the structural impact of algorithms. In an algorithm-driven platform environment, whether crisis information can reach the audience and how the audience perceives its emotional tone not only depends on the content of the organization's response but also on the algorithm logic of the platform.

The rise of social media has shifted the mode of communication from hierarchical to networked. As a result, organizations can no longer monopolize the central position of crisis communication. The SMCC model fills a gap left by the SCCT theory — the neglect of the communication process itself. The matching of crisis types and response strategies is no longer a decision made solely by the organization, but also considers the mediating role of influential social media users in public perception, how fans tend to convey information, and how different information forms and channel combinations affect the effectiveness of communication strategies. Moreover, the emergence of the "Scansis" concept indicates that emotions are no longer regarded as by-products of the attribution process but are seen as independent driving factors in crisis communication. For instance, some leading domestic chain online supermarket brands (such as Douyin, Dianping, etc.) have begun to build a full-channel UGC public opinion scanning system, automatically capturing users' negative comments daily, identifying potential concentrated complaints in advance, completing the rectification of expired product labels in all stores before the issue escalates, and simultaneously releasing apologies and compensation plans, completely avoiding the problem from evolving into a public relations crisis across the entire network. It can be seen that when formulating crisis response strategies, it is necessary to simultaneously assess the dominant emotional state of the public. Simple apologies or compensation may no longer be effective.

Furthermore, at the cultural and psychological levels, values such as collectivism, face consciousness, and the pursuit of "moderation" have jointly shaped how the public attributes responsibility and how organizations choose to respond. In the Chinese context, the strategic framework of SCCT may need to be readjusted, considering adopting more culturally adaptable new options, such as "indirect response" and "implicit responsibility assumption." In terms of governance, Chinese social media platforms have a unique dual-track system that combines algorithm operation with content supervision policies, covering content review, hot topic control, and public opinion guidance mechanisms. This is different from Western platforms' algorithm-driven model and has changed the assumption of information free flow in the social media communication model. Therefore, platform governance policies must be considered as overall constraints on the visibility of information.

5. Conclusion

Although the SCCT theoretical framework has been proven to be reasonable and practical in the traditional media environment, its applicability is limited due to the fundamental changes in crisis communication caused by social media. Nowadays, the public is not just a group of people who passively receive information anymore — they have become people who actively make meaning and even set the agenda themselves. At

the same time, algorithms, which work as a hidden structural power, are changing what information people can see and how that information gets shared around. In this context, SCCT faces multiple theoretical challenges. However, this does not mean that SCCT has lost its value. Instead, it needs to be updated within a broader framework to incorporate factors such as dynamic contexts, diverse actors, emotional dimensions, and algorithm mediation. This paper sums up the main features of crisis communication on social media, and it gives background that helps us understand where SCCT works and where it does not. It lets us find the paths that emotions take when people attribute crises, starting from the media-based communication logic of SCCT and Scansis, and it puts local real-world contexts into a single framework for analysis. This paper argues that SCCT should move beyond the traditional static approach of strategy matching and evolve toward more dynamic, adaptive theoretical frameworks.

This study gives a number of practical takeaways for how organizations manage crises: To start, organizations need to cut down the time it takes to make crisis decisions and put in place systems that monitor events in real time and respond quickly. Next, when organizations are figuring out what response strategies to use, they have to look at what the public is mostly feeling, and calming those emotions should come before simple apologies. Organizations also need to change how they talk to people based on the algorithm rules of each different platform, instead of just sending out the same exact post to every channel. When one looks at the situation in China, organizations have to think carefully about how the government's role, cultural thinking, and platform rules all interact with each other, because this changes how well their crisis communication works. There are a couple of areas that still need more work in future studies. One is to run real tests on how people attribute blame and how different strategies work when the same crisis happens in different algorithm settings, and to compare results across multiple platforms. Another thing people need to look at more closely is how generative artificial intelligence changes the whole process of crisis communication, so that the theories people already have can keep up with the always-changing digital communication space.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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