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### Abstract

Employees' communication behaviors are an important area of research for public relations. In this study, employees' communication behaviors in a de-identified context have been studied from the perspective of online flaming by analyzing "confessions" posted on a Facebook confessions page. The theoretical perspectives of the Uses and Gratification Theory and employee communication behavior in public relations literature were adopted in this study. Positive and negative "confessions" were analyzed to identify employees' motivations in posting them. While negative posts expressing anger and frustration at policies, personnel, and the management in general dominated the page, positive posts indicated expressions of pride, nostalgia, and gratitude for social support from co-workers. Petitions from employees to change behaviors and policies were also found.

*Keywords:* confessions, employees' communication behaviors, Facebook, social media, Uses and Gratification Theory, paracrisis

## 1. Introduction

A *confessions page* is a page on Facebook created for the members of a specific organization, where members have the option of “confessing” their secrets or any information that they would like to share with others affiliated to the organization (Bounds, 2013). What makes these pages interesting is that these posts are de-identified, as users write out their messages on a different portal, such as GoogleDocs, without including any identifiable information. These messages are then posted on to the confessions page by the administrator, who too is de-identified. The potential effect of such pages is compounded by the fact that the pages are open to all Facebook users. The trend of confessions pages on Facebook started with college students, and now spreading to high school students (Bounds, 2013), who all use these pages to “confess” about a variety of issues, including their secret crushes, their past relationships, their schools, the work they need to put in at school, and even the food in their dining courts. These posts are often characterized by explicit content and language, profanity and hostile intentions. The next logical step may be for employees of an organization to start a confessions page.

The confessions page of an organization forms the subject of this study. The confessions page of a large multi-national organization was identified, and its contents analyzed to identify themes and motivations behind the confessions, especially when such “confessions” are hostile toward the organization. Using the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and concepts of employee communication behaviors, the nature of employees’ negative communication behavior on a Facebook confessions page are explored and discussed. On a broader level, the idea of employees’ posts on such pages is situated in the concept of paracrises (Coombs & Holladay,

2012). The overarching goal of this study is to examine how employees use confessions pages, and the implications of such pages for public relations practice.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Integration of Uses and Gratification Theory and Employee Communication Behavior**

Being an important part of an organization's day-to-day functioning, employees are privy to sensitive information about the organization, and are in direct contact with the organization's key stakeholders such as consumers, suppliers, etc. Employees have also been shown to be important sources for information for stakeholders. Center and Jackson (2003) discussed how external publics view the messages received from employees to be more influential than PR messages and press releases. Given their strategic importance, it is unsurprising that much public relations research has been devoted to understanding the antecedents and consequences of employees' communication behaviors (e.g., Kim & Rhee, 2011).

Blumler and Katz's (1974) Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) may be particularly useful in explicating employees' (negative) communication behaviors, especially on social media. The theory explains why people use different forms of media by focusing on their needs and motivations such as tension release (Windahal, 1981). In this theory, audiences were conceptualized as exhibiting active information seeking behavior in the pursuit of gratifications. However, one major limitation of the UGT is that it has focused on the audiences' media consumption rather than their active communication behaviors. "Audience activeness" should be further researched in the context of employees' communication behaviors against their organization on social media. Alonzo and Aiken's (2004) work is one of the few studies to apply

the UGT to predict and identify users' motivations in the process of hostile online communication behavior, or flaming, supporting prior research which suggests that an anonymous computer-mediated communication environment encourages disinhibitions, leading to loss of social cues which may result in deviant, anti-social behavior (e.g. Hiltz et. al, 1989).

In this study, an extension of the UGT is proposed by incorporating Kim and Rhee's (2011) concepts of employee communication behavior (ECB). Integrating the two perspectives allows for a better explanation of employees' communication behaviors about their organization on social media, as it helps explain their motivations for doing so. The relational quality between the organization and employee as perceived by the employee has been shown to be an antecedent of the direction of such communication - either negative or positive (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Of note, too, is the research on employees' deviant and anti-organizational behavior in the fields of management and applied psychology (e.g. Reisel, et al, 2010; Bolin & Heatherly, 2001; Dineen, Lewicki, & Tomlinson, 2006). For example, Reisel et al (2010) studied the relationship between job insecurity, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors, and found that employees satisfied in their job were less likely to experience negativity against the organization, burnout, and were less likely to engage in deviant behaviors in the workplace. This study forms an extension of this work on employees' deviance, by explicating the communicative aspects of employees' deviance, especially in an open access, online context such as social media.

It is important to identify the motives or needs of employees who engage in negative megaphoning about their organization. McQuail (1994) proposed that people have several motives that trigger actions, such as the need for information and advice, experiencing empathy

with problems of other people, feeling connected with others, escaping from problems and worries and experiencing emotional release. People have needs that influence their communication behaviors (Rubin, 1992). Employees' negative communication behaviors have been shown to be the result of their negative experiences with their organization (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Hence, when employees post negative comments against their employers, we posit that they will exhibit their negative emotions to escape problems that they have encountered at work or to release their negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or dissatisfaction with the organization. On the flip-side, employees may also utilize this de-identified space to express their positive emotions about their employers. Employees' "confessions" constitute an emotion-based coping approach to vent their negative feelings about or express positivity towards their organization. The following research questions form the basis of this study:

*RQ1: What motivations are salient in employees' positive "confessions" about the organization?*

*RQ2: What motivations are salient in employees' negative "confessions" about the organization?*

Besides understanding the employees' motivations in engaging in communication behaviors on Facebook's confessions pages, it is also important to discuss the overarching impact of this phenomenon. To do so we draw upon the idea of a paracrisis, and seek to understand whether employees' negative communication behaviors on Facebook confessions pages may constitute a paracrisis. Coombs and Holladay (2012) proposed the idea of a paracrisis, or a threat to the organization charging it with unethical or irresponsible behavior. Specifically, a paracrisis is a special form of a crisis threat which does not necessarily involve legal violations, but irresponsible conduct which has been recognized by stakeholders as such and caused them to petition the organization. For there to be a paracrisis, Coombs and Holladay (2012) state that

there must be a petition to the organization and such a petition must be visible by other stakeholders. Therefore, the final research question of this study is as follows:

*RQ3: How do employees' posts on a confessions page constitute a paracrisis?*

### **3. Method**

This study comprises a qualitative content analysis of posts on a Facebook confessions page. The page from which posts were analyzed is titled "Ernst & Young Confessions." The constant comparative method was applied as posts were categorized into themes. Constant comparison is a "back and forth process," where data is read, re-read, notes made, and findings compared and classified, and inductive reasoning is used to build themes (Cresswell, 2013). Posts by members were copied and analyzed for subject and content and classified into themes. Posts were collected until themes were saturated, after which data collection was limited to posts that represented new themes (N = 558). After the initial categories were identified, the posts in each category were further analyzed to identify sub-themes. Finally, the posts were categorized for emotions and motivations evident in the text.

#### **3.1 Background of the subject of study**

Ernst & Young (EY) is a one of the largest service firms in the world. EY employs over 167,000 employees in over 140 countries (Facts and Figures, 2013). While the confessions page that is the subject of the study is not identified to any specific country, an analysis of the posts reveals that the locations identified by users and the language used in the posts point to the users being employed by EY, India. The posts and the comments on the page were predominantly in English and Hindi, the two most widely spoken languages in India (National Informatics Centre, 2009).

Most of the posts used a combination of both languages, which lends credence to the thought that the users of the page are EY, India employees. One of the authors coded all the messages, and being a native speaker of Hindi and proficient in both languages (English and Hindi), was able to adequately analyze the posts. During data collection, close attention was paid to the language being used, and no other languages besides English and Hindi were evident in the posts.

#### **4. Results**

The page entitled “Ernst & Young Confessions” was started on March 15, 2013. Since then, as of January 19, 2015 it has received 2376 confessions and 11,971 likes.

##### **4.1 RQ1: What motivations are salient in employees’ positive “confessions” about the organization?**

A few posts on the page, mostly by former employees, were positively inclined toward the organization. The comments from the previous employees reflect their comparisons of EY to their current workplace that triggers their emotions. An analysis of the positive posts on revealed three major themes or motivations for which users “confessed” – to express pride in working for (or having worked for) the organization, to express nostalgia after leaving, or to express gratitude to friends and co-workers for social support. The first two themes, those of pride and nostalgia, are discussed together because they appear together in posts from former employees.

##### **4.1.1 Expressions of pride and nostalgia after leaving**

One user posted:

Man, I see a lot of people cribbing and carping and niggling. EY, India practice is one of the best places to work- in terms of people. You get out of EY - and you realize what a

brain f\*c\$ing world it is everywhere else [*sic*]. And, I can tell u this because I am currently working for my 4th company, all different locations. [*sic*].

The above post indicates that the page is characterized by posts that express grievances about the organization and that that the user is a former employee of EY and not a current employee. But this user was clearly responding to complaining posts by other users by defending the organization, referring to it as “one of the best places to work.” The posts from former employees include expressions of both pride (EY is the best place to work) and regret that they had left. The post quoted above, for instance, chastises the other users of this confessions page, asking them to stop “cribbing and carping” and to realize that EY is “one of the best places to work.” This individual admitted to having changed four jobs since leaving EY, and it would not be a far stretch to say that this individual regretted leaving EY.

Current employees also reveal their positive emotions about EY, for instance, by alluding to pride in working for EY. For example, one user posted, “I just am in love with this firm....the pressure, the work, presentations, proposals, reports, execution, management, just everything....EY in blood! [*sic*].” This user demonstrates his or her positive feelings for the organization because of the pressure that he or she faces. Yet another user posted, “I love working with E&Y. There have been times when i have done late sittings, been shouted at by my manager, abused him. But it's been an amazing experience! So far so good! - Mumbai Intern. [*sic*].” Similarly, the expression of pride can be seen from this note: “No matter how much we crib, abuse the peers, get dumped with work ..all of us must take great pride in saying we work for Ernst &Young!!#brandname [*sic*].”

One particular user chose the confessions page to express his or her pride in having worked for EY, but also expressed a sense a relief at leaving – a departure from the previous posts. The user posted, “You've got to work for EY if you want to know the real meaning of happiness... it all starts after leaving EY, when you proudly say am an ex EY and you can flaunt the knowledge you've gained in EY and in true sense deep down your heart there comes a voice that says "thank god its over" [sic].” Such posts, however, support the discussion of pride in the organization mostly coming from former employees.

#### **4.1.2. Gratitude for social support**

Posts about positive experiences in EY also involved positive experience to their workplace interpersonal relationships, and sought to express gratitude for the social support they received from their co-workers. For example, one user posted, “For my best friend in EY.. My life in EY was picture-perfect until u decided to leave. The whole team misses u a lot! [sic]”

Another user paid tribute to his/her team by posting, “I have the best team to work with :)work is not fun all the time, clients and seniors are not appreciative all the time, but it is my team which makes all this a passe' and work-place a fun-place :) [sic].” While this user did not allude to co-workers as friends, he/she did discuss the social support he/she has received from team-members in the course of the work.

These posts represent the positive communication behaviors from former and current employees, and an analysis of the reasons why these posts may have been made has been presented. The motivations displayed by the users, however, those of pride, regret, and gratitude toward co-workers, are telling in themselves. The first, expression of pride, is the result of reputational

assets that the company has developed over the many years of its existence, and it being counted in the “Big 4” accounting firms in the world. The second, expressions of nostalgia on leaving EY may be a function of having faced negative working environments at other workplaces rather than a good working environment at EY, as is evidenced by some of the comments. The final motivation, expressions of gratitude for social support, has more to do with the people involved rather than the working environment fostered by the organization. A point of interest in this set of results is that few of the motivations for positive word of mouth behavior have to do with positive behaviors from the organization; rather, EY seems to be reaping the benefits of the interpersonal relationships that employees forge with each other, which contributes to their overall experience in the company.

#### **4.2 RQ2: What motivations are salient in employees’ negative flaming behaviors or “confessions” about the organization?**

While some users of Ernst & Young Confessions display willingness to say positive things about the organization, this sentiment is not shared by many others on the page. Posts against the organization are prevalent on the page. Two broad sets of motivations emerged from the analysis – anger and frustration, and petitions and requests to redress problems. The anger and frustration-related negative confessions about the organization can be further classified into three categories – negative confessions about specific policies, negative confessions against specific personnel and negative confessions against the management in general.

##### **4.2.1 Expressions of anger and frustration**

###### **4.2.1.1 Negative “confessions” about specific policies.**

The policies implemented by Ernst & Young seem to be the subject of many (ranting) posts on the Ernst & Young Confessions page. One user posted, “EY Travel Policy: Meal Allowance per day eligible Rs.200/- Cab Fare per person max - Rs.250/- Can someone please teach the policy makers the concept of inflation that is to be applied on the 19th century rates! [sic].” A few users have also posted about the hiring policies of EY. One user posted, “What's with the top management? Instead of promoting and encouraging people already slogging here for years, they hire new ones?? [sic].” Another user had this to say about the policies related to hiring associate consultants and senior consultants,

I fail to understand the process for hiring. While interns are anyways excused from knowing too much, which is fair enough. But on what basis are these ACONS and CONS hired. Some interns are far better than these guys. They are here to do nothing but to increase the work load of others. [sic].

#### **4.2.1.2 Negative “confessions” about specific personnel.**

Specific managers and personnel at EY are also the targets of posts and confessions on the Ernst & Young Confessions page. A user posted:

This happened in Chennai - a manager in tax has been constantly saying loud rude and inappropriate comments about girls - cons, interns , css etc. Can this issue be raised to Hr? Nobody wants to work with him anymore. And we all fear him. [sic].

Another post showed the consequences of the actions of a specific manager on an employee’s continued presence on the organization. The user posted, “I quit the firm after 3 and a half years just because of my manager. Hope she changes her attitude else more will leave. [sic].” The negative feelings that these users harbor about specific personnel are evident from these posts.

More disturbingly from the organization's perspective, there are confessions posted on the page against specific personnel that may open the organization to legal action. One user confesses to "bribing a tax official." Another post points to sexual harassment in the workplace as a user writes:

Hey ppl I need a favour. There's this guy who constantly makes passes at me in the office. He's my manager and also my counselor. He manages to get me allocated on most of his clients. He passes lewd comments n makes me stay l8 for work. Not sure if this qualifies for sexual harassment. I've really worked hard to get this far n he's really instrumental in my promotion. Which I'm eligible for in this year. But I have a feeling he's gonna make full use of it. Please advise [*sic*].

Such posts pose a great threat to the very survival of the organization, leaving the organization open to lawsuits, or in extreme cases, governmental sanctions

#### **4.2.1.3 Negative "confessions" about management in general.**

Posts on the Ernst & Young Confessions page are also characterized by anger and frustration toward the management and partners of the accounting firm in general and perceptions of supervisory injustice. For instance, one user posted, "Vision 2020 tip#1: hire and promote managers with good technical, managerial and interpersonal skills...truly speaking its d managers who run d big4... Stop promoting peopl wid good politacal n manipulating skills for gods sake!!! [*sic*]." This particular post points to a practice within the organization to promote politically savvy individuals rather than people who work for it, expressing negative feelings toward the current managerial staff. Another post was about the behavior of managers during an subordinate's notice period, which read, "Your managers start showing their true colors once

you've put in your papers! They'll assign you to the worst of projects and overload you with other's work as well.. [sic].” However the following post directly indicates the connection between supervisory injustice and employee turnover. One user wrote:

Why good employees leave? Employees leave managers, not companies! Beyond a point, an employee's primary need has less to do with money, and more to do with how he is treated and how valued he feels. Much of this directly depends on the immediate manager..!![sic].

A user expresses his or her frustration with the management through a post, in which he or she wrote:

Its really degrading and upsetting when you go up to your senior/ manager.....with some *dhaasu* [innovative] tax advisory ideas and they dont bother to care or listen and are glued to the laptop all the while like a zombie. Once you are done with sharing your views, they lift their head to look at you and say this - 'WHAT WERE YOU SAYING?!!!!! Ultimately, in the PMDP (the review and appraisal process) we are asked to come up with out of the box ideas and all.....Seriously, if they had only BOTHERED to LISTEN to us in the first place!!?!!!!! [sic].

Posts such as these point to general apathy among the management towards ideas from employees, and an organizational environment where vertical communication is discouraged.

#### **4.2.2 Petitions or requests for management to address issues**

Another prominent category of negative megaphoning posts discussed issues, and addressed the management of the organization directly with requests to resolve issues. In some cases, the users even provided input as to how problems could be solved. For instance, one user posted:

I have worked for many audit clients. I have noticed that one of the reasons we end up working late or extend the work is because we didnt have a team planning event. I have tried asking managers for a TPE but they dont show much interest. Days go by and at the review they yell - you could have done this done that . Also I end up spending time more on the areas - which sometimes they dont look into much.. I do understand the top level employees are very busy and handle a lot of pressure but i would request all the partners and managers to take out some time for a team planning... it make take an hour of your time but will make many things get clear, which will help us to understand whats the actual risk in a client and the key areas we should concentrate. Believe me it would be a lot of help to us....[sic].

Another user posted,

Instead of trying to make employees stay by forcing them to Serve the entire notice period and not negotiating on it... The partners should try to make the environment better fr the employees so tht they dont feel like going... Most of the employees leave like I m not coming back to this place again... Even if someone pays me extra... So much fr "building a better working world"...[sic].”

A poignant request pointing to the organizational culture and working conditions read:

This letter goes to managers..... respected managers please consider us human beings, we are not machines. That u can call us any time day nd night nd all the weekends..literally weekends r more irritating thn weekdays..... Nd u'll call on the weekends lyk we r slaves....please stop this...

Ur faithfully

Human being ( not machine) [sic].

#### **4.3 RQ3: How do employees' posts on a confessions page constitute a paracrisis?**

One of the themes and motivations for employees' confessions identified as part of RQ2 is petitions and requests to management to address issues in the organization. From the discussion above it is clear that employees of EY use the Facebook confessions page as a de-identified way demanding changes in the organization's behavior. In fact, in one confession, a user reported his or her exit interview experience where the employee told the interviewer to refer to the Facebook confessions page for feedback on how to reach managerial goals. The post read:

“In my exit interview to the HR "Start reading the confession page and try resolving the issues one at a time and see the 'better working world' being built automatically. You won't have to wait till 2020" [sic].”

Current and former employees are using the confessions page as a feedback mechanism, as is evident from the posts reported here. Considering that these petitions are public (by virtue of being on an openly searchable page on Facebook), and being circulated by a key stakeholder group, employees, lend credence to the idea that this particular confessions page constitutes a paracrisis for EY. One user posted, “At one of our clients place we share their workstations, an senior guy at the clients place watches YouTube half the time and we slog our ass out..[sic].”

Another user posted, “On one of our Global 360 clients, we flout our QRM policies and the SEC Rules with full confidence and without any remorse..all this of course with the connivance of the Associate Director and the Partner! [sic].” Such reports of unethical and irresponsible conduct

from EY constitute a challenge crisis for which the employees are publicly petitioning the organization through social media.

#### **4.4 “Confessions” from non-internal publics**

Evidence was found to indicate that the Ernst & Young Confessions page is being used by the members as a venue to flame about the organization, and express their complaints about a wide variety of topics ranging from policies, specific individuals, to the overall management of the organization. The organization runs the risk of these posts being read by potential clients and employees. Indeed, other posts on the page indicate that individuals outside of the organization, potential employees, stakeholders and publics, are reading the posts. One such post read, “HR at EY sucks....I was about to join EY but thanks to NO PROPPER RESPONSE from HR even after clearing interviews...I had to change my mind [*sic*].”

### **5. Discussion**

This research represents one of the first scholarly efforts to explicate employee flaming behaviors on social media by integrating the theoretical perspectives of Uses and Gratifications Theory and concepts from employee communication behavior literature. The results of this study have several important theoretical implications. First, this paper contributes to the enhancement of the Uses and Gratifications Theory by exploring employees’ active communication behaviors as part of emotion-focused coping. This study has identified salient motivations for employees’ positive and negative word of mouth behavior on social media.

Second, this study is also one of the first exploratory studies to apply Kim and Rhee's (2011) concepts of employee communication behavior in the social media setting. In this study, we expanded their discussion not only by paying attention to the valence of employee communication behavior but also by exploring the motives of employees' use of social media. In doing so the results of this study explain how employees' flaming behaviors on social media may constitute a challenge crisis for the organization, and help it identify where to should look into to address issues faced by employees.

Third, the results of this study also help extend the conceptualization of Coombs and Holladay's (2012) idea of a paracrisis, and contribute to the growing body of literature on this unique construct. To our knowledge this is one of the first studies to apply the idea of a paracrisis being brought forth by an organization's employees, and help extend its application to internal publics' petitions on social media.

This study is also a rich source of practical applications. The findings from this study reveal that Facebook confessions pages can and are being used by employees to vent their anger and frustration about a variety of organizational issues to others of the same group affiliation. This presents a significant challenge for the public relations practitioners of the organization in question, because not only are the posts de-identified, they are also open to anyone who has a Facebook account. There is no way to track whether posters are actual employees or not, which may present a greater threat: the opportunity for competitors to post negative "confessions" anonymously on these pages. The de-identified nature of these posts also leaves the organization open to reputational damage, but also to potential loss of business. The importance of the public

relations function in monitoring such posts and addressing such issues at the earliest is paramount for the continued functioning of the organization. In other words, such a monitoring function allows the management to make more strategic decisions and policies as well as to engage in rectifying behaviors that address the issues and concerns of employees.

Despite the threats posed by such pages on social media, there are points of learning that the public relations practitioners for the organization can take away from these pages. The anonymity offered by the confessions page seems to have led Ernst & Young employees to express negative feelings about the organization that they might not have had the messages been identifiable, as is also indicated in past research. This circumstance provides a unique opportunity for the public relations function to understand the issues that are faced by their internal publics.

However, there are a few limitations associated with this study. This study encompasses the confessions page of only one organization. More research is needed to first identify the confessions pages of other, and more diversified, organizations, and then identify commonalities and differences in the “confessions” posted on such pages. For instance, there might be differences in the nature of confessions from employees of high performing companies and low performing companies. Exploring the dynamics associated with employee networks and their negative communication behavior is a potential research area.

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