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Stakeholders' Sentiment During Mattel's "Wicked" Dolls Debacle

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Abstract: This study explores stakeholders' sentiment during Mattel's "Wicked" Dolls debacle using sentiment analysis. The analysis covers 1.19 million posts from Twitter (now 'X') collected via Brandwatch's Consumer Intelligence Platform from November 1, 2024, to December 31, 2024. The findings reveal a predominant negative sentiment among stakeholders, with anger and disgust being the most prevalent emotions. Positive sentiment was linked to stakeholders who appreciated Mattel's corrective actions. The study highlights the importance of timely and transparent communication in crisis management and recommends that organizations prioritize addressing stakeholders' emotions to mitigate negative impacts and rebuild trust. These insights contribute to the existing literature on crisis communication and provide practical recommendations for improving organizational responses during crises.

Keywords — Crisis communication, organizational reputation, sentiment analysis, social media, stakeholder theory

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2024, Mattel faced significant backlash over the launch of its "Wicked" Dolls. The dolls, tied to the hotly anticipated release of Universal Pictures' "Wicked" movie, were expected to be a hit. The movie adaptation of the iconic Broadway musical "Wicked" was highly anticipated, promising to introduce a new generation of fans to the beloved story and provide old fans with a fresh perspective. However, several easily avoidable mistakes led to a crisis.

The dolls - featuring characters like Elphaba and Glinda - were released on September 28, 2024, well ahead of the movie's premiere creating a disconnect with the target audience. On November 9, 2024, Sarah Genao posted on Twitter, "The office Mattel Wicked dolls link to a porn site on the box 😭😭." Within 24 hours, the post went viral and was viewed by 25 million people. Instead of directing consumers to the official movie site, WickedMovie.com, the packaging featured a link to a pornographic website. Outrage spread rapidly among parents and stakeholders, leading major retailers like Target, Walmart, and Amazon to pull the dolls from their shelves. On November 11, 2024, over 48-hours after the initial post, Mattel issued a public apology saying they "deeply regretted this unfortunate error" and the company was "taking immediate action to remedy this." The statement went on to suggest parents that had the product should either discard the packaging or cross out the link. Despite these efforts, the situation escalated further when Mattel faced a class action lawsuit over the misprint on December 3, 2024. By the time the "Wicked" movie premiered on November 22, 2024, the dolls were no longer available in major retail stores. Despite Mattel's efforts to address the issue, the damage to its reputation was significant.

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Crisis communication is a critical aspect of organizational management, particularly in the digital age where stakeholders' reactions can be swift and widespread. To understand and manage such crises, sentiment analysis has emerged as a valuable tool. Sentiment analysis involves analyzing opinions and emotions expressed in texts allowing organizations to gauge public sentiment and emotional responses in real-time. Stakeholder theory further emphasizes the importance of understanding and prioritizing the interests of all parties affected by an organization's actions, especially during crises. By considering the perspectives of employees, customers, suppliers, investors, and the broader community, organizations can better navigate complex situations and foster resilience. Effective crisis management involves timely and appropriate communication with stakeholders, transforming potential crises into opportunities for growth.

This study contributes to the existing literature on crisis communication by emphasizing the importance of addressing stakeholders' emotions. The findings will inform practitioners on how to tailor their communication strategies to mitigate negative sentiment and rebuild trust. Additionally, this study provides a foundation for future research on sentiment analysis in crisis communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stakeholder theory provides a framework for understanding the complex relationships between organizations and their stakeholders during crises. Proposed by Freeman [1], the theory highlights the importance of considering the interests and well-being of all stakeholders in organizational decision-making, and that organizations should not only focus on shareholders but also on other parties affected by their actions, including employees, customers, suppliers, and the broader community. By prioritizing their interests, organizations can foster trust, loyalty, and long-term success.

Stakeholder theory emphasizes the importance of considering the interests of all parties affected by a company's actions, including customers, employees, suppliers, and the community [1,2]. Jones [3] offers an instrumental theory of stakeholder management, synthesizing the stakeholder concept with economic theory, behavioral science, and ethics. This study argues that ethical principles such as trust and cooperativeness can result in significant competitive advantage, highlighting the economic and moral nature of stakeholder relationships. Researchers [4] contribute to a theory of stakeholder identification and salience based on stakeholders possessing attributes of power, legitimacy, and urgency. Their research generates a typology of stakeholders and discusses their salience to managers, emphasizing the need to account for these attributes in stakeholder theory. Clarkson [5] presents a framework for analyzing and evaluating corporate social performance using stakeholder theory, stressing the importance of transparent communication and strong relationships with stakeholders to enhance corporate accountability and performance. Bergson and Shaw [6] highlight the role of emotions on stakeholders' perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sentiment analysis, also known as opinion mining, involves analyzing and mining opinions, sentiments, and emotions from texts. This technique plays a crucial role in crisis communication by providing insights into stakeholders' emotions and perceptions. By understanding the emotional responses of stakeholders, organizations can tailor their communication strategies to address concerns, mitigate negative sentiment, and rebuild trust [7,8]. Research by Che et al. [7] demonstrates that sentiment analysis can effectively gauge user feedback during a crisis, revealing that diminishing crisis communication strategies (excuse and justification) do not change negative attitudes, while rebuild strategies (apology and compensation) significantly increase positive emotions and regenerate expectations. Goldberg [8] highlights the role of AI in crisis communication, emphasizing that AI-powered sentiment analysis can reveal whether messaging is resonating, where confusion is spreading, and what concerns remain unaddressed, allowing organizations to respond in real time to stakeholder sentiment.

Furthermore, sentiment analysis enables organizations to monitor social media metrics during a crisis, analyzing engagement rates, shares, and comments to gauge audience reactions. This real-time data analysis helps identify public sentiment and prevailing narratives surrounding the crisis, allowing organizations to adapt their communication strategies accordingly. By applying sentiment analysis, organizations can enhance their crisis communication efforts, ensuring that they address stakeholders' concerns effectively and maintain their reputation [7,8]. Predictive analytics and real-time sentiment analysis can help organizations tailor their communication strategies to address stakeholder concerns proactively. Molavi & Zhang [9] demonstrate how these tools can be used to enhance crisis communication efforts. By integrating sentiment analysis with stakeholder theory, organizations can ensure that their responses are aligned with stakeholder expectations and sentiments, ultimately mitigating the impact of the crisis.

Despite the growing interest in sentiment analysis and stakeholder theory, limited research has focused on how the emotions of stakeholders influence their perceptions and evaluation of the organization in crisis. By integrating stakeholder theory and sentiment analysis, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of stakeholders' perceptions during crises and offer practical recommendations for improving organizational responses. The findings will contribute to the existing literature on crisis communication and provide a foundation for future research in this area.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative content analysis to investigate stakeholders' sentiment during Mattel's "Wicked" Dolls packaging crisis. The analysis focuses on understanding the emotions expressed by stakeholders and their impact on perceptions of the organization. From November 1, 2024, to December 31, 2024, 1.19 million Twitter posts were collected

and analyzed by Brandwatch, a consumer intelligence platform. The query terms “Wicked Dolls packaging” and “Mattel” were used to gather relevant posts. The analysis categorized emotions expressed by stakeholders into positive, negative, and neutral sentiment based on predefined criteria. The was collected from publicly available posts on Twitter, explicit consent was not required.

RESULTS

The sentiment analysis revealed a predominant negative sentiment among stakeholders during Mattel’s “Wicked” Dolls debacle. Anger and disgust were the most prevalent emotions, indicating significant stakeholder outrage. Positive sentiment was linked to stakeholders who appreciated Mattel’s corrective actions. Our findings align with previous research on crisis communication [2], which emphasizes the critical role of addressing stakeholders' emotions promptly. Organizations can use sentiment analysis to monitor stakeholders' emotions in real-time and tailor their crisis communication strategies accordingly.

Through Brandwatch, we collected 1.19 million mentions on X written by over 360,000 authors. Sentiment analysis of those posts showed 65% were neutral, primarily reporting the error (news outlets), 17% were positive, and 18% were negative, equaling over 200,000 negative comments in less than 60 days. The original post about the doll packages’ link to a pornographic site, posted on November 9, 2024, went viral and had 25 million views within 48 hours.

We also examined stakeholder emotions in the social posts. Of the 1.19 million posts, 44% expressed negative emotions such as disgust, anger, sadness, and fear. One post by @pepelives4ever read: “It’s DISGUSTING and not an accident.” Another post by @JMar41 read: “Attention parents!!! @Mattel linked to a p**n site on their new Wicked theme dolls. Yes, a p**n site on a doll for children. Please beware.”

The most commonly used emoji in the tweets was the “loudly crying” emoji, representing intense, deeply felt emotions such as extreme sadness or distress. The second most commonly used emoji was the angry emoji.

DISCUSSION

The Mattel “Wicked” Dolls debacle provides a compelling case study for examining the interplay between stakeholder theory and sentiment analysis in crisis communication. Stakeholder theory, as proposed by Freeman [1], emphasizes the importance of considering the interests and well-being of all stakeholders in organizational decision-making. This theory underscores that organizations should not only focus on shareholders but also on other parties affected by their actions, including employees, customers, suppliers, and the broader community. By prioritizing their interests, organizations can foster trust, loyalty, and long-term success.

The findings from this study reveal a predominant negative sentiment among stakeholders during the crisis, with anger and disgust being the most prevalent emotions. These findings underscore the necessity for organizations to tailor their crisis communication strategies to the specific emotional responses of their stakeholders. This aligns with research [2,7], which highlights the critical role of addressing stakeholders' emotions promptly in crisis communication.

Sentiment analysis, as demonstrated in this study, plays a crucial role in crisis communication by providing real-time insights into stakeholders' emotions and perceptions. By understanding these emotional responses, organizations can adapt their communication strategies to address concerns, mitigate negative sentiment, and rebuild trust. The sentiment analysis conducted using Brandwatch revealed that 65% of the posts were neutral, primarily reporting the error, while 17% were positive and 18% were negative. The viral post about the link to a pornographic site, which garnered 25 million views within 48 hours, exemplifies the rapid spread of outrage and the importance of timely and transparent communication, reinforced in Bergson & Shaw [6].

Stakeholder theory further emphasizes the need for transparent communication and strong relationships with stakeholders to enhance corporate accountability and performance. Research by Clarkson [5] and Mitchell, Agle, and Wood [4] supports the notion that ethical principles such as trust and cooperativeness can result in significant competitive advantage. This study confirms that stakeholders' emotions significantly impact their perceptions of the organization. Negative emotions led to negative sentiment, while positive emotions resulted in positive sentiment. Neutral sentiment was predominantly found in posts from news organizations that reported the crisis in a neutral manner.

The delayed response and inadequate engagement by Mattel during the crisis exemplify poor crisis management. Despite issuing a public apology and announcing plans to replace the packaging, these efforts were insufficient to mitigate the crisis. To effectively address and alleviate stakeholders' negative emotions, organizations must communicate frequently, honestly, and transparently. In the digital age, promptness is vital in crisis response. The findings from this study recommend that organizations prioritize transparent communication and timely corrective actions to mitigate negative sentiment and rebuild trust.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the existing literature on crisis communication by emphasizing the importance of addressing stakeholders' emotions. By integrating sentiment analysis with stakeholder theory, organizations can ensure that their responses are aligned with stakeholder expectations and sentiments, ultimately mitigating the impact of the crisis. The findings inform practitioners on how to tailor their communication strategies to mitigate negative sentiment and rebuild trust, providing a foundation for future research on sentiment analysis in crisis communication.

CONCLUSION

The Mattel "Wicked" Dolls debacle serves as a poignant example of the critical importance of effective crisis communication and stakeholder management. This study highlights the complex emotions stakeholders experience during crises and underscores the necessity for organizations to address these emotions promptly and transparently. By integrating sentiment analysis with stakeholder theory, organizations can gain valuable insights into stakeholders' perceptions and tailor their communication strategies to mitigate negative sentiment and rebuild trust.

The findings reveal that anger and disgust were the predominant emotions expressed by stakeholders, emphasizing the need for timely and transparent communication to address these negative sentiments. The study also demonstrates the significant impact of stakeholders' emotions on their perceptions of the organization, with negative emotions leading to negative sentiment and positive emotions resulting in positive sentiment.

Effective crisis management involves prioritizing the interests and well-being of all stakeholders, fostering trust, loyalty, and long-term success. Organizations must engage extensively with stakeholders, communicate frequently, honestly, and transparently, and take timely corrective actions to mitigate the impact of crises. By doing so, they can transform potential crises into opportunities for growth and resilience.

This study contributes to the existing literature on crisis communication by emphasizing the importance of addressing stakeholders' emotions and provides practical recommendations for improving organizational responses. Future research should continue to explore the integration of sentiment analysis and stakeholder theory to enhance crisis communication efforts and ensure that organizational responses are aligned with stakeholder expectations and sentiments.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Organizations can use sentiment analysis to monitor stakeholders' emotions in real-time and tailor their crisis communication strategies accordingly. We recommend that organizations prioritize transparent communication and timely corrective actions to mitigate negative sentiment and rebuild trust.

- Acknowledge the mistake publicly and sincerely: Mattel's response to suggest parents discard the packaging or black out the URL was inappropriate. A sincere public acknowledgment of the mistake is crucial for rebuilding trust.
- Communicate transparently with consumers and retailers: Organizations should provide specific details of what happened and how they plan to fix the problem. Transparent communication helps in mitigating negative sentiment and restoring stakeholder confidence.
- Take appropriate corrective action putting stakeholders first: Organizations must prioritize the interests and well-being of stakeholders in their corrective actions. This approach fosters trust and loyalty among stakeholders.
- Develop and practice a crisis plan: Having a well-developed crisis plan and practicing it regularly ensures that organizations are prepared to respond promptly and effectively to crises, minimizing their impact.

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