Alena Rodicheva, Svetlana S. Bodrunova, Ivan Blekanov, Nikita Tarasov

St. Petersburg State University

st061901@student.spbu.ru

**Discursive and attitudinal speech features in cumulative crises of brands**

Crises of brands on social networks have been shown to have the cumulative nature in terms of opinion formation. However, the rapid rise of user commenting does not always mean that the majority of comments is negative and/or aggressive. Moreover, comments addressed to various actors of the conflictual discussion, e.g. brands, their representatives, or users’ interlocutors, may differ highly in negativity and aggression, as well as represent varying value sets. Taking the VkusVill ad scandal of 2021 as the case, we show that cumulative crises of brands are more complicated than they are thought of; counter-intuitively, the core of the discussion turns to be polarized on values, non-aggressive, and mostly addressing the fellow discussants, not the brand itself.

Keywords: cumulative deliberation, cumulative brand crisis, values, discourse, polarization

Many brands from time to time find themselves in rapidly developing crises that are accompanied by mounting user commenting on social networks. One could expect that such comments would be mostly negative and highly non-deliberative. However, our research [5] shows that, in the growing bulk of comments, the proportion of positive and negative sentiment stays, especially in the cases that polarize the commenters in terms of value orientations. In such polarizing cases, when value orientations are at the heart of the crisis and the sentiment is not completely negative, there remains room for meaningful public discussion.

This room, though, might be critically limited due to non-deliberative features of online discussions, like irrationality, distrust, aggression, or nondialogicity. The conceptual framework of cumulative deliberation [1] implies that user speech is predominantly non-deliberative – that is, irrational, emotional, hardly argument-based, conflictual, polarized, opinionated, non-dialogical, fragmented and, most importantly, not seeking meaningful consensus or even temporary agreement. This may endanger both the public dialogue within a brand crisis and the harmonization efforts of the brand. The concept also implies that public opinion online forms in a cumulative way, via accumulation of users’ positions in their written utterances, eventually forming either spirals of silence [4] or echo chambers [3]. However, there is also evidence that micro-deliberative patterns, like discussions in small threads, diminish negativity in user talk and may foster consensual intentions, calm down the heatedness and hatred in user speech, and help raise constructive conversations. The intentions of being constructive and get involved into meaningful discussing may depend on user traits, such as gender or age, values-based positioning, or brand loyalty. Thus, there is a need to see how deliberative/cumulative discussion features combine, and whether these patterns are related to user traits within a given crisis.

For our case study, we have created a semi-automated method of a brand crisis communication strategy assessment that includes automated data collection, social network analysis, sentiment analysis, and manual coding with Kappa testing, as suggested by Krippendorff [2]. For this case, we limit ourselves to VK.com, the largest Russian-speaking social network.

We reveal the cumulative nature of online crisis experienced by VkusVill via combined social-network and sentiment analysis. Our mapping of the user talk aims at finding micro-patterns of dialogue; their absence is considered the cumulative pattern when individual and unrelated user comments amount. Then, we select the ‘epicenter’ of the crisis, with the overall number of 161 user posts and 989 user comments from the VkusVill’s official account on VK.com. We conduct Krippendorff Kappa pre-testing (k≥0.7) and code these posts and comments for nine variables: user traits (gender), discursive features (addressee, (dis)agreement, aggression), and attitudinal (towards the trigger value, the interlocutor, the brand, supporters of the trigger value, and its opponents). After that, we use descriptive statistics, such as Spearman’s rho that helped us trace the correlations between user traits, discursive features, and cumulative/deliberative discussion patterns.

As a result, we show that the brands’ mistakes and the crises that follow work as polarizing agents and points of crystallization of public conflict. The ‘epicenter’ discussion segments comprise polarized micro-dialogues and cumulative commenting directed urbi et orbi; few comments are directed to the brand itself. The conversation dynamics moves from completely cumulative to micro-deliberative patterns in short dialogical sequences. There is no correlation between gender and discursive features. Men in the crisis audience showed a slightly higher propensity toward anti-LGBT values, but gender was not a factor linking discursive and attitudinal variables.

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