

The Specificity of Crisis Management in Social Media from the Perspective of W.T. Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory

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ABSTRACT

Scientific objective: The purpose of the analysis presented in the paper is to verify W. T. Coombs' typology. The paper analyzes the events in which the organization from the perspective of a crisis situation: is [1] a victim, [2] led to a crisis situation unconsciously, [3] led to a crisis situation consciously. Some of crisis situations are difficult to assign to the types of situations indicated because they can be signs of manipulation. The goal is to review such possibilities. **Research methods:** The author analyzed four crisis situations, including Coombs' typology. The analysis is not a representative qualitative study. The selection of crisis situations analyzed in this study took into account the conditions: [1] short-term crisis situations (all events analyzed concern the period 2017–2019), [2] known and recognizable entities (organizations, brands, people), [3] significant involvement of messages recipients—users of social media, and [4] raising the topic of crisis situations by the communications industry—scientists, researchers, and representatives of market practice. **Results and conclusions:** The analyzed examples showed deficiencies in Coombs' typology of crisis situations. There was a space for communication abuse directed at message recipients—social media users. These abuses in culminating forms can be manipulative through the use in communication strategies of crisis situations generated for the purposes of achieving the organization's goals. The purpose of manipulation can be economic, marketing, and other aspects. **Cognitive value:** In the era of creating false or misleading events and information, the analyzed situations may pose a threat to the truth and ethics of the discourse of various types of organizations in the market environment. As a result, message recipients can make decisions based on generated events, which may mislead the recipient. Therefore, observation and analysis of the problem will be continued, and its deepening will find expression in qualitative research.

KEYWORDS

crisis, crisis management, media, social media



Strong market competition and a changed media space mean that organizations are facing new challenges related to crisis management. In the literature, this crisis time is often referred to as chaos, attributing to it, among others, uncertainty, threat to the functioning of the subject, and close observation by the recipients. The traditional media (press, radio, television) has changed and the Internet, including social media, became one of its elements. This process resulted in the creation of a different environment—and so, a different recipient of a crisis situation appeared, as well as other media reactions, and a different potential of crisis situations, which often influences the organization's reactions in crisis situations.

Persons responsible for crisis management, wanting to effectively implement management policy, should redefine the variables of potential crisis situations, which in turn should be reflected in procedures, guidelines or plans for crisis management. Management in variable conditions is one of the features of the management process. Already in 1980, Peter F. Drucker wrote:

“Because one thing is certain: managers will have to work and achieve aims in a time of great change. And in a time of great change, the main task of the board is to ensure the institution's ability to survive, to ensure structural strength and health, the ability to bear blows, the ability to adapt to sudden changes and to take advantage of new opportunities. (...) In a time of great change they cannot [managers] assume that tomorrow will be an extension of today. On the contrary, they must manage with change in mind; on change as an opportunity and as a threat.” (Drucker, 1995, p. 9)

Managing a crisis situation treated as an element of organizational change—on the one hand constituting a threat to its functioning or existence, on the other being an opportunity for reorganization and a new opening—one of the key elements of the adopted management strategy is determining the degree of responsibility of the organization and the resulting sequence of events. Therefore, the analysis of crisis situations in this paper will be based on the typology proposed by W. Timothy Coombs rejecting the division of crisis situations due to characteristic factors depending on the internal and external environment of the organization, as is the case with Ian Mitroff's typology.

The analysis presented in the paper based on Coombs' typology is not a representative qualitative study, but its purpose is to review, despite the more accurate systematics of crisis situations and their specificity arising from the social media environment than in Mitroff's, the difficulties, challenges and restrictions associated with the mapping of crisis situations showing features of randomness and crisis situations generated in a conscious and intentional manner.

The selection of crisis situations analyzed in this study took into account the conditions: [1] short-term crisis situations (all events analyzed concern the period 2017–2019); [2] known and recognizable entities (organizations, brands, people); [3] significant involvement on the part of message recipients—social media users; [4] raising the topic of crisis situations by the communications industry—scientists, researchers, and representatives of market practice.

Ultimately, an in-depth and expanded analysis of future crisis situations will form the basis of a typology taking into account the undisclosed and conscious generation of a crisis situation by the organization in order to achieve its objectives, but at the same time assigning it the level of responsibility for occurring events, similar to unintentional and accidental events. The typology developed in this way will also take into account the activities of the organization in the sphere of crisis management showing the features of manipulation towards its internal and / or external recipient.

Crisis and Crisis Situation *Versus* Problem / Incident

Referring to the period when media space was delimited by the boundaries of traditional media (press, radio, television) of an institutional nature (medium registered in accordance with

applicable law), it is noted that events in the perception of the organization affecting its image and reputation much less frequently than today were referred to as crisis. Complementing the media space with the Internet and the development of social media enabling the current recipients to enter into the role of their creators increased the risk of threats to the image and reputation of organizations of various types, as well as, perhaps unintentional and non-reflective, defining as a crisis and crisis situation any event of a nature a problem or incident arising from the nature of the business.

On the basis of theory and practice, the crisis situation in the context of public relations activities are defined as:

“(…) the period in which, as a result of the event or events, the effective implementation of the mission and assumed goals of the organization, brand or public figure is exposed, and the crisis marks the culmination of crisis situation (sudden event; predictable or not).” (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015, p. 54; Rydzak, 2011, p. 35)

It is also worth noting that the use of the term “crisis” in the field of public relations often refers to events that are defined as a media crisis denoting the moment when the crisis is made public by the media (institutional, social and own organizations) (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015, p. 54). Thus, we have a situation when a crisis is understood as a media crisis caused not always by the internal or external crisis of the organization, but by a temporary, ephemeral event, sometimes embedded in the context of social or political events, dependent (e.g. employee error) or independent (e.g. situation context) from the organization. Often, the consequence of this type of events is not the cited effects (exposure to the implementation of the mission and the set goals), but the increased interest of media space participants—both institutional media and Internet users. Therefore, it is worth considering whether for the events referred to the terms other than the crisis or crisis situation, which are now widely used, should be used. It is probably a result of the development of online media, especially social media, which by making it easier for internet users to create, modify, and distribute content, also allow them to become experts or to build a sense of “being an expert.” In this way, even people outside the PR industry, without competence and experience in crisis management, initiate or engage in discourse about specific events, sometimes irresponsibly creating everyday events as unique.

When looking for terms that would reliably name events of interest to institutional or social media, it is worth considering terms such as “an incident” (incident—event, incident, case; from Latin *incidere*—“to happen”; see Kopaliński, 1967, p. 227) or “a problem,” with the proviso that even an incident or problem should be treated with caution from the perspective of the organization’s communication management (which in practice can be implemented by media monitoring), because it can be a spark of crisis. For many years in the science and practice of PR, the term “crisis symptoms” was used, which meant events that could develop into a crisis situation under appropriate conditions or that could be suppressed in other circumstances.

Differentiating the scale of the event and skillfully determining its stage of development—is this a problem?; a crisis situation?; or maybe already a crisis? (Rydzak, pp. 30–31)—is important because its consequence should be the implementation of appropriate preventive or management measures in a crisis (Fig. 1). It is also worth taking into account the fact that in the current market situation, with highly competitive markets, problems and incidents (symptoms) are common events, but they do not always go into the phase of crisis situations and escalate to crises (they often do not have such “potential”). Sometimes, it is also possible, due to, among others, properly conducted management activities, not to make the crisis or crisis situation public in various media. However, there are situations when problems and incidents go into a crisis situation (and / or crisis) phase through their media coverage (media crisis), especially in social media.

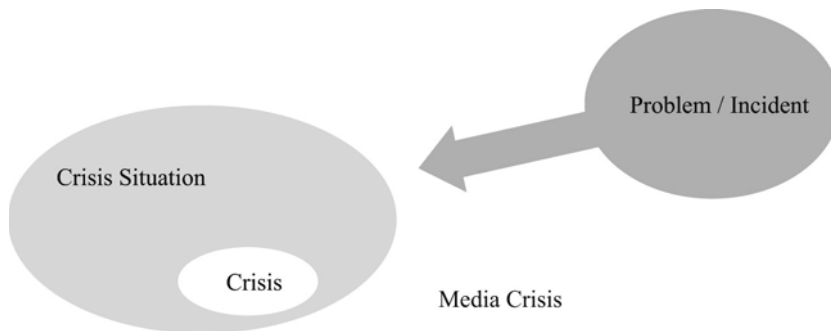


Fig. 1. The Relationship Between the Problem / Incident, the Crisis Situation / Crisis of the Organization and Its Media Crisis

Source: Own study

The Specificity of Crisis Situations in Social Media

When analyzing crises in the social media environment, three variables should be considered, namely:

1. Features of the new media environment;
2. Characteristics of groups around the organization;
3. Typology of crisis situations in social media.

According to new media researchers, due to the first variable (the features of the new media environment) impact on the media space and the risk of potential sparks of crisis situations may have, among others: anonymity (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015, p. 67; Pyżalski, 2012, p. 32–45), digital content and the resulting ease of material modification (Pyżalski, 2012, pp. 20–24), interactivity (Pyżalski, 2012, pp. 20–24), the existence of the so-called network audience (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2016, p. 67), the phenomenon of inhibition (Pyżalski, 2012, p. 42), and the “pilot’s cabin effect” (Walrave & Heirman, 2009, pp. 27–46).

These features may be “triggers” which under certain conditions will be able to activate or promote the development of a crisis. These factors may result from the technical capabilities of the Internet (indicated: anonymity, digitality, the resulting ease of material modification, and interactivity) and its availability to users. They can also be caused by the behavior of Internet users (indicated: network audience, uninhibited phenomenon, pilot’s cabin effect) often different from the attitudes accepted in the real world (offline).

Taking into account the second variable (the characteristics of the groups surrounding the organization) it can be seen that the groups defined in traditional media lose their importance in social media. In place of typologies that segment the environment of organizations into its closer (e.g. employees) and further (e.g. clients, local organizations and others) or internal (e.g. employees), and external (e.g. clients), it seems more adequate to define the groups of the environment as communities with specific forces of influence in social media. The change is a result of the reconstruction of the Internet user paradigm, which from the recipient obtained the capabilities of the sender-recipient, i.e. an entity using online content, but also having the technical capabilities and skills to create, process, and distribute them (Hermoso, 2018). Referring to the competences of new media users, or rather problems arising from their misuse, Jürgen Habermas described this situation in significant words:

“Since the invention of the printed word, which has transformed every human being into a potential reader, it took several centuries to master reading skills for all humanity. The Internet, however, turns us into potential authors, and functions only a few decades.” (Hermoso, 2018, pp. 6–8)

Such segmentation can be done by distinguishing groups in the environment of organization—and their participation in a crisis situation will determine the actions taken, the degree of relationships, commitments, responsibilities etc. (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015, pp. 65; Wojcik, 2015, pp. 356–360):

1. Priority environment, i.e. groups of the environment around the organization that should be absolutely included in crisis scenarios.
2. Important environment, i.e. groups of the environment of the organization, which in the event of having sufficient resources (human resources, time, financial) should be included in crisis scenarios.
3. A negligible environment, i.e. groups of organizations around the organization whose absence in crisis scenarios should not cause negative consequences.

Taking into account the third variable (the typology of crisis situations) it is worth departing from the classical division proposed by Mitroff (typology assuming the grouping of crisis situations according to the factors that trigger them), instead adopting W.T. Coombs’ typology of the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), which binds the organization’s responsibility and the impact of its activities on its reputation. The difference between Coombs’ typology is the rejection of the division of crisis situations due to the characteristic factors depending on the internal and external environment of the organization. While in Mitroff’s, crisis situations were included in eight groups: 1. External problems of an economic nature; 2. Large scale damage; 3. Professional factors; 4. External problems of an informative nature; 5. Breaks at work; 6. Visible damage; 7. Human resources; 8. Psychopathology conditioned by four variables (1. Technical and economic reasons; 2. Human and social causes; 3. Typical situations; 4. Atypical situations) (Mitroff & Pearson, 1998, pp. 40–41), Coombs adopted the level of attribution of the organization’s responsibility for the crisis as a classification variable (Coombs, 2007, p. 167) (Fig. 2).

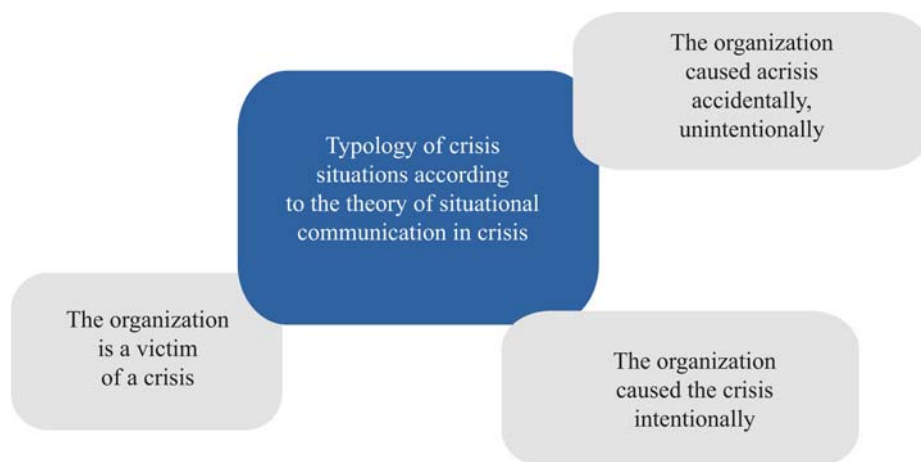


Fig. 2. Typology of Crisis Situations According to W.T. Coombs

Source: Coombs, W.T. (2007). Protecting Organizational Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10 (3), 167

This means that Coombs' typology of crisis situations according to the situational communication theory in crisis presents crisis situations depending on the attitude presented by the organization and the threats to its reputation that are associated with these attitudes (Coombs, 2007, p. 167):

1. Organization as a victim of a crisis: the environment of the organization attributes a low level of attribution of responsibility for the crisis, which in turn translates into a mild threat to the reputation of the organization. Examples of such crises are gossips, slanders, generating events based on fake news or deepfakes, activities to the detriment of the organization implemented by both external and internal environment or events independent of the organization, for example natural disasters.
2. An organization that causes crisis situations unknowingly (accidentally, unintentionally): the environment of the organization is willing to attribute a minimum level of attribution of responsibility for the crisis situation, which is a moderate threat to the organization's reputation. Examples of crisis situations that have been generated by the organization unknowingly may be various types of product irregularities resulting from technological defects (failure of the machine resulting in damage to the health of the employee operating it, creation of a defective product due to technical or technological reasons, accusation of the organization of operating in an improper manner (violation of accepted social and other rules).
3. An organization that causes crisis situations consciously: the environment of the organization attributes to it a strong attribute of responsibility for the crisis (situations related to the deliberate exposure of people to risk, taking inappropriate actions or breaking the law), which in turn means a serious threat to the reputation of the organization. The group of such crises includes, for example, consciously taken actions in the production of defective products (diversion), violation of legal regulations by the organization, misleading the recipients of the organization (by the organization) and others.

Information about crisis situations that operate in social media can come from two sources: from the social media environment or from outside the network. In the latter case, they can be transferred by Internet users from traditional institutional media channels or obtained outside the media circulation. And while it is not difficult to identify crises that Coombs has perpetrated as being a victim, it seems difficult for an organization that causes crises, consciously or unconsciously (accidentally). This may result, among others, from organizational values, the importance of ethics in conducting business, and thus, for example, activities based on controversial communication strategies, balancing on the border of ethics or exceeding it, and building relationships that are subject to significant risk. The emergence of a crisis situation is then quite likely, although dependent on internal and external factors. On the other hand, the qualification of whether an organization caused a crisis situation unconsciously or consciously will largely depend on the reliable conduct of the audit within the organization, as well as the tendencies and possibilities of conducting open and honest communication with recipients (internal and external). It can be assumed that in many crisis situations, due to long-term thinking about the image, reputation, and their impact on the financial or other results, organizations will be willing to adopt management of communication with the environment, which will be focused on situating the crisis situation as caused by the organization, but unconsciously. In this way they will try to avoid at least some negative consequences.

Communication of Organizations, Brands, and People in Practice

Referring to Coombs' typology, in public space it is possible to indicate crisis situations that qualify for three typology areas, with the proviso that for some crisis situations there may be a problem determining whether the organization's activities were accidental or conscious.

One such situation, which aroused considerable interest in social media, and in the initial phase generated many unfavorable opinions, was an event referring to the tragic death of the climber Tomasz Mackiewicz on Nanga Parbat (January 2018), when he and Elisabeth Revol got stuck at high altitude during the descent from the summit. In the enormous excitement, interest of the media and social media users during the weekend (a week earlier the climbers attempted to go down—eventually Revol was saved, while Mackiewicz remained at the top) on the profile of one of the popular YouTubers there was a graphic (meme) showing a photo of Tomasz Mackiewicz with the Hortex logo and the words “Himalayan Frozen Food.” In addition to the fact that the graphics violated cultural norms, it also used the brand logo without the knowledge and consent of its owner in such a context that it could negatively affect its image. Hortex’s reaction was firm: effective steps were taken to remove the Facebook post and a corresponding statement was issued. The company was also considering legal action against YouTube.

“We express our condolences to the family of Tomasz Mackiewicz. We express our regret and absolute opposition to the publication with which we have nothing to do. Yesterday we started actions to remove the meme, demanding both the author and Facebook to delete this post that violates moral principles and unlawfully uses the brand logo. Thank you all for intervening and reporting this outrageous meme to us. This case touched us equally deeply.” (Hortex, 2018)

Without a doubt, this crisis situation according to Coombs’ typology can be classified as “the organization as a victim.” What is characteristic of this qualification and directly related to the space of social media are the actions of social media users. The network community (except in situations where the organization is not immediately identified as a victim) is understanding, it supports the organization, tones emotions, explains the problem in groups of friends gathered around it. Effective management steps on the part of the organization (e.g. quick statement, information on the steps taken, etc.) allow getting out of this type of crisis with a strengthened image.

It is more difficult to present examples that could be classified as crisis situations caused by the organization in a random and conscious manner. It is worth referring to three events that on the one hand could be considered as actions undertaken by the organization in a conscious and purposeful manner, and on the other—if you believe the explanations of the organization—can be considered accidental, resulting from the employee’s unconscious error. What connects these events is significant emotions, criticism and hatred towards brands, as well as the lack of preventive measures and pre-established crisis management rules (according to brand representatives’ declarations).

The first situation is the crisis of the Tiger Energy Drink (Tiger) brand in August 2017. The Tiger scandal (Maspex Wadowice) began with an Instagram entry (then the profile was watched by about 7,2 thousand Internet users) with graphics showing the raised middle finger (a gesture considered offensive) and with the words: “Screw what was, what will happen is important.” The entry was published on August 1, on the anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, and functioned on Instagram for eight days without causing any negative repercussions. The crisis began only after eight days, when the post went to another social platform (Twitter). Twitter, which has users with a profile different from Instagram, has become a place to start discussions, but also for further distribution. Maspex responded immediately, apologizing for the entry:

“We are very sorry about the publication of graphics that appeared on August 1 on the brand’s Instagram profile. We apologize for this error, which should not have happened. We know that deleting this publication will not fix this error, but the post has already been removed. Once again, we are very sorry. A similar situation will never happen again.” (Pallus, 2017)

The brand, the president of the company producing the energy drink, and the external agency responsible for implementing the brand's communication strategy apologized, which in such significant crises is a recommended practice because it shows both respect for the recipients and the awareness of managers about the importance of the crisis. At the same time, the company undertook to financially support living insurgents as part of the "Help for Insurgents" collection (in the amount of PLN 500,000; collection organized by the World Union of Home Army Soldiers). The company also decided to take action, which surprised some observers from the industry, because it declared that employees responsible for servicing the brand would not be dismissed, while the consequences would be drawn in relation to the external agency servicing the brand (the cooperation agreement was terminated) (Dąbrowska, 2017).

The company took further corrective actions on August 14, placing apologies in selected press titles, including in *DGP*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Do Rzeczy*, and *Gazeta Wyborcza*. The ads were signed on behalf of the Tiger brand, not the Maspex manufacturer, which was supposed to be an element that removed the crisis from other manufacturer's brands. As a consequence of the crisis, some of the Tiger channels on social media were closed, and the company decided to restart them more than a year after the events described. In a Tiger crisis, you may wonder that the company, as its representatives admitted in the media, did not have a crisis management plan, especially in the part on prevention, even though the crisis management process itself can be assessed as exemplary.

The second case (Baran, Piotrowska, & Przybylski, 2018) also balances between accidental action (brand declaration) and a potentially conscious strategy of communicating with recipients (past activities of the brand). At the beginning of September 2018, Reserved presented the "I Can Boogie" campaign promoting the fall-winter 2018 collection. There are no objections with regard to the campaign (dynamic and attractive spot with the Polish actress Joanna Kulig and the French model Jeanne Damas), contrary to the statement of the marketing director of the Reserved department stores, which was included in the press release and read:

"In our campaign, the phrase »Yes Sir, I Can Boogie« takes on a new meaning. In it we encourage all women to flirt and seduce, as in the good old days of Marilyn Monroe. The days when a woman was a woman, she wore skirts, had breasts and a waist." (Baran, Piotrowska, & Przybylski, 2018)

This statement was discriminated against as women with slim bodies or preferring "a style that is different from the one presented in the new collection of the brand" (Aries, Piotrowska, & Przybylski, 2018). Despite a significant response in social media, the brand did not respond. Only after a few days did the Reserved marketing director consider her statement "unfortunate" and "too short" and put a statement in which she wrote, among others:

"I would like to apologize to everyone who felt affected by this comment and assure you that the essence of our approach is feminine diversity." (Baran, Piotrowska, & Przybylski, 2018)

The statement calmed the critics of the first message and you may wonder why such an experienced brand did not decide to do so immediately after noticing the first negative reactions. On the one hand, a quick retort would probably stop the escalation of negative emotions and comments around the brand, on the other, it would not negatively affect the campaign itself. One may wonder, then, whether the period of inactivity of the brand was not a deliberate procedure to generate interest first in the message, and as a consequence—in the campaign spot and the campaign itself. Similarly, one can consider the tone of the first message, which, by depicting femininity from a sexual perspective, seemed to be the ideal source of emotions and reactions from the recipients.

Presumptions that the brand based its communication on a deliberately generated crisis may additionally confirm similar events from the past of LPP SA, the owner of the Reserved brand (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015, pp. 31–44). You may also wonder about the lack of crisis awareness in such a large brand as Reserved, which, having a communication department, should ensure that the message about the campaign is not a message causing a crisis.

The third situation, which in the most visible way can be classified according to Coombs' typology as a crisis situation consciously generated by the organization, are communication creations of the Devil Energy Drink (Devil) brand.

On the brand's Facebook fan page (fan page liked by 134,000 Internet users) in January 2019 at around 9:00 pm there was a graphic showing the profile of a naked boy (child, upper body) with mouth wide open and the slogan: "Roman already knows what he will have in his mouth soon." A can of drink was placed next to the text and a brand logo was placed in the background. The graphic, like other ones of this brand, aroused a lot of emotions and generated a lot of negative comments (some of them directly referred to associations with pedophilia). What was their effect? The picture was removed from the profile after a few hours (the reasons for deletion were not given, so either it was the brand's reaction to negative comments of Internet users, or the decision of the Facebook administration).

However, the brand continued to communicate with graphics referring to "Roman." The next day almost identical graphics appeared on brand's fanpage as before. The distinctive element was the figure, no longer a boy (child), but a young man whose age was around the age of majority.

After about three hours, the brand released another graphic. This time the character was changed again, an even more mature, though still young man. The text was also changed to: "Roman already knows what he may have in his mouth." Also the designation "18+" appeared on the graphic, which could suggest that the message is directed to adults (a Facebook account can be created, according to the website's regulations, from the age of thirteen, so this type of content marking does not guarantee that its viewing limits will be restricted to minors). The graphics were also provided with an entry saying: "To be continued at 8:00 pm." Changing the password, indicating the time and announcement of an event, as well as marking the age of "18+" could suggest that the brand is starting to provoke. With each of these pictures, comments were increasingly critical of the brand and the creators of communication messages.

Finally, after 8:00 pm on the fanpage there was a graphic suggesting that it could be an element of the brand's social campaign, which is a combination of three graphics discussed earlier and complemented with two texts: "Check what your child drinks" (in the upper part, original spelling) and "The Social Campaign: energy drinks should be banned for minors" (in the bottom, original spelling).

Individual graphics with the boy and men were a provocative reference to another brand creation. In November 2017, a graphic presenting a young woman's face raised up and held up with a male hand was made available on the Devil Energy Drink fanpage. The painting was complemented with the slogan: "She Already Knows What She Will Have in Her Mouth in a Moment." This message provoked many negative comments, ranging from allegations of lack of taste, to treating a woman only in the context of a sexual object. The message upset the recipients so much that they complained to the Advertising Ethics Committee (KER), which in February 2018 stated: "Graphics perpetuated negative stereotypes through the treatment of women, and the slogan contained the discrimination against women" (tw, 2019). KER's critical decision encouraged the Your Case Association to take the case to court. The association accused the company of violating a provision stating that the act of unfair competition is, *inter alia*, advertising contrary to decency and violating human dignity. The association demanded

the withdrawal of the advertisement, publication of an apology and payment of PLN 60,000, intended to support students under the care of the “For Polonia” Foundation in Warsaw. In June 2018, the District Court in Legnica complied with the claims, and due to the lack of appeal of the brand manufacturer, it became final.

The difficulty of explicitly qualifying a crisis situation according to Coombs’ typology as induced accidentally or consciously, is that the communication strategies of organizations, brands or individuals are sometimes based on controversy, causing shock, which is usually associated with criticism of the environment. Entities based on such communication strategies, if they want to cause significant media response and at the same time on a positive image, will, however, try to present the events as situations that were generated accidentally or even the organization as a victim. Then, for example, there may be arguments such as: an unintentional error of an employee (usually an anonymous trainee), no crisis procedures or competition. There may also be a situation in which an organization, brand or person will not explain the events (which usually gives rise to the suspicion of conscious actions in the recipients) or vice versa—they will additionally strengthen the sense of conscious crossing of borders by subsequent provocative communication activities.

The Tiger brand crisis, presented on the basis of materials available in the media, could be classified as a situation generated by the organization, but in a random way (manufacturer’s declaration and quick management actions taken in the crisis), although doubts and the question whether constructing a strategy based on controversy will still remain, balancing on the verge of good taste and social values actually allow such an assessment. After all, communication activities in social media were conducted under the slogan “Do It So That They Will Remember You,” lasted several months, and most of the graphic creations presented controversial content (e.g. April 10, on the anniversary of the Smolensk catastrophe, a graphic on the occasion of “Airman’s Day” was posted). Thus, the adoption of the manufacturer’s version of the explanation implies a conclusion about insufficient brand crisis protection.

A similar situation occurred in the event of the Reserved brand crisis. The brand’s activities (a statement straightening the statement of the marketing director) may suggest that, according to the Coombs’ typology, the crisis situation was triggered accidentally, although, as in the situation described above, also in the case of the Reserved brand doubts and questions remain about the controversial content of the message announcing the promotional campaign, about the reaction time, and about the brand crisis protection.

While in the last two crisis situations it was difficult to classify events as accidental or conscious, in the case of the Devil Energy Drink brand there are symptoms indicating that the crisis situation was consciously generated and the crisis itself was included as part of the brand’s communication strategy. This can be evidenced by: lack of crisis management (no explanation, no credible apologies), lack of prevention in the area of crisis management despite a previous court judgment and financial penalty (PLN 60,000) or elements of provocation visible at subsequent graphics.

An Expiring Crisis and Growing Crisis

It should be additionally noted that crisis situations— especially those taking place in social media—can take two forms: an expiring crisis and a growing crisis. Piotr Bielawski, in relation to the concept of a growing crisis, used the concept of a secondary crisis, defining it as a crisis that “may be much more serious than the original one and results only from inefficient communication with the public” (Bielawski, 2011, p. 44; Rydzak, 2011, pp. 98–99). An expiring crisis can be said when the crisis situation, after going through the appropriate phases, disappears, allowing

the organization to start a new stage of its activity (Fig. 3). This is possible, among others, when crisis management is effective and the event itself no longer raises media interest or does not evoke the emotions of recipients—online users.

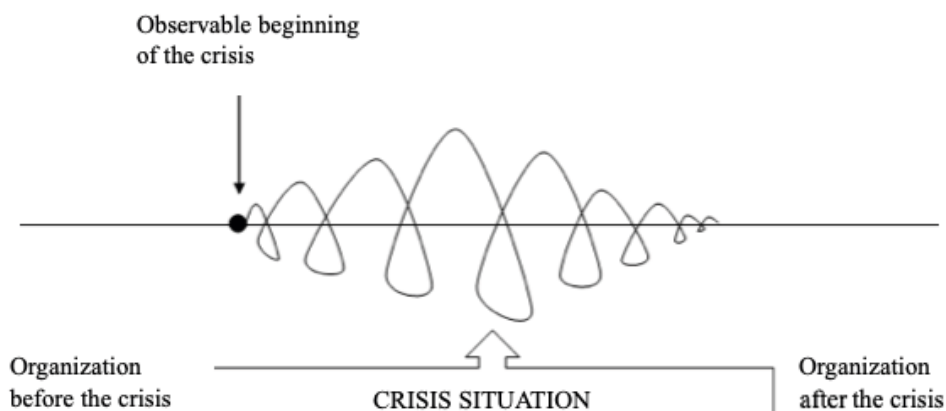


Fig. 3. Organization in the Event of an Expiring Crisis

Source: Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, M. (2015). *Public relations organizacji w zarządzaniu sytuacjami kryzysowymi organizacji. Sztuka komunikowania się*. Warsaw: Difin

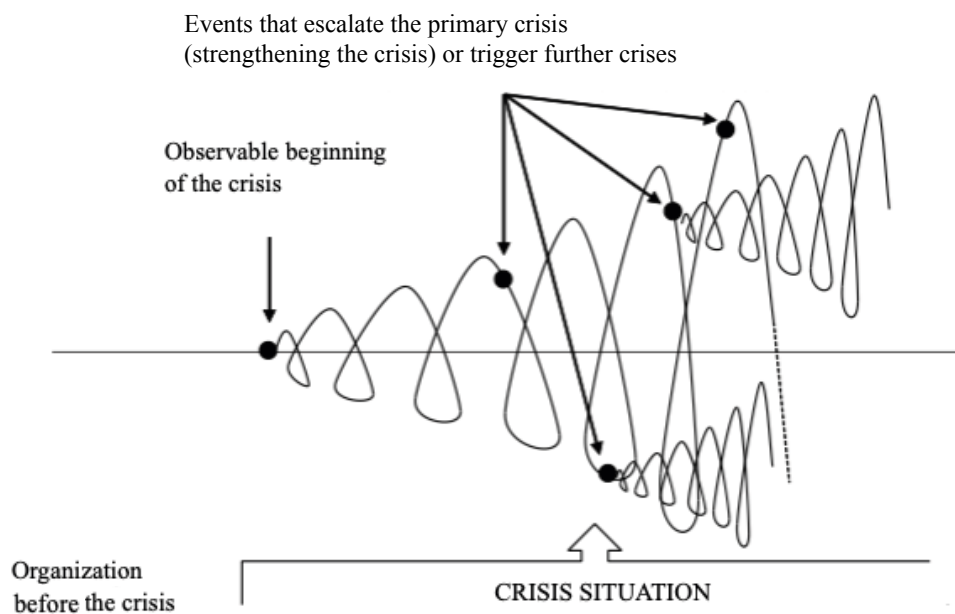


Fig. 4. Organization in a Situation of Growing Crisis

Source: Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, M. (2015). *Public relations organizacji w zarządzaniu sytuacjami kryzysowymi organizacji. Sztuka komunikowania się*. Warsaw: Difin

A growing crisis (Fig. 4), however, consists in triggering subsequent negative around the primary crisis events that keep the organization in crisis. And when it manages to bring it to a state in which a crisis situation seems to be under control, the organization is already in the course of another crisis situation. This can be represented as a spiral of crisis that is difficult to get out of, because the organization must simultaneously manage many negative events. The phenomenon of triggering subsequent crises by the crisis is also defined by the wave effect (Krzakiewicz, 2018, p. 14). Given that these events can engage different audiences, managing communication processes and image security require much more commitment and attention. Sometimes the reason for functioning in such a spiral, that is in a growing crisis, is incorrect crisis management or lack of management activities.

Summary

The practice of functioning in social media shows that crisis management in social media has a different specificity than outside the network. The analysis of the typology of crisis situations according to the situational communication theory in crisis, by Coombs, although it has its application in online and offline space, it shows how different the specificity of its application in relation to social media is.

Depending on the classification of the crisis situation by the environment—organization as a victim or organization as an entity accidentally or intentionally causing a crisis situation—the response of the online environment to the development of events that in social media are characterized by significant dynamics, higher emotional involvement of recipients, and are less predictable than crises outside the web. It should also be taken into account that in a social media environment, in conditions that are unfavorable to organizations, a crisis situation may be generated on the basis of events that theoretically emerge outside the crisis area.

That is why it becomes so important for the organization to adopt the right perspective of “what the organization sees versus what happened” and in this context to properly define (or redefine) “crisis situations” and “problems” that may be involved in the organization (already at the prevention stage). As a consequence, it becomes justified to perceive the features of the new media environment that may affect the emergence and spread of crisis situations, as well as crisis management taking into account whether the organization is a “victim” of the crisis or the entity causing it in an accidental or conscious manner.

At the same time, a wide field of communication abuse is directed towards the message recipients—social media users. These abuses at culminating moments can lead to manipulation by using crisis strategies generated for the needs of the organization in the communication strategies. Coombs’ typology, which seems to be the most adequate in the analysis of the discussed events, can be useful until the analysis at the level of the organization’s declaration regarding the fact of a crisis situation, regardless of the organization’s actions and / or without the organization’s fault. And because of the circumstances, it allows the organization to become a victim.

Observations and analyzes of the presented crisis situations may, however, point to deficiencies in the Coombs’ methodology in the area of external analysis consisting in observing the event in terms of the organization’s goals, its response, and achieved profits or losses. At the level of Coombs’ crisis typology, according to the situational communication theory in crisis, these communication abuses at the level of analysis of specific events can be seen in the impossibility or in significant problems with assigning an event to a specific type of crisis situation.

In the era of creating untrue or misleading events and information, the analyzed situations may pose a threat to the truth and ethics of the discourse of various types of organizations in the

market environment. Therefore, observations and analysis of the issue will be continued, and their deepening will find expression in qualitative research.

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