The NRA in Crisis: Social Identities and Publics' Cognitive and Affective Evaluations

Hongmei Shen[1] (iD) and Yang Cheng[2]

Abstract

Contextualized in the Florida Parkland high school mass shooting and National Rifle Association (NRA) crisis, our study is among the first to apply the social identity theory in understanding simultaneously publics' cognitive and affective evaluations of a non-profit organization's crisis response. Results from an online survey ($N = 603$) revealed that participants displayed a range of both negative and positive emotions towards the NRA, including anger, disgust, and interest and hope. On the rational side, publics considered NRA's actions as harmful and unjust. Publics' NRA affiliation status and political partisanship identity had a significant main effect on their crisis evaluations.

Keywords

crisis communication, cognitive evaluations, affective evaluations, social identities, non-profit organizations

Introduction

As the deadliest mass shooting at a high school since 1999, the 2018 Parkland high school shooting triggered heated debates on gun control in the United States, where more mass shootings—a total of 346 times in 2017—occurred than any other countries and the number of shootings continued to climb (Silverstein, 2020). Soon afterwards, the National Rifle Association (NRA), the largest U.S. gun rights advocacy non-profit

[1]San Diego State University, San Diego, CA, USA
[2]North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, USA

Corresponding Author:
Hongmei Shen, School of Journalism and Media Studies, San Diego State University, 5550 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182-4561, USA.
Email: hshen@sdsu.edu

organization (NPO), filed a lawsuit to challenge a Florida bill to raise the minimum age for rifle purchase to 21 (Lee, 2018). Immediately following the NRA's response, American publics reacted differently toward the NRA, in terms of rational evaluations and emotional responses, including trending hashtags such #BoycottNRA. NRA members differ from non-NRA members in political views, gun rights support, and firearm use (Parker, 2017). Consequently, it is interesting to explore how publics with different backgrounds, such as political partisanships and NRA memberships, may rationally and emotionally react to this NPO in a crisis situation. Whether publics' political and social group identities may interact with each other and influence their perceptions toward the NRA remains unknown. Theoretical and practical insights from these questions will shed light on the web of relationships between NPOs and their stakeholders, ranging from non-members to volunteers and donors, and provide guidance on NPO crisis communication.

To answer these questions, this study conducted an online survey ($N = 603$) in the United States. The primary goal is to contribute to organizational crisis communication and NPO research in three ways: (a) enhancement of crisis communication research on NPOs by exploring publics' cognitive as well as affective evaluations in a high profile crisis, (b) enrichment of current NPO theorizing by applying social identity theory, which may shed light on NPO crisis management in the aftermath of mass shootings and other traumatic events, and (c) illustration of the impacts of political partisanship and group social identity on affective and cognitive public evaluations toward an NPO (i.e., the NRA), potentially benefiting NPO communication professionals with measurement of political influences underpinning public emotions and opinions.

Literature Review

Scholarship on crisis communication has long focused on crisis responses and their effects on image repairs in a *corporate* setting from an organizational perspective, showing little interests in NPOs (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2014). Further, the majority of crisis communication research examines publics' cognitive or rational evaluations of crisis situations, exemplified by the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and image repair theory. Alternatively, a growing group of studies have contended for the strategic importance of assessing publics' affective evaluations in crises, such as anger, sympathy, and fear, and pertinent organizational response strategies (e.g., Jin, Liu, Anagondahalli, & Austin, 2014). Few studies have investigated the antecedents of both cognitive and affective evaluations, although naturally human beings' decision-making process is guided by both our rationality and emotions (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002). Therefore, our study sought to explore predictors of publics' cognitive and affective evaluations, such as publics' identities, in a nonprofit context. We herein provide a brief review of NPOs and crisis communication, cognitive and affective crisis evaluations, and lastly social identities as they relate to publics' evaluations.

Crisis Communication by NPOs

NPOs have received limited attention from strategic communication scholars (e.g., Lewis, 2005; Sisco, 2012). As Sisco (2012) summarized, NPOs vary from corporation as they are not driven by return on investment; instead they deeply connect with publics and act in accordance with the values of communities, the fabric of which intertwines with publics' various social identities. When crises occur, NPOs can especially become vulnerable, jeopardizing fundraising revenues or even the organizations' very existence. Thus, there is a need to expand current crisis communication research to NPOs and advance our understanding of the mechanisms whereby publics' political and social identities may influence their cognitive and affective reactions toward NPOs in a crisis situation.

Cognitive and Affective Crisis Evaluations

Publics' cognitive evaluations of a crisis refer to their rational assessment of the situation, comprising their conflict judgment and unfairness perceptions (Yang, Sivadas, Kang, & Oh, 2012). Crisis situations consist of conflict and negotiations. Publics usually consider the extent to which organizations' actions harm their lives and show a lack of concerns for public interests. Such conflict judgment perceptions in a crisis often result in relationship dissolutions (Dwyer & Tanner, 2009). On the other hand, publics' unfairness perceptions reflect a state when publics feel the organization's "treatment or suggested conditions are inadequate, in comparison with those toward other partners" (Yang et al., 2012, p. 1108). Publics evaluate the consistency and bias in an organization's stance and actions in a crisis. To add to the body of knowledge on precursors to publics' rational evaluations of crisis, we examined both rational conflict judgment and unfairness assessment.

Relatedly, emotions abound in a crisis, including anger, sadness, outrage, fright, anxiety, and sympathy (Jin et al., 2014). In crisis situations, emotions operate as publics' affective evaluations of the situation, guiding their decision-making process to make sense of and respond to the crisis. Past research has primarily focused on negative emotions. More recently, researchers have also begun to explore potential positive emotions in crisis. For example, Fredrickson (2013) found both negative and positive emotions in people's affective responses to the September 11 terrorist attacks, such as sympathy, gratitude, interest, love, and anger. Kim and Niederdeppe (2013) similarly uncovered positive emotions (interest, alertness, and curiosity) in an H1N1 influenza pandemic on a university campus. To continue this thread of research, we explored both positive and negative affective evaluations in a crisis situation.

Social Identities and Public Evaluations of NPOs in Crises

Social identity theory posits that individuals' sense of pride and self-esteem derive from their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Previous social identity research has examined how personal traits such as race, nationality, gun ownership,

and political affiliation constitute group identities (e.g., Borden, 2016). Within a crisis context, the impacts of social identities become more salient in areas such as self-categorization, depersonalization, and identity distancing (Borden, 2016). In the case between the NRA and their publics in the Florida mass shooting, we first identified NRA affiliation as a social identity. As research showed when people identified as being affiliated with a group, the derived self-esteem drove people to believe in-group members and denied negative messages about their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to social identity theory, one can argue that when publics and the crisis-affected organization shared a common identity, publics could grow more favorable cognitively and affectively toward the organization than they did not share a common identity. This study thus proposed the first set of hypotheses (H1a and H1b):

> **H1a:** Those who are affiliated with the NRA (e.g., members only, employees only, donors only, and volunteers only) are less likely to feel emotionally negative toward the organization than those who are not.
>
> **H1b:** Those who are affiliated with the NRA (e.g., members only, employees only, donors only, and volunteers only) are less likely to rationally evaluate the organization in a negative way than those who are not.

More recently, scholars also began a lively debate on the origins of political partisanship, applying the social identity theory to explore the political influence of partisanship (e.g., Huddy & Bankert, 2017). For instance, Huddy and Bankert (2017) found that partisanship as one type of social identity could generate strong emotions among individuals and drive their political engagement. Communication scholars also supported the influence of partisanship on publics in crises (Benoit, 1997). In the case of NRA and its publics, studies showed that the majority of Republicans (61%) in the United States are gun owners and almost 75% Republicans would like to support NRA, according to a Quinnipiac University National Poll (2016); conversely, only 39% Democrats owned guns and most Democrats in the U.S. tend to hold negative perceptions toward the NRA. This research thus considered political partisanship as a social identity and proposed two additional hypotheses.

> **H2a:** Those who are Democrats are more likely to feel emotionally negative toward the NRA than those who are Republicans and others.
>
> **H2b:** Those who are Democrats are more likely to rationally evaluate the NRA in a negative way than those who are Republicans and others.

Research also suggested the above-mentioned two types of social identities (i.e., organizational affiliation and political partisanship) might interact with each other. According to a survey in 2017 by the Pew Research Center (Parker, 2017), 77% of gun owners who confirmed their NRA affiliation identified themselves as Republicans, whereas only 20% were Democrats or leaning to Democratic. In contrast, among gun owners who were not affiliated with the NRA, only 58% of them were Republicans and 39% Democrats. Consequently, NRA affiliations were likely related to publics'

political partisanship and their interaction may affect people's cognitive and affective evaluations as well. Thus, we posited the third hypothesis below.

> **H3:** Organization affiliation interacts with political partisanship to affect publics' cognitive and affective evaluations, such that non-NRA affiliated Democrats would evaluate the NRA most negatively and NRA-affiliated Republican supporters being the least negative.

Method

Data Collection and Sample

We used the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) participant pool for online data collection in June, 2018 (N=603). Studies have contended that MTurk data are of great quality, especially notably the diversity of demographics indicators, such as age, gender, race, and income (Cheng & Shen, 2020; Ross, Irani, Silberman, Zaldivar, & Tomlinson, 2010). The mean age for our participant pool (53.4% male; 46.6% female) was 36 (SD=12.22). Some participants were not affiliated with the NRA and not supportive of it (62.7%, n=378), in contrast with 51 members (8.5%), 56 employees (9.3%), three donors (0.5%), seven volunteers (1.2%), and 108 non-NRA affiliated members who were supportive of the organization (17.9%). In terms of party affiliation, 45.4% were Democrats (n=274), 33.0% were Republicans (n=199), and 21.6% others (n=130). The majority of participants had at least a college education (67.1%) and were White (64.8%) or Asian (18.4%). Approximately half (49.9%) of the sample earned less than $50,000.

Measures and Analysis

We used five-point Likert type scales. For affective evaluations, we adopted eight negative emotions items from Jin et al. (2014) and Bunmi, Lohrb, Sawchukc, & Tolind (2007), including fear, anger, and disgust (Cronbach's α=0.94), and four positive affective evaluation items (Fredrickson, 2013), such as joyful and hopeful (Cronbach's α=0.91). Regarding cognitive evaluations of the NRA, we revised items from Yang et al. (2012), including five items for conflict judgment (Cronbach's α=0.88) and three items for unfairness judgment (Cronbach's α=0.94). To examine individuals' social identities, we used a single question for political party: "Which political party will you support?" with the options of Democrats, Republicans, and others. Organizational affiliation was phrased similarly "please indicate your affiliation with the NRA" with the choices of "member only, employee only, donor only, volunteer only, no affiliation, just a supporter of the NRA, and no affiliation, not a supporter of the NRA." We performed multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to examine the hypothesized main effects and interaction effects among the two identity-related concepts.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

In the wake of the Florida Parkland high school shooting, our participants displayed a range of both negative and positive emotions toward the NRA. They largely felt angry ($M=3.49$, $SD=1.49$) and disgusted ($M=3.49$, $SD=1.54$), followed by agitated ($M=3.46$, $SD=1.39$), sad ($M=3.25$, $SD=1.43$), anxious ($M=2.94$, $SD=1.40$), fearful ($M=2.88$, $SD=1.45$), afraid ($M=2.79$, $SD=1.42$), and scared ($M=2.75$, $SD=1.44$). They reported low levels of positive emotions, including being interested ($M=2.65$, $SD=1.46$), hopeful ($M=2.38$, $SD=1.41$), grateful ($M=2.12$, $SD=1.36$), and joyful ($M=2.03$, $SD=1.33$). Overall higher levels of negative emotions ($M=3.13$, $SD=1.22$) were observed than positive ones ($M=2.30$, $SD=1.24$). On the rational side, participants leaned toward disagreement with the NRA's actions ($M=3.31$, $SD=1.09$), which were seen as harmful and unjust ($M=3.03$, $SD=1.15$).

Hypothesis Testing

The first hypothesis speculated that those who were affiliated with the NRA were less likely to feel emotionally negative (H1a) and rationally negative (H1b) toward the organization than those who were not. MANOVA results partially supported H1a. The multivariate main effect was significant: $F_{8, 1182}=32.28$, $p<.00$, partial $\eta^2=0.18$, Wilks' $\Lambda=0.67$. Non-NRA affiliated supporters felt the lowest level of negative emotions ($M=1.87$, $SD=1.10$), followed by NRA-affiliated participants ($M=3.27$, $SD=1.07$) and non-NRA affiliated non-supporters ($M=3.45$, $SD=1.06$). The post-hoc pairwise comparisons identified statistically significant differences between the non-NRA affiliated supporters and non-supporters as well as between the NRA-affiliated participants and non-affiliated supporters ($p<.00$), but not the NRA-affiliated participants and the non-affiliated non-supporters ($p=.20$). In terms of positive emotions, NRA-affiliated participants exhibited most positivity ($M=3.57$, $SD=1.02$) than the non-NRA affiliated supporters ($M=3.11$, $SD=1.10$), and non-supporters ($M=1.67$, $SD=0.84$). Follow-up post-hoc analysis further confirmed significant differences among the three groups ($p<.00$).

H1b was supported by the MANOVA results. The non-NRA-affiliated non-supporters perceived most conflict ($M=3.64$, $SD=0.84$), followed by the NRA-affiliated participants ($M=3.42$, $SD=1.06$), and non-NRA affiliated supporters ($M=2.03$, $SD=0.96$). With respect to rational unfairness evaluation, NRA-affiliated participants were ranked the highest ($M=3.44$, $SD=1.12$), followed by non-NRA affiliated non-supporters ($M=3.20$, $SD=1.02$) and non-NRA affiliated supporters ($M=1.98$, $SD=0.97$). In addition, the univariate test of main effect was significant for both conflict $F_{2, 594}=43.69$, $p<.00$. $\eta^2=0.13$; and unfairness $F_{2,594}=18.97$, $p<.00$. $\eta^2=0.06$. Post-hoc analysis found all the pairwise comparisons significant ($p<.00$).

To take a closer and more nuanced look at the different sub-groups of NRA-affiliated participants, we found that employees and donors felt the highest levels of both negative emotions (employees: $M=3.67$, $SD=0.82$; donors: $M=3.63$, $SD=1.63$)

and positive emotions (employees: $M=3.59$, $SD=1.10$; donors: $M=3.59$, $SD=1.10$). Volunteers were similarly mixed with negative ($M=3.25$, $SD=0.18$) and positive emotions ($M=3.18$, $SD=0.37$) whereas members appeared to be more emotionally positive ($M=3.59$, $SD=1.01$) than negative ($M=2.81$, $SD=1.09$). A different pattern emerged with regards to their cognitive evaluation of the NRA's actions after the shooting. Donors reported the highest level of conflict judgment ($M=3.93$, $SD=0.50$) and unfairness evaluation ($M=4.11$, $SD=0.84$), followed by employees (conflict: $M=3.73$, $SD=0.82$; unfairness: $M=3.72$, $SD=0.93$), members (conflict: $M=3.12$, $SD=1.25$; unfairness: $M=3.15$, $SD=1.28$), and volunteers (conflict: $M=2.91$, $SD=0.64$; unfairness: $M=2.95$, $SD=0.56$).

H2 predicted that Democrats would be more likely to feel emotionally (H2a) and rationally negative (H2b) toward the NRA than Republicans and others. MANOVA results yielded support for the hypothesis. The multivariate main effect was significant: $F_{8,\ 1182}=7.77$, $p<.00$, partial $\eta^2=0.05$, Wilks' $\Lambda=0.90$. Follow-up post-hoc analysis showed significant pairwise differences ($p<.00$). Regarding affective evaluations, Democrat supporters felt most negative ($M=3.67$, $SD=0.92$), compared with Republican supporters ($M=2.51$, $SD=1.25$) and others ($M=2.95$, $SD=1.22$). The univariate main effect was also statistically significant: $F_{2,\ 594}=18.53$, $p<.00$. $\eta^2=0.06$. In light of rational evaluations, similar patterns emerged with Democrat supporters being most negative (conflict: $M=3.86$, $SD=0.73$; unfairness: $M=3.46$, $SD=0.93$), as opposed to Republican advocates (conflict: $M=2.67$, $SD=1.12$; unfairness: $M=2.59$, $SD=1.22$), and others (conflict: $M=3.11$, $SD=1.07$; unfairness: $M=2.78$, $SD=1.12$). The univariate main effect was also significant: $F_{2,\ 594}=8.33$, $p<.00$. $\eta^2=0.03$. All the subsequent post-hoc pairwise comparisons were statistically significant ($p<0.00$) except between Republicans and others ($p=.22$) in terms of their unfairness evaluations.

Interaction effects. H3 anticipated that participants' NRA-affiliation would interact with political party to affect their cognitive and affective evaluations, such that non-NRA affiliated Democrats would evaluate the NRA most negatively and NRA-affiliated Republican supporters being the least negative. MANOVA results provided partial support for the hypothesis. The multivariate main effect was borderline significant: $F_{16,\ 2376}=1.61$, $p=.06$, partial $\eta^2=0.01$, Wilks' $\Lambda=0.96$. A significant univariate interaction effect was observed for negative emotions: $F_{2,\ 594}=2.34$, $p<.05$. $\eta^2=0.02$; positive emotions: $F_{2,\ 594}=2.39$, $p<.05$. $\eta^2=0.02$; and conflict: $F_{2,\ 594}=2.68$, $p<.00$. $\eta^2=0.02$, but not unfairness evaluations: $F_{2,\ 594}=2.05$, $p=.09$. $\eta^2=0.01$.

Discussion

Situated in the Florida Parkland mass shooting crisis, this study explored publics' cognitive and affective evaluations of the NRA's crisis response simultaneously and tested the impacts of social identities on them. Online survey results based on a nationally representative sample revealed that in the wake of the Florida Parkland high school shooting, our participants displayed a range of both negative and positive emotions toward the NRA, including the primary higher levels of anger and disgust and lower amount of interest and hope. On the rational side, publics considered NRA's actions as harmful and unjust.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

First, this study adds to the knowledge of NPO organizational communication in a crisis situation, by introducing the social identity theory in crisis communication. NRA-affiliated publics appeared to be more complex than society normally believed to be. There were many shades of gray in their presumably black-and-white social identities. The NRA members, employees, volunteers, and donors sensed more conflict and bias (rationally) as well as outrage yet hope and interest (emotionally) in NRA's actions after the shooting, than non-NRA affiliated participants. This finding suggests that in-group members are even more critical but also supportive of their own affiliated organizations than out-group members, contrary to traditional social identity research (e.g., Borden, 2016). On the other hand, salient social identities such as political partisanship, do clearly set in-group and out-group publics apart. Democrats responded more negatively toward the NRA on both the rational and emotional levels, as opposed to Republicans and others. Political ideals served as a prominent polarizing force.

We thus argue that social identities need not simply categorize NPO publics as in-group vs. out-group. Depending on the salience of group social identity, one may more aptly conceptualize social identities on an in-vs.-out continuum, fluctuating in accordance to the prominence and strength of the identity. Multiple identities could intensify the impact of each other in a crisis. In addition to the organization's characteristics, such as crisis history (Coombs, 2014), we propose that crisis communication research consider publics' social identities and the ways in which different identities multiply to affect their judgment of an organization's crisis response. Such inquiries will further illuminate the complex web of power relations in and out of an NPO and presents opportunities to communication professionals seeking to respond to a major crisis, but also particularly add to the body of knowledge on NPOs in crisis with respect to the ideological context in which they operate (Lewis, 2005; Svensson, 2009).

Second, our study highlights the value of understanding publics' rational as well as emotional evaluations of involved organizations' crisis response, which are subject to the influence of their social identities. This finding adds to the body of knowledge on organizational communication in crisis situations, from the publics' perspective (Cheng, Shen, & Jiang, 2020). More research is needed to factor social identities as well as cognitive and affective evaluations into the selection of crisis response strategies. Certain identities may be particularly salient for some NPOs. Our study marks the starting point of a line of research for NPOs to best understand the lived experiences of their publics, cognitively, affectively, socially, and ideologically (Lewis, 2005; Svensson, 2009).

Lastly, our research sheds light on NPOs in crisis situations. NPOs are run in fundamentally different ways from corporations. Answering the call for more research NPOs (Sisco, 2012), we shifted the focus to NPO publics and discovered variations in their cognitive and affective evaluations of the NRA's actions. Employees and donors felt more negativity and positivity in their rational and emotional assessment, than volunteers and members. While factoring in publics' responses, NPO crisis managers need to strategically cater to the varying needs of different strategic publics, including both in-group advocates and out-group opponents.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study has a few limitations. First, we only examined two social identities. Other prominent social identities such as race can be assessed in future studies. It will be an interesting avenue of research to further test the ways in which different social identities intersect with each other in publics' crisis evaluations. Also, we chose an online survey method. Future research may add different methods, including interviews, participant observations, as well as experiments.

ORCID iD

Hongmei Shen https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0630-2408

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Author Biographies

Hongmei Shen is a professor in public relations at the School of Journalism and Media Studies, San Diego State University. She has published book chapters and articles on relationship management, conflict management, crisis communication, and global public relations.

Yang Cheng is an assistant professor at North Carolina State University. She teaches research methods, public relation, crisis communication, and global communication. Her research interests include corporate artificial intelligence, relationship management, and crisis communication.