Using the Theory of Emotional Stakeholders to Experimentally Test the Influence of Proxy Communicators about Organizational Crises in Digital News Reports

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Abstract

The emergence of new and social media has transformed the way that stakeholders and organizations interact between and amongst each other. Online news consumers are now able to directly respond to crisis news reports by offering their own interpretation, thus expanding the diversity of viewpoints audiences are exposed to (Carpenter, 2010; Springer, 2014). Using the Theory of Emotional Stakeholders framework our study aims (1) to understand how positive and negative user-generated comments in response to online news reports of crisis events impacts audience perceptions of organizational blame; (2) to examine the persuasive effects of user comments when expert or official organizational responses are provided; and, (3) to measure the affective response to online news reports including user comments. Using experimental procedures our findings show that user comments from organizations, faith-holders, and hate-holders contribute to audience evaluations of crisis responsibility, both causal and treatment. Results found that user comments from faith-holders reduced causal responsibility in the intentional cluster compared to the control condition; however, when organizations were facing preventable crises, user comments from faith-holders amplified perceived treatment responsibility. A detailed description of the findings, discussion, limitations and future directions are provided.

Keywords*: crisis communication, user comments, online news, organizational crisis*

The growth, utilization, and adoption of new and social media have transformed the way stakeholders and organizations interact between and among each other. Publics can presently "connect with organizations and each other in ways that were limited or not possible before," (Hart, 2011, pg. 114). The rapid evolution of new media technology has generated calls from crisis communication scholars for inquiry and study of this emerging domain (Coombs, 2008). Driven to understand the nature of crises in online environments and further inform the corporate crisis communication process, recent models and theories have been posited toprovide new predictive and explanatory insight including the New Media Crisis Communication Model (SiahAnn Mei *et al.*, 2010) and Theory of Emotional Stakeholders (Luoma-aho, 2006; 2009).

"For organizations, reputation is everything, and hence what the stakeholders believe and think about the organization, expect from it and say about it to others is likely to affect its reputational assets," (Ndlela, 2019, pg. 77). Ndlela argues that because reputation is a result, not only of interaction between the organization and stakeholders, but also of multiple interactions among stakeholders, then stakeholder orientation should inform all the facets of reputational management in all phases of crisis management. Online news websites have become important forums for analysis because they communicate relevant and timely information to digital audiences and may contribute to the formation of stakeholders' opinion toward organizations.

Poindexter (2012) maintains that online news differs from traditional journalism according to several qualitative attributes including: *accessibility, perpetual updating, search-ability, share-ability, comment-ability, link/ease and reliability, contribute-ability,* and *coolness*. Users can actively engage or participate in these forums in a variety of ways such as: (a) clicking on news stories of interest, (b) commenting on news reports, (c) sending in stories or news tips, (d) participating in online surveys/polls, (e) recommending stories or topics, and/or (f) sharing stories through social media networks.

"Posting comments in news articles is currently one of the most popular forms of user participation in online-content generation," (Weber, 2014, pg. 951).Easily accessible content and opportunities to respond to online news reports provides new avenues for understanding media audiences and their interests. We live in an age in which it is now possible to know in real-time the number of times content has been clicked on, shared, commented on,and/or responded to; all are important objective indicators of the level of interest, engagement, and persuasive impact of digital news content.

This study aims (1) to understand how positive and negative user-generated comments in response to online news reports of crisis events impact organizational reputations (2) to examine the persuasive effects of when corporate crisis responses are provided, and (3)to measure the emotional response to online news reports including user comments. To do so we provide a review of literature related to digital news, explain how different reporting styles have previously been found to impact audience perceptions toward organizational responsibility, and use Luoma-aho's Theory of Emotional Stakeholders (TES) as a framework for developing the experimental materials.

Digital News & Crisis Reporting

White and Raman (1999) argue that Web 2.0 is the first mass medium to allow an uninterrupted free flow of information, 24/7/365, from source to mass audiences without gate keeping, payment, or filtering. As online and mobile friendly platforms (apps, widgets, etc.) have become more widely used, audiences are increasingly going online for news information (Houston, Hansen, & Nisbett, 2011). Jenkins (2006) maintains that traditional journalism has adapted to our participatory culture and as a result the rules of engagement between those who produce news content and those who attend to such content have changed.

The manufacturing and production of news content has evolved due to the opportunities provided by new media technology and social media. Recent trends away from traditional journalism now allow users to contribute to multiple stages of the news production process. Consumers of online news information are more involved in the access/observation stage (i.e., receiving the content), and the final stage, interpretation. The interpretation stage occurs after a story is produced and is open for discussion and comment (Domingo *et al.*, 2008; Herminda, 2011). Other important stages such as story selection and how the story is covered, or framed, remain under the control of media professionals.

Herminda (2011) maintains that the interpretation stage is the most accessible for user participation, specifically within the comment section of news stories. Online news consumers are able to directly respond to news stories by offering their own comments, adding insight and interpretation, and expanding the diversity of viewpoints that audiences and stakeholders are exposed to (Carpenter, 2010; Springer, 2014). SiahAnn Mei *et al.* (2010) previously found that "when crises were reported in online media, more people became aware of them and even helped perpetuate them by circulating them further" (pg. 149).

Although daily media reports may move past the day-to-day developments of evolving crisis events, the online reports of crises may remain in the public domain and subsequently impact attitudes and perceptions toward an organization's reputation to a wider audience base over an extended period of time. Additional research into the persuasive impact of crisis events reported in digital media environments is needed to more fully understand the anticipated degree of reputational threat that organizations in crisis may face.

Organizational Crisis Responsibility& Reputation

Organizational crises vary in their scope, complexity and causality. Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) incorporates insight from attribution theory as the underlying rationale for linking specific types of crises to specific crisis communication strategies. Based on a compilation of early crisis typologies, Coombs (2007) identifies three crisis clusters to anticipate the degree of reputational threat organizations may face and these include: *victimcluster* (e.g., events with low organizational responsibility such as natural disasters, rumors, or product tampering), *accidental cluster* (e.g., events resulting from moderate organizational responsibility such as technical-error accident or technical error product harm),and the *intentional/preventable cluster* (e.g., events with high organizational responsibility such as human errors or organizational misdeeds). Extant literature has extensively documented the connection between attributions of responsibility and the expected threat to an organization's reputation based on crisis type (Coombs, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs & Holladay, 2006). In general, SCCT argues when organizations are victims of crises, little blame is attributed to the organization; however, if an organization intentionally caused or actively contributed to the occurrence of an organizational crisis then stronger attributions of blame and responsibility are predicted.

Historically SCCT narrowly conceptualizes these attributions of responsibility to singular causal-based understandings (Weiner, 1996). In contrast to *causal responsibility*, which generally refers to the perceptions of the cause or origin of a problem/crisis (Fincham & Jaspers, 1980; Shaver, 1985; Kruglanski, 1989), *treatment responsibility* is operationalized as whom or what has the ability or obligation to alleviate the effects of the problem/crisis (Brickman *et al.*, 1982). The additional consideration of treatment responsibility suggests even when organizations are victims of crises a threat to the organization's reputation may occur or be amplified by stakeholders' perceptions of the organization's responsibility for alleviating the effects of the crisis. We argue that threats to an organization's reputation area function of both causal and treatment responsibility. Previous research expanded the SCCT conceptualization of crisis causality and found print-based news reports of crises emphasizing treatment responsibility amplified the reputational threats resulting from crises, in both victim and accident clusters, and also resulted in more negative effect in non-victim audiences (Mason, 2014, 2016). Drawing from extant literature we hypothesize:

H1) Compared to crisis news reports that do not include treatment responsibility statements, reports that include treatment responsibility statements will increase the degree of reputational threat, demonstrated by more negative perceptions of organizational reputations.

User Comments

Weber (2014) reports there is an increasing amount of user-generated content and this frequently supplements professionally generated online news content. User-generated content is defined as "content that is made available through publicly accessible transmission media such as the Internet; reflects some degree of creative effort; and is created for free, outside professional routines and practices," (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2012, pg. 54-55). User-generated content facilitates the free-flow of opinion and sharing of experiences online (Wang &Owyang, 2010). Thus, user comments provide a space for civic discourse and civic engagement toward timely and relevant news issues.

Online audiences are increasingly involved in the observation and interpretation of digital news content. Millner, Veil, and Sellnow (2011) label third party sources of critical information during crises as 'proxy communicators.' With access and opportunity members of digital audiences may perceive themselves to be digital influencers, or proxy communicators, advocating either on behalf of or against an organizations' interest during a time of crisis. "Although proxy communicators can fill the void created when an organization in crisis chooses to remain mute, this substitution is not without problems," (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2014, pg. 157).

Houston, Hansen, and Nisbett (2011) argues that "because comments are a structural feature of online media content, they represent a computer-mediated version of interpersonal communication," (pg. 88) and allow for discussion and interaction among a variety of stakeholders. Previous investigations focusing on the persuasive impact of user comments in the consumer context found that negative user-generated product reviews decreased stakeholder's perceptions of an organization's trustworthiness (Pavlou & Dimoka, 2006). User comments in response to blog posts have been found to polarize attitudes and influence risk perceptions toward particularly novel issues, such as emerging nanotechnology (Anderson *et al.*, 2014).

In news media, user comments have been found to impact the perceived quality of journalism (Prochazka, Weber,& Schweiger, 2016); and also amplify prejudicial attitudes in online forums (Hsueh, Yogeeswaran, & Malinen, 2015).User-generated content is a matter of concern to a wide-range of organizations, and many utilize reputation management software to scan and monitor for reputational threats emerging within digital environments (e.g., Radian6, Sysomos). If negative feedback is identified organizations have several response options. Some may simply choose to delete the comments if they control the platform on which they are expressed. If the platform is uncontrolled (e.g., online news websites) an organization may try to intervene by:(a) petitioning the distributor to remove and/or reposition the offending comments, (b) demanding a cease and desist, (c) requesting an internal or external review of the statements for accuracy, or (d) directly responding to the commentator.

Theory of Emotional Stakeholders

Understanding the persuasive impact of user comments to news reports of organizational crises is an important area of investigation yetit remains an underdeveloped area of inquiry within crisis communication literature. In this study we use the Theory of Emotional Stakeholders (TES) as a conceptual framework to experimentally test the persuasive impact of user comments on the attitudes and perceptions of organizational reputations and responsibility. Luoma-aho's (2006; 2009; 2010) Theory of Emotional Stakeholders (TES) conceives a *faith-holder* to be "a stakeholder who trusts the organization and has frequent personal experiences and contact with the organization," (2006, pg. 14), and a *hate-holder* is defined as "stakeholders that feel strong distrust or even hate towards an organization" (2009, pg. 5). Although the theory is criticized for a lack of conceptual clarity concerning the definition of faith-holders and hate-holders*,* as many individuals can feel extremely negative, without actually 'hating' an organization, we retain the terms in this study. In doing so we anticipate that faith-holders will express statements of support toward an organization in crisis, and hate-holders will be critical toward the organization. TES argues that hate-holders can damage the reputation of a company while, "faith-holders may hold the key to maintaining organizational legitimacy," (Luoma-aho, 2010, pg. 5).Given the variety of crisis types within the previously identified crisis clusters, and the wide array of comments that may result from exposure to the news story the below *RQ* is offered.

RQ1) Compared to control, how will digital audiences evaluate organizational causal and treatment responsibility when digital news reports include user comments presented as (a) faith-holders, (b) hate-holders and a (c) corporate crisis response?

Recently emotion-focused crisis communication research has generated interest and attention from crisis communication scholars. A well-developed stream of research has previously examined the role of emotion in the selection of crisis response strategies and also attributions of crisis responsibility (Coombs &Holladay, 2005; Coombs, Fediuk & Holladay, 2007; Choi &Lin, 2009; Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013). Previous research has found that when stakeholders turn negative toward a company, they are more inclined to express their negative emotions on social media, such as on the company's Facebook page, corporate blog, and in response to news coverage (Choi &Lin, 2009; Champoux *et al*.,2012; Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Pang *et al.*,2014;Haigh & Wigley, 2015).

To date a significant portion of crisis communication scholarship has concentrated on negative emotional reactions of the stakeholders and effective corporate crisis responses to attenuate or augment negative reactions. Less is known about proxy support from an organization's faith-holders, who in crisis situations may voice support by offering positive evaluations of an organization's previous performance, or defending or protecting an organization's product, image, or brand. It remains unknown how user comments will influence the perceptions of audiences in response to online news reports of crisis events, therefore the below research questions are offered.

RQ2) Compared to control, will crisis clusters that include user comments from faith-holders (supportive) result in decreased reputational threats, demonstrated by less negative perceptions of organizational reputations?

RQ3) Compared to control, will crisis clusters that include user comments from hate-holders (critical) result in increased reputational threats, demonstrated by more negative perceptions of organizational reputations?

Faith-holders and hate-holders are not the only sources providing user comments to crisis reports, organizations may also formally engage by sharing or posting corporate crisis communication messages. Environmentally scanning in order to identify daily reputational threats online is rather easy, the choice whether or not to strategically and publicly engage is less clear. In general, user responses to news reports are outside the control of organizations; but as Byrd (2012) notes, organizations may choose to offer a strategic organizational response. It is unknown if and how organizational crisis responses within the user comments of crisis news reports will impact audience perceptions toward the organization's reputation therefore the below research question is offered.

RQ4) How will audiences assess an organization's reputation that engages online addressing a crisis in response to hate-holder user comments?

Emotional responses to crisis situations are not uncommon. The association between exposure to online news reportsand emotional responses flows from cognitive appraisal theory. Cognitive appraisal argues that people do not experience emotions randomly but rather as a product of their own cognitive evaluations (appraisals) of an event or phenomenon (e.g., Ellsworth, 1991; Lazarus, 1991; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Roseman, 1991).Within crisis communication literature emotion has been studied in a variety of ways including: towards specific crisis events (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larking, 2003; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013), coping strategies in response to crisis events (Jin, 2009; 2010) and assessing the utility and effectiveness of specific crisis response messages (Jin, Pang,& Cameron, 2010a; 2010b; Kim & Cameron, 2011; Claeys, Cauberghe, & Leysen, 2013).These studies reveal that positive emotion (i.e., optimism, contentness, and happiness) helps individuals adapt and cope to crisis-induced stress, and therefore contributes to resiliency. Negative emotions (i.e., anger, sadness) have been reported to be closely associated with the perceived predictability or organizational control of crisis events, and may impact the perceptions of an organization's reputation and responsibility, in addition to stakeholders' subsequent acceptance of crisis response messages. In the SCCT theoretical frame higher levels of anger are associated with the intentional/preventable crisis cluster compared tocrises emerging within the victim cluster, as the acts are perceived to be avoidable. This study measures the emotional reactions to user comments of online crisis news reports and hypothesizes the following:

H2) Compared to control, crisis reports that are followed by user comments from hate-holders will generate elevated levels of negative effect in the accidental and victim crisis clusters.

The next section of the manuscript reports the process and procedures used to develop the experimental materials, recruit participants, and data gathering strategies used to answer the hypotheses and research questions posed.

Method

Respondents in this study included 230 participants recruited into an online message processing study hosted through the Communication Research Lab (CRL) at a Midwestern university. All materials and measures received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Responses were gathered using Qualtrics®online data collection software and migrated into IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 22 (SPSS) for analysis.

Sample Description

Participants were 27.8% male and 64.3% female; with an average age of 24.2 yrs. of age; 78.7% were Caucasian, 7% Asian, 5.2% African American, 5.2% Hispanic, and 4.3% Native American. Education levels varied with 58% completing a high school/GED, 10.7% held an Associate's degree, 19.1% a Bachelors, 5.1% held a Master's degree, and 4.7% a Ph.D., MFA, M.D. or other terminal degree.

Participants first provided demographic data and were then informed that they would be shown a digital news report. They were instructed to read the news report thoroughly, including any comments in the feedback section. After reading the news report participants responded to the dependent measures. Each participant read two news articles. The crisis reports were randomized so that no participant received a news report from the same crisis cluster.

Message Development

A total of 48 digital crisis news reports were produced. As in previous studies, crisis situations were adapted from actual cases, with limited geographic connection to the sample population; therefore, the researchers hold that participants would have limited a priori knowledge of the scenarios. Two crisis types from within the victim, accidental and preventative crisis clusters were included in the study. The victim scenarios consisted of a natural disaster (e.g., CA drought) and a product tampering case (e.g., Enfamil baby formula).The accidental scenarios were represented by a technical-issue (e.g., chemical leak) and a product recall (e.g., Whirlpool coffee makers).The intentional cluster included a fraudulent marketing case (e.g., Purdue-OxyContin) and a financial fraud case (e.g., Bank of America mortgage fraud).We controlled for several message features including: message source, comment length, user name, and frequency of comments. User comments were manipulated and appeared below the digital news reports. Four conditions for each message were created and include: supportive (faith-holders), critical (hate-holders), organizational, and control (no user comments).Statements from faith-holders included statements of positive experiences and testimonies while hate-holders user comments included statements of critique, blame, and disappointment. For example, the Bank of America (BOA) scenario, representing an intentional/preventable crisis type, included user comments from faith-holders such as: *"Banked with them for years, never had a problem"* or "*Bank of America is awesome they support schools, local communities, and small families*." The user-comments of hate-holders were represented by statements such as "*BOA=bank of fraud*" and "*I would have gone to prison for this but they get fines and a slap on the wrist*."All visual representations of the user comments were held consistent so that the number of comments and user identities did not change.

No mug shots or photos were used to represent the user comments, only an alphabetical or numerical character (i.e., "A" or "2"). A description of each crisis is provided in Table 1 of this manuscript, an example of the experimental reports is included in the appendix.

Dependent Variables

Organization Reputation. An abbreviated organizational reputation scale was used. The 7-pt,4-item scale included statements such as, after reading the report (a) *I feel more negative towards the organization*, (b) *I trust the organization more*, (c) *I feel more positive toward the organization*, and (d) *I do not trust the organization as much.* Each item was assessed on a 7-pt scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).Reliability for all criterions in the current study was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α=.89, M=4.55, SD=.53).

Causal Responsibility. The 3-item causal responsibility measurement derived from Brickman *et al.* (1982). The statements used in the present study were: (a)*to what extent do you believe the organization is responsible for the cause of this situation,*(b) *to what extent do you believe the organization could have avoided the problems they now experience, and* (c) *to what extent do you believe the organization could have controlled the current situation*? Each item was assessed on a 7-pt scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Scale reliability was again assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α=.87, M=4.55, SD=.12).

Treatment Responsibility. Similar to the above treatment responsibility (TR) was assessed on a 7-pt, 3-item scale (Brickman *et al.,* 1982). Scale items included statements such as: (a) *to what extent do you believe the organization is responsible for solving this issue;*(b) *to what extent do you believe the organization can provide solutions for this problem;*(c) *to what extent do you believe the organization is capable of responding to this issue?* (α=.84, M=5.09, SD=.65).

Affect. An adapted version of Dillard and Peck's (2001) affective response scale was used to measure the dimensions of anger, fear, contentment, and happiness. The 7-pt, 10-item scale consisting of bi-polar opposites such as*angry-happy, annoyed-pleased, aggravated-relieved, scared, happy-sad.* Reliability was established at (α=.92, M=3.28, SD=.50).

Table 1. Description of Crisis Scenarios and Experimental Manipulations Employed in this Study

	Crisis	Description	TR	Faith-holders	Hate-holders	Org. Response
Accidental	Technical-error-accident	A Gen Chem chemical leak due to car accident in VA	Refusal to test safe guards at other plants	That plant kept food on the table for my family for 2 generations; My cousin works at that plant- thankfully no one was hurt.	The company shouldn't produce what they can't protect; How much sulfer acid mist was released into the air this time.	We do not anticipate additional chemical leaks because of future rolling blackouts. We share the energy grid with hospitals and other essential services and are exempt from forced blackouts. We are actively working to contain the leak and protect those impacted. We will provide a detailed report to the general public on the cause and consequences of this event in order to avoid future leaks when more information is available. To our knowledge the driver of the truck is OK, we are dedicating all available resources to protect everyone from chemical exposure. If you have questions or concerns please contact us at media@genchem.com
	Technical-error-product harm	Whirlpool recall on coffee makers	Customers responsible for paying for returns and replacements	I've used Whirlpool products since I was little- never had a problem.; Love my Whirlpool fridge!	We need to pay for your mistakes- no thanks!; Welcome to America where everything costs so much but is cheaply made in China.	Our products are fully-tested before we introduce them into the consumer market. We are making our customers aware of an issue that was brought to our attention by the manufacturer of the electrical circuit used in the impacted models. We regret this inconvenience and look forward to working with our customers to repair or replace the impacted models. media@whirlpool.com
Victim	Product tampering	Product tampering at local retailers	Retailer did not remove all cans from shelves	This is so sad! What sicko would target babies?; I hope this doesn't ruin Enfamil- I raised 3 kids on that stuff!	I doubt they can resolve this- there are too many people involved in the process of making formula; I no longer trust baby formula- back to the ol' natural way	We are actively investigating this matter. For the time being all of our products are being pulled from retailers' shelves. If you have any information or questions about these events contact us at media@enfamil.com
	Natural Disaster	CA-natural disaster resulting from drought	Disaster funds only available to farmers not other stakeholders (i.e., transportation and manufacturing workers).	Good for CA- helping the people; Farmers could use as much help as they can get	Farmers get benefits but no one else- the foods got to move!; Glad to know we all have to suffer.	This drought has negatively impacted California more than any other state in the nation. The new disaster declaration at the federal level has allowed us to offer some relief to our local farmers. Unfortunately the federal funds are restricted to these individuals and organizations. We are actively seeking resources to assist others impacted by this disaster. If you have any questions feel free to contact me at johanns@nc.gov
Intentional	Organizational misdeed/misconduct	Bank of America Mortgage Crisis	Bank of America has not provided any compensation/payments	Banked with them for years- never has a problem; BOA is awesome- they support schools, local communities, and small families.	Bank of America= Bank of fraud; I would have gone to prison for this but they get some fines and a slap on the wrist!	Bank of America regrets these events. Bank of America looks forward to closing the doors on this case and moving forward in order to continue to provide our banking services to individuals and small businesses throughout the U.S. The fines and penalties resulting from this case will impact Bank of America for many years to come. If you have any questions or concerns please contact us at media@boa.org.
	Organizational misdeed -with injuries	Purdue-OxyContin Marketing	Purdue has not implemented training, monitoring or compliance	Purdue Pharma is more than this one mistake; My uncle used the drug…it saved him from a lot of pain.	½ a YEARS $$$! Should have doubled the fine; They knowing killed…and addicted people	Purdue will appeal this decision. Our focus has and will remain on producing medications that help people live full and long lives. Purdue apologizes for the circumstances surrounding these events. Although we can't control when our products are misused we are dedicated to manufacturing safe, affordable medication. If you have questions or concerns contact me media@purdue.org

Note: The chart above categorizes the type of crises used in this study in terms of SCCT's crisis typology, including identification and description of the specific event. TR= Treatment Responsibility manipulation. The right column describes how treatment responsibility was operationalized in relation to the specific crisis events.

Report of Findings

Prior to reporting the omnibus and univariate results for the research questions and hypotheses advanced a test of discriminant validity was conducted to ensure that attributions of causal and treatment responsibility are in fact discreet constructs. An exploratory factor analysis using principal component method used an orthogonal Varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization. The results of the principle component factor analysis revealed a two-factor solution (each with eigenvalues>1) with items configuring as predicted and accounting for 83% of the variance.

H1 held that crisis reports including treatment responsibility statements will pose a greater degree of reputational threat demonstrated by lower evaluations of organizational reputations compared to reports that only include causal responsibility statements. An ANOVA was computed with treatment responsibility as the fixed factor and organizational reputation as the dependent variable. Significant differences were found $F(3,349)= 13.38$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.10$. Compared to control, or those reports which did not include treatment responsibility statements, ($M=4.89$, $SD=1.15$), events in the accidental cluster that included the treatment responsibility statements reported the most negative perception of organizational reputations ($M=5.28$, $SD=.96$) as did the crises in the intentional cluster ($M=4.96$, $SD=.91$).

In order to answer *RQ1* a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was computed with crisis cluster and user comments as the predictor variables and organizational responsibility as the dependent variable. The MANOVA results indicated significant differences on the factors of user comments $F(3, 335)= 6.02$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.05$ and crisis cluster $F(2, 335)= 23.91$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.13$. The univariate tests reported in Table 2 show that irrespective of participants being exposed to user comments from faith-holders, hate-holders, or the organization at the center of the crisis in the accidental or victim clusters they were more likely to report increased treatment responsibility, compared to control. Those who were not exposed to any user comments still reported higher treatment responsibility, opposed to causal responsibility in the accidental ($M=5.15$, $SD=1.47$) and victim clusters ($M=4.38$, $SD=1.64$).

Table 2.Perceptions of Organizational Responsibility resulting from User Comments

	Intentional Crises		Accidental Crises		Victim Crises	
	Cause	Treatment	Cause	Treatment	Cause	Treatment
Faith-holders	5.03(1.37)	5.20(1.28)[a]	5.28 (.86)[a]	5.62(1.13)	3.03(1.68)[a]	5.54(1.17)
Hate-holders	4.86(1.29)[a]	4.60(1.20)	5.16(1.11)	5.48(1.15)	3.47(1.77)	4.89(1.41)
Org. Response	5.48 (.87)	4.44(1.24)	5.26(1.16)	5.75(1.19)	3.68(1.18)	4.93(1.24)
Control	5.65(1.02)	4.88(1.52)	5.07(1.04)	5.15(1.47)[a]	2.64(1.48)	4.38(1.64)[a]

Note: [a] indicates significant at p<.001, a 7-pt Likert scale ranging from *not at all* to *very much,* higher scores indicate greater organizational responsibility.

The results show that subjects exposed to faith-holder statements reported less causal responsibility attributions ($M=5.28$, $SD=.86$)and more treatment responsibility ($M=5.62$, $SD=1.13$) in the accidental crisis cluster. Similar findings are noted in the victim crisis cluster for causal ($M=3.03$, $SD=1.68$) and treatment responsibility ($M=5.54$, $SD=1.17$). Findings show that compared to control, critical comments from hate-holders within the victim cluster increased perceived causal ($M=3.47$, $SD= 1.77$) and treatment responsibility ($M=4.89$, $SD=1.14$). User comments from hate-holders impacted perceptions toward causal ($M=5.16$, $SD=1.11$) and treatment responsibility ($M=5.48$, $SD=1.15$) within the accidental crisis cluster. Compared to the accidental and preventable crisis clusters, participants who were exposed to crisis news reports when organizations are the victims of crisis events reported, as would be expected, the lowest amount of causal responsibility ($M=2.64$, $SD=1.48$) and treatment responsibility ($M=4.38$, $SD=1.64$).Interestingly, when organizations acted inappropriately within the intentional/prevention crisis cluster, and respondents were exposed to news reports including comments from hate-holders, they reported the lowest amount of causal ($M=4.86$, $SD=4.60$) and treatment responsibility ($M=4.60$, $SD=1.20$).

RQs 2 and 3 sought to understand if user comments from faith-holders and hate-holders would augment public perception of organizational responsibility relative to the control condition, no user comments. In order to answer *RQ2*and*RQ3*an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed with user comment type (e.g., supportive, critical) as the predictor variable and organizational reputation as the dependent variable. The ANOVA revealed significant differences $F(2, 146)= 2.92$, $p=.05$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Findings show that compared to both control ($M=4.77$, $SD=.79$) and hate-holders ($M=4.89$, $SD=.71$), digital news reports including faith-holders statements in the user comments resulted in more negative evaluations of organizational reputations ($M=5.15$, $SD=.71$). *RQ4*sought to understand audience responses to corporate crisis response messages via user comments.

An ANOVA was computed and found that compared to the control condition, which had no user comments, participants exposed to crisis reports with user comments from the impacted organization reported greater organizational responsibility in the accidental cluster toward both cause (*M*=5.26, *SD*=1.19) and treatment responsibility (*M*=5.75, *SD*=1.19) and the victim cluster toward causal (*M*=3.68, *SD*=1.18) and treatment responsibility (*M*=4.93, *SD*=1.24). In contrast, when organizations offered a corporate crisis communication statement participants exposed to crisis reports in the intentional cluster reported less causal (*M*=5.48, *SD*=.87) and treatment responsibility (*M*=4.44, *SD*=1.47). The strongest perceived causal responsibility came in response to user comments including an organizational response (*M*=5.48, *SD*=.87), while the strongest reported perceived treatment responsibility came in reaction to news reports featuring user comments from faith-holders (*M*=5.54, *SD*=1.17).

Finally, *H2* posited that compared to the control condition, crisis reports that were followed by user comments from hate-holders would generate elevated levels of negative effect in the victim and accidental crisis clusters. A univariate analysis of variance was computed with user comment and crisis cluster as the independent variables and affect as the dependent variable. Results indicated there were no significant interactions $F(6,352)=.44$, $p>.05$, or within the factors of user comments $F(3,352)=1.81$, $p>.05$ and crisis cluster $F(2, 352)=2.18$, $p>.05$.

Table 3.Impact of User Comments on Negative Affect

	Intentional	Accidental	Victim
Faith-holders	3.40 (.97)	3.57 (.96)	3.38 (1.59)
Hate-holders	3.14 (1.02)	3.20 (.84)	3.29 (.81)
Org. Response	2.89 (.77)	3.39 (.61)	3.13 (.75)
Control	3.13 (.80)	3.46 (.96)	3.28 (.84)

Note: a 7-pt Likert scale was used to measure affect; lower numbers indicate increased negative affect.

The following section of the manuscript will discuss these findings in more detail. Methodological limitations and future directions for additional study are provided.

Discussion, Limitations, and Future Directions

This investigation sought to more fully understand how user responses from faith-holders, hate-holders, and organizations impact audience perceptions of organizational reputation and responsibility in digital news reports about organizational crisis events. Several findings emerged that offer important theoretical and pragmatic consideration for crisis communication practitioners. To begin, we found that no matter what type of user comment, whether it be from faith-holders, hate-holders, or the organization involved in the crisis; participants were more likely to report increased treatment responsibility specifically in the accidental and victim clusters. This is germane to general beliefs such as: "*It's not your fault-- you might not have caused it but you are responsible for fixing it,*" or "*It may be an accident but you still need to pick/clean it up.*"We argue both causal and treatment should be factored with anticipating the degree of reputational threat posed by organizational crises. It maybe that crises occurring within specific clusters sensitizes audiences such that they do not change their evaluations of cause, but rather increase their attributions of treatment responsibility.

These findings also reveal that in cases where organizations have clearly acted inappropriately (e.g., intentional/prevention crisis cluster),participants exposed to crisis reports including user comments from hate-holders reported the lowest amount of causal responsibility(*M*=4.86, *SD*=4.60) and a corporate crisis communication message from the impacted organization resulted in less treatment responsibility (*M*=4.44, *SD*=1.24). This is an unexpected and perplexing finding. It may be that in these crisis states, when fault and accountability are clear, rather than fostering additional scrutiny or negative perceptions based on the hate-holders comments, a sense of organizational empathy emerges which attenuates the strong negative reputational threats anticipated to result from these events. These findings may also result from the specific organizations used to represent the intentional/preventative crisis cluster (i.e., a bank and pharmaceutical company). The hedonic relevance (i.e., personal health and personal finances) of these organizations may alter individuals' attitude toward organizational responsibility (for review see Miller, 2016).Further testing of a more robust variety of crises representing these clusters is needed.

Our study found that user comments from faith-holders reduced causal responsibility in the intentional cluster (*M*=5.03, *SD*= 1.37) compared to the control condition; however, when organizations were facing preventable crises, user comments from faith-holders increased treatment responsibility (*M*=5.20, *SD*=1.28). This can be explained as psychological reactance to faith-holders' support for organizations facing crises, specifically in the intentional/preventative cluster. If an organization, either with intent or through neglect, caused a crisis, others may respond negatively to the faith-holders' defense of the organization. This is an important finding that may aid future decision-making related to encouraging or requesting support from faith-holders in certain types of crises situations.

If faith-holders are activated in intentional/preventable crisis statesit may create a boomerang effect that actually increases perceptions of treatment responsibility and further erodes organizational support. There was no established factorial model for investigating this topic and retrospectively there are some weaknesses in both the design and operationalization of the constructs. To begin, this study was an initial first attempt to experimentally test the Theory of Emotional Stakeholders (TES) concepts of 'faith-holders' and 'hate-holders' represented through user comments in response to online news reports of crisis situations. There are some considerations related to the selection of the news source of the crisis reports and the limitations of the organizational crisis response manipulations within the experimental materials. We offer the below recommendations for scholars seeking to advance this line of inquiry in the future.

The research foci of online user comments are not without controversy. Suler (2004) argues there is an 'online disinhibition effect' at-play which predicts that when an individual's identity is unknown, there is little accountability for their actions or words, thus their inhibition drops. Through this digital veil of anonymity some individuals may engage in uncivil, antagonistic and/or hate-filled speech more freely and without fear of the consequence. Because negative user comments have been found to decrease the perceived quality of journalism (Lee & Jang, 2010) many news organizations are now disabling the option of posting user comments, noting that negative user comments devalue the perceived quality of news journalism in the eyes of others (e.g., NPR, Bloomberg, & Popular Science). Opposed to banning user comments completely, some news organizations have begun requiring registration prior to posting, or requiring log-in via personal social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) thereby removing concerns of anonymity. Santana (2014) reported that 48.9% of the 137 largest U.S. newspapers have disallowed anonymity in their commenting forums, 41.6% allow anonymity and 9.4% do not offer comment forums (Santana, 2014). It is unclear how future user comment policy changes will impact the influential nature of these communication forumsto online news reports of crisis situations in the long-term, however the subject will likely attract attention from scholars, applied communication practitioners and organizational leaders interested in engaging in online reputation management for the foreseeable future.

At the time the experimental materials employed in this study were developed the goal was tocreate a generalized,3-6 line organizational crisis response that acknowledged the crisis and provided a feedback loop to the organization (i.e., phone number, email, website, etc.). Because of this approach there is no clear theoretical classification of the organizational crisis communication response strategies utilized in this study. Some responses maybe considered transcendent strategies, while others included explicit statements of regret. In order to better understand which type of crisis response best addresses the variety of faith-holder and hate-holder user comments, additional research, replication and refinement are needed. Future work may employ a broader range of accommodative and non-accommodative organizational crisis communication strategies. Although these concerns were outside the scope of the present investigation, they certainly warrant future study.

The Theory of Emotional Stakeholders (TES) conceptualizes three broad stakeholder categories: faith-holders, hate-holders, and fake-holders. No responses from "fake-holders" were incorporated into this study as these individuals are generally characterized as using false or fake personas to alter or change public perception. This study narrowly aimed to more clearly understand the impact of supportive, critical, and corporate user comments, thus fake holders were omitted from the analysis. Additional study of the persuasive impact of fake-holders is needed. Whether the motivation is to engage for purposes of deception, instigation, or agitation these individuals may adopt pseudo-personas or use sock-puppetry to augment positive and/or negative emotions of others in online social environments. Future work should consider high and low organizational involvement by stakeholders. Highly involved stakeholders may report more engagement, demonstrated by increased information seeking and sharing, and also create more online user comments. Experimentally testing and measuring these effects will remain a challenge. Alternative methods such as eye-tracking- and log-file-analysis may be useful methodologies to further understand the persuasive impact of the communication exchanges in these forums.

User comments are not the only variable influencing the perceptions of organizations presented in digital news reports of crisis events. Baden and Springer (2014) maintain that "reactions to news coverage, user commentary is inevitably influenced by the information and frames provided therein," (pg. 532) thus additional work exploring the media framing of crises is encouraged. In this study no general attitudes, a priori knowledge, or involvement levels with the organizations were measured prior to the presentation of experimental materials. Pang (2013) contends that if "an accusation that was circulated online resonated with pre-existing negative experiences with the organization/individual experienced by other stakeholders or if it reinforced a pre-existing negative view held by the organization, it [is] more likely to be shared and escalated," (pg. 104).

Further investigations using pre- post designs may provide a better contrast while measuring additional variables such as participants' knowledge about or engagement with the organization at the center of the crisis (i.e., organizational involvement) and perceptions of the reporting journalism/reporting agency/network (i.e., source credibility). In doing so offer more insight can be gleaned into attitudinal and perceptual change.

Ongoing experimental and laboratory studies along with case studies will continue to inform the strategic choices organizations make when deciding whether or not to engage stakeholders online in response to user comments. Luoma-aho(2010) argues that hate-holders can damage the reputation of a company, while "faith-holders may hold the key to maintaining organizational legitimacy," (pg. 5). Our findings indicate the relationship between organizations and faith-holders may only be mutually beneficial in certain crisis-types and within specificcrisis clusters. This study found that (1) hate-holders may lower assessments of organizational blame in the intentional cluster, perhaps demonstrating an empathetic response, while (2) faith-holders may undermine an organization's reputation when defending crises emerging from within the intentional/preventable cluster. Clearly further investigation and replication of findings is needed. Scholarship of this nature will help to inform the optimal selection and delivery of strategic crisis messages needed to effectively manage the emotional response of stakeholders during times of organizational crisis.

TES provides new avenues for additional subjects of scholarly inquiry outside of crisis communication and reputational management. Organizations frequently engage in issues management and are expected to take formal positions on controversial issues (i.e., restroom access/use, equality of pay, data privacy and management, etc.). Using TES for analyzing stakeholder responses to organizational position statements (e.g., white papers) may help to more fully understand the emotions of both internal and external stakeholder groups.

Conclusion

Negative user-generated content may erode positive stakeholder relationships and damage organizational reputations. Our findings reveal that user comments from organizations, faith-holders, and hate-holdersall contribute to audience evaluations of organizational responsibility, both causal and treatment, and impact organizational reputations. Because crisis events can prompt information-seeking and sharing behaviors, understanding if and how to strategically respond is an important consideration for practitioners who are expected to skillfully engage in online relation building and reputation management.

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EXAMPLE Cluster: INTENTIONAL Type: ORG-MISDEED **Org.:** PURDUE PHARMA

Left Circle: Manipulation of Faith-holder User Comments;

Right Circle: Manipulation of Hate-holder User Comments;

Lower Right - P indicates insertion of an organizational crisis response;

Not Pictured: The control condition included no user comments; there was no content below "Join the Discussion."

Note: All experimental news reports retained the same format and design. No changes to the dates, trending topics, photography, reporter name, etc. were made. Each message in the experimental condition included the same visual representation, and user IDs of users in all scenarios. The number of user comments varied between the experimental conditions: faith-holder/hate-holder condition (*n*=7), one additional comment was added to the organizational response condition (*n*=8); no comments were shown in the control condition (*n*=0).