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Effects of organizational conflict history and employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 on negative megaphoning and turnover intention

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Abstract

Purpose

This study explores the interaction effects of organizational conflict history and employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 on negative megaphoning and turnover intention.

Design/methodology/approach

Survey data ($N = 476$) were collected from US citizens, who self-identified as full-time employees, through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in August 2020.

Findings

Organizational conflict history (i.e. highly conflict-prone vs less conflict-prone workplaces) interacts with employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 (i.e. inactive vs active publics) in affecting employees' negative megaphoning and turnover intention toward their organizations. Employees who are active publics on COVID-19 in highly conflict-prone workplaces reported the highest negative megaphoning and turnover intention. On the contrary, employees who are inactive publics on COVID-19 in less conflict-prone workplaces reported the lowest negative megaphoning and turnover intention.

Practical implications

COVID-19 is an uncontrollable, exogenous crisis for organizations. While it is expected that employees in highly conflict-prone workplaces would report higher negative megaphoning and turnover intention, this study found that employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 would further exacerbate the effects. This finding reflects the importance of managing organizational conflicts continuously and preemptively while also segmenting and cultivating relationships with employees based on their situational perceptions of issues and crises.

Originality/value

This study identified the significance of the interaction of cross-situational factors (e.g. employees' recollection of organizational conflict history) and situational factors (e.g. employees' situational perceptions of issues) in affecting employees' negative behavioral intentions in crisis situations, even if the crises are exogenous and uncontrollable.

Keywords: conflict, crisis communication, employee communication, internal communication

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected almost all mankind and social institutions. For organizations, it has become a *chronic* issue as the pandemic and its effects have persisted or have even worsened. Employees are fearful of losing their jobs (Healy, 2020). Organizations have struggled to deal with the prolonged uncertainty and to make decisions that minimize the negative impact of the pandemic. Larsen and Navrbjerg (2015) found that during economic crises, employee relations are strained due to tensions between management and employees, which are caused by challenges such as wage concessions, reduced working hours and layoffs. Because of this job insecurity, economic crises affect employee stress and satisfaction (Halkos and Bousinakis, 2017).

Like economic crises, the COVID-19 pandemic is an *external* (exogenous) problem for many organizations, but its dire consequences are an *internal* problem. Almost all organizations have struggled to sustain their operational routines and are confronted with more risks than ever before (McKinsey and Company, 2020). For employees, the risks are equally high; they have to evaluate the benefit of going to work against the risk of contracting COVID-19 (Hamid and Sherno, 2020). Thus, organizations are advised to engage in proactive crisis communication by prioritizing people's information needs effectively and addressing the immediacy and uncertainty of the crisis (Mendy *et al.*, 2020). Amongst the different stakeholder groups affected by the pandemic, employees are of paramount importance because they are amongst the most affected and have changed their expectations toward their employers such as expecting safety assurances from them (The Institute for Public Relations, 2020). Internal communication has become more important than before as a knowledgeable and engaged workforce remains crucial for organizational decision-making while many employees are working in virtual environments (Grates, 2020). Also, during crises, employees play a strategic role in supporting and defending their organizations (Kim and Rhee, 2011) and in helping organizations build organizational resilience through internal and external communicative behaviors (Lee, 2019) and work-role performance (Kim, 2020). According to Frandsen and Johansen (2011), internal crisis communication is different from external crisis communication because employees are both receivers and senders of crisis information and have stakes and expectations from their organizations.

Although existing research has identified the importance of employees and their communicative behaviors during crises (Lee, 2019; Mazzei *et al.*, 2012), the COVID-19 pandemic presents some unique characteristics which warrant further investigation into examining employees as strategic publics. First, COVID-19 is an *external, uncontrollable* crisis in which organizations are victims. Despite this, most employees cast doubts over their organizations' and leaders' capabilities to manage COVID-19 (Syed, 2020). Although organizations may not have a crisis history of dealing with pandemics of this scale, and are thus attributed less responsibility (Coombs, 2007), perceived organizational control over the situation (or the lack of it) presents a reputational threat (Eaddy and Jin, 2018). Crisis history has mostly been explored in existing research as similar crises which happened in the past (e.g. Kim, 2017) which served as a positive or negative reference point that publics refer to when evaluating crisis responsibility and organizational reputation (e.g. Lee and Kim, 2016; Kim, 2017; Eaddy and Jin, 2018). However, existing research has examined crisis history in experimental settings, involving the manipulation of particular crisis types, hypothetical crises and non-victim publics (Coombs, 2004; Eaddy and Jin, 2018; Lee and Kim, 2016; Lee, 2019). It was suggested that future research explored diverse types of real crises and their effects on triggering changes in perceptions of and reactions toward real organizations (Kim, 2017; Lee, 2019). Considering that COVID-19 is an unprecedented crisis for which employees would not be able to refer to similar crises in the

past as a reference point, this study examines *organizational conflict history* as a generic construct which measures employees' recollection of the frequency of internal conflicts (e.g. workplace harassment, discrimination and leadership scandals) and external conflicts (e.g. consumer complaints, lawsuits and negative media coverage) that their organizations have experienced in recent years. The construct addresses the limitations in existing research which focused on particular crisis types by exploring *conflicts* (defined as the collision of interests between an organization and its publics) (e.g. Murphy and Dee, 1992) rather than *crises* (defined as unexpected events which could affect many people) (Coombs, 2004). In the context of internal crisis communication, the generic construct of organizational conflict history allows the exploration of employees' recollection of the frequency of diverse types of real issues resulting from the collision of interests in their workplaces.

While it can be expected that organizational conflict history would have negative effects (in line with existing research findings on prior crisis history), it will be worth examining whether employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19, a problem which is external to an organization, could further exacerbate the effects. Existing research has found that different problem-related perceptions of crisis situations affect their communicative behaviors (Lee, 2019; Wang, 2020). This effect is well-documented; however, studies have focused on crises with internal causes such as gender discrimination (Lee, 2019). Employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 as an external, uncontrollable crisis, which also manifests itself to be an internal financial and health crisis for organizations, merits further examination. According to Lee (2019), future studies should examine how different types of crises could affect employees' crisis perceptions in causing negative employee outcomes. Hence, considering the intersection between cross-situational factors (e.g. individuals' evaluations of organizational factors such as prior crisis history or prior reputation) (e.g. Coombs, 2004; Lee and Kim, 2016; Eaddy and Jin, 2018) and situational factors (e.g. individuals' crisis perceptions) (e.g. Lee, 2019), this study proposes to examine the interaction effects of employees' recollection of organizational conflict history of their organizations and their situational perceptions of COVID-19 in causing two negative employee outcomes: negative megaphoning and turnover intention. Theoretically, this will shed light on how individuals' evaluations of both the organization (as a cross-situational factor) and the issue (as a situational factor) affect employees' behavioral intentions in the internal crisis context (e.g. Lee, 2019). Practically, this study would contribute to the practice of internal public segmentation in the crisis context (e.g. Lee, 2019). Particularly, during crises, when employees' communicative behaviors are critical to crisis recovery (Kim *et al.*, 2019), identifying, segmenting and prioritizing some employees as strategic constituencies could help the strategic allocation of resources to the maintenance of organization-employee relationships (OERs) (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2008).

Literature review

Employees play a significant and strategic role in crisis communication because they are both senders and receivers of information about their workplaces. They make sense of the crisis and communicate with one another, to management within the organizations and with others outside the organizations (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). Although previous research on crisis communication has mostly focused on external stakeholders (e.g. Frandsen and Johansen, 2011), there has been a rise of research studies on internal crisis communication in the past decade, all of which points to the importance of distinguishing employees from other stakeholders in crisis communication due to their different information roles and needs (e.g. Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Adamu and Mohamad, 2019).

Employees are different from other stakeholders because they are often the first to experience the problematic conditions of crises and are both affected by and involved in how their organizations respond to them. Although they have high crisis perceptions, employees are often given little say in crisis management (Snoeiijers and Poels, 2018). Internal crisis communication is critical in creating shared crisis awareness in organizations and to prevent misalignment between employee and organizational understandings and behaviors toward the crisis situations (Jin *et al.*, 2018; Kim, 2018). Employees should be involved in the communication and actions of the organizations because they can and should be major actors in developing a culture of early problem detection and to help organizations better handle the crises (Adamu and Mohamad, 2019). Crises are also a time of transformation during which organizational actions and employee reactions can create and transform organizational culture (Strandberg and Vigsø, 2016).

Internal communication becomes more important during COVID-19 as organizations need an engaged workforce to open up new avenues of innovation and to overcome new challenges (Grates, 2020). Organizations are advised to “get personal” in their communication and to demonstrate “a common sense of purpose with employees” by sharing and engaging with them in this time of change (Honigmann *et al.*, 2020). While some organizations are gaining trust from employees, others reported a decline in trust (Carufel, 2020). Acknowledging the importance of internal crisis communication during COVID-19, this study proposes that effective internal crisis communication requires deep knowledge of organizations and their employees. As such, it examines the intersection of organizational conflict history (i.e. comparing employees in highly conflict-prone and less conflict-prone organizations) and employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 (i.e. comparing active and inactive publics on COVID-19) in affecting two negative employee outcomes: negative megaphoning and turnover intention.

Organizational conflict history (highly conflict-prone vs less conflict-prone organizations)

Organizational conflicts can have internal causes such as leadership scandals or external causes such as consumer complaints. Conflicts are inevitable in organizations because of constant changes happening both internally and externally, causing a collision of interests between organizations and their stakeholders. However, the ways in which organizations deal with conflicts could vary. More effective organizations are better able to recover from the conflicts by leveraging their strategic relationships with their employees and legitimacy from external constituencies. These organizations can continue to mobilize resources even in turbulent environments when other organizations struggle. According to Huang (2001), conflicts are defined as situations arising “when parties hold or perceive incompatible interests, goals, resources, prestige, power, and so on” (p. 269). Huang (2001) advised that public relations strategies be employed to build a sense of control mutuality between an organization and its publics for relational outcomes and conflict resolution.

The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Excellence study has accumulated evidence that successful organizations are capable of achieving their goals and sustaining performance due to long-term relationships with strategic publics (e.g. employees, regulators, etc.). These long-term relationships are typically cultivated when organizations invest in public relations to cultivate and preserve relationships with strategic publics, the values of which can be quantified as a return on relationships (Grunig *et al.*, 2002). Notably, the value of public relations in organizational success can be demonstrated by the capacity of communication management to deal with internal and external disputes or conflicts. Conflicts, such as litigation, with concerned stakeholders or active and activist publics

impose great costs for organizations. When such conflicts happen in and around organizations, effective organizations can avoid or proactively manage the situation as they are capable of finding constructive and integrative solutions, or at least mutually acceptable solutions, in the process (“integrative strategies of conflict resolution,” Grunig and Grunig, 2001). In this vein, Ehling (1992) noted and quantified dispute resolution in terms of win-win negotiation and cooperation over conflicts as a value of public relations and a key characteristic of successful organizations. Grunig (1992) noted that dynamic, turbulent environments, such as conflicts with concerned activists or special-interest groups, are taxing but not necessarily negative to organizations. With symmetrical communication and empowered communication managers, organizations can turn challenges into developmental opportunities (e.g. developing more flexible organizational structures).

COVID-19 has created unprecedented turbulence for most organizations. Employees are not likely to fault their organizations for the consequences and problems from the pandemic (Mazzei *et al.*, 2019). However, the relational history between employees and organizations, which could be affected by employees' individual and collective memories of organizations' past conflicts, can intricate employees' assessment of how those consequences and problems from the pandemic are managed in their organizations. In fact, employees consciously and unconsciously assess the effectiveness and even ethics (e.g. fairness) of their organizations and management in dealing with the problematic situation (Eaddy and Jin, 2018). Further, the history of conflicts in various levels of organizations provides context for the current assessment and delegatory confidence of employees and management toward organizational efforts to cope with present challenges.

When employees award greater trust and loyalty to their management and organizations, those organizations are better able to weather external crises and be “crisis prepared” (Pearson and Mitroff, 1993). In sum, organizations and workplaces which are less prone to conflicts or more capable of swiftly managing them are better able to weather enduring issues such as COVID-19. In contrast, highly conflict-prone organizations suffer from the doubts of employees and external stakeholders. While present research has explored *prior crisis history* in and around the organization as a determinant of negative outcomes, but has mostly manipulated crisis types and the presence or absence of crisis history in experimental settings (e.g. Coombs, 2004; Lee and Kim, 2016; Eaddy and Jin, 2018), this study proposes to explore *organizational conflict history* as a generic construct of employees' recollection of the frequency of conflicts happening in and around their organizations among amongst internal stakeholders and/or with external stakeholders and publics. Conflict is interpreted as the collision of interests between their organizations and publics externally and internally (e.g. Huang, 2001). This new and generic construct allows the examination of collision of interests beyond crisis types and takes into consideration of different conflicts which take place in all organizations regardless of their sizes.

Employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 (active publics vs inactive publics)

COVID-19 is a prime example of a hot issue which has triggered the rise of hot-issue publics (i.e. publics who are active on a single problem which affects nearly everyone in the population and has received extensive media coverage) (Aldoory and Grunig, 2012). Hot-issue publics are a special group of active publics because they arise out of a media controversy and gradually evolve from inactive to active publics as a result of media coverage (Kim *et al.*, 2012). According to Grunig (1997), hot-issue publics are “more intellectual publics than actively behaving publics” (p. 29) because of their high problem recognition. They are engaged in communicative behaviors on the issues (Chen *et al.*,

2017; Kim *et al.*, 2012) and in collective action such as protests and demonstrations (Grunig and Kim, 2017). During crises, they can present a threat to organizations because they tend to pay more attention to negative issues surrounding the crises (Aldoory and Grunig, 2012).

While existing research has examined individuals' situational perceptions of issues and crises within their organizations (e.g. Lee, 2019), the extent to which individuals' situational perceptions of *external* issues affecting their organizations has not been explored. Employees communicate both inside and outside their organizations in relation to their work (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). At the same time, they can be hot-issue publics on certain external issues which have an impact on their organizations such as COVID-19. As such, it is possible that employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19, reflecting whether they are active on the issue of COVID-19, can affect their communicative behaviors which may also turn other employees into active publics (e.g. public-initiated public relations problem, Kim and Ni, 2013). Employees who have heightened situational perceptions about COVID-19 might be more aware of and more concerned about how their organizations handle COVID-19 as an internal problem. These situational perceptions can be measured using three variables: problem recognition (i.e. the extent to which employees feel that COVID-19 is a problematic issue), involvement recognition (i.e. the extent to which they feel personally affected by the issue) and constraint recognition (i.e. the extent to which they feel capable of making a difference in the issue) (Kim and Grunig, 2011). Although it can be expected that organizational conflict history would lead to negative employee outcomes like prior crisis history tested in experimental settings (e.g. Lee and Kim, 2016; Kim, 2017; Eaddy and Jin, 2018), this study seeks to explore whether employees with higher situational perceptions of an issue or a crisis would report more negative employee outcomes (e.g. Lee, 2019). To date, much research on crisis communication with employees has mostly focused on organization relationship quality (e.g. Lee, 2017; Kim *et al.*, 2019), overlooking the importance of employees' situational perceptions of the issues or crises in triggering their communicative behaviors as receivers and givers of crisis information which could affect organizational reputation (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Lee, 2019).

Negative megaphoning

When organizations are in crisis, employees can engage in both positive and negative megaphoning about their organizations (Lee, 2017). They can be motivated by organizational factors such as the (lack of) practice of symmetrical communication (Kang and Sung, 2017) or individual factors such as an altruistic motive (Lee and Kim, 2020). Negative megaphoning is conceptualized as employees' negative external communicative behaviors about their organizations (Kim and Rhee, 2011) and can be a negative outcome amongst situationally motivated employees in conflict-prone organizations. It is one of the two employee communicative behaviors (ECB); the other one of which is scouting, defined as employees' voluntary efforts to bring in external information into the organization (Kim and Rhee, 2011). According to Lee and Kim (2020), both organization-level and individual-level factors can be determinants of employees' negative communicative behaviors. The current literature has identified quality of relationships (e.g. Mazzei *et al.*, 2012), crisis perceptions (e.g. Lee, 2019), employee positions (e.g. Lee, 2017) and symmetrical communication efforts (e.g. Kim and Rhee, 2011; Kang and Sung, 2017) as predictors to employees' communicative behaviors. Considering the possible effects of organizational conflict history and employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 on their communicative behaviors, the following hypotheses will be tested:

H1. Employees in highly conflict-prone organizations are more likely to engage in negative megaphoning than employees in less conflict-prone organizations.

H2. Employees who are active on the issue of COVID-19 are more likely to engage in negative megaphoning than employees who are inactive.

H3. Organizational conflict history and employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 interact to affect negative megaphoning. Specifically, those employees with higher issue-activeness in highly conflict-prone organizations are more likely to engage in negative megaphoning.

Turnover intention

Even though there is heightened job insecurity during the pandemic, employee turnover intention should remain among the concerns of organizational management (Cho *et al.*, 2017; Hom *et al.*, 2017) because employees are the backbone of organizational success and effectiveness (Kim and Rhee, 2011; Waters *et al.*, 2013) and have accumulated knowledge and networks of relationships for the organizations (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 2017). The workforce is critical to organizations' recovery from the pandemic. However, when a crisis such as COVID-19 hits, even though employees fear job insecurity, organizational factors such as poor relationships can lead to high turnover intention (Kim *et al.*, 2012). Wynen and Op De Beeck (2014) found that financial and economic crises increase turnover intention amongst employees of the US federal government as they became less satisfied with certain aspects of their jobs. Current research has identified turnover intention as an outcome of organizational factors such as organizational justice and organizational culture (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2017) and leadership style and organizational commitment (van Prooijen and de Vries, 2016) and individual factors such as employees' emotions and job satisfaction (Cho *et al.*, 2017). Following this, while it can be expected that organizational conflict history would be positively associated with turnover intention, this study proposes to also study whether employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 would affect turnover intention with the following hypothesis:

H4. Employees in highly conflict-prone organizations have higher turnover intention than employees in less conflict-prone organizations.

H5. Employees who are active on the issue of COVID-19 have higher turnover intention than employees who are inactive.

H6. Organizational conflict history and employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 interact to affect turnover intention. Specifically, employees with higher situational perceptions in highly conflict-prone organizations will report higher turnover intention.

Method

Data collection and participants

After obtaining approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), survey data were collected from participants who self-identified as full-time employees in the US through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in August 2020. To ensure the quality of the responses, a screening question was used, resulting in 476 valid responses received from 500 participants.

The average age of the participants was 34.75 years old. Their age ranged from 22 to 69 years old. The sample consisted of 62.6% ($n = 298$) male and 37.4% ($n = 178$) female. Caucasian participants represented 76.3% ($n = 363$) of all participants, while 11.1% ($n = 53$) were African American, 9.5% ($n = 45$) were Asian American and 3.1% ($n = 15$) were of other ethnicities. Regarding education levels, 3% of the participants ($n = 15$) had a high school

degree or less, 5% ($n = 24$) had a two-year associate degree or less, 63% ($n = 300$) had a bachelor's degree or had some university education and 29% ($n = 137$) had a postgraduate degree or some postgraduate education. Twenty-two percent of the participants ($n = 104$) had a family income of less than US\$30,000, 24% ($n = 113$) had a family income between US\$30,000 and US\$49,999, 41.2% ($n = 196$) had a family income between US\$50,000 and US\$79,999 and 13% ($n = 63$) had a family income of US\$80,000 or more.

A large portion of employees had worked in their organizations for 3–5 years (37.4%, $n = 178$). A total of 29.6% ($n = 141$) of them had worked in their current organizations for less than three years, and 33.0% ($n = 157$) had worked in their organizations for over five years. A total of 77% of the participants ($n = 367$) were in managerial positions (e.g. manager and director), 16.8% were intern or entry level workers ($n = 80$) and 6.1% were in other types of positions ($n = 29$). The sizes of participants' organizations varied in terms of the number of employees – 20.8% ($n = 99$) of them worked in organizations with less than 100 employees, 38.2% ($n = 182$) of their organizations had between 100 and 499 employees, 34.0% ($n = 162$) had between 500 and 4,999 and 6.9% ($n = 33$) had 5,000 or more.

Measures

Independent variables

A seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (= strongly disagree) to 7 (= strongly agree) was used to measure the situational variables. Adapting items from previous study (Kim and Grunig, 2011), problem recognition was measured using three items (e.g. I was surprised when I heard about this issue), constraint recognition was using three items (e.g. I can make a difference regarding this issue and its impact on my organization) and involvement recognition was measured using three items (e.g. I recognize a strong connection between myself and this issue) about the COVID-19 pandemic. The Cronbach's alphas are as follows: problem recognition ($\alpha = 0.68$), constraint recognition ($\alpha = 0.69$) and involvement recognition ($\alpha = 0.58$). The skewness and kurtosis for the three variables are as follows: problem recognition (−0.638, 0.135), constraint recognition (−0.756, 0.801) and involvement recognition (0.466, −0.352), all falling within the acceptable range of not exceeding 3 for skewness and not exceeding 8 for kurtosis (Kline, 2005). The situational variables were used to segment publics into active and inactive publics on the issue of COVID-19.

To test the effects of organizational conflict history on employee's issue-related behaviors, new measurement items were proposed. The adoption of this construct seeks to address the limitations of existing crisis research which are mostly experimental studies focusing on the manipulation of crisis types (Coombs, 2004; Eaddy and Jin, 2018; Lee and Kim, 2016; Lee, 2019) by encouraging participants to recall their own workplaces' conflicts. The construct, organizational conflict history, measures the internal and external conflicts which occur as a result of a collision of interests between an organization and its stakeholders (e.g. Huang, 2001). Based on a literature review of common conflicts in and around organizations, six items were created involving three internal conflicts (i.e. workplace harassment, discrimination and leadership scandals) (e.g. Knights and O'Leary, 2005; Lee, 2019) and three external conflicts (i.e. consumer complaints, lawsuits and negative media coverage) (e.g. Huang, 2001; Bach and Kim, 2012; Avraham, 2015). Participants were asked to recall how often their organizations had experienced these conflicts in the past two years on a seven-point scale from “never” to “very often.” The six items were examined for their internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.93$), and exploratory factor analysis showed that only one principal component was extracted. The factor loadings for the items ranged from 0.828 to

0.888. The total variance explained was 75.141%. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.921 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, indicating the adequacy of the items in explaining the underlying construct. The skewness and kurtosis for the variable were -0.598 and -0.870 respectively, falling within the acceptable range (Kline, 2005).

Dependent variables

To test negative megaphoning and turnover intention as negative employee outcomes, survey items from previous studies were used. Negative megaphoning was measured using three items (e.g. I would post negative things about this organization on the Internet or social media) adopted from Kim and Rhee (2011). The items had a reliability of 0.87 in Cronbach's α . Turnover intention was measured using three items from (Carmeli and Freund, 2009). The reliability of three items was 0.88 in Cronbach's α . The skewness and kurtosis for the two variables are as follows: negative megaphoning ($-0.452, -1.005$) and turnover intention ($-0.992, -0.086$), falling within the acceptable range (Kline, 2005).

Analysis

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviations and correlations of the variables used in this study. A series of regression analysis was conducted to examine how the focal variables are associated with negative megaphoning and job turnover intentions by controlling demographic information (i.e. gender, age and information) and job-related variables (i.e. numbers of years in an organization, numbers of employees in an organization and annual revenue of an organization). Table 2 indicates that after controlling demographic information and employees' information related to their organizations, involvement recognition was positively associated with negative megaphoning ($\beta = 0.17, p < 0.01$), whereas problem recognition was positively related to turnover intentions ($\beta = 0.10, p < 0.05$). Organizational conflict history is the strongest factor in predicting negative megaphoning ($\beta = 0.53, p < 0.01^{***}$) and turnover intention ($\beta = 0.71, p < 0.01^{***}$).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Organizational Conflict History	4.36	1.64	-					
2. Problem Recognition	5.37	1.05	.18**	-				
3. Constraint Recognition	5.26	1.06	.34**	.57**	-			
4. Involvement Recognition	5.32	1.03	.34**	.60**	.66**	-		
5. Negative Megaphoning	5.00	1.54	.61**	.27**	.36**	.40**	-	
6. Turnover Intention	4.64	1.65	.74**	.24**	.32**	.33**	.56**	-

** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Regression results to predict negative megaphoning and turnover intention

	Negative Megaphoning	Turnover Intention
Demographics		
Gender ^a	.00	-.08**
Age	-.07	-.02
Income	-.05	-.14***
Employee/Organization		
Number of years in organization	-.00	-.08*
Number of employees in organization	-.04	.00
Annual revenue of organization	.05	.07*
Situational Variables		
Problem recognition	.05	.10*
Constraint recognition	.05	.01
Involvement recognition	.17**	.04
Organizational Conflict History	.53***	.71***
R ²	.43	.61
F	35.39***	71.26***

Note. N = 476. Variables recoded as follows, Gender (male=1, female=0). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** , $p < .001$.

Although the multiple regression models already showed the expected main effects for organizational conflict history and some situational variables, an additional step was taken to further examine the nature of the relationships by dichotomizing the independent variables using two-way ANOVA models. The variables are dichotomized for two reasons (DeCoster *et al.*, 2009, 2011). First, multiple regression and ANOVA belong to the same generalized linear model (GLM) tradition. Second, dichotomization of continuous variables should be used when the variables and their relationships are suspected to have departed from true linear relationships. When the distribution curves of the tested variables and the relationships between focal variables (e.g. organizational conflict history-negative megaphoning) are disproportionate, the significant regression coefficients would not show the full nature of effects and relationships. Thus, the midpoint was set as the regrouping point to examine the effects of organization's conflict history and issue activeness on the two negative outcomes.

To divide individuals on the basis of organizational conflict history for which six items were used, the midpoint (4) of the survey scale (i.e. seven-point Likert scale) was used to determine whether employees were in highly conflict-prone or less conflict-prone workplaces. The number of respondents in less conflict-prone workplaces was 170 (35.7%), whereas 306 (64.3%) respondents were identified to be working in highly conflict-prone workplaces.

To segment individuals into subgroups of publics, the three situational variables were analyzed using the public segmentation method proposed by Kim (2011). According to the summation procedure (Kim, 2011)¹, the midpoint of the survey data was used as the cut-off point to recode each of the situational variable into two groups, 0 (= low) and 1 (= high). The points ranged from 0 to 3 when the three variables are added. Those who had a summated score of 3 were considered active publics, reflecting high levels of problem recognition and involvement recognition and low levels of constraint recognition. Among the 476 respondents, 340 (71.4%) were identified as active publics, while 136 (28.6%) were inactive publics on issue of COVID-19.

Subsequently, employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 (i.e. active vs inactive) and perceptions about organizational conflict history (i.e. highly conflict-prone vs less conflict-prone workplaces) were used as independent variables to predict employees' negative megaphoning and turnover intentions.

¹ The summation method (Kim, 2011), which was developed based on the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) (Kim and Grunig, 2011), requires the sampling of not only people (i.e. publics) but also issues. Setting the midpoint (rather than the median or any other central tendency quantity) as a cut-off is essential to show the nature of phenomenon inquired (i.e. publics as problem solvers). Researchers using STOPS first choose the issues of concern. Then, the participants recruited into their studies could show variations in terms of their situational perceptions of the issues chosen. Hence, it is expected that the same issue studied could result in different distributions depending on the issue as well as the sample. For some issues, there could be more participants with higher situational perceptions. For example, the issues of MERS and SARS might result in low situational perceptions amongst US employees as opposed to COVID-19. Because US employees have high situational perceptions of COVID-19, the distribution of situational perceptions taken from a US sample could be more highly concentrated above the midpoint. The summation procedure was used in this study not to show an equal balanced split (i.e. a median split will result in equal group sizes and will be advantageous for statistical tests), but to use the midpoint to illustrate the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to meet the very purpose of the special issue – to examine how unusual the pandemic is to employees.

A series of ANOVA was conducted with a 2 (employees' issue-activeness on COVID-19: active public vs inactive public) × 2 (recollection of organizational conflict history: highly conflict-prone vs less conflict-prone organizations) between-subjects factorial design to predict the negative outcomes: negative megaphoning and turnover intention.

Results

The results from the 2 × 2 factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that there were significant main effects for organizational conflict history on negative megaphoning ($F(1, 472) = 34.420, p < 0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.179$) (H1) and turnover intention ($F(1, 472) = 218.655, p < 0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.317$) (H4). The results also revealed that there were significant main effects for employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 on negative megaphoning ($F(1, 472) = 34.420, p < 0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.068$) (H2) and turnover intention ($F(1, 472) = 11.233, p < 0.05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.023$) (H5). Thus, the main effects for employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 and organizational conflict history were all supported.

The results also showed significant interaction effect between employees' issue-activeness on COVID-19 and organizational conflict history on negative megaphoning ($F(1, 472) = 7.495, p < 0.01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.016$) (H3) and turnover intention ($F(1, 472) = 34.420, p < 0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.179$) (H6). As shown in Table 3, active employees who perceived high level of organizational conflict history ($M = 5.82$) also reported higher negative megaphoning than inactive employees who perceived high level of organizational conflict history ($M = 4.68$). Further, active employees who perceived high level of organizational conflict history ($M = 5.60$) reported higher turnover intention than inactive employees who perceived organizational conflict history ($M = 4.75$). Figures 1 and 2 showed the interaction effects of employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 and organizational conflict history on negative megaphoning and turnover intention, respectively.

Table 3. Mean comparisons of negative outcomes by organizational conflict history and issue activeness on COVID-19

		Negative		Turnover	
		Megaphoning		Intention	
Organizational		Inactive	Active	Inactive	Active
Conflict History		Public	Public	Public	Public
Low	<i>M</i>	3.70	4.11	3.22	3.25
	<i>(SD)</i>	(1.45)	(1.93)	(1.31)	(1.95)
High	<i>M</i>	4.68	5.82	4.75	5.60
	<i>(SD)</i>	(1.05)	(0.85)	(0.93)	(0.89)

Note. Interaction effect on negative megaphoning: $F(1, 472) = 7.495, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .016$. Interaction effect on turnover intention: $F(1, 472) = 34.420, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .179$.

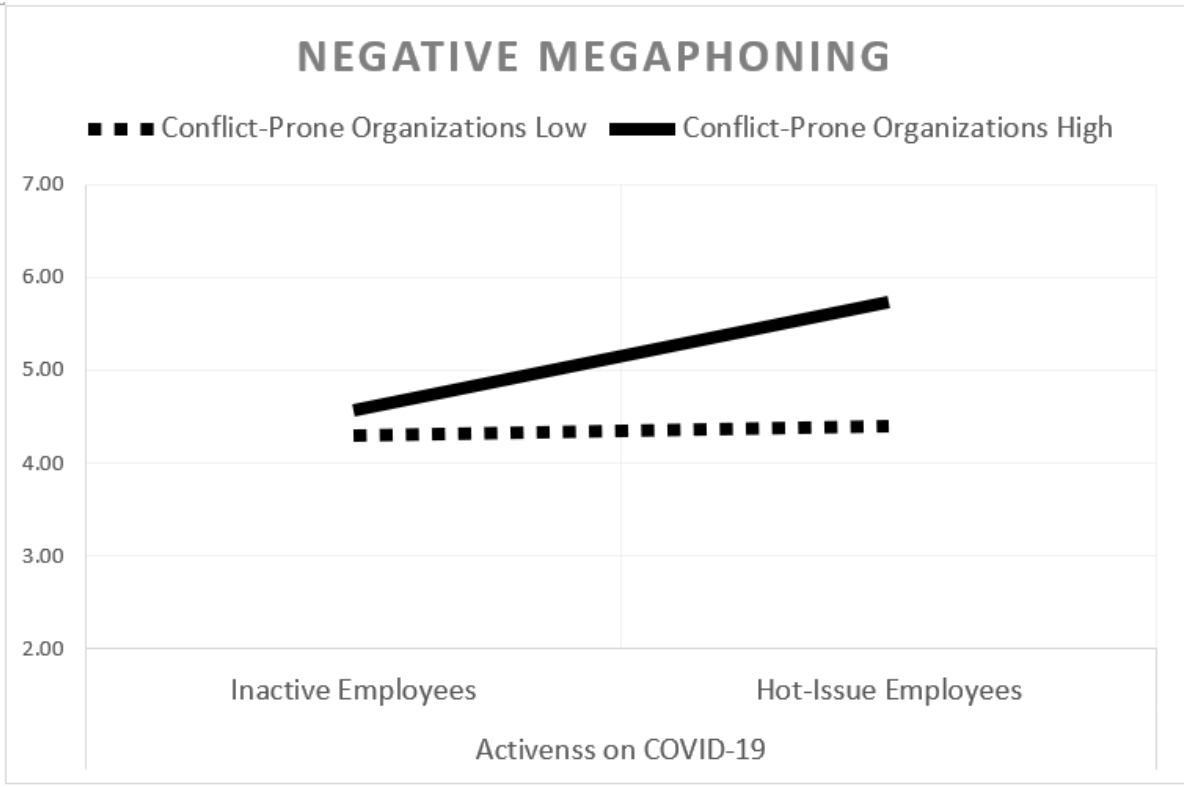


Figure 1. Interaction effect of employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 and organizational conflict history on negative megaphoning

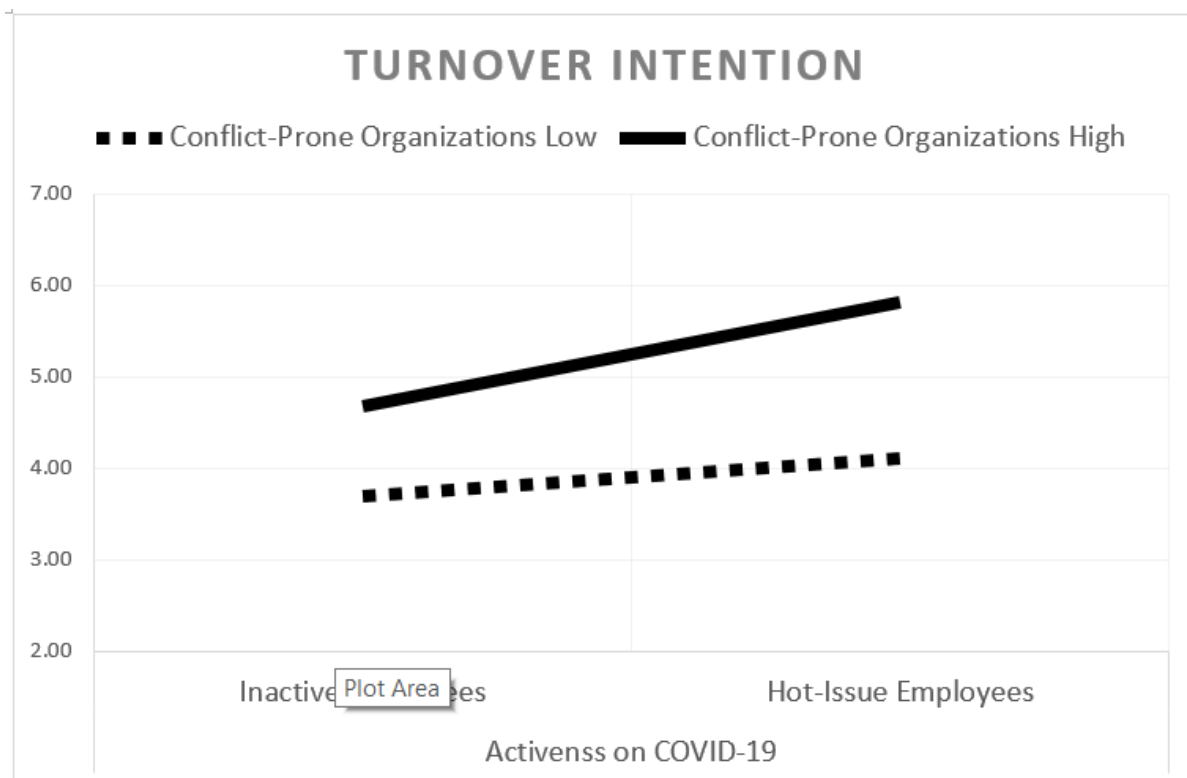


Figure 2. Interaction effect of employees' situational perceptions of COVID-19 and organizational conflict history on turnover intention

Discussion and conclusion

COVID-19 is a sudden and widespread problem that has brought lasting changes for both individuals and social institutions. The pandemic has become a mega-issue, spawning subproblems and issues for all aspects and actors in social life. This study explored and found the interaction between employees' situational perceptions of the issue as a situational factor and recollection of organizational conflict history as a cross-situational factor in affecting two negative employee outcomes: negative megaphoning and turnover intention. Active publics on the issue of COVID-19 in highly conflict-prone organizations reported the highest negative megaphoning and turnover intention. Inactive publics on COVID-19 in less conflict-prone organizations reported the lowest negative megaphoning and turnover intention.

Theoretically, the roles and effects of employees during exogenous, uncontrollable crises were rarely explored in public relations research. Although exogenous, uncontrollable crises like COVID-19 threaten employees' job security and organizational morale (Markovits *et al.*, 2014), from a public relations perspective, understanding employees' evaluation of their workplaces (e.g. a cross-situational factor) and their situational perceptions of the issues or crises (e.g. a situational factor) allows organizations to identify and segment certain publics as their strategic publics to whom they allocate resources to build and cultivate relationships to prevent negative megaphoning and to reduce turnover intention. After all, their communicative behaviors, whether they are advocates or adversaries, could either positively or negatively affect their organizations' reputation while also possibly motivating others to become advocates for or adversaries against their organizations. During crises, employees' advocacy for their organizations is crucial for crisis recovery.

This study explored the interaction between organizational conflict history and employees' situational perceptions toward COVID-19 as an exogenous crisis in affecting negative employee outcomes. The findings from this study have several notable theoretical implications. First, employees can vary in their activeness toward problems they experience from the pandemic situation. Employees, who are more active or concerned about COVID-19 and its subproblems, tend to be suspicious and negative in their communicative action related to their organizations and are likely to consider leaving their organizations. Second, employees in organizations which have experienced more past conflicts in their workplaces are likely to doubt management, negatively talk about their organizations and consider leaving their current workplace. Finally, the negative effects from employees' alertness to the exogenous crisis (i.e. COVID-19) are exacerbated when their organizations are prone to internal and external conflicts. Employees under such conditions are most likely to be suspicious toward management actions, express negative opinions about their organizations and consider leaving their current job. The interaction effects between the two factors indicated the possibility that employees with high situational perceptions of COVID-19 in conflict-prone organizations feel less optimistic about their organizations' ability to control the effects of the crisis. Future research should explore how the interaction effects could affect perceived organizational control over the situation (Eaddy and Jin, 2018).

In terms of practical implications, this study outlines how some organizations are exposed to greater risks of employee disloyalty and that in those organizations, segmenting and prioritizing employees with high issue-activeness and cultivating relationships with them might help to prevent negative employee outcomes. The results of this study suggest the strategic value of the use of public segmentation to identify key publics when organizations confront with issues or crises even if the issues and crises are exogenous and uncontrollable. For example, communication practitioners could proactively conduct an internal survey to understand employees' situational perceptions of the issues or crises and to explore the specific concerns of the most active employees. In addition to segmenting employees based on their situational perceptions, employees may also vary in their recollection of organizational conflict history.

The findings of this study also suggest the important roles of employee-organization relationships (EORs) and symmetrical communication (Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Men and Jiang, 2016) in understanding active employees' problem recognition in a given issue and in working with them to develop organizational practices for crisis recovery. Previous studies have found that employees who have low relationship quality with their organizations are more likely to perceive external issues as a problematic situation and show a higher level of negative megaphoning (e.g. Lee, 2019). Symmetrical internal communication leads to positive internal outcomes such as feedback-seeking behaviors and employee creativity (Lee and Kim, 2021). EORs and symmetrical communication can influence employees' perception on a given issue and their negative communication behaviors.

Furthermore, organizations exist over time, and their pasts create either doubt or/and trust for their current actions. When a crisis occurs, there are accentuated impacts from how communication managers have dealt with the problems in and around organizations. Employees' strategic values are recognized in organizational performance and its sustainability (Mazzei *et al.*, 2012). Continuous, proactive and effective conflict management prevents failure from the inside and some of the most draining impacts of COVID-19. Although COVID-19 is beyond the control of most organizations, this study found that the effects of past conflicts can exacerbate its negative effects on employee loyalty tendencies.

This finding reflects the importance of managing organizational conflicts continuously and proactively among internal and external stakeholders and the need for effective communication between an organization and its employees, even when neither party is at fault.

Conflicts are inevitable in the process of organizing people toward common interests. However, some organizations deal with them better than others. Proactive, integrated and symmetrical communication can prevent further collisions and repair devolving relationships between an organization and its strategic publics. Employees are a key-internal public, whose personal and collective experiences in how organizations deal with past conflicts matter greatly to organizations weathering an exogenous crisis (i.e. COVID-19). Employees in more conflict-prone organizations can discredit problem-solving efforts by their management. In this vein, when external crisis has an impact on their organizations, employees' coping process of the crisis can be influenced by previous history of their organizations to handle their internal and external problems, issues and conflicts.

Limitations and future directions

This study has limitations which could be addressed in future research studies. First, organizational conflict history was a newly proposed generic construct which was measured as a composite of six types of conflicts. Although it is different from crisis history and allows an examination into diverse types of conflicts respondents experience in their workplaces, the construct needs to be further conceptualized and examined for validation. Second, the reliabilities of the situational variables were low, potentially caused by the adaptation of the items in the current research context. Although they met the minimum standard of 0.5 (Nunnally, 1967), further research should examine whether, how and why the adaptation of the measurement items in different contexts could affect reliabilities and other indicators of internal consistency. For the data collected via MTurk, although MTurk is commonly used by researchers to obtain quality data, it should be acknowledged that the sample of employees who participated in this study may not be representative of the US population (Sheehan, 2018). Lastly, while this study has proposed one cross-situational factor and one situational factor as the causes of two negative employee outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that there are other factors contributing to these outcomes. Future studies should also consider examining the proposed framework in other countries to investigate potential differences.

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